



Exploring cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams in a selected South African university

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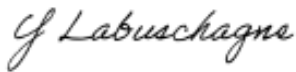
Mini-dissertation accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree *Master of Business Administration* at the North-West University

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DECLARATION

I, Yvette Labuschagne, student number 10745807, hereby declare that this mini-dissertation, titled ***Exploring cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams in a selected South African university*** submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Business Administration in the Faculty of Economics and Management Science at the North-West University, is my own original work and has not been submitted to any institution of Higher Education. All the sources used for this study are cited and referenced in the reference list.



Signed

27 November 2025

Date

DEDICATION

Firstly, I would like to dedicate this mini-dissertation to the Lord, in whom all wisdom originates and to whom all glory returns. His grace carried me through every moment of my life.

To my devoted husband, Riaan, and our two wonderfully made daughters, Bea and Zoé, as well as our soon-to-be sons-in-law, Tristan and Bernard: your love and support have been both my anchor and my constant source of inspiration. Your patience, encouragement, and the many quiet (and loud!) sacrifices you made along the way enabled me to persevere when the journey felt long and demanding. This work is yours as much as it is mine, and I am grateful for each of you.

I also dedicate it to the rest of my family and friends, whose care, prayers, and encouragement formed a circle of support around me. Your presence, near or far, mattered more than words can express.

This work is a tribute to each of you. Your love shaped my strength.

PREFACE

This mini-dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Business Administration in the Faculty of Economics and Management Science at North-West University. The study emerged at the juncture of my professional experience and academic interest in how diverse project teams function within a South African university context. Working in a multicultural, multi-campus environment made it increasingly clear that technical competence alone is not sufficient to secure successful project outcomes; the way in which people understand, interpret, and respond to cultural differences in teams plays a critical role. This realisation prompted a deeper inquiry into cultural intelligence (CQ) in multicultural project teams.

The purpose of this study was to explore how CQ is perceived and practised in multicultural project teams within a selected South African university, and how these practices shape team dynamics and project delivery. By focusing on the lived experiences of project team members, the research was aimed at illuminating not only whether CQ matters, but how and why it matters in everyday project work. In doing so, this study contributes to both the academic literature and the practical understanding of team functioning in higher education institutions (HEIs) that are characterised by cultural, linguistic, and organisational complexity.

The research adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach, in which data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with project team members who worked in multicultural project environments. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns of meaning in the data. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional structure, and care was taken to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for all participants throughout the research process.

The structure of this mini-dissertation reflects a logical progression from context to contribution. Chapter 1 introduces the background, problem statement, research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 presents a critical review of the literature on CQ, multicultural teams, and project work in HE. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including the research paradigm, design, sampling, data collection, and analytic approach. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings in the form of themes and sub-themes, supported by participants' narratives. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature and the research questions. Chapter 6 concludes the study by summarising the key insights, outlining practical implications, and suggesting directions for future research.

This work reflects a journey of learning, reflection, and growth: professionally, academically, and personally. It is my hope that the insights offered here will support leaders, project practitioners,

and institutions in cultivating more inclusive, culturally intelligent ways of working in multicultural project teams.

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To my incredible and 'crazy' MBA group, Alliance, thank you for making these two years unforgettable. Time flies when you're having fun, and that is precisely what happened! We have become friends for life, and I am grateful for sharing this journey with each of you.

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To my study leader, Prof. Yvonne du Plessis, thank you for your guidance, support, and academic direction. Your leadership and mentorship shaped the depth and quality of this work, and I am grateful for the privilege of having been under your supervision.

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To my colleagues at NWU-IT, thank you for your understanding, encouragement, and support throughout this academic journey. I appreciate each of you. I would also like to extend a big shout-out to the NWU Business School's support staff and lecturers for their patience and academic guidance.

Finally, to the participants who generously shared their experiences, thank you. Your voices brought richness, depth, and meaning to this research. Without your willingness and openness, this study would not have been possible.

To each of you: your support is woven into every chapter of this work. Your love, encouragement, and belief in me made this journey possible. We are truly the sum of those who have loved us, and I am grateful for every person who shaped, strengthened, and uplifted me along the way. As I reach this milestone, I am reminded that what lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. Thank you for helping me discover and nurture what lies within.

ABSTRACT

Multicultural project teams in HEIs operate within complex environments shaped by cultural diversity, institutional structures, and varying communication norms. The aim of this study was to explore how CQ is perceived and practised by project team members working in a multicultural South African university. In doing so, the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences of navigating cultural differences in project work, and how these experiences inform team dynamics and project delivery.

The research was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, and followed a qualitative approach and an exploratory design to understand how meaning is constructed within multicultural project settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine project team members across academic and support roles, all of whom were actively involved in project work at the selected university. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2021:66) to identify key themes and sub-themes that reflected patterned meanings in participants' accounts.

The findings demonstrated that CQ is experienced as a dynamic, collectivist practice-based capacity rather than a static, individual attribute. Participants described CQ as emerging through reflective awareness of cultural difference, intentional inclusion, adaptive communication, and sensitivity to relational strain within teams. Where CQ was consistently practised, participants reported improved co-ordination, stronger interpersonal trust, and reduced misunderstandings. In contrast, inconsistent CQ practices were associated with communication breakdowns, emotional fatigue, and avoidable project delays.

The study contributes to the understanding of CQ in higher education (HE) by illustrating how culturally intelligent practices could enhance resilience, cohesion, and collaboration in multicultural project teams. It also provides practical recommendations for enhancing CQ in project environments, thereby supporting both team effectiveness and more inclusive institutional cultures within South African universities.

Key terms: cultural intelligence, multicultural project teams, higher education, project team dynamics, inclusive collaboration

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CQ	cultural intelligence
EQ	emotional intelligence
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IQ	intelligence quotient
PMI	Project Management Institute
SA	South Africa
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

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CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction to the study

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is widely acknowledged in the contemporary academic landscape as a vital capability for effective collaboration in multicultural teams (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Ang *et al.*, 2015; Chandan, 2015; Earley & Ang, 2003). CQ is described as a person's ability to operate successfully in environments characterised by cultural diversity (Ott & Michailova, 2018; Wang & Goh, 2020). In South Africa, research on higher education institutions (HEIs), such as universities, where multicultural project teams or work groups comprise individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, is gaining increasing importance (Sousa *et al.*, 2023). This study explored the perceptions and practices of CQ amongst team members involved in multicultural project teams at a South African university. The selected institution reflects the rich cultural and language diversity of the country, offering a highly relevant context for researching this phenomenon.

1.2 Motivation for the study

This study was inspired by a growing demand for successful intercultural collaboration at universities, specifically within multicultural project teams. The continued diversification of universities in South Africa and around the world increases the need for staff who are able to interact across cultures, making cultural adaptability an essential skill (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020; Sousa *et al.*, 2023; Yousef, 2024). Staff without adequate cultural adaptability are at risk of miscommunication and conflict when working in a multicultural team. Expanding CQ throughout the organisation will help to alleviate many of the issues caused by inadequate communication and create a culture where all employees feel they can contribute to their full potential (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023).

The significance of developing CQ is supported by recent research findings. Henderson *et al.* (2018) posit that staff with high CQ will experience greater performance and job satisfaction than their low-CQ counterparts. In the South African context, Lezar and Van der Walt (2023), in a study on diverse work environments, report that CQ is positively related to employee thriving, underscoring the importance of CQ for successful collaboration and personal success in multicultural teams. Although CQ is widely recognised as a major factor in collaborative communication and trust (Henderson *et al.*, 2018; Ott & Michailova, 2018), there is limited research on the use of CQ at the university level, and even less with regard to administrative and support staff (Eberlein, 2008). Most research focused on students and academic expatriates, with

the vast majority of the employees involved in the success of university projects overlooked (Randazzo & Nelson, 2020; Sternberg *et al.*, 2022).

South African universities are representative of the country's complex history and diversity (Cross, 2004; Mavutha & Biyase, 2025). As such, in South African universities, the nature of working in a team has many different value systems, languages and practices that affect how to work together as a team. These complexities can create challenges for both coordination and communication in teams (Sogancilar & Ors, 2018). Yousef (2024), provides examples of how cultural diversity in project teams can be viewed as a 'perceived risk factor' to team communication, thus highlighting the importance of CQ to convert diversity to a positive. The inclusion of CQ into project team processes could increase inclusivity, promote mutual respect and result in increased team effectiveness (Henderson *et al.*, 2018; Holgate, 2020).

The present research is aligned with calls for institutions to become more inclusive and responsive to cultural diversity (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023; Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015; Yousofpourfard, 2010), and supports the United Nations (2015) Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The present study, which focused on the South African HE landscape, differs from other studies through its focus on multicultural staff teams instead of the commonly researched student population (Ott & Michailova, 2018; Randazzo & Nelson, 2020), which aimed to address this gap in knowledge. The motivation for the study was to, ultimately, contribute to filling a significant gap in local and international literature concerning CQ amongst staff in HEIs.

The next section provides additional background to the study.

1.3 Background to the study

South Africa's cultural history of apartheid and subsequent democracy shaped not only the country (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2024) but also its universities, given their embeddedness in South African society and diverse environments. Project teams at South African universities are comprised of individuals from different cultural backgrounds who hold various professional designations and speak a variety of languages (Mavutha & Biyase, 2025). This phenomenon was compounded by the many university mergers that occurred during the post-apartheid period (Du Plessis, 2011b). The success of project teams at South African universities thus depends, to a great extent, on the quality of these teams' communication, co-operation, and trust.

The diversity of South African universities is not limited to the composition of project teams; it also relates to their environments. In addition to being organisationally complex, South African

universities function within diverse cultural environments (Mavutha & Biyase, 2025), which also affect the operations of project teams (Du Plessis, 2011b). South African university project teams engage in a variety of collaborative activities, including institutional audits, system changes, curricular reviews, and strategic transformation projects.

While diversity may yield greater innovation through multiple perspectives and approaches, the same diversity, which manifests in an array of cultures and languages, may hinder effective communication and collaboration, and the loss of cohesion and trust could ultimately undermine productivity (Sogancilar & Ors, 2018). This underscores the importance of CQ.

CQ represents the capability to navigate cultural diversity (Earley & Ang, 2003:308; Ott & Michailova, 2018). In addition, CQ enhances team members' own awareness of how they perceive, respond to, and interact with other team members in multicultural situations (Earley & Ang, 2003:242).

Previous research on CQ in HE focused mainly on students and academic faculty members, thus excluding administrative and support staff (Sternberg *et al.*, 2022), this despite support staff playing important roles in planning, co-ordination and implementation. For this reason, the current study included both academic and non-academic staff members. The inclusion of support staff was an attempt to address the knowledge gap resulting from the underrepresentation of support staff in prior research (Randazzo & Nelson, 2020). In summary, this study was aimed at contributing to the development of more inclusive approaches to teamwork through the examination of CQ perceptions and practices amongst team members at different job levels at a South African university.

The following section refines and articulates the study's problem statement.

1.4 Problem statement

The increasingly multicultural nature of university staff and students presents both opportunities and challenges for project teams. While diversity introduces varied perspectives and skills, it also complicates collaboration when misunderstandings and conflicting values arise. Although the value of CQ is recognised internationally (Ang *et al.*, 2015:274; Ott & Michailova, 2018), its practice within South African university project teams remains underexplored, especially amongst administrative and support staff (Erez *et al.*, 2013). Prior research focused primarily on students or expatriates (Randazzo & Nelson, 2020). While the research gap is most visible with regard to support staff, the present study included both academic and non-academic staff, as project success depends on contributions from all staff categories. Therefore, this study addresses a gap

in the body of knowledge on CQ by exploring how members of multicultural project teams, comprising both academic and administrative staff at a South African university, perceive and practise CQ, and how this influences collaboration, trust, and project success.

The next section explains the significance of the study.

1.5 Significance of the study

South African universities are increasingly multicultural (Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2023), which introduces a wealth of diverse perspectives, but also poses challenges for project teams. On one hand, varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds bring new ideas and skills; on the other, differences can complicate collaboration through misunderstandings or conflicting values (Yousef, 2024). Thus, understanding the role of CQ in multicultural project teams at universities in South Africa is vital (Nel *et al.*, 2015). The literature shows a significant gap in this area, as prior research concentrated mainly on Western academic settings and large corporations (Erez *et al.*, 2013), leaving a lack of understanding of how CQ is viewed and used in the South African context of university project teams.

By approaching CQ as a teamwork competency (Yousoufpourfard, 2010), this study provides practical implications for leadership development, training programmes, and approaches to create culturally adaptable working environments that could also have practical implications beyond the context of HE. Lessons learned from CQ in academic project teams could be applied to other knowledge-intensive industries, such as research institutions, consulting firms, and global organisations, where cross-cultural collaboration is a critical factor in the success of daily operations (Du Plessis, 2011b).

Therefore, the current study contributes to the existing literature by addressing the previously noted knowledge gap and providing both theoretical and practical insights into the cognitive, behavioural, and motivational aspects of CQ as they relate to real-world project team processes. Therefore, the study advances the field's knowledge base regarding cross-cultural teamwork in academia. The findings are anticipated to assist in improving current practices and may be useful in gaining an understanding of CQ in the greater HE sector in South Africa.

