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# Developing Next-Generation Transformational Leaders: Student Sensemaking in Leadership and Change Management Through Reflective Inquiry

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study explores how students construct their understanding of transformational leadership through reflective inquiry in a leadership and change management in a global business course within an international business program in Thailand. Drawing on 120 reflective journals, the study examines how students interpreted lessons from 25 transformation leaders in Thailand and applied leadership and change theories to make sense of leadership in culturally situated contexts. Using theory-informed thematic analysis and a transformational leadership capability framework, the study traces shifts in students' conceptions of leadership over time. The findings show movement from leader-centric and performance-focused assumptions toward more relational, ethical, and adaptive understandings of leadership, highlighting trust-building, culturally responsive communication, and inclusive change practices. The study contributes by demonstrating how reflective inquiry grounded in locally embedded leadership examples can support contextually grounded leadership learning in internationalized classrooms while promoting equity, belonging, and global engagement in global business and higher education contexts.*

**Keywords:** Transformational leadership, leadership development, reflective inquiry, student sensemaking, leadership education, global business education, inclusive pedagogy

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's hybrid and globalized work environments, leaders face unprecedented demands. Postpandemic realities require leaders to operate across physical and digital boundaries, bridge generational divides, and engage teams in culturally complex contexts. Hybrid work has become a dominant mode of organizing knowledge work, heightening these challenges by diminishing the social glue of colocation and requiring leaders to sustain trust and legitimacy from a distance (Chen & Tan, 2025; Waizenegger et al., 2020). While hybrid models offer flexibility, they also weaken the social cohesion and informal interactions that underpin trust and engagement. The real strategic test is no longer only what leaders do but how they lead while sustaining legitimacy, alignment, and cohesion across physical and virtual divides (Detjen & Webber, 2023).

These shifts have direct implications for higher education, particularly leadership and change management courses that prepare students for globally distributed and culturally diverse workplaces. However, leadership education can remain concept-heavy and decontextualized, leaving students able to describe leadership models but less able to interpret how leadership is enacted, negotiated, and contested in real organisational contexts—especially under hybrid and cross-cultural conditions. This pedagogical gap is particularly salient for internationalized business education, where leadership learning increasingly depends on reflective judgment, ethical reasoning, and culturally responsive sensemaking rather than the uncritical application of universal models. Such reflective learning processes are also central to international student development, where students interpret global knowledge through culturally situated perspectives and intercultural learning experiences.

However, despite the urgency of this challenge, leadership research remains fragmented. Much of the scholarship treats hybrid work as a structural or logistical issue, paying limited attention to how leadership practices evolve under hybrid regimes (Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024). Where leadership is studied in hybrid contexts, the focus often lies in Western or low-context settings, leaving a critical blind spot in understanding culturally mediated leadership practices in Asia (Horwitz & Mellahi, 2018). In parallel, leadership education frequently draws on global frameworks without sufficient attention to cultural translations, such as how leadership behaviors and change practices are reinterpreted through local norms, hierarchy, and relational expectations. This gap is especially concerning

given that high-context cultures, which are characterized by indirect communication, strong hierarchical norms, and emphasis on relational harmony, necessitate very different leadership approaches in hybrid settings.

Thailand offers a fertile context for investigating this challenge. Cultural norms, such as respect for hierarchy, collectivism, and indirect communication, shape leadership expectations and mediate how global leadership models are enacted (Dorfman et al., 2012; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2009). However, surprisingly little is known about how leaders in high-context cultures manage hybrid transformation while preserving relational harmony and generational inclusion. This gap is notable since hybrid work itself is being redefined beyond mere place-time flexibility. Scholars now view hybrid work as a configuration of modality, temporality, and coordination (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025), making leadership more fluid, ambiguous, and culturally mediated. Accordingly, leadership education must equip students to work with ambiguity and to evaluate leadership practices in culturally situated ways.

While transformational leadership based on Bass and Avolio's (1994) and Kotter's (1996) change models remain cornerstones of leadership scholarship, their direct translation into hybrid, high-context settings is problematic. Global models often assume open communication, linear change processes, and low power distance. However, these assumptions conflict with cultural practices in many Asian contexts. Current leadership research rarely attends to the hybrid and cultural intersection, as evidenced by systematic reviews that show a paucity of studies that deeply engage national culture (Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024). For students, this creates a learning challenge: they may reproduce "one-size-fits-all" leadership ideals without developing the reflective capacity to adapt leadership judgment to context.

This study addresses these challenges from a curriculum and pedagogy perspective by examining how students construct their understanding of transformational leadership through reflective inquiry in a leadership and change management in a global business course within an international business program in Thailand. Students engaged in self-directed inquiry and sensemaking based on 25 transformation leaders in Thailand, using leadership and change theories as interpretive lenses to analyze leadership practices in culturally situated contexts. Drawing on 120 reflective journals, the study explores how students translate leadership theory into nuanced interpretations of trust, legitimacy, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive change.

Accordingly, the study pursues three research objectives: (1) to examine how students make sense of transformational leadership when analyzing transformation leaders in Thailand through reflective inquiry; (2) to investigate how students use leadership and change theories as interpretive lenses to evaluate culturally situated leadership practices; and (3) to identify how students' leadership conceptions shift toward more relational, ethical, culturally responsive, and inclusive understandings of leading change in hybrid and globalized work contexts.

By centering student sensemaking rather than leader self-report, this study contributes to reimagining curriculum and pedagogy for internationalized

leadership education. It demonstrates how reflective inquiry can function as an inclusive learning design within internationalized classrooms for developing students' culturally adaptive leadership understanding, supporting educational conversations around equity, belonging, and global engagement in globally oriented higher education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership is a widely applied framework for leading change and uncertainty and fostering motivation, commitment, and performance by aligning individual aspirations with organisational goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978). Unlike transactional leadership, which relies on rewards and exchanges, transformational leaders promote intrinsic motivation, trust, and personal growth through four core dimensions: idealized influence (ethical role modeling), inspirational motivation (articulating a compelling vision), intellectual stimulation (encouraging creativity and critical thinking), and individualized consideration (providing tailored support) (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Research links transformational leadership to higher engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Avolio et al., 2004; Breevaart et al., 2014; Judge & Piccolo, 2004), as well as reduced resistance to change and stronger trust in uncertain contexts (Faupel & Süß, 2019). Hybrid work settings are characterized by limited in-person interaction and increased reliance on digital communication. In this setting, the role of transformational leaders is to help sustain shared purpose, inclusive communication, and virtual engagement (Aguirre-Camarena & De la Cruz Ayala, 2024; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Contreras et al., 2020).

