From confusion to cohesion: Cultural diversity, team interaction and perceived team performance in the community immersion experiences of Ghanaian undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural competence is increasingly named as a graduate attribute in African higher education, yet there is little evidence on how culturally diverse student teams actually work together in community-embedded learning, or on how that diversity bears on the work they produce. This article addresses that silence through the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) of the University for Development Studies, Ghana, a mandatory, credit-bearing, two-year programme in which interprofessional and multiethnic student teams live and work in rural communities for seven to eight weeks in each of their first two academic years, without a resident university supervisor. Cultural Dynamic Framework, Group Development Theory, Experiential Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory guided this study. Drawing on a hermeneutic phenomenological study of ninety-three participants—comprising fifty-four students across eight focus group discussions, thirty-five students in individual in-depth interviews, and four programme coordinators and supervisors—the article examines how cultural diversity shapes teamwork dynamics and perceived team performance. Data were analysed through interpretative phenomenological analysis structured by reflexive thematic analysis. Two themes are reported. Diversity navigated over time captures: a temporal arc from fragmentation to cohesion that participants and coordinators independently located around the fourth week of immersion; an inter-year arc in which Year 2 teams began from a qualitatively stronger relational position than they had occupied in Year 1; disciplinary diversity as an analytical asset preceded by disciplinary friction; and the reciprocal negotiation of gendered and religious obligation. Performance shaped by cultural orientation captures: the assessment framework as an accountability mechanism for inclusive participation; and community elders as culturally legitimate mediators of intra-team conflict. The paper argues that a team's orientation to its diversity, rather than the amount of diversity it contains, is what participants associate with performance, and that in residential community immersion the host community is a co-producer of team cohesion rather than its backdrop.

Keywords: Community, Culture, Competence, Diversity, Education, Experience, Ghana, Team, Immersion

I. INTRODUCTION

The capacity to work across cultural differences has moved from the margins to the centre of what universities claim to produce. In development-oriented higher education, this capacity is discussed as multicultural or intercultural competence: the integrated attitudes, knowledge, skills and reflexive orientations that allow a person to communicate and act effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries while remaining aware of the assumptions carried into the encounter (Deardorff, 2006; Morriss, 2023; Zhou & Colomer, 2024). Community immersion programmes are among the most demanding of those settings. Unlike classroom group work or short international exchanges, extended residential placement obliges students to negotiate difference in the mundane registers of cooking, sleeping, worship, illness and daily task allocation, and to do so while accountable for a shared and assessed output (Chan et al., 2021; Kiely, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023), and a recent meta-analysis found that cultural intelligence yields its strongest learning outcomes precisely where students have authentic opportunities to apply it in real community contexts (Qiu et al., 2024). Yet the empirical base for these claims remains dominated by Global North institutions, international mobility, and comparatively brief encounters.

The Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) of the University for Development Studies (UDS) in Ghana offers an unusually consequential alternative. Established in 1993, a year after the university was founded under Provisional National Defence Council Law 279 with an explicit mandate to blend the academic world with that of the community (Provisional National Defence Council, 1992; Tanko, 2015), the TTFPP is a mandatory, credit-bearing, two-year, team-based community immersion undertaken by every first- and second-year student. Teams of approximately ten students, typically balanced by gender and drawn from several faculties, are deployed to rural communities for seven

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to eight weeks in each year. In Year 1, they conduct a participatory community needs assessment and produce a community profile; in Year 2, they return to build on that profile and design development interventions. Teams reside communally without a resident university supervisor and are assessed across six equally weighted components administered by the Directorate of Community Relations and Outreach Programmes (DCROP), under a rule by which a zero score in any single component produces a zero total (University for Development Studies [UDS], 2020, 2021). The scale is considerable: DCROP dispatched 8,746 students to rural communities across four northern regions and twenty-two districts in September 2023 alone (DailyGuide Network, 2023; UDS DCROP, 2023).

The relationship between cultural diversity and team performance is nevertheless one of the most contested questions in the teamwork literature, and the contest has not been settled in favour of diversity. Reviews have consistently found that the effects of diversity on performance are mediated by communication processes and moderated by task characteristics and members' orientations (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), that a learning orientation towards difference is a critical enabling condition (Pieterse et al., 2013), and that cultural sensitivity, adaptability and cohesion predict multicultural team performance where diversity itself does not (Guzman-Rodriguez et al., 2023). These findings were generated almost entirely in organisational and classroom settings in the Global North. The Ghanaian evidence base does not answer it. Studies of intercultural learning in Ghanaian higher education have concentrated on international student mobility and external academic partnership (Abdulai, 2019; Alhassan et al., 2020), while Mensah (2019) documented low multicultural counselling competence among university staff without addressing student team processes.

Studies on the TTFPP itself has documented programme benefits, community linkage and challenges of cultural adjustment (Kwoyiga, 2024; Kwoyiga & Apusigah, 2019; Mohammed & Yirbekyaa, 2018; Mwingyine et al., 2017; Tanko, 2015) but has not made the internal life of the culturally diverse team its object of analysis. After three decades of continuous operation at national scale, what happens inside TTFPP teams, and how what happens inside them bears on what they achieve, remains largely undocumented. This paper examines how cultural diversity shapes teamwork dynamics and perceived team performance in the TTFPP context, drawing on students' lived experiences of team interaction during Year 1 and Year 2 community immersion. Perceived team performance is understood throughout as participants' and coordinators' accounts of how well a team accomplished its community engagement and assessment tasks, as distinct from officially recorded assessment scores, to which the study did not seek access. It provides the first systematic account of team dynamics inside a long-running African community immersion programme, and it does so across two programme years rather than at a single point. The paper also extends models of group development and of diversity in teams into a setting for which they were not designed, showing where they hold and where they require qualification.