The next section provides a brief overview of the research philosophy on which the study was based and the methodology followed in executing the study, which is expanded upon in Chapter 3.

1.6 Methodology

A well-defined explanation of how the research was carried out and why specific methodologies were chosen demonstrates a rational approach and justifies why the selected methodology should produce relevant and useful findings (Braun *et al.*, 2016:31; Ponelis, 2015). As the present study aimed to answer 'how' and 'why' questions, it was based on an interpretivist paradigm, which recognises the subjective, socially constructed understanding of the nature of the phenomenon under study (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Ponelis, 2015). Understanding the complexities of CQ in project teamwork requires more than objective measures, as CQ is constructed through the meanings created and interpreted collectively amongst participants (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Earley & Ang, 2003:208). As such, a qualitative research approach was used to thoroughly explore how project team members perceive and utilise CQ in a multicultural university setting.

A qualitative methodology was considered suitable for this exploration because it enables a deep understanding of the participants' experiences, interpretations, and social interactions that form the basis of team dynamics (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2024). Qualitative methodologies permit researchers to gather rich, contextual information and insight into complex behaviours and real-life experiences that may not be observable with the use of quantitative methodologies (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Earley & Ang, 2003:200). Thus, the approach is consistent with the complexity of the research setting, and enabled the discovery of the 'how' and 'why' of CQ as practised in the study setting (see Ponelis, 2015). The qualitative approach and methods provide epistemic access, that is, access to the interpretive processes and experiential knowledge through which participants understand and enact their practices, in order to gain illuminating insights into individuals' deeply personal meaning-making and practices in the domain under study (Mkhize & Balfour, 2017; Nomlomo & Katiya, 2018). The study followed a cross-sectional time horizon, thereby providing a detailed picture of the phenomenon under study at a particular point in time (Bryman *et al.*, 2021:108).

Consistent with the interpretative paradigm and qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data from purposively selected participants. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to engage with participants at a deeper level and capture their personal perspectives on, and actual experiences of, CQ (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Utilising open-ended questions and interactive dialogue, the research collected detailed accounts of how the team members develop and implement CQ in their daily work activities. The collected interview data were analysed through thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns or themes that emerged from the participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive

method of analysis ensures that the findings are grounded in the data and reflect participants' lived experiences (Braun *et al.*, 2016:16).

The use of this qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to remain open to the emergence of potentially new insights, as opposed to being bound by a priori hypotheses (Ponelis, 2015), and in addition, it offers the ability to obtain rich and detailed evidence situated within a context, which enhances both the credibility and applicability of the conclusions (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Findings derived in this manner not only contribute to theoretical understanding but also provide a basis for developing practical recommendations (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2024). This methodology was considered contextually warranted, given the multilingual, multicultural, multi-campus realities of not only the institution under study, but also the greater South African HE.

1.7 Thesis statement

This research argues that CQ is more than a valuable interpersonal skill; it is an important facilitator of project success in culturally diverse university-based project teams. In particular, it argues that the four CQ dimensions (cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural) are central to how team members view and practise intercultural collaboration, how they resolve misunderstandings, how behaviours shape team dynamics, and the strategies team members employ to ensure project success (Eisenberg & Williams, 2012; Yousofpourfard, 2010). While some may argue that technical expertise and formal project methodologies are the main drivers of project outcomes (Eberlein, 2008; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2024), this study asserts that, without sufficient CQ, team cohesion, knowledge-sharing, and timely project delivery are undermined.

1.8 Research objectives and research questions

This section presents the research objectives and the related research questions.

1.8.1 Research objectives

The overall objective of this study was to explore the perceptions and practices of CQ in multicultural project teams within a selected South African university. To achieve this objective, the study was guided by the following research objectives (ROs):

RO1: To explore how members of multicultural teams perceive CQ and its importance to team performance;

RO2: To determine how members of multicultural project teams practise CQ;

RO3: To establish the challenges that project team members experience in practising CQ;

RO4: To explore how members of multicultural project teams manage or resolve CQ-related challenges;

RO5: To explore how the CQ of members of multicultural project teams influences team dynamics and contributes to successful project outcomes within the university; and

RO6: To establish the strategies team members apply in embracing CQ within multicultural project teams.

1.8.2 Research questions

In line with the overall objective, the main research question of this study was: How do team members in multicultural teams in a South African university perceive and practise CQ? In answering the main research questions, the study was guided by the following research questions (RQs).

RQ1: How do team members perceive CQ and its importance in multicultural project team performance?

RQ2: How do team members of multicultural project teams practise CQ?

RQ3: What challenges do team members experience in practising CQ?

RQ4: How do project team members manage or resolve CQ-related challenges?

RQ5: How do team members' CQ influence team dynamics and contribute to successful project outcomes within the university?

RQ6: What strategies do members in multicultural project teams apply to embrace CQ?

The next section discusses the scope of the study.

1.9 Demarcation of study scope

The delimitations of a study clarify the parameters of the study's focus and, thus, elucidate the applicability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:150). The present study's scope is defined according to the applicable field of study, sector, setting, and participants.

1.9.1 Field of study

This research is situated within the people management domain that enables organisations to find, develop, involve and retain staff so they will achieve better working relationships and create better quality work environments (Purcell *et al.*, 2008). As globalisation increases and labour markets become increasingly diverse, CQ has evolved as an important subject area for studying how organisations are able to effectively manage their teams, support inclusion and improve overall organisational effectiveness (Patel & Shankar, 2025).

In terms of specific areas of research, this study falls into the categories of team dynamics, intercultural competence and organisational behaviour, examining how individuals handle the issues associated with managing cultural diversity in their professional project-based teams. CQ is therefore a key component of people management, as it impacts on individuals' ability to communicate, establish trust and co-operate to make decisions collectively in culturally diverse groups (Iskhakova & Ott, 2020). Therefore, the results from this study add to the body of knowledge surrounding the effective people management practices in culturally diverse environments.

The findings of this study are highly relevant to the disciplines of human resource management (HRM), organisational development, and leadership studies, as the study identifies how CQ impacts employee engagement, teamwork and organisational performance.

1.9.2 Sector

This study is located in South Africa's HE sector, with specific reference to one public HE institution situated in a multilingual and multicultural context. The HE sector is characterised by working collaboratively on projects that include research, teaching, and institutional projects, as well as the administration of student affairs (Rossouw & Goldman, 2023). Projects require cross-cultural communication and cooperation; therefore, CQ is a significant skill for collaborative work on teams (Patel & Shankar, 2025). Due to the diversity of the workforce in the HE sector and the diversity of culture, history, society and language in South Africa (Rossouw & Goldman, 2023),

the HE sector provides a distinct environment in which the practice and perception of CQ can be investigated in the context of a project team.

1.9.3 Setting and time horizon

This study was confined to a specific South African university within its geographical region, which is the North-West Province of South Africa.

Purposive sampling was employed in order to allow the inclusion of participants who have had extensive experience (Braun *et al.*, 2016:6) working in multicultural project teams, as well as including participants from the academic faculties and support departments with extensive experience working in multicultural project teams.

The study has adopted a cross-sectional time horizon, which provided a 'snapshot' of the phenomena at a particular point in time (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:186). This temporal limitation means the study collected perceptions and team dynamics at a specific point in time, and did not examine CQ or team dynamics over an extended period (Bryman & Bell, 2011:98). Thus, comparing the evolvement of CQ over time and how developments affect performance was beyond the scope of the current study. The choice of a cross-sectional design was both a practical and intentional demarcation, as the aim was to provide insight into the current state of CQ in multicultural teamwork at the time of the study, without assertions regarding how it may change (Bryman & Bell, 2011:98; Saunders *et al.*, 2009:186).

1.9.4 Participants

Finally, the study was limited to the perspectives of staff members who were members of project teams, and thus excluded other stakeholders such as students, senior management, and external collaborators. This was a deliberate delimitation in order to keep the focus of the study centred on those directly involved in day-to-day multicultural team activities in the institution (see Bryman & Bell, 2011:56). As a result, the findings represent the experiences and viewpoints of staff members, and exclude the perspectives of students or leadership regarding the influence of the institutional culture or leaderships on such teams. Although these other perspectives are recognised as important, they were intentionally omitted from the study's scope in order to maintain a manageable and focused research project.

In summary, the narrow context of one university in a specific region and the use of a targeted participant group in a study following a cross-sectional time horizon were deliberate choices by

the researcher to facilitate a comprehensive investigation of CQ in multicultural project teams (see Bryman & Bell, 2011:53; Creswell & Creswell, 2018:69). While these choices limit the scope of the study, they also provide a strong foundation for the credibility of the conclusions (Bryman & Bell, 2011:53).

The next section provides definitions of the key concepts of interest in the present study.

1.10 Definitions of key terms

The following key terms are pertinent to the study.

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is a broad and multifaceted construct that refers to the ability of an individual to perform successfully and efficiently in multicultural situations (Earley *et al.*, 2006:5). CQ comprises metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural components.

- **Metacognitive CQ** is the mental capability to acquire and understand cultural knowledge (Ott & Michailova, 2018);
- **Cognitive CQ** pertains to an individual's understanding of many cultures, including customs, norms, practices, and behaviours (Ang *et al.*, 2006:108-109);
- **Motivational CQ** is the drive and enthusiasm to adjust to a multicultural environment (Chen & Lin, 2013); and
- **Behavioural CQ** is the capacity to behave appropriately in cross-cultural interactions (Earley *et al.*, 2006:83).

Project management is defined by the Project Management Institute (PMI) (2017:10) as applying knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities in order to meet the aims of the project. It involves all steps in a project, from initiation and planning to execution, control, and closure of the work, while achieving agreed-upon goals and meeting specific success criteria within a specified timeframe (PMI, 2017:10).

Team dynamics are the intentional and unintentional psychological forces that shape a team's behaviours and performance, and are affected by roles and responsibilities, leadership styles, and the relationships and interactions amongst team members (Earley *et al.*, 2006:156).

Project outcomes are expressed according to predetermined standards of success and go beyond the conventional measures of time, cost, and quality (Müller & Jugdev, 2012). Current

definitions of project success include the satisfaction levels of important stakeholders, including individuals from the organisation, the client organisation, the project team, and project end-users (Pheng *et al.*, 2006; Zuo *et al.*, 2014). This definition is inclusive, representing modern approaches to project management, which consider the expectations of multiple stakeholders (Pheng *et al.*, 2006). In the present study, these outcomes were explored from the participants' perspectives.

Diversity management refers to the methods and techniques employed to create a workplace culture that accepts and values the uniqueness of employees' personal characteristics and similarities; promotes teamwork and innovation by fostering inclusiveness, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity in the workplace (Köllen, 2019).

The subsequent section provides an overview of the layout of the dissertation.

1.11 Chapter outline

The study is organised into six chapters. Each chapter builds sequentially upon the previous chapter to ensure a clear progression from the background and theoretical foundations to the empirical insights and recommendations.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the study's context and presented the motivation, problem statement, purpose, research objectives, and related research questions. The chapter explained the significance of the study, followed by a brief overview of the methodology employed in conducting the study. The subsequent sections reviewed the study's delimitations and definitions of key terms.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter synthesises existing scholarship on CQ, multicultural team dynamics, and characteristics of project teams in universities. The chapter identifies gaps in prior research, specifically the lack of context-specific research in South Africa on this topic, and presents the current study as a response to those gaps. The literature review also establishes a robust theoretical base for the research and locates the research problem in terms of existing knowledge.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

This chapter details the study's paradigm, approach, and design, followed by discussions of the methods employed to select participants from the study population, collect data, and analyse the data, along with justification for their selection. Chapter 3 further describes the ways in which the trustworthiness of the study was enhanced, followed by the ethical considerations pertinent to the study.

Chapter 4: Data analysis and findings

Chapter 4 describes the process of analysing the data, i.e., how thematic analysis was used to distil key themes from the participants' accounts. The chapter then reports the findings of the study, together with supporting quotations from the interview transcripts.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

This chapter discusses the study findings in relation to extant literature and theory, and links the findings to the relevant research objectives and -questions. The chapter discusses each of the themes identified, and interprets what the findings mean for our understanding of CQ in multicultural teams. Chapter 5 also explores the implications of the findings for improving intercultural collaboration and project team practices in HE.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

The final chapter provides a summary of the study's main findings and contributions to knowledge. The chapter describes what the study has demonstrated about CQ in multicultural project teams and why CQ is important. The chapter then provides practical recommendations for universities. Chapter 6 also reviews the study's limitations and provides recommendations for future research.

1.12 Chapter summary

This chapter introduced the study through the motivation for conducting the study, which was to explore CQ amongst members of multicultural teams at a South African public university in North-West province. This was followed by a discussion of the research problem, namely, a lack of knowledge on the phenomenon from the perspectives of team members, which underscored the significance of the research. The chapter also presented the thesis of the study, which is that CQ is more than an interpersonal nicety; it is a key facilitator of project success. Specifically, the four CQ dimensions: cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural, are argued to be central to how team members collaborate across differences, resolve misunderstandings, shape team climate, and craft workable strategies for execution. Without the required CQ, cohesion,

knowledge-sharing, and timely delivery are undermined. Subsequent sections presented the study's research objectives and the related questions, followed by the delimitations of the study and a brief overview of the research philosophy and study methodology.