However, its predominantly Western empirical base raises questions about applicability in high-context, collectivist cultures (Dorfman et al., 2012). In Thailand, leadership effectiveness often depends on humility, indirect communication, and respect for hierarchy (Pimpa & Moore, 2012; Yukongdi, 2010). Practices such as discreetly socializing new ideas, offering private recognition, and avoiding public confrontation reflect culturally adapted expressions of transformational leadership (Judkrue, 2012; Sakulkijkarn & Khanthong, 2022). For leadership education, these cultural adaptations are not simply contextual details. Rather, they shape what students recognize as legitimate leadership, what they interpret as ethical influence, and how they evaluate inclusion and fairness in leading change.

Transformational leadership in high-context settings is expressed through culturally situated practices that shape how influence, ethics, and inclusion are enacted and interpreted during change (Lu & Sun, 2025). Using Thai transformation leaders as learning exemplars enables students to practice reflective inquiry by translating leadership theory into context-sensitive judgments about trust, legitimacy, and change. Within internationalized business

education, such interpretive processes are particularly important as students learn to translate global leadership models across cultural contexts.

These adaptations highlight a learning challenge for students: widely taught leadership models must be interpreted through culturally situated practices rather than assumed to transfer universally. Accordingly, this study uses transformational leadership as an interpretive lens guiding student analysis rather than as a prescriptive model of leadership practice to examine how students construct context-sensitive understandings of leadership and change through reflective inquiry grounded in Thai transformation leadership exemplars.

**Change Management and Kotter's Model in Cultural Contexts**

Kotter's (1996, 2007) eight-step model offers a structured approach to change, from establishing urgency to anchoring new practices in organizational cultures. However, much of the empirical evidence and documented applications are derived from Western settings, leaving limited clarity about how the model translates into high-context cultures such as Thailand. (Jiang, 2022; Kuffuor et al., 2024; Panizzon et al., 2016; Yazıcı, 2024).

In Thailand, deeply rooted values of hierarchy, harmony, and collectivism influence how change is initiated, legitimized and sustained (Pimpa & Moore, 2012; Suseno et al., 2021). For example, the "create urgency" step often relies on direct communication, but Thai leaders may favor relationship-based, nonconfrontational strategies to maintain face and preserve harmony (Komolsevin et al., 2010). Similarly, "building a guiding coalition" requires balancing competence with seniority and status to maintain credibility and avoid destabilizing existing authority structures (Gabris & Ihrke, 2007). Anchoring change in culture depends less on formal policy and more on trust-based networks and relational credibility that sustain commitment over time (Ackaradejruangsri et al., 2023; Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007).

Despite its robustness, empirical work on Kotter's model in Southeast Asia is scarce, especially in hybrid work contexts that blend face-to-face and digital interactions (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Contreras et al., 2020). For students learning leadership in internationalized classrooms, these contextual variations highlight the need to interpret change frameworks critically rather than apply them as universally transferable models. Building on this gap, the present study treats Kotter's framework as an interpretive lens guiding student analysis of leadership practices within hierarchical, relationship-oriented settings. In doing so, Kotter's model is positioned not as a rigid sequence but as a flexible heuristic that requires cultural sensitivity when applied to transformation in Thai organisational contexts.

**Cultural Dynamics and the GLOBE Framework**

Culture shapes leadership behaviors, expectations, and outcomes. The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) study identifies nine cultural dimensions, including power distance, institutional

collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, to explain cross-national differences in leadership effectiveness (Dorfman et al., 2012).

Thailand, as a high-context, collectivist society, scores highly on in-group collectivism, power distance, and humane orientation (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2009). These traits reflect strong group loyalty, hierarchical respect, and an emphasis on compassion, which shape expectations for leaders to act in ways that preserve harmony, maintain relational credibility, and demonstrate care. As a result, leadership and change frameworks may be enacted through culturally specific practices rather than applied in standardized form. For students studying leadership in internationalized business programmes, recognizing these culturally embedded expectations is critical for interpreting how global leadership theories operate in practice.

Power distance shapes authority, feedback, and participation (Yukongdi, 2010), while institutional collectivism and harmony norms affect communication of urgency, disagreement, and risk (Pimpa & Moore, 2012). These cultural dynamics are especially salient under hybrid work, where trust-building and engagement rely more heavily on mediated communication and relational cues.

While the GLOBE framework provides a structured national profile of leadership characteristics, there remains a notable lack of research that blends this quantitative perspective with in depth, qualitative explorations of how leadership is understood and practiced in high-context cultures, particularly within hybrid or digital work environments (Böhmer, 2025).

This gap suggests that although the GLOBE dimensions capture broad cultural tendencies, they do not fully reveal the nuanced ways in which leaders and followers interpret, negotiate, and enact leadership behaviors in settings where context, relationships, and communication are mediated by technological and hybrid working conditions. As a result, the practical realities of leadership within these complex environments often remain underexplored, highlighting the need for research that situates the GLOBE framework alongside rich, context-sensitive qualitative evidence. Accordingly, in this study, the GLOBE framework functions as a contextual lens that helps students interpret how leadership expectations are culturally shaped rather than as a prescriptive model of leadership behavior.

**Trust-based Leadership and Psychological Safety**

Trust and psychological safety are critical for effective leadership in hybrid work, where physical separation, technological mediation, and fewer informal interactions challenge communication and collaboration (Carmeli et al., 2014; Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety—a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking—supports learning, creativity, and resilience, particularly when leaders show authenticity, empathy, and inclusion (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). Recent studies confirm that in hybrid contexts, trust must be intentionally cultivated through microinteractions such as regular check-ins, transparent communication, and visible availability (Östergård et al., 2024).

