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## **Autobiographical Reflective Writing in Higher Education: Framing Intercultural Awareness and Civic Consciousness**

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## **Autobiographical Reflective Writing in Higher Education: Framing Intercultural Awareness and Civic Consciousness**

### **ABSTRACT**

Autobiographical reflective writing is a powerful yet underexplored pedagogical and diagnostic tool in higher education. This study examines writing functions as a medium for evidencing and potentially supporting intercultural awareness and civic consciousness among Georgian university students. Drawing on 122 autobiographical sketches produced between 2009 and 2024 across four universities, the analysis compares reflective patterns across three instructional phases using thematic coding and rubric-based assessment (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Grounded in theories of transformative learning, intercultural development, and civic learning, the study shows that autobiographical writing reliably elicits empathy, cultural awareness, and reflexive engagement, while revealing persistent challenges in translating insight into inclusive or civic practice. Later cohorts demonstrate stronger narrative coherence, theoretical integration, and reflexive depth, whereas the articulation of concrete inclusive action remains uneven. These patterns reflect differences in pedagogical design, including prompts, scaffolding, and feedback, rather than individual developmental progression. The study concludes that systematically scaffolded autobiographical writing offers higher education a sustainable means of evidencing reflective depth, identifying the awareness–action gap, and embedding intercultural and civic learning outcomes within programme-level quality assurance. Conceptually, it integrates reflective pedagogy, intercultural development, and civic learning into a design-sensitive framework; methodologically, it demonstrates a transferable combination of rubric-based assessment, thematic coding, and narrative citation; and practically, it outlines principles for designing prompts, rubrics, and feedback that transform reflective writing from a private exercise into a structured social practice with demonstrable outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Reflective writing; Autobiographical sketch; Multicultural awareness; Civic Consciousness; Higher education; Transformative learning; Inclusive pedagogy; Awareness-Action gap*

### **Introduction**

Universities require students to demonstrate knowledge and define who they are becoming in an increasingly diverse society. Yet competences essential for this - intercultural understanding, moral reasoning, and civic consciousness are difficult to cultivate through conventional, content-heavy instruction. This paper examines students' autobiographical sketches, extending to the reflective

reading by the instructors, a common instructional yet seldom theorised practice. Here, the autobiographical sketch is treated as a reflective cycle and positioned as a pedagogical tool that surfaces lived experiences, renders moments of cultural encounter and tension visible, and translates insights into dispositions for civic and intercultural action.

The study explores how autobiographical reflective writing operates in higher education to challenge assumptions, expand perspective-taking, and convert personal reflection into civic dispositions. Rather than viewing reflective writing as a purely expressive exercise, it examines how students construct their narratives, what instructional scaffolds support this engagement, and how evidence of change can be captured through transparent criteria and rubrics.

The primary research question is: How does autobiographical reflective writing function as a pedagogical mechanism for evidencing and supporting intercultural awareness and civic consciousness under different instructional design conditions in Georgian higher education?? This question is followed by three interconnected objectives:

1. Critically examine assumptions in reflective assignments and identify design features, prompts, facilitation, and feedback that support transformation rather than self-report.
2. Identify indicators of reflective depth and intercultural positioning in perspective-taking, empathy, and comfort with ambiguity.
3. Describe how moral reasoning and civic engagement cues consolidate into civic consciousness as an integrated triad of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

The study makes interlocking contributions: conceptually, it integrates reflective pedagogy, intercultural development, and civic learning; methodologically, it offers an adjustable assignment architecture with prompts, facilitation moves, and evidence-focused rubrics; and practically, it provides design guidance for instructors and QA stakeholders to use reflective writing as structured social practice with demonstrable outcomes. By centring the assignment, the paper reframes reflective writing from a private exercise to a pedagogical mechanism aligned with broader curricular and societal aims.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Intercultural sensitivity in higher education: developmental trajectories and assessment instruments***

Intercultural sensitivity is widely viewed as a developmental process rather than a fixed trait. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) remains foundational, describing progression from ethnocentric orientations (denial, defence, minimisation) to ethnorelative positions (acceptance, adaptation, integration) (Bennett, 1986, 1993, 2013). Deardorff's process model similarly

frames intercultural competence as an iterative cycle of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and outcomes developed through interaction and reflection (Deardorff, 2006).

King and Baxter Magolda's intercultural maturity framework adapts these ideas to higher education, integrating cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. It argues that students gradually learn to hold multiple cultural perspectives, define identity in relation to difference, and interact constructively across boundaries (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Pérez et al., 2015). Within this tradition, intercultural sensitivity extends beyond awareness of "the other", revises individual meaning schemes and creates the capacity to act accordingly.

Empirical research offers diverse assessment instruments, mixing surveys and scenario tests with performance tasks and reflective assignments. Increasingly, narrative and reflective methods are recognised for their capacity to capture how students interpret diversity in context and over time. Classic work on critical incidents exhibits narrating disorienting episodes exposing meaning-making processes (Flanagan, 1954; Brookfield, 1995; Tripp, 2011). Kember et al.'s (2008) four-level reflection scheme, habitual action, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection, provides operational criteria for depth of reflection while intercultural frameworks such as DMIS and intercultural maturity are often applied to interpret reflective texts as indicators of developmental movement (Bennett, 1986; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Fantini, 2016; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

These approaches position reflective writing, critical-incident analysis, and rubric-based evaluation as powerful tools for making intercultural development visible. Yet most studies remain cross-sectional, capturing students' positioning at a single point rather than tracing longitudinal change. Few examine how assignment design prompts, scaffolds, and feedback shape developmental trajectories.

### ***Georgian higher education context and diversity in higher education***

Since joining the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2005, Georgia has integrated European structures and standards into tertiary education (European Higher Education Area, n.d.). Over two decades, reforms introduced a three-cycle degree structure, ECTS, a national qualifications framework (NQF), and learning outcomes across programmes (Amashukeli, Lezhava & Chitishvili, 2020; Papiashvili, 2024). The revised NQF (2019) codifies levels 6-8 and aligns with EQF/QF-EHEA, reinforcing outcomes-based learning and sector permeability (ETF, 2020). At the same time, external quality assurance has consolidated: ENQA's review confirmed substantial compliance with ESG standards, while EQAR registration reflected alignment with European QA frameworks (ENQA, 2019; NCEQE, 2021; EQAR, 2024). Internationalisation has expanded through Erasmus+, US-supported mobility, English-medium programmes, and partnerships, increasing the number of international students from 9,352 to 37,100 between 2017–2018 and 2024–2025 (Geostat,

2025). Diversity drivers include visibility, QA convergence, and employability, while constraints involve funding, staffing, and uneven capacity. Attraction and retention hinge on advising, housing, language support, and campus integration (Eurydice/EACEA, 2020; Beelen & Jones, 2015). These dynamics demand inclusive course design and pedagogy (Campbell, 2009; ESG, 2015).

Even inclusive design and pedagogy call for systematic identification of gaps and needs, in Georgia, intercultural and diversity-related research has historically focused mainly on practising teachers and teacher education. Yet, studies of in-service and pre-service teachers reveal strong declarative commitments to fairness and inclusion, but variable levels of intercultural sensitivity and limited translation of values into practice (Tabatadze, 2015; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2018). These findings underscore systemic challenges in preparing educators for multilingual, multiethnic, and religiously diverse classrooms.

More recent work has turned to university students themselves. Studies of intercultural maturity among Georgian university students show a pattern that parallels international research: students often express openness towards “difference,” yet their responses tend to rely on academically “correct” formulations rather than deep self-interrogation or willingness to question their own assumptions (CCIIR, 2020; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2025<sup>1</sup>).