Chapter 2 reviews scholarly work on CQ, multicultural teamwork, and South African HE, pointing out conceptual anchors and gaps.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a definition of CQ, discusses its dimensions, and positions CQ in the body of literature on collaboration, diversity management, and HE leadership, highlighting its role in the larger debate around organisational inclusion and resulting productivity. Additionally, the chapter identifies the existing gap in the literature concerning CQ as it relates to administrative and support staff in universities, which provided the rationale for this study.

Due to increasing cultural diversity in work environments globally, including in academic institutions, CQ has gained much interest in organisational and educational research (Church, 2024). Historically, cultural diversity in South African universities was limited by systemic inequalities; however, recent mergers of educational institutions have significantly enhanced the representation of South African students and university employees from diverse cultures and languages (Booi *et al.*, 2017), bringing into focus the value of CQ in universities.

Due to globalisation and the resulting cultural diversity in organisations and institutions, which led to CQ increasingly becoming a necessity for CQ in the form of a critical skill for cross-cultural collaboration, there is now a proliferation of research in this area (Ang *et al.*, 2015:274; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:18). Although people and teams are more interconnected than before, they continue to encounter problems related to cultural differences that impede their communication and productivity (Ang *et al.*, 2007). CQ emerged as a key construct to explain why some individuals excel in cross-cultural interactions while others fail (Ang *et al.*, 2015:274).

The subsequent sections provide a definition of CQ, followed by discussions of its various dimensions.

2.2 CQ defined

CQ, as a concept, was first introduced by Earley and Ang (2003:59), who define it as a multidimensional intelligence that enables individuals to understand and act appropriately across a range of culturally diverse cultures. Unlike intelligent quotient (IQ), which is indicative of cognitive abilities (Braaten & Norman, 2006), and emotional intelligence (EQ), which relates to the ability to control ones' own and others' emotions (Slaski & Cartwright, 2002), CQ encompasses a broader set of capabilities, spanning cognition, motivation, metacognition, and behaviour, which, together, allow a person to interpret unfamiliar cultural cues and respond

appropriately (Ang *et al.*, 2015). Thus, CQ is a general capability that spans various cultural contexts, rather than knowledge of a specific culture (Ang *et al.*, 2015).

CQ is associated with, but distinguishable from, other types of intelligence or competence (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:8). For example, while EQ and social intelligence provide an individual with the ability to understand and manage others, these capabilities do not specifically account for the cultural context of the interaction (Ang *et al.*, 2015). An individual can have high levels of EQ and social skills and still have difficulty functioning in a new culture. CQ fills the void left by other forms of intelligence, providing individuals with the ability to recognise and respond to cultural differences (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:377).

Furthermore, CQ has been demonstrated to predict individuals' intercultural effectiveness better than their IQ or personality (Ang *et al.*, 2015). In other words, CQ provides unique explanatory power regarding success in culturally diverse settings, and, therefore, it represents a critical construct in today's multicultural environment (Ang *et al.*, 2015). CQ creates a bridge between theoretical models of intercultural competence and actual practice (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:377). It is not based on mere cultural awareness. Still, it involves the motivation to learn, the mental acuity to develop a strategy, and the ability to demonstrate appropriate behaviours in culturally diverse interactions (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:332).

The next section discusses the dimensions of CQ.

2.3 Dimensions of CQ

CQ comprises four dimensions, namely motivational, cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioural CQ, discussed below.

2.3.1 Motivational CQ

Motivational CQ encompasses the drive and confidence to function in culturally diverse settings, and includes an individual's interest in and energy directed towards learning about and functioning in intercultural situations (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Chen & Lin, 2013). In South African university project teams, this dimension has been linked to persistence in collaboration and knowledge-sharing (Van Greunen, 2022).

2.3.2 Cognitive CQ

Cognitive CQ represents a person's knowledge and understanding of norms, practices, and behavioural conventions across different cultures (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). This involves knowledge about the values, beliefs, economic and legal systems, social norms, and language of other cultures. This dimension is essentially the knowledge base of CQ; people high in cognitive CQ have rich mental libraries of information about how cultures vary and what that means for interactions with these (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:332). As an example of cognitive CQ, one might know that direct eye contact could be considered respectful in some cultures but rude in others, or that certain behaviours are determined by a person's level in a social hierarchy.

Cognitive CQ is typically developed through education, reading, travel, and experiences with diverse cultures (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:262). In addition to providing the specific knowledge that helps individuals recognise and accurately interpret cultural nuances, research indicates that a strong cognitive CQ develops metacognitive CQ (strategic thinking related to cultural interaction) leading to greater accuracy in making cultural judgments and decisions (Ang *et al.*, 2007).

2.3.3 Metacognitive CQ

Earley and Ang (2003:51) define metacognitive CQ as the ability to acquire, monitor, and revise cultural assumptions during intercultural interactions. In a university project team, this form of CQ enables team members to think ahead and plan strategies to prevent potential miscommunications, adapting their approach accordingly. Metacognitive CQ entails active cultural awareness and strategy: planning and adjusting mental models during intercultural interactions (Ott & Michailova, 2018).

Furthermore, Ang *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that, when individuals combine cognitive CQ with metacognitive CQ, they make more accurate cultural judgments than those who have only cognitive CQ (Ang *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, to achieve a high level of overall CQ, cognitive CQ should be developed in conjunction with motivation and self-awareness of one's own biases and assumptions (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:361). Researchers further warn that merely possessing factual information regarding a culture may result in stereotypes or oversimplification of cultural behaviours (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Ang *et al.*, 2015).

2.3.4 Behavioural CQ

While developing knowledge about a culture is vital, simply having such knowledge does not ensure that the individual will act accordingly (Earley & Ang, 2003:18; Earley *et al.*, 2006:105). The ability and willingness to act on the knowledge is defined as behavioural CQ (Earley *et al.*, 2006:34). Even if one is motivated and knowledgeable, failing to adapt one's behaviour can lead to miscommunication and conflict (Earley *et al.*, 2006:83). For example, one may use an inappropriate hand gesture or invade what is considered personal space in a culture. Thus, the behavioural dimension of CQ is an individual's ability to act appropriately, verbally and non-verbally, when interacting with people from culturally diverse backgrounds (Ang *et al.*, 2006; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:17; Earley *et al.*, 2006:83). Behavioural CQ includes a willingness to alter speech patterns (e.g., tone, pace, directness), body language (e.g., gestures, eye contact, distance between individuals), and mannerisms or rituals (e.g., greetings, mealtime etiquette) to match the cultural norms of the environment (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:7; Earley *et al.*, 2006:98). Team members with high behavioural CQ will be able to flexibly modify their behaviour with regard to, e.g., being more formal or informal, showing respect in expressing disagreement, and determining the proper amount of small talk before getting to the point of the conversation. Behavioural CQ is not limited to mimicking what others say or do; rather, it represents the ability to adjust one's behaviour to create an environment where all parties feel respected and understood (Earley *et al.*, 2006:98; Earley & Ang, 2003:84).

Researchers have warned that, if an organisation is unable to implement behavioural adaptations (i.e., team members do not apply their metacognitive abilities), inclusive practices will not be sustained in the long term (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Kock & Santoso, 2024:217). Ultimately, this aspect of CQ plays a significant role in developing trust and rapport across cultures (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:212). Empirical research supports the importance of behavioural CQ (Ang *et al.*, 2007). Ang *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that behavioural CQ significantly predicted individuals' cultural adaptation and task performance in multicultural settings. In other words, those who could adapt their behaviours to fit the cultural context were better able to adjust to new environments and accomplish their work goals.

The four dimensions of CQ, along with their definitions and expected outcomes in the context of multicultural project teamwork, are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: CQ dimensions (Earley and Ang (2003); Van Dyne *et al.* (2012))

CQ dimension	Definition	Key outcomes
Cognitive	Knowledge of norms, values and practices	Understanding stakeholders, avoiding offence
Metacognitive	Awareness and regulation of assumptions	Adaptive communication, reflection
Motivational	Drive to engage across cultures	Persistence
Behavioural	Verbal and non-verbal displays	Inclusive interactions, trust-building

This framework reflects the foundational work of Earley and Ang (2003) and Van Dyne *et al.* (2012). CQ can assist team members from diverse cultural backgrounds in better managing their interactions and collaborating in project-based teamwork (Iskhakova & Ott, 2020). South African studies show that metacognitive CQ must be supported by behavioural adaptability to ensure inclusivity (Kokt & Sentso, 2024), thereby enhancing psychological well-being (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023).

The four dimensions of CQ should be operationalised in concert. Motivation drives one to adapt, cognitive knowledge indicates what adaptation is needed, metacognitive skill helps one plan the acquisition of knowledge, and behavioural CQ ensures the adaptation is enacted (Eberlein, 2008; Eisenberg & Williams, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Thus, behavioural CQ is the outward evidence of the other dimensions of CQ. Individuals' levels of behavioural CQ determine whether intercultural engagements build trust or deepen divides (Henderson *et al.*, 2018).

Regarding multicultural project teams, the institutional environment may involve subtle yet meaningful cultural codes related to authority, gender, status, or seniority (Zuo *et al.*, 2014). For example, understanding when it is culturally respectful to wait one's turn to speak, to defer to a senior colleague, or to express disagreement indirectly could reduce unintentional offence and increase perceived inclusivity. However, behavioural adaptation is not without complexity. Overcompensation, mimicry, or inauthentic adjustments could appear disingenuous (Earley *et al.*, 2006:109). Therefore, effective behavioural CQ is grounded in genuine respect and an authentic desire to connect, rather than performance (Earley *et al.*, 2006:34; Eisenberg & Williams, 2012). It also includes discernment of when not to adapt, for instance, when core values or institutional principles are at stake (Earley *et al.*, 2006:51; Eisenberg & Williams, 2012).

Organisationally, this dimension can be fostered through exposure to diverse team settings, role-modelling by inclusive leaders, and opportunities to practise culturally adaptive behaviours in safe environments (Chen & Lin, 2013). For institutions aiming to build inclusive cultures, encouraging behavioural CQ amongst staff supports respectful daily interactions and sustains more profound structural transformation (Livermore, 2025). From the above, it is clear that CQ is an integrated ability, with each of its dimensions representing a different facet of how individuals approach cross-cultural encounters.

The next section looks at the theoretical positioning of CQ.

2.4 Theoretical positioning of CQ

CQ emerged in the early 2000s as a theoretically grounded response to the limitations of existing approaches to intercultural competence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). While earlier constructs, such as social intelligence, emotional intelligence, and intercultural communication competence, offered valuable insights, none provided an integrated developmental model explaining how individuals recognise, interpret, and adapt to cultural cues in real time across diverse contexts (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). CQ fills this gap by conceptualising intercultural effectiveness as an interplay of metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural capabilities (Ang *et al.*, 2015). These capabilities operate together to support individuals' adaptive functioning in multicultural work environments, including those found in HEIs, that is, public universities providing formal tertiary education in South Africa. (Ott & Michailova, 2018; Iskhakova & Ott, 2020).

In South Africa, where cultural diversity is woven into everyday institutional life, CQ has become increasingly salient. Recent studies indicate that CQ predicts thriving, well-being, and effectiveness in multicultural organisational environments, including universities (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2024). Du Plessis (2011a) positions CQ as a complex managerial competence that involves cultural knowledge, motivation, and behavioural flexibility, and these attributes are especially important in environments characterised by fluid identity boundaries, multilingual communication, and layered governance structures. In this regard, CQ is particularly relevant for universities, where staff frequently have to negotiate diverse expectations, norms, and interactional rhythms in their project work and daily engagements (Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015). As the literature shows, team members with higher levels of CQ tend to interpret culturally unfamiliar behaviours more accurately, adjust their communication styles more flexibly, and build rapport more quickly, which in turn reduces miscommunication and conflict (Balbinot *et al.*, 2024; Moslehpour *et al.*, 2024).

It is, however, important to differentiate CQ from adjacent constructs. Diversity management, for example, operates mainly at organisational and structural levels and concerns policies, systems, and strategic interventions aimed at creating inclusive environments and leveraging workforce diversity (Das, 2021; Köllen, 2019). These interventions provide the environmental scaffolding for fair and inclusive practice, but they do not necessarily equip staff with the micro-skills needed for culturally complex interactions. CQ complements diversity management by offering a capability-based account of how individuals actually operationalise inclusivity in everyday interpersonal encounters (Alexandra *et al.*, 2021). Without such micro-skills, diversity initiatives may become symbolic, performative, or compliance-driven and can, in some cases, result in cynicism rather than genuine inclusion (Earley *et al.*, 2006; Kokt & Sentso, 2024). A similar distinction applies to intercultural communication theories, such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions (2001) and Hall's (1976) work on high- and low-context communication. These frameworks illuminate the cultural logics that underpin behaviour across societies and offer descriptive accounts of communication styles, value systems, and behavioural norms. They explain why differences exist, but they do not offer a developmental pathway or a concrete behavioural model that individuals can enact when facing culturally complex tasks, and multicultural teams need ongoing, adaptive behavioural adjustments rather than static cultural knowledge (Henderson *et al.*, 2018).

