

Intercultural Competence among Emerging South Asian Leaders: Preliminary Results of the 2025 YSALI Cohort Study

Elizabeth J. Sandell and Malaika Azam

Abstract— In today's connected world, young leaders need more than just technical skills—they must be able to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. This study examines intercultural competence (the ability to interact respectfully and effectively across cultures) among participants in the first Young South Asian Leadership Initiative (YSALI) program. Using the Intercultural Development Inventory and follow-up interviews, investigators considered how well these emerging leaders from seven South Asian countries were prepared to lead in multicultural environments. This article presents a preliminary report, based on early survey returns from 15 of 82 participants. This research will provide important insights into youth leadership development in South Asia and offers recommendations for improving cultural exchange programs.

Index Terms—Intercultural Competence, South Asia, Young Emerging Leaders, Intercultural Development Inventory®.

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership today requires more than being smart or skilled in a particular job. Modern leaders must also have *intercultural competence*—the ability to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. This skill is especially important in South Asia, a region with incredible diversity in languages, religions, traditions, and national identities.

The Young South Asian Leadership Initiative (YSALI) is a program supported by the U.S. Department of State that brings together promising young leaders from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. YSALI aims to develop leadership skills, encourage civic engagement, and build cooperation across borders. By bringing together youth from different countries and backgrounds, YSALI creates opportunities for participants to learn from each other and develop their intercultural skills.

This study examines the intercultural competence of the first YSALI cohort in 2025. Investigators wanted to understand: How well prepared are these young South Asian leaders to work across cultural differences? What factors influence their intercultural development? And how can programs like YSALI better support this critical leadership skill?

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the intercultural competence levels of participants in the 2025 inaugural YSALI cohort and to explore how individual and collective experiences within YSALI influence intercultural development.

The primary research objectives included:

1. To measure baseline levels of intercultural competence among the YSALI participants.
2. To identify key factors (e.g., country of origin, prior international experience, language skills) influencing intercultural competence.
3. To provide aggregate feedback to participants to support future growth.
4. To contribute to the academic literature on leadership development in the Global South, particularly within youth-focused cultural exchange programs.
5. To offer policy and programmatic recommendations for enhancing intercultural learning within YSALI and similar regional initiatives.

This study directly aligns with YSALI's mission to develop globally competent and culturally aware youth leaders. It provides an assessment of how well participants are prepared to engage across cultural differences—an essential leadership trait in South Asia's deeply diverse and complex environment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. What is Intercultural Competence?

Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate and interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds [1]. Researchers have been studying this concept for decades, and they've found that it's not something people are simply born with. Nor do individuals develop it automatically over time. Rather intercultural competence can be developed and improved over time with intentional experience and learning.

According to [2] and [3], people develop intercultural competence through predictable stages. At first, people may deny that cultural differences exist or think their own culture is the best (polarization). As they develop, they begin to recognize cultural differences but may downplay their importance (minimization). Finally, more developed individuals accept and adapt to cultural differences, adjusting their behavior appropriately in different cultural contexts.

B. Why Intercultural Competence Matters for Leaders

Research shows that leaders with strong intercultural competence are more effective in several ways. They build

better relationships with diverse teams, make decisions that consider multiple perspectives, and navigate conflicts more successfully [4] and [5]. In international organizations, leaders with high intercultural competence help their teams perform better and create more inclusive work environments [6].

For young leaders in South Asia, intercultural competence is particularly important. The region has a complex history of both cooperation and conflict between neighboring countries [7]. Leaders who can bridge cultural divides are essential for addressing shared challenges like climate change, economic development, and peacebuilding [8].

C. Measuring Intercultural Competence

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)® is one of the most widely used tools for measuring intercultural competence. The IDI has been tested and validated across many countries and cultures [9] and [10]. It measures where people achieve on the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC), from Denial (not recognizing cultural differences) to Adaptation (skillfully adjusting to different cultural contexts).

Studies using the IDI have found that international experiences do not automatically lead to intercultural development [11]. Simple exposure to different cultures isn't enough—people need structured opportunities to reflect on their experiences and challenge their assumptions [12]. This finding is important for programs like YSALI that aim to develop intercultural competence through international exchange.