In other words, cognitive endorsement of diversity does not necessarily signal developmental growth. Despite structural reforms, research largely focuses on teachers’ attitudes and preparedness (Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2013; Chanturia, 2023), offering limited insight into students’ intercultural maturity or how pedagogy shapes it. Existing studies show students endorse diversity cognitively but rarely interrogate assumptions deeply (CCIIR, 2020; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2025). With Georgian HE that is committed to student-centred learning and transversal skills (ESG, 2015; Eurydice/EACEA, 2020), reflective and narrative-based assessments, such as autobiographical sketches, are emerging as tools for evidencing learning outcomes, yet remaining under-theorised. This study addresses that gap by examining autobiographical reflective writing as both assessment and pedagogy, exploring what sketches reveal about intercultural sensitivity and how design and feedback shape development over 15 years.

### ***Approaches to developing intercultural sensitivity in higher education***

If intercultural sensitivity is developmental, pedagogy, not policy language alone, must create conditions for growth. The literature highlights three interlocking domains: reflective and transformative learning; interactional diversity and civic learning; and feedback as the mechanism linking reflective insight to behavioural change (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Taylor, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> The cited paper offers a conceptual framework and analysis of implementation factors for reflective writing, separate from the empirical data (122 student sketches) and analysis shown in the current study.

### ***Reflective and transformative learning***

Reflective learning theories frame reflection as a structured process that connects experience, interpretation, and forward action (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Gibbs, 1988; Moon, 2006). Rather than free-form introspection, these models emphasise purposeful prompts, guided questioning, and cycles of revisiting experience.

Transformative learning theory foregrounds critical reflection on disorienting dilemmas as the engine of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Questioning assumptions enables learners to reconstruct frames of reference and revise behaviour. Empirical studies show structured reflective writing enhances critical thinking, creativity, and analytical skills (Bubnys & Žydzūnaitė, 2010; Jasper, 2005).

Recent higher education research links these processes to intercultural and civic outcomes. Service-learning and community-engagement studies demonstrate that structured reflection through prompts, discussion, and assessment supports sustained changes in perspective and civic orientation (Schank & Halberstadt, 2023). Experimental designs confirm that transformative-learning debriefings improve problem solving, critical thinking, and professional judgement beyond standard debriefings (Oh et al., 2021). Within this tradition, autobiographical reflective writing is especially potent. Narrating educational and social trajectories surfaces positionality, implicit beliefs, and “contact zones” where difference becomes salient (Pratt, 1991; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Assignments inviting accounts of encounters with language, ethnicity, disability, religion, or migration provide rich material for mapping reflections onto intercultural-development models (DMIS, ICC, ICSI) and tracking movement from awareness to action (Bennett, 1986; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Fantini, 2016; ESG, 2015).

### ***Interactional diversity and civic learning***

Intercultural development does not occur through reflective writing alone. Research shows that interactional diversity, the quantity, quality, and structure of interactions with diverse peers, is a key driver of growth. Large-scale and longitudinal studies confirm that structured engagement enhances

cognitive complexity, pluralistic orientation, and civic readiness (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Denson & Chang, 2009; Bowman, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2012). Dialogue-based courses and diversity-focused curricula correlate with gains in perspective-taking, democratic engagement, and collaboration across differences (Hurtado, 2007; Engberg & Hurtado, 2011). European scholarship stresses that “internationalisation at home”, curricular initiatives, classroom dialogue, and co-curricular activities are often more consequential for intercultural competence than mobility alone (Beelen & Jones, 2015; UUKi, 2021). From this perspective, reflective assignments such as autobiographical sketches work best when embedded in a broader ecology of interactional diversity and civic opportunities. Reflection then becomes a site where students interpret experiences with difference, connect them to values and theoretical frameworks, and consider implications for future action.

### ***Feedback as a mechanism that converts reflection into behavioural change***

Feedback research shows that information alone does not guarantee learning; design, interpretation, and use matter. Hattie and Timperley (2007) conceptualise effective feedback at three levels - task, process, and self-regulation, arguing that it should answer “How did I do?” and “Where to next?” questions. Meta-analyses confirm iterative, information-rich feedback produces stronger learning gains than grades or evaluative comments (Butler, 1987; Shute, 2008; Evans, 2013; van der Kleij et al., 2015; Wisniewski et al., 2020).

Contemporary theory extends this to a dialogic view: feedback is a process where students develop feedback literacy, the ability to interpret, evaluate, and act on information (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Revision, discussion, and feed-forward guidance are integral to effective pedagogy, not optional extras.

In autobiographical reflective writing with intercultural aims, feedback plays a distinctive role. When instructors link comments to developmental frameworks, such as indicating where a narrative sits along DMIS stages or intercultural-maturity dimensions, students better understand their positioning and growth goals (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Pérez et al., 2015; Deardorff, 2006). Rubrics with clear criteria for narrative coherence, reflexivity, intercultural understanding, and inclusive action provide shared reference points for students and teachers (Kember et al., 2008; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Ryan, 2012; Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Crucially, feedback converts reflective insight into behavioural change. Without feedback on naming developmental levels, challenging assumptions, and demanding evidence of practice, reflective tasks risk remaining expressive self-reports. With dialogic, iterative feedback and resubmission opportunities, assignments become structured developmental cycles that move students from awareness and empathy toward inclusive action.



### ***Synthesis and implications for the present study***

Taken together, the literature points to several gaps that the current study addresses. First, while developmental models of intercultural sensitivity and maturity are well-established, fewer studies have used autobiographical reflective writing as a longitudinal indicator of intercultural and civic development in higher education, particularly in post-Soviet systems undergoing Europeanisation. Second, existing research often treats reflective assignments as given, paying limited attention to how specific design features - prompts, scaffolds, interactional context, and especially feedback that define whether reflection leads to transformation or remains self-descriptive.

By analysing 122 autobiographical sketches produced over 15 years in Georgian universities, combining reflective pedagogy, intercultural development, and civic learning, this study responds directly to these gaps. It treats the autobiographical sketch not only as coded data but as a designed reflective cycle whose transformative potential depends on how students are prompted, guided, and given feedback. This synthesis sets the stage for Objective 1: to critically examine assumptions embedded in reflective assignments and identify design features that plausibly support movement from awareness toward inclusive, enacted practice in higher education.

### **Methodology**

This study integrates three strands - reflective pedagogy, intercultural development, and civic learning- to examine how autobiographical sketching supports students' progression from awareness to inclusive, enacted practice in diverse Georgian higher education settings. Although data come from four universities, the analysis does not compare institutions; instead, it traces temporal evolution across three collection periods (2009–2010; 2015; 2022–2024) to show how reflective patterns differed across phases alongside system reforms, pedagogical changes, and growing internationalisation.

### ***Positionality and Potential Bias***

A critical methodological consideration requires explicit disclosure: the two researchers who conducted the coding and rubric scoring are also the instructors who designed and facilitated the autobiographical sketch assignments across the four institutions during the study period. This dual role introduces potential confirmation bias, as familiarity with students' work and investment in pedagogical outcomes could influence interpretation. We acknowledge this limitation transparently and took the following steps to mitigate bias: (a) all sketches were fully anonymized prior to analysis, with institutional and temporal identifiers coded separately; (b) a substantial time lag (minimum 6 months, often several years) separated instruction from analysis, reducing recall of individual students; (c) the coding scheme and rubric were developed iteratively through close reading of texts rather than



imposed a priori, grounding categories in students' actual language; (d) inter-rater reliability was established through independent parallel coding of a pilot subset (10-15%) with systematic reconciliation of discrepancies; and (e) we prioritized behavioural evidence and concrete practices over aspirational statements to minimize interpretive generosity. While these steps reduce bias, we recognise that complete objectivity is unattainable when analysing one's own pedagogical artefacts. This trade-off was accepted because the instructors' deep contextual knowledge of assignment conditions, institutional cultures, and Georgian higher education dynamics provided interpretive resources unavailable to external coders. Readers should interpret findings with this positionality in mind.