CQ therefore holds a distinctive theoretical position. It links the structural concerns of diversity management with the descriptive richness of intercultural communication theory. Still, it moves beyond both by offering a practice-centred, integrative, and empirically validated model of adaptive intercultural behaviour (Ang *et al.*, 2006). Research demonstrates that CQ predicts intra-team knowledge-sharing (Van Greunen, 2022), buffers emotional strain (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023), strengthens co-ordination and collaboration (Iskhakova & Ott, 2020), and enhances interpersonal trust and cohesion (Balbinot *et al.*, 2024). In administrative and project-based university environments, CQ further supports sense-making and relationship-building in liminal, cross-functional roles where staff often find themselves working 'between' formal structures and informal expectations (Ott & Michailova, 2018). In this sense, CQ is not an abstract ideal, but a concrete resource that helps staff navigate the everyday complexities of South African HE.

The relevance of CQ for the present study thus lies in its capacity to connect organisational, cultural, and interpersonal mechanisms. It provides a theoretical framework that is well suited to the multilingual, multicultural, and governance-intensive conditions characteristic of South African HE, enabling a nuanced analysis of how team members co-ordinate meaning, resolve misunderstandings, and align their work across cultural boundaries (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Yousef, 2024). By offering an integrated explanation of adaptation across cognitive, motivational, and

behavioural layers, CQ serves as an analytically robust lens through which to examine the experiences and practices of multicultural project teams in a South African university context.

The next section focuses on CQ amongst non-academic staff.

2.5 CQ amongst non-academic staff in a multicultural university

Although most studies on CQ in HE centred on students and academics, the intercultural work of non-academic staff, including administrative, technical, professional and project co-ordination roles, is both pervasive and consequential for team performance and institutional outcomes (Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015; Yousofpourfard, 2010). These roles span organisational boundaries: staff interface with diverse student populations, academic colleagues, external partners, and compliance regimes, often mediating expectations, timelines, and risk across organisational silos (Earley *et al.*, 2006:12). In such liminal positions, CQ becomes a practical capability for sense-making and relationship-building rather than being a purely dispositional trait (Ott & Michailova, 2018).

Recent research in South Africa and comparable multicultural contexts supports three integrated observations. First, CQ underpins intra-team knowledge-sharing, a core predictor of project effectiveness in knowledge-intensive environments (Van Greunen, 2022). In projectised administrative settings (e.g., audits, system implementations, transformation initiatives), non-academic staff frequently broker tacit knowledge across functions. Here, metacognitive CQ supports the checking of assumptions and reframing messages for different audiences. Cognitive CQ provides culture-general schemas that prevent stereotyping, motivational CQ sustains engagement in ambiguous situations, and behavioural CQ enables adaptive, respectful interaction (Eisenberg & Williams, 2012).

Second, South African evidence links CQ to thriving at work (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2024). For non-academic staff who face significant emotional labour in front-line services and project roles, CQ buffers strain by improving relatedness, perceived fairness, and belonging in diverse teams (Chen & Lin, 2013; Yousofpourfard, 2010).

Third, dimensional interdependence matters. Raising awareness (metacognition) without enacting different behaviours often fails to shift team climates or service outcomes (Kokt & Sentso, 2024). This is salient in university projects, where language policy, legacy norms, and status hierarchies can create asymmetries in voice and influence. In such cases, behavioural CQ (e.g., calibrating directness, turn-taking, and politeness strategies in multilingual meetings) must

accompany reflective routines to prevent well-meant awareness initiatives from becoming symbolic compliance (Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015).

Literature on non-academic staff, though thinner than student-focused research, consistently identifies four recurring challenges in multicultural university project teams (Henderson *et al.*, 2018):

Language and code-switching demands. Henderson *et al.* (2018) found that administrative and technical staff often navigate tri-lingual or multi-lingual interactions (internal and external). Misalignments in register, politeness norms, or email tone escalate avoidable conflict. CQ, particularly the behavioural dimension, helps staff repackage technical content and maintain relational quality in executing time-pressured deliverables.

Status gradients and voice. According to Eisenberg and Williams (2012), project governance may privilege academic voices or legacy power centres, with non-academic professionals occupying liminal professional identities. CQ supports voice efficacy (motivational CQ) and tactful assertion (behavioural CQ), while metacognition helps staff choose forums and framings that secure uptake of operational knowledge (Ang *et al.*, 2006; Eisenberg & Williams, 2012; Henderson *et al.*, 2018).

Procedural fairness and service ethos. In contexts where transformation goals, policy rules, and stakeholder expectations collide, CQ enables administrative staff to translate rules into equitable practices, thereby reducing perceptions of arbitrariness and building trust (Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015; Yousofpourfard, 2010). This is consistent with findings that CQ is associated with positive socio-emotional climates and well-being (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2024).

Tokenism risks in diversity initiatives. Where inclusion is framed mainly as a compliance exercise, awareness training that is not followed by behavioural change tends to breed cynicism rather than genuine commitment (Earley *et al.*, 2006:105; Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015). Evidence from South African service settings also cautions that metacognitive CQ on its own is not enough; in this regard, behavioural enactment and motivational reinforcement, for example, through recognition systems and visible role-modelling, are needed to anchor new practices in the everyday routines of teams (Kokt & Sentso, 2024).

In summary, the CQ of non-academic staff can be seen as a project-level performance lever in universities (Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015; Yousofpourfard, 2010). It influences how knowledge is co-ordinated, how conflict is de-escalated, and how fairness is enacted in daily interactions,

and thus it plays a quiet but essential role in how university projects are implemented. The literature also clarifies where the gap lies: studies frequently mention administrative staff in passing, but seldom examine their team-embedded practices, for example, how project administrators resequence agendas to accommodate colleagues whose communication relies more heavily on contextual cues, and how operations co-ordinators redesign workflows after culturally charged misunderstandings (Eisenberg & Williams, 2012; Henderson *et al.*, 2018). Addressing this gap requires qualitative research to surface practice-proximal routines (e.g., pre-meeting briefings, restating or re-framing contributions during meetings to ensure shared understanding, and after-action reflections) that concretely express CQ in administrative project work (Holgate, 2020; Shomoossi *et al.*, 2019; Sousa *et al.*, 2023; Yousef, 2024).

The next section discusses empirical evidence of the impact of CQ in projects.

2.6 Empirical evidence of CQ's impact on project outcomes

Beyond theory, a growing body of empirical research confirms that CQ has measurable and positive effects on team- and project outcomes, including collaboration quality, innovation, conflict resolution, and overall performance (Balbinot *et al.*, 2024).

A recent South African study by Van Greunen (2022) found that CQ is positively and significantly related to intra-team knowledge-sharing behaviour in knowledge-intensive teams, explaining 34% of the variance in reported knowledge-sharing. Knowledge-sharing is widely recognised as a critical driver of project success, particularly in project teams that depend on the integration of diverse expertise (Chen & Lin, 2013). For university project teams, this result implies that CQ strengthens the flow of task-critical information, enhancing co-ordination and, ultimately, project outcomes (Chen & Lin, 2013; Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015; Yousofpourfard, 2010).

Lezar and Van der Walt (2023) show that CQ is a significant predictor of thriving at work in South African organisations, and that the motivational and behavioural CQ dimensions had the greatest effect. The study's structural equation model showed that CQ explained 41% of the variance in flourishing, a variable that showed significant relationships with resilience, sustained engagement, and goal attainment (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023). In project settings, these outcomes represent improved levels of member commitment, a decrease in members' withdrawal behaviour, and greater progress against milestones.

In research on organisational performance, CQ has been shown to influence outcomes in culturally diverse work environments. Although Chen *et al.* (2012) did not examine project delivery metrics, their multilevel study demonstrated that higher motivational CQ is associated with

stronger performance in culturally diverse organisations. Moon (2010) similarly found that organisational CQ, conceptualised as a dynamic capability, acts as a buffer against the negative effects of cultural diversity on cohesion; in some cases, high-CQ diverse teams were able to match or surpass the performance of more homogeneous teams. Collectively, these findings indicate that CQ is not merely a soft skill, but a capability with measurable implications for work performance in multicultural settings.

In research on project teams in HE settings, Shomoossi *et al.* (2019) note that administrative and support staff at Iranian universities who obtained a higher CQ score were perceived as more effective in collaborative projects, particularly where those projects were cross-departmental in nature. Likewise, Sousa *et al.* (2023), in a study using a sample from European HE, show that CQ supports team learning behaviours which, in turn, support improvement in project innovation outputs.

Collectively, these empirical findings highlight the importance of CQ as a project-critical capability. CQ does not only affect relational characteristics like trust and communication, it predicts measurable project outcomes such as project delivery against the committed date, assimilation of knowledge, innovation, and thriving of team members. These findings provide concrete support for the present study's stance that CQ is pivotal to the effectiveness of multicultural project teams in universities.

The next section links the dimensions of CQ to specific project outcomes of project teams in universities.

2.7 Linking CQ dimensions to specific project outcomes in universities

Empirical studies illustrate that each CQ dimension is aligned with specific project critical deliverables in HE.

Cognitive CQ (knowledge of cultural norms and practices) contributes to effectiveness in stakeholder analysis and clarity in communication (Chen & Lin, 2013; Eisenberg & Williams, 2012; Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015). Van Greunen (2022) found that teams with higher cognitive CQ exhibited significantly increased knowledge sharing, accounting for 34% of the variance in knowledge exchange.

Metacognitive CQ (the awareness and regulation of cultural assumptions) facilitates adaptive problem-solving. In this regard, Koko and Sentso (2024) warn of the dangers associated with awareness of cultural assumptions without behaviours that promote inclusivity. However, when

combined with intentional reflection processes (e.g., debriefing after projects), metacognitive CQ leads to improved conflict resolution and enhanced team learning.

Motivational CQ (the drive to engage across cultures) is linked to resilience and sustained engagement (Chen & Lin, 2013; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Lezar and Van der Walt (2023) found, in their study, that motivational CQ was the most significant predictor of thriving in the workplace, with both outcomes associated with greater persistence and less withdrawal.

Behavioural CQ (adaptability in verbal and non-verbal behaviour) has a direct influence on team dynamics and project outcomes (Eisenberg & Williams, 2012; Henderson *et al.*, 2018; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Sousa *et al.* (2023) found that behavioural CQ supports inclusive participation and, through this, innovation in projects in HE. Behavioural CQ thus ensures that project members feel respected, which, in turn, enhances co-operation and reduces costly interpersonal conflict (Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

Overall, these findings suggest that CQ dimensions are not abstract psychological constructs; instead, they are practical enablers of project success, with each dimension contributing uniquely to the processes of knowledge integration, conflict management, commitment, and outcomes in multicultural university project teams.

The next section highlights the gaps in the literature on the domain under study.

2.8 Research gaps in the literature

Despite the increasingly voluminous literature on CQ, researchers have identified various gaps and underexplored fields.

There is a dearth of studies on CQ in the South African university context, in which cultural diversity is both an asset and a liability (Eberlein, 2008). While studies of CQ in the workplace are abundant globally (Han *et al.*, 2022), investigations that include support- and administrative project team members in universities are lacking. Support staff are often overlooked in research on academic teamwork, which tends to prioritise faculty- or student perspectives (Asoba & Mefi, 2022). This leaves a significant gap in understanding, as support- and administrative employees regularly collaborate with academics on projects, from implementing new systems to organising institutional events, and their intercultural competencies are crucial. This study responds to this gap by focusing on all staff members engaged in project teams, thereby offering insights into a segment of the HE workforce that has been underrepresented in CQ research.

While existing studies highlight the benefits of CQ in team settings (Balbinot *et al.*, 2024), further exploration is needed to understand how CQ is perceived and applied by project team members in academic environments (Ang *et al.*, 2006; Ang *et al.*, 2015; Livermore & Van Dyne, 2015:297). Prior research established CQ's positive effects in general terms (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:93), but there is limited knowledge of how staff consciously leverage their cultural knowledge when working on real-world projects with multicultural colleagues. Exploring staff in project teams' perceptions could shed light on practical challenges in applying CQ on the ground, beyond what top-down strategies aim to achieve.

There is limited empirical research on the metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural dimensions of CQ in multicultural project teams (Paulus *et al.*, 2016). Within project teams in HE, it remains underexplored whether cultural knowledge (cognitive CQ), intercultural engagement (motivational CQ), or adaptive conduct (behavioural CQ) is most salient to effective collaboration, and how these aspects interact (Ang *et al.*, 2007). The present study aimed to address this gap by exploring the constituent dimensions of CQ in multicultural project teams within HE.

The literature suggests that CQ is an area of importance in multicultural teams, and may help attune multicultural project teams in HE to the cultural patterns and behavioural expectations that influence communication, co-ordination, and problem-solving (Moon, 2013). However, research on the South African context is lacking, as only limited exploration has been done of the dimensions of CQ in project teams in this context (Nel *et al.*, 2015). By exploring CQ as a competency in team projects, as posited by Henderson *et al.* (2018), the present research was aimed at generating insights into how effective communication, trust, and collaboration can be fostered in the multicultural project teams of universities.