D. Youth Leadership Development in South Asia

Research on youth leadership in South Asia shows that young people in the region face unique challenges and opportunities. Many are passionate about social change but lack platforms to connect with peers across borders [13]. Political tensions between countries can limit opportunities for regional cooperation. At the same time, contemporary South Asian youth are more connected through technology and social media than any previous generation [14].

Leadership development programs for South Asian youth are relatively new, and there is limited research on their effectiveness [15]. Most existing studies focus on individual countries rather than regional initiatives. This makes YSALI particularly important as one of the first programs to bring together emerging leaders from across South Asia. However, sponsors do not yet know much about how such programs influence participants' intercultural development.

E. Research Gap

While there is substantial research on intercultural competence in Western contexts and some studies on youth leadership in individual South Asian countries, there is very little research combining these topics. No previous studies have examined intercultural competence among young South Asian leaders participating in a regional exchange program. This study fills that gap by providing the first assessment of intercultural development in a YSALI cohort.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study used a quantitative methods approach. Investigators collected data at one point in time after participants completed the 2025 YSALI program.

B. Participants

The target population was the 82 participants in the first YSALI cohort in 2025. These young leaders came from seven South Asian countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. They represented diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, religion, language, and professional fields.

After the 2025 YSALI program ended, an IDI qualified administrator sent an email invitation to all participants explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Communications were very clear that this research was separate from YSALI's official activities and would not affect their standing in the program.

By the time this article went to press, 15 of the 82 YSALI participants responded to the IDI®. Consequently, the material contained herein constitutes a preliminary report, based on initial responses.

C. Measurement Instruments

The measurement instrument was the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)® to collect data. The IDI is a 50-item online questionnaire that measures intercultural sensitivity. It takes about 20-30 minutes to complete. Participants could select from among 17 languages that included Arabic, Chinese (Simplified and Traditional), Czech, English, Finnish, French (Canada and France), German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, and Turkish.

The IDI assesses a person's preferred approach to cultural differences and similarities on the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC):

- Denial: Not recognizing or being interested in cultural differences.
- Polarization: Viewing one's own culture as superior or, conversely, viewing other cultures as better.
- Minimization: Recognizing cultural differences but focusing mainly on universal similarities.
- Acceptance: Recognizing and appreciating cultural differences in values and behaviors.
- Adaptation: Being able to shift perspective and adjust behavior to different cultural contexts.

D. Data Collection Process

The data collection happened in three phases: Phase 1 (September 2025): An IDI qualified administrator sent introductory emails to all 82 YSALI participants. The email included detailed information about the study, an informed consent form, and a secure link to the IDI assessment. Phase 2 (September and October 2025): Participants completed the IDI online at their convenience.

Phase 3 (November 2025): Participants received feedback about the study's findings at the group level, along with resources for continuing their intercultural development.

E. Data Analysis

IDI data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (averages, percentages, and ranges) to understand the overall orientation of the respondents. Data was analyzed with IDI® protocols to generate three results: Perceived orientation toward cultural differences, developmental orientation toward cultural differences, and the gap between those two results.

F. Ethical Considerations

Investigators followed ethical guidelines to protect participants:

Before participating, everyone received a detailed consent form explaining the study's purpose, what they would be asked to do, the voluntary nature of participation, and how their privacy would be protected. They had to actively agree to participate before accessing the IDI.

All data was anonymized, meaning participants' names and identifying information was removed. Data was stored on encrypted (password-protected) devices that only the research team could access.

Participation was completely voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

The study design was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research with human subjects at Minnesota State University, Mankato, which ensures research meets ethical standards. [IRBNet ID 2354370.]

IV. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

A. Individual Responses

So far, 15 of the 82 participants in 2025 YSALI have completed the survey. Table I shows how these participants individually scored on the IDI®.

TABLE I: NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS IN EACH ORIENTATION

Orientation	n=15
Denial	3
Polarization	5
Minimization	6
Acceptance	1
Adaptation	0

B. How Participants See Their Own Cultural Skills

Figure 1 shows how the group rates their own ability to understand and work with people from cultures different than their own. The group believes that they are in the Acceptance stage. This means that they think they recognize and appreciate the differences between their own culture and others.



Fig. 1 Perceived orientation toward cultural differences.

