



ASEAN Integration and The Role of Thai Universities in Enhancing Cross-Cultural Competence through International Inter-University Activities in Thailand: The Case Studies of Thai Students at Naresuan University and Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional block aiming to connect people and cultures, with international student mobility being a key aspect of its mobility policy. This policy promotes cross-cultural understanding, internationalization of tertiary education, global connections, and employability of students. Despite progress, enhancing cross-cultural competence among Thai university students is still a challenge. This study argues that international inter-university initiatives promoting good practices and global perspectives can boost cross-cultural competence in Thai students. The study, therefore, examines the role of international inter-university activities in fostering a global learning environment and students' perspectives on their effectiveness. Semi-structured interviews with 20 participants from two Thai universities were conducted. The findings suggest that exposure to cross-cultural learning environments through these activities significantly improved Thai students' cross-cultural competence. However, the study recommends additional interventions and opportunities focusing on program administration quality and efficiency, faculty diversity, student body diversity, academic learning environment, the standard of facilities and services, and a global-oriented learning environment to better equip Thai students with cross-cultural competence skills. These results can contribute to the enhancement of effective education policy and curriculum development for Thai universities.

Keywords: *Internationalization, interuniversity activities, multicultural competency, cross-cultural interactions*

1. Introduction

In recent years, globalization, regionalization, regional integration, and technological advancements have mitigated the differences that once problematize our diversity as obstacles to enhancing connectivity among people and cultures both internationally and domestically in various parts of the world (Garneau & Pepin, 2014). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one of such regional blocks birthed to connect the people and cultures in the region. Obviously, such regional integration comes with huge socioeconomic and political benefits as well as challenges. This has prompted a drastic move towards demands for cross-cultural awareness as a mark of a higher level of competency among its twenty million tertiary education students and over seven thousand universities (Atherton et al 2018) to enhance cross-cultural understanding amongst its future workforce (Wheelen & Hunger, 2004). According to Lavankura (2013), Thailand's education sector has been repositioned to serve this purpose, with primary, secondary, and especially university institutions at the forefront in the efforts to equip the next generation of Thais with intercultural competencies through the implementation of international programs.

In fact, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 places emphasis on travel facilitation, addressing the skilled worker shortage, and increasing intra-ASEAN university student mobility in order to encourage people mobility in the region (Atherton et al, 2018). International student mobility within the ASEAN region is a crucial part of the mobility policy, as it promotes cross-cultural competence by allowing students from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds to share their knowledge and experiences. Several national and regional policies have been implemented by ASEAN. The mobility of labor within ASEAN, which is governed by Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs), enables skilled professionals to seek employment in other member countries. This is due to the recognition of their abilities, experience, and qualifications by member countries. As a result, intercultural communication is promoted, which leads to a better understanding of cultural customs, and enhances regional integration and cooperation. In addition, ASEAN's mobility strategy emphasizes inclusivity, as reflected in the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025

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which prioritizes the rights of people with disabilities and their integration into development plans. This approach fosters a more diverse and inclusive community, while also developing intercultural competency and understanding. Overall, the ASEAN mobility policy is a comprehensive framework that addresses various aspects of interregional migration and promotes social justice, economic growth, and regional integration. By promoting skilled labor mobility and international student mobility while embracing inclusivity, ASEAN aims to encourage cross-cultural competence and build a more cooperative and understanding regional community.

According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), culture is a dynamic and relational process that originates from the interactions between individuals and is characterized by shared meanings. Carpenter-Song, Schwallie, and Longhofer (2007), see culture as a complex phenomenon that must be studied in relation to its historical, social, political, and economic contexts. Gregory, Harrowing, Lee, Doolittle, and O'Sullivan (2010) further underscored the need for a contextual approach when examining culture. Cultural competence is defined as the appropriateness and effectiveness of one's behavior in an alien cultural environment or the acquisition and maintenance of culture-specific skills for practical reasons such as interacting effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Chongdarakul (2013), Ueaichimplee and Pilanthanon (2021) believe that international programs are instrumental in fostering global citizens who have thinking, communication, technical skills, and an understanding of the social and cultural diversity of others by being sensitive to cross-cultural differences and adapting to other cultural environments in ASEAN community. Therefore, it is not surprising that the recent increased emphasis of Thai universities on enhancing cross-cultural awareness among students from their tertiary educational institutions through internationalization and regionalization that is restricted to academic programs has become a relevant development agenda advocated by these universities (Kälvemark & Van der Wende, 1997). According to scholars, the principal justifications for internationalization have been classified into four primary categories, namely social/cultural, political, academic, and economic. These categories have been identified by De Wit (2000) and Knight (1999) as well as Knight and De Wit (1997, p. 174). Also, a study by Bell-Rose (2007) also confirmed that international programs are integral to educational systems, even in the United States.