Much of CQ research has been directed at business, management, and expatriate contexts, with particular emphasis on corporate settings and global leadership (Ott & Michailova, 2018). Other fields, such as education, non-profit organisations, and public institutions, remain underresearched. Within the context of HE, particularly that of South Africa, studies have focused primarily only on students or academic faculty, neglecting administrative and support staff in multicultural teams. The current research addresses this by exploring CQ in a HEI setting with a focus on non-academic staff.

The majority of CQ research has examined individual-level capabilities, essentially treating CQ as an individual difference and focusing on individual outcomes (e.g., personal adjustment, individual performance) (Ott & Michailova, 2018). However, researchers have pointed out the need to study CQ at multiple levels, including the team and organisational levels (Ng *et al.*, 2012). This leaves unanswered questions such as whether a team or an entire organisation could

develop and manifest collective CQ, and what the effect thereof is on outcomes. Initial efforts, such as Ng *et al.*'s (2012), to measure firm-level motivational CQ suggest that collective cultural capacities matter, but this area remains relatively unexplored. Thus, there is a gap in understanding CQ beyond the individual, a gap that is addressed in the present study.

Another limitation is the way CQ is measured and assessed in research. Most studies used self-report surveys (for example, the 20-item Cultural Intelligence Scale) to measure respondents' CQ. Finley *et al.* (2017), for instance, employed this scale in their study, thereby illustrating the predominance of self-report methodologies in the CQ literature. Podsakoff and Organ (1986) identified early on that self-reports can provide useful information, but noted that self-report measures could introduce biases (social desirability, common method bias). In recent years, some work was done to apply alternative measures of CQ that could be linked to performance measures, for example, situational judgment tests, where study participants are required to show their cultural judgment in action (Ng *et al.*, 2012). The findings show that performance measures of CQ show additional variance in the outcome measures, beyond that explained by the self-report (Ng *et al.*, 2012). The literature suggests that assessment of CQ measures should include a more varied method of assessment, such as observational measures, peer-reported measures, or performance measures (Ng *et al.*, 2012).

2.9 Chapter summary

CQ is a multifaceted concept encompassing cognitive knowledge, metacognitive strategy, motivational drive, and behavioural flexibility. This literature review defined each dimension and discussed its significance in the overall CQ. Subsequent sections positioned CQ theoretically and discussed literature on CQ amongst non-academic staff and empirical evidence of the impact of CQ on project outcomes. The discussion thereafter focused on linking specific dimensions to project outcomes, together with a review of notable gaps in the literature. Most prior studies concentrated on business- or expatriate contexts and employed self-report measures. These limitations underscore the need for the present study, which was situated within an educational institution and focused on non-academic staff. This research was aimed at deepening the understanding of CQ by focusing on multicultural project teams in a South African HEI, and the insights from this study may enrich the theoretical discourse on CQ.

The next chapter details the methodology employed in conducting the present study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the methodology followed in conducting the study, commencing with the philosophical stance adopted. Subsequent sections discuss the research approach, the research design, the time horizon, the study population and method of sampling, and the collection and analysis of the data. The chapter concludes with the strategies employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical considerations that were considered pertinent.

3.2 Research paradigm

A research paradigm represents the researcher's view of the nature of reality or truth and how to gain knowledge about that reality (Bryman & Bell, 2011:24). The present study is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed within a context and is subjective, and, thus, focuses on individuals' lived experience and how they make meaning of these, rather than the statistical measurement of variables and prediction (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:50; Creswell & Poth, 2018:45-47). The interpretivist stance was considered appropriate for exploring the phenomenon of CQ because CQ is enacted relationally and contextually (Ang *et al.*, 2006; Ang *et al.*, 2015).

3.3 Research approach

The present study followed a qualitative research approach, in which data were collected in the form of text (e.g., participant narratives) and images, amongst others (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative approach was selected to enable in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and meaning-making of members of multicultural project teams (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018:228; Thorne, 2016:65). While the findings of qualitative research are not generalisable, they may be transferable to other contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:244; Creswell & Poth, 2018:45-47). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for a practice-proximal construct such as CQ, where context, language, and interaction shape how competence is perceived and enacted (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:521).

3.4 Research design

The study adopted an exploratory design, which is appropriate for under-researched study topics and areas where knowledge is limited. An exploratory design focuses on gaining new insights into a phenomenon or viewing it from a fresh perspective (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:180). In the present study, the aim was to gain a holistic and in-depth understanding of CQ in practice within a specific context and among individuals who have received little research attention (Pacho, 2015; Saunders *et al.*, 2023:210).

3.5 Methods

This section describes the study's population, together with the method employed to select the sample. This is followed by explanations of the methods employed to gather and analyse the data.

3.5.1 Population and sampling

A study population comprises all units of analysis of interest to a researcher in a particular study, and individuals are selected from this population to form the study sample (Bryman & Bell, 2011:176; Saunders *et al.*, 2023:292). In the present study, the target population comprised full-time academics and support staff of the institution under study who had experience working in multicultural project teams.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, in which participants are selected based on the researcher's judgement regarding their ability to contribute rich, meaningful, and relevant data on the phenomenon under study (Andrade, 2021; Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Purposive sampling is a non-probability method, meaning not every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected for participation (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). The process of sampling was aided by the use of inclusion criteria (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018:229), which were: full-time employment with the university, active membership in a multicultural project team, more than six months of experience working in multicultural teams, and fluency in English.

The decision to include both academic and support staff arose from the recognition that multicultural collaboration at universities is not confined to teaching or research functions. In universities, project teams operate across administrative, technical, and strategic departments, and support staff often play an integral role in the planning, co-ordination, and implementation of institutional projects (Asoba & Mefi, 2022). In this sense, it was important that the study did not

focus only on the ‘front line’ of academia, but also on the people who hold much of the operational work. Including a broad cross-section of personnel, therefore, made it possible to explore how CQ is practised in a distributed way throughout the organisation. Limiting participation to full-time staff of the institution helped to ensure a consistent context, as all teams functioned under similar institutional conditions, which in turn supported a more cohesive analysis of how cultural diversity plays out in the study setting (see Henderson *et al.*, 2018).

A minimum period of six months’ engagement in project work was required. The reasoning here was that individuals needed enough time to encounter intercultural interactions and challenges in a meaningful way. Six months is generally regarded as sufficient for individuals to have experienced and reflected on significant intercultural encounters (Creswell & Poth, 2018:157). Participants with very limited tenure in their project role might not yet have been exposed to the full dynamics of multicultural teamwork, and may therefore not have developed informed perspectives on CQ (see Creswell & Poth, 2018:157). Finally, as the interviews were conducted in English, participants were required to be conversant in English, so that questions and responses could be understood clearly, and the data could be collected and interpreted with reasonable accuracy (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015:533–544).

In qualitative research, the adequacy of the sample is determined by the richness and depth of the data rather than by sheer numbers or statistical representativeness (Brinkmann, 2022:48; Creswell & Poth, 2018:159; Saunders *et al.*, 2023:314). In this study, the focus was therefore on obtaining detailed, experience-based accounts from those who met the criteria, rather than on reaching a particular numerical target. Based on the iterative process of data collection and analysis, additional participants were sampled until data saturation had been achieved, which is the point where no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews, indicating sufficient coverage of the phenomenon. In the present study, the principle of saturation plus one was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Palinkas *et al.*, 2015; Van Rijnsoever, 2017). Data saturation was achieved by the eighth interview, and the researcher conducted an additional interview to confirm saturation.

In organisational research, access to potential participants is seldom open; it is typically mediated by gatekeepers who control contact with staff and can legitimise or block entry into the field (Lamprianou, 2022; Thorne, 2016:117). In the present study, a gatekeeper was employed to facilitate ethical access and to safeguard both the institution and prospective participants ([Annexure B](#)). The gatekeeper was a senior administrator who worked with university project members but had no direct line-management authority over them. This positioning was important to minimise coercive power relations and selection bias. The gatekeeper’s role was limited to

circulating a standard invitation and information sheet, and did not include identifying specific individuals for participation (see Bashir, 2023). Using a gatekeeper in this way helped align the study with institutional protocols and signalled that the research was legitimate. Potential participants received the invitation from a familiar and trusted organisational figure, received detailed study information, and arranged interviews in private. This process fosters trust and reduces perceived risk and power imbalances, thereby encouraging candid accounts (Alexander, 2019; Shenton, 2004).

3.5.2 Data collection

In the present study, primary data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. This approach provides flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore participants' unique experiences while ensuring that the research questions are addressed (Mashur *et al.*, 2022; Saunders *et al.*, 2023:351). An interview guide (see [Annexure D](#)) was used to structure the process and to make sure that all participants were asked the same core questions, so that no important topic was overlooked during the interviews.

In semi-structured interviews, the researcher is able to ask additional, probing questions to gain more information or to clarify points made by participants, and this was also the case in the present study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Neutral, open-ended prompts were used to avoid leading participants towards particular answers. In this regard, the data collection strategy aligned well with the study's exploratory design and interpretivist paradigm, both of which emphasise obtaining an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and how they make sense of their experiences (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008:318).

The researcher kept field notes during the interviews to capture contextual and interactional cues that might not be evident in the transcript alone (see Saunders *et al.*, 2023:351). All interviews were conducted in private via secure videoconference, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher in preparation for analysis.

3.5.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a cyclical process in which the researcher engages with the data, interprets it, and reflects on it in order to reach meaningful conclusions (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). In the present study, thematic analysis, a widely accepted method of qualitative data analysis, was employed (Bryman *et al.*, 2021:27). The aim of thematic analysis is to identify,

analyse, and report patterns of meaning within the data, and to organise these patterns into themes that speak to the research questions (Braun *et al.*, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher followed the six steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is well-suited to analysing qualitative data, as it enables attention to nuance, contradiction, and situated practice (Bryman *et al.*, 2021:27).

The data were analysed in an inductive approach, whereby the researcher moves from detailed information contained in the data to higher-order insights and conclusions (Bryman *et al.*, 2021:27). During the analysis, the present researcher remained sensitive to the theory underpinning the study, namely the four dimensions of CQ (cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, behavioural), without constraining the analysis (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Saunders *et al.*, 2023:155). This approach balances openness to the data with conceptually informed interpretation (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018:92). The present researcher used ATLAS.ti v25 only for organisation, memoing, and retrieval, and personally undertook the interpretation of the data, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

The application of the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) is explained below.

Step 1: Familiarisation with the data

Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio-recordings verbatim and cleaned the data by removing only non-lexical utterances such as “um” and “er” while ensuring not to change the meaning. The researcher then commenced the first step of analysis, which involved immersion in the data by reading the transcripts multiple times to gain a broad understanding of the participants' experiences and voices. The researcher also identified preliminary observations based on interesting phrases, new ideas, and possible connections amongst the data (Jowsey *et al.*, 2021).

Step 2: Generating initial codes

In this step, the researcher systematically worked through each transcript to highlight meaningful segments of text and label them with codes that captured the essence of each segment (see Jowsey *et al.*, 2021). The coding process yields numerous codes attached to portions of the text, essentially breaking down the data into manageable analytic units.

Step 3: Identifying sub-themes and themes

The researcher grouped similar codes together in sub-themes or categories, which were then combined into overarching themes.

Step 4: Reviewing and refining themes

The next step was to conduct a thorough evaluation of the themes and their sub-themes. Each theme was carefully re-examined and compared to the original interview data to ensure the themes represented the information contained in the data. The researcher also re-read the transcripts to determine if the data extracts included in each theme accurately reflected the same idea. During this process, the themes were further refined. Overlapping themes or categories were combined, and broad themes were broken down into narrower categories. This iterative refinement process enhances each theme's internal homogeneity (i.e., each theme's data strongly cohere) and external heterogeneity (i.e., themes are sufficiently different from one another), resulting in a robust set of final themes.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

Upon the conclusion of refinement of the themes, each was defined and given a concise, descriptive name. The researcher wrote a brief definition for each theme, articulating what aspect of the data it covered and what made it necessary. This step ensures that the themes are coherent and related to the research questions (Jowsey *et al.*, 2021).

Step 6: Producing the report

In the final phase, the researcher compiled the analysis findings into a coherent narrative. The themes are presented individually, with supporting verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts, as recommended by Jowsey *et al.* (2021). The participant quotations were interwoven with analytic commentary that explains how each theme addresses a research question, along with links to the relevant literature.

Table 2 provides an example tracing the analysis from a single coded extract from Participant 5's interview transcript to the construction of themes. The purpose is not to show all analytic moves, but to demonstrate how the six phases described below were enacted in practice and documented as part of the audit trail. A more detailed account of theme development and the connections between the themes and the research questions is provided in Chapter 4.