C. The Actual Cultural Development Level

In contrast to the group's Perceived Orientation toward cultural differences, the group is *really* at the Polarization stage. Analysis of preliminary responses shows that the group reflects an "us" versus "them" point of view about cultural differences.

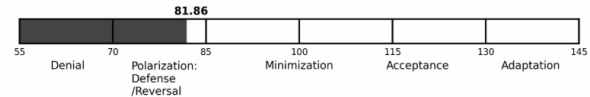


Fig. 2 Developmental orientation toward cultural differences.

A closer look at the results (see Figure 2) shows something interesting: this group's version of Polarization causes them to view other cultures more positively than their own. They tend to be critical of their own cultural groups, while seeing other groups' values and practices in a more positive light.

D. Gap in Orientation toward Cultural Differences

There is a big difference between how participants see themselves and their actual skill level (see Figure 3). The group overestimates their ability to work across cultures. This Orientation Gap score is illustrated in Fig. 3.

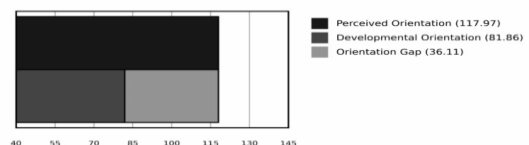


Fig. 3 Gap between Perceived and Developmental orientations toward cultural differences.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Understanding South Asian Youth Leadership

This is the first study to measure intercultural skills among young leaders from South Asia in a systematic way. The results will help us understand if programs like YSALI are helping participants develop these important intercultural leadership skills.

If participants have strong intercultural skills, it means that bringing together young people from different South Asian countries creates real opportunities for cultural learning. Young South Asian leaders were selected for the YSALI program based on their potential and promise for the future. If the scores are lower than organizers hoped, it tells us that these programs need more structured training activities focused on cultural understanding and intercultural skills.

Researchers expected most YSALI participants to score in the Polarization and Minimization stages on the IDC. As expected, this indicated that participants recognize cultural differences but still tend to focus on what people have in common.

B. Program Improvement

The study's findings can help make YSALI and similar initiatives better. The results provide:

- Evidence about what participants learn about culture,
- Information about where participants need more support or training

- Recognition of how the program builds inclusive leadership skills.

Here are some examples of how the findings could lead to program improvements:

Example 1: If participants score high in Acceptance but struggle with Adaptation, future programs could include more hands-on activities where participants practice adjusting how they communicate with different groups.

Example 2: If interviews show that language barriers make it hard for participants to connect, programs could use more small-group activities with people who speak multiple languages to help facilitate.

Example 3: If participants from certain countries show lower scores, program designers could be more intentional about mixing people from different backgrounds and helping them have meaningful conversations.

C. Broader Leadership Development

This study helps us understand how leadership and cultural skills connect in South Asia. Many leadership programs teach skills like public speaking, managing projects, and networking. However, they often ignore cultural awareness and the ability to adapt to different cultures. This research shows that these cultural skills aren't just nice to have—they are essential for leaders, especially in diverse regions like South Asia.

One important question to explore is how historical conflicts and political tensions between South Asian countries affect how young people develop intercultural skills. Understanding how young leaders handle these sensitive issues is crucial. If YSALI participants can build real friendships and working relationships across political divides, they show us something important: people can develop strong intercultural skills even when their countries have difficult relationships. These individuals might become bridge-builders in their communities.

Such research may contribute to public diplomacy through documentation of program impact. Results may suggest ways in which policy might align with broader goals of peace-building, intercultural dialogue and democratic resilience.

D. Limitations of the Study

Like all research, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged:

1) Self-Selection Bias

People who chose to respond early to the survey may already be more interested in intercultural topics than those who don't participate. This could mean the results show higher intercultural competence than exists in the full cohort. Additional data collection is necessary.

2) One-time Measurement

Intercultural competence is being measured at one point in time, after the YSALI program. Without data from before the program, researchers can't definitively say that YSALI caused any particular level of intercultural development. Participants may have already had similar levels of intercultural competence before joining YSALI.

Discovering that certain subgroups (perhaps participants from smaller countries or those from marginalized communities) show particularly high intercultural competence would challenge assumptions about who makes the "best"

intercultural learners. Additional conclusions may be made if future studies found that participants' biggest intercultural challenges weren't between different countries but between different socioeconomic classes, religious groups, or urban versus rural backgrounds within South Asia.

