Between colleagues and communities: Students' lived experiences in the university for development studies third trimester field practical programme, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural competence is increasingly positioned as a core graduate attribute in development-oriented higher education, yet the scholarship underpinning this claim has been constructed largely from Global North settings, international mobility schemes, and short classroom encounters. This study describes students' lived experiences of cultural diversity and team interaction during community immersion in the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) of the University for Development Studies (UDS), Ghana, a mandatory, credit-bearing, two-year programme in which interprofessional and multiethnic student teams live and work in rural communities for seven to eight weeks annually without resident supervision. The study described how students experienced cultural diversity, how they navigated team interactions, and how these experiences evolved across Year 1 and Year 2 of participation. The analysis is oriented by four theoretical resources, Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, Experiential learning theory, Group development theory and Cultural Intelligence Theory. A hermeneutic phenomenological design was employed, generating data through thirty-five individual interviews, eight focus group discussions with fifty-four students, and four coordinator interviews. Findings revealed three experiential structures: cultural encounter as disorienting arrival; identity under productive pressure; and team interaction as movement from fragmentation to cohesion. Students initially encountered difference as protocol breach, fear, and linguistic exclusion; subsequently as embodied participation, empathy, and inventive strategies such as ethnicity-matched household interviewing; and finally, as an enriched rather than diluted cultural selfhood. Cohesion consolidated around the fourth week of each immersion and again, at a higher level, in Year 2. The study concludes that multicultural learning in TTFPP is a temporally nested, community co-produced, and necessity-driven process in which discomfort functions as the productive entry point of learning. It recommends that UDS institutionalise pre-departure cultural orientation focused on interpretive preparation rather than discomfort prevention, incorporate multicultural competence as a named and assessed programme outcome, treat team composition as a deliberate design variable with minimum linguistic capacity requirements, and formalise community elder roles as recognised support structures.

Keywords: Community Immersion, Cultural Diversity, Experiential Learning, Ghana, Higher Education, Multicultural Competence, Team Interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

The claim that graduates should be able to work across cultural differences has moved from the margins of higher education policy to its centre. Two decades after Deardorff's (2006) Delphi study produced the first consensus model of intercultural competence, the construct now underwrites internationalisation strategies, graduate attribute frameworks, and professional accreditation standards worldwide. Recent scholarship has broadened it further, towards capabilities accounts attentive to institutional conditions (Morriss, 2023), towards multicultural literacy as a dimension of global citizenship (Zhou & Colomer, 2024), and towards the demonstration that cultural intelligence yields its strongest learning effects when students are given authentic opportunities to exercise it in real community settings (Qiu et al., 2024). Where such encounters are engineered, they are usually engineered across national borders. The dominant delivery vehicles in the literature are study abroad, international service-learning, and internationally mixed classroom teams (Chan et al., 2021; Jin & Sercu, 2025). This orientation carries an implicit assumption that culturally significant differences are something students travel to meet.

In much of Africa, this assumption does not hold. Ghana alone comprises more than one hundred ethnic groups speaking approximately seventy-nine languages, with major groupings including Akan, Mole-Dagbani, Ewe, Ga-Dangme, Gurma, Guan, Grusi, and Mande (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021), and with a history of inter-ethnic conflict

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in the northern regions that gives the question of how young people learn to work across difference a weight beyond the pedagogical. Yet the Ghanaian intercultural competence literature has attended principally to international students and external partnerships (Abdulai, 2019; Alhassan et al., 2020).

The University for Development Studies' (UDS) Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) offers an unusually well-specified setting to correct this. UDS was established by Provisional National Defence Council Law 279 of 1992 with a mandate to blend the academic world with that of the community for the total development of northern Ghana in particular and the country as a whole (Provisional National Defence Council, 1992; Tanko, 2015). The TTFPP, launched in 1993, operationalises this mandate. It is a mandatory, credit-bearing, two-year, team-based community immersion in which first- and second-year students are deployed in teams of approximately ten members, balanced by gender and drawn from multiple faculties, to rural communities where they live and work for seven to eight weeks in each year (University for Development Studies [UDS], 2020, 2021). In Year 1, teams conduct a participatory community needs assessment and produce a community profile; in Year 2, they return to that foundation and design development interventions. Teams reside communally without a resident university supervisor and are assessed across six equally weighted components administered by the Directorate of Community Relations and Outreach Programmes (DCROP), under a rule by which a zero score in any single component produces a zero total. In September 2023, the Directorate dispatched 8,746 students to communities across twenty-two districts (DailyGuide Network, 2023; UDS DCROP, 2023). Three features make this programme analytically valuable rather than merely large. First, its diversity is layered: interprofessional (different faculties bring different epistemic cultures and vocabularies), ethnolinguistic and religious (team members drawn from northern and southern Ghana must communicate across genuine linguistic difference), and community-facing (the host community's cultural world may be unfamiliar to every member of the team). Second, its pedagogy is participatory: the participatory rural appraisal tradition on which the programme draws requires students to treat indigenous knowledge as authoritative and to occupy facilitating rather than expert roles (Chambers, 1994). Third, and most distinctively for the study of learning over time, its structure is iterative: the same student returns to community immersion a year later, having already lived through one cycle.