In fact, modern universities have seen a shift towards internationalism in all areas, such as recruiting international students and faculty, expanding higher education worldwide, conducting collaborative research projects and exchanges, emphasizing study abroad opportunities, assessing intercultural dynamics, training students to excel in a globalized context, contributing to the global society and incorporating a variety of other-worldly values into mission statements (Altbach & De Wit, 2015; Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Knight & De Wit, 1997; Marginson 2016). Thai universities have also gradually transformed into campuses with students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, with the aim of developing their cross-cultural competence in their college lives. Since then, the Thai government has dedicated a variety of organizations to oversee international programs, including the Department of Education, the American Councils for International Education, and the American International Education Foundation. This concerted effort is reflected in the government's construction of a national policy on international programs at a basic education level with the aim of making Thai citizens more global minded in the 21st century (Ueaichimplee & Pilanthanon, 2021).

According to studies, having a global perspective workforce is key to the success of a nation in the contemporary business world dominated by numerous conflicting forces that challenge the 21st century's labor market (Jones & George, 2003, as cited in Moussa, 2012). Therefore, the ability of each member state to overcome the challenges and maximize the 'mutual' benefits of such an economic block demand enhanced cross-cultural competence (the process of adapting to an unfamiliar environment and its requirements by obtaining the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that place its citizens at the same level or ahead of its neighbors. Williams (2001) articulated cultural competence as an aptitude of individuals and systems to interact or react efficaciously across cultures while showing consideration and esteem for the culture of the person or organization they are serving.

Consequently, the concept of international programs has gained traction as Thailand looks towards integration with the ASEAN community. For instance, at the elementary education level, international or



English-focused programs have been implemented to fulfill this international education policy (Jack Van de Water, 2005). Furthermore, all educators and teachers who teach core subjects are urged to use English as a medium of instruction. Also, every sector of Thai society appears eager to increase the recognition of the importance of English as an integral part of international programs. But according to Wit (2011), international programs are not simply educational programs in the English language regarded as part of the overall accomplishment of international program management in Thailand.

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that Thai authorities in the field of education often misconstrue the notion of international program management in Thailand to English proficiency skills (Wit, 2011). Therefore, it is still to be seen whether the efforts of Thai universities to achieve these objectives through internationalization are limited to enhancements of academic programs based on the Thai context or are enhanced to embrace global perspectives that are effective in improving student intercultural competence. This led to three key questions raised in this study namely, how has the quality of the existing international interuniversity activities affected the effectiveness of the programs in enhancing Thai students' cross-cultural competence? To what extent do these activities create a global learning environment and good practices in Thai Universities for cross-cultural competence knowledge development among the students? How do the students perceive the effectiveness of these inter-university activities and if any, what are necessary gaps that must be addressed to make them more effective?

For example, Kantamas (2022) conducted a study on the impact of studying English on Thai university students' intercultural competence using a structured questionnaire to survey 30 Thai students studying English in China. The results revealed no major demographic differences between the male and female target groups. However, the study revealed that negative attitudes toward Asians lead to a separation between the Thai and Chinese groups. The study also revealed that language was essential for communication and mutual understanding between cultures, as well as for building relationships with locals. The survey also suggested that making friends from various groups to exchange opinions in the target society enhances cross-cultural competence.

This article empirically examines the role of Thai universities in enhancing cross-cultural competency for ASEAN integration through inter-university activities of international students in Thailand to improve the development of cross-cultural competence among Thai university students who enrolled in international inter-university activities based on school climate, personal value system, and traditions. The study focuses on the qualification and diversities of faculty members, international and cultural diversities of student bodies, international academic learning environment, and the standard of facilities and services offered to students in these activities.