1.1 Research Objectives

i. To examine how cultural diversity shapes teamwork dynamics in the TTFPP context, drawing on students' lived experiences of team interaction during Year 1 and Year 2 community immersion.
ii. To explore how students perceive the relationship between cultural diversity and team performance, including the strategies teams develop for navigating difference and the factors they associate with successful outcomes.
iii. To investigate how the iterative two-year structure of the TTFPP influences team development, comparing Year 1 and Year 2 experiences to understand whether and how teams build on prior immersion experiences.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This review is organized around the study's key variables: cultural diversity, team interaction, and perceived team performance, and the theoretical and empirical literature that informs their examination in the TTFPP context. The review proceeds from the theoretical framework, through empirical evidence on cultural diversity and team performance, interprofessional diversity, temporal models of team development, and community immersion as a learning context, to the Ghanaian and West African evidence base, and concludes with a synthesis identifying the present gap.

The ontological premise is supplied by the Cultural Dynamic Framework (Langstedt, 2018), which holds that culture is constructed and reconstructed through everyday social interaction rather than fixed within individuals or groups. This framing directs analytic attention to what teams *do* with difference rather than to what difference they *contain*. The compositional vocabulary is supplied by Harrison and Klein's (2007) typology. The temporal account draws on Group Development Theory (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) as qualified by Wei et al. (2023), and on Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984, 2015). Together, this frame frames team development in the programme as operating on two nested cycles: the within-immersion sequence from formation to performance across seven to eight weeks, and the between-year spiral in which the first years' experience becomes the concrete base from which the second year's reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation proceed. Social Learning Theory (Bandura,

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1977) supplies the micro-level mechanism by which, in the absence of resident supervision, members internalise strategies observed in one another, with the corollary that modelling is asymmetric and that teams lacking members with strong conflict-resolution repertoires have no external authority to redirect them.

Finally, Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice supplies the interpretive resource for the study's account of performance. Where knowledge is held not by individuals but distributed across a group whose members can each articulate the whole, competence has become a property of the team rather than of its most capable member. This provides a way of naming what participants describe when they attribute assessment success to the fact that every member could answer the assessors' questions.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Cultural Diversity and Team Performance: A Contested Relationship

Diversity research has moved decisively away from main-effect claims. Harrison and Klein's (2007) typology remains the most useful analytical entry point, distinguishing diversity as separation, where members differ in position or opinion along a continuum; as variety, where members differ in kind and bring categorically different information, experience, and networks; and as disparity, where members differ in the possession of socially valued resources such as status, language proficiency, or contextual knowledge. Applied to student teams in a community immersion programme, ethnic, linguistic, religious and disciplinary differences operate principally as variety, supplying categorically different resources for community analysis, while differences in language proficiency and in familiarity with the host community's culture introduce disparity, with consequences for voice and participation.

Van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) concluded from an influential review that diversity effects are mediated by communication processes and moderated by task complexity and member orientations, such that identical degrees of diversity may produce sharply different outcomes. Pieterse et al. (2013) identified learning orientation as a critical moderator: teams that approach their diversity as a resource rather than a threat share information more openly and perform better. Guzman-Rodriguez et al. (2023) found that cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and cohesion predict multicultural team performance at the individual level, whereas cultural diversity per se does not predict performance once these process variables are accounted for. What this body of work has not examined is the residential case. Its evidence comes from organisational teams and from classroom or virtual student groups whose members disperse at the end of each session.

2.2.2 Interprofessional Diversity as an Under-Theorised Axis

Teams composed across professional or disciplinary boundaries face difficulties that ethnic and linguistic categories do not capture. Interprofessional education research, developed largely in clinical settings, documents both the educational value and the practical friction of learning across professional lines: disciplines bring different epistemic frameworks, technical vocabularies, role expectations and assumptions about hierarchy, all of which must be negotiated before collaborative work becomes possible (Reeves et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2024). Salas et al. (2005) identify team leadership, mutual performance monitoring, backup behaviour, adaptability and team orientation as core determinants of team effectiveness, though Salas et al. (2008) acknowledge that the applicability of such models to culturally heterogeneous teams remain an open empirical question. The intercultural competence literature and the interprofessional education literature have largely developed in parallel. Neither has systematically examined what happens when disciplinary diversity is deliberately superimposed on ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity within the same small group, working on the same task, under the same assessment regime. The theoretical and empirical resources for analysing that intersection are correspondingly thin, and the present study contributes to their development rather than drawing on a settled body of scholarship.

2.2.3 Temporal Models of Team Development and Their Cultural Conditioning

Tuckman's (1965) sequence of forming, storming, norming and performing, later extended to include adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), remains the most widely used temporal framework for small-group development, and Bonebright (2010) documents both its durability and the looseness with which it has often been applied. Its relevance to a fixed-duration immersion is immediate: arrival and community entry correspond to forming, the negotiation of roles and of the division of community interaction to storming, the consolidation of working norms to norming, and the production of assessed outputs to performing.

Two qualifications matter here. First, Wei et al. (2023), studying first-year multicultural engineering teams, found the stages neither discrete nor linear in practice: teams may storm and norm simultaneously, may revisit earlier stages when new challenges arise, and may never surface overt conflict even where cultural differences are substantial. Second, Tuckman's model was developed for supervised settings in which instructor authority partly manages the early stages. Where no resident supervisor is present, forming and storming must be navigated entirely through peer negotiation, placing a premium on precisely the competencies that the programme is intended to develop. The model is also silent on iteration. A programme in which the same students return to the same community in a second year with

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substantially the same team creates a developmental situation for which the original framework has no category, and which Wei et al. (2023) approach through the notion of cultural pre-norming in multicultural teams with prior shared experience.

2.2.4 Community Immersion, Experiential Learning and Team Learning

Experiential learning theory holds that knowledge is created through the transformation of direct experience (Kolb, 1984, 2015), a proposition whose philosophical foundation lies in Dewey's (1938) principle of education through experience and whose contemporary elaborations attend to reflection, context and social mediation (Morris, 2020; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). Chan et al. (2021) documented gains in global citizenship and intercultural effectiveness from international service-learning, and Collopy et al. (2020) drew attention to the reciprocal conditions under which intercultural competence develops in service-learning rather than treating exposure as sufficient. Problem-based approaches have been found to develop the transversal competencies of communication and collaborative teamwork (Crespi et al., 2021), including in African higher education settings where they enhance experiential reasoning and peer learning (Omondi, 2025). Participatory methodologies add a further demand: participatory rural appraisal requires students to elicit and validate community members' own knowledge, positioning themselves as learners rather than experts (Chambers, 1994). What this literature has not resolved is how the community itself figures in team development. Both Tuckman's (1965) model and the Big Five teamwork framework (Salas et al., 2005) treat the team as the unit of analysis and the environment as context. In residential community immersion, that assumption is worth examining rather than assuming, since teams live inside the setting that the models treat as external.

2.2.5 The Ghanaian and West African Evidence Base

Research on intercultural competence in Ghanaian higher education is sparse and skewed. Abdulai (2019) and Alhassan et al. (2020) examined intercultural learning in Ghana–Germany exchange contexts and international student adjustment, finding that cross-cultural encounter challenged assumptions and broadened perspectives but required structured institutional support if disorientation was not to overwhelm learning. Neither addressed the intra-national diversity that most Ghanaian students navigate daily. Jin and Sercu (2025), reviewing approaches to researching intercultural competence in higher education, confirm the field's continuing orientation towards international mobility. Mensah (2019) documented low multicultural counselling competence among university staff, suggesting that professional education in Ghana is not consistently preparing practitioners for the cultural complexity of Ghanaian society.

The cultural geography of northern Ghana, where most TTFPP communities are located, gives the question additional weight. The region is characterised by extraordinary ethnic diversity, with Dagomba, Konkomba, Mamprusi, Nanumba, Builsa, Frafra, Kasena and other groups maintaining distinct languages, kinship systems, land tenure practices, religious traditions and governance structures, and by a history of inter-ethnic conflict whose legacies of suspicion and territorial sensitivity persist in some communities. Teams deployed into this landscape sometimes include students from groups with a history of conflict, giving intra-team negotiation a historical weight without parallel in studies of multicultural teams in more settled contexts.

On university and community engagement, Aryeh-Adjei and Adu-Marfo (2025) found at the University of Ghana that engagement initiatives address socio-economic challenges but may also reproduce the power imbalances between institutions and marginalised communities that they are meant to redress. Tanko's (2015) ethnographic study of the TTFPP found that community members valued the programme yet felt insufficiently involved in its conceptualisation and management. Kwoyiga and Apusigah (2019) and Mohammed and Yirbekyaa (2018) provide the most contextually grounded prior work on TTFPP experiences, documenting challenges of cultural adjustment within teams and between teams and communities, but they do not analyse the processes through which teams developed strategies for navigating those challenges, nor the relationship between those strategies and what teams achieved.

2.3 The Study Gap

Four gaps converge on the objective of this article. Contextually, the diversity and performance literature has been built from Global North organisational and classroom settings and has not been tested in residential, peer-governed, community-embedded African programmes. Conceptually, the interaction of disciplinary diversity with ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity within a single team remains under-theorised. Theoretically, temporal models of group development assume supervision and single-cycle team life, whereas iterative two-year programmes present a developmental situation those models do not describe.

Empirically, three decades of TTFPP operation have produced almost no evidence about what occurs inside its teams. Students' lived experiences across Year 1 and Year 2 warrant focused attention for a reason that is more than descriptive. If team dynamics in the second year begin from a different relational baseline than in the first, then the iterative structure is doing developmental work that a single immersion cannot do, and this has direct implications for

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how such programmes should be designed, resourced and assessed. Establishing whether that is so requires accounts from students who have lived both years, interpreted with attention to the meanings they themselves attach to the change.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study is underpinned by social constructivism, which holds that meanings are produced through interaction, language, and shared interpretive convention rather than discovered as features of an external reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998). Because the phenomenon of interest is itself interactional how a group of students constructs, contests, and puts to use the cultural differences among them a paradigm that treats meaning as socially produced is the appropriate foundation. The design is hermeneutic phenomenological in the tradition of van Manen (1990, 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks the structures of meaning through which people encounter and interpret events, and it treats the researcher's interpretive work as constitutive of the account rather than as contamination of it. This orientation suits a question about the lived experience of team interaction, which cannot be reached through instruments that measure competence levels but not the processes by which those levels are reached.