Despite three decades of operation, what happens inside TTFPP teams has not been systematically documented. Existing scholarship on the programme has examined outcomes, benefits, and challenges (Kwoyiga, 2024; Kwoyiga & Apusigah, 2019; Mohammed & Yirbekyaa, 2018; Mwingyine et al., 2017; Tanko, 2015) rather than the experiential texture of cultural negotiation itself. The gap is simultaneously contextual, in that no comparable account exists of extended residential, peer-governed, interprofessional immersion in a sub-Saharan African setting; methodological, in that the multicultural competence field remains dominated by cross-sectional survey designs that measure levels of competence but cannot reach the meaning-making through which it forms; and practical, in that DCROP currently designs orientation, supervision, team composition, and assessment without evidence about the processes those decisions are meant to support.

1.1 Research Objectives

i. To describe how students experience cultural diversity during TTFPP community immersion, including the forms of difference encountered, the emotional and cognitive responses these elicited, and the meanings students attached to these experiences.
ii. To examine how students navigate team interaction within interprofessional and multiethnic TTFPP teams, including the processes through which teams move from initial fragmentation to cohesion and the strategies students develop to manage diversity.
iii. To compare students' experiences of cultural diversity and team interaction between Year 1 and Year 2 of TTFPP participation, identifying how the iterative two-year structure shapes the development of multicultural competence over time.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The analysis is oriented by four theoretical resources, selected because each explains a distinct facet of the experience under description and because the layered character of the TTFPP setting requires their combination. Van Manen's (1990, 2014) hermeneutic phenomenology supplies the study's orientation to lived experience. Its central methodological claim is that genuine understanding of a lifeworld begins when its taken-for-granted features are encountered as strange and therefore as requiring interpretation. This analytical predicts that the earliest and most disorienting moments of immersion, when students' pre-reflective cultural frameworks fail them, will be the most revealing of how culture is ordinarily inhabited, and it directs attention to the texture of those moments rather than to students' retrospective evaluations of them.

Experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984, 2015; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023), read alongside Kiely's (2005) account of transformative disruption, explains how such moments become learning. Concrete experience alone

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is inert; it becomes competence when it is processed reflectively and tested in subsequent action. Kiely's contribution is to specify that the experiences with the greatest transformative yield are the dissonant ones. This framing allows the article to interpret protocol breaches, fear, and linguistic exclusion as productive entry points rather than as programme failures. Group development theory (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), with the multicultural qualifications introduced by Wei et al. (2023), provides the temporal grammar for team interaction, while intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) explains why sustained cooperative co-residence under shared accountability alters attitudes towards ethnic and religious out-groups. Harrison and Klein's (2007) variety construct supplies the vocabulary for the point at which teams began to treat their own composition as a resource.

Cultural Intelligence Theory (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007) anchors the study's normative assumption. It treats the capability to function effectively across cultural differences, comprising metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural dimensions, as learnable through authentic experience rather than as a fixed trait or the substitution of one cultural identity for another, so that productive engagement with difference should enrich rather than erase participants' cultural foundations. Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, they were held in productive tension with the data throughout the hermeneutic circle, and the findings reported below prompt refinements to two of them, discussed in Section 4.2.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Multicultural competence: from attribute to process

Deardorff's (2006) model organises intercultural competence into requisite attitudes (respect, openness, and curiosity), knowledge and comprehension, internal outcomes (adaptability, empathy, and an ethnorelative view), and external outcomes (effective and appropriate behaviour). Susan et al. (2012) address part of this by adding a critical consciousness dimension, insisting that competence includes awareness of power and structural inequality rather than politeness across difference alone. Morriss (2023) presses further, arguing that institutions, not only individuals, must be assessed for the conditions they provide. Kubota (2016) and Dervin (2010) supply a sharper critique: models that treat cultures as bounded units risk reproducing the essentialism they claim to dissolve. Developmental accounts offer a partial answer. Bennett's (1986, 2017) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity charts movement from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations, while King and Baxter Magolda (2005) describe intercultural maturity as the integration of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development, with the hallmark of advanced maturity being a shift from categorical to relational cultural knowing. However, both frameworks are derived from Global North populations, and their applicability to intra-national African diversity remains an open empirical question rather than a settled premise.

2.2.2 Experiential and community-based learning

Experiential learning theory supplies the mechanism by which an encounter becomes competence. Kolb's (1984, 2015) cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, an elaboration of Dewey's (1938) argument that education proceeds through experience, has been widely applied to service-learning and field practice (Passarelli & Kolb, 2023), and equally widely critiqued for its tidy sequencing and thin treatment of context and emotion (Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Morris, 2020). Kiely's (2005) longitudinal work on service-learning offers the most useful corrective for present purposes: the transformations he documented were triggered not by pleasant encounters but by specific moments of dissonance that destabilised participants' existing frameworks. Collopy et al. (2020) similarly find that intercultural competence gains in service-learning depend on reciprocal rather than charitable relationships with communities, and Cruz-Feliciano (2023) warns that community-based experience can reproduce extractive relations when the community is positioned as a site of learning rather than a partner in it. Crespi et al. (2021) identify problem-based learning as particularly effective for transversal competencies including communication, teamwork, and intercultural negotiation, and Omondi (2025) reports enhanced experiential reasoning and teamwork competencies in an East African implementation. The university literature–community engagement in Africa (Aryeh-Adjei & Adu-Marfo, 2025; Boyer, 1996) establishes the institutional case for engagement but rarely descends to the level of what students actually undergo inside it.