In Thailand, indirect communication, face-saving, and hierarchical norms can limit open expression, especially across generations. Trust in this type of culture is built through consistency, humility, and relational attentiveness rather than assertiveness or public recognition (Pimpa & Moore, 2012; Selvarajah et al., 2013). This aligns with insights from Detjen and Webber (2023), who stress that sustaining legitimacy in distributed organisations requires leaders to balance authority with approachability and to create credibility through presence rather than control. Relatedly, compassionate and inclusive leader behaviors can support psychological safety by signaling care, fairness, and openness in both virtual and in-person interactions (Karakas, 2023; Swain, 2018).

The nature of hybrid work has transformed leadership requirements by increasing reliance on mediated communication, reducing informal coordination, and heightening demands for agility and digital fluency (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Effective hybrid leadership typically involves balancing accountability with flexibility through clear communication, empathy, adaptability, and digital collaboration routines (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Across dispersed teams, transparent expectations and feedback are frequently linked to trust and coordination (Contreras et al., 2020).

The reduced informal interactions during hybrid work can heighten isolation, hinder innovation, and weaken social bonds. Leaders must counter this through intentional practices, including regular check-ins, inclusive communication routines, and virtual team-building to maintain psychological safety and engagement (Malhotra et al., 2007).

Implementing hybrid work practices in the Thai high-context, hierarchical culture can disrupt traditional cues of authority and relational harmony (Pimpa & Moore, 2012). Physical absence may complicate leader–employee relations, and employees may hesitate to raise concerns in virtual forums without established trust (Tylnyi et al., 2024). Thai leaders therefore need proactive, approachable, and emotionally attuned digital communication, balancing cultural expectations with clarity and frequency (Yukongdi, 2010).

In addition, generational diversity increases complexity, where digital-native employees value flexibility, while older cohorts may prefer structured, authority-consistent interactions (Choudhury et al., 2021). Bridging these preferences can require inclusive hybrid routines, cross-generational digital support, and dialog that builds shared understanding (Hanzis & Hallo, 2024; Ramasamy & Mengling, 2024).

For students studying leadership in internationalized business programmes, these hybrid and cultural dynamics highlight how trust-building and psychological safety are interpreted through culturally embedded leadership practices rather than universal leadership prescriptions. In this study, these hybrid and cultural dynamics provide the context for reflective inquiry into Thai transformation leaders, enabling analysis of how learners interpret hybrid leadership as a culturally situated practice rather than a universal technique.

**Generational Diversity and Leadership Adaptation**

The contemporary workplace spans four generations, which comprise Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, each of which possesses distinct values, communication preferences, and work expectations (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, 2010). These differences become pronounced in hybrid settings, where flexibility, digital fluency, and autonomy intersect with traditional norms of hierarchy and discipline. For leadership education in internationalized classrooms, this diversity highlights why learning designs should be adapted to help students interpret leadership as context-dependent practice rather than a universal template (Torres-Arends et al., 2025).

Young employees often prioritize autonomy, work–life integration, and purpose-driven engagement, while older cohorts value structure, loyalty, and clear authority (Smith et al., 2015). Misaligned expectations can fuel friction, particularly in transformation initiatives, unless addressed through inclusive and adaptive leadership. With its emphasis on inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, transformational leadership offers a framework for bridging these divides by fostering respect, tailoring communication, and creating shared purpose (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Practices such as mentorship, reverse mentoring, and cross-generational dialog can help build trust and reduce silos.

In Thailand, where age and seniority remain strong markers of authority, generational dynamics are further shaped by deference to elders and indirect communication (Ota et al., 2012). Younger employees, although technologically adept, may hesitate to challenge tradition (Trifan & Pantea, 2023), while senior staff often expect hierarchical leadership and loyalty (Morais et al., 2024). Hybrid work adds complexity, as younger generations may embrace digital platforms and flexible schedules, while older colleagues may struggle with technology or feel disconnected (Dunn et al., 2023; Lebedeva, 2019). These dynamics also reinforce the importance of inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments that legitimize diverse experiences and support student engagement and belonging.

For students analyzing leadership in internationalized business programmes, generational diversity therefore becomes an important interpretive lens for understanding how leadership expectations are negotiated across cultural and organisational contexts. In this study, generational dynamics provide a salient interpretive theme through which students analyze Thai transformation leaders and reflect on how inclusive leadership is enacted and legitimized in culturally situated hybrid contexts. This emphasis on student agency in interpreting relational dynamics and translating leadership theory into judgment is consistent with research on student developmental trajectories in cross-cultural learning environments (Suengkamolpisut et al., 2026).

**Summary of Literature Review and Conceptual Foundation**

The literature establishes transformational leadership as a key framework for motivating change, strengthening trust, and supporting diverse teams. However, much of the evidence is based on the Western context, raising questions about

how leadership is interpreted in Thailand, where hierarchy, collectivism, and harmony shape legitimacy and influence. Kotter's change model offers a structured lens, yet its linear assumptions may require cultural translation in high-context settings. The GLOBE framework explains cultural variations such as power distance and collectivism, but limited research connects these cultural dimensions to how leadership is interpreted and practiced under hybrid and digitally mediated work conditions.

These gaps matter for leadership education because students often encounter global leadership models without sufficient support for interpreting culturally situated practice, particularly as hybrid work and generational diversity reshape communication, trust, and inclusion. This challenge is particularly salient in internationalized business education, where students must learn to interpret global leadership frameworks through intercultural and context-sensitive judgment. Accordingly, this study uses transformational leadership, Kotter's model, and the GLOBE framework as interpretive lenses in guiding student sensemaking while examining how students construct context-sensitive understandings of leadership and change through reflective inquiry grounded in 25 transformational leaders in Thailand.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were proposed:

- $RQ_1$: How do students make sense of transformational leadership when analyzing transformation leaders in Thailand through reflective inquiry?
- $RQ_2$: How do students utilize leadership and change theories as interpretive lenses to evaluate culturally situated leadership practices?
- $RQ_3$: How do students' conceptions of leadership shift toward more relational, ethical, cultural responsive, and inclusive understandings of leading change in hybrid and globalized work contexts?

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist design to explore how students interpret and analyze Thai leaders' enactment of transformational leadership in culturally embedded hybrid work environments. The aim was to uncover how leaders navigate change, foster trust, and manage generational diversity in a high-context culture where formal authority and interpersonal harmony intersect with digital transformation demands.

**Study Context and Units of Analysis**

Participants were students enrolled in an on-site undergraduate course at a Thai international college during the 2024-2025 academic year. The course is called Leadership and Change Management in Global Business. A total of 120 student reflective journals were used as the unit of analysis because they document students' theory-informed sensemaking and evolving conceptions of transformational leadership. Student journals were referenced using anonymised identifiers (e.g., SJ01–SJ120). The student cohort consisted primarily of Thai undergraduates enrolled in an international business program, with a small number of foreign students. The cohort represented mixed gender distribution and included students in their third and fourth years of study.

Table 1 summarizes the 25 leadership exemplars selected by students for analysis as part of a course-based reflective inquiry assignment. Profiles were constructed using publicly available secondary sources (e.g., leadership speeches, media interviews, organizational communications, and reports). The leaders were not research participants and were not contacted; they served solely as learning exemplars supporting students' theory-informed analysis.

**Reflective Inquiry Task and Data Generation**

Reflective journals were generated through a structured reflective inquiry assignment in which students selected transformational leader profiles in Thailand using publicly available secondary sources (e.g., leadership speeches, media interviews, organisational communications, and reports). The leaders were not research participants and were not contacted directly. Students were guided to use transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994) and Kotter's (1996) change model and selected Thai cultural dimensions informed by the GLOBE project (Dorfman et al., 2012; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2009) as interpretive lenses guiding analysis rather than prescriptive analytical frameworks.

Prompts asked students to justify their leader selection, interpret leadership practices through specified lenses, evaluate culturally embedded choices (e.g., hierarchy, harmony, indirect communication), and articulate how their leadership conception evolved. Journals were submitted digitally and anonymised prior to analysis. Only minimal contextual descriptors were retained where ethically appropriate.

The study received institutional ethical approval. Students were informed that their reflections could be used for research in anonymised form and confirmed that they had read and understood this condition before submission. Participation had no impact on course grading, and all identifying information was removed prior to analysis.

**Table 1: Student-Selected Leadership Profile Exemplars in Thailand Used for Reflective Inquiry**

| Profile No. | Position/Role | Organization Type | Industry Sector | Gender | Years of Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | General Manager | Thai Enterprise | Apparel/Fashion | Male | 20+ years |
| **2** | CEO | Thai SME | FMCG | Female | 15+ years |
| **3** | Operations Director | Thai Enterprise | Logistics | Male | 10–15 years |
| **4** | General Manager | MNC | Construction & Engineering | Female | 20+ years |
| **5** | Executive (Corporate Planning) | MNC | Food and Beverage | Male | 15+ years |
| **6** | HR Director | MNC | Hospitality/Tourism | Female | 20+ years |
| **7** | Director of Finance | Thai Company (SME) | Automotive Parts | Male | 10–15 years |
| **8** | Country Director | MNC | Software/Tech | Male | 20+ years |
| **9** | Business Development Director | Thai Startup | Technology (AI) | Male | 10–15 years |
| **10** | Managing Director | Thai SME | Logistics/Supply Chain | Female | 20+ years |
| **11** | Managing Director | Thai SME | Food Import/Distribution | Male | 15+ years |
| **12** | Global Lead, People & Org Development Director | MNC (German HQ) | Tech & Equipment Leasing | Female | 20+ years |
| **13** | Strategic HR Development & HR Delivery | MNC (US office) | Logistics | Female | 16+ years |
| **14** | Senior Product Manager | Regional Tech Startup | Digital Asset/Crypto | Male | 10+ years |
| **15** | Innovation Manager | Thai Conglomerate (MNC Joint-Vent) | Consumer Products | Male | 10–15 years |
| **16** | CEO | Thai SME | Food | Male | 15+ years |
| **17** | Managing Director | Thai Enterprise | Real Estate | Male | 15+ years |
| **18** | CEO/Co-Founder | Thai Startup | Tech/Digital Platform | Male | 10+ years |
| **19** | Executive Director | Thai Manufacturing | Consumer Goods | Female | 20+ years |
| **20** | Marketing Director | Thai Conglomerate | Food & Beverage | Female | 10–15 years |
| **21** | Operations Manager | Thai SME | Services/Events | Female | 5–10 years |
| **22** | Vice President – HR | Thai Enterprise | Hospitality | Female | 15+ years |
| **23** | General Manager | Thai Enterprise | Retail/Apparel | Male | 15+ years |
| **24** | L&D Manager | Thai Company | Education/Early Childhood | Female | 10–15 years |
| **25** | Head of Strategy | Thai SME | Technology/Startup | Male | 10+ years |

**Data Analysis**

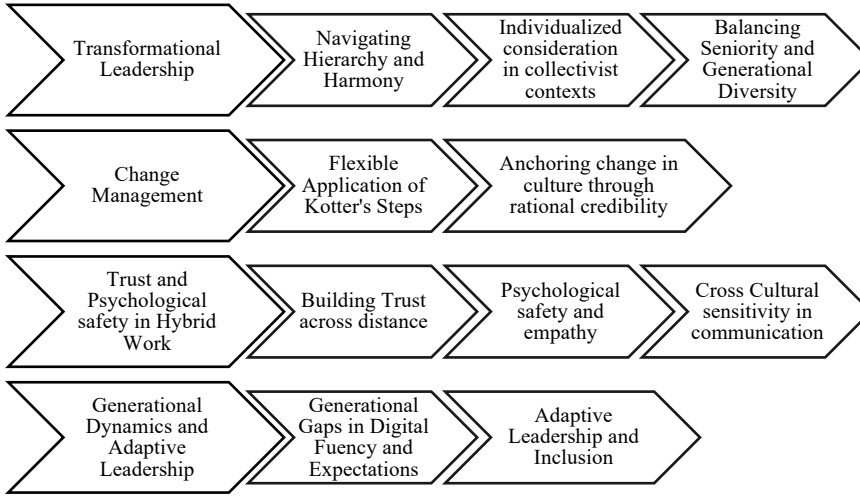
The reflective journals were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine how students constructed meaning about transformational leadership and leading change through reflective inquiry. The analysis followed an interpretivist orientation, focusing on the sensemaking students articulated as they interpreted leadership exemplars in culturally situated contexts.