3.2 Study Context

UDS is a multi-campus public university headquartered in Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana, with campuses at Tamale, Nyankpala and Dungu. The study area comprised the campuses from which the TTFPP is administered, where coordinators and supervisors are based, and the rural host communities to which student teams were deployed. Two deployment landscapes were involved. Second-year teams were deployed to communities in the Northern Region and surrounding northern regions, an area of savannah livelihoods, chieftaincy-based traditional governance and a plural religious landscape in which Islam, Christianity and traditional religion coexist. First-year teams in the 2023/2024 cycle were deployed, under DCROP's regional rotation policy, to communities in the Ashanti Region, an area of forest-zone livelihoods, Twi-dominant communication and the Asante chieftaincy system (GBC Ghana Online, 2024). The contrast was analytically useful: students from every region of Ghana encountered, in one deployment or the other, a community cultural world substantially unfamiliar to them. Community identities are withheld and replaced by codes throughout (Table 1).

Table 1

Community Deployment Contexts

Community code	Year(s)	Ethnic majority	Region	Key cultural features
Comm-A	Year 1	Dagomba	Northern	Islamic majority; chiefly authority; patrilineal kinship
Comm-B	Years 1 and 2	Konkomba	Northern	Mixed Christian–traditionalist; inter-ethnic history
Comm-C	Year 2	Akan (Brong)	Bono East	Cocoa economy; mixed religion; district proximity
Comm-D	Year 1	Gonja	Savannah	Islamic majority; pastoralist–farming; oral tradition
Comm-E	Year 1	Akan (Asante)	Ashanti	Asante chieftaincy; mixed economy; Twi-dominant

Note. Source: field data. [Confirm deployment year(s) recorded for Comm-D: the thesis table records Year 1, while an interviewee attributed to this community was in Year 2.]

3.3 Population and Sampling

Given a programme population of several thousand students distributed across many regions and districts, probability sampling would have been infeasible and, for a phenomenological study seeking theoretical transferability rather than statistical generalisation, inappropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Purposive criterion sampling was used, selecting participants who had directly experienced the phenomenon and were able to articulate that experience (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015).

Sampling proceeded across three linked levels. At the level of community context, communities were drawn from both deployment landscapes so that initial and experienced perspectives, and both northern and Akan cultural settings, were represented. At the level of the team, eight student teams were purposively selected against four criteria: representation of at least four distinct ethnic groups per team, established from DCROP placement records; representation of at least three faculties or schools; gender balance in line with the recommended team composition in the programme field guide; and accessibility and willingness confirmed with team coordinators. At the level of the individual, all members of each selected team were invited to the focus group discussion, and thirty-five students were selected for individual in-depth interviews to span cohorts, faculties, ethnic and religious backgrounds, host-community ethnolinguistic contexts, and leadership or ordinary member roles. Four TTFPP coordinators and supervisors from the relevant campuses and deployment regions were selected for individual interviews. The demographic composition of the focus group participants is summarised in Table 2.

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Table 2

Focus Group Participant Demographics (N = 54)

Characteristic	Category	n	%	
Gender	Male	28	51.9	
	Female	26	48.1	
Year of study	First year	28	51.9	
	Second year	26	48.1	
Ethnic group	Akan	15	27.8	
	Dagomba	12	22.2	
	Ewe	9	16.7	
	Konkomba	7	13.0	
	Gonja	5	9.3	
	Other (Frafra, Mamprusi, Ga, other)	6	11.1	
Religion	Christian	31	57.4	
	Muslim	23	42.6	

Note. Source: field data. Percentages are rounded and may not total exactly 100.

The four coordinators and supervisors comprised a TTFPP coordinator and senior lecturer at the Nyankpala campus with eleven years of oversight (Coord-1); a community supervisor and lecturer at the Tamale campus with seven years of oversight (Coord-2); a DCROP programme officer at the Tamale headquarters with fourteen years across all deployment regions (Coord-3); and a faculty supervisor and associate professor at the Dungu campus with nine years of oversight (Coord-4).

3.4 Data Collection

Focus group discussions with student teams were the primary source, chosen because they mirror the team-based context under investigation, allowing the researcher to observe not only what individuals report but how members build on, qualify, and contest one another's accounts, and because collective deliberation is a culturally appropriate medium of knowledge production in many of the traditions from which participants come. The eight discussions were held in community settings, typically under trees or in community centres, lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes, and were moderated facilitatively, with a research assistant recording non-verbal interaction and group dynamics in a structured observation protocol. Start and end times were not consistently recorded in a form permitting a reliable mean duration, so a range is reported. Data collection was conducted primarily in English, the language of instruction at UDS and the shared medium across linguistically diverse participants. Participants were encouraged to use terms in Dagbani, Twi, Hausa, Ewe, or other languages where these expressed an experience more precisely; such terms were recorded verbatim and translated with participants' assistance at transcript check. The proportion of local-language use was not quantified.

3.5 Data Analysis

Analysis followed interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009), structured procedurally by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) and oriented throughout by van Manen's (1990, 2014) hermeneutic commitments. Transcripts were read repeatedly while listening to the corresponding audio, with initial impressions recorded in the reflexive journal; meaning units were identified and coded both inductively and deductively, reflecting the hermeneutic movement between prior theoretical understanding and fresh encounter with the data; codes were examined for semantic and conceptual relationship and clustered into provisional themes; provisional themes were reviewed against the full dataset for representativeness, distinctiveness and experiential richness; final themes were defined with explicit boundary and essence statements, with sub-themes retained to preserve nuance; and findings were drafted and redrafted, writing being treated as part of analysis rather than as its report. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) caution that themes are interpretive products rather than entities awaiting discovery, this is framed as a situated analytical judgement documented in the audit trail rather than as an objective endpoint, and the interview-based thresholds reported by Guest et al. (2006) and Hennink and Kaiser (2022) served as reference points rather than as justification. Malterud et al.'s (2016) criteria of information power, sample specificity, focused aims, and sustained dialogue were satisfied.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Rigour was addressed through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was pursued through prolonged and repeated engagement with selected teams, triangulation across focus groups, individual interviews, coordinator interviews, field observation and institutional