2.2.3 Diversity, teams, and team interaction

Research on culturally diverse teams converges on a conditional finding: diversity is a double-edged resource. Harrison and Klein's (2007) distinction between separation, variety, and disparity clarifies this. Where difference is construed as variety that is, as a distribution of non-substitutable informational resources it enhances creativity and problem-solving; where it is construed as separation or disparity, it fragments teams. Van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) and Pieterse et al. (2013) show that the outcome turns on process variables such as learning orientation and team reflexivity rather than on composition alone, and Guzman-Rodriguez et al. (2023) confirm the mediating role of individual characteristics in multicultural team performance. Tuckman's (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) forming-storming-norming-performing sequence remains the standard temporal account, although Bonebright (2010) documents

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how loosely it has been applied and Wei et al. (2023) find that its stages do not map cleanly onto multicultural teams, where cultural negotiation may recur rather than resolve. Allport (1954) specified equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support as conditions under which contact reduces prejudice; Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis confirmed the effect while showing that it operates more broadly than the original conditions require.

2.3 Research gap

Three limitations of this combined literature matter for the present study. First, the interprofessional dimension of diversity has been theorised almost entirely in clinical education (Reeves et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2024) and scarcely at all in community development or African rural contexts, even though disciplinary differences are superimposed on ethnic and linguistic difference in programmes such as the TTFPP. Second, temporality is under-examined: most studies observe a single placement, so nothing is known about whether and how the experience of difference changes when the same students return for a second year. Third, and most fundamentally, the literature is dominated by measurement. Studies establish that competence increases; few establish what the increase consisted of experientially. Lived experience, in van Manen (1990, 2014). This study addresses these gaps by providing a systematic phenomenological account of how domestic students in a sub-Saharan African university experience cultural diversity and team interaction during extended, iterative, community-based immersion.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study is underpinned by social constructivism, which holds that meanings, including the meanings people attach to cultural difference, are produced through interaction, language, and shared interpretive conventions rather than discovered as objective facts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998). It employs a qualitative approach realised through a hermeneutic phenomenological design in the tradition of van Manen (1990, 2014). Hermeneutic rather than descriptive phenomenology was selected because the research objective concerns not only what students experienced but how those experiences were interpreted within the institutional and cultural horizons of the programme, a question that requires interpretive engagement. The design was interpreted through critical hermeneutics, which adds to Gadamerian interpretation a moment of suspicion directed at what an account takes for granted and at the relations of power, including disparities of language and of access to community knowledge within teams, that shape whose meanings prevail (Kinsella, 2006).

3.2 Study Context and Setting

Fieldwork was conducted within the operational landscape of the TTFPP. UDS is a multi-campus public university headquartered in Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana, with campuses at Tamale, Nyankpala, and Dungu. The study setting comprised the campuses from which the programme is administered and the rural host communities to which teams were deployed. Two deployment landscapes were represented. Teams were deployed, in the main, to communities in the Northern, North East and Savannah regions, characterised by savannah livelihoods of smallholder agriculture, agro-pastoralism, and small-scale trade, chieftaincy-based traditional governance, and a plural religious landscape in which Islam, Christianity, and traditional religion coexist. In addition, under DCROP's regional rotation policy, first-year teams in the 2023/2024 cycle were deployed to communities in the Ashanti Region and second-year teams to communities in the Ahafo, Bono and Bono East regions, an area of forest-zone livelihoods, Twi-dominant communication, and the Asante chieftaincy system (GBC Ghana Online, 2024; UDS Graduate School, 2024). The contrast was analytically deliberate: in one deployment or the other, students from every region of Ghana encountered a community cultural world substantially unfamiliar to them. Community identities were withheld and replaced with anonymised codes throughout.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised all first- and second-year UDS undergraduates who participated in the TTFPP during the 2023/2024 academic year, together with the coordinators and supervisors who oversaw them. Given the scale of this population, purposive criterion sampling was used (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015), with the fundamental criterion that participants had directly experienced the phenomenon and could articulate it. Sampling proceeded across three linked levels. At the community level, sites were drawn from both deployment landscapes described above. At the team level, eight student teams were selected against four criteria: representation of at least four distinct ethnic groups per team, established from DCROP placement records; representation of at least three faculties or schools; gender balance consistent with the Field Guide's recommended composition; and accessibility and willingness confirmed by team coordinators. At the individual level, all members of each selected team were invited to the focus group discussion,

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and thirty-five students were selected for individual in-depth interviews to span cohorts, faculties, ethnic and religious backgrounds, team roles, and host-community ethnolinguistic contexts.

The realised sample comprised 93 participants: 54 students across eight focus group discussions, 35 students in individual in-depth interviews, and four TTFPP coordinators and supervisors. Individual interviewees spanned both cohorts, multiple faculties, major ethnic and religious groupings, and both leadership and ordinary member roles. The distribution of participants across cohorts was as follows: among individual interviewees, 14 were Year 1 students, and 21 were Year 2 students; among focus group participants, 28 were Year 1 and 26 were Year 2 students, with the eight groups distributed across both cohorts.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were generated through focus group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews, coordinator interviews, field observations, and reflective journaling, supplemented by institutional documents including the Year 1 and Year 2 Student Field Guides and assessment rubrics (UDS, 2020, 2021). Consistent with van Manen's (1990) characterisation of the phenomenological interview as a conversation in which researcher and participant jointly explore the meaning of an experience, all encounters followed thematic guides rather than fixed schedules, and questions were phrased to elicit experiential accounts rather than opinions.

Year 1 and Year 2 experience was captured through three complementary strategies. First, cohort sampling: the eight focus groups were distributed across the first- and second-year cohorts. Second, repeated engagement: where field conditions permitted, first-year teams were engaged at more than one point during the seven-to-eight-week immersion. Third, retrospective comparison: second-year teams participated in extended single sessions at or immediately after the close of their immersion, and their accumulated two-year participation supplied a comparative vantage point on how the second year differed from the first.