Analysis proceeded iteratively. First, journals were read in full to familiarize the research team with students' narratives of leader selection, interpretation, and self-positioning as emerging transformational leaders. Second, open coding captured how students described leadership behaviors, change practices, cultural dynamics, trust/psychological safety, and generational considerations. Third, codes were clustered into a thematic structure that reflected recurring patterns in students' sensemaking. This structure was then refined through comparison across journals and attention to disconfirming or divergent cases where student interpretations differed from dominant patterns.

To strengthen analytic coherence, themes were interpreted with reference to the study's conceptual lenses, which comprised transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994), Kotter's change model (Kotter, 1996), and Thai cultural dimensions informed by GLOBE (Dorfman et al., 2012; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2009). Interpretations were further sensitized by Thai contextual logics (e.g., hierarchy, relational harmony, and indirect communication), allowing analysis of how students translated global frameworks into culturally situated leadership judgments. NVivo supported data management and auditability. Analytical rigour was strengthened through reflexive memos and peer debriefing to challenge early interpretations and consolidate the thematic structure (Ridder, 2014). The resulting thematic framework is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates the thematic framework developed from the analysis of student reflective journals (N = 120). The framework summarizes four overarching themes and associated subthemes that capture how students interpreted transformational leadership, change management, trust and psychological safety, and generational dynamics when analyzing Thailand-based leadership exemplars. The framework represents patterns identified across student reflections and serves as an analytical structure guiding the presentation of findings.

**Figure 1: Thematic Framework of Students' Sensemaking of Transformational Leadership and Change in Thailand-Based Leadership Exemplars**




The frequencies reported in Table 2 represent the number of student reflective journals (N = 120) in which each subtheme appeared, rather than the total number of coding instances, indicating the relative prominence of themes across student reflections.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-Themes Identified in Student Reflective Journals

| Theme | Subtheme | Illustrative analytic focus | Frequency across leadership profiles (N = 25) | Frequency across journals (N = 120) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cultural Adaptation of Transformational Leadership** | Navigating Hierarchy and Harmony | Leadership legitimacy negotiated through hierarchical consultation and harmony preservation | 23 | 92 |
| | Individualized Consideration in Collectivist Contexts | Relationally sensitive support and private feedback practices | 20 | 81 |
| | Balancing Seniority and Generational Diversity | Integrating hierarchical authority with younger | 21 | 85 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | employees' expectations for autonomy | | |
| **Reinterpreting Change Management (Kotter's Model)** | Flexible Application of Kotter's Steps | Change interpreted as iterative and relational rather than strictly sequential | 22 | 88 |
| | Anchoring Change through Relational Credibility | Trust and relational legitimacy supporting sustained change | 19 | 74 |
| **Trust and Psychological Safety in Hybrid Work** | Building Trust Across Distance | Micropractices of presence, responsiveness, and communication | 23 | 109 |
| | Cultural Sensitivity in Communication | Communication calibrated to hierarchy, seniority, and generational expectations | 22 | 90 |
| | Psychological Safety and Empathy | Leader openness and humility supporting candid dialog | 18 | 68 |
| **Generational Dynamics and Adaptive Leadership** | Generational Gaps in Digital Fluency and Expectations | Differences in technology comfort and work preferences | 20 | 79 |
| | Adaptive Leadership and Inclusion | Reciprocal learning structures and inclusive leadership practices | 22 | 91 |

## RESULTS

The findings illustrate how students interpret transformational leadership and lead change through reflective inquiry using Thailand-based leadership profiles. Drawing on publicly available leadership materials (e.g., speeches, interviews, organisational communications), students applied transformational leadership, Kotter's change model, and cultural frameworks as interpretive lenses to analyze how leadership is enacted and legitimized in high-context and hybrid work environments. Across reflective journals (N = 120), students frequently suggested that leadership effectiveness in Thai hybrid contexts is associated less with visible charismatic assertion and more with cultural fluency, relational credibility, and adaptive communication.

**Cultural Adaptation of Transformational Leadership**

Students widely recognized transformational leadership as a useful framework but interpreted its enactment in Thailand as culturally contingent. Rather than emphasizing visible inspiration alone, student reflections frequently highlight leadership practices that preserve hierarchy, maintain harmony, and protect face, particularly in hybrid contexts where digital mediation may reduce informal relational cues and increase the potential for miscommunication.

**Navigating Hierarchy and Harmony**

Students frequently interpreted vision-setting as a staged, legitimacy-building process. Across multiple student reflections, leadership influence was described as beginning with private alignment among senior stakeholders before broader communication. This sequencing was interpreted as enabling disagreement to be addressed discreetly while maintaining relational harmony. One leader profile illustrated this process:

> "If a vision challenges current practice, I share it privately with senior staff first to get their buy-in before going public." (LP17, Managing Director, Real Estate)

Students framed this approach as culturally strategic, suggesting that leadership legitimacy in hierarchical contexts may depend on respectful consultation and consensus-building rather than immediate public declaration.

**Individualized Consideration in Collectivist Contexts**

Students interpreted individualized consideration as relationally sensitive and discreet support practices. Rather than emphasizing public praise or corrective feedback, many student reflections described effective leadership as providing feedback and coaching privately, allowing leaders to maintain group cohesion and interpersonal comfort:

> "Praise or correction is always one-on-one, never in front of the group. It's about keeping everyone comfortable and united." (LP03, Operations Director, Logistics)

Students interpreted such discretion as culturally appropriate care, noting that private communication may help preserve harmony and trust, especially in hybrid work environments where opportunities for informal relational repair can be limited.

**Balancing Seniority and Generational Diversity**

Students also frequently connected transformational leadership with managing tensions between hierarchical seniority norms and younger employees' expectations for autonomy and digital fluency. Reciprocal learning structures were interpreted as practical mechanisms for inclusion:

> "We set up a buddy system so new graduates can help senior colleagues with technology, and senior staff can share their experience and guidance." (LP15, Innovation Manager, Consumer Products)

Students interpreted these arrangements as enabling participation without undermining authority, suggesting that such practices can support collaboration while maintaining cohesion in hybrid teams. Overall, students conceptualized transformational leadership in the Thai context as a form of cultural orchestration in which leadership legitimacy is constructed through hierarchy-sensitive sequencing, harmony-preserving communication, and relationally grounded support practices.

