

**Exploring Student's Experience to International Exposure: A Phenomenology Study of Learning Program  
(Study at Intercultural Communication and Self-Development)**

**Asri Essada Nurachmah<sup>1</sup>**

*Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Indonesia.*

**Andi Nursyamsi Amin**

*Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Indonesia.*

**ABSTRACT**

Vocational education not only encourage students to practice what theories brought to them but also supported them to be able to engaged with some international activities that is done by either internal institution or private organization. Learning program is one of the international activities that connects one of Polytechnic students in Singapore and Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang's students. It is a program that is held every once a year and acquire students to solve the problem from the issues given by the facilitators. The limitation of this research is four students from Business Administration Department. This 12-day program consisted of 59 students and 6 facilitators with diverse cultural and environmental backgrounds and disciplines, requiring them to interact together to discuss three social projects and generate 6 problem-solving ideas. This research uses qualitative-phenomenology method where four students from Business Administration Department were in-depth interviewed regarding the program. It aims to explore of student's experience to international exposure during the program. After conducted a program, there are some evaluations showed up such as: self-efficacy, hands-on experience, and adaptation's encouragement are three key points to be able to networks globally. After completed the research, the finding shows that students felt an eye-opening experiences, gaining self-efficacy, and global mindset.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, Self-Development, Self-Efficacy, International Networks, Learning Program.

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<sup>1</sup>E-mail Corresponding Author: [asriessada@gmail.com](mailto:asriessada@gmail.com)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The educational developments of the current generation are continuously monitored through UN programs and down to the national level. In order to contribute to the fulfillment of the SDGs and the President's goal of improving welfare and educational equality, institutions are required to provide not only theoretical and practical provisions but also other collaborative programs that can develop students to be ready to enter the industrial world and global competition. Preparation for both of these requires adaptation and open-mindedness so that the fields of study are broad and varied, so that they are expected to be able to socialize with the environment both in comfort zones and more dynamic conditions. One strategic instrument implemented to bridge this need is a cross-country experiential learning program. This program is an annual event that involves lecturers, students, and other related stakeholders for 12 days doing the social project in a pointed area of South Sulawesi.

The authors believed that by contributing to this program, students gain so many eye-opening experiences especially the atmosphere whenever they want to talk with others. They would use a lot of facial expression, gestures, and maybe some slang words just to make every conversation understandable to all communicators. It is acceptable that the end students will understand each other yet the deeper understanding and the moment when they gathered and discussed were significantly different with the international student. Most of the internal students were silent and some of them just pretended they understood but actually they did not. The significance of this study lies in both its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it brings together established frameworks in communication and self-development to explain how cultural background can transform learning processes. Practically, it offers insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers on designing pedagogical interventions that harness the affordances of digital technologies.

Students not only improve their ability to handle cultural differences but also experience a renewed sense of purpose in their language studies, making the process more engaging and effective. Diverse and complex cultures make it more difficult to communicate effectively in the international workplace. Intercultural communication competence is essential for students engaged in the increasingly internationalized educational program and tertiary students who are entering the workplace (Liu et al., 2022). Not to mention that students are obliged to work globally however, before entering the workplace, students need to be practiced and joined at some international events held by the institution to train some interpersonal skills. Given that Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) enables individuals to navigate cultural misunderstandings and communicate effectively across diverse backgrounds. ICC can help individuals learn and adapt to different cultures and establish effective communication and interaction by respecting the norms of people from other backgrounds. In the Learning Program program, there were approximately 59 students, 6 facilitators that came from different backgrounds such as Indonesia, Melayu, Chinese, and Tamil. These points encourage students to know and to respect each other in terms of their religion, habit, and etc. The Intercultural Communicative Competence firstly exposed by Byram, it is actually a systematic approach to understanding how language learners develop both

linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding simultaneously. Students must become referees who can manage communication and interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds. Students need to learn to step out of their perspectives and worldviews (Hicham et al., 2025). Moreover, interactions from the participants intercultural communication variables in action, such as mindfulness, motivation, positive attitudes toward people from diverse backgrounds, empathy, humility, and openness (Xu, 2022). Students who were involved in the Learning Program program also experienced homestay for 3 days and 2 nights in order to gain deeper information related to the pain points from the project given by the committees. One of the related references mentioned that homestays and a combination of studying and practical activities increased the willingness of participants to engage in intercultural communication, and fostered greater open-mindedness and tolerance in the preservice teachers (Lu & Habil, 2025).

Besides ICC, the author will explore about Anxiety or Uncertainty Management (AUM). Anxiety-Uncertainty Management theory was developed in the 1980s and 1990s by William Gudykunst, as an extension of Uncertainty Reduction theory (URT) (Lund & Walston, 2020). Uncertainty particularly characterizes the early stages of the information search process, wherein students struggle to come to terms with their research ability and formulate questions and processes through which to identify and synthesize knowledge.

The Learning Program acquired students to be able to communicate with one another, share knowledge into their actions, feel empathy to the local communities etc., however, students seemed confused in several days and needed to process everything clearly until they reached what exactly the goal was. Although they came from various backgrounds, they speak, write, and discuss in English. Student's perceptions of themselves, their thoughts and beliefs, the obstacles they encounter while learning English, cultural contrasts between their native language and English, and the dynamics of the instructor-learner relationship contribute significantly to their anxiety in English as Foreign Language (Minda, 2026). Students need to think one or two sentences in their local language (*bahasa*) then translate to English in which they need to think twice and sometimes the energy runs out easily.

In the phase of improving self-development experience, Kolb's theory about Experiential Learning Cycle used to provide statements that related to the research. The concept of experiential learning is often associated with the application of active and practice-oriented modalities such as project-based learning, internships, clinical placements, service-learning, and industry-partnered projects. These approaches have consistently reported benefits, including enhanced technical proficiency, improved transfer of knowledge to real-world contexts, the development of transversal skills (e.g., communication and teamwork), increased student satisfaction, and indications of better employability upon graduation (Villarroel Henríquez et al., 2025). In the 12-days of making social projects, students need to practice Design Thinking methodology as a framework of problem solving that is delivered by real-world contexts. They set some solutions to the local communities and hope that their pilot projects will be beneficial for the locals. In applying this framework, there are three parts that are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation. The utilization of Kolb's learning cycle promotes an

active synergy between cognitive skills—like critical thinking and inquiry—and socio-emotional capacities, including empathy and collaborative dialogue. Through an embodied learning process, theoretical concepts are constantly tested against lived experiences. This framework suggests that the immediacy and directness of an educational program drastically amplify student involvement. Consequently, this deep engagement not only enhances the overall learning quality but also ensures that the acquired insights are retained more permanently. Research on the effectiveness of experiential learning has revealed it can enhance critical thinking, help learners develop a deeper understanding of the topics, and support lifelong learning (Ehlert & Brennan, 2025). By integrating Experiential Learning with an emphasis on social entrepreneurial self-efficacy and intentions, the program offers a transformative approach tailored to developing countries' socio-cultural and economic contexts while combines active engagement, observation, reasoning, and emotional experiences to foster critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and practical skills—essential for addressing complex social challenges (Al Issa et al., 2025).

Internationalization activities in higher education require students to develop psychological adaptability relevant to global needs. The key characteristic of this readiness is rooted in possessing a global mindset, a cognitive capacity that enables individuals to understand, appreciate, and interpret cross-cultural phenomena without being trapped in ethnocentric bias. Through this perspective, students no longer view cultural differences as communication barriers, but rather as learning spaces to expand their flexibility of thinking (Hamid et al., 2024). This global mindset not only actively encourages students' personal transformation, enabling them to position themselves adaptively within the diverse ecosystem of global society but also maintain universal developmental structure while adapting pedagogical, communication protocols, and assessment approaches to honor cultural values and learning preferences. (Hruby, 2026).

The integration of a global mindset and concrete actions will foster a strong sense of global readiness in students (Pane et al., 2025). This readiness goes beyond formal linguistic competence to encompass psychological independence, emotional openness, and self-efficacy as they resolve sociocultural conflicts in the field. Programs based on direct international exposure, such as the Learning Program, provide a stimulus that forces students to step outside their interpersonal comfort zones. One of the platforms that can help them is the availability of internet-based tools that can be used to create a platform that students can access to enhance their intercultural awareness and strengthen their professional identities by engaging with them geographically and culturally (Gulko et al., 2026). When students successfully manage anxiety and negotiate new perspectives with local communities across countries, they simultaneously actualize the main indicators of global readiness as the basic capital for developing a resilient personality. Towards the Educational partnerships can also address these challenges by training professionals in adaptive techniques tailored to local contexts, fostering innovation within available resource constraints (Chau et al., 2025).

The uniqueness of the Learning Program () program lies in the integration of the Design Thinking methodology, which places empathy as the primary foundation of students' interpersonal interactions. This humanistic approach requires participants to immerse themselves directly in

local communities to fully understand social realities. Through in-depth observation and participatory interviews, students actively absorb the obstacles and real needs of the communities they partner with in the project. This process of immersing themselves in others' feelings effectively breaks down sociocultural barriers and trains the emotional sensitivity of participants across countries. This deep empathetic understanding then sparks students' critical thinking to design appropriate social innovation solutions (Robledo et al., 2025). These field dynamics prove that empathy in Design Thinking is not merely a theoretical concept, but an active communication skill that must be practiced. Ultimately, the unique characteristics of the program successfully transform students' egoistic perspectives into global social concerns. Successful completion of these social projects, in turn, strengthens students' interpersonal readiness and personal maturity before they enter the professional world.

The Learning Program () program is often evaluated quantitatively based solely on administrative satisfaction or outcomes, yet the psychological dynamics, cultural tensions, and interpersonal communication barriers experienced by students during direct interactions with local communities are often overlooked. In reality, student readiness for international exposure does not develop instantly, but rather emerges from a complex and anxious adaptation process. Without a thorough understanding of how students interpret these sociocultural challenges, universities will struggle to assess the program's effectiveness in shaping participant maturity. Therefore, the primary research question centers on the urgency of exploring in-depth the essence of students' lived experiences related to their interpersonal readiness and self-development within the program. The focus of this research question is: how does participation in the Learning program transform students' self-development in facing international exposure?

While there is extensive literature on the impact of study abroad programs on students, most previous studies have focused on conventional, one-way academic mobility within the modern campus environment. Furthermore, previous research methodologies have been dominated by quantitative approaches that measure readiness variables using static numerical scales. This research fills this research gap by applying a qualitative-phenomenological approach to capture the emotional dynamics, empathy, and perspective negotiation that quantitative surveys cannot capture.

This study aims to evaluate and deconstruct students' readiness for international exposure through a phenomenological lens in the Learning Program. Specifically, this research seeks to identify how students manage intercultural communication anxiety and adapt their interpersonal competencies in the field. Furthermore, this study aims to map the stages of student self-development transformation, from the development of social empathy to the formation of a resilient and open-minded mindset.

The novel of the research stems from research that focuses on the conceptual integration of intercultural communication competency (ICC) theory and Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle in the context of a Design Thinking-based social innovation project. Unlike typical global readiness research, this study offers a novel perspective that positions the "Empathy" stage in Design Thinking as a key stimulant for interpersonal communication and a catalyst for student

personality development. Through phenomenological analysis, this research successfully formulated a global readiness model based on in-depth reflection on concrete actions in local communities.

