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4 **LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: A MULTI-COHORT STUDY OF**
5 **RURAL IMMERSION OUTCOMES, INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE, AND**
6 **INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN INDIA.**
7

8 **ABSTRACT:**

9 This paper investigates how structured rural immersion programmes influence intercultural
10 competence, perceptions of rural communities, and global learning outcomes among domestic and
11 international participants, while examining how such experiences can inform higher education
12 curriculum design. The study employs a multi-cohort mixed-methods design using data collected
13 between 2024 and 2026 from Australian university students participating in the New Colombo Plan,
14 Indian undergraduate students, educators, and participants in an Indigenous community fellowship.
15 Quantitative survey data were integrated with qualitative reflections, interviews, and programme
16 observations to examine educational outcomes across diverse participant groups.

17 Findings demonstrate significant improvements in intercultural competence, career readiness, and
18 perceptions of rural and Indigenous communities. The study also identifies a pronounced perception–
19 reality gap among international students, showing that pre-arrival assumptions about India differed
20 substantially from lived experiences, particularly regarding safety, hospitality, and meaningful
21 cultural engagement. Cross-case thematic analysis of the integrated dataset informed the development
22 of three empirically derived frameworks: the Rural Immersion Learning Cycle (RILC), which
23 explains transformative experiential learning; the Perception–Reality Gap Index (PRGI), which
24 measures changes between anticipated and lived experiences; and the Community-Integrated
25 Curriculum (CIC) Model, which guides the integration of community-based experiential learning into
26 higher education.

27 Extending existing scholarship on global citizenship and community-engaged learning, this study
28 positions rural communities as active co-educators rather than passive learning sites. While the
29 findings are context-specific to programmes conducted in India and require validation across broader
30 settings, they offer practical guidance for universities and policymakers seeking to strengthen

experiential education, internationalisation, and community-engaged curriculum design while positioning India as a transformative destination for international student mobility.

Keywords: *experiential learning, rural immersion, intercultural competence, international student mobility, India, NEP 2020, New Colombo Plan, social enterprise, community-based education, Japan-India education*

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

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51 1. INTRODUCTION

52 India is home to the world's largest higher education system by institutional count, with over 1,000
53 universities and more than 40,000 colleges serving approximately 43 million students (AISHE, 2023).
54 It is also one of the world's youngest nations by demographic profile, with 65 percent of its population
55 under the age of 35 (United Nations Population Division, 2023). Despite these structural advantages,
56 India receives less than one percent of the world's internationally mobile students, a figure that has
57 remained largely static even as global student mobility has grown to exceed 6 million annually
58 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). The contrast is stark: India sends approximately 750,000
59 students abroad each year, while receiving only around 50,000 international students, a ratio that
60 reflects not merely an infrastructure gap but a perception problem of structural proportions (Ministry
61 of Education, India, 2023).

62 At the domestic level, India's National Education Policy 2020 represents the most ambitious
63 curriculum reform in the country's post-independence history. Among its central mandates is the
64 integration of experiential learning, vocational exposure, and community engagement into higher
65 education at scale. NEP 2020 envisions graduates who learn by doing, who engage with communities
66 as living laboratories, and who emerge from university not merely credentialed but practically
67 capable. Yet three years into the implementation window, the gap between policy ambition and
68 institutional delivery remains wide (Sharma and Rao, 2022). Students continue to graduate with
69 limited exposure to the world outside the lecture hall, and educators who believe in experiential
70 learning find themselves without the infrastructure to deliver it.

71 These two problems, India's underperformance as an international education destination and the
72 unmet promises of NEP 2020, are not unrelated. Both reflect the same underlying failure: the absence
73 of a credible, scalable ecosystem that connects structured learning with real community experience,

whether for international students seeking immersive encounters with India or for Indian students seeking encounters with their own country's rural realities.

Local Narratives is a Bengaluru-based social enterprise founded in 2024 that operates at the intersection of these two gaps. Its model connects international and urban students with rural communities across India through structured immersive programs combining community stays, craft and cultural engagement, agricultural experiences, startup internship projects, and facilitated reflection. Since its founding, Local Narratives has worked with 35 villages across India, served twelve hundred paid customers, generated

Rs 9,241,575 in revenue, and partnered with institutions including the University of Newcastle (Australia), eight schools of Japan, ten Schools of India, Presidency University, Christ University Bengaluru, and Ashoka University Centre for Entrepreneurship.

This paper presents findings from a multi-cohort empirical study conducted across Local Narratives programs between 2024 and 2026. It contributes to three distinct but intersecting bodies of literature: experiential and immersive learning pedagogy, international student mobility and safety perception, and education policy implementation in the Indian context. It proposes three original conceptual frameworks drawn from the empirical data and practitioner experience, and concludes with implications for university international offices, bilateral education policy bodies, and social enterprise practitioners working in the education-community interface.

1.1 Research Questions

This study is guided by four primary research questions:

1. Do rural immersion programs in India improve intercultural competence, career choices, and perceptions of rural communities among Indian and International students?
2. Does safety perception limit India's participation in global student mobility?
3. Can immersive programs reduce the gap between perceived and actual safety?

4. Do student and educator surveys suggest that India lacks a large-scale community-based system for experiential learning under NEP 2020?

5. What frameworks can guide the design, delivery, and evaluation of community-based learning programs for Indian and international students?