Table 2: Analytic progression from transcript to theme (own compilation)

Step	Analytic move	Example
Step 1: Immersion and initial notes	Data excerpt selected for analysis	<i>"When people start writing minutes in mixed languages, others get lost"</i> (Participant 5).
Step 2: Generating initial codes	Line-by-line coding; short, action-oriented labels assigned	Excerpt coded as: <i>using language to acknowledge others, small gestures of inclusion</i> . Codes entered into ATLAS.ti with a memo noting that the participant links everyday language choices to a sense of belonging.
Step 3: Identifying categories and candidate themes	Codes grouped with related codes to form sub- themes	This excerpt was compared with other coded segments in which participants described adjusting their language, checking understanding, or offering greetings in different languages. These codes all reflected small, intentional communicative adjustments designed to foster clarity and inclusion. Because they expressed a shared underlying meaning, they were collated into a coherent cluster, which was then developed into a candidate sub-theme labelled <i>Adaptive communication practices</i> . This sub-theme was situated within a provisional theme that captured the everyday enactment of CQ in team communication.
Step 4: Reviewing and refining themes	Testing fit of data within and across themes; resolving overlaps	During review, <i>Adaptive communication practices</i> was compared to sub-themes related to formal communication rules and emotional sensitivity. The data consistently referred to practical, situational adjustments in wording. The sub-theme <i>The formal-informal language boundary</i> , was created, and its description was refined to emphasise micro-acts of acknowledgement through language. It was located under a more focused theme, later labelled <i>Communication as the core of CQ in project teams</i> .
Step 5: Defining and naming themes	Writing theme definition; clarifying scope and focus	The theme <i>Communication as the core of CQ in project teams</i> was defined as: A practical operating discipline that stabilises meaning and protects dignity through closed-loop communication, documentary alignment, a managed formal–informal language boundary, and a preference for safety before speed. The excerpt from Participant 5's transcript was listed as a core exemplar because it captures the idea of how "a simple greeting" can function as a culturally intelligent act.
Step 6: Producing the report	Selecting illustrative quotes; linking findings to research questions and literature	In Chapter 4, this quotation is used under the theme <i>The formal-informal language boundary</i> , to illustrate how team members use everyday linguistic choices as a form of CQ. The analytic commentary explains that such micro-practices support feelings of belonging and align with literature on CQ and inclusive communication. The link to RQ1 (perceptions) and RQ2 (practices) is made explicit.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the study process: problem statement → research questions → sampling → data collection → analysis → reporting (top lane), coupled to the audit-trail artefacts that enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability at each stage (bottom lane), which is discussed in section 3.7.

Research design and audit-trail overview - CQ in multicultural project teams

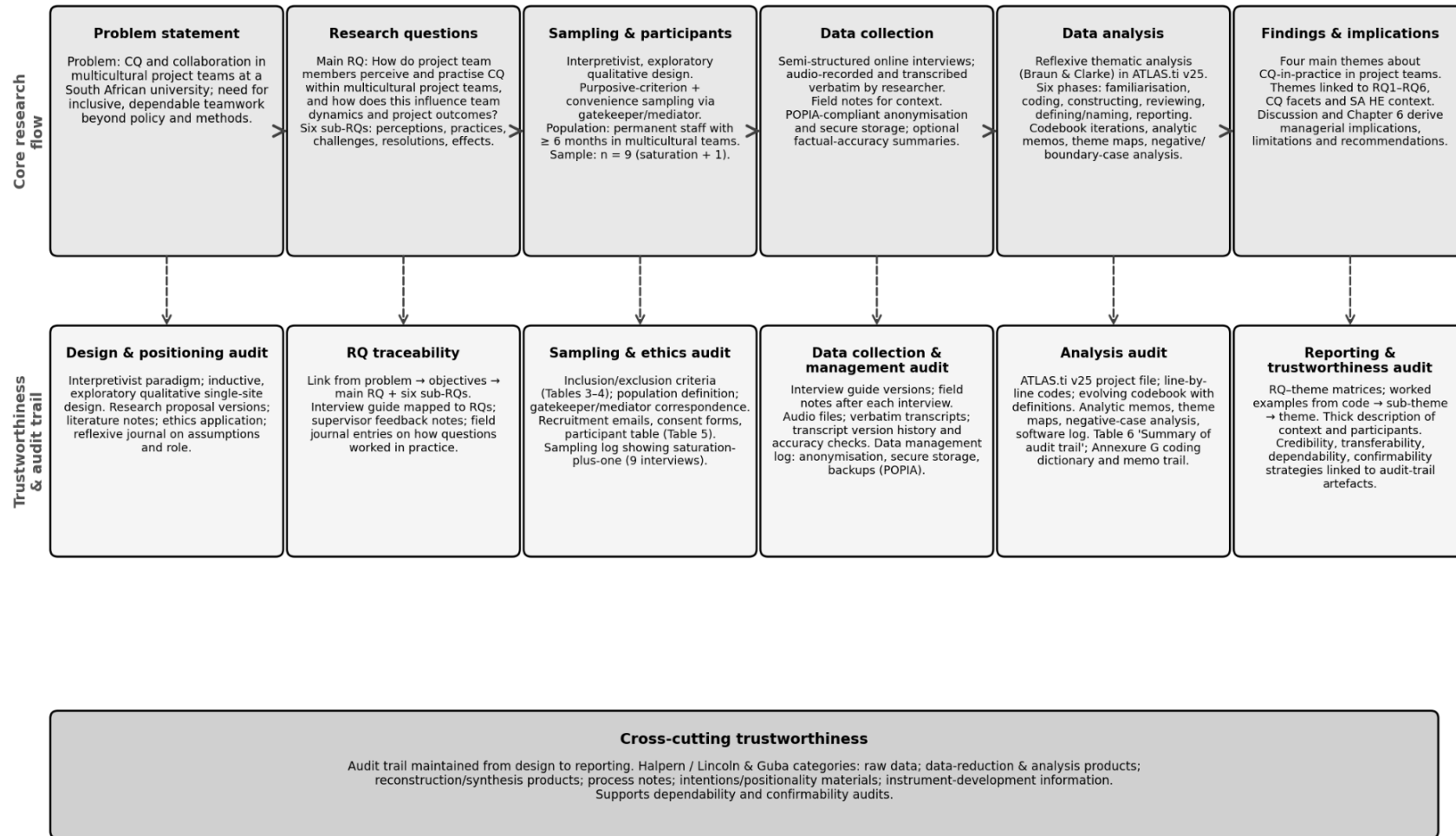


Figure 1: Overview of research process (own compilation)

The next section discusses the study's time horizon.

3.6 Time horizon

The study provides a snapshot of CQ practices at a specific point in time, rather than examining and comparing changes over an extended period (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:213). The choice of a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal time horizon aligned with the study's goal of exploring current CQ practices and perceptions at the institution under study.

The next section discusses the strategies employed to ensure academic rigour in the study.

3.7 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the criteria of validity and reliability used in quantitative studies are usually translated into the broader idea of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is achieved by attending to four well-known criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings reflect participants' meanings and experiences accurately (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:219,455). In practice, credibility is strengthened through prolonged engagement with the dataset, ongoing peer-debriefing with the academic supervisor to probe assumptions and test the coherence of themes, and the use of verbatim extracts in the reporting to demonstrate how interpretations are grounded in participants' own words. Transferability concerns the extent to which the findings may be applied to other contexts. This requires the provision of thick descriptions of the study context, the participants, the aim of the study, and the research problem (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:219). Dependability relates to the stability and consistency of the research process over time (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:219; Thorne, 2016:128) and is supported when the researcher demonstrates a recognised methodology and a logical, transparent research process, underpinned by a detailed audit trail of how the study was executed. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are grounded in the data rather than in the researcher's own preferences or biases (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:219; Thorne, 2016:128). Peer-debriefing, member-checking, and reflexive journaling all help to enhance confirmability by showing that interpretations are accountable to the data.

In the present study, several strategies were used to strengthen trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the dataset. The researcher read and re-read the transcripts and supporting documents and then engaged in peer-debriefing with the academic supervisor to probe assumptions and test whether the themes made sense in relation to the raw data (Stahl & King, 2020). Peer review in this sense helped to expose possible blind spots or

biases in interpretation, so that the findings did not become simply an extension of the researcher's own perspective (Stahl & King, 2020). In addition, the presentation of the findings is supported by verbatim quotations from the interviews.

To enhance transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that researchers should provide sufficiently detailed and 'thick' descriptions of the organisational context, the participants, and the study conditions, so that readers can decide for themselves to what extent the findings may apply to other settings. In this study, attention was therefore given to describing the institutional context, the nature of the project teams, and the main methodological choices in a clear and concrete way. Dependability was strengthened by providing a detailed audit trail of how the study was conducted, including the procedures and methods followed in sampling, data collection, and data analysis. This supported methodological transparency and allowed others to trace how particular findings were reached. To enhance confirmability, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling, careful bracketing of assumptions, neutral interviewing, and the use of verbatim extracts in reporting to help demonstrate that interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researcher's personal views (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The researcher also employed member-checking by requesting that participants review the summaries of the interviews for factual accuracy.

Figure 2 illustrates how trustworthiness was enhanced specifically in the data collection and analysis processes.

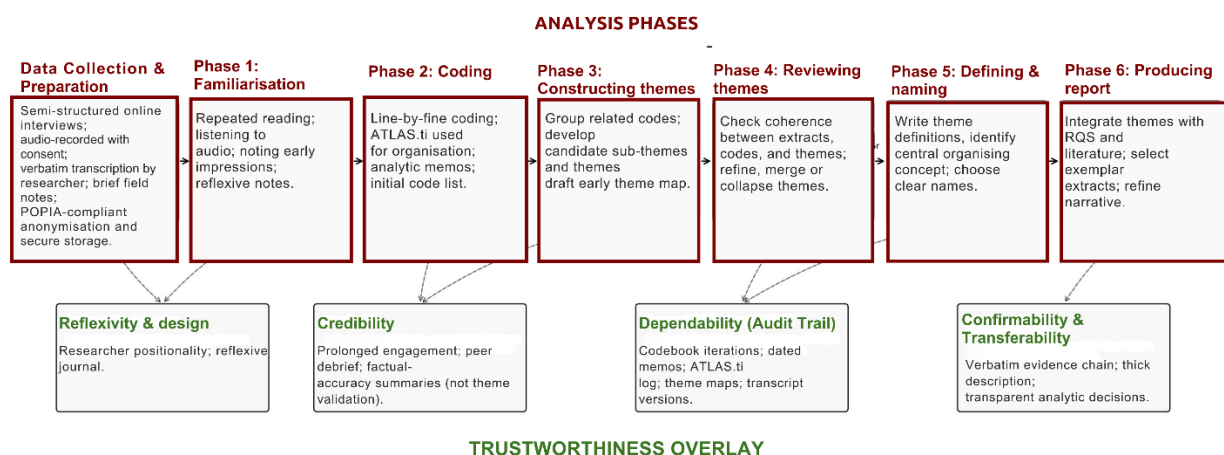


Figure 2: Trustworthiness and data analysis (own compilation)

The researcher engaged in reflexive journaling and peer-debriefing, maintained a dated decision log, and archived theme maps as part of creating an audit trail. Analytic rigour was paramount during the entire process. The researcher regularly returned to the data to ensure that

interpretations remained grounded in the participants' actual words. While objectivity is difficult to attain in research that requires interpretation of participants' views (Bryman & Bell, 2011:701), the researcher maintained reflexivity by documenting the decision-making process, areas of uncertainty, and moments of insight in reflective memos (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018:226). This process assisted in ensuring that the researcher's perspectives did not influence the interpretation and reporting. Adhering to a systematic, stepwise approach to thematic analysis and keeping detailed records helped ensure that the findings are credible and traceable back to the raw data (Jowsey *et al.*, 2021).

3.8 Ethical considerations

Ethics are captured in principles that guide the execution of research. These include respect for human rights, honesty, and responsible use of the data. Furthermore, ensuring that no harm comes to participants is a significant concern in research involving humans (Miteu, 2024). The following ethical considerations were considered pertinent to the present study and were upheld throughout.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee ([Annexure A](#)). Institutional permission ([Annexure B](#)) to approach staff was granted via a gatekeeper. All participants received an information sheet ([Annexure C](#)) outlining the purpose of the study, what participation entailed, potential risks and benefits, data-handling procedures, and their rights, including the right to decline to answer any question, to withdraw without penalty, and to request deletion of their data before analysis commenced. Written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview and again confirmed during the interview (see Bryman & Bell, 2011:136).

Participation was entirely voluntary, and clear communication channels (via the gatekeeper) were maintained to answer questions and keep participants informed. No financial incentives were offered for participation.

In compliance with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act 4 of 2013, participants were assured of anonymity, and the researcher anonymised the transcripts by replacing names with pseudonyms and removing potentially identifying details. The data are stored on encrypted, password-protected drives accessible only to the researcher. Data will be retained and destroyed in accordance with the university's records-management policy. A summary of the findings will be made available to participants who indicated that they would like to receive it, as well as relevant university stakeholders.

3.9 Chapter summary

This chapter detailed the study's interpretivist stance and the methodology employed in conducting the study. Discussions encompassed the qualitative research approach and exploratory research design, followed by the methods employed, including the purposive sampling of participants, the collection of data via semi-structured interviews, and the inductive thematic analysis of the collected data. Subsequent sections detailed the strategies employed to ensure the study's trustworthiness and the ethical principles that were adhered to throughout the research.