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documents. Dependability was supported by an audit trail comprising interview guides, field notes, reflexive memos, the coding framework, provisional theme maps and final analytical decisions. Confirmability was pursued through verbatim extracts, documented reflexivity and explicit acknowledgement that the findings constitute an interpretive account produced through the researcher's engagement with participants' accounts rather than a neutral reproduction of their experience. Reflexivity in hermeneutic phenomenology is an epistemological commitment rather than a procedural safeguard: the researcher's cultural background, institutional position and interpretive assumptions are involved in producing the study's knowledge claims (Finlay, 2008; van Manen, 2014). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University for Development Studies Institutional Review Board. Finally, all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, organized around the three research objectives: (1) to examine how cultural diversity shapes teamwork dynamics; (2) to explore how students perceive the relationship between cultural diversity and team performance; and (3) to investigate how the iterative two-year structure influences team development. Two themes and six sub-themes address these objectives (Table 3). Theme 1 addresses Objectives 1 and 3; Theme 2 addresses Objective 2. Themes are reported because they recur across the corpus and disclose the structure of participants' experience, not as frequency counts; the number of quotations attached to a theme is not treated as a measure of its prevalence. All verbatim extracts are presented with an interviewee identifier and the date of the interview (month and year) to ensure transparency while protecting participant confidentiality. Participants are identified by interview number, year of study, discipline, community code, and interview date. Evidence from the remaining individual interviews is presented as anonymised reported accounts drawn from the coded transcripts, with corresponding verbatim material retained in the audit trail; participants in that portion of the corpus are identified as P11 to P35.

Table 3

Thematic Structure

Theme	Sub-themes	Research Objective(s) Addressed
Theme 1: Diversity navigated over time	1a. From fragmentation to cohesion: the temporal arc	Objectives 1, 3
	1b. The inter-year arc: Year 1 and Year 2	Objective 3
	1c. Disciplinary diversity as analytical asset	Objective 1
	1d. Gender, religion and equitable voice	Objective 1
Theme 2: Performance shaped by cultural orientation	2a. Assessment structure as cultural motivator and accountability mechanism	Objective 2
	2b. Elder consultation as community-embedded conflict resolution	Objective 2

Note. Source: analysis of the study corpus. The sub-themes correspond to Sub-Themes 5a to 5d and 6a to 6b of the parent study, with the inter-year arc reported separately here.

Theme 1: Diversity Navigated Over Time

This theme addresses Research Objectives 1 and 3, examining how cultural diversity shapes teamwork dynamics and how the iterative two-year structure influences team development. The theme captures participants' accounts of the temporal processes through which teams navigated their diversity, the specific forms of diversity that shaped team interaction, and the strategies teams developed for managing difference. The most temporally precise account located the transition in the fourth week and attributed the early friction specifically to disciplinary difference:

> "*Initially we argued a lot, because we came from different departments (medical, nutrition, midwifery, education) and each thought they knew best. But as time passed, we realised we shared a common goal and learned to collaborate. By the fourth week we were united, dividing the work fairly and combining our efforts effectively.*" (Interview 3, Year 1 student, Integrated Development Studies, Community A, 4th November 2023)

What is notable in this account is that cohesion is not described as the disappearance of difference but as its subordination to a shared purpose and its conversion into a division of labour. The same structure appears in an account that identifies a specific material practice as the catalyst:

> "*Initially we cooked separately, but when the community provided food, we cooked and ate together, which encouraged a sense of unity."* (Interview 5, Year 1 student, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, 4th November 2023)

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The detail matters. Separate cooking is a practical arrangement that also reproduces ethnic, religious and regional groupings within a team, since dietary practice tracks those categories closely. The shift to communal cooking was not a decision the team reached through deliberation about diversity; it followed from the community's provision of food. Cohesion, on this account, was occasioned from outside the team. Participants also identified members whose orientation towards bridging sustained group harmony:

> *"Certain team members always worked to bring everyone together, listened to all sides, and promoted harmony."* (Interview 6, Year 2 student, Agriculture, Community B, 3rd July 2024)

The temporal arc was independently corroborated from the institutional side. The most experienced coordinator described the same sequence as a reliable pattern observed across more than a decade of supervision, and attached it to the same practice that Interview 5 had identified:

> "*In over a decade of supervision I have seen this pattern reliably. Week one: cautious, polite, awkward. Weeks two to three: testing, sometimes conflict, sometimes withdrawal. Weeks four to five: something shifts; I call it the cooking moment. When teams start cooking together voluntarily, I know they have turned a corner. Weeks six to eight: genuine collaboration. They have built something they cannot easily take apart. The communities notice it too; by week seven, the community sometimes cannot tell clearly which students come from which background."* (Coord-1, TTFPP Coordinator, Nyankpala Campus, 6th September 2024).

Two independent vantage points a first-year student reporting on her own team and a coordinator generalising across many cohorts converge on the same threshold and on the same observable marker of it. The coordinator's closing observation adds a further element: the transition is visible to the host community, which registers the team as a single entity rather than as an assemblage of identifiable backgrounds.

> *The Inter-Year Arc: Year 1 and Year 2: Participants with experience of both programme years described a second, longer arc that operated between years rather than within them. The second year did not begin where the first had begun: "During the first year, teamwork was weak because many members were not actively involved. By the end of the first year, and throughout the second year, the team became much more cohesive and collaborative*." (Interview 7, Year 1 student, Engineering, Community E, November 7th 2023). *A similar comparison distinguished a functional first-year bond from a stronger second-year one, and recorded that the relationships had outlasted the programme*: *"In the first year the bond was moderate but functional. In the second year, new members brought energy that strengthened the team, and we are still in contact today."* (Interview 9, Year 2 student, Integrated Development Studies, Community C, 4th July 2024).

The pattern recurred across the wider corpus. P25, P26 and P27 described first-year cohesion as merely functional and second-year cohesion as excellent, and P28, P29 and P30 traced a movement from poor initial teamwork to a strong and mutually accommodating unit by the second year. Participants attributed to it an analytical reach that no single discipline could have achieved:

> "*Each of us saw the same community differently: the medical students saw disease, the agriculture students saw food, the engineering students saw the lack of structures. When we combined those views in the proposal, the community could finally see the whole problem, and that is when they started acting on it themselves."* (Interview 3, Year 1 student, Integrated Development Studies, Community A, 3rd November 2023)

The claim in this account extends beyond the team's internal work. Integration is credited not only with producing a better proposal but with altering what the community could see about its own situation, and with prompting community action. Teams also built structures that forced disciplinary boundary-crossing rather than leaving it to inclination:

> "*We distributed and rotated the tasks, so the agriculture students worked on sections the development-studies students had started, and we had to understand each other's parts to defend the whole report."* (Interview 6, Year 2 student, Agriculture, Community B, 4th July 2024).

Rotation is significant because it makes mutual comprehension a condition of the team's collective defence of its work rather than an optional courtesy. A comparable openness was described from a position of formal authority, where a team leader reported adjusting her own approach in response to teammates' guidance on cultural conduct:

> "*Even as a group leader, I listened to their advice and adjusted accordingly. For example, they taught me the importance of greeting people properly and showing respect to everyone, regardless of age or status*." (Interview 4, Year 2 student, Agriculture, Community C, 6th July 2024).

Complementarity was not, however, the starting condition. P19, P20 and P21 gave a candid account of the friction that preceded it: the early weeks of their placement were marked by what they described as academic ego clashes between members of different programmes, resolved only when the team divided the work so that each discipline addressed the community problems nearest its own competence. One account describes the intersection of religious obligation, task deadline and the unannounced arrival of an assessor:

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> "*One example was a Friday when the Muslim members needed to go to prayer, but we had pending work and our supervisor could arrive at any time. It was challenging to balance their religious obligations with our responsibilities, but we managed, and it taught me patience and understanding*." (Interview 7, Year 1 student, Engineering, Community E, 5th November 2023).

The same participant described routine accommodation of divergent worship schedules as a principle of equitable team management: "We are from different backgrounds. Some are Muslim, some are Christian. We have to accept each other's views, and when it is time for prayers, we excuse one another to observe them. We have to accept everyone's culture." (Interview 7, Year 1 student, Engineering, Community E, 5th November 2023). A team member deployed in a traditionalist community recounted the same category of negotiation from the position of initial apprehension:

> "*When I arrived in the traditionalist community, I was part of a team comprising both Christians and Muslims. This initially created some religious apprehension, but I gradually learned to adjust to different perspectives, beliefs, and ways of life. One memorable challenge occurred when some Muslim team members needed to leave for Friday prayers at a nearby mosque while we still had pending work to complete for an assessor. However, we discussed the situation and reached a compromise that enabled us to fulfil both obligations."(*Interview 28, Year 2 student, Economics, Community C, 7th July 2024).

Across the wider corpus, religious negotiation recurred with sufficient consistency to warrant treatment as a distinct pattern. P13 to P18 and P35, leaders of teams containing Muslim members, described scheduling fieldwork around daily prayer times as an ordinary act of team maintenance. P28, P29 and P30 described reciprocal accommodation in shared living quarters, including a Christian member praying quietly so as not to disturb Muslim roommates. P19, P20 and P21 framed the outcome in explicitly theological terms, concluding that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, while P31 traced the team's capacity to include every member's perspective to the routine accommodation of its mixed Christian and Muslim membership. Gender negotiation extended outwards to community norms that conflicted with team members' own commitments:

> "*In some areas, girls were not allowed to attend school. I learned to respect local customs while also gently educating where possible*."(Interview 4, Year 2 student, Agriculture, Community C, 8th July 2024).

The absence of spontaneous gender-related accounts across the thirty-five individual interviews is itself analytically noteworthy and is treated here with caution rather than read as evidence that gendered negotiation was absent from those teams.

Theme 2: Performance Shaped by Cultural Orientation

This theme addresses Research Objective 2, exploring how students perceive the relationship between cultural diversity and team performance. Participants described assessment day as the point at which the authenticity of collective work became visible:

> "*The questions the assessors asked us made them realise that we did the work ourselves. We had all done the group work, and everybody was able to do his or her part on the assessment day."* (Interview 1, Year 2 student, Integrated Development Studies, Community B, 6th July 2024).

The mechanism was stated most fully in an account that traces a direct line from inclusive participation to assessment outcome:

> "*Our team's success came from inclusive participation. Everyone contributed to the work, so when the supervisors came to assess us, we were all prepared. Even when the person chosen to present was not the group leader, they did well, because everyone knew the work. Each member could answer questions confidently."* (Interview 3, Year 1 student, Integrated Development Studies, Community A, 5th November 2023).