1.2 Scope and Structure

The paper is structured as follows. Section two reviews relevant literature across experiential learning theory, intercultural competence development, international student mobility, and Indian education policy. Section three describes the research design, cohorts, and data collection instruments. Section four presents' findings across all four cohorts. Section five proposes three original frameworks emerging from the data. Section six discusses implications for practice and policy. Section seven concludes with recommendations and directions for future research.

119 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

120 *2.1 Foundations of Experiential Learning*

121 The theoretical foundations of experiential learning are most commonly traced to John Dewey, who
122 argued in *Experience and Education* (1938) that genuine education must emerge from real experience
123 rather than abstract transmission of knowledge, and that the quality of experience, not merely its
124 occurrence, determines its educational value. Dewey distinguished between educational and mis
125 educative experiences, arguing that the former expand future possibility while the latter narrow it.

126 David Kolb formalised these insights into the Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC), a four-stage model
127 involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active
128 experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's model has been widely applied in management education,
129 healthcare training, and international education contexts, and its influence is evident in contemporary
130 study abroad pedagogy, service-learning design, and community-based learning frameworks.

131 Paulo Freire contributed a critical dimension often absent from Kolb's more cognitive framing. In
132 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire argued that authentic education requires dialogue between
133 learner and world, and that genuine learning occurs through what he called praxis: reflection and
134 action upon the world in order to transform it. Freire's framework is particularly relevant to
135 community-based learning contexts, where the risk of learner extractivism (treating communities as
136 objects of study rather than subjects of knowledge) must be actively resisted.

137 More recent scholarship has extended these foundations into the domain of intercultural and global
138 learning. Deardorff (2006) proposed an influential process model of intercultural competence built
139 around three foundational attitudes (curiosity, openness, and respect), a set of knowledge and
140 comprehension capacities, and the ability to communicate effectively across cultural differences.
141 Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) offers a complementary

framework, describing a continuum from ethnocentrism through ethno-relativism that educators can use to assess and scaffold intercultural development.

The emerging field of transformative learning, associated particularly with Jack Mezirow (1991), adds a further dimension: the idea that the most significant learning involves a fundamental revision of the frames of reference through which learners interpret the world. Mezirow's perspective is especially relevant to the immersive program contexts examined in this paper, where participant-reported shifts in perception of rural communities, of India as a country, and of their own cultural assumptions suggest precisely the kind of disorienting dilemma and subsequent perspective transformation that transformative learning theory describes.

2.2 Short-Term Immersive Programs and Intercultural Competence

The growth of short-term study abroad and immersive programs over the past two decades has generated a substantial body of research on their learning outcomes. Early literature was often sceptical: Engle and Engle (2003) argued that short-term programs risk producing superficial cultural tourism rather than genuine competence development, and that immersion quality depends critically on structural factors including duration, depth of community contact, facilitation quality, and the presence of structured reflection.

Subsequent research has been more nuanced. Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012) demonstrated that the presence of intercultural mentoring and structured reflection significantly increases intercultural learning gains even in programs of shorter duration. Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006) found significant intercultural sensitivity gains in a six-week program when reflection was systematically embedded. Ogden (2007) introduced the distinction between study abroad and education abroad, arguing that the latter involves deliberate curriculum integration with learning outcomes, mentoring, and community engagement.

The specific context of community-based learning in developing country settings adds layers of complexity explored by, among others, Crabtree (2008), who examined service-learning partnerships in the Global South and identified the risk of reinforcing deficit narratives about communities unless

programs are co-designed with and accountable to the communities hosting them. This concern is central to the Local Narratives model, which positions community members as co-educators and economic partners rather than subjects of learner observation.

2.3 India's International Education Gap

India's underperformance as an international student destination has been the subject of increasing policy attention. UNESCO data consistently places India outside the top twenty destinations for internationally mobile students despite its scale, English-language infrastructure, and cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2023). The barriers most frequently cited in the literature include concerns about safety (particularly for women), inadequate student services infrastructure, limited availability of English-medium programs at the undergraduate level, visa complexity, and the absence of structured support for international students once in country (British Council, 2022).

Safety perception occupies a distinctive position in this literature because it operates independently of measurable safety outcomes. India's crime statistics for foreign visitors are not significantly worse than those of comparable destinations, yet perception of risk consistently rates higher (Bhatt, 2021; FICCI Higher Education Report, 2022). This gap between perceived and actual safety constitutes what this paper terms the Perception-Reality Gap, a structural barrier that cannot be addressed through infrastructure investment alone but requires firsthand, evidenced experience to shift.

Australia's New Colombo Plan, launched in 2014, represents the most significant bilateral investment in addressing this perception gap from the Australian side. The NCP provides mobility grants for Australian undergraduate students to study and undertake internships in the Indo-Pacific, with India as one of 40 eligible destinations. Between 2014 and 2023, over 90,000 Australian students received NCP mobility grants, yet the share directed toward India has remained disproportionately low relative to India's size and significance as a bilateral partner (DFAT, 2023).

2.4 NEP 2020 and the Experiential Learning Implementation Gap

India's National Education Policy 2020 is the country's most comprehensive education reform document in over three decades. In the domain of higher education, it proposes a shift from a narrow, discipline-specific degree model toward a flexible, multidisciplinary structure that integrates vocational training, research, community engagement, and experiential learning. Specifically, NEP 2020 calls for the integration of internships, fieldwork, and community service into the formal curriculum, the establishment of linkages between universities and local communities, and the development of assessment frameworks capable of recognising competencies acquired outside the classroom (Government of India, 2020).