The next chapter reports the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the analysis and presents the findings of the study. The purpose of the study was to explore how project team members perceive and practise CQ in multicultural team settings, and how this shapes team dynamics and project outcomes. The chapter addresses the main research question: How do project team members in a South African university perceive and practise CQ within multicultural project teams, and how does this influence team dynamics and project outcomes? This question was addressed by answering six research questions:

RQ1: How do team members perceive CQ and its importance in multicultural project team performance?

RQ2: How do members of multicultural project teams practise CQ?

RQ3: What challenges do team members experience in practising CQ?

RQ4: How do project team members manage or resolve these challenges?

RQ5: How do team members' CQ influence team dynamics and contribute to successful project outcomes within the university?

RQ6: What strategies do members of multicultural teams apply to embrace CQ?

Consistent with the saturation-plus-one approach (Saunders *et al.*, 2023:314), interviews were conducted until no substantively new insights emerged. Saturation was reached after eight interviews, and a ninth interview was conducted to confirm saturation. Table 3 presents a profile of the nine purposively selected participants who met the inclusion criteria: active members of a multicultural project team within the selected university, with a minimum of six months' experience, and fluency in English.

Table 3: Participant profile (own compilation)

Participant	Role type	Project role	Experience in multicultural project teams
Participant 1	Support	Project manager	20+ years
Participant 2	Support	Project manager	15 years
Participant 3	Support	Project manager	30+ years
Participant 4	Academic	Project manager	3 years
Participant 5	Support	Project manager	6 years
Participant 6	Support	Project team member	15+
Participant 7	Support	Project team member	16+ years
Participant 8	Academic	Project team member	3 years
Participant 9	Support	Project manager	30+ years

Table 3 demonstrates that the sample comprised individuals (academics and support staff) with considerable experience in the phenomenon under study.

The next section explains the analytical pathway the study followed.

4.2 Analytical pathway

This section explains how the themes in this chapter were constructed using Braun and Clarke's (2021:66) reflexive thematic analysis. The findings emerged from the analytic pathway described in Chapter 3. The work moved iteratively from raw data to initial codes, then to code clusters, sub-themes, and, in time, the final themes. The process was recursive rather than strictly linear; for the sake of clarity, however, it is presented here in sequential phases. For each phase, the procedures are described and paired with an example that shows how a specific fragment of data travelled from transcript to code, then to sub-theme, and finally to theme.

The figure in [Annexure H](#) offers a worked example using a single data fragment from Participant 5. It begins with the raw transcript excerpt and shows how the researcher returned to it for repeated familiarisation, generated inductive codes, and grouped related codes into a provisional sub-theme. The example then traces how that sub-theme was refined during theme review. It concludes by showing how the theme was defined, named, and integrated into the final account.

The second row of the figure presents the matching audit-trail artefacts, such as coding memos, sub-theme maps, and theme definitions, so that the basis for each decision is visible at every stage.

4.2.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

After each interview, the audio was transcribed verbatim, with only non-lexical fillers (for example, “um” and “ahem”) removed. The researcher read and re-read each transcript while listening to the recording. Notes on tone, emphasis, and local context were made during this work. These notes were entered as dated memos in ATLAS.ti v25.

The memos captured first impressions of how participants described CQ in their project work. They also marked points of difficulty and moments of success or strain in interaction. This early immersion helped the researcher notice recurring patterns. In particular, it drew attention to how participants framed communication, representation, and adaptation within multicultural teams.

4.2.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Line-by-line coding was conducted at a fine-grained level. Each data segment was given a gerund-based code that attended to participants’ concrete actions and sense-making. In practice, this meant assigning labels such as *“reading the room”*, *“back-briefing in writing”*, *“bringing quieter members in”*, and *“modelling openness to difference”*. This approach kept the analysis close to what participants said and did, while allowing patterns of practice to emerge across interviews. Coding proceeded inductively, with the researcher attending primarily to semantic meanings while remaining alert to underlying assumptions and institutional cues. ATLAS.ti served as a repository for these codes and their associated memos; however, the codes were created, merged, and refined through the researcher’s interpretive judgments rather than any automated functions.

As an example, when one participant described *“taking the temperature of the room and adjusting your approach ... to meet the group where it is”*, the extract was coded as *reading the room* and *adapting communication*. A memo attached to these codes noted that several participants described similar micro-moves of sensing the group’s mood and altering their communication style accordingly. This memo later provided a bridge between isolated codes and more abstract sub-themes concerned with how CQ is enacted through communication practices.

4.2.3 Phase 3: Constructing candidate sub-themes and themes

Once all nine transcripts had been coded, the codes were iteratively compared within and across participants. Conceptually related codes were grouped together into preliminary code clusters in ATLAS.ti. The researcher examined how clusters of action-oriented codes appeared to express shared underlying ideas about CQ, and drafted candidate sub-themes to describe these patterns. Code clusters that pointed to broader organising meanings across the dataset were then tentatively assembled into candidate themes.

Continuing the earlier example, the codes *for reading the room*, *adapting communication*, *checking understanding*, and *back-briefing in writing repeatedly co-occurred in accounts of maintaining project communication alignment* across culturally diverse members. These codes were collated into the sub-theme *Closed-loop communication*. Along with related sub-themes such as *Making expectations explicit* and *Holding space for different voices*, this sub-theme contributed to the development of the theme *Communication as the core of CQ in project teams*.

4.2.4 Phase 4: Reviewing and refining themes

Candidate themes were reviewed in two iterative cycles. First, each theme was checked against the coded extracts collated under it to confirm a coherent pattern of meaning and to ensure that the extracts genuinely exemplified that pattern. Codes that did not fit were re-assigned, split, or removed. Second, the refined themes were considered against the full dataset to evaluate whether they represent the breadth and nuance of participants' accounts of CQ in multicultural project teams.

During this phase, the initial candidate theme that combined leadership, representation, and voice was judged too broad. After rereading the relevant extracts and revisiting the memos, the cluster was divided into two themes, namely *Inclusivity through leadership and representation*, and *CQ as a strategic and institutional imperative*. This review ensured that each theme had a clear conceptual centre rather than a loose aggregation of related ideas.

4.2.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Each theme was then defined as a shared pattern of meaning organised around a central idea. The researcher prepared analytic summaries for each theme, outlining what was distinctive about it, how it related to CQ, and how it interacted with the other themes. Theme names were kept

concise and echoed participants' language, while signalling the analytic claims made in the chapter.

Communication as the core of CQ in project teams, the previous example, was defined as a theme that captures how participants placed communication practices, such as "*reading the room*", clarifying expectations, and closing feedback loops, at the centre of how CQ becomes visible and consequential in project work. The name reflects both the centrality and enacted nature of CQ as described by participants.

4.2.6 Phase 6: Producing the analytic narrative

The final phase involved weaving the refined themes into a coherent analytic account. The researcher selected extracts that most clearly illustrated each theme and sub-theme, while attending to the range of participants and campus contexts. The aim was to present an account that remains close to the data, is transparent about its reasoning, and links directly to the research questions and the relevant literature. The narrative was written to move between thick descriptions of participants' experiences and interpretive commentary that linked these experiences to the broader CQ literature and the specific context of a multicultural South African university.

Throughout this process, analytic decisions were documented through memos, codebook iterations, and ATLAS.ti project logs, forming an audit trail that tracked the study's progression from line-by-line coding of individual transcripts to the construction of the four themes presented in the remainder of this chapter. The process is illustrated in Figure 3.

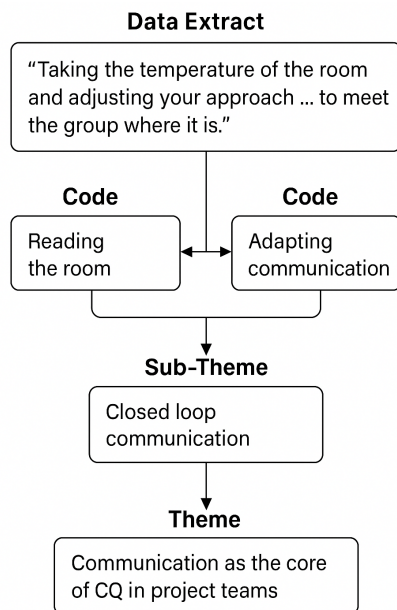


Figure 3: Example of the analytical pathway from data extraction to code, sub-theme, and theme (own compilation)

Figure 3 illustrates how a participant's statement ("*taking the temperature of the room and adjusting your approach ... to meet the group where it is*") was coded (*reading the room* and *adapting communication*), collated into the sub-theme *Closed-loop communication*, which resorted under the theme *Communication as the core of CQ in project teams*. [Annexure G](#) presents the coding dictionary and memo excerpts illustrating how transcript segments from Participant 5 were transformed into codes and then collated into sub-themes and themes.

4.2.7 Audit trail

An audit trail was maintained to document the progression of the study from raw interview material to the final set of themes reported in this chapter. The audit trail records key decisions and products at each stage of data collection and analysis, allowing an independent reader to follow the logic of the research process.

During data collection, field notes were compiled after each interview to capture contextual details such as setting, non-verbal cues, and immediate impressions of how participants framed CQ in their project work. Each recording was transcribed verbatim within 24 to 48 hours. A version history of the transcripts was retained so that any later corrections or clarifications could be traced.

For analysis, ATLAS.ti v25's 'Project file' functioned as a central repository for the developing codebook and associated memos.

After coding each interview, the researcher compared the new codes and memos with those from previous transcripts. The audit trail records that, for Interviews 1 to 5, the codebook expanded as participants introduced additional contextual and relational aspects of CQ. From Interview 6 onwards, memos noted that no substantively new conceptual categories were emerging, and that later data were elaborating and reinforcing existing codes. Interviews 7 and 8 were therefore treated as tests of code- and theme stability. A ninth interview was conducted as a deliberate saturation-plus-one case. The audit trail for Interview 9 showed that all coded segments could be accommodated within the existing coding frame, and that no new themes were required, supporting the judgement that the thematic structure was comprehensive for the purposes of this study.

As codes were clustered into sub-themes and themes, further memos recorded the rationale for grouping particular codes together and for assigning them to specific themes. Similar chains of evidence exist for each sub-theme and theme. Draft theme maps and alternative configurations that were considered and discarded were also saved, together with brief justifications for the final thematic structure.

Throughout the process, reflexive memos were used to record the researcher's evolving interpretations, positionality, and concerns about potential blind spots, particularly in relation to institutional dynamics and the multilingual, multi-campus context. These memos, together with dated versions of the chapter drafts and supervisor feedback, form part of the audit trail. Taken together, the ATLAS.ti project file, codebook iterations, memos, theme maps, transcripts, and field notes provide a transparent record of what was done, how analytic decisions were reached, and how the final themes were constructed.

The table in [Annexure I](#) summarises the principal stages of the process, the actions taken at each point, and the artefacts retained as evidence.

Table 4 below illustrates the analytical structure by showing how individual codes were clustered into sub-themes and then integrated into broader themes. This step-wise presentation clarifies how interpretive decisions were made during the theme construction process. The left-hand column lists micro-practices expressed in gerunds (e.g., checking for understanding, back-briefing, inclusive turn-taking). These are the observable behaviours through which CQ is enacted in everyday project work. The sub-themes show how related behaviours were grouped

into coherent patterns of practice, for example, *checking for understanding* and *visual scaffolding* resort under 1.1 *Closed-loop communication*, while *back-briefing* resort under 1.2 *Documentary alignment*. The themes represent the higher-order claim substantiated by these patterns. In this instance, communication practices constitute the core of CQ; inclusivity is enacted through leadership routines of representation, boundary-setting, and fairness; cultural adaptation and emotional literacy are performed through calibrated, context-sensitive adjustments; and CQ is consolidated as a strategic and institutional imperative through routines such as convene and correct, run-downs, recognition, and onboarding scripts.

Table 4: Analytic pathway from transcript to theme (own compilation)

Data extract (verbatim)	Initial codes (gerunds)	Reflexive memo (1–2 lines)	Sub-theme	Theme
<i>“I ask questions rather than assume, always with respect.”</i>	Checking understanding; asking before acting; respecting face	Routine, face-safe checking prevents drift and surfaces tacit expectations; functions as a micro-move within closed-loop talk	1.1 Closed-loop communication	1. Communication as the core of CQ
<i>“I reach out informally..during meals, coffee, or social events..where sensitive issues can be discussed more naturally.”</i>	Creating informal spaces; moving off-record for sense-making	Issues are de-escalated privately, then brought back into workstreams once alignment is reached	3.3 Private-then-public repair	3. Cultural adaptation & emotional literacy
<i>“Language is powerful; even a simple greeting in someone’s language shows acknowledgement.”</i>	Code-switching for acknowledgement ; signalling inclusion	Small, skilful shifts across the formal–informal boundary build belonging without derailing formal process	1.3 The formal–informal language boundary	1. Communication as the core of CQ
<i>“Pre-briefings could have prevented misunderstanding.” [regarding dignitaries and handshakes]</i>	Pre-briefing protocols; setting non-negotiables; anticipating hotspots	Advance signalling of red lines and expectations protects relationships and avoids public loss of face	2.2 Diplomatic boundaries	2. Inclusivity through leadership & representation

Data extract (verbatim)	Initial codes (gerunds)	Reflexive memo (1–2 lines)	Sub-theme	Theme
<i>“Leaders must be sensitive to cultural nuances such as prayer times or dietary restrictions, and avoid imposing dominant practices.”</i>	Situating practices; tailoring for faith/diet; avoiding imposition	Practical schedule/menu tailoring operationalises inclusion in everyday routines	3.1 Situated tailoring (role, locale, faith/diet)	3. Cultural adaptation & emotional literacy
<i>“Shared values, ethical codes, and institutional policies help prevent one culture from dominating, and ensure fairness.”</i>	Codifying fairness; using policy as a guardrail; preventing dominance	Policy provides a fairness ‘rail’ that leaders can reference when mediating competing claims	2.3 Policy as fairness guardrail	2. Inclusivity through leadership & representation
<i>“CQ should be embedded in institutional frameworks and strategic imperatives.”</i>	Embedding CQ; institutionalising routines	Moves from ad-hoc practice to systematised routines and expectations	4.1 Everyday CQ infrastructure	4. CQ as strategic & institutional imperative

To expand on Table 4, [Annexure G](#) presents the coding dictionary and memo excerpts illustrating how transcript segments from Participant 5 were transformed into codes and then collated into sub-themes and themes. Table 5 illustrates the analysis from code to sub-theme to theme.