**Reinterpreting Change Management (Kotter's Model)**

Students often treated Kotter's model as a flexible heuristic sequence when analyzing leadership practices. Across student reflections, changes in high-context environments were frequently interpreted as legitimacy dependent. This required relational readiness and hierarchical endorsement, particularly in hybrid contexts where miscommunication risks may be amplified.

**Flexible Application of Change Steps**

Students interpreted effective change initiation as beginning with discreet consultation and alignment among senior stakeholders before broader communication:

> "I don't announce change to everyone at once. First, I discuss it with senior leaders to get their agreement." (LP08, Managing Director, Manufacturing)

They noted that urgency creation, coalition-building, and communication may overlap and recur rather than unfold as strictly sequential stages. This would reflect what they interpreted as a more iterative and relational approach consistent with cultural expectations in hierarchical environments.

**Anchoring Change Through Relational Credibility**

Students emphasized that sustainable change was interpreted as being anchored in trust and relational credibility rather than formal policy alone. Relational credibility, consistency, and culturally resonant justification were described as key factors shaping the acceptance of change initiatives:

> "People follow the change because they trust me, not because of the policy." (LP22, HR Director, Hospitality/Tourism)

In hybrid contexts, students highlighted that credibility may need to be reinforced through visible availability, transparent updates, and consistent follow-through, as digital communication can limit informal relationship building. Students reframed Kotter's model as culturally contingent and relationally anchored, suggesting that change leadership in Thai contexts may involve adaptive sequencing and relational legitimacy, as opposed to strict procedural compliance.

Trust and Psychological Safety in Hybrid Work

Across the reflective journals (N = 120), students frequently positioned trust and psychological safety as foundational conditions for sustaining engagement and enabling inclusive change in hybrid environments. Trust-building was interpreted as everyday relational work, which was particularly important, as hierarchy and indirect communication can discourage open expression.

**Building Trust Across Distance**

Students highlighted **micropractices** of relational presence, such as short check-ins, responsiveness, and transparent communication, as signals of trust-building in distributed teams:

> "I check in with my team almost every day even if it's just a short message. It helps them know I care." (LP12, Global Lead, People & Organisational Development)

Students interpreted this practice as maintaining relational visibility and accessibility**,** which they viewed as particularly important in hybrid contexts where informal workplace interactions are reduced.

**Psychological Safety and Empathy**

Students associated psychological safety with leader humility and openness. This includes the willingness to acknowledge mistakes, especially in hierarchical environments where employees may hesitate to express disagreement:

> "I share my own mistakes… it shows them it's okay to be honest." (LP04, General Manager, Construction & Engineering)

Students interpreted such behaviors as signaling interpersonal openness and reducing hierarchical barriers**,** thereby encouraging more candid communication.

**Cultural Sensitivity in Communication**

Students interpreted effective communication as culturally calibrated, requiring leaders to adapt tone and communication channels according to seniority norms and generational expectations:

> "I think carefully about the words, so they sound respectful to senior staff; with younger ones, I'm more casual." (LP09, Business Development Director, Technology)

Students suggested that communication sensitivity in hierarchical and multicultural teams requires balancing respect for authority with approachability, particularly in hybrid environments where communication is often digitally mediated. Students therefore framed trust and psychological safety as relational resources, sustained through accessibility, empathy, and culturally attuned communication.

Generational Dynamics and Adaptive Leadership

Students frequently characterized generational diversity as a persistent leadership challenge that becomes more visible in hybrid work environments**.** Within their reflections, effective leadership was interpreted as adaptive and inclusion-oriented**,** balancing traditional authority structures with evolving expectations for flexibility and participation.

**Generational Gaps in Digital Fluency and Expectations**

Students often noted differences in technology comfort and work preferences as potential sources of workplace tension:

> "Our Gen Z team members are very quick with new technology and appreciate flexibility, while some senior employees feel more secure with set schedules and regular office presence." (LP16, CEO, Thai SME – Foods)

Students interpreted these differences as reflecting generational variation in work expectations rather than organisational resistance, suggesting that leaders must mediate these perspectives.

### Adaptive Leadership and Inclusion

Reciprocal learning structures were frequently interpreted as practical mechanisms for fostering inclusion while preserving respect for experience and seniority:

> "We set up a buddy system where younger staff help with digital platforms, and older colleagues share their industry experience. It helps both sides feel respected and supported." (LP19, Executive Director, Manufacturing – Consumer Goods)

Students interpreted these arrangements as supporting cross-generational collaboration while maintaining organisational cohesion. Students therefore conceptualized adaptive leadership as integrative work, aligning transformation demands with cultural expectations while encouraging participation across generational groups.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate how students used leadership and change frameworks as interpretive lenses to develop context-sensitive evaluations of transformational leadership and inclusive change in Thailand-based hybrid settings. Through reflective inquiry grounded in leadership exemplars, students engaged in theory-informed sensemaking that addressed the study's research questions.

## DISCUSSION

This study shows that students' leadership learning extended beyond applying transformational leadership and change models as universal templates. Across reflective journals, students interpreted transformational leadership as a context-sensitive and ethically grounded practice**,** emphasizing legitimacy-building, relational credibility, and inclusive communication in hybrid and high-context settings. Their sensemaking connected cultural adaptation, change pacing, trust and psychological safety, and generational inclusion, suggesting that leadership effectiveness was interpreted as an interdependent relational capability rather than a set of isolated competencies**.**

Conceptually, these findings contribute to leadership education in international programmes by demonstrating how reflective inquiry supports students' development of culturally grounded leadership judgment. Through engagement with locally situated leadership exemplars, students moved beyond abstract leadership models to interpret leadership as an acrelational practice embedded in cultural norms and hybrid organisational contexts. In doing so, reflective inquiry appears to support students' understanding of leadership in

ways aligned with equity, belonging, and responsible global engagement in culturally diverse learning environments (Dorfman et al., 2012; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2009; Kotter, 1996; Pimpa & Moore, 2012; Yukongdi, 2010).

## Cultural Adaptation as the Core of Transformational Leadership Sensemaking

Student reflections suggest that transformational leadership remains a compelling ideal, but its enactment was consistently interpreted as culturally contingent. Consistent with high-context, collectivist norms, students emphasized leadership practices that preserve hierarchy and harmony while still enabling direction setting and participation (Pimpa & Moore, 2012; Yukongdi, 2010). Interestingly, these adaptations were not interpreted as a weakening of transformational leadership principles. Instead, students positioned cultural responsiveness as the mechanism through which transformational leadership becomes legitimate and ethical in Thai contexts.

Two interpretive shifts are particularly salient. First, students reconstructed vision-setting as a legitimacy-building sequence rather than a unilateral act. Leadership influence was understood to begin with private alignment among senior stakeholders before wider communication, protecting face and embedding change within culturally recognized authority structures (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2009). Second, students framed individualized consideration as discreet, face-sensitive support, such as private coaching and feedback, rather than public recognition. This interpretation aligns with collectivist expectations of unity and relational comfort, underscoring that care and motivation may be enacted through relational safeguards rather than universally visible behaviors.
This pattern reflects students' developing agency in interpreting relational dynamics and translating leadership theory into contextually situated judgment**,** which is consistent with developmental perspectives on cross-cultural learning (Suengkamolpisut et al., 2026).

Theoretically, these findings reinforce arguments that transformational leadership is not expressed through identical behaviors formed across cultures but is translated through local norms and relational expectations (Dorfman et al., 2012). Pedagogically, the findings suggest that reflective inquiry helps students approach leadership as cultural judgment rather than conceptual recall, an important capability for inclusive leadership practice in internationalized learning environments.

## Reinterpreting Change Management as Relational and Culturally Situated

Students' sensemaking also repositioned Kotter's (1996) change model as a flexible interpretive heuristic rather than a rigid sequence of steps. Deviations from the eight steps were not interpreted as failure. Instead, adaptive sequencing was viewed as necessary in high-context environments where legitimacy, relational harmony, and social sanctions shape change readiness (Yukongdi,

2010). Students frequently described change initiation through discreet consultation and coalition building among trusted senior figures rather than highly public urgency messaging. This highlights the relational and cultural dynamics that influence the acceptance of change initiatives.

A key conceptual insight emerging from the reflections is that students interpreted change leadership as a process of negotiation and sensemaking rather than procedural compliance. This interpretation aligns with perspectives that view change leadership as narrative work and a relationship agent in contexts where formal authority alone cannot secure commitment. In hybrid settings, students further suggested that relational credibility and consistency become more salient as digital interaction reduces opportunities for informal reinforcement.

For leadership education, these insights suggest that teaching change frameworks as diagnostic and interpretive tools, instead of step-by-step prescriptions, may better prepare students for culturally complex and digitally mediated workplaces.

**Trust, Psychological Safety, and Belonging in Hybrid Leadership**

Trust and psychological safety emerged in students' reflections as central relational conditions for sustaining engagement and enabling inclusive change in hybrid contexts. While psychological safety is commonly defined as a climate that supports interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017), students' sensemaking suggests that in hierarchical and high-context cultures, safety may be enacted through discretion, respect, and face-sensitive communication (Lu & Sun, 2025).

Students interpreted trust as an actively maintained relational process rather than a static interpersonal condition. In hybrid work environments, this process was frequently associated with everyday practices of relational presence. Micropractices such as regular check-ins, responsiveness, and transparent communication were interpreted as signals of credibility that compensate for reduced physical proximity, echoing arguments that relational visibility substitutes for proximity-based reassurance in distributed settings (Detjen & Webber, 2023). Students also associated psychological safety with leader humility and empathy, particularly the willingness to acknowledge mistakes and encourage dialog in ways that respect hierarchical sensitivities. In this sense, psychological safety was not interpreted as the removal of hierarchy but as the creation of relational conditions in which employees feel able to speak within culturally appropriate boundaries.

From an international education perspective, this interpretation is notable. Students did not treat trust and psychological safety as generic interpersonal "soft skills." Instead, their reflections framed them as strategic leadership capabilities that support participation, dignity, and belonging across different organizational statuses and digital divides. This suggests that reflective inquiry can help students recognize how leadership practices shape inclusion and engagement in culturally diverse hybrid workplaces.

**Generational Dynamics and Adaptive Leadership as Inclusion-by-Design**

Students' reflections frequently positioned generational diversity as a practical leadership challenge that becomes more visible in hybrid work environments. Rather than interpreting generational differences as fixed traits or sources of inevitable conflict, students often framed them as contextual conditions requiring adaptive and inclusive leadership practices (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

In many reflections, tensions between seniority-based expectations and younger employees' preferences for flexibility, digital collaboration, and more informal communication were interpreted as differences in work expectations shaped by experience, technological familiarity, and organisational norms. Students suggested that these differences require leaders to mediate between stability and change, balancing respect for hierarchical structures with the need to incorporate emerging ways of working.

A notable interpretive insight emerging from the reflections is students' framing of inclusion as differentiated attentiveness rather than uniform treatment. Students frequently interpreted effective leadership as involving adjustments in communication style, feedback practices, and interaction channels in ways that different groups experience as respectful and legitimate. In this sense, inclusion was understood not as identical treatment but as contextually responsive leadership practice.

Students also highlighted reciprocal learning structures, such as buddy systems and reverse mentoring, as mechanisms that allow generational groups to exchange expertise while preserving cultural norms of seniority. These practices were interpreted as culturally acceptable approaches to integrating digital knowledge with experiential authority, enabling younger employees to contribute technological skills while senior colleagues maintain organisational guidance roles.

This interpretation extends adaptive leadership perspectives (Heifetz et al., 2009) by illustrating how cultural hierarchy and generational diversity intersect to shape leadership practice in hybrid contexts. From a leadership education perspective, these reflections suggest that reflective inquiry can help students understand inclusion as a series of leadership design choices that structure participation, respect, and belonging across generational groups in contemporary organisations.

**Integrative Interpretation: Culturally Adaptive Transformation Leadership**

Taken together, the findings suggest that students interpreted transformational leadership in Thailand-based hybrid contexts as a culturally adaptive and relationally negotiated practice rather than a universal behavioral template. As illustrated in Figure 2, student reflections connected legitimacy-building, change pacing, trust and psychological safety, and generational inclusion as interdependent dimensions shaping how leadership is understood and evaluated.