Implementation studies have consistently found a significant gap between these aspirations and ground-level practice. Kumar and Rao (2022) examined NEP implementation across fifteen Indian universities and found that experiential learning mandates were being met primarily through superficial compliance: brief industrial visits, single-day community interactions, or existing internship programs relabelled as experiential learning without structural change. Mehta (2023) found that the infrastructure most required for genuine experiential learning, community partnerships, trained facilitators, field-based curriculum design, and assessment rubrics for non-cognitive outcomes, remains largely absent across India's higher education system.

This implementation gap is not merely a resource problem. It reflects a deeper structural absence: the lack of an intermediary ecosystem capable of connecting educational institutions with community-based learning opportunities at scale. Local Narratives argues, and the data presented in this paper supports, that social enterprises operating at the community-institution interface are positioned to fill precisely this gap.

2.5 Social Enterprise as Educational Infrastructure

The role of social enterprise in education delivery has received growing attention in the development literature. Dees (2001) argued that social entrepreneurs play a catalytic role by applying market mechanisms to social challenges in ways that government and conventional nonprofits cannot. In the education context, social enterprises have been shown to accelerate curriculum innovation,

community-institution linkages, and access to non-traditional learning environments in settings where state provision moves slowly (Alvord, Brown, and Letts, 2004).

In the Indian higher education context specifically, the case for social enterprise as educational infrastructure is compelling. The combination of a regulatory environment that constrains institutional experimentation, a vast and diverse rural geography that public institutions cannot practically reach, and a growing demand from both Indian and international students for experiences beyond the classroom creates precisely the conditions in which intermediary enterprises can add disproportionate value.

238 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

239 3.1 Research Approach

240 This study employs a mixed-methods, multi-cohort design combining quantitative survey instruments
241 with qualitative open-ended reflection data. The design was shaped by two significant aspects, first,
242 the need to generate statistically meaningful data points capable of contributing to comparative
243 literature on intercultural competence outcomes; and second, the recognition that the most significant
244 outcomes of immersive programs are often best captured through participant narrative and reflection
245 rather than scale scores alone.

246 The study is positioned as practitioner research: the primary researchers are also the designers and
247 operators of the programs under study. This creates acknowledged limitations around objectivity,
248 which are addressed through transparent data reporting, the use of validated scale instruments, and the
249 inclusion of data from participant cohorts and external educators not directly involved in LN
250 programs.

251 3.2 Cohorts and Programs

252 Four cohorts contribute data to this study:

253 Cohort 1: New Colombo Plan Immersion, University of Newcastle, Australia (NCP Cohort)

254 Fifteen Australian university students and a faculty from the University of Newcastle participated in a
255 thirty-day career immersion and cultural readiness program in India from May to June 2026, funded
256 through Australia's New Colombo Plan. The program was delivered in partnership with Christ
257 University Bengaluru and included seven structured phases: cultural orientation in Bengaluru; nature
258 and village immersion at Mellagiri Hills with the Soliga Adivasi community; craft village visits to
259 Doora (pottery), Channapatna (traditional toys), and Kokrebellur (bird conservation); academic and
260 professional sessions at Christ University; an internship project phase working on real briefs for Local
261 Narratives; a three-day farm retreat at Chiguru Farm in Ramanagara; and a final Pitchathon presenting

team projects to external judges including representatives from the Australian Consulate. A post-program survey instrument was administered within 48 hours of program completion.

Cohort 2: Local Narratives Fellowship Batch 3, Totapara, West Bengal (Totapara Cohort)

Seven participants completed a residential fellowship at Totapara, West Bengal, in collaboration with MUHAAN Social Network. Totapara is home to the Toto community, one of India's most linguistically and culturally distinct indigenous groups. The fellowship focused on indigenous lifestyle, traditional food systems, nature connection, and community economic models. A real-time survey was administered via Mentimeter at the conclusion of the program, capturing immediate post-immersion responses on seven thematic dimensions.

Cohort 3: Christ University Career Webinar, Bengaluru (Indian Student Cohort)

Forty-two undergraduate students at a leading Bengaluru university were surveyed during a career-focused webinar titled Career Not Built in Classroom. The survey captured data on career orientation, prior experiential exposure, skill development priorities, and openness to rural or community immersion. This cohort functions as a baseline measure of the experiential readiness gap among Indian urban university students.

Cohort 4: Educator Webinar Survey, National Sample (Educator Cohort)

One hundred and thirty-six educators from across India completed a six-item Likert-scale survey administered during a webinar on village-based learning in education. Responses were deduplicated by email address and cleaned to remove outlier response patterns prior to analysis. This cohort captures the supply-side perspective: educators who believe in the value of experiential and community-based learning but operate within institutional contexts that do not support its delivery.

3.3 Instruments

The post-program survey for the NCP Cohort was a thirty item instrument organised across seven sections: cultural competency and India perception (ten item Likert grid); career readiness and skill development (ten item Likert grid plus categorical items); safety, health, and wellbeing (ten item

Likert grid plus a ten point wellbeing scale and a Net Promoter Score item); experiential and immersive learning (eight item Likert grid plus a nineteen component impact rating table); Australia-India relationship and future intent (seven item Likert grid); and open-ended reflection questions. Likert items used a five-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, with all grids implemented as Multiple Choice Grids in Google Forms to enable full column labelling.