Table 5: Code → Sub-theme → Theme (own compilation)

Code	Definition	Example quotation	Sub-theme	Main theme
Checking for understanding	The participant asks the recipient to restate the next step in the decision	<i>“Say it back to me—what’s your first action by Friday?”</i> [P6; support]	1.1. Closed-loop communication	1. Communication as the core of CQ
Back-briefing	Same-day written recap that converts talk into a portable commitment	<i>“I send a one-paragraph recap before close of business”</i> [P7; support].	1.2. Documentary alignment	1. Communication as the core of CQ

Code	Definition	Example quotation	Sub-theme	Main theme
Decision log	Register capturing decision, owner, why, and due date	<i>"If it's not in the log, it's not a decision"</i> [P8; academic].	1.2. Documentary alignment	1. Communication as the core of CQ
Visual scaffolding	Use of quick sketches or screenshares to align meaning	<i>"We draw it so everyone sees the same picture"</i> [P3; support].	1.1. Closed-loop communication	1. Communication as the core of CQ
Lingua franca boundary	Formal artefacts in English; informal multilingual warmth allowed in the room	<i>"We talk in Setswana too, but emails are always English"</i> [P5; support].	1.3. Formal–informal language boundary	1. Communication as the core of CQ
Meeting choreography	Explicit sequencing (rounds, summary, next steps)	<i>"We go round once, then summarise and assign"</i> [P2; support].	1.4. Safety before speed	1. Communication as the core of CQ
Inclusive turn-taking	The chair invites quieter voices and enforces one-at-a-time talk	<i>"I ask: 'We've heard X, who else?'"</i> [P4; academic].	2.1. Multi-level representation	2. Inclusivity through leadership & representation
Representation with decision rights	The right stakeholders are present and authorised to decide	<i>"If finance isn't authorised, we reschedule"</i> [P9; support].	2.2. Diplomatic boundaries	2. Inclusivity through leadership & representation
Fairness script	The leader states the rule before applying it, to avoid personalisation	<i>"The rule is 48-hour notice; we'll move it next week"</i> [P8; academic].	2.3. Policy as a fairness guardrail	2. Inclusivity through leadership & representation
Softening disagreement	Polite challenge that preserves dignity while surfacing issues	<i>"May I suggest a different route for this?"</i> [P1; support].	3.1. Situated tailoring	3. Cultural adaptation & emotional literacy
Private-then-public repair	Sensitive correction in private, then neutral re-entry in writing	<i>"We fix it off-line and note the correction in minutes"</i> [P7; support].	3.2. Tempo- and tone calibration	3. Cultural adaptation & emotional literacy
Status calibration	Adjusting tone/deference for hierarchy/age/gender dynamics	<i>"I rephrase when a senior joins; same point, softer"</i> [P6; support].	3.3. Private-then-public repair	3. Cultural adaptation & emotional literacy
Time-orientation bridging	Aligning pace to mono-/polychronic expectations	<i>"We split it: quick win now, deeper work"</i>	3.4. Narrative and exemplar alignment	3. Cultural adaptation & emotional literacy

Code	Definition	Example quotation	Sub-theme	Main theme
		<i>later</i> " [P8; academic]		
Convene and correct	Quickly gather, name the drift, agree on a fix, and capture it	<i>"We called a 10-minute huddle and reset the plan"</i> [P3; support].	4.1. Everyday CQ infrastructure	4. CQ as strategic & institutional imperative
Run-downs with acceptance criteria	Short checklists that define 'what good looks like'	<i>"Add acceptance criteria so QA knows when to sign off"</i> [P4; academic].	4.2. Convene and correct	4. CQ as strategic & institutional imperative
Recognition of enablement	Credit given for enabling behaviours (translation, summarising)	<i>"We thanked her for translating—everyone moved faster"</i> [P2; support].	4.3. Learning-first stance	4. CQ as strategic & institutional imperative
Onboarding scripts	Teach newcomers the norms (back-brief, decision log)	<i>"Day one: here's how we write and decide"</i> [P5; support].	4.4. Goal-centred discipline	4. CQ as strategic & institutional imperative

The next section reports the themes that emerged from the data, together with the related sub-themes.

4.3 Themes and sub-themes

Four themes were identified through the thematic analysis, which are shown, together with their sub-themes, in Figure 4.

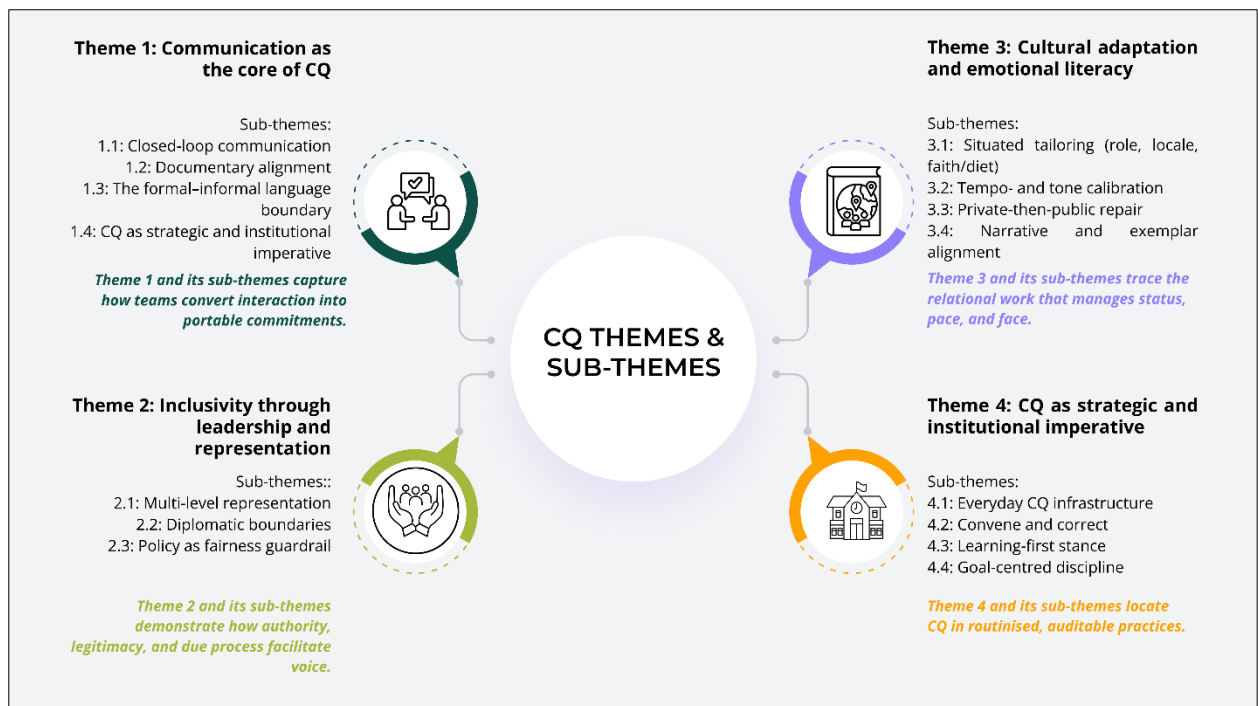


Figure 4: Themes and sub-themes (own compilation)

The findings are presented using anonymised participant quotes (P1 to P9) to foreground participants' voices and illustrate points. A brief interpretation is provided to clarify the findings, while a deeper analysis is reserved for the discussion chapter. Throughout the write-up, brief verbatim extracts are used sparingly and are tagged with the schema [P#, role], where 'role' identifies the participant's functional position in the university (e.g., academic or support) to protect anonymity while preserving analytic relevance. The themes and sub-themes are reported below.

4.4 Theme 1: Communication as the core of CQ in project teams

Effective communication emerged as the cornerstone of culturally intelligent practice in project teams. Participants consistently emphasised that choice of language, clarity of communication, and responsiveness to verbal and non-verbal cues are essential to ensuring that all team members feel included and understood. This theme comprises four sub-themes, discussed below, namely *Closed-loop communication*, *Documentary alignment*, *The formal-informal language boundary*, and *Safety before speed*.

4.4.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Closed-loop communication

Closed-loop communication emerged as a core routine through which multicultural project teams keep a shared sense of meaning in view. Participants described a disciplined sequence. They first attend to the situation, then adjust their delivery, and finally seek clear confirmation. This combination appears to limit drift, understood here as the gradual divergence in how agreements are interpreted and enacted, improve clarity, and secure joint understanding across language and status lines. As one participant put it, *“You read the room quickly and adjust how you talk”* [P3; support].

This routine begins with close monitoring of cues in the room. People notice silence, signs of doubt, or slow uptake. They then adjust pace, register, and tone so that all can follow. Several participants drew attention to this point: *“You see when people are getting lost, then you slow down”* [P6; support]. The description suggests flexible behaviour in response to the load of working in a second language.

The adjustment is followed by a short act of checking. Participants framed this as a move from hearing to meaning that is shared. *“Active listening—summarising key points for confirmation”* [P7; support] captures this step. Likewise, *“So, what I’m hearing is X—does everyone agree?”* [P4; academic] shows how a summary invites correction without exposing anyone to embarrassment. Team members also used their own back-briefs to test alignment: *“Let me repeat the goal in my words so we are sure”* [P9; support]. This practice tends to bring to light subtle, often unspoken differences at an early stage in the process.

Participants linked this sequence to fewer errors later. *“If we don’t check, we walk out with five different versions”* [P2; support]. Another added, *“People nod, but it doesn’t mean they understood. You must verify”* [P1; support]. These accounts point to a common risk in multicultural settings: outward agreement can signal politeness rather than comprehension.

Taken together, the extracts indicate a simple, repeatable mechanism. Team members scan the room for signs of confusion, disengagement, or loss of face. They adjust how they speak, which may involve slowing down, using simpler phrasing, adding a quick visual, or changing the format of the exchange. They then close the loop through a brief check, such as a summary for confirmation, an explicit invitation to correct, or a same-day written back-brief. The sequence appears to steady meaning in real time and to stop quiet divergence from hardening into rework or strain between people.

This mechanism seems most salient where some members work in a second language. Participants noted that doubt often remains unspoken because asking a question can threaten face: *“Sometimes you keep quiet because you don’t want to look stupid in English”* [P9; support]. Closed-loop routines distribute responsibility for understanding. Speakers invite correction. Listeners have the licence to query. The shared record is tidied soon after the exchange, so that those who act later inherit the same understanding. Teams reported fewer misrouted tasks, a smaller gap between intent and action, and steadier progress under time pressure: *“When we summarise, the work flows. When we don’t, things fall apart later”* [P6; support]. The pattern reflects multiple dimensions of CQ in action. Metacognitive CQ is evident in the monitoring of interactions and the judgment of when to intervene. Behavioural CQ is evidenced in rephrasing, summary-checking, switching registers, and inviting back-briefs. Cognitive CQ underwrites the rationale for selecting a common working language for verification, and motivational CQ is shown in the willingness to invite correction despite hierarchical sensitivities.

Two constraints delineate the boundary conditions within which this mechanism works. First, verification ceases to function when it becomes bureaucratic: *“I prefer a natural check, not a checklist”* [P8; academic], signalling that overly formalised routines can feel performative. Second, confirmation presupposes psychological safety: *“People may hesitate to admit they don’t understand ... fear of seeming incompetent”* [P9; support]. Without a climate of protected disclosure, summary-checks elicit polite assent rather than genuine alignment.

Overall, closed-loop communication operationalises CQ by converting culturally intelligent intentions into micro-practices that stabilise meaning and reduce interpersonal and organisational friction. By institutionalising a scan–adapt–verify loop in meetings, teams ensure that meaning is co-constructed rather than assumed. Participants consistently linked closed-loop routines to fewer rework cycles, steadier hand-offs, and more predictable delivery trajectories, demonstrating how CQ enables communication and materially strengthens team dynamics and project outcomes in multilingual project environments.

4.4.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Documentary alignment

Sub-theme 1.2 captures how team members translate spoken interