



Latin American University Exchange Students’ Experiences with Intercultural Sensitivity Development: The Role of Emotions

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ABSTRACT

We studied the affective component of intercultural competence: intercultural sensitivity. Specifically, this mixed methods study will be used to understand how Latin American students experienced their experience studying abroad in the UK, including what and how they learned and changed. The study explores the relationships between intercultural sensitivity and experiences of intercultural contact to predict the variables that impact its development. This study contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon of learning abroad, particularly in the context of UK higher education. Results suggest that emotions are key to the experience of studying abroad, both positive and negative, and these impact the ways that one learns about oneself and about others and one’s ability to reflect on one’s own culture as well as being open to a new culture.

Keywords: Global citizens, Higher education, Intercultural competence, Intercultural sensitivity, Study abroad.

This paper presents a study examining the experiences of Latin American students in the UK and the factors they identify as shaping the development of their intercultural sensitivity (IS). The Latin American population in the UK, now approximately a quarter of a million (Blair, 2019), has grown fourfold since 2001, making them the second fastest-growing non-EU migrant group in the country (McIlwaine, Cock, & Linneker, 2011, 2026). With the UK’s departure from the European Union and the resulting changes in the freedom of movement, it is

increasingly critical to understand the experiences of international students from other regions. This understanding not only informs institutions about the motivations and decisions of these students in selecting the UK as their study destination but also offers opportunities to foster environments that better support the development of IS. This research aims to explore IS development from the perspective of Latin American students, with a focus on changes in their identities and emotional responses to cultural diversity. The findings highlight potential relationships between acculturation strategies, identity development, and IS, providing valuable insights for host universities to create inclusive and supportive environments for international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalization has significantly increased international student mobility, presenting unique challenges as students adapt to new cultural and educational environments. Intercultural sensitivity and emotional management are crucial for their adaptation and success. This literature review highlights key studies and theoretical perspectives related to intercultural sensitivity and emotion among international students.

Intercultural sensitivity is the ability to recognize, respect, and adapt to cultural differences and is essential for effective interaction in multicultural settings. Milton J. Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) describes a continuum of stages (denial, defense, and minimization) to ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration) through which individuals can progress as they develop greater intercultural sensitivity and competence. His work focused on how individuals perceive and respond to cultural differences, and his model has become a fundamental tool in the field of intercultural education. The DMIS was one of the first theoretical frameworks to directly link the concept of intercultural sensitivity with personal development and intercultural competence.

Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) revised this model to emphasize the integration phase, where individuals adapt not only their behaviors but also their cultural identities through continuous interactions with diverse cultures. Bennett (2013) argues that in the contemporary era, the model requires consideration of not only individual adaptation but also the impact of globalization on collective cultural identity. This revision has influenced how educational institutions approach the teaching of intercultural competence.

Chen and Starosta's (1996) model offers a comprehensive view of intercultural competence by integrating affective, cognitive, and behavioral components, stressing the importance of attitudes and emotions alongside knowledge and skills. This study focuses on the gap between knowing and acting in intercultural sensitivity, which involves empathy and the rejection of ethnocentrism (Downing & Husband, 2002).

We adopt the Chen & Starosta model as the theoretical framework for this study because of the importance it places on the emotional component. The

management of emotions is critical for international students, who often experience stress, anxiety, and loneliness while adapting to new cultural and academic environments. Lazarus and Folkman's theory of stress and coping (1984) describes how individuals evaluate and cope with stressful situations. The context of international students has been used to explore how they manage the stress associated with cultural adaptation. Gross's emotion regulation theory in intercultural contexts (2015) explores how individuals manage their emotions when faced with significant cultural differences.

Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation (2001) posits that intercultural adaptation is a dynamic process involving personal growth and adjustment to a new environment. It includes factors such as cultural openness and the ability to manage stress. In this vein, Ward, Bochner, & Furnham (2001) integrated Kim's theory with Berry's acculturation model (1997), emphasizing the importance of both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Their combined model provides a comprehensive understanding of the adaptation process of international students.

The literature underscores the interdependence of intercultural sensitivity and emotional regulation in the adaptation of international students. Integrating theoretical models such as Bennett's revised DMIS, Deardorff's framework, Chen & Starosta's approach, Gross's emotion regulation theory, and the adjustment models of Gudykunst and Tabor & Milfont provides a comprehensive understanding of these processes.

METHOD

This study employs a phenomenological research design (Weber, 1949), integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. By investigating the lived experiences of participants (Converse, 2012), the research seeks to deepen insight into the development of intercultural sensitivity (IS) and the acculturation processes among international students.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the degree of intercultural sensitivity (IS) exhibited by international students in contexts characterized by cultural diversity and coexistence.
2. To analyze the meanings and interpretations that students attribute to their experiences within a culturally different environment, with a specific focus on their identity formation.

Participants

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy (Creswell, 2005) to recruit eight participants aged 20--29 years who were enrolled in the UK. Their prior international travel experiences varied; most had taken short tourist trips,

primarily within Latin America, whereas some had visited Europe and the USA multiple times. Only one participant had previously been to the UK, two had studied or interned in Europe, and one had lived abroad in Europe and North America during childhood.

Table 1. Participants characteristics (n = 8)

Come from		Studying Abroad Before		Arrival study level	
Mexico	4	Yes	2	High School	2
Salvador	1	No	6	Undergraduate	5
Ecuador	1			Master	1
Chile	2				
National identity		Living Abroad Before		Occupation	
Latino American	5	Between half-1 year	4	Studying	7
Latino American	2	Between 1-2 years	1	Working	0
+ Spanish	1	Between 2-3 years	2	Both	1
Latino American + French		Between 4-5 years	1		
Language level		Working Abroad Before		Actual Studying	
Proficiency	8	Yes	2	Undergraduate	2
English	4	No	6	Master	4
Proficiency English+French				PhD	2
International School		UK Residence			
Yes	3	Durham	1		
No	5	Manchester	2		
		York	5		

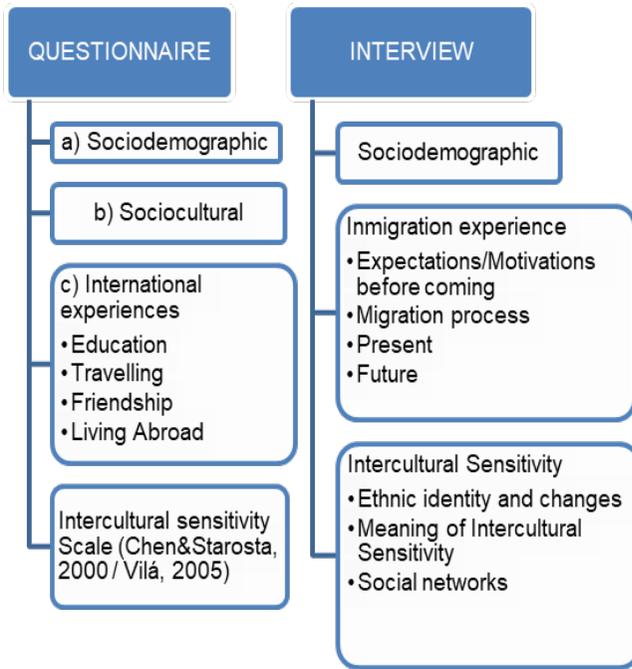
Data collection

We utilized interviews and questionnaires for data collection. The questionnaires provided detailed information about the adopted strategies, whereas the interviews assessed the participants' meanings behind these strategies.

The questionnaire included four sections: a) Sociodemographic information; b) Sociocultural aspects (academic level and occupation); c) International experiences (education, travel, friendships, living abroad); and d) Intercultural sensitivity factors measured by the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (24 items; Cronbach's alpha: 0.86) (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Spanish validation: Vilá, 2006). This scale, validated for adult college students, was appropriate for our study.

The semistructured interviews (Kvale, 2015) focused on key variables of intercultural inclusion (Passiatore et al., 2019) within a migration context (Eguiluz, 2017) and comprised three sections: sociodemographic aspects, immigration experiences, and intercultural sensitivity.

Figure 1: Procedure and instruments



Analysis

The questionnaires and interviews were conducted and analyzed in Spanish to ensure that the participants could express themselves freely and that their voices were accurately represented.

The study's research methods were approved by both universities' ethics boards.

Quantitative analysis was performed via SPSS25, with a focus on descriptive statistics, frequencies, and percentages. Qualitative analysis utilized NVivo12 for thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008; Lester, 2020). Information categorization was based on Chen's six characteristics of intercultural sensitivity and themes emerging from participants' narratives (Gibbs, 2012). The analysis followed the four steps of phenomenological analysis outlined by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003).

Figure 2. Method design

	QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE
DATA COLLECTION	Questionnaires + In-depth Interviews	Questionnaires
DATA ANALYSIS	Data systematization Categories (previous + emergings) Categories tree Validation categories (Tirangulation researchers + Chen&Starosta Intercultural Sensitivity Model)	Sata systematization Statistics analysis Profile dimensions Intercultural Sensitivity
	Convergence	Divergence / Discrepancy
	Integration findings with a systematic triangulation of perspect	
	Central themes and categories + Main Narrative / Discourse Findings	

RESULTS

International Experience and Acculturation in the UK

Arrival in the UK and feelings about the move

The participants discussed several motivations for moving to the UK. These generally fall into three main categories: personal experience, professional development and practical reasons.

First, it is the research that they do here that they do not have in other universities; the second thing is the culture because I have always been drawn to English or British culture, I wanted to experience it. In addition, third, I'd say that I was looking to experience living abroad, far from my family, I wanted that personal development (Miguel).

Table 2. Statements about arrival and present moment

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. <i>I feel comfortable living in Europe</i>	4	5	4,50	,535
2. <i>I found it easy adapt to living in Europe</i>	1	5	3,75	1,488
3. <i>My move to Europe was how I expected it to be</i>	2	5	3,62	1,061
4. <i>I experienced culture shock when I moved to Europe</i>	2	5	4,00	1,195
5. <i>I feel integrated into European culture and society</i>	2	5	3,50	1,309

The participants had both positive and negative expectations of British people having been told that ‘they would be more formal, more polite and more things like that’ (Miguel) but that ‘they say that English people are cold and that it’ll be difficult to find people to help you out or say come with me here or come along there’ (Hugo). For most, they were clear that they would be moving somewhere quite different from their country of origin:

I knew it would be difficult, but I didn’t think it would be so difficult. I mean, I’d say that El Salvador and England are completely different worlds; we don’t have anything in common, nothing at all (Diego).

Most reported positive things about the experience of living in the UK: discovering and learning new things, meeting people (Luis, Miguel, Marcelo, Hugo, Diego) and being shown around and helped out (Miguel, Marcelo). The arrival was often intimidating or uncomfortable but a positive challenge (Antonio). Meeting people from other countries and the international mix of UK universities (Miguel, Marcelo, Hugo) stood out as positive.

On the other hand, some participants reported more negative aspects of their arrival and first impressions of the UK. Some discussed having to leave things behind, such as their family stability, work, partners, and family, and having to adapt (Alicia, Gustavo). They noted that getting used to a new environment took time (Alicia), and they mentioned the difference in climate and food (Gustavo), which left difficult situations at home (Gustavo), and getting used to speaking the language (Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio) as aspects that were initially difficult to manage.

The extent to which the environment was international seemed to have an impact on the first impressions. When there were many nationalities, it was generally a positive thing, even when this was something many had not truly experienced before (Miguel, Marcelo, Hugo). Indeed, having an interest in meeting people from different places and being curious were seen as useful precursors. However, when the environment was less international, owing to the nature of the course or the residence, it was more difficult to adapt with only British people around (Gustavo, Antonio):

The majority of the people who studied with me and the ones around me were British, so I felt the issue of the language barrier most of all ... and like it made it harder to adapt very quickly ... it was difficult, the first 2 or 3 weeks, I found it hard and I barely came out of my room and stuff, so it wasn’t that pleasant (Gustavo).

The role of the university was another key factor in terms of teaching styles and the attitudes of staff and fellow students.

University is difficult, ... the way of teaching is very different from the Mexican way and more than anything I feel like it is a very lonely process, like they don't make a society, they are very individualistic and it is difficult to communicate with my classmates. (Allia)

Others felt that they experienced more independence and academic freedom through the teaching style (Marcelo) and that although it was challenging at first, it could lead to more opportunities for working and networking (Gustavo).

In general, these first impressions gave way to different feelings as they began to settle. Some claimed to be 'satisfied with the way of life here' (Miguel) or fulfilling their goals (Alicia, Antonio) (items 1, 2 and 3, Table 2) and reported feeling very happy with their current situation (Alicia, Hugo, Antonio) (item 1, Table 2). Although there were times when some felt frustrated or wondered if all the effort was worth it (Diego) (items 4 and 5, Table 2), most had 'lowered the volume' (Antonio) of their own culture to try to appreciate aspects of their new environment, saying that they felt 'very at home at this stage in my life' (Hugo). Some felt that they had assimilated more because the relationships they had formed and made an effort to understand the culture, and people made them feel more content (Alicia).

Social Relations

Support

The narratives about the support needed to embark on an international experience were broadly similar for most of the participants. Most mentioned their family and often their parents in particular to provide the emotional (and sometimes financial) support that gave them confidence in their ability to study abroad (Luis, Alicia, Gustavo, Hugo).

Some also mentioned their friends from their home country as important sources of support (Luis, Alicia, Gustavo) and financial support from their governments (Miguel). Some commented on the support provided by the University in terms of events (Miguel) and supervisors or tutors (Hugo, Antonio) and meeting people romantically (Alicia), through sport (Gustavo), or have made good friends with housemates (Miguel, Alicia). Most focused on the importance of finding good friends¹ in the UK. Four said that they had made good British friends (Marcelo, Gustavo, Diego, Antonio), but all eight discussed the importance of having friends from around the world. Perhaps this was because they were also navigating an international experience. This emerged as the main theme.

Friendship

For many, having friends who also spoke Spanish helped with the acculturation process (Luis, Marcelo, Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio). Indeed, on a practical level, their proficiency with the language had an impact on how well they initially settled: 'I think that knowing how to speak the language truly well definitely helps with that.' (Marcelo). They claimed not to be nervous (item 9, Table 2) and to have a better attitude (item 8, Table 2) toward interacting with people from other cultures since they moved to the UK, which is a good indicator of a positive process of acculturation and intercultural learning.

¹ We are defining a 'friend' as someone they spend time with outside of their timetabled academic study who they have met during their time in Europe.

Table 3: Intercultural Friendships

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. I have European friends	2	5	4,38	1,061
2. I have friends from Latin America	4	5	4,88	,354
3. I have friends from my country of origin	1	5	3,86	1,464
4. I have friends from many different countries	5	5	5,00	,000
5. Most of my friends have the same first language as me	2	4	2,88	,641
6. I speak other language (different to my first language) with most of my friends	3	5	4,00	,756
7. I find it difficult to maintain close friendships with people from different cultures to me	1	4	2,25	,886
8. My attitude to people from other cultures has become more positive since I moved here	3	5	4,25	,886
9. I am more nervous about interacting with people from different cultures since I moved here	1	3	1,75	,707

Three themes emerged: the importance of an international environment, the benefits of finding others who share their language and culture and the difficulty of forming relationships with British people.

Shared language and culture

Finding others who shared aspects of their culture or language, at least at the beginning, helped the participants settle (Luis, Marcelo, Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio).

International environment

Some also commented on the role of the university and noted that within the classroom, relationships were fine, but there could be more support for integration outside the classroom (Alicia, Gustavo), which was more difficult. The importance of an international environment and meeting people from around the world had a positive impact on acclimatization (Luis, Miguel, Marcelo, Gustavo, Diego, Antonio). The participants commented that they liked ‘that diversity of people’ (Antonio), finding it easier to get along with a more international group of people (Gustavo) and finding it ‘easier to make friends with other people who also come from far away’ (Miguel).

British people

The most dominant theme, however, was the extent to which they were able to establish relationships with British people. In general, the participants claimed that it was more difficult to make friends with local people than with other international students (Luis, Miguel, Diego, Marcelo, Gustavo, Antonio). Most said that they had fewer British friends, in part because they were in an international environment at the University but also because of cultural differences.

They discussed how it takes a long time to make relationships with British people (Antonio), who are ‘generally more closed’ (Diego), reserved (Antonio) or ‘not inclusive’ (Gustavo). This may be because there is not a shared sense of humor (Marcelo), because it is difficult to find things in common (Gustavo), or because it is simply difficult to relate to British people because they are established here (Luis, Miguel, Diego). There was a strong perception that British people are not close to their families and that the culture is very individualistic, cold, distant and closed (Miguel, Alicia, Diego, Antonio). Most also identified segregation between groups and that it is difficult to break into a group of British people. For this reason, they missed aspects of Latin American culture (Luis, Miguel, Gustavo, Hugo, Diego). Some speculated on the aspects of the culture that made them feel this distance, and they highlighted the polite, respectful nature of British culture as something that seemed to inhibit close relationships (Miguel, Antonio):

I don't believe English people because they are so courteous but so cold at the same time; they are so distant (Antonio)

Others commented that even when it is possible to make friends with British people, it is seen as because they are not ‘typical’—‘he is the “least English” English person who I know’ (Antonio). There was a lot of stereotyping when it came to judging whether they would relate better to people from different places.

In terms of British culture, participants spoke positively about social class, which they saw as more equal than the vast inequalities of Latin American countries (Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo). There were also positive comments in terms of security and social organization (Luis, Miguel, Antonio). The transport system was also viewed in positive light for being reliable and efficient (Luis, Alicia) and, importantly, having the freedom to go out, use public transport or walk alone without safety fears (Alicia, Gustavo, Diego, Antonio).

There were negative comments about issues related to food and drink. The participants made comparisons between British and Latin American food, with participants missing the latter (Luis, Miguel, Alicia), and some also lamented the lack of Latin food available (Luis), the cost and quality of food (Alicia) and the social interaction surrounding food culture (Luis). The British drinking culture was also identified as negative (Miguel, Alicia).

There were both positive and negative comments about social attitudes and values. British culture was seen as individualistic, cold, closed minded, distant (Miguel, Alicia, Diego, Antonio), overly correct, reserved and moderated, and therefore false (Miguel, Antonio). Three had experienced discriminatory comments (Miguel, Gustavo, Antonio). On the other hand, many participants saw British culture as responsible and punctual (Hugo), polite and courteous (Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo, Antonio), and accepting and integrating other cultures (Marcelo) (compared with assimilation policies, which they had seen in France). Several people commented that there was more freedom to behave in ways that you wanted without judgment (Gustavo, Diego, Antonio):

What I like most is the freedom that people have; people can do more things than in my country, and it is more accepted. ... there's not as much prejudice in English society; they are more progressive. (Diego)

Two participants gained insight from partners and their families, who presented new perspectives that they had not seen before, and this new way of seeing things in a different light enabled them to reassess some of their prior assumptions in a way that was very positive (Alicia, Marcelo).

It seemed that it was by forming close relationships that the participants were best able to unlock ideas about culture and begin to see different perspectives in a light that they had not done before and that are not possible virtually or from a distance. The fact that these relationships were hard to find at the outset perhaps meant that they had to do more work to get past the 'polite' and 'cold' exterior of British social relations, but for those that did so, the impact on their understanding and the acculturation process was profound.

Identity development

The participants were asked to define themselves from a list of terms. Most thought of themselves as international students (Luis, Miguel, Diego, Hugo, Antonio), but some selected other terms, including global citizen (Alicia, Hugo), transnational citizen (Marcelo), international citizen (Gustavo), and immigrant (Diego). These labels are often connected with the aspects of their identity that are important to them, which are explored below.

To define themselves, two of them used sociodemographic variables such as their gender, profession, nationality, or domicile (Luis, Miguel), and seven talked about the values and qualities they possessed (Miguel, Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo, Diego, Hugo, Antonio). These included being responsible, organized, and careful (Miguel, Alicia, Marcelo, Antonio), loyal and friendly (Alicia, Diego, Antonio), happy and fun (Alicia, Gustavo, Diego), hardworking and resilient (Alicia, Diego), knowledgeable and interested in learning (Marcelo, Hugo), curious and open (Gustavo, Hugo), thoughtful (Diego), quiet and slow (Marcelo), idealist (Gustavo), ambitious (Diego), adventurous (Hugo) and anxious (Antonio). One person mentioned the importance of the value of living and letting live (Miguel).

When asked whether this experience has changed how they identify themselves, five of the participants said that there would have been minor changes to the words they used (Luis, Miguel, Hugo, Diego, Antonio), whereas the other three said they would have used the same words but noted that they had changed in terms of the degree of emphasis (Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo). One participant felt that they had changed a lot as a person since they left their own country 'above all in empathy and kindness' (Diego).

However, for most, this change was incremental, for example, being more confident (Gustavo, Antonio) or more sure of themselves and who they are now (Alicia, Gustavo, Hugo). For some, it was difficult to be themselves at the beginning, but 'as you adapt, you are able to reaffirm who you are' (Gustavo). An important issue was feeling that they were more open, tolerant and less judgmental (Diego, Gustavo, Hugo):

However, I wasn't such an open person as I am now to different cultures, to get to know new people and places, that is something that I have acquired this year. (Hugo)

There was a feeling that even when the words they used to describe themselves were the same, they still felt that there had been a qualitative change in their way of being, for example, picking up traits they saw and liked in British culture, ‘like being more polite or complaining less about things’ (Marcelo).

They felt that being exposed to more cultural diversity had an impact on their sense of self and who they are (Diego, Alicia, Marcelo, Hugo). Having themselves reflected in another culture was seen as an opportunity to look at their own idiosyncrasies or ideas and consider where they come from. Many reported that they had grown in some way through the experience of living abroad (Diego, Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo, Hugo). Some thought that these realizations about how they had changed would be stronger once they returned home and had more chances to reflect on what they had done and seen.

I think that I am different, perhaps I am not going to truly notice until I get back and I reflect on it May be not change as a person, but grow, add more things to my rucksack to put it that way (Hugo)

Intercultural Sensitivity

Interculturality is generally understood as an interaction or a relationship (Luis, Miguel, Diego, Alicia, Marcelo, Hugo), which involves the capacity to engage with each other and develop a deeper understanding and acceptance of each other’s culture and work together (Hugo) when something new arises from the mixing of cultures (Diego) and when there is a genuine connection.

Some participants referred to the system of ideas that underpins different cultures as an important factor in defining both cultural diversity and interculturality (Luis, Marcelo, Hugo, Antonio). The participants said that their understanding of these ideas had broadened since being in the UK, perhaps because of greater cultural differences to which they were exposed (Luis, Miguel, Diego), and even if the understanding was similar, they saw cultural difference as a point of interest for mixing and learning about the ‘other’, and they felt they had the opportunity to experience and practice the ideas (Diego, Hugo).

Chen Intercultural Sensitivity Model

In this final section, we consider the above findings and relate them to the five dimensions (Table 4) and six characteristics identified by Chen and Starosta (1997) and draw together the findings from the interviews and questionnaires (all the averages that surpass the theoretical medium scores²) in considering the extent to which we found evidence of these aspects of IS development in the participants and their experiences.

² Theoretical scores have been calculated from the number of items of each dimension, as a reference of the minimum, maximum and medium scores (theoretical), scoring 1, 5 or 3 in all items, respectively.