The eight focus groups were conducted in community settings, typically under trees or in community centres, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, moderated facilitatively by the researcher with a research assistant recording group dynamics and non-verbal interaction in a structured observation protocol. The thirty-five individual interviews lasted 40 to 60 minutes and were conducted in private spaces within or near the community; for first-year participants, they were scheduled during the immersion period so that emerging themes could be followed up while students were still embedded in the experience. Coordinator interviews were conducted during campus visits or by video call. Data collection was conducted primarily in English, the language of instruction at UDS and the shared medium across the participant groups; participants were encouraged to use Dagbani, Twi, Hausa, or Ewe terms where these expressed an experience more precisely.

3.5 Data Analysis

All discussions and interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transferred to encrypted, password-protected university cloud storage within 24 hours, and deleted from the recording device. Transcription was verbatim, under the researcher's supervision, using consistent conventions: ellipses for pauses, parentheses for laughter and notable non-verbal features, square brackets for clarifications and translations, and verbatim recording of code-switching with English translations in square brackets. Transcripts were checked against audio before analysis, and participants were offered the opportunity to review, clarify, add to, or withdraw their material.

Analysis followed interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009), structured procedurally by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) and oriented throughout by van Manen's (1990, 2014) hermeneutic commitments. Transcripts entered the analysis cumulatively in interview order, with new codes created wherever existing codes failed to capture a segment of meaning. Saturation was assessed formally rather than asserted, following Guest et al. (2020): a saturation tracking grid recorded each transcript's contribution against a thematic structure provisionally established from the first ten interviews and the focus group corpus. No new major theme emerged after the ten base interviews; new codes within existing sub-themes continued to appear up to the cluster of interviews 28 to 30, and no substantially new code emerged after interview 30; interviews 31 to 35 were confirmatory and illustrative. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) caution that themes are interpretive products rather than pre-existing entities, this is reported as a documented analytical judgement rather than an objective end point. Taguette (version 1.4, open source) supported corpus management, hierarchical coding, and retrieval.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University for Development Studies Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving a full explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Participants were assured of voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the confidentiality of their responses. Rigour was pursued through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility rested on prolonged and repeated engagement with selected teams, triangulation across focus groups, individual interviews, coordinator

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interviews, field observations, and institutional documents. Reflexivity was treated as an epistemological commitment rather than a procedural step (Finlay, 2008; van Manen, 2014). The design is predominantly cross-sectional in its treatment of individual participants: the inter-year arc and the fourth-week threshold reported below are reconstructed from accounts given at or near a single point in time rather than observed as change within the same persons, and claims of programme effect are therefore reported as participants' attributions rather than as established causal relationships.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Analysis of the corpus yielded three experiential structures directly addressing the study's objectives: cultural encounter as disorienting arrival (Objective 1); identity under productive pressure (Objective 1); and team interaction as movement from fragmentation to cohesion (Objectives 2 and 3). Themes are reported because they recur across interviews, focus groups, and coordinator accounts, not as frequency counts; the analysis reports patterns of meaning rather than statistical prevalence. Participants are identified by interview number, year of study, faculty, and anonymised community.

4.1.1 Theme One: Cultural Encounter as Disorienting Arrival

Objective: To describe how students experience cultural diversity during TTFPP community immersion.

Participants across both cohorts described their first days in the community as marked by an acute and often unanticipated awareness of difference, experienced simultaneously inside the team, between the team and the community, and within students' own assumptions. The chief was not happy with what we did, coming to the community without his notice. Therefore, we learned a lot from it. (Interview 1, Year 2, IDS, Community B, July 10, 2024). A participant recounted a second breach, this time of the ceremonial welcome:

> *When we were in the community, we went to the chief's palace, and the chief welcomed us by giving us water. Some people did not understand; they had never entered a chief's palace before, so they refused the welcome of the water. Sometimes, it was disturbing.* (Interview 1, Year 2, IDS, Community B, July 10, 2024).
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> *Unfamiliar community ritual produced fear before it produced understanding, and the resolution was investigative rather than avoidant: The community observed traditional rituals involving noise and gatherings. At first, some team members were scared, but we quickly adapted. By consulting the community chief, we learned the schedule and how to prepare, which helped us feel more comfortable and integrate better.* (Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, July 10, 2024).
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> *Disorientation also took the form of prior assumptions meeting counter-evidence. Two participants described arriving with ethnic stereotypes that immersion dismantled: Initially, I assumed that the Konkomba people might be violent. However, during our stay, they welcomed us with accommodation and food, and the chief even assisted us on our way home. (Interview 8, Year 1, Agriculture, Community A). I realised that some of my assumptions about people from different backgrounds, such as the Dagomba being violent or exclusive, were misconceptions. Living together, everyone was treated equally, which changed my perception and helped me appreciate the cultural diversity.* (Interview 5, Year 1, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, July 10, 2024). Not every arrival was fearful. A southern participant deployed to the north described an orientation of anticipation rather than apprehension:
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> *I had never been to the North before, so the cultural practices were different from what I was familiar with. I anticipated new experiences and approached them with curiosity rather than fear.* (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, July 12, 2024).

The wider interview corpus confirmed and extended this pattern. Participants 28, 29, and 30, members of a mixed Christian and Muslim team deployed in a traditionalist community, each described being frightened by a sudden nocturnal ritual involving loud metallic sounds until the team learned to consult the chief about the ritual calendar. One articulated how religious apprehension inside the team was worked through by practical negotiation:

> *When I arrived in the traditionalist community, I was part of a team comprising both Christians and Muslims. This initially created some religious apprehension, but I gradually learned to adjust to different perspectives, beliefs, and ways of life. One memorable challenge occurred when some Muslim team members needed to leave for Friday prayers at a nearby mosque while we still had pending work to complete for an assessor. However, we discussed the situation and reached a compromise that enabled us to fulfil both obligations.* (Interview 28, Year 2, Economics, Community C, July 12, 2024).