### ***Autobiographical Sketch as Pedagogical Assignment***

The autobiographical sketch is conceptualised as a designed reflective cycle rather than a free-form narrative. Across institutions, instructors (also authors of this manuscript) used comparable prompts grounded in reflective pedagogy and developmental frameworks of interculturalism. The pedagogical purposes were to: (a) Render positionality visible (Holmes, 2020; Takacs, 2003); (b) Surface encounters with contact zones shaped by language, ethnicity, belief, disability, or migration (Pratt, 1991); (c) Link personal experience with inclusive instructional choices; (d) Evidence intercultural awareness and civic orientation.

Assignment design aligns with “backward-design” logic and evidence strategies (Fink, 2013; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), supporting reflective depth and developmental analysis.

### ***Data Corpus and Temporal Grouping***

The dataset comprises 122 anonymised autobiographical sketches across three phases: Phase 1 (2009-2010): first-generation reflective assignments in new pedagogical modules; Phase 2 (2015): tasks embedded in diversity- and policy-related coursework; Phase 3 (2022–2024): mature reflective pedagogy integrated into postgraduate and doctoral programmes in education, public administration, and related social sciences. Sketches originate from four universities (East Europe University (EEU), Ilia State University (IliaUni), Georgian Institute for Public Affairs (GIPA), Tbilisi State University (TSU)), with institutional identity treated as contextual metadata rather than an analytic axis. The primary unit of analysis is the individual sketch, whereas the main comparison is across temporal phases. Distribution: Phase 1 (N = 25), Phase 2 (N = 12), Phase 3 (N = 85). This cross-sectional temporal design compares cohorts at different time points rather than tracking individual students over time. Observed differences may reflect both pedagogical evolution and cohort-specific characteristics (e.g., program level, student demographics). Across all periods, the assignment retained a consistent structure (autobiographical prompt, diversity focus, feedback on reflective quality). Phase 3 yields the largest corpus due to wider uptake of structured reflective pedagogy and expanded diversity-focused

teaching. In total, 637 quotations were extracted and coded, forming the basis for qualitative interpretation and descriptive quantitative aggregation. Accordingly, phase differences are interpreted as comparative patterns shaped by cohort characteristics and pedagogical design (prompts, rubrics, feedback), rather than as evidence of individual developmental progression.

### ***Analytic Framework: Three Strands Integrated into Codes and Rubric***

The analytical framework integrates three established strands - reflective pedagogy, intercultural development, and civic/inclusive learning- into a single evaluative model for examining longitudinal changes in students' reflective capacity. This consolidation is necessary because autobiographical sketches are hybrid artefacts: part personal narrative, part reflective cycle, part documentation of intercultural positioning, and part civic/intended practice. No existing model captures all these dimensions; hence, an integrated frame is required.

The conceptual framework maps onto both a thematic coding scheme (8 codes) and a reflective rubric (5 criteria).

#### *Reflective Pedagogy Strand*

Drawing on experiential and transformative learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000; Moon, 2006; Brookfield, 2017), reflection is understood as a structured process encompassing engagement with experience, examination of assumptions, meaning-making, and orientation toward future action. This strand operationalises reflective depth through Narrative Coherence, Reflexivity, and Critical Incident analysis, indicators widely recognised in reflective learning models and suitable for cross-period comparison.

#### *Intercultural Development Strand*

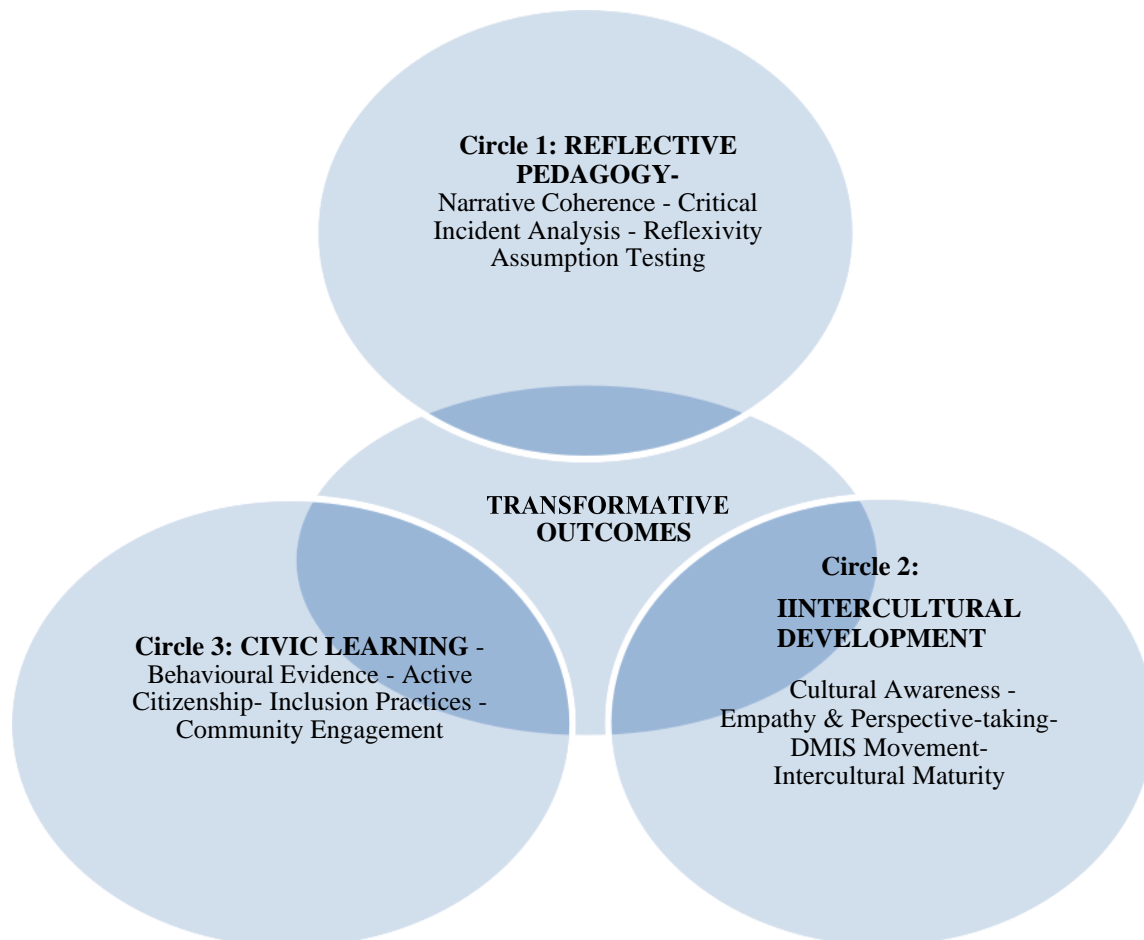
Informed by intercultural development and competence frameworks (Bennett, 1986–2013; Deardorff, 2006; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005), this strand examines students' capacity to interpret difference beyond stereotypes, demonstrate perspective-taking, and position themselves reflexively within intercultural encounters. It integrates core elements of DMIS progression, intercultural maturity, and process-oriented competence models linking attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviour.

#### *Civic Learning Strand*

Grounded in civic and inclusive learning research (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2007; Bowman, 2010), this strand emphasises the necessity of translating intercultural understanding into practice. Prior studies highlight behavioural enactment through interactional diversity, democratic engagement, and equity-oriented action (Campbell, 2009; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Chittum et al., 2022). Inclusive Action is assessed as the clarity and feasibility of intended or enacted behaviour in educational or civic

contexts (Ash & Clayton, 2009), enabling distinction between expressed awareness and actionable commitment.