Table 4. Participants' scores and theoretical scores of the intercultural sensitivity scale

	Min	Max	M	SD	Min Theor SC	M Theor SC	Max Theor SC
Interaction Involvement	26	32	28,6 3	1,9 2	7	21	35
Respect of Cultural Differences	18	29	24,3 7	3,7 0	6	18	30
Interaction Confidence	14	23	18,5 0	2,8 2	5	15	25
Interaction Enjoyment	10	15	12,7 5	1,6 6	3	9	15
Interaction Attention	10	13	11,2 5	1,1 6	3	9	15
ISTotal	87	105	95,5	6,5	24	72	120

The participants noted changes in terms of each of the characteristics of people with high IS identified by Chen and Starosta (1997).

Empathy and interaction enjoyment

Empathy was reflected in the ways they discussed understanding experiences with people who enabled them to see things from different perspectives (Miguel). For some, this learning about themselves reaffirmed who they are and the values they hold (Gustavo).

All the participants mentioned aspects of the experience they had enjoyed; experiencing different perspectives was something motivating and positive (Diego, Alicia, Hugo, Miguel, Antonio), and for some, this was key to underpinning the changes they experienced:

I've loved it, doing these things and feeling motivated to learn, to want to share these things It has been enriching ... I think that it will change my way of seeing things, seeing life (Hugo)

Involvement in interactions

The participants noted the importance of an international environment to stimulate involvement in intercultural interactions (Luis, Miguel, Marcelo, Gustavo, Diego, Antonio). They commented on the enriching nature of forming relationships with people of other cultures (Luis, Miguel, Diego, Alicia, Marcelo, Hugo). One key aspect to note was the importance of making contact with others and living, interacting and learning about others (Miguel, Diego, Alicia, Gustavo) to aid in the development of IS:

... it's like a driver of this sensibility to live abroad and like this experience of being alone, feeling different I think you can do that in your own country, but going abroad is much quicker and more effective. (Antonio)

Open Mindedness to Differences and Respecting Cultural Differences

The demonstration of open mindedness was a key aspect of the IS noted by many participants (Miguel, Alicia, Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio), and this was often related to how they approached similarity and difference. Many said that they felt that they were more open minded as a result of their experience in the UK (Diego, Gustavo, Hugo). All of the participants said that they felt a difference between themselves and others in the UK (Luis, Miguel, Marcelo, Gustavo, Hugo, Diego, Antonio), which was related to differences in terms of their mentality, language and background (Luis, Marcelo, Hugo, Diego, Antonio):

I feel like my mentality is very different from the English mentality (Diego)

However, most were clear that they felt comfortable managing this difference (Luis, Miguel, Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio) (item 3, Table 3) and that they had developed ways to respect, accept, appreciate and embrace difference (Alicia, Hugo, Gustavo):

It's where you make an effort to find similarities and appreciate the differences (Alicia)

Indeed, for many being open, it was often easy to find points of similarity:

It's nice, at first when you meet a person from another culture, you feel different, but once those bonds of friendship grow stronger, you realize that we are not that different (Miguel)

Being open to difference and similarity could be accomplished through taking an interest and asking questions to learn more (Miguel, Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio), for example, having a greater awareness of different cultural practices (Hugo) (item 2, Table 3).

Self-regulation or reflection and interaction attention

The participants were reflective about how the experience had impacted their way of being. They reflected on how they had worked on becoming more intercultural (Antonio, Miguel, Alicia, Hugo, Diego), reflected on their own culture from the outside (Miguel, Alicia, Hugo, Diego, Antonio) and perhaps became less tolerant of negative aspects, such as racist comments or jokes (Miguel, Antonio). However, they also recognized that it is difficult to be intercultural, especially when you love your own culture (Diego, Alicia, Antonio).

Importantly, this reflection was also seen as part of a process (Diego, Hugo, Antonio), and there was a need to keep checking oneself and making an effort (Diego, Antonio, Alicia).

They talked about adopting new habits (Marcelo) or taking care to understand differences better (Gustavo) and, for some, reflecting on their experience had helped to reaffirm who they are (Alicia, Gustavo, Hugo) or how this had impacted their sense of identity (Diego, Alicia, Marcelo, Hugo). For some, reflecting on differences they noticed with their own culture also highlighted positive aspects of the culture of their country of origin (Alicia, Diego).

Self-esteem and Confidence and Interaction Confidence

The development of self-esteem was also evident in many of the participants; they mentioned their personal development or how they had grown in some way (Miguel, Diego, Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo, Hugo), improvement of language skills (Diego, Gustavo, Hugo), and the confidence they had gained (Alicia, Marcelo, Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio). They talked about having the tools to experience a new culture (Marcelo) and develop confidence in oneself that can open doors (Hugo).

Suspension of judgment

Suspension of judgment, questioning prior assumptions and taking time to understand different perspectives were all parts of how they saw the development of their own IS. Appreciating things for what they are (Miguel, Diego, Gustavo, Hugo, Antonio) was one way that participants had begun to suspend their judgments:

Overcoming prejudice and recognizing their own biases and reflecting on their prior behavior (Antonio, Gustavo, Hugo, Diego) were also mentioned and demonstrated ways in which the participants had become less judgmental about other cultures:

I think before I was more, not closed exactly, but I wouldn't be excited about meeting people from other countries, but now I would ... because I hadn't lived it, and when you don't know, often you judge it before getting to know it, and I think now I get to know something and then judge (Hugo)

They mentioned learning through relationships (Alicia, Marcelo), being open to challenging their assumptions, asking questions and learning before forming opinions (Hugo). They often surprised themselves with the things they liked (Diego, Hugo, Antonio), and they cited this as evidence of the changes taking place in them.

DISCUSSION

Since IS has been highly valued worldwide, several researchers have proposed it as a prerequisite for achieving intercultural competence (Chen and Starosta, 2000; Hammer, Bennet and Wiseman, 2003). In Chen and Starosta's (2000) study, IS was found not only to be crucial for enabling people to become successful global citizens but also to be a predictor of intercultural competence (Wu, 2015).

Numerous empirical studies have revealed that the development of IS is associated with various sociocultural, social-psychological, personality and individual determinants (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022). There is abundant evidence that international experience, such as studying abroad, is a key way in which an IS can be developed (Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Anderson et al., 2006; Tarchi et al, 2019). However, it has long been recognized that it is fully possible to study abroad without truly experiencing culture (Lantz-Deaton, 2017). Unless students' reflective processes are explicitly fostered, their exposure to cultural differences does not necessarily increase their intercultural understanding (Vande et al. 2012). There are many variables that impact IS development, such as initial levels of intercultural competence (Anderson et al. 2006), staff qualifications for an international classroom (Tekkens, 2003) or reflective and meeting opportunities offered by host and local institutions before departure and prereturn (Vande et al. 2012).

The participants, despite their varied backgrounds, share similar experiences, noting that good language skills and prior international exposure facilitate intercultural interactions. Fantini (2019) emphasized that language fluency enhances cultural understanding. Initial experiences can be challenging, often marked by homesickness and the idealization of one's home culture, complicating relationship-building with locals. Personal support from both home and within the host country is critical for positive self-identity development.

Despite this, first moments are often difficult and are especially marked by a disenchantment with what they expected and what they found. There is a tendency to miss home, idealizing and comparing everything: culture, food, and people. Thus, there is a tendency to generalize: "British people are like that...". Once they arrive, forming meaningful relationships is key. Personal support (from home and in the UK) is the most important aspect of achieving a positive perception of the experience abroad and its own role, which impacts positive self-identity development.

Forming close relationships can be hard with British people (perhaps this is specific to Britain, or perhaps it is always harder with the host nation as they are more settled into their lives), so an international environment is fundamental to a positive environment to develop IS. Friendships enable one to 'lower the volume' of one's own culture and be more inclined to make an effort to understand other perspectives. Social support and coping strategies help mitigate acculturative stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). A diverse environment enhances the overall experience, whereas a lack of cultural partners can hinder adaptation.

The more international or intercultural an environment is, the more positive the feeling about the experience. Being the only international student in a local context complicates cultural differences. Finding people with a shared culture or language at the beginning was another source of help for those who had less prior experience or lower language skills. These “cultural partners” could take on a role, at least at the beginning, as support to interact with the difference.

For participants, universities play an important role in supporting students in finding a community. Universities were seen to be very international places, which was great but also, owing to culture and structures, could be very lonely, and not enough was done to facilitate the making of friends (this tended to be done in informal settings and rarely in the classroom). Mixing with others and lowering the volume of their own culture was a positive step. This idea of self-regulation connects with that of Tabor and Milfont (2019), who reported that students with high levels of emotional intelligence and a growth mindset toward cultural learning exhibited better academic and social adjustment in their studies abroad.

Social relations are not only the main element of good integration but also the most difficult. These are easy to manage on a superficial level, but going deeper is difficult. The fact that these relationships (especially with British people) were hard to find at the outset, perhaps meant that they had to work harder at the experience. This emotional engagement had an important impact on their process of acculturation. This finding aligns with that of Sawir et al. (2008), who examined the experiences of loneliness and social isolation among international students in Australia. This highlights the importance of social networks and extracurricular activities in mitigating feelings of loneliness. Sawir et al. (2008) suggested that universities should provide more opportunities for social interaction and emotional support to help international students integrate better into their new environments. In this sense, it would help if the university took a more active role in promoting interaction between students. However, real change occurs when prejudices are put aside on both sides. When this happens, something clicks, and suddenly, the whole experience takes on a different meaning and results in a new understanding of oneself as well. Self-knowledge and development of identity, maturity toward a feeling of being a global citizen, and development of IS.

There are several important personal factors, including the propensity to ask questions, the desire to learn about other cultures, and the ease of making friendships across cultures. This can be impacted by many factors in the environment. This is related to Gudykunst's dynamic theory of cross-cultural adaptation (2005). This model focuses on the interaction between an individual's cultural identity and the demands of the new environment. Gudykunst & Kim (2017) demonstrated that international students' ability to manage the tensions between their original cultural identity and new cultural expectations is crucial for successful adaptation.

The development of effective acculturation strategies is aided by relationships. The emotional element is fundamental, along with reflection on the role of oneself in the context. Reflection on the meaning of experience and relationships plays a fundamental role in understanding new identities as

intercultural people. Not a new identity but a deepening of some values or getting to know yourself better, in different ways, getting to know one's own culture better, and yet increasing self-confidence to face intercultural environments and perhaps broader life challenges. An intercultural environment does not always have a large effect on identity change but rather promotes self-reflection. The participants related that, at first, the other culture "serves" as a constant comparison; if there is a positive change in one's identity, the cultural difference complements who I am. It seems that the development of resilience (Smith & Khawaja, 2021) is a key protective factor that helps students manage loneliness and adapt to academic life abroad.

There is something key to say about the development of confidence as core to the process and the development of openness to difference and becoming less judgmental. Also on reflecting on who they are and their own cultures. This reflection is an important process; whether it happens during the experience or when the person comes back home, it is indispensable. This connects with Dearsordff's framework for intercultural competence (2006), which proposes a model of intercultural competence that includes attitudes, knowledge, and skills, emphasizing the importance of self-reflection and evaluation in the development of intercultural competence.

CONCLUSIONS

The issues discussed here highlight the significant social value of addressing the integration of international students, a priority for countries welcoming increasing numbers. Ensuring smooth integration and intercultural experiences is vital for fostering understanding and nurturing global citizens (William et al., 2024). This research emphasizes the often-overlooked affective dimension of intercultural competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Despite extensive research on factors influencing intercultural sensitivity (IS), inconsistent results indicate a need for further investigation (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022). The current literature tends to focus on short-term study abroad rather than long-term settlement experiences, which involve community participation and assimilation as keys to developing IS.

Previous studies have emphasized primarily the cognitive dimensions of acculturation (Sanhuenza & Cardona, 2009), often neglecting the emotional aspects crucial for forming cross-cultural relationships. The development of intercultural competence involves transforming one's identity, values, self-confidence, and perspectives (Arthur, 2000). Qualitative methods should be employed to explore how immigrants navigate their cultural orientations and integrate cultural schemas (Chirkov, 2009; Ward, 2008). It is essential to highlight participants' experiences, as research has often concentrated on dominant cultures (Touraine et al., 2004).

Our study focuses on Latin American students in the UK, aiming to understand their views on status and identity. This evidence can inform the design

of programs to enhance affective intercultural competence, improving interactions in culturally diverse environments such as UK higher education.

The results show that emotions significantly influence the study-abroad experience, affecting self-discovery and cultural openness. Building close relationships is vital for acculturation, unlocking new perspectives. While international environments can facilitate this, students often initially gravitate toward familiarity, with deeper learning occurring when they confront their biases.

The study suggests further exploration of the development of intercultural sensitivity among local populations, as the responsibility for integration should not rest solely on newcomers (Qu & Song, 2024). High intercultural competence in international students will not suffice without engagement from host communities.

The findings indicate that Allport's contact hypothesis is insufficient for developing IS. In contrast to the "immersion assumption" (Vande et al. 2012), the presence of cultural diversity on campuses does not automatically lead to intercultural contact (Mostafaei and Nosrati, 2018). This "illusion of internationalization" (Harrison and Peacock, 2010) and "immersion myth" (Jackson, 2018) hinder many international students from establishing relationships with national students. Many international students tend to connect primarily with peers of their own nationality, highlighting the necessity of facilitated interaction, as the literature and our results have shown (He, Lundgren & Pynes, 2017).

In conclusion, the literature and our results demonstrate that emotional regulation is critical for international students, who often face stress, anxiety, and loneliness as they adapt to new cultural and academic environments. Emotional intelligence (of both sides), coupled with a positive attitude toward cultural learning, facilitates better adjustment. Self-regulation and emotional regulation are necessary not only for personal well-being but also for social interaction and academic performance. Educational institutions could foster intercultural competence by incorporating reflective practices and intercultural training programs into their curricula. These orientation programs will be interesting for international and local students and should include components that strengthen resilience and provide specific strategies for coping with loneliness, which are crucial for emotional and social adaptation.

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