The corpus also disclosed a harder dimension: encounters with practices students found ethically troubling rather than merely unfamiliar. Participants 19, 20, and 21 described discovering that their host community continued to practice female genital mutilation and delayed male circumcision, defended locally as teaching children the endurance of pain; their team advised respectfully against the practices while continuing to work within the community's authority

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structures. As early disorientation gave way to routine, cultural learning was described as occurring through embodied participation rather than observation. Communal cooking, initially strange, became a revelation of belonging:

> *Every Friday, people in the community come together to cook and eat in one big group. At first, it felt strange to me because we do not do that in my area. However, witnessing the joy and sense of belonging it created made me understand the value of engaging with others*. (Interview 5, Year 1, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, July 18, 2024).

Agricultural participation produced knowledge that coursework had not:

> *At a cocoa farm, I learned how to break cocoa pods and gained practical knowledge beyond what we learned in school. With my teammates, I learned that my way of doing things is not always the only way*. (Interview 4, Year 2, Agriculture, Community C, July 18, 2024).

Ceremonial participation and sport were repeatedly named as sites of cultural and linguistic learning:

> *I participated in local events, such as funerals and naming ceremonies, which taught me about their customs and traditions*. (Interview 8, Year 1, Agriculture, Community A, July 18, 2024). *The community organised a football match between the students and the community members, and that was where I learned some of their language*. (Interview 2, Year 2, Business/Economics, Community D, July 18, 2024). *One memorable experience was attending the funeral of our landlord's mother. I observed how they danced and engaged with one another in the evenings. As the community did not have a formal school, teaching the children and interacting with them left a lasting impression.* (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, July 18, 2024).

The recurrence of the same participatory occasions across independently deployed teams- weekly communal meals eaten from a shared bowl (participants 11, 12, and 34), community football (participants 13 to 18), cocoa farming (participants 22, 23, and 24), all-night funerals, and evening teaching (participants 25, 26, and 27). One account joined participation, teamwork, and linguistic exclusion in a single reflection:

> *Through this experience, I learned the importance of teamwork and emotional control. Some of my most memorable moments included attending an all-night funeral and teaching children in the community during the evenings. Playing games with my teammates also helped us bond and develop stronger relationships. Because I had never been to the northern part of the country before, I expected to encounter cultural differences. However, I faced only a few cultural challenges. Language was a major difficulty because many people spoke Dagbani, while only a few spoke Twi or English. This sometimes made me feel isolated and left out of conversations*. (Interview 25, Year 1, Communication, Community D, July 20, 2024).

Language as lived barrier and creative bridge: Language emerged as the most operationally consequential dimension of difference, producing both the sharpest experiences of exclusion and the most inventive team responses. Fragmentation occurred simultaneously within teams and between teams and communities:

> *This was difficult. The common language they spoke was different from the one I was accustomed to. The difficult aspect was that my group members were not able to speak it, so communication was hard, but we found a way to interpret for each other*. (Interview 2, Year 2, Business/Economics, Community D, July 20, 2024).

Dependence on a single translator carried direct operational costs:

> *Most of the community spoke local languages, such as Konkomba, and not English. We relied on a lead translator during data collection. Without that person, we had to postpone activities, which was challenging. This taught me to be patient and adaptable.* (Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, July 20, 2024).

Teams responded with structural innovations. The first was linguistic sub-grouping:

> *Communication was sometimes challenging because some community members spoke Dagbani, and not all teammates knew the language. We organised our team so that at least one person in each subgroup could communicate in the local language, ensuring data collection went smoothly*. (Interview 5, Year 1, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, July 20, 2024).

Second, and analytically the most significant, this extended the principle into ethnicity-matched household interviewing:

> *We had Konkomba, Asante, and Dagomba members. In the community, we found that the same groups were present. So, we were able to divide ourselves: when we got to a particular house and there was a Dagomba person there, the Dagomba member would take the lead in the interview*. (Interview 2, Year 2, Business/Economics, Community D, July 20, 2024).

Alongside these adaptations, participants described the interior experience of exclusion:

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> *Most community members spoke Dagbani, and only a few of us could speak it. Occasionally, the community would speak Dagbani among themselves, and I felt left out, which made communication difficult. (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, July 20, 2024). Being from the south, I sometimes face language barriers. I primarily communicated in English or Twi and requested clarification when necessary. This taught me patience and adaptability in interactions.* (Interview 4, Year 2, Agriculture, Community C, July 20, 2024).

The wider corpus extended the repertoire and marked its limits. Participants 11, 12, and 34 deliberately paired Twi and Dagbani speakers within fieldwork subgroups; participants 13 to 18 and 35 practiced ethnicity-matched interviewing; participant 33 learned basic Asante phrases and Konkomba greetings from teammates as a deliberate act of affiliation. By contrast, participants 19, 20, and 21 and participants 28, 29, and 30 described the vulnerability of teams containing no speaker of the community language. Sustained residential proximity produced forms of understanding participants consistently described as different in kind from prior knowledge:

> *Living in areas with no electricity or network and witnessing limited access to healthcare made me appreciate the challenges people face and strengthened my empathy*. (Interview 4, Year 2, Agriculture, Community C, July 22, 2024). *Seeing early marriages in the community, where underage girls were pregnant and sometimes lost their pregnancies, was impactful. The lack of accessible water and the distances they travelled to collect it deepened my empathy and respect for their daily struggles.* (Interview 9, Year 2, IDS, Community C, July 22, 2024).

