



Predicting Intercultural Leadership Readiness using the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES): Evidence from Student Organizations

Lailatul Badriyah*, Novia ayu lestari², Afani Rhoudatul Jannah³, and Widia Bella Pisra⁴, Gilang aldipari⁵, Jernilan Beta Haryani⁶, Tia Ristika Sari⁷, Egi Yekardela⁸

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8} Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno, Bengkulu

Email*: lailatulbadriyah@mail.uinfasbengkulu.ac.id

Received: 5 May 2026

Revised: 27 June 2026

Accepted: 7 July 2026

Abstract

This study aims to test the influence of the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES) on Intercultural Leadership Readiness to students who are active in the organization. The background of this research is based on the increasing need for adaptive leadership in a multicultural context, especially in Indonesian higher education environments that have ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. This research uses a quantitative approach with predictive correlational design. The research sample consisted of 110 students who were active in organizations, who were selected using purposive sampling techniques. Data were collected through a Likert scale-based questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS, including reliability tests, normality tests, Pearson correlations, and simple linear regression. The research results show that ICES has high reliability ($\alpha = 0.878$) and has a positive and significant effect on *Intercultural Leadership Readiness* ($\beta = 0.759$; $p < 0.001$). The determination coefficient value ($R^2 = 0.576$) shows that cultural empathy contributes 57.6% to cross-cultural leadership readiness. These findings confirm that cultural empathy is an important factor in shaping inclusive and adaptive leadership in multicultural environments. This research provides theoretical contributions in the development of leadership models based on local cultural contexts, as well as practical implications for the development of student leadership programs in higher education.

Keywords: Cultural Empathy; Cross-Cultural Leadership; Ices; Student Organizations; Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

The intensification of globalization and transnational interaction has fundamentally reshaped the competencies required of emerging leaders in higher education. Universities increasingly function as culturally heterogeneous environments in which ethnic, religious, linguistic, and ideological identities intersect. Within these contexts, student organizations serve as critical arenas for leadership socialization and civic engagement (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Mayhew et al., 2016). However, effective leadership in plural settings demands more than administrative skill; it requires intercultural sensitivity, identity integration, and the capacity to navigate differences constructively. International scholarship has underscored the importance of intercultural competence and cultural intelligence for leadership effectiveness in diverse environments (Ang et al., 2007; Bird & Mendenhall, 2016; Rockstuhl et al., 2011). Nevertheless, empirical investigations into culturally grounded psychological predictors of intercultural leadership readiness remain limited, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Intercultural leadership readiness refers to an individual's psychological preparedness to lead across cultural boundaries while promoting inclusion, dialogue, and collective efficacy. Previous research has linked such readiness to constructs such as cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ng et al., 2009), global mindset (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016), and inclusive leadership behaviors (Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Shore et al., 2011). Yet, these constructs are frequently operationalized using instruments developed in Western socio-cultural settings. Scholars in cross-cultural psychology have cautioned against uncritical construct transfer without contextual adaptation, emphasizing the importance of indigenous scale development (Cheung et al., 2011; Heine, 2020). This concern is particularly salient in Indonesia, a society characterized by profound ethno-religious diversity and collectivistic cultural norms.

Empathy has long been recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive perspective-taking and affective concern (Davis, 1983). Extending this framework, ethnocultural empathy captures responsiveness toward individuals from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Wang et al., 2003). Empirical evidence indicates that intercultural empathy predicts reduced prejudice, enhanced intergroup trust, and greater multicultural effectiveness (Todd & Galinsky, 2014; Zhang & Noels, 2024). Moreover, empathy has been associated with ethical and prosocial leadership orientations (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Kalshoven et al., 2013). Despite these findings, few studies have positioned culturally embedded empathy as a primary predictor of intercultural leadership readiness within student organizational contexts.

Theoretically, this study integrates empathy within a social identity and leadership development framework. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel et al., 2001) posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, potentially reinforcing in-group favoritism and out-group bias. Leaders operating in plural environments must navigate these identity dynamics by fostering inclusive norms and cross-group collaboration. Empathy may serve as a cognitive-affective mechanism that reduces rigid identity boundaries and enhances identity complexity, thereby strengthening leadership readiness. Furthermore, leadership development research highlights the formative role of collegiate involvement in shaping socially responsible leadership capacities (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Komives et al., 2005).