Theoretically, this research enriches the body of knowledge in business communication and developmental psychology by providing a conceptual model of how social empathy transforms individuals' interpersonal competencies in multicultural environments. Practically, the results of this study provide empirical guidance for higher education administrators and international curriculum designers to develop mobility programs that focus not only on cognitive aspects but also on socio-emotional empowerment. This policy contribution is crucial to ensure that investments in international programs produce graduates with global readiness and personal maturity relevant to the needs of the professional industry.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The qualitative research design in this study is constructed as an inductive-exploratory approach that aims to explore, deconstruct, and understand social reality from the subjective perspective of the participants. The main objective of this qualitative design is to capture the essence of students' life experiences in a complete and in-depth manner. This approach was deliberately chosen because the phenomena of international exposure readiness and self-development are complex, dynamic, and highly contextual psychological and interpersonal processes. The author used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA as an approach is still in its relative infancy, first articulated in the 1990s as a means of offering a qualitative approach that was focused on personal experience and firmly embedded within psychology (MacLeod, 2019). In this study, 4 students from the Business Administration Department were interviewed and the result interpreted from one answer to another.

Through this design, researchers can explore how personal meanings, emotional changes, and empathy development are constructed by students during interactions in the Learning Program.

A purposive and criterion-based sampling strategy was used to select students who had participated in at least one learning activity during their program. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from business administration, engineering, and accounting using origin language that is Bahasa Indonesia. The sample was gender-balanced and included participants aged 19-21 years, enrolled in the first-second level of academic year. Ethics approval and informed consent were obtained, and recruitment was supported through referrals from department and international office. Data was gathered through semi-structured direct interviews in which were 10-15 min long, were conducted using an interview guide organized into four main thematic blocks: (i) perceived value of experiential learning, (ii) development of professional skills, and (iii) global adaptation. All interviews were video recorded with permission and supported by field notes. Credibility was enhanced through the use of a consistent protocol, peer debriefing after interview rounds and selective member checks on key interpretations.

## **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This section thoroughly discusses the findings of the research. It is suggested the author write 3.1 for the result, while the discussion section is written 3.2. (Example: 3.1 Result and 3.2 Discussion) The content may include narrative explanation, tables of statistical outputs that have been reformatted to be more informative (direct copy-pasting from statistical software is not recommended). The results and discussion section should be written in Times New Roman, font size 12 pt. Meanwhile, table titles should be written in Times New Roman, font size 11 pt, and centered.

### **3.1 Result**

#### **a. Perceived Value of Experiential Learning**

All informants agreed that the primary value of this program lies in the ability to adapt to new environments, initiate conversations in a foreign language, and persist in uncomfortable situations or situations where it's difficult to respond or interact. Students experienced all stages of the experience holistically, from language skills and analytical thinking to high adaptability and problem-solving skills.

*"We never expected this project to be completed. It turns out that to solve the problem, we had to deepen our empathy and find out what this MSME really needed, and then translate it into prototypes based on the various ideas that emerged." (Interviewee 1, 2026).*

#### **b. Professional Skills Development**

The international exposure in this program significantly tested and developed students' soft skills. Informants reported increased confidence in cross-cultural interpersonal communication, learning new values and cultures, learning new social terms, being able to lead themselves and their groups, and contributing to initial data collection. This was both enjoyable and valuable for personal development.

*"At first, I was very anxious and doubtful about whether I would be able to integrate into group discussions with international students. But after learning the steps and being myself, I knew I would enjoy it. I felt much more confident in opening up conversations, negotiating, and discussing." (Interviewee 2, 2026).*

#### **c. Global Adaptation**

Living with limited exposure to the outside world was not a barrier to participating in this program. When two nations unite to carry out a project, culture shock and communication anxiety are inevitable in the first few days, and this is normal and very human. This orientation process is important for students to validate their feelings so they can finally integrate and develop the mental readiness to contribute on a global scale, even if only in the initial stages and in neighboring countries. However, it is all worth it for the provisions students gain to prepare for their next steps in their studies.

*"Living and collaborating with people from different national backgrounds in stressful situations has taught me to appreciate different ways of working. At first, I found it difficult to blend in because of the different speed of thinking, but then I relearned the whole process every night, both at home and in a relaxed atmosphere with them. We had*

*many discussions about how to study in Singapore, what the consequences are, how to manage stress and so on. The world keeps turning, and that rotation consists of various different cultures and nations. From there I learned that we must think broadly, globally, and be open-minded to change. This program has just finished, I am no longer afraid of facing an international environment; I feel ready to seek work experience both nationally and globally." (Interviewee 4, 2026).*

## 3.2 Discussion

### 3.2.1 Implementation between Theory and Practice through Learning Program.

The findings in the first theme confirm that the international readiness of Business Administration students is not shaped by the accumulation of cognitive theory in the classroom, but rather by the transformation of concrete experiences. The phenomenon experienced by P1 reflects David Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle, specifically the shift from the Concrete Experience phase to Reflective Observation. When students are required to engage with real-world community problems, they are forced to abandon their theoretical assumptions taught in class. This process is essential for understanding the realities of industry and business, where field uncertainties must be responded to with flexible thinking, rather than simply remaining silent or fixated on theoretical studies.

### 3.2.2 Strengthening Professional Self-Efficacy Through Design Thinking

Design Thinking is the freshest and most recent concept students have embraced. Until now, their problem-solving processes have focused solely on specific grand theories or have never even been taught in class. However, when this program implements The Design Thinking framework to complete their projects, the practice of cross-cultural communication, the ability to sharpen empathy for both fellow participants and the local community, and the ability to negotiate within multicultural teams require a balance between the affective and behavioral aspects of the students themselves. The key to this success lies in fostering social empathy. When students are encouraged to actively listen to solve social projects, they simultaneously reduce their communicative anxiety. As a result, their self-efficacy increases as they realize they are capable of producing internationally recognized solutions, as they are interacting with international students.

### 3.2.3 Identity Deconstruction: From Local Mindset to Global Readiness

The interviewee's in-depth reflection on her readiness to face global challenges demonstrates a process of adaptation in her ability to care for herself, those around her, and the environment. This model serves as the basis for Michael Byram's ICC framework. The global adaptation phase in this program is not just a simple adaptation, but rather an achievement of Critical Cultural Awareness. Students successfully overcome the anxiety phase by suspending disbelief about the workings of other cultures. A strong mentality and acceptance of new cultures that can be formed from this intense life experience are the main indicators of

global readiness. The results of this phenomenological study confirm that international exposure based on social projects in the field is far more effective in shaping students' global personality character than any academic mobility.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This qualitative-phenomenological research successfully evaluated the readiness of students at the Ujung Pandang State Polytechnic to face international exposure through the Learning program. Data analysis of four participants confirmed that this international mobility program, based on social innovation projects and Design Thinking, acted as an effective catalyst for student self-development. Field dynamics demonstrate that global readiness is not formed instantly through classroom theory, but rather emerges from a cross-cultural communication process that combines concrete experiences, critical reflection, and strengthening socio-emotional aspects. This program actively supports students in transforming their communication anxieties into mature interpersonal competencies, while simultaneously increasing their self-efficacy in solving real-world problems in multicultural environments. The measurement of the effectiveness of tacit knowledge transfer and absorption in this study relied entirely on students' subjective perceptions through interviews (self-reported data). This approach has the potential to introduce response bias, where students' assessments regarding theoretical understanding may be influenced by momentary emotional factors while completing the survey.

Theoretically, this study concludes that Kolb's Experiential Learning model, combined with Byram's intercultural communication competency (ICC) model, can be implemented, as it aligns with the interviewees' responses, which indicated a shift from a local mindset to a global mindset. Practically, this study recommends that higher education institutions integrate this international community service-based learning model into their formal curriculum. Strategic investments in programs that require direct field involvement, such as Learning Programs, have proven to produce graduates who excel not only academically but also possess the personal maturity and cultural flexibility relevant to the needs of the global professional industry. Therefore, it is clear that students' readiness for international relations can be achieved if opportunities to participate in multicultural programs are greater, both in quantity and quality. In order to enrich this research, future research is expected to expand the scope of the investigation by using mixed-methods or quantitative longitudinal methods to empirically measure the long-term impact of the integration of the Kolb and Byram model on students' readiness for international engagement. Furthermore, further research should also explore variations in the implementation of this curriculum across higher education institutions with different socio-cultural characteristics, as well as involving perspectives from industry stakeholders as users of graduates, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of international community service programs on a broader scale.

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