**Figure 1: Integrated Analytical Framework**



### ***Development of the Integrated Model***

The analytical framework applied in this study was developed through iterative cycling between data patterns and established theoretical frameworks (an abductive process), emerging from recurring patterns in the data and the structural logic of the autobiographical assignment. This process yielded a hybrid, adap

table model suitable for cross-temporal comparison of autobiographical sketches.

The model guided a dual analytic strategy: (1) An eight-code thematic scheme capturing reflective depth, intercultural stance, and civic translation as presented in the table 1:

**Table 1. Eight-code thematic scheme inductively developed from research data**

<b>Reflective Structure</b>
1. Narrative Sequencing & Coherence
2. Critical Incident Articulation
3. Assumption-Testing & Emotional Interpretation
<b>Intercultural Positioning</b>
4. References to Cultural/Linguistic Difference
5. Statements of Positionality
6. Indicators of Developmental Movement (e.g., evidence of shifting interpretations of difference)
<b>Civic/Inclusive Orientation</b>
7. Planned Inclusive Actions
8. Links to Instructional/Civic Behaviour

(2) A five-criterion rubric assessing narrative coherence, reflexivity, critical incident analysis, intercultural understanding, and inclusive action.

**Table 2. Five rubric criteria that correspond directly to the three conceptual strands.**

Conceptual Strand	Rubric Criterion (0–5 scale)	Rationale
Reflective Pedagogy	1. Narrative Coherence	Structure, clarity, and purposeful arc of the sketch (reflective pedagogy strand).
	2. Reflexivity	Degree to which assumptions and positionality are interrogated and evidence of growth is documented (reflective pedagogy strand).
Reflective pedagogy + Intercultural Development	3. Critical Incident	Presence and handling of a specific, consequential episode tied to diversity or justice, including articulated implications (reflective pedagogy + intercultural development).
Intercultural Development	4. Intercultural Understanding	Depth of cultural analysis with situated empathy (merging Cultural Awareness and Empathy & Feelings; intercultural development strand).
Civic Learning	5. Inclusive Action	Concrete, current, or credible planned practices (inside classrooms or in wider civic arenas) that demonstrate translation of insight into behaviour (civic learning strand)

Inclusive Action captures both pedagogical and civic enactment, while the Active Citizenship code isolates explicit engagement beyond immediate instructional roles.

Rubric anchors were iteratively calibrated using exemplar sketches from each period. The scale is intentionally simple enough for longitudinal consistency, yet sensitive enough to capture variation, particularly on depth (Critical Incident, Reflexivity) and enactment (Inclusive Action). This structure aligns with validated reflection frameworks and assessment guidance (e.g., Kember et al., 2008; Ryan, 2012; American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2009a, 2009b; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

### ***Codebook (quotation-level thematic coding)***

At the quotation level, an eight-code scheme that captures stance, affect, criticality, and action was applied. This scheme is directly aligned with the three strands:

- CA – Cultural Awareness: identifies or contextualises difference (ethnic/linguistic/religious); situates self/others with specificity.
- EF – Empathy & Feelings: expresses emotions and perspective-taking; moral sensitivity toward “the other”.
- CI – Critical Incident: narrates consequential encounter or dilemma tied to diversity/justice.
- BE – Behavioural Evidence: concrete inclusive moves (grouping norms, language scaffolds, differentiation, conflict mediation).
- RE – Reflexivity: self-interrogation of assumptions/positionality; reframing and meaning-making.
- RB – Recognised Bias: ownership of past bias or community stereotyping; reports of change.
- AC – Active Citizenship: civic engagement or advocacy (peer mentoring, petitions, policy critique, community projects).
- IN – Inclusion Practices: day-to-day routines that foster belonging, access, or fairness.

Each quotation could receive multiple codes (multi-label coding). Codes were operationalised with decision rules and exemplars in the project framework, enabling consistent application across the 637 quotations and supporting descriptive aggregation at the level of phases and cohorts (with institutional breakdowns used only to contextualise patterns, not as the primary focus of interpretation. Behavioural Evidence captures immediate, situated practices; Inclusion Practices refer to routinised pedagogical strategies; Active Citizenship denotes engagement beyond institutional roles.

### ***Coding and analysis procedures***

The analytic strategy combined qualitative structural/thematic analysis with descriptive quantitative summarisation of rubric scores and code frequencies. Procedures unfolded in four steps:

**Step 1 - Familiarisation and protocol:** Researchers reviewed the conceptual framework, rubric anchors, and codebook, jointly clarifying code boundaries and criterion definitions. A shared workbook and narrative logs were used to document evolving decisions and to maintain transparency in how borderline cases (e.g., RE vs RB, BE vs IN) were handled.

**Step 2 - Pilot coding and calibration:** Two analysts (the same as the instructors who assigned the sketches) independently coded and scored a pilot subset (approximately 10–15% of cases) spanning all three phases and a range of sensitivity levels. They compared results, discussed discrepancies, and refined decision rules until reaching a stable consensus. Inter-rater agreement was calculated using per

cent agreement for rubric scoring (mean = 87%, range 82-94% across criteria) and Cohen's kappa for binary code presence ( $\kappa = 0.79$ , substantial agreement; Landis & Koch, 1977). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Following recommendations for qualitative reliability in developmental construct coding, the emphasis was placed on conceptual agreement rather than on coefficients alone (Campbell et al., 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

**Step 3 - Full coding and scoring:** In the main phase, all 122 sketches were: 1. Read holistically as case narratives; 2. Assigned rubric scores (1–5) for each of the five criteria, and 3. Coded at the quotation level using the eight thematic codes (CA, EF, CI, BE, RE, RB, AC, IN). Periodic cross-checks and reconciliation meetings ensured continued alignment. Outputs included: Per-case sheets (metadata, rubric scores, codes, illustrative excerpts); Phase-level tables, summarising average rubric scores and code frequencies by collection period; and Descriptive cohort summaries that occasionally disaggregate by institution to contextualise variation (e.g., differing prevalence of BE/IN), while the main interpretive emphasis remains on temporal and developmental patterns.

Quantitative outputs, including mean rubric scores, presence/absence of codes, and correlations between criteria, were used to characterise typical profiles of sketches in each phase as well as to examine the awareness–action gap (e.g., comparing awareness-related indices to BE/IN as enactment indicators), and to construct composite indices such as an Actionability Index. The Actionability Index was constructed using equal weighting based on the theoretical premise that enacted inclusion requires convergence of three elements: critical self-examination (RE), analysis of consequential diversity-related experience (CI), and articulation of concrete behavioural responses (BE). While alternative weighting schemes are possible, equal weighting treats these dimensions as necessary and complementary rather than hierarchical, reflecting the premise that all three must converge for enacted inclusion to occur. These analytic layers make visible where reflective engagement is most strongly evidenced (e.g., awareness and affect) and where pedagogical design, including feedback, requires further strengthening (e.g., behavioural translation). The index is used as a descriptive heuristic (not a validated scale) to make the ‘awareness-to-enactment’ pattern legible.

**Step 4 - Narrative citation analysis:** Finally, coded quotations were assembled into theme-based citation sets such as interethnic contact and friendship, teacher bias and unequal treatment, language and accent, inclusion practices, etc., and interpreted qualitatively to provide rich, context-sensitive evidence for claims about intercultural and civic development. Representative quotations are referenced in the findings through anonymised labels (e.g., EEU\_01, GIPA\_05), with language of origin retained where possible to preserve voice; translations are used selectively for clarity.