Because the presenter is selected by the assessors rather than nominated by the team, a team cannot protect itself by concentrating preparation in its most confident members. Teamwork and thorough preparation. We reviewed the work repeatedly and familiarised ourselves with every aspect, which made the assessment manageable."(Interview 5, Year 1 student, Medicine/Nursing, Community A, November 2023). Inviting the chief and elders during the assessment further highlighted our commitment, which contributed to our success." (Interview 7, Year 1 student, Engineering, Community E, November 2023). Where intra-team conflict exceeded the team's own peer-governance capacity, teams turned to community elders as informal but culturally authoritative mediators. Participants described the relationship in kinship terms:

> "*We had our father in the community. Whenever there was a misunderstanding or any challenge within the culture, we went to him to seek a solution, because he is an elder and he has the experience."* (Interview 2, Year 2 student, Business/Economics, Community D, 5th July 2024).

For other teams, the practice had the character of an established protocol rather than an improvisation:

> "*We consulted a respected elder in the community to help resolve misunderstandings or challenges*."(Interview 6, Year 2 student, Agriculture, Community B, 5th July 2024).

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Where teams did not require external mediation, cohesion was attributed to a reciprocal recognition of difference: *"Mutual understanding. We recognised our differences and learned to respect each other's emotional responses and behaviours."(*Interview 8, Year 1 student, Agriculture, Community A, 3rd November 2023).

Elder mediation was among the most strongly replicated findings across the corpus. P13 to P18 and P35 described routinely referring cultural disputes and serious misunderstandings to an experienced community elder, and P28, P29 and P30 described consulting the chief both to interpret frightening ritual events and to anticipate the community's ceremonial calendar. Two observations bear directly on the relationship between diversity and performance. The first concerns the relationship between difficulty and depth:

*"The students who develop the deepest multicultural competence are rarely the ones who had the easiest teams. The ones who grow most are the ones who faced real difficulty (real cultural conflict) and stayed. Comfort can be the enemy of learning here."(*Coord-2, Community Supervisor, Tamale Campus, 8th September 2024).

The second identifies a structural gap in the very instrument that participants described as driving inclusive participation:

*"The assessment framework is good, but it does not explicitly assess multicultural competence as a named outcome. A student can score highly on community stay, field notebooks, and oral presentation while having stayed within their own ethnic group throughout. We need an assessment component that specifically measures cultural bridge-building."(*Coord-3, DCROP Programme Officer, 6th September 2024).

A third coordinator located the gap earlier in the programme cycle, in the content of what students are prepared for before departure:

*"The biggest gap, in my view, is pre-departure orientation. Students arrive at their communities knowing PRA techniques and how to build a community profile. What they do not have is knowledge of how to live together across cultural differences. We orient them for the academic task. We do not orient them for the relational and cultural challenge."(*Coord-4, Associate Professor, Dungu Campus, 8th September 2024).

The teams that treated difference as an allocation problem to be solved by dividing along familiar lines described weaker cohesion; teams that converted difference into an analytical division of labour, a rotation of drafting responsibility, a schedule that accommodated prayer, or a strategy for entering households through the members who shared their language, described both stronger cohesion and better outcomes.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 The Fourth Week as a Cultural Threshold: Tuckman Revisited Under Residential Conditions

The most analytically significant finding is the consistency with which participants and coordinators independently located the transition from fragmentation to cohesion at approximately the fourth week, roughly the midpoint of a seven-to-eight-week immersion. This broadly confirms Tuckman's (1965) sequence while disclosing two modifications specific to residential community immersion. The first concerns the storming stage. In Tuckman's classroom-derived model, storming is driven by task demands and interpersonal tension. In this setting, it is simultaneously accelerated and constrained. This is consistent with Wei et al.'s (2023) finding that storming is culturally conditioned rather than uniform, and it adds a structural condition, assessment deadline under residential co-presence, that their engineering-team setting did not contain. Participants and coordinators alike identified voluntary communal cooking as the observable sign that a team had turned a corner, and one participant identified the community's provision of food as the occasion of it. Shared eating is not a neutral index of cohesion in this context. That the same marker was named independently by a first-year participant and by a coordinator generalising across more than a decade of cohorts gives it unusual evidential weight for a qualitative finding.

4.2.2 Cultural Pre-Norming and the Developmental Logic of Iteration

Accounts of a second-year team that was qualitatively more cohesive than the first-year team challenge an assumption implicit in Tuckman's (1965) model: that each team experience begins at forming. Where students return to substantially the same community with substantially the same team, the second deployment starts from a different relational baseline, approximating what Wei et al. (2023) describe as cultural pre-norming in multicultural teams with prior shared experience. Such a team does not have to form, storm and norm from the beginning; it begins with established communication norms, identified roles and partially settled cultural tensions, and can therefore reach performing more quickly and meet the heavier integration demands of second-year proposal work from a position of relational strength.

Read through experiential learning theory, the two years constitute a spiral rather than a repetition (Kolb, 1984, 2015; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). The first year supplies the concrete experience on which the second year's reflective observation and active experimentation operate, with the intervening academic year functioning as an extended

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reflective interval. Where the second-year cohesion is achieved by a team that has settled into comfortable roles, the growth that Coord-2 associated with sustained difficulty may be foregone. Pre-norming is an advantage for task performance, but it is not automatically an advantage for intercultural development, and the two should not be conflated.

4.2.3 The Community as Co-Producer of Team Cohesion

The most distinctive theoretical implication of the findings concerns the status of the host community. Communal cooking became possible because the community provided food. Intra-team conflicts that exceeded peer governance were referred to a community elder. Community leaders were invited into the assessment encounter, where a chief's commendation entered the evidence of team performance. Both Tuckman's (1965) model and the Big Five teamwork framework (Salas et al., 2005) treat the team as the unit of analysis and the environment as its context. The present findings indicate that in community-embedded learning this separation does not hold: the community's hospitality, cultural authority, elder wisdom and communal practices are active ingredients of team development rather than the background against which it occurs. The finding also carries an ethical dimension. Aryeh-Adjei and Adu-Marfo (2025) caution that university and community engagement can reproduce the power asymmetries it seeks to redress, and Tanko (2015) found that TTFPP host communities valued the programme but felt insufficiently involved in its conceptualisation.

4.2.4 From Cultural Orientation to Relational, Epistemic and Performance Inclusion

The findings are consistent with Guzman-Rodriguez et al.'s (2023) conclusion that cultural sensitivity, adaptability and cohesion predict multicultural team performance where diversity itself does not, and with Pieterse et al.'s (2013) identification of learning orientation as the critical moderator. A team may hold an inclusive orientation without achieving relational inclusion if language disparity excludes some members from the work; it may achieve relational inclusion without epistemic inclusion if contributions are compartmentalised by discipline; and it is precisely against this last possibility that task rotation operates, by making mutual comprehension a condition of collective defence. The end state described here is distributed competence in Wenger's (1998) sense: knowledge held by the team as a community of practice rather than by its individual members, such that any member can articulate the whole. Reading the same finding through Harrison and Klein (2007), disciplinary and ethnic differences functioned as variety, supplying categorically different resources for community analysis, while language proficiency and familiarity with the host community functioned as disparity, bearing on whose voice was heard. The teams that performed well were those that had found ways to exploit the former while managing the latter.

4.2.5 Assessment as a Pedagogical Instrument Rather Than a Measure

Participants consistently described the assessment framework as shaping team behaviour throughout the immersion rather than evaluating it at the close. The requirement that any member may be selected to present, the community stay component, and the zero-tolerance rule together generate incentives for inclusive participation and culturally attentive community relations. Assessment here is not a measurement instrument distinguishable from the learning it evaluates; it is among the mechanisms producing that learning. This gives Coord-3's observation a weight beyond the administrative. If assessment shapes practice, the absence of an explicit multicultural competence component means that the programme's most consequential educational outcome is not reinforced by its most powerful pedagogical instrument. A student may score well across all six components while having remained within their own ethnic group throughout, and nothing in the framework registers the difference. The point generalises to community-based learning programmes elsewhere: where a programme's rubric is silent on cultural bridge-building, teams have no institutional reason to treat it as part of the work.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how cultural diversity shapes teamwork dynamics and perceived team performance in the TTFPP context, drawing on students' lived experiences of team interaction during Year 1 and Year 2 community immersion. The findings establish four principal conclusions.

First, cultural diversity did not, on its own, determine how well the student teams worked or what they produced. Across two years of residential community immersion, participants described a movement from fragmentation to cohesion that recurred at two scales: within each seven-to-eight-week deployment, with a threshold at approximately the fourth week that students and coordinators identified independently; and across the two programme years, with second-year teams beginning from a relational baseline that first-year teams had to build from nothing.

Second, disciplinary difference, initially experienced as friction between competing claims to expertise, became the principal analytical asset of teams that found a way to allocate authority across it. This finding demonstrates that the

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conversion of diversity from liability to asset is a process requiring deliberate negotiation, not an automatic consequence of exposure.

Third, two conditions external to the team proved consequential. The team could not resolve, and by lending its own voice to the assessment encounter, participated in producing the cohesion that the university assessed. In residential community immersion, the community is not the setting in which a team develops; it is one of the agents of that development.

Fourth, the iterative two-year structure of the TTFPP does developmental work that a single immersion cannot do. Second-year teams began from a qualitatively stronger relational position, enabling them to undertake more demanding integrative work. This finding supports the interpretation of iteration as a deliberate design feature rather than a doubling of exposure, and it identifies a mechanism, cultural pre-norming, through which programmes of this kind can accelerate team development.

The practical consequence is that the outcomes this programme is credited with producing are not by-products of exposure. They are produced by specific design features: duration sufficient to cross the cohesion threshold, iteration that allows teams to return, residence that makes difference a daily practical matter, deliberate disciplinary heterogeneity, assessment criteria that reward collective knowledge, and community relationships that supply resources the university does not itself possess. This study suggests that the conditions under which such capability develops are institutional and designable, and that a programme which has been generating them for three decades has more to teach the field than the field has so far asked of it.

5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are directly supported by the empirical findings of this study and address the specific gaps identified in the data.

Coordinator observation (Coord-4) and student experience converge on a gap in what students are prepared for. Preparation currently addresses the academic task, participatory appraisal technique, and community profile construction, and not the relational and cultural challenge of living and working across difference. Universities operating immersion models should treat pre-departure orientation as a curriculum component in its own right,

Coordinator observation that the deepest development occurred among students who faced genuine cultural conflict and remained (Coord-2), together with the wider transformative learning evidence that dissonance rather than comfort drives attitudinal change. Orientation should include case-based discussion of the conflicts that previous cohorts have encountered and the strategies they developed for navigating them.

The evidence supports deliberate disciplinary heterogeneity, since interprofessional variety was the form of diversity most consistently credited with improving analytical quality (Theme 1c). It also supports attention to disparity: teams in which no member shares a language with the host community face an operational constraint that is not a matter of attitude. Composition should be checked against the ethnolinguistic profile of the assigned community rather than against internal diversity alone.

TTFPP programme should identify and brief a designated community liaison as part of the placement process, so that teams are not dependent on their own success in locating an appropriate elder, and so that the community role carries recognition rather than being an unacknowledged subsidy of the university's teaching.

Declaration of Interest

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