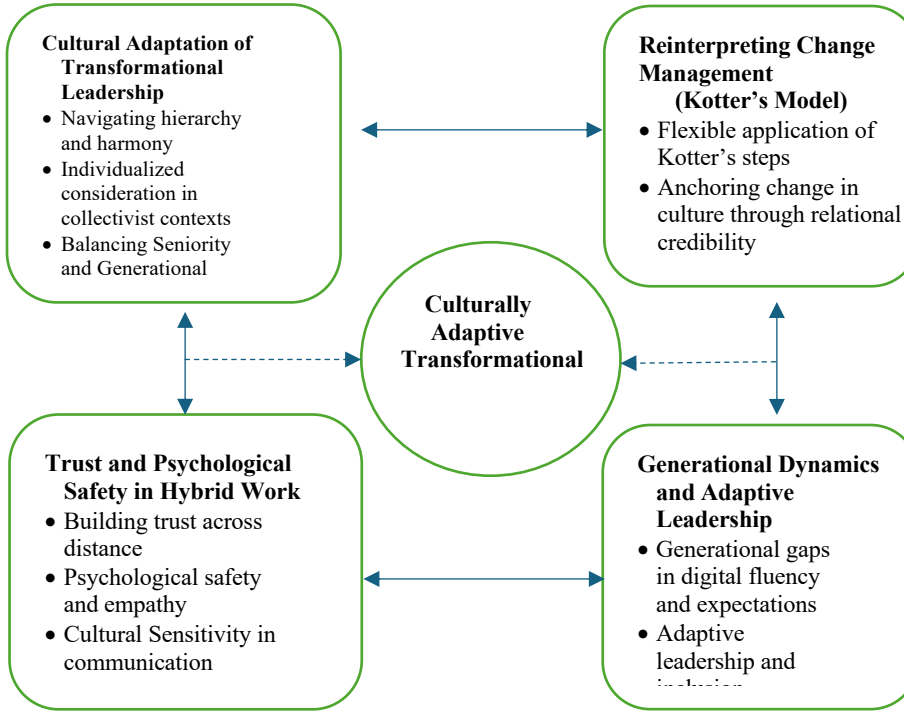



**Figure 2:** Thematic framework of culturally adaptive transformational leadership in Thai hybrid organizations

Within this interpretive framework, transformational leadership principles were not rejected but translated through culturally embedded practices. Leadership legitimacy was frequently interpreted as emerging through hierarchy-sensitive consultation and relational credibility. Similarly, change leadership was framed not as strict adherence to procedural steps but as an iterative process of negotiation and alignment with cultural expectations. Trust and psychological safety were interpreted as relational resources sustained through everyday interaction, while generational inclusion was understood as an adaptive leadership design that balances respect for seniority with opportunities for emerging expertise.

This integrative interpretation suggests that students approached leadership frameworks such as transformational leadership and Kotter's change model as interpretive tools for analyzing culturally situated leadership practices. Through reflective inquiry, students engaged in theory-informed sensemaking that connected leadership concepts with contextual realities observed in the selected leadership exemplars.

From a leadership education perspective, this study therefore highlights how reflective inquiry can support students' development of context-sensitive leadership judgment, enabling them to interpret leadership practices across cultural, organisational, and generational contexts. Rather than memorizing leadership frameworks as universal prescriptions, students appeared to develop the ability to evaluate leadership practices through cultural awareness, relational sensitivity, and ethical considerations.

More broadly, these findings contribute to scholarship on leadership education in internationalized higher education by illustrating how curriculum design can function as Internationalization-at-Home, enabling students to engage global leadership theories while critically examining their application within culturally embedded organisational settings. In this way, reflective inquiry pedagogy can support leadership learning that emphasizes contextual awareness, inclusive participation, and responsible global engagement in culturally diverse and digitally mediated environments.

## Conclusion

This study investigated how undergraduate students in an international business programme develop context-sensitive understandings of transformational leadership through reflective inquiry using culturally situated leadership exemplars. Analyses of 120 reflective journals suggest that students do not approach leadership and change frameworks as universal templates. Instead, they interpret and ethically evaluate leadership practices through cultural and relational lenses, particularly when considering legitimacy, trust, inclusion, and leading change in hybrid and digitally mediated contexts.

Across the reflections, students' sensemaking coalesced around four interconnected dimensions, namely, cultural adaptation of leadership, reinterpretation of change processes, trust and psychological safety, and generational adaptation. Together, the dimensions point to a culturally adaptive understanding of leadership practice. Within this interpretation, leadership effectiveness was often framed less in terms of charismatic influence and more as legitimacy-building and relational credibility enacted through culturally responsive communication and inclusion-oriented practices.

This study contributes to leadership education by illustrating how reflective inquiry can support students in developing context-sensitive leadership judgment when theoretical frameworks are used as interpretive lenses. Through this process, students engaged in theory-informed sensemaking that connected leadership concepts with culturally embedded organisational realities.

For international higher education, the findings highlight the pedagogical value of reflective inquiry as a form of Internationalization-at-Home. By engaging global leadership theories alongside culturally grounded leadership exemplars, students were able to critically examine the cultural assumptions embedded in dominant leadership frameworks and explore how these frameworks may be interpreted in locally meaningful ways. Such approaches may support the

development of leadership awareness that emphasizes inclusion, contextual sensitivity, and responsible global engagement.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single course in one international programme, which may limit contextual transferability. In addition, the analysis relied on reflective journals rather than direct observation of leadership behavior, meaning that the findings capture students' interpretations rather than demonstrated leadership practice. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal designs that examine how reflective learning influences leadership behavior over time, comparative studies across institutions or cultural settings, and mixed-method approaches linking reflective learning with workplace experiences such as internships or early career leadership roles.

Overall, the study suggests that preparing future leaders in international programmes requires more than teaching global leadership models. Pedagogical designs that encourage reflective engagement with cultural context may help students develop leadership understanding that is both culturally legitimate and ethically responsive to the complexities of contemporary global work environments.

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*In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:*

☒ *Guidelines on the structure and wording for more robust statements.*
☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
☐ *Some sections, with extensive editing*
☐ *Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
☐ *Entire work, with extensive editing*

*This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. AI was used to provide suggestions on how to make more compelling arguments in a more structured manner. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.*

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