Unless otherwise specified, percentages refer to sketch-level presence ( $\geq 1$  coded passage in a sketch). Where quotation-level distributions are reported (e.g., across the 637 extracted quotations), these are labelled explicitly as % of quotation.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

All sketches were originally produced as course assignments and were fully anonymised for this study; personal identifiers were removed, and institutional names were retained only in aggregate form. Participation was complete at the cohort level, as all available submissions within target programs were included, minimising selection bias. Prior to submission, students were notified that anonymised coursework may be used for pedagogical research. All assignments were fully de-identified prior to analysis, and no identifying information is reported. Feedback practices across courses followed common principles, developmental comments linked to rubric criteria and encouragement of revision, though the intensity of feedback cycles (e.g., resubmission requirements) varied by cohort and course. These variations were treated descriptively to interpret phase-level patterns in reflective depth and behavioural evidence.

Given discrepancies in instructions, institutional contexts, program types, and time frames, limitations were acknowledged: Uneven length and detail across sketches; Potential recall and social-desirability effects inherent in autobiographical writing; Imbalanced case numbers across phases and institutions (Phase 3 overrepresented).

Mitigation strategies included: Focusing interpretation on patterns consistent across multiple cases and phases; Prioritising behavioural evidence (BE/IN) and civic indicators (AC) where possible; Triangulating rubric scores, thematic codes, and narrative citations.

### **Research Results**

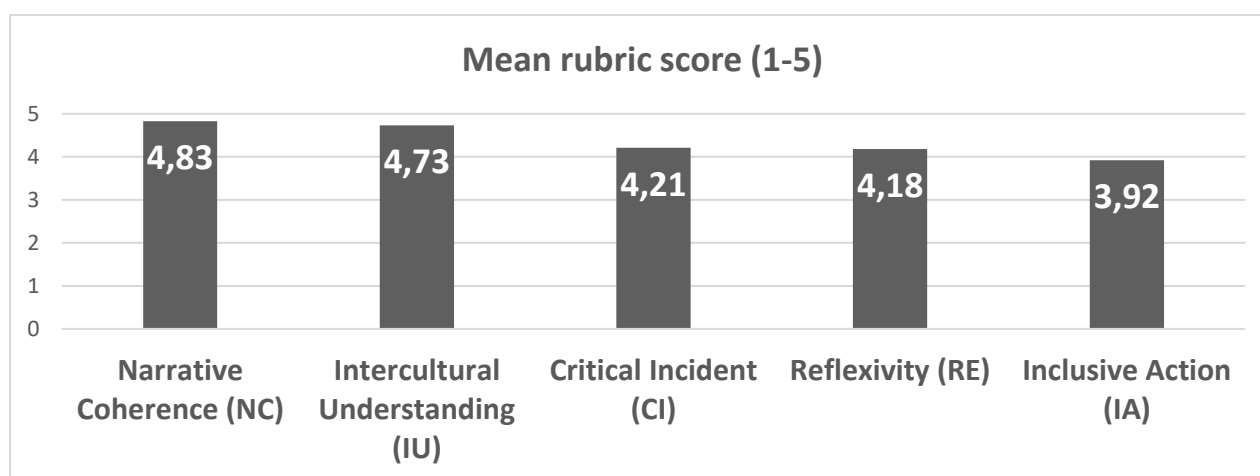
As outlined in the methodology, the dataset comprises 122 autobiographical sketches produced over 15 years. The assignments cluster into three phases that roughly mirror the diffusion of reflective pedagogy and diversity-oriented teaching in Georgian higher education. This distinguishes between themes that appear repeatedly in a few papers versus those that are common across the entire student cohort. The assignments cluster into three phases that roughly mirror the diffusion of reflective pedagogy and diversity-oriented teaching in Georgian higher education. All 122 sketches were scored against five rubric criteria aligned with the three conceptual strands, namely, Narrative Coherence, Intercultural Understanding, Critical Incident, Reflexivity, and Inclusive Action. Students generally performed strongly on criteria capturing structured narration and intercultural awareness. Aggregated rubric scores were highest for Narrative Coherence ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ) and Intercultural Understanding. At the code level, this strong performance was reflected in the high prevalence and intensity of Cultural Awareness (CA;  $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) and Empathy & Feelings (EF;  $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ), which together constitute the awareness dimension of intercultural understanding. Greater dispersion appeared on Critical Incident (CI) ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ), Behavioural Evidence (BE) ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ), and Reflexivity (RE) ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).



### ***Constraints of ceiling effects on discriminant assessment***

The concentration of scores at the upper end of the rubric scale indicates a ceiling effect, with most assignments clustering between 4 and 5 on Narrative Coherence, Cultural Awareness, and Empathy-related criteria. This compression limits the discriminant capacity of the rubric to differentiate among higher levels of intercultural positioning, particularly with respect to fine-grained distinctions proposed in developmental models (e.g., adaptation versus integration). As a result, rubric-based awareness indicators should be interpreted primarily as evidence of successful elicitation of intercultural content rather than as precise measures of advanced developmental stages. Analytic leverage therefore, lies less in further differentiation of awareness scores and more in examining criteria and codes that capture translation into practice, such as Behavioural Evidence (BE), Inclusion Practices (IN), and Active Citizenship (AC). Qualitative citation analysis is particularly important for distinguishing how students articulate and operationalise inclusive action beyond expressed awareness. Read together, these patterns suggest that ceiling effects reflect strong elicitation but limited discrimination at the upper range; they also indicate where pedagogical design succeeds in surfacing awareness and where additional scaffolding is required to strengthen enactment.

**Figure 2: Mean Rubric Scores Across Five Criteria**



Two broad patterns characterise the corpus. First, the assignment consistently elicited coherent narratives and recognition of diversity-related issues and emotions: most students narrated experiences clearly and identified cultural differences and associated feelings. Second, the criteria linked to transformative learning, critical interrogation of incidents, and translation into practice, showed greater variability. However, ceiling compression is evident for narrative and awareness dimensions, leaving limited room to distinguish advanced levels of intercultural and civic maturity.

Internal relationships among criteria indicate meaningful associations among criteria.

Reflexivity correlates moderately with Critical Incident ( $r \approx .56$ ) and Coherence ( $r \approx .42$ ), suggesting deeper self-interrogation co-occurs with substantive incident analysis and narrative control. By contrast, links between Critical Incident and Behavioural Evidence ( $r \approx .30$ ) and between Reflexivity and Behavioural Evidence ( $r \approx .10$ ) are weaker. In short, students who write rich, reflective stories about diversity do not consistently describe changes in practice, echoing concerns about the “last mile” between insight and enactment. While students often reach an insightful understanding of diversity, expressing empathy, and analysing incidents, they struggle to translate these reflections into concrete behavioural or civic commitments.

Correlations are reported descriptively to characterise association patterns; interpretation emphasises effect size rather than significance testing, given the exploratory design and ceiling compression.

**Figure 3: Inter-criteria Correlation Matrix**

Criterion	NC	IU	CI	RE	IA
NC (Narrative)	1	0.35	0.38	0.42	0.25
IU (Intercult)	0.35	1	0.45	0.48	0.3
CI (Critical)	0.38	0.45	1	0.56	0.3
RE (Reflexive)	0.42	0.48	0.56	1	0.1
IA (Action)	0.25	0.3	0.3	0.1	1

### *From Awareness to Action: A Persistent Gap*

To make the “last mile” visible, two composite indicators were constructed: the **Awareness-Action gap** and the **Actionability Index (AI)**. At the code level, Awareness was calculated from Cultural Awareness (CA) and Empathy & Feelings (EF), aligning with the rubric criterion *Intercultural Understanding*. Awareness was operationalised in two complementary ways: as intensity (mean CA+EF scores) and as prevalence (frequency of CA/EF codes), while Action was examined through the presence and depth of Behavioural Evidence (BE), Inclusion Practices (IN), and Active Citizenship (AC). While awareness codes appear in nearly all sketches, action codes, when present, are typically less specific and less transferable, which is illustrated in the qualitative excerpts that follow. This pattern suggests that students are more likely to narrate their diversity experiences and emotional responses than to specify concrete inclusive practices. This gap may reflect both assignment prompts (which emphasised experience over action planning) and developmental progression consistent with transformative learning models (Mezirow, 2000). Binary code coverage confirms this pattern: At the

sketch level, awareness-related codes showed near-universal presence, with Cultural Awareness (CA) identified in 97% of assignments, Empathy & Feelings (EF) in 98%, and Reflexivity (RE) in 100%. Action-oriented codes were less consistently present at the assignment level, with Behavioural Evidence (BE), Inclusion Practices (IN), and Active Citizenship (AC) identified in 72%, 54%, and 66% of sketches, respectively. Many students narrated interethnic tensions or exclusion and expressed empathy, yet fewer articulated repeatable strategies, such as adapting grouping norms or language scaffolds, to make future teaching more inclusive.

As detailed in Methods, the Actionability Index  $AI = \text{mean} (RE, CI, BE)$  was 4.47; 59% of assignments scored  $\geq 4.5$ , indicating that in three of five cases, students moved toward credible, inclusive action. However, the weak correlation between Reflexivity and Behavioural Evidence ( $r \approx .10$ ) signals that sophisticated reflection does not guarantee behavioural commitment. This underscores why BE, IN, and AC are treated as distinct dimensions rather than assumed outcomes of narrative coherence or self-awareness. Pedagogically, this highlights the need for stronger scaffolding around the “so what?” of reflection, explicitly requiring students to formulate and document inclusive routines, civic initiatives, or professional practice changes. Turning to Objective 1, phase comparisons illustrate how changes in prompts, scaffolds, and feedback conditions relate to differences in reflective depth and action articulation.

### ***Temporal Patterns Across Cohorts***

Although data originate from four universities, the analytic focus is temporal rather than institutional. The three phases (2009–2010, 2015, 2022–2024) reflect the gradual embedding of reflective and intercultural pedagogy in Georgian higher education - from early experimental use of autobiographical sketches, through intermediate diversification into diversity- and policy-oriented courses, to mature integration within postgraduate and doctoral programs.

A comparison of earlier (2009–2015) and later (2022–2024) cohorts offers a cross-temporal comparison on how design features and system reforms coincide. Using Cohen's  $d$  to characterise the magnitude of differences, Critical Incident ( $d = +0.63$ , medium-to-large effect) and Reflexivity ( $d = +0.39$ , small-to-medium effect) scores are higher in recent cohorts, whereas Behavioural Evidence is stronger in earlier cohorts ( $d = -0.61$ , medium-to-large effect). This descriptive comparison suggests that students now analyse diversity-related dilemmas and interrogate assumptions more deeply but articulate fewer concrete inclusive practices. Given unequal phase sizes and potential non-normality due to ceiling effects,  $d$  values are interpreted as approximate magnitude indicators.

This shift aligns with changes in assignment framing. Recent phases standardised prompts and rubrics and encouraged resubmission, strengthening narrative coherence and reflective depth. Students

increasingly link stories to structural factors, language policy, curriculum gaps, and religious rituals, and acknowledge positionality and bias. Yet they often stop at intention (“I will try to be more attentive...”) without specifying classroom routines or civic engagement. Earlier cohorts, though narratively less polished, describe tangible acts such as mediating conflicts, adapting group work, supporting minority peers, or initiating community projects. Quantitatively, Behavioural Evidence and Inclusion Practices codes appear in up to 95% of early assignments, compared with substantially lower rates later. The pattern is not “more is better” but a rebalancing: gains in coherence and depth sometimes coincide with under-articulated practice. Regarding Objective 3, thematic patterns show when empathy and critical incidents consolidate into civic/inclusive orientation

### ***Thematic coding frequencies and the meaning of students’ writing***

Building on the rubric-level view of awareness, reflection, and action, we use thematic coding to see what students actually write. Applying the eight-code scheme from the methodology, we grouped 637 excerpts to identify dominant intercultural and civic experiences and how they enable or hinder the articulation of inclusive practices. Codes of awareness and reflection (CA, EF, CI, RE) appear in nearly all assignments, while practice-related and civic codes (BE, IN, AC) occur less often and unevenly. The analysis shows where these codes “live” in narratives and what episodes reveal cultural difference, injustice, care, and civic engagement. These results address Objective 2, indicating where growth-relevant indicators cluster (awareness/coherence) versus where variability remains (incident analysis and enactment).

Everyday contact and unequal treatment form is the largest cluster as dominant experiences of interethnic contact and friendship (258 citations). Students often situate stories in ordinary spaces - classrooms, village streets, in projects, where Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian, or other minority peers are real people with whom they study, joke, argue, and build trust. Many vignettes convey warmth and details, like shared tea, joint exam prep, or family visits. Diversity here appears less as policy and more as lived reality.

Alongside these supportive encounters is a second major cluster: teacher bias and unequal treatment (104 citations). Students recall being ignored, ridiculed, and disadvantaged or seeing peers suffer, due to language, faith, ethnicity, disability, or social background. One student notes that in her village “both teachers and locals spoke about other ethnic groups in a very negative, dismissive way,” shaping her later unease with non-Georgian classmates. Another recalls a lecturer grading Azerbaijani students more softly, which she now interprets as lowered expectations rather than care. These clusters show sketches gravitate toward contact zones where difference is mediated through peers and teachers, not abstract categories. Contact can foster friendship and solidarity, but also leave deep marks when power is misused or expectations are uneven.

### ***Institutional and structural drivers: religion, language, and curricular gaps***

Other themes point to institutional arrangements. Sketches coded as religious indoctrination (59 citations) describe rituals, prayers, or “moral” lessons framing some students as “proper” Georgians and others as suspect. Those who did not conform due to belief, secular upbringing, or ~~embarrassment~~ felt quietly marginalised in classrooms where religion and national identity fused.

Another set of quotes focuses on language, accent, and access (56 citations). Students recount struggling with Georgian as an additional language, being mocked for accents, or watching peers “disappear” in lessons because materials and instruction lacked accommodation. Several note that while higher education endorses equality, structural support, prep courses, adapted materials, and linguistic scaffolds are scarce.

A smaller but important cluster highlights a positive multicultural climate (67 citations). Here, universities are described as places where “no one was singled out or humiliated” and staff “treated everyone equally” regardless of ethnicity or language. These sketches counter inequality narratives, showing institutional cultures where diversity is normalised and dignity protected. Students also evaluate coherence between rhetoric and reality. One student notes a “Tolerance” course in the programme was “often not delivered,” signalling a gap between curricular promises and actual learning.

### ***Signs of inclusion practices and civic agency***

Although less frequent, themes coded as inclusion practice/differentiation (32 citations) and empathy/care/compassion (27 citations) are key for understanding how some students bridge the gap between awareness and enactment. Inclusion-practice episodes describe concrete moves: mixing groups, adjusting tasks for weaker language skills, mediating conflicts, or setting norms to protect minority students. One student joined a tutoring initiative for non-Georgian-speaking freshmen, adapting explanations, accompanying students to offices, and helping them “to feel less foreign in the new city.” Another, during practicum, invited pupils to share regional stories, paired students strategically, and rephrased tasks “so nobody quietly disappears.”

A small but symbolically important cluster shows explicit civic actions (AC): collecting signatures for a kindergarten, organising campus diversity events, joining projects for minority students, or supporting displaced families. One student wrote that after hearing displaced people’s stories, she “could no longer remain only ‘tolerant’; “I wanted to help shape a new generation that would treat difference as normal.” These accounts show reflection occasionally crystallising into responsibility beyond the classroom.

Overall, such inclusion routines and civic initiatives remain modest compared to larger pools of awareness, empathy, and critical incidents. This imbalance echoes rubric-level patterns where

Behavioural Evidence, Inclusion Practices, and Active Citizenship appear less consistently and at lower depth than Cultural Awareness or Empathy.

### ***The “Other” category and its analytical limits***

Nearly a third of the coded citations fall into an “Other” category (197 citations). These fragments provide context, family histories, general descriptions of schools or universities, and emotional atmospheres, but do not engage directly with cultural difference, power or inclusion. They enrich the narrative texture of the sketches yet contribute little to the specific constructs of the intercultural and civic framework. For that reason, they were not used for thematic comparisons, although they remain important for understanding each student’s broader life story.

Placed alongside the rubric results, the thematic distribution sharpens the profile of the awareness-action gap that runs through this study. Most students chose to narrate experiences in which diversity is very present: interethnic or international friendships, biased or supportive teacher behaviours, religious rituals, language barriers and occasional institutional good practice. These choices demonstrate high levels of cultural awareness, empathy and critical-incident recognition, exactly the dimensions where rubric scores cluster at the top end. By contrast, far fewer students dwell on how they altered their own practice as emerging teachers, administrators or professionals. Inclusive routines and civic engagements are visible, but they occupy a smaller part of the thematic landscape than one might expect given the richness of students’ diagnoses of injustice and exclusion. In other words, the sketches show that students see and feel a great deal, but they are less consistent in turning these insights into articulated, sustainable patterns of action.

Code frequencies are reported using sketch-level presence (whether a code appears at least once), which captures breadth of engagement and shows the gap between metrics that is small (CA: 97% vs 84%; EF: 98% vs 71%). This indicates that when students mention cultural awareness, they typically demonstrate it. For action codes, the gap is larger (BE: 72% vs 38%; IN: 54% vs 33%), indicating that mentions of inclusive behaviour are often brief or aspirational rather than concretely described.

Thematic coding of 637 quotations using the eight-code scheme shows that Cultural Awareness (CA) and Reflexivity (RE) were most pervasive, present in 84% and 79% of assignments, with Empathy & Feelings (EF) also high (71%). When a stricter criterion is applied, focusing on clearly articulated, elaborated, or sustained instances of enactment, Behavioural Evidence (BE) is evident in 38% of sketches, Inclusion Practices (IN) in 33%, and Active Citizenship (AC) in 21%. The contrast between broader sketch-level presence and these more conservative estimates highlights the gap between initial mention of action and fully articulated, actionable commitment. In short, most students

recognise cultural differences, describe emotions and dilemmas, and interrogate assumptions, but far fewer describe concrete, repeatable, inclusive practices or civic initiatives. This mirrors the awareness–action “last mile” seen in rubric scores, but at the level of lived experience and narrative detail. Regrouping coded quotations into broader themes produced a similar landscape. The most frequent were:

- Interethnic contact and friendship (N = 258)
- Teacher bias and unequal treatment (N = 104)
- Positive multicultural climate (N = 67)
- Religious indoctrination in school (N = 59)
- Language and accent/access barriers (N = 56)
- Inclusion practices and differentiation (N = 32)
- Empathy, care, and compassion (N = 27)
- Other/contextual narrative (N = 197)

Three clusters stand out for the research questions: (1) contact and friendship across differences, (2) structural and institutional harms, and (3) early traces of inclusive and civic action.

**Table 3: Distribution of Thematic Codes Across 637 Quotations**

Theme Category	N (Count)	% of Total	Example Codes
Interethnic Contact & Friendship	258	40.50%	CA, EF
Teacher Bias & Unequal Treatment	104	16.30%	CI, RE
Positive Multicultural Climate	67	10.50%	CA, EF
Religious Indoctrination	59	9.30%	CI, RB
Language & Accent Barriers	56	8.80%	CA, BE
Inclusion Practices	32	5.00%	BE, IN
Empathy/Care/Compassion	27	4.20%	EF, AC
Other/Contextual	197	30.90%	Various

### ***Contact and friendship across differences***

The largest thematic cluster, interethnic contact and friendship, includes narratives of neighbours, classmates, or colleagues from minority backgrounds, shared celebrations, and collaborative projects. Many episodes originate in school or community settings rather than university, suggesting reflective writing prompts students to revisit formative experiences as they prepare for professional roles.

These stories often combine Cultural Awareness (CA) with Empathy & Feelings (EF), and



students notice differences in language, clothing, religion, customs, while expressing curiosity, discomfort, or admiration. In many cases, contact becomes a turning point: early prejudice gives way to recognition of commonalities and a more nuanced view of “the other.” This mirrors intercultural-development literature but is grounded in small, concrete episodes rather than abstract attitudes.

However, even in this large cluster, explicit descriptions of subsequent educator or citizen actions are rare. Many sketches end at changed perception (“I started to think differently...”) without bridging to classroom routines, curriculum choices, or civic action. Contact experiences thus offer fertile ground for insight, but only sometimes translate into articulated plans for inclusive practice.

### *Structural harms: bias, religious pressure, and language barriers*

A second sizeable cluster centres on teacher bias and unequal treatment, often linked to religious indoctrination and language/accent barriers. Students recount witnessing or experiencing differential grading, public shaming, derogatory comments, or pressure to conform to dominant rituals.

These episodes are typically coded with Critical Incident (CI) and Reflexivity (RE), as they involve breaches of fairness that force re-evaluation of norms. Several sketches acknowledge prior complicity, remaining silent when peers were humiliated, accepting biased narratives, reproducing stereotypes and later frame this recognition as a catalyst for change (“then I realised... now I try to...”). Such accounts echo disorienting dilemmas in transformative-learning theory.

Language and accent barriers form a related thread. Students describe peers struggling with Georgian as a second language, unequal access to preparatory programmes, or ridicule for non-standard accents. These stories show how structural inequalities persist through curriculum design, assessment formats, and a lack of language support. Again, awareness and moral evaluation dominate, but few sketches detail how writers now scaffold language or advocate policy changes.

Across these themes, autobiographical assignments surface system-level constraints - bias, ritual pressure, and access gaps that shape intercultural positioning and frame the context for inclusive practice.

### *Protective factors and emerging inclusive action*

A smaller but important cluster includes quotations coded as Inclusion Practices (IN), Behavioural Evidence (BE), Active Citizenship (AC), and Empathy/Care (EF), oriented toward action. These excerpts describe concrete moves: reorganising groups to avoid isolating minority students, adjusting tasks for language levels, mentoring peers, organising diversity days, or initiating community projects.

Though less frequent than awareness-focused themes, these accounts illustrate what closing the “last mile” looks like. They cluster in later phases, when students are in teaching or public-service

roles. Reflection explicitly connects past exclusion or solidarity to present responsibilities: (a) Writers recall dismissive comments and explain how they now respond differently; (b) They describe civic initiatives (e.g., tutoring, petitions, advocacy) linked to prior insights; (c) They adopt routines, such as rotating speaking turns, bilingual materials, and intentional group work as deliberate responses to earlier injustices.

These narratives show that when assignments invite students to articulate what they did or will do differently, autobiographical writing can document and reinforce a trajectory from insight to inclusive practice.

Taken together, thematic distributions confirm and nuance the study's central claim. Autobiographical reflective writing, scaffolded through prompts and feedback, surfaces intercultural experience in Georgian higher education: friendships across difference, memories of bias, contested rituals, and emerging inclusive and civic initiatives. Students are not short of material; the challenge is translating awareness into repeatable practices and sustained engagement.

From the three strands: **Reflective-pedagogy** is strongly represented: students narrate experiences, interrogate assumptions, and describe shifts in meaning-making; **Intercultural development** appears in themes charting movement from unexamined norms toward more complex positioning; **Civic/inclusive-learning** is thinner - BE, IN, and AC cluster in later sketches and around assignments that ask for future-oriented action.