One account described a reversal of the expected direction of care, in which the student became the recipient of community support:

> *During the second week, I fell ill in a remote community without a hospital or pharmacy. The community members and my teammates helped me reach the district hospital, cared for me, and paid my bills. Their kindness and support deeply affected me*. (Interview 5, Year 1, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, July 22, 2024).

Others located empathy in sustained relational work and in a recalibrated sense of their own position:

> *Teaching children in the community, especially when others were reluctant, taught me to be patient and respectful. Interacting with them helped me understand their perspectives, be more assertive, and communicate respectfully.* (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, July 22, 2024*). I realised that we are all different. Some of us are fortunate in ways that others may not be fortunate. You see people who are behind, and it makes you more aware of your position.* (Interview 3, Year 1, IDS, Community A, July 22, 2024).

4.1.2 Theme Two: Identity under Productive Pressure

Objective: To describe how students experience cultural diversity during TTFPP community immersion.

Immersion surfaced ethnic and religious identities that the campus environment had allowed students to hold lightly, producing an awareness that was uncomfortable and generative in equal measure. Religious composition inside the team became salient as soon as the team entered a community whose religious world differed from both:

> *Initially, this was challenging because our group consisted of Christians and Muslims, while the community we were assigned to was mainly traditionalist. Initially, there were some adjustments due to religious differences, but we soon realised that the community was welcoming*. (Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, July 22, 2024).

Sustained cross-religious co-residence produced reframing rather than mere tolerance:

> *As a Muslim, I had a limited understanding of Christian and traditional practices. Being in a room with people from different tribes and religions helped me realise that we are all worshipping the same God, just in different ways. I now respect other religions and understand that we are all pursuing the same higher purpose.* (Interview 3, Year 1, IDS, Community A, July 22, 2024).

Accommodation was concrete and required explicit negotiation of personal practice:

> *For example, when I prayed aloud in a room shared with other members, I was asked to lower my voice. I adjusted to respect their preferences while maintaining my practice*. (Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, July 22, 2024).

Across the wider corpus, religious difference was negotiated through the logistics of shared living and assessed work rather than through doctrinal discussion. Participants 13 to 18 and 35, leading teams containing Muslim members, described scheduling fieldwork around daily prayer times as ordinary team maintenance; participants 28, 29, and 30 described a sharper test, in which Muslim teammates needed to travel to a neighbouring mosque for Friday prayers at the moment an assessor's visit was expected, and the team negotiated a compromise honouring both obligations. One described a shift from cultural isolation to reciprocity:

> *We understand ourselves as students, so certain things, we have to mingle with the community to learn how they do their things, and then they also learn something from us*. (Interview 1, Year 2, IDS, Community B,

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July 22, 2024). Others described a move from cultural certainty to cultural humility, and from anxiety about difference to anticipation of it:

They helped me understand that people are different, and that I need to adapt my approach to their cultural context while still being myself. (Interview 4, Year 2, Agriculture, Community C, July 22, 2024). *I now expect to encounter different practices and view them as opportunities to learn. In the communities, people value peace, support each other, and live harmoniously, which taught me to support my colleagues better.* (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, July 22, 2024). *I used to assume that living with people from different backgrounds would be difficult. My experience showed me they could treat us with respect and hospitality, making cultural differences normal and manageable*. (Interview 9, Year 2, IDS, Community C, July 22, 2024).

4.1.3 Theme Three: Team Interaction as Movement from Fragmentation to Cohesion

Objective: To compare students' experiences between Year 1 and Year 2 of TTFPP participation.

Participants described a consistent temporal arc in team life, from initial caution and fragmentation, through a period of friction and negotiation, to established cohesion. The pace varied; the shape did not. The intra-immersion arc and its threshold: The most temporally precise account located the turn in the fourth week and identified disciplinary conviction as the source of early friction:

Initially we argued a lot, because we came from different departments (medical, nutrition, midwifery, education) and each thought they knew best. But as time passed, we realised we shared a common goal and learned to collaborate. By the fourth week we were united, dividing the work fairly and combining our efforts effectively. (Interview 3, Year 1, IDS, Community A, August 5, 2024)

Cohesion was not only a function of elapsed time; specific practices catalysed it, and community provision was implicated in the most frequently named of them: Initially we cooked separately, but when the community provided food, we cooked and ate together, which encouraged a sense of unity. (Interview 5, Year 1, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, August 5, 2024).

Certain members performed identifiable norm-building work:

Certain team members always worked to bring everyone together, listened to all sides, and promoted harmony. (Interview 6, Year 2, Agriculture, Community B, August 5, 2024).

Coordinator observation, drawn from a decade of supervision across many cohorts, corroborated both the sequence and its threshold:

In over a decade of supervision, I have seen this pattern reliably. Week one: cautious, polite, awkward. Weeks two to three: testing, sometimes conflict, sometimes withdrawal. Weeks four to five: something shifts; I call it the cooking moment. When teams start cooking together voluntarily, I know they have turned a corner. Weeks six to eight: genuine collaboration. They have built something they cannot easily take apart. The communities notice it too; by week seven, the community sometimes cannot tell clearly which students come from which background. (Coord-1, TTFPP Coordinator, Nyankpala Campus, *August 5, 2024*).

The inter-year arc: how Year 2 differed from Year 1**:** Participants with two-year perspectives described a second, longer arc operating across the programme years. The first year was characterised as functional at best; the second as qualitatively different:

During the first year, teamwork was weak because many members were not actively involved. By the end of the first year, and throughout the second year, the team became much more cohesive and collaborative. (Interview 7, Year 1, Engineering, Community E, *August 5, 2024*). *In the first year, the bond was moderate but functional. In the second year, new members brought energy that strengthened the team, and we are still in contact today.* (Interview 9, Year 2, IDS, Community C, *August 5, 2024*).

The pattern recurred across the wider corpus: participants 25, 26, and 27 described first-year cohesion as merely functional and second-year cohesion as excellent, and participants 28, 29, and 30 traced a movement from poor initial teamwork to a strong, mutually accommodating unit by the second year. A coordinator's observation cut across the student accounts and qualified any simple equation of cohesion with learning:

The students who develop the deepest multicultural competence are rarely the ones who had the easiest teams. The ones who grow most are the ones who faced real difficulty (real cultural conflict) and stayed. Comfort can be the enemy of learning here. (Coord-2, Community Supervisor, Tamale Campus). This observation is consistent with the student data reported above, in which the incidents participants recalled most vividly and credited most explicitly with changing them the chief's displeasure, the frightening ritual, the illness in a community without a clinic, and the experience of sitting outside a conversation conducted in Dagbani were without exception the difficult ones (Coord-1, TTFPP Coordinator, Nyankpala Campus; August 5, 2024).

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4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Disorientation as the Productive Entry Point

The experiential arc described by the participants begins with disorientation and moves through sustained engagement towards adaptive competence. Read through van Manen (1990, 2014). Students who declined the chief's ceremonial water or approached the palace unannounced were not making deliberate cultural errors; they were acting from pre-reflective frameworks that the community context abruptly rendered inadequate. In van Manen's terms, that inadequacy is the beginning rather than the failure of cultural understanding, since it brings taken-for-granted frameworks into collision with alternatives and generates the dissonance that interpretation requires.

Kiely's (2005) concept of transformative disruption explains why these moments outperform smoother encounters pedagogically. The team frightened by nocturnal ritual did not withdraw; it consulted the chief, obtained the ritual calendar, and thereafter anticipated events that had previously been alarming. This is Kolb's (1984) cycle running under the conditions of residential immersion, with the community itself supplying the reflective resource. This finding does suggest that the relevant institutional question is not how to prevent disorientation but how to ensure that students possess the interpretive and relational resources to convert it, which is a question about preparation and support rather than about insulation. It requires the critical consciousness dimension that Susan et al. (2012) add to Deardorff's (2006) architecture: an awareness that cultural respect and ethical judgement can pull in opposite directions, and that competent practice consists in holding both rather than collapsing one into the other.

4.2.2 Embodied Learning and the Limits of Transmission

The most powerful cultural learning participants reported did not occur through instruction. It occurred through communal cooking, cocoa farming, funeral attendance, evening teaching, and football. This is consistent with Kolb's (1984) premise that concrete experience is the origin of meaningful learning, but the data support a stronger claim: the knowledge produced through embodied participation was different in kind from what transmission can deliver. What changed was not only what the participant knew about Ghanaian farming but how she held her own practices, which became visible to her as choices rather than as the natural order of things. King and Baxter Magolda (2005) identify this movement from categorical to relational cultural knowledge as the hallmark of advanced intercultural maturity, and Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis specifies the conditions under which contact produces it. The TTFPP satisfies Allport's (1954) conditions with unusual completeness: equal status within the team, a common and consequential goal, cooperative interdependence enforced by an assessment structure in which no member can succeed alone, and institutional sanction.

4.2.3 Language as the Most Consequential and Most Generative Form of Difference

Language proved more operationally consequential than any other dimension of diversity: more visible than ethnicity in its daily effects, more exclusionary than religion in its felt experience, and more generative of innovation when navigated well. Barna's (1994) account of language as a stumbling block to intercultural communication is confirmed by participants who felt left out when community members spoke Dagbani among themselves and by teams whose data collection halted when a translator was unavailable.

Three distinct relationships between language and competence are visible in the data. The first is empathetic: the experience of linguistic exclusion produced a felt understanding of what it is to be unable to participate in a group's meaning-making, which is itself a competence, since it equips future professionals to recognise and remedy such exclusion in their own practice. The second is organisational: the necessity of managing linguistic diversity produced institutional innovations, sub-grouping by language capability and, most strikingly, ethnicity-matched household interviewing. The latter deserves emphasis. It converts the precise feature of team composition that created the communication problem into its solution, and it corresponds exactly to Harrison and Klein's (2007) variety construal of diversity as a distribution of non-substitutable resources. The third relationship is developmental and reciprocal: language learned through community relationships, phrases picked up at a football match, greetings learned from teammates, enabled deeper relationships, which in turn generated further language learning. This is the reciprocal determinism of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory operating over a timescale that only extended immersion makes available. Teams containing no speaker of the community language did not develop these strategies; they developed dependency on a single intermediary and absorbed the operational risk that dependency carries.