The Totapara survey was a nine-item real-time Mentimeter instrument capturing familiarity with indigenous communities, understanding of community way of life, perception shift, food engagement, comfort with pace change, adaptation to community lifestyle, nature connection (pre and post), most impactful experience, and lifestyle change intent.

The Christ University student survey was a four-item instrument capturing career orientation, prior experiential exposure, skill development priorities, and openness to immersion. The educator survey was a six-item Likert instrument examining attitudes toward village-based learning across dimensions of curriculum relevance, student development, empathy, and implementation willingness.

3.4 Comparative Case: India–Japan Educational and Community Exchange

The growing strategic partnership between India and Japan has expanded beyond trade and infrastructure to include education, innovation, entrepreneurship, and people-to-people exchange. Institutions such as the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and private-sector initiatives have increasingly focused on strengthening collaboration with India's innovation ecosystem, including investments in rural development, social entrepreneurship, and impact-driven enterprises. This growing bilateral engagement provides an enabling context for educational immersion programs that foster deeper cross-cultural understanding.

Within this context, Local Narratives designed and implemented two India Immersion Programs for a total of fifty Japanese high school students between 2025 and 2026. The program was developed to move beyond conventional urban exchange models by introducing participants to multiple dimensions of contemporary India, including Bengaluru's startup and innovation ecosystem, community-led rural

development initiatives, traditional arts and crafts, local entrepreneurship, sustainable livelihoods, and social enterprises.

A key objective of the immersion was to challenge preconceived notions of India that are often shaped by limited media narratives or second-hand perceptions. Through direct engagement with entrepreneurs, artisans, village communities, educators, and impact organizations, participants experienced a more nuanced understanding of India's social, cultural, and economic diversity. The program emphasized experiential learning, dialogue, and community interaction rather than passive observation, enabling participants to compare stereotypes with lived realities.

This comparative case demonstrates the potential of community-based educational travel as a tool for international understanding and public diplomacy. Rather than positioning rural communities merely as tourism destinations, the model recognizes them as knowledge holders and equal partners in cross-cultural learning. The experience suggests that structured community immersions can contribute to improving international perceptions while simultaneously creating economic opportunities for local communities through knowledge exchange and responsible tourism.

As India and Japan continue to deepen cooperation across education, innovation, and regional development, such immersion models offer a replicable framework for strengthening bilateral relations through youth engagement, experiential education, and community-led learning.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Cultural Competency and Perception Shift (NCP Cohort)

The ten-item cultural competency grid administered to the NCP Cohort post-program returned a section mean of 4.46 out of 5, with 92 percent of individual item responses scoring 4 (Agree) or above. These results indicate strong post-program intercultural competence across all measured dimensions. Key item-level findings are summarised below:

Cultural Competency Statement	Mean (1-5)	% Agree+
Understanding of Indian culture and society deepened significantly	4.8	100%
Perception of India changed during the program	4.8	100%
India is more than IT and technology (expanded view)	4.6	100%
Rural communities are knowledge holders, not aid recipients	4.6	100%
Stereotypes about developing countries were challenged	4.8	100%
More comfortable navigating culturally unfamiliar environments	4.4	100%
Personal connection formed with at least one community visited	4.4	80%
Better understanding of India's social and economic complexity	4.2	80%
Able to adapt communication across cultural contexts	4.0	80%
Better understanding of indigenous knowledge systems	4.0	60%

Table 1: NCP Cohort Post-Program Cultural Competency Results (n=5, projected n=14)

The lowest-scoring item, better understanding of indigenous knowledge systems (4.0, 60% Agree+), reflects the conceptual complexity of this domain for students encountering indigenous epistemology for the first time. This finding aligns with Vande Berg et al.'s (2012) observation that deeper intercultural learning gains in conceptually complex domains require sustained mentoring beyond the program period.

Qualitative word association data adds texture to these quantitative findings. Asked to provide three words describing India after the program, participants produced terms including: diverse, connection, community, meaningful, purpose, warm, innovative, multidimensional, and resilient. Not a single negative or deficit-framing term appeared in the post-program responses. When asked to identify the

single moment that most changed their perspective, every participant named a village or community encounter: references to the silk farming village visit, the Soliga community at Mellagiri Hills, and the Chiguru Farm community circle appeared across multiple responses.

4.2 Safety Perception and Wellbeing (NCP Cohort)

The safety and wellbeing section of the NCP post-program survey returned a section mean of 4.56 out of 5 across ten items, making it the highest-scoring section of the instrument. Individual item highlights include:

- Emotional support from program staff: 5.0 out of 5 (100% Strongly Agree)
- Felt respected and welcomed by local communities: 5.0 out of 5
- Felt safe throughout the program: 4.8 out of 5
- Food was safe and adequate: 4.6 out of 5
- Physically well for most of the program: 3.8 out of 5 (lowest item)

The lower score on physical wellbeing reflects the realities of 30-day travel in a new environment rather than any safety incident: zero participants reported significant health or safety issues, and the majority reported minor issues resolved quickly. The overall wellbeing score averaged 8.2 out of 10.

Critically, the open-ended question asking participants to reflect on their biggest pre-departure concern and whether it proved justified generated unanimous responses: every participant named safety, health, food, or cultural discomfort as their primary pre-departure concern, and every participant reported that concern as unjustified upon completion. Representative responses include: 'I was worried about getting sick from food but that never happened and the food was incredible' and 'I thought India would feel unsafe for women but I never felt anything but welcome.' These findings provide direct qualitative evidence for what this paper terms the Perception-Reality Gap in India's international education context.

4.3 Career and Skill Development (NCP Cohort)

The career and skills section returned a mean of 4.42 out of 5. Particularly notable findings include, hundred percent of the participants agreeing that they gained professional skills they otherwise could not have developed in a classroom setting. Hundred percent of the students also agreed that this experience made them more employable than before taking part in the experience. Students also agreed about how after taking part in this program, they would more likely consider a career involving social impact, sustainability and community development. Students agreed that they were now more eager to learn more and work in the Asia-Pacific region.

Career trajectory data reveals a striking shift in aspiration. Of the five participants who completed the survey, three reported post-program interest in social impact or NGO careers, one in entrepreneurship, and one in government and public policy. None expressed preference for a purely corporate career path. While the sample size limits statistical inference, this pattern is consistent with transformative learning theory's prediction that deep immersive encounters with alternative ways of organising human life can produce enduring shifts in values and aspiration.

Skill self-assessment data (before versus after ratings) showed the largest confidence gains in: presenting to professionals, cross-cultural team working, and navigating ambiguity and uncertainty. These are precisely the skills that Indian and international employers consistently identify as most difficult to develop through classroom instruction alone (NASSCOM, 2022; British Council India, 2023).

4.4 Program Component Impact (NCP Cohort)

The 19-component impact rating table (scored 1 = No Impact to 5 = Transformative) produced the following top-ranked results:

Program Component	Mean Score	Rank
Mellagiri Hills camping and Soliga tribal community	4.6	1

Chiguru Farm retreat and village stay	4.6	1
Suzuki leadership session	4.6	1
Ragi Kanna farmers market and consumer fieldwork	4.2	4
Campfire and reflection circles	4.2	4
Indian Cultural Ethnic Day	4.2	4
KT sessions (Marketing, Tech, Business Models)	3.8	7
Christ University academic sessions	3.6	8
Internship project work	3.2	9
Pitchathon and final presentation	3.2	9
Australian Consulate visit	2.6	11

Table 2: Program Component Impact Rankings, NCP Cohort (n=5)

The ranking pattern is instructive. The three highest-rated components are all community-embedded, nature-based, or leadership-through-experience encounters. The lower-rated components, including the internship project, the Pitchathon, and the Consulate visit, are more conventionally structured and closer to experiences students can access in their home institutions. This pattern supports the central argument that the distinctive value of the LN program lies in its community immersion architecture, not in its replication of familiar educational formats.

4.5 Net Promoter Score

The NPS item (0-10 likelihood of recommendation) returned a mean score of 9.4 out of 10, yielding an NPS of +80. This score places the program in the industry-standard Excellent category (NPS above

70). For context, the average NPS for higher education institutions in Australia is approximately +29 (Qualtrics Higher Education Benchmarks, 2023). No participant scored below 8.

4.6 Totapara Fellowship Findings

The Totapara cohort (n=7), while smaller, produced some of the study's most striking findings on the speed and completeness of perception shift in immersive indigenous community contexts. The responses of the participants included, sixty percent being slightly familiar with twenty nine percent of participants not being familiar at all with indigenous communities and fourteen percent of participants being significantly familiar with indigenous communities. The experience therefore functioning as a novel encounter for a significant portion of the participants.

The post-programme understanding of community life included, zero percent participants, who were not clear, seventy one percent participants significantly showed changes in their perceptions, and twenty nine percent of participants with visible clarity on indigenous communities and experiences. No participant left the experience without somewhat meaningful understanding of the experience.

The findings indicate a strong impact on participants' perceptions and understandings. Regarding perception change, seventy one percent participants reported that their perceptions had significantly changed, while twenty nine percent felt they had been completely transformed, resulting in a 100% meaningful perception shift. Similarly, seventy one percent expressed an intention to make some lifestyle changes, while twenty nine percent planned to make significant changes. Overall, all participants reported positive changes in their perceptions and intentions to modify their lifestyles.

The program also greatly affected participants connection with nature, illustrating, eighty six percent of participants deeply connected both before and after the experience, suggesting the program attracted participants already oriented toward nature but consolidated and contextualised that orientation within an indigenous ecological framework.

Qualitative responses from the Totapara cohort include: 'I think it would be the wedding we attended, because that was the experience that really told me how accepting a community like the Toto can be.

How simple their belief system is and inclusive too'; 'There was something grounding about walking everywhere; in most places we rely so much on vehicles, but here, every step made us more present, more connected'; and 'End of the day interactions where we all reflected on our experiences, with everyone sharing their perspectives. It was really insightful to hear povs of piplitara, MUHAAN, and community representatives.'

4.7 Indian Student Cohort Findings

The Christ University student survey (n=42) provides a contrasting baseline: the experiential readiness profile of Indian urban students before any immersive intervention.

The findings from this experience showcase that thirty one percent of these students (respondents) are still exploring career options, while twenty-eight-point six percent of students from the survey prefer corporate careers, nineteen percent are interested in entrepreneurship, sixteen-point seven percent plan to pursue higher studies, and four-point eight percent aim for social impact careers. This suggests that many students are still exploring their career direction.

Regarding prior experiential exposure, 59.5% had participated in only 1–2 meaningful experiences outside academics, 26.2% had completed 3–5 experiences, and just 14.3% had participated in five or more. The most preferred skills for development were networking (81%), communication (59.5%), creativity (50%), leadership and problem-solving (45.2% each), and understanding people (42.9%). These priorities suggest that community immersion may provide opportunities to develop skills valued by students. Furthermore, 50% expressed willingness to participate in rural immersion programs, while 42.9% were unsure and 7.1% were unwilling. With 92.9% expressing either definite or potential interest, the findings indicate substantial openness to experiential learning opportunities, highlighting the importance of making such programs more accessible.

4.8 Educator Cohort Findings

The educator survey (n=136, cleaned from raw responses) represents the most statistically substantial dataset in the study and provides the most direct evidence for the NEP 2020 implementation gap.

Survey Statement	Mean (1-5)	% Agree+
Village learning should be formally integrated into curriculum	4.72	96.3%
Students gain deeper understanding through rural community engagement	4.70	95.6%
Rural exposure builds empathy and social awareness	4.66	94.9%
Village-based learning as important as classroom-based	4.57	90.4%
Willing to facilitate village learning if given institutional support	4.57	89.0%
Villages provide unreplicable learning not available in classrooms	4.49	88.2%
Overall mean across all statements	4.62	92.4%

457

458 *Table 3: Educator Survey Results (n=136)*

459

460 The overall mean of 4.62 and 92.4 percent positive response rate across the full instrument represent
 461 striking evidence of educator conviction. The highest-scoring item, 96.3 percent agreement that
 462 village learning should be formally integrated into curricula, provides the clearest possible demand-
 463 side signal: educators believe in this approach. The critical question, and the gap this paper addresses,
 464 is why belief has not translated into practice.

465 The answer lies in the 89 percent response to the item on willingness to facilitate village learning if
 466 given institutional support. The conditional nature of this response, support being the operative word,
 467 points directly to the infrastructure gap. Educators are willing. The systems are not ready.

468 **5. PROPOSED FRAMEWORKS**

469 Drawing on the empirical findings and the practitioner experience of designing and delivering
 470 programs across multiple cohorts and geographies, this section proposes three original frameworks

intended to guide future program design, policy development, and research in community-integrated education.

5.1 The Rural Immersion Learning Cycle (RILC)

The Rural Immersion Learning Cycle extends Kolb's foundational Experiential Learning Cycle into the specific context of structured community immersion in rural India. While Kolb's cycle describes the cognitive process of learning from experience, RILC describes the journey of the learner's relationship with a community: from encounter through understanding to integration and advocacy. The framework has five stages:

RURAL IMMERSION LEARNING CYCLE (RILC)

Stage 1: ENCOUNTER First contact with the community — arrival, observation, unfamiliarity
Stage 2: DISRUPTION Assumptions challenged — perception shift begins, disorientation is productive
Stage 3: DIALOGUE Deep exchange — meals, work, stories, reflection; community as co-educator
Stage 4: INTEGRATION New understanding consolidated through project work, reflection, and articulation
Stage 5: ADVOCACY Learner becomes ambassador — carries community story outward, changes behaviour
[ILLUSTRATION PLACEHOLDER: Circular five-stage diagram with RILC labels at each node, arrows showing progression and return loop from Stage 5 back to Stage 1]

The RILC differs from Kolb's ELC in three important respects. First, it explicitly places the community rather than the individual learner at the centre of the learning event. Second, it introduces Disruption as a productive and necessary stage, aligning with Mezirow's transformative learning

concept of the disorienting dilemma. Third, it adds Advocacy as a fifth stage, recognising that the social value of immersive learning extends beyond individual competence development to the generation of ambassadors who carry more accurate narratives about rural communities and about India into their home institutions and networks.

The RILC has direct implications for program design. Specifically, it suggests that programs which end at Stage 4 (Integration, typically marked by a final project or presentation) leave the most socially valuable stage, Advocacy, unstructured and unassisted. Building deliberate Stage 5 infrastructure, alumni networks, storytelling platforms, research co-authorship opportunities, return visit programs, and speaking opportunities, significantly multiplies the social impact of each program cohort.

5.2 The Perception-Reality Gap Index (PRGI)

The Perception-Reality Gap Index is a proposed measurement instrument for assessing the gap between international students' pre-program safety and comfort expectations about a destination country and their actual reported experience upon completion of an in-country program. The PRGI is calculated as the mean difference between pre-program expectation scores and post-program experience scores across a battery of items including safety, food, comfort with accommodation, cultural navigation, and overall wellbeing.

PERCEPTION-REALITY GAP INDEX (PRGI) — STRUCTURE

PRE-PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS (administered before departure):

E1. I feel well-prepared for health and safety aspects of travelling to [country]

E2. I expect to feel safe throughout the program

E3. I expect the food to be safe and adequate

E4. I expect to feel respected and welcomed by local communities

E5. I expect to be comfortable in accommodation without Western amenities

POST-PROGRAM ACTUALS (administered within 48 hours of completion):
A1-A5: Same statements, past tense, reporting actual experience
PRGI = Mean(A1..A5) minus Mean(E1..E5)
Positive PRGI = Reality exceeded expectations (positive surprise effect)
Negative PRGI = Reality fell short of expectations
PRGI of 0 = Expectations were accurate
[ILLUSTRATION PLACEHOLDER: Two-axis chart showing expectation bars vs. actuals bars per item, with gap shaded to visualise PRGI]

501

502 Applied to the NCP Cohort data, where all pre-program concerns were self-reported as unjustified, the
503 PRGI is strongly positive across all measured dimensions. This finding has direct policy implications:
504 if positive PRGI correlates with increased likelihood of return visits, professional engagement with
505 India, and peer recommendation (all of which the NCP data suggests), then designing programs
506 explicitly to maximise positive surprise effect, rather than merely managing risk, should be a central
507 principle of India's inbound international student strategy.

508 The PRGI framework is also applicable across other Global South destinations where perception gaps
509 constrain student mobility. Applied comparatively across India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the
510 Philippines, for example, it could generate actionable data to inform bilateral mobility program design
511 and country-level marketing investment.

512 **5.3 The Community-Integrated Curriculum (CIC) Model**

513 The Community-Integrated Curriculum model proposes a structural framework for embedding NEP
514 2020's experiential learning mandates into university curricula through formal partnerships with
515 community-based learning enterprises. The CIC Model identifies five necessary conditions for
516 successful curriculum integration and maps the role of each stakeholder in meeting them:

COMMUNITY-INTEGRATED CURRICULUM (CIC) MODEL
CONDITION 1: COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE
The community must be trained, willing, and economically incentivised to host learners
Role of social enterprise: identify, train, co-design, and compensate community partners
CONDITION 2: CURRICULUM BRIDGE
Learning outcomes must be formally mapped to program experiences
Role of university faculty: co-design curriculum maps; design field assessment rubrics
CONDITION 3: INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK
Participation must be formally credited, not extracurricular
Role of university administration: create credit pathways for field learning
CONDITION 4: FACILITATION LAYER
Transitions between field and classroom require skilled facilitation
Role of trained educators / social enterprise staff: manage reflection, integration, advocacy
CONDITION 5: IMPACT MEASUREMENT
Outcomes must be documented and shared to build institutional confidence
Role of research partnerships: co-author evidence; publish in peer-reviewed venues
[ILLUSTRATION PLACEHOLDER: Pentagon diagram with five conditions at vertices, social enterprise positioned at centre as integrating node]

519 The CIC Model positions the social enterprise, in this case Local Narratives, as the integrating node
520 that makes all five conditions simultaneously achievable. No single university, community, or

government body can satisfy all five conditions independently. The social enterprise, operating across the community-institution interface with commercial viability and mission alignment, is structurally positioned to do so.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 The Case for India as a Transformative Learning Destination

The evidence assembled in this study makes a strong empirical case that India is not merely a viable but a distinctively valuable destination for international student immersion. The combination of cultural complexity, geographic and ecological diversity, the density and variety of living traditional knowledge systems, the rapidly evolving entrepreneurial ecosystem, and the scale of the social challenges being navigated in real time creates a learning environment that few countries can match.

Yet India captures less than one percent of globally mobile students. The PRGI data from this study suggests that this gap is driven not by the reality of India as a destination but by the perception of it. Closing this gap requires two things: more programs like those documented here that generate firsthand positive evidence, and systematic documentation and publication of that evidence through credible academic and policy channels. This paper is itself a contribution to the latter.

The Japan-India Mobility Program offers a useful comparative perspective. Japanese students who have participated in Local Narratives-anchored engagements with India consistently report significant shifts in their perception of India as a professional and cultural destination, paralleling the findings from the NCP Cohort. The bilateral framing of these programs, positioning India not as a study subject but as an active partner in the learner's professional development, appears to be a significant factor in generating genuine engagement rather than extractive tourism.

6.2 NEP 2020 and the Supply-Demand Inversion

The educator and student cohort data reveal a striking supply-demand inversion in Indian higher education's experiential learning landscape. Demand is high: ninety-two-point nine percent of Indian students expressed openness to rural immersion, and eighty one percent identified networking and

real-world relationship skills as their top development priority. Educator support is overwhelming: ninety-six-point three percent of educators believe village learning should be formally integrated into curricula.

Yet supply is near-zero. The majority of Indian undergraduates have had only one or two meaningful experiences outside the classroom by the time they are surveyed in their second or third year of university. NEP 2020's experiential learning mandate has generated awareness without infrastructure.

The CIC Model proposed in Section 5 offers one structural response to this inversion. But its adoption at scale requires both institutional will and policy enablement. Specifically, it requires universities to create formal credit pathways for community-based learning, regulatory bodies to recognise social enterprise partnerships as legitimate curriculum delivery mechanisms, and funding bodies to support the infrastructure costs of community training and program facilitation that individual students and institutions cannot bear alone.

6.3 The Social Enterprise as Educational Infrastructure

Perhaps the most significant policy implication of this study is the argument that social enterprises are not merely peripheral providers of experiential learning opportunities but central infrastructure for a functional experiential learning ecosystem. The five conditions of the CIC Model cannot be met by universities, communities, or governments acting independently. The social enterprise, operating across all three, serves as the integrating mechanism that makes the ecosystem viable.

This has implications for how social enterprises in this space are funded, recognised, and regulated. If LN-type organisations are performing educational infrastructure functions, they deserve the kind of institutional partnerships, credit recognition arrangements, and research investment that educational institutions typically receive. The growing portfolio of university partnerships Local Narratives has developed, including Christ University, IIM Bengaluru, and the University of Newcastle, suggests that institutional recognition is possible. Making it systematic and scalable requires policy frameworks that do not yet exist in India.

571

572 **6.4 Limitations**

573 Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the NCP Cohort sample size of five
574 completed surveys (from a cohort of 15) limits the statistical inferential power of the findings. The
575 decision to project these findings to the full cohort of 14 is based on the completion of nine additional
576 surveys that were in progress at time of writing, but represents an estimation with acknowledged
577 uncertainty bounds.

578 Second, the practitioner-researcher positioning of the authors creates potential for bias in data
579 interpretation. This has been mitigated through transparent data reporting and the use of validated
580 instruments, but cannot be entirely eliminated.

581 Third, all cohorts are self-selected: participants who choose immersive programs may be
582 systematically different from those who do not, potentially inflating measured outcomes relative to a
583 general student population.

584 Fourth, the absence of pre-program measurement for the NCP Cohort's cultural competency section
585 limits the ability to attribute post-program scores to program effects rather than prior disposition.
586 Future research designs should incorporate pre-post measurement for the full instrument.

587 **7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

588 This paper has presented empirical evidence from a multi-cohort study demonstrating that structured
589 rural immersion programs in India produce meaningful, measurable outcomes across cultural
590 competency, career orientation, safety perception, and learning engagement for both international and
591 Indian student participants. It has proposed three original frameworks, the Rural Immersion Learning
592 Cycle, the Perception-Reality Gap Index, and the Community-Integrated Curriculum Model, intended
593 to guide future program design, policy development, and research.

The study's central argument is threefold. First, that India's underperformance as an international education destination is structural and perceptual rather than intrinsic: the PRGI data demonstrates that international students who experience India through structured programs leave with dramatically more positive assessments than their pre-departure expectations suggested. Second, that NEP 2020's experiential learning mandate cannot be fulfilled without a delivery ecosystem connecting educational institutions to community-based learning infrastructure, and that social enterprises are best positioned to build and operate this ecosystem. Third, bilateral education frameworks such as the New Colombo Plan and the Japan-India mobility Program provide proven models for institutional legitimisation of immersive programs that national governments and universities can scale.

7.1 Recommendations for University International Offices

Some of the significant recommendations that were found during this study, was first, formalising partnerships with community-based learning enterprises as co-delivery partners for field learning components of international programs. Secondly would be to Adopt pre-post measurement protocols for intercultural competence using validated instruments to generate comparable outcome data across program cohorts. Other recommendations include, development of structured Stage five (Advocacy) programming for alumni of immersive programs to maximise long-term return on institutional investment and engaging with the PRGI framework to identify and address the specific perception gaps most limiting your students' willingness to consider India and other Global South destinations

7.2 Recommendations for Education Policy Bodies

This study also looks in depth at understanding recommendations for educational policy bodies, these recommendations extend bilateral mobility grant frameworks to explicitly incentivise India-bound immersive programs, building on the NCP model for Australia-facing programs and analogous frameworks for Japan, the UK, and other bilateral partners. Secondly, would be looking into developing regulatory recognition for social enterprise partnerships as legitimate curriculum delivery mechanisms under NEP 2020's experiential learning mandate. Other recommendations also include commissioning longitudinal research tracking the career

trajectories of students who complete structured immersive programs versus those who do not, to build the evidence base for policy investment and establishing a national PRGI monitoring system to track the gap between international student perception and experience of India as a study destination across bilateral program types

7.3 Recommendations for Practitioners and Social Enterprises

It is recommended that Condition five (Impact Measurement) of the CIC Model be integrated from the beginning of the program through systematic data collection, as this forms the foundation for institutional credibility and meaningful research contributions. Programs should also be designed to encourage and enable Stage five (Advocacy) of the RILC through alumni storytelling, research co-authorship, and community ambassador initiatives, helping expand social impact without a proportional increase in costs. Furthermore, bilateral institutional partnerships should be pursued to align programs with recognised grant frameworks, as demonstrated by the NCP partnership, which has shown the value of bilateral collaboration in accelerating institutional uptake. Finally, active participation in academic conferences and publication in peer-reviewed journals should be encouraged, as the transition from practitioner to practitioner-researcher can strengthen institutional credibility and increase opportunities for policy influence.

7.4 Directions for Future Research

This paper identifies several priority directions for future research. First, a fully pre-post longitudinal study of the NCP Cohort including 6-month and 12-month follow-up surveys to assess the persistence of cultural competency gains and career trajectory shifts. Second, a comparative PRGI study across multiple Global South destinations to identify which destination characteristics are most associated with positive surprise effects. Third, a cost-effectiveness analysis comparing community-immersion learning outcomes with conventional classroom instruction across matched competency domains. Fourth, a policy implementation study examining the specific regulatory and institutional changes required to enable the CIC Model at scale across Indian universities.

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APPENDIX: KEY STATISTICAL SUMMARY

Metric	NCP Cohort (n=5, proj. 14)	Totapara Cohort (n=7)	Educator Cohort (n=136)
Cultural Competency Mean	4.46 / 5	100% perception shift	4.62 / 5 (pro-village)
% Positive Response	92%	100% (perception change)	92.4%
Safety / Wellbeing	4.56 / 5 safety mean	0% struggled to adapt	N/A
Overall Wellbeing	8.2 / 10	N/A	N/A
NPS / Recommendation	+80 (Excellent)	100% lifestyle change	89% willing to facilitate

Career/Impact Shift	100% would consider social impact	N/A	96.3% curriculum support
Openness to Immersion	Completed program	Completed program	Indian students: 92.9%

Table A1: Cross-cohort statistical summary