This pattern underscores a key implication: if the goal is progression from awareness to enacted practice, reflective tasks cannot stop at "tell your story." They must push students to articulate practices, routines, and civic commitments, and revisit them over time.

## Discussion

The findings confirm that autobiographical reflective writing reliably surfaces intercultural awareness, emotional engagement, and reflexive meaning-making. High prevalence of Cultural Awareness, Empathy & Feelings, Critical Incident, and Reflexivity indicates that students readily access interpretive and moral dimensions of diversity, consistent with research on reflective and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2001; Kember et al., 2008; Ryan, 2012). Throughout the discussion, references to "action" are used as shorthand for three analytically parallel dimensions - Behavioural Evidence, Inclusion Practices, and Active Citizenship, which capture different sites and scales of enactment. The key contribution of this study lies not in documenting awareness per se, but in showing where and why translation into inclusive or civic practice remains uneven.

However, the study also exposes the well-documented awareness–action gap (Deardorff, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 2005). Behavioural Evidence, Inclusion Practices, and Active Citizenship appear less

frequently and with less detail, reflecting earlier findings that moral sensitivity and intercultural disposition do not automatically translate into action (Campbell et al., 2013). Composite indices reinforce this: Awareness scores consistently exceed Action; many students articulate ethical commitments that remain abstract or aspirational. This confirms broader literature showing that inclusive or civic behaviour requires explicit instructional design, opportunities for enactment, and structured reflection (Chittum, Enke, & Finley, 2022).

Cross-institutional differences further confirm the importance of design and facilitation. Courses incorporating dialogic feedback, multi-stage submission, and explicit links to practice are more likely to produce sketches that move from reflection to action. Where scaffolding is weaker, narratives remain emotionally vivid but less grounded in concrete, inclusive or civic strategies. This parallels evidence that reflective assignments yield developmental impact only when embedded in coherent pedagogical systems (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Overall, the findings position autobiographical writing as a reliable mechanism for surfacing intercultural experience and reflective depth, while demonstrating that behavioural and civic enactment requires intentional, structured support.

### ***Curricular and assessment implications***

Several concrete implications for curriculum and assessment follow from this analysis: First, *design for transfer and enactment*. If the aim is to support movement from reflection to inclusive behaviour, autobiographical writing cannot remain a marginal exercise. It should be embedded in developmental cycles where students (a) analyse experiences, (b) formulate specific inclusive or civic responses, (c) implement or rehearse these responses, and (d) revisit them in later reflections. Assignment briefs and marking criteria must explicitly require evidence of practice as a core expectation, not an optional extra.

Second, *tightening rubric anchors*. The high concentration of top scores on Cultural Awareness and Reflexivity suggests recalibrating upper-level anchors. A “5” might require not only rich reflection but also explicit linkage to frameworks (e.g., intercultural maturity, DMIS, civic-learning literature), awareness of policy or institutional context, and clearly described, plausible practices. This would reduce ceiling effects, sharpen distinctions between competent and advanced performances, and make progression more visible.

Third, *feedback as a transformative tool*. The strongest examples of developmental movement appear where feedback is criterion-based, dialogic, and feed-forward. Students revise sketches in light of comments naming strengths and gaps in reflective depth, intercultural understanding, and inclusive action. Investing in staff feedback literacy, shared rubrics, and examples of effective comments is as important as assignment design. Without such support, sketches risk remaining eloquent diagnostics

of inequality without translating into changed practice.

Fourth, *alignment with QA and programme-level evidence*. Well-designed reflective tasks can serve quality-assurance priorities. Autobiographical sketches produce authentic artefacts that feed into course review, programme accreditation, and curriculum reform as direct evidence of learning outcomes related to intercultural competence and civic readiness. Studies show that when reflection combines with civic projects, resulting artefacts provide rich evidence for programme-level outcomes (Chittum, Enke, & Finley, 2022). The mixed-method framework here, codes, rubric scores, and narrative excerpts, offers one model for turning individual assignments into aggregated, interpretable data for decision-making.

Fifth, *attention to local cultures of facilitation*. Variation across courses and institutions shows that impact depends on facilitation practices, staff readiness, and programme integration. In systems like Georgia's, where Bologna, ESG, and NQF expectations have reshaped structures, reflective pedagogy must be recognised as a core mechanism for making those expectations real. This requires institutional support: time for feedback, communities of practice around reflective teaching, and explicit inclusion of such tasks in curriculum maps and assessment strategies.

### ***Scholarly importance of the study and suggestions for future research***

As detailed in the introduction, this integrated framework offers conceptual, methodological, and practical contributions to the field. This framework can guide future research and be tested in other contexts. Methodologically, it offers a transferable combination of rubric-based assessment, thematic coding, and narrative citation adaptable for programme evaluation and research elsewhere. Practically, it points to design principles around prompts, rubrics, feedback, and QA alignment that help universities turn reflective writing from a private exercise into a structured social practice with demonstrable outcomes.

The analytical model emerged through iterative cycling between data patterns and established theoretical frameworks, integrating three interwoven dimensions: (a) reflection on experience and positionality, (b) intercultural engagement with difference, and (c) orientation toward inclusive or civic action. This integration was necessary because autobiographical sketches function simultaneously as reflective narratives, intercultural positioning statements, and civic intentions, dimensions that no single existing framework captures comprehensively.

The model operates at two levels. At the coding level, an eight-code thematic scheme (CA, EF, CI, BE, RE, RB, AC, IN) enabled systematic tracing of how students sequenced narratives, interpreted critical incidents, framed cultural differences, acknowledged biases, and projected inclusive actions. Although informed by established frameworks (DMIS, intercultural maturity, civic learning), coding categories were “iteratively refined abductively (data-led, theory-interpreted) through close reading,

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grounding analysis in students' authentic voices while maintaining theoretical coherence.

At the evaluative level, a five-criterion rubric (narrative coherence, reflexivity, critical incident, intercultural understanding, inclusive action) assessed depth and developmental movement across entire sketches. The rubric provided analytic sensitivity to distinguish, for example, between sketches that merely describe experience versus those demonstrating interpretive growth, or between generic aspirations and concrete commitments to practice - distinctions essential for a dataset spanning fifteen years with subtle, uneven developmental shifts across cohorts.

This dual-level architecture accommodates narrative diversity while enabling temporal comparison. Because the model emerges from authentic student narratives yet remains theoretically anchored, it offers an adaptable framework for future research on reflective and intercultural learning in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that autobiographical reflective writing, when systematically scaffolded, offers higher education a robust means of evidencing intercultural awareness and civic consciousness across cohorts spanning fifteen years. Analysing 122 sketches across fifteen years shows how reflection evolves from descriptive narration toward more analytically framed and reflexive engagement with diversity, while revealing persistent challenges in translating insight into enacted practice.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. Autobiographical texts are vulnerable to selective recall and social desirability; the dataset is uneven across phases and institutions; and high-end compression in rubric scores limits fine-grained discrimination among advanced performances. Future research should pursue temporal comparison across cohorts to examine whether reflective gains translate into sustained behavioural change in professional or civic contexts. Comparative studies across cultural and disciplinary settings would further test generalizability. Effect sizes are reported descriptively to characterise the magnitude of differences and should not be interpreted as causal estimates due to cohort heterogeneity and imbalanced group sizes. Finally, closer integration of reflective writing with structured intercultural encounters may offer the most promising pathway for narrowing the awareness-action gap.

Ultimately, autobiographical reflective writing can serve as a low-cost, high-impact pedagogical tool for advancing intercultural and civic learning - provided it is not left to stand alone. When coupled with intentional prompts, actionable rubrics, and dialogic feedback, such writing helps students move beyond “saying the right things” about diversity toward gradually doing those things in their classrooms, institutions, and communities.

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