Theoretically and methodologically, this qualitative study borrowed from Deardorff's (2006) cross-cultural attitude strategies to foster the development of effective skills in intercultural contexts. Deardorff defined intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and behave appropriately in intercultural settings based on one's knowledge, skills, and attitudes. According to Borchum's (2002) account, cultural competence can be defined as an ongoing and continually expanding process that is characterized by non-linear dynamics. Borchum maintained that cultural competence is predicated upon the enhancement of knowledge as well as the development of skills that align with its various attributes (p. 5). This study analyzed the effectiveness of an international education program, specifically inter-university activities, on cross-cultural competencies among Thai students from three universities in Thailand.

The study is influenced by the research works of Williams (2001) and Martin and Vaughn (2007) on enhancing comprehension of the constituents of cultural competence. The following traits have been identified as instrumental in fostering cultural competency: self-awareness about one's own cultural background, familiarity with one's own cultural perspective, familiarity with diverse cultural practices, and a positive attitude towards intercultural differences. Theoretically, this study is guided by Lave and Wenger (1990) theory on how individuals co-create and transform their cultural practices through active participation. According to Lave, learning is contextually situated and typically occurs as an inherent part of activity and culture. It is unintentional rather than planned. Lave and Wenger refer to this as legitimate peripheral participation.



Anthropological and ethnographic research perspectives were adopted as an analytical lens, standing for a change in basic assumptions from quantitative studies to qualitative empirical evidence. Barbara Rogoff's research focuses on the relationship between individuals and society in human development, viewing development as a cultural phenomenon. She draws inspiration from Vygotsky theory on the connection between cognitive development and community, using a method that combines psychological and anthropological approaches with ethnographic fieldwork.

In sum, since the official inauguration of ASEAN in 2016, the public and private sectors, especially in the education and corporate world have experienced a sharp rise in dealing with Southeastern Asians and beyond with diverse cultural backgrounds as never before, prompting a shift towards the internationalization of university programs. The number of international students has risen. As a result, Thai universities are now experimenting with how inter-universities programs across the region and beyond can impact intercultural competencies highly needed by the new generation workforce in Thailand. Thus, advancing empirical understanding of the effectiveness of these activities in enhancing students' competence sites at the heart of this study.

2. Objectives

1. To examine how international interuniversity activities help to promote a global learning environment with good practices for knowledge development to enhance Thai students' cross-cultural competence.
2. To examine students' perspectives on successful inter-university activities that enhance cross-cultural understanding.

3. Materials and Methods

This paper relied on primary and secondary data sources, including scholarly studies, analysis, and respondents' opinions. A semi-structured interview was employed to collect the data. Precisely, this research was conducted by examining the activities of two member universities of the Association of Universities in Asia and the Pacific (AUAP) in Thailand (Naresuan University, Phitsanolouk and Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima). Although there are many universities that consistently hosted inter-university events, these two member universities were chosen because they have consistently hosted interuniversity events with participants from Southeast Asian universities, both from AUAP and non-AUAP members since 1995 with history of success beyond the region. In addition, the primary records of announcement materials and event proceedings, as well as students' journals were analyzed, and interviews were conducted with program managers and events coordinators for professional insights. Students were also interviewed for firsthand accounts on their perspectives on satisfaction with the effectiveness of the activities in enhancing their cultural competence outlined in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AACU) Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric (Table 1) and to encourage students to cultivate intercultural knowledge and skills, as defined by Deardorff. The VALUE rubric, which was developed by faculty experts from across the United States, integrates the stages of the DMIS model proposed by Bennett with the intercultural competency knowledge and skills outlined in Deardorff's PMIC model. The rubric addresses cultural self-awareness, understanding of cultural worldview frameworks, empathy, and verbal and nonverbal communication skills, as well as attitudes of curiosity and openness.