4.2.4 Team Interaction on Two Nested Timescales

The temporal structure of team interaction is the article's principal contribution to the study of group development in community-based learning. The intra-immersion arc cautious formation in week one, friction and testing in weeks two and three, consolidation from week four, and sustained collaboration through weeks six to eight is broadly consistent with Tuckman's (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). However, two features of the data qualify the classical model in ways that align with Wei et al.'s (2023) findings on multicultural teams. The first concerns what precipitates the transition. In Tuckman's account, norming follows from the internal resolution of interpersonal conflict. In these

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teams, the transition was repeatedly attached to a specific, community-mediated practice: cooking and eating together, often enabled by the community's provision of food. The coordinator's term, the cooking moment, names a threshold that is not internal to the team at all. This supports repositioning the host community from the contextual background of team development to an active co-producer of it. The second concerns nesting. Participants with two-year perspectives described the arc repeating at a higher level: Year 1 teamwork weak or merely functional, Year 2 cohesive and collaborative. Because team membership changes between years, this cannot be explained as the simple persistence of relationships. What appears to carry forward is dispositional and procedural: students return knowing that early friction is survivable and temporary, that difference is workable, and that specific strategies sub-grouping, ethnicity matching, elder consultation, prayer-time scheduling are available to them. In Kolb's (1984) terms, Year 1 supplies the concrete experience and reflective observation from which Year 2 begins at the stage of active experimentation. The iterative two-year structure, in other words, is not a duplication of the first year's learning but a different phase of a single cycle, and this is a design feature that shorter programmes cannot approximate by extending duration alone.

4.2.5 Enrichment rather than Erasure

Cultural Intelligence Theory (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007), whose premise that cultural capability is learnable and domain-general rather than a substitution of one cultural identity for another anchors the study's normative assumption, supplies the test the findings appear to pass: participants described an expanded cultural repertoire built on retained foundations rather than a dilution of cultural identity. The Muslim participant who concluded that "we are all worshipping the same God, just in different ways" did not describe attenuated faith but a reframing that left her own practice intact while enlarging her regard for others'. The participant who learned to "adapt my approach to their cultural context while still being myself" articulates this premise almost exactly. In terms of the theory, this is metacognitive rather than merely cognitive development: a change in how cultural knowledge is held rather than an addition to its content.

Two cautions are warranted. First, as noted in the findings, the absence of accounts of destabilisation may partly reflect participants' reluctance to report harm to a researcher affiliated with their own institution, and the claim is accordingly advanced as consistent with the available accounts rather than as demonstrated. Second, the coordinator's observation that the deepest development occurred among students who faced real conflict and stayed suggests that enrichment is not automatic. It is the outcome of difficulty successfully metabolised, which implies both that some students may metabolise it less successfully and that the programme currently has no mechanism for identifying them.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to describe students' lived experiences of cultural diversity and team interaction during TTFPP community immersion across Year 1 and Year 2 of the programme. The findings address the three research objectives in turn. Regarding the first objective to describe how students experience cultural diversity, the study found that students entered TTFPP communities and found their cultural bearings inadequate. The evidence shows is that this inadequacy was the beginning of their learning rather than its obstruction. Disorientation prompted enquiry, enquiry produced knowledge, and knowledge enabled practice, a sequence that recurred across independently deployed teams and was corroborated by coordinators observing many cohorts over many years. Students' cultural identities were enriched rather than eroded through sustained encounters, with participants describing expanded repertoires built on retained foundations.

Regarding the second objective of examining how students navigate team interaction, the study found that team interaction followed a consistent temporal arc from initial caution and fragmentation, through friction and negotiation, to established cohesion. Teams developed specific strategies to manage diversity, including linguistic sub-grouping and ethnicity-matched household interviewing, the latter representing a higher-order competence in which teams converted their own heterogeneity from a communication problem into a capability. However, teams lacking a speaker of the community language developed dependency rather than ingenuity, indicating that composition sets limits on what adaptive strategies can achieve.

Regarding the third objective of comparing Year 1 and Year 2 experiences, the study found that the movement from fragmentation to cohesion operated on two nested time scales: within each seven-to-eight-week deployment, consolidating around the fourth week, and across the two years of participation, with Year 2 teams beginning where Year 1 teams had ended. The iterative two-year structure is not a duplication of the first year's learning but a different phase of a single learning cycle. The task for institutions is not to smooth the encounter but to prepare students to interpret it, to compose teams that can act on what they interpret, to recognise the community as a partner in the learning rather than its backdrop, and to name and assess multicultural competence as the outcome the programme has, for three decades, been quietly producing without measuring.

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5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations arise directly from the study's findings and are addressed to the University for Development Studies, the Directorate of Community Relations and Outreach Programmes, and universities operating comparable community-engaged learning programmes. First, UDS should institutionalise a structured pre-departure cultural orientation. It should not attempt to pre-empt disorientation, which the evidence indicates is the productive entry point of learning. It should equip students to interpret and act on disorientation when it arrives: protocols for entering a community and approaching traditional authority.

Under the present framework, a student can score highly across all six components while remaining within their own ethnic group. DCROP should develop assessment criteria in consultation with the community and include indicators drawn from these findings, such as evidence of participation in community practices and demonstrated strategies for managing linguistic diversity. Team composition should also be treated as a deliberate design variable: each team should, where feasible, include at least one member proficient in the primary language of the host community. DCROP should review its placement records annually to monitor compliance with this threshold and adjust allocations accordingly.

The absence of resident supervision emerged as both the source of the deepest peer-governed learning and the largest operational risk. The implication is not to install resident supervisors, which would displace the peer negotiation that produced the learning, but to build lightweight support that does not substitute for it. Scheduled remote check-ins, a clear escalation route for conflicts exceeding a team's capacity, and formal recognition of the community elder role.

For universities considering or operating comparable programmes, three findings transfer. First, duration and totality matter more than frequency: the learning documented here depended on students living inside difference rather than visiting it. Second, iteration is a distinct resource; a second cycle is not a repetition of the first but the experimentation phase of a learning cycle begun a year earlier, and programmes designed as single placements forgo this. Third, the host community is a pedagogical agent whose contribution should be recognised, resourced, and sustained.

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