Within Indonesia, higher education institutions are explicitly mandated to cultivate character, tolerance, and social cohesion. Nationally indexed research has consistently



emphasized the importance of multicultural education, religious moderation, and character-based leadership formation in universities (Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Anam, 2016; Budiono, 2021; Mentari et al., 2021; Nugraha & Sumaryatiningsih, 2022; Oktori, 2017; Otaya, 2014; Raihani et al., 2025). Studies indexed in SINTA further indicate that campus diversity climate and interreligious engagement significantly influence student attitudes toward tolerance and pluralism. However, these investigations often rely on general measures of empathy or tolerance rather than culturally specific psychometric instruments designed for the Indonesian plural context. Consequently, empirical models examining how indigenous cultural empathy predicts leadership-related outcomes remain scarce.

To address this gap, the present study employs the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES), a psychometrically validated instrument designed to measure Openness and Awareness Across Cultures and Tolerance and Respect Across Identities. Conceptually, ICES extends the ethnocultural empathy framework (Wang et al., 2003) by integrating culturally grounded normative dimensions aligned with Indonesia's plural ethos. This approach responds to broader methodological calls for culturally sensitive scale construction in global psychological research (Cheung et al., 2011; Heine, 2020). Student organizations provide an empirically strategic context for examining this relationship. These organizations function as semi-formal leadership laboratories where members coordinate collective action across socio-cultural boundaries. Research demonstrates that collegiate leadership involvement predicts long-term civic engagement and ethical leadership trajectories (Mayhew et al., 2016). International scholarship on inclusive leadership further highlights competencies such as perspective-taking and moral inclusivity as central to effective leadership in diverse groups (Chin et al., 2017; Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Shore et al., 2011). Yet, structural models empirically linking culturally grounded empathy to intercultural leadership readiness remain underdeveloped, especially within Southeast Asian higher education research.

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine whether cultural empathy, as measured by ICES, predicts intercultural leadership readiness among Indonesian university students active in student organizations. By employing confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling, the study aims to validate the measurement structure of ICES in organizational contexts and test its predictive capacity. In doing so, it advances theoretical integration between intercultural empathy and leadership readiness, contributes a nationally grounded psychometric framework, and provides empirical evidence from an underrepresented plural society. In an era marked by identity polarization and socio-cultural fragmentation, higher education institutions must cultivate leaders capable of navigating complexity with ethical sensitivity. Positioning cultural empathy as a foundational psychological predictor of intercultural leadership readiness offers a preventive and developmental approach to inclusive leadership formation in student organizations.



METHODS

Design

This study employed a quantitative approach using a predictive correlational design to examine the influence of cultural empathy on intercultural leadership readiness. The quantitative approach was selected to enable the measurement of relationships between variables using statistical analysis, while the predictive correlational design was used to assess the extent to which the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES) predicts intercultural leadership readiness without manipulating the variables under study.

Participants and Data Collection

The participants in this study consisted of 110 students who were actively involved in student organizations. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, focusing on students who had experience in organizational activities, as such involvement is considered relevant for assessing leadership readiness in intercultural contexts. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to respondents.

Instrument

The research instrument comprised two main variables. The independent variable, cultural empathy, was measured using the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES), which consists of 13 items designed to assess openness and awareness across cultures, as well as tolerance and respect across identities. The dependent variable, Intercultural Leadership Readiness, was measured using a 14-item scale that captures individuals' preparedness to lead effectively in culturally diverse environments. All items were measured using a Likert scale.

Measurement Model and Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha, assumption testing through normality analysis, and inferential statistics using Pearson correlation and simple linear regression. These analytical techniques were selected to evaluate the strength of relationships between variables and to determine the predictive effect of cultural empathy on leadership readiness. Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of the data were ensured, and the collected data were used solely for research purposes.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The results of reliability testing of both research instruments showed a high level of internal consistency and met psychometric quality standards. Scale Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES) consisting of 13 items, Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.878 (standard $\alpha = 0.884$), while the instrument Intercultural Leadership Readiness with 14 items it shows a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.867 (α standard = 0.886). Both values are above the threshold of 0.80, which is in perspective Lee Cronbach categorized as high reliability.

On variables Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES), most items have value *Corrected Item-Total Correlation* above 0.30, which indicates adequate item discrimination



power. Items such as ICES7 (0.668), ICES10 (0.746), ICES11 (0.706), and ICES12 (0.743) show very strong contributions to the construct of cultural empathy. There is, however, one relatively weak item, ICES1 with a correlation value of 0.186. This value is below the minimum recommended in psychometric analysis, indicating that the item is less representative in measuring the ICES construct. This is reinforced by value *Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted* of 0.891, which is higher than the previous total alpha (0.878), thus empirically showing that the deletion of ICES1 has the potential to increase the reliability of the scale. Meanwhile, on variables Intercultural Leadership Readiness, the majority of items also showed good item-total correlations (above 0.30), such as L5 (0.717), L9 (0.732), and L3 (0.667), reflecting strong contributions to cross-cultural leadership readiness constructs. However, two items merit special attention, namely L12 (0.209) and L14 (0.334). Item L12 in particular shows low values and is below the ideal threshold, and has values *Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted* of 0.881, which is higher than total alpha (0.867). This indicates that item L12 has the potential to decrease the internal consistency of the scale and deserves to be considered for revision or deletion. Even though item L14 is still above 0.30, it is classified as marginal and therefore still requires an evaluation of substance.

Overall, both instruments have demonstrated good quality with dominance of internally valid items. However, in order to improve the precision of the measurements and the strength of the constructs, refinements are recommended taking into account deletions or revisions in low-correlation items. This step is in line with the principle of instrument development in reliability theory put forward by Lee Cronbach, that the quality of the scale can be improved through the selection of items that have high consistency and discriminating power.

Table 1. Summary Statistics on Reliability Scale

Metric	Person	Notes
N	110	-
Reliability ICES	0.878	High
Reliability Leadership	0.867	High

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

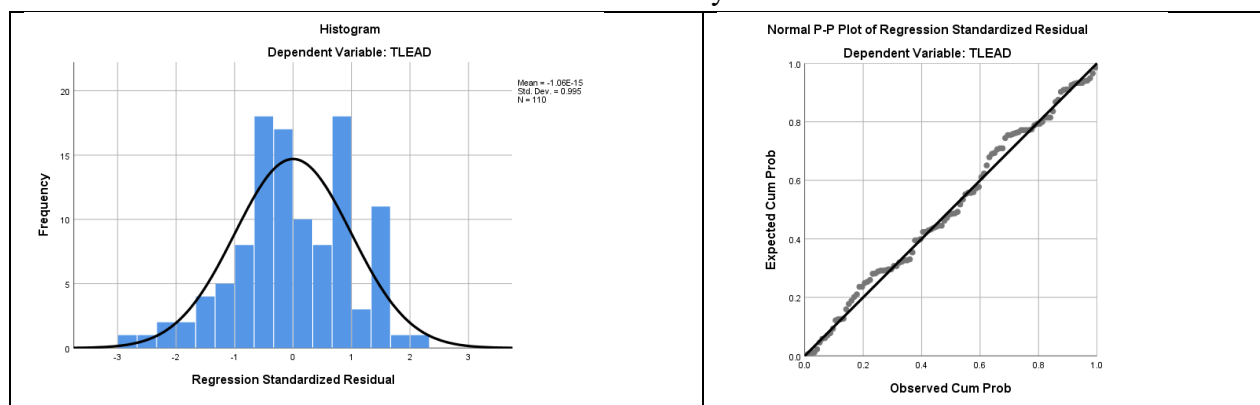
Results

The analysis results indicate that the instruments used in this study demonstrate good psychometric quality. The reliability test for the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES) yielded a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.878, while the Intercultural Leadership Readiness scale obtained a value of 0.867. Both values exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating that all instruments possess high internal consistency and are suitable for measuring the research variables. The *item-total statistics* analysis shows that most items have a Corrected Item-Total Correlation above 0.30, indicating good discriminative power. However, several items exhibit relatively low contributions, such as ICES1 (0.186) and L12 (0.209), suggesting the need for further evaluation to refine the instruments, although overall the scales still meet reliability criteria.

Furthermore, the classical assumption test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test shows a significance value of 0.200 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the residual data are normally

distributed. With the normality assumption fulfilled, linear regression analysis can be conducted validly. The Pearson correlation test results reveal a strong relationship between cultural empathy and intercultural leadership readiness, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.759$ ($p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that higher levels of students' cultural empathy are associated with higher levels of readiness to perform leadership roles in multicultural contexts.

Picture 1. Normality Result



Moreover, the simple linear regression analysis shows that the coefficient of determination (R^2) is 0.576, meaning that 57.6% of the variance in Intercultural Leadership Readiness can be explained by the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES), while the remaining variance is influenced by other factors outside the research model. The F value of 146.492 with a significance level of $p < 0.001$ indicates that the regression model is highly fit. The resulting regression equation is $Y = 9.053 + 0.825X$, which implies that each one-unit increase in cultural empathy leads to an increase of 0.825 in intercultural leadership readiness. In addition, the t-test result shows a value of $t = 12.103$ ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted and the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. Therefore, it can be concluded that cultural empathy has a significant effect on intercultural leadership readiness among students who are actively involved in organizational activities.

Table 2. Summary of Statistical Analysis Results

Analysis Type	Indicator	Value	Interpretation
Normality Test	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Sig.	0.200	Data are normally distributed
Correlation	Pearson Correlation (r)	0.759	Strong positive relationship
	Significance (p)	0.000	Statistically significant
Regression	R	0.759	Strong model relationship
	R Square	0.576	57.6% variance explained
	Regression Coefficient (B)	0.825	Positive effect
	t-value	12.103	Significant predictor
	Sig. (p)	0.000	Significant effect
ANOVA	F-value	146.492	Model is statistically significant
	Sig. (p)	0.000	Model fit is significant
Collinearity	Tolerance	1.000	No multicollinearity
	VIF	1.000	No multicollinearity

The results of this research show that cultural empathy has a strong and significant influence on cross-cultural leadership readiness, with a contribution of 57.6%. These findings confirm that cultural empathy is a key competence in shaping leadership capacity in multicultural contexts, particularly in students active in organizations. Cultural empathy not only includes the ability to understand differences in values and norms, but also involves *perspective taking*, affective sensitivity, as well as adaptive behavioral responses in cross-cultural social interactions. Theoretically, this result is in line with the view that empathy is an integral part of intercultural competence that contributes directly to the effectiveness of global leadership. Individuals with a high level of cultural empathy tend to be better able to build inclusive interpersonal relationships, improve communication quality, and show better adaptability in dealing with diversity (Wang et al., 2021; Ang & Van Dyne, 2020). Furthermore, the considerable contribution of cultural empathy in this research also strengthens the finding that cross-cultural competence is a major predictor of leadership effectiveness in multicultural organizations (Rockstuhl et al., 2020).

From a cutting-edge empirical perspective, empathy has been proven to play a role in improving leadership quality through strengthening conflict resolution capabilities, team collaboration, and more inclusive decision making (Zhou et al., 2022). Apart from that, empathy also encourages adaptability and innovative behavior in organizations, so that it becomes an important factor in dealing with complex social dynamics (Ma et al., 2024). In the context of student organizations, this ability is especially relevant because the interactions that occur involve diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Cultural empathy also serves as a relational mechanism that strengthens group cohesion and builds *psychological safety*. Research shows that empathetic communication in leadership can increase trust, member satisfaction, and prosocial behavior in organizations (Caffrey, 2023; Li, 2024). In fact, empathy has systemic effects through processes *emotional contagion*, where leader empathy can spread to team members and form a more inclusive organizational culture (Ni et al., 2023). This emphasizes that cultural empathy not only impacts individuals, but also collective dynamics in organizations.

Nevertheless, the results of the item analysis indicate the existence of several low-contribution indicators, indicating that the cultural empathy construct is still multidimensional and requires continuous refinement of the instrument. These findings are in line with recent research which emphasizes the importance of developing cross-cultural empathy measuring tools to be able to capture the complexity of interactions in global society (Zhang & Noels, 2023; Li et al., 2023).

Overall, this research confirms that cultural empathy is a strategic determinant in shaping cross-cultural leadership readiness. Therefore, the development of cultural empathy through student organizational activities needs to be systematically integrated as an effort to build a generation of leaders who are adaptive, inclusive and competent in facing global challenges.



CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cultural empathy, as measured by the Indonesian Cultural Empathy Scale (ICES), has a significant and positive effect on intercultural leadership readiness among students actively involved in school organizations. The findings reveal a strong relationship between the two variables, with cultural empathy contributing substantially to students' preparedness to lead in multicultural contexts. The regression results further confirm that cultural empathy serves as a meaningful predictor, explaining a considerable proportion of variance in intercultural leadership readiness. These results highlight that students who possess higher levels of cultural empathy characterized by openness to diversity, sensitivity to cultural differences, and the ability to take others' perspectives tend to exhibit greater readiness to assume leadership roles in diverse social environments. This underscores the importance of integrating cultural empathy as a core component in leadership development, particularly within student organizations that function as practical spaces for social interaction and experiential learning. This study provides empirical evidence that strengthening cultural empathy is a strategic pathway for fostering intercultural leadership readiness. Therefore, educational institutions are encouraged to design and implement programs that cultivate cultural empathy to prepare students as adaptive, inclusive, and globally competent future leaders.

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