3) Cultural Fit of the IDI

While the IDI has been validated in many countries, most research on it has been conducted in Western contexts. Leaders should be cautious about assuming it works the same way in South Asian cultural contexts. Future follow-up interviews help address this limitation by capturing perspectives that the survey might miss.

4) Unexpected Findings

Research often reveals surprises. Some unexpected findings include:

Participants scoring lower than anticipated, suggesting that simply bringing diverse youth together isn't enough—more structured intercultural learning activities may be needed.

We might also discover that certain groups (perhaps participants from smaller countries or those from marginalized communities) show especially high intercultural skills. This would challenge assumptions about who is naturally good at intercultural learning.

Another surprise might be finding that participants' biggest challenges aren't between different countries. Instead, their struggles might be between different economic classes, religious groups, or urban versus rural backgrounds within South Asia.

Whatever we find, both expected and unexpected results will contribute valuable knowledge to the field.

VI. CONCLUSION

Future studies should explore whether certain populations show particularly high or low intercultural competence. This would help leaders understand who benefits most from programs like YSALI and who might need additional support.

Research should also investigate whether participants' biggest intercultural challenges are within South Asian societies (between different classes, religions, or backgrounds) rather than between different countries. Again, this would help programs focus on important areas for growth.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Elizabeth J. Sandell was born in Ayre, Massachusetts, USA. She completed her higher education at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: BA in social work (1974), MA in educational administration (1980), and PhD in curriculum and instruction (1991). Sandell defines her mission as: "to teach, write, and organize people in transition, so they grow in faith and hope, control their own decisions and resources, and use their gifts and talents."

Her professional experience included teaching in childcare and kindergarten, administration in public school programs for parents' education, director of Christian Education at a local parish, and administration at the University of Minnesota. She is a Past President of the Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children. She is currently a tenured professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN USA.

She has published *Undergraduate Research: Step-by-Step* (Mankato, MN: Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2022) and many research articles. Her research agenda includes development and evaluation of approaches to multicultural and diverse education in the USA and in other countries. From 2010 to 2025, she mentored

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Dr. Sandell was named as a 2025 Faculty Partner of the Year for MSU Service Learning by Mankato Youth Place. Her other awards included the 2023 Presidents' Civic Engagement Leadership Award from the Iowa & Minnesota Campus Compact; the 2013 Global Citizen Award from the International Center, MSU, Mankato; and the 2012 Undergraduate Research Mentor of the Year from the Undergraduate Research Center, MSU, Mankato. She was a 2022 - 2023 Faculty Fellow in Decreasing Equity Gaps in Gateway Courses at MSU, Mankato. And she was a 2021 - 2022 Faculty Fellow in The Socially Just Classroom: Teaching for Equity at MSU, Mankato. Since 2018, she has been a member of the editorial board for the [International Journal of Humanities and Social Development Research](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.02.014).



Malaika Azam was born in Mastung, Balochistan, Pakistan. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree in education from Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIEMS), Quetta, Pakistan, in 2022, graduating as a Gold Medalist with a CGPA of 3.96/4.00. She also completed an exchange semester in elementary education at

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She currently serves as a Fellowships and Scholarships Specialist at the Balochistan Youth Resource Centre, where she mentors youth on national and international opportunities. She has worked as a research team member at Minnesota State University, focusing on intercultural competence, and has contributed to research presented at conferences in Poland, the United Kingdom, and published in Azerbaijan. She has also led community development projects in Balochistan, completed an administrative internship at Alhamd Islamic University, and participated in many leadership and academic training programs. Her research interests include teacher education, intercultural competence, inclusive education, and global citizenship education.

Malaika Azam has received multiple distinctions, including the Gold Medal for academic excellence; selection as the only female participant for the inaugural Young South Asian Leaders Initiative Civic Engagement Workshop 2025 in Sri Lanka; and the Global UGRAD Alumni Convocation 2024 in Thailand. She represented Pakistan at international conferences, including WorldCUR-BCUR 2023 in the United Kingdom and the 17th Global Studies Conference 2024 in Poland. She is actively involved in educational research, leadership development, and intercultural learning initiatives.