Table 1: Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015)

Domain	Capstone		Milestone		Benchmark
	4	3	2	1	
Knowledge <i>Cultural self-awareness</i>	Articulates insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how her/his experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description.)	Recognizes new perspectives about own cultural rules and biases (e.g., not looking for sameness; comfortable with the complexities that new perspectives offer.)	Identifies own cultural rules and biases (e.g., with a strong preference for those rules shared with own cultural group and seeks the same in others.)	Shows minimal awareness of own cultural rules and biases (even those shared with own cultural group(s)) (e.g., uncomfortable with identifying possible cultural differences with others.)	
Skills <i>Empathy</i>	Interprets intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview and demonstrates the ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group	Recognizes intellectual and emotional dimensions of more than one worldview and sometimes uses more than one worldview in interactions	Identifies components of other cultural perspectives but responds in all situations with own worldview	Views the experience of others but does so through own cultural worldview.	
Attitudes <i>Curiosity</i>	Asks complex questions about other cultures, and seeks out and articulates answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.	Asks deeper questions about other cultures and seeks out answers to these questions.	Asks simple or surface questions about other cultures.	States minimal interest in learning more about other cultures	
Attitudes <i>Openness</i>	Initiates and develops interactions with culturally different others. Suspends judgment in valuing her/his interactions with culturally different others.	Begins to initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others. Begins to suspend judgment in valuing her/his interactions with culturally different others.	Expresses openness to most, if not all, interactions with culturally different others. Has difficulty suspending any judgment in her/his interactions with culturally different others, and is aware of own judgment and expresses a willingness to change	Receptive to interacting with culturally different others. Has difficulty suspending any judgment in her/his interactions with culturally different others, but is unaware of own judgment	



3.1 Participants

Approximately, 20 participants were selected in this study. Specifically, the data comes from students, lecturers, and head of international program at Naresuan University (NU), Phitsanolouk and Suranaree University of Technology (SUT), Nakhon Ratchasima. Out of this number, ten participants were selected from each university. Because the study aims to encompass a diverse range of participants to generate comprehensive insights and perspectives, these participants were divided into three groups which consisted of a Head of International Program, four lecturers, and five students from each of the two universities. One major criterion for the selection of the Head of the International Program is that he/she must currently hold the position of Head of International Program for a duration not less than three years. The lecturers were also selected based on the relevance of their ability and personal background to the issue under study, with at least 5 years of teaching experience in the International Programs. Similarly, students were all 3rd year students who have spent not less than two years in the programs. The students were given orientation on cultural competence and encouraged to keep personal journals that will help them recall their experiences. Table 2 holds comprehensive data regarding the participants.

Data collection was done using a semi-structured interview in the form of fieldwork, and nonparticipant observation. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research method to allow for flexibility and adaptability during data collection. This approach enabled the researchers to explore participants' perspectives and experiences more deeply, while still keeping a level of consistency and structure across all interviews. Semi-structured interviews facilitate a balance between predetermined questions and the freedom to explore emergent themes, thus providing rich, detailed information from participants. Follow-up interviews were also conducted using phone calls and e-mails when required. The interviews focused primarily on the effectiveness of existing interuniversity activities and practices, results, implications, and their contribution to developing Thai students' cross-cultural competencies to prepare them for opportunities and challenges ahead in ASEAN and beyond.

Given the international and cross-cultural nature of the study and the participant linguistic backgrounds, a combination of both Thai and English was used during the data collection. This was possible because English is the major medium of communication in these programs. The duration of each semi-structured interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. Considering the researcher's bilingual background, the researcher used her English and Thai language skills to ensure exact translation and transcription of the collected data was done.

Regarding the ethical process, the researchers obtained informed consent from participants before conducting the interviews, ensuring that they understand the purpose of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Additionally, participants confidentiality and anonymity were kept by removing any identifiable information from the collected data and using pseudonyms or codes to protect participants' identities. Finally, the data was carefully managed and stored securely to safeguard participants' privacy and complied with relevant ethical guidelines or institutional review board requirements.

The analysis was performed using interpretative analytical approaches to gain an understanding of the subject matter. The data analysis involved three key processes: description, analysis, and interpretation. Description entails the act of detailing and characterizing data while acknowledging its factual nature. The analysis involves scrutinizing connections, variables, and associations within the data set. Lastly, the interpretation of data entails constructing comprehension or justification for data beyond direct observation or analytical observations. The reasons are to find key variables (activities) and determine how these activities have been used to create a global learning environment that empowers Thai students with intercultural competencies. It used a range of primary data supplemented with secondary sources gained, including interviewing, field journal from non-participant observation, as well as news and articles analysis. To ensure the confidentiality of all participants, the participants were assigned pseudonyms, specifically participant A to U.

**Table 2:** List of Interviewees' Information

University	No	Participant	Gender	Experience	Position
Group 1: Naresuan University (NU), Phitsanolouk, Thailand	1	Participant A	Male	3 years	Head of International Program
	2	Participant B	Female	5 years	Lecturer
	3	Participant C	Male	6 years	Lecturer
	4	Participant D	Male	6 years	Lecturer
	5	Participant F	Female	5 years	Lecturer
	6	Participant G	Female	3 years	Student
	7	Participant H	Male	3 years	Student
	8	Participant I	Female	3 years	Student
	9	Participant J	Male	3 years	Student
	10	Participant K	Female	3 years	Student
Group 2: Suranaree University of Technology (SUT), Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand	1	Participant L	Female	3 years	Head of International Program
	2	Participant M	Male	6 years	Lecturer
	3	Participant N	Male	6 years	Lecturer
	4	Participant O	Male	5 years	Lecturer
	5	Participant P	Female	5 years	Lecturer
	6	Participant Q	Female	3 years	Student
	7	Participant R	Male	3 years	Student
	8	Participant S	Female	3 years	Student
	9	Participant T	female	3 years	Student
	10	Participant U	Female	3 years	Student

4. Results

To understand the perceptions of the students, lecturers and head of programs on the effectiveness of these programs in creating a global learning environment that enhance Thai students' intercultural competence, the research finding are presented in four sections based on analysis of assessment levels of 1) cultural self-awareness, 2) curiosity, 3) openness, and 4) empathy, of the 3rd year students who enrolled in these interuniversity activities from two groups of universities in Thailand as defined in the VALUE rubric excerpted in Table 1 above. In other words, all descriptions of intercultural competency levels in the following sections are from the above rubric in Table 1 and are grounded on the outcome of the data on the effectiveness of existing international interuniversity activities; effective learning environment with good practices for global cross-cultural competence knowledge development; and students' perspectives about these inter-university activities in enhancing cross-cultural competence.

4.1 Cultural self-awareness

To assess the level of cultural awareness, the researcher analyzed the participants' personal journal entries, and the curriculum that guides activities and the quality of staff, including the diversity of staff and students in these programs from both universities, and found strong correlations. The finding revealed that the students' cultural self-awareness stands at Level 2. This implied that the students could identify their own cultural rules and biases but have a preference for their own cultural rules. The journal entry from participant C in group 1 and participant Q in group 2 below capture this degree of development. Participant C in group 1 reported,

Foreigners often stand or sit remarkably close to each other, including people from other countries even though they do not know each other before. I find it exceedingly difficult at the beginning to deal with the lack of distance between foreigners and I during group activities. Thai people like to keep physical distance from strangers, so I felt extremely uncomfortable and wondered if I would ever become ok with it. This experience taught me that keeping distance and personal space with strangers is not as important in another cultural context.



Also, reflecting on her personal experience, participant Q also stated that “participating in these activities helped me learn how deep-rooted my preference for my own cultural norms regarding personal space and distance was”. Participant A also noted that “I had difficulty recognizing prejudices rooted in my own cultural perspectives and the need for me to try not to draw conclusions easily” When asked during the interviews about how this program has helped them to improve their cultural competence, specifically on cultural self-awareness, the lecturer and the head of programs also confirmed that the knowledge they gained from the cultural frameworks help decipher their discomfort and the need to adopt a different attitude and perception toward personal space, especially when dealing with strangers. This finding highlights the significance of regionalization and internationalization of inter-university activities in promoting cross-cultural competence among Thai university students.

4.2 Curiosity

The study evaluated the effectiveness of these programs in enhancing students’ curiosity and found that half (5 out of 10) of the students expressed curiosity at Level 2 or 3 on the VALUE rubric. However, the lecturers revealed that some participants merely shared experiences without asking questions. Nonetheless, the head of programs acknowledged that most of the students made considerable progress, even though their progress is slower than expected. This progress was further captured in our interview with the remaining participants who explained that they were able to describe their own cultural beliefs and values and expressed their preference for their cultural values because the cultural framework and interactions helped them to comprehend the degree of the root of these behaviors in based on their cultural milieus. The remaining participants showed a shift from Level 2 to Level 3 curiosity, where Level 2 implies asking basic questions about others’ culture and Level 3 involves seeking deeper answers. By implication, Level 2 of curiosity implies that a person can ask plain questions about others’ culture while Level 3 means that an individual asks deeper questions and seeks out answers from others. The study also interviewed the rest of the participant from group 1 and 2 and found that they also demonstrated progress by describing their cultural beliefs and values and understanding the roots of their behavior. For example, citing how Thai attitudes towards the punctuality and ability to freely ask questions differs from the westerners, Chinese, other Southeastern Asians in the programs who are always punctual and striving to succeed and do things timely, this prompted her to learn to become more observant and asks deeper questions about everything to enable her get things done on time like her peers. This led to a greater appreciation for punctuality and deeper questioning. The Program heads also observed that participants asked more surface-level questions but acknowledged noteworthy progress. Overall, participants in group 1 noted slower progress than those in Group 2.

4.3 Openness

The research revealed that most of the participants, specifically over 90%, displayed Level 2 and Level 3 cultural openness. This shows their willingness to engage in various interactions, but they still find it challenging to refrain from judging others, despite being aware of the need to do so. This progress was exemplified by Participant H’s interview, where he recounts his experience during a lecture at NU when foreign students were conversing amongst themselves. According to Participant H, “although I initially felt disrespected, I later realized that I needed to be more resilient in embracing cultural openness than I had previously understood”. The statement implies that participant H was conscious of the opposition to the culture he was exposed to but looked to broaden his perspective. His stance was introspective and perceptive, serving as a crucial step toward personal growth. Although some students were unaware of their biases, participants U and K acknowledged meeting similar situations that challenged their preconceived notions about the role and status of an American lecturer who ate snacks during class due to hunger and work demands. Despite this, they considered their observations an anomaly and refrained from passing judgment. This suggests a transition to Level 3, characterized by a willingness to engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds while setting aside personal biases to appreciate the value of such experiences.



4.4 Empathy

The various sources of data namely, interviews, journal entries, and observations used in this study revealed a notable change in the participants' recognition of the importance of acknowledging emotions and showing supportive behavior towards individuals from diverse cultures. The findings align with the VALUE rubric's definition of empathy, which involves perceiving intercultural experiences through multiple perspectives, acknowledging the emotions of those from distinct cultural backgrounds, and responding with supportive actions. These results were further corroborated by the heads of programs and lecturers from both universities who identified varying levels of empathy among students ranging from Level 2 to 4. These differences were attributed to differences in intercultural competency skills such as openness, curiosity, and empathy. According to the students, this intercultural activity replicated experiences and emotions that are widely shared when engaging with an unfamiliar culture. The participants accepted that paying attention was an indispensable skill. At the start of the program, they realized that it was hard for outsiders to join in the dialogue. As participant A remarked, "I did not apprehend why they were behaving like that." Participant Q stated, "Listen to the other people's conversations, actions, and movements. That is how I figured out how to start a conversation with the group I was having difficulty communicating with".

5. Discussion

5.1 Promoting global learning environment with good practices for knowledge development to enhance Thai students' cross-cultural competence through international interuniversity activities.

We examine the role of inter-university activities in promoting a global learning environment and fostering Thai students' cross-cultural competence. The findings of our research are discussed in light of relevant theories, including Deardorff's (2006) cross-cultural attitude strategies, Borchum's (2002) account on cultural competence, the works of Williams (2001) and Martin and Vaughn (2007) on enhancing comprehension of the constituents of cultural competence, Lave and Wenger's (1990) theory on co-creation and transformation of cultural practices, and Vygotsky's theory on the connection between cognitive development and community. Our research findings show that inter-university activities significantly contribute to creating a global learning environment and enhancing Thai students' cross-cultural competence. This is in line with Deardorff's (2006) cross-cultural attitude strategies, which emphasize the importance of fostering effective skills in intercultural contexts. As Thai students engage in international inter-university activities, they develop cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities essential for effective intercultural communication and collaboration (Deardorff, 2006).

For example, on the effectiveness of the existing international interuniversity activities in enhancing students' cross-cultural competence, the study revealed that at the beginning of the programs, these university students experienced challenges in their cross-cultural adaptation because of misinterpretation between foreign and Thai students. Cultural differences during communication showed difficulty in bridging the gap between the two groups. Furthermore, language barriers created communicative incompetence, making it difficult for Thai students to understand the perspectives and ways of life of international students without any tools to help them learn English and understand each other. This hindered their ability to adapt to global perspectives. However, after being involved in these activities, the students had a novel cultural experience which assessed their ability to attentively listen to and see the other culture.

This intercultural activity replicated experiences and emotions that are widely shared when engaging with an unfamiliar culture. Students accepted that paying attention was an indispensable skill. At the start of the program, they realized that it was hard for outsiders to join in the dialogue. Nevertheless, their involvement in these activities provided the students with a novel cultural experience, assessing their ability to attentively listen to and observe another culture. Both the lecturers, heads of programs and students noted that these intercultural activities enhance intercultural competencies in that they simulated experiences and emotions that are commonly experienced when interacting with an unfamiliar culture, thus providing real life situation and experience for students to learn from other cultures. Our findings support Borchum's (2002) account of cultural competence, which posits that individuals can develop cultural competence through exposure to diverse cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives. By participating in inter-university

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activities, Thai students gain insight into different worldviews, thereby enhancing their understanding of the constituents of cultural competence as suggested by Williams (2001) and Martin and Vaughn (2007).

Furthermore, the study also examines the extent to which these interuniversity activities create a global learning environment with good practices for cross-cultural competence knowledge development. The study found that the administration, faculty diversity, diversity of international and cultural student bodies, international academic learning environment, and standard facilities and services of an international education program that promotes cross-cultural competencies among its students are satisfactory in terms of quality and efficiency. Some of the students noted that the activities create a global environment which provides them with opportunities and abilities to create relationships with people from divergent backgrounds making it possible for them to evaluate their own cultural behaviors and break down the barriers between their cultures.

The results also showed an increased knowledge, respect, cultural awareness, and desire to cooperate with diverse cultures. Listening and observation skills were also improved to build cooperation and diminish feelings of being an outcast, hence, improving self-awareness. Earlier studies by Karłowicz, (2009) and Peterson and Jones (2002) also support these findings. The study also found that these programs create global learning environment, which reflected on the diversity of the administration, faculty diversity, international student body diversity, international academic learning environment, and standard facilities and services.

In return, the global nature of the environment in these international education programs promoted cross-cultural competencies among its students satisfactorily. This is also true in terms of quality and efficiency in creating a global learning environment with good practices for cross-cultural competence knowledge development. However, the research participants raised complaints about inefficiencies, poor communication due to language barriers, and inadequate attempts to address the issue. Despite this, most of the participants were satisfied with the factors mentioned above except for services and diversity of faculty. Students developed cultural competence through a cross-cultural experiential learning program. These findings are also supported by extant studies on the issues in Thailand (Chuangchid, 2018).

5.2 Students' Perspectives on the Effectiveness of the Program

This study showed that the role of inter-university activities in fostering cross-cultural competence can also be understood through the lens of Lave and Wenger's (1990) theory on situated learning. For instance, as Thai students participate in international inter-university activities, they actively engage in social practices and interactions that facilitate co-creation and transformation of their cultural practices (Lave & Wenger, 1990). This immersion in new cultural environments enables Thai students to learn and internalize cultural norms and practices, thus promoting cross-cultural competence.

The study also proved that students' perspectives on the success of these inter-university activities in enhancing cross-culturalism appear to be positive. The findings further established that the involvement of specialized international organizations, such as AUAP (Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific), WFUNA (The World Federation of United Nations Association), CGNK (Centre for Global Non-Killing, CIRAD-FIUC (Fédération Internationale des Universités Catholiques), ASAIHL (Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning) and IAUP (International Association of University Presidents), either independently or with partners, improved the nature of international inter-university activities by making them more collaborative, participatory, wide in scope, and focused due to the established track records of these organizations in organizing such activities. Therefore, through the broad and interdisciplinary collaboration between specialized organizations and parties involved in international student activities, students' cross-cultural exposure is enhanced. In particular, the acknowledged that deficiencies are addressed such as insufficient English language proficiency and the lack of learning environments that foster cross-cultural capabilities, which would have put Thai students at a disadvantage in terms of free labor mobility within the region. These findings align with Vygotsky's theory on the connection between cognitive development and community. As Thai students participate in inter-university activities, they engage in socio-cultural interactions and collaborative learning experiences that facilitate cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). These experiences provide them with opportunities to develop higher mental functions, such as critical



thinking, problem-solving, and cultural understanding, which are crucial for effective communication and collaboration in diverse cultural contexts.

In sum, students' perspectives on their cultural competence affirmed that these activities exposed them to the fact that cultural knowledge, awareness, and cooperation are essential to understanding diverse cultures. The results indicated improvement in student's ethnocentrism and a bias towards the unfamiliar culture. Similar responses were also echoed in Kantamas (2022) findings on Thai students studying English in China. Limitations of the study include the small sample size and lack of follow-up with students in school settings. These limitations must be acknowledged, as the findings may not be generalized to larger classes or different genders. There is also a possibility of social desirability bias, and the students were not monitored over time to determine if their attitudes changed.

6. Conclusion

This study revealed that the internalization of Thai University through international interuniversity programs is effective in enhancing students' cross-cultural competence. The result reflects the propositions of key authors such as Deardorff's (2006) cross-cultural attitude strategies, the works of Williams (2001), and Martin and Vaughn (2007), which highlights the importance of fostering attitudes conducive to effective intercultural communication and collaboration as well as explication of the components of cultural competence, emphasizing the need for comprehensive understanding and adaptation to diverse cultural contexts. According to Lave and Wenger's (1990) work on how individuals engage in the co-creation and transformation of cultural practices through active participation in communities of practice, inter-university activities foster the development of cross-cultural competence by facilitating collaborative learning experiences among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, as intercultural competence becomes increasingly relevant, it is essential to employ different approaches, such as participative instruction models that incorporate intercultural dynamics within ASEAN using methods and platforms that focus on empowering students with diverse backgrounds from member countries.

Furthermore, a larger number of regional participants and key players must be involved in these activities to take advantage of the opportunities available through ASEAN integration. In fact, Vygotsky (1978) and Leont'ev (1978) research on the relationship between cognitive development and community also emphasize the role of social interaction in shaping individuals' cognitive processes and cultural understanding. Therefore, by participating in international inter-university activities, students not only enhance their cultural competence but also contribute to the collective cognitive development within their academic communities.

Although there are areas that require improvement, nonetheless, the study demonstrates the value of regionalization and internationalization in inter-university activities for fostering cross-cultural competence among Thai university students. We believe that the potential impacts of ASEAN integration on Thailand, particularly in terms of socioeconomic and political-cultural aspects, depend heavily on the country's citizens' intercultural competence. The economic opportunities and diverse markets present in the region present a unique opportunity to create a cultural melting pot, in addition to its abundance of natural resources. Also, by deliberately integrating intercultural development activities with structured and collaborative reflection and drawing upon a range of theoretical perspectives to elucidate the underlying processes and potential benefits of such initiatives, students can acquire fundamental abilities and terminology relevant to cultural competence that they can apply throughout their ongoing education and personal growth.

In conclusion, our research findings suggest that inter-university activities play a crucial role in promoting a global learning environment and enhancing Thai students' cross-cultural competence. These activities provide opportunities for Thai students to develop cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities essential for effective intercultural communication and collaboration. Furthermore, participation in international inter-university activities exposes Thai students to diverse cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives, fostering their cultural competence and cognitive development. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions of higher learning prioritize the implementation and expansion of inter-university activities to foster cross-cultural competence among Thai students. As a recommendation for further study, further study

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is required to expand the scope to cover universities in all regions of Thailand with more participants because the study has high impact in the academic arena and potential for creating new knowledge regarding the success of ASEAN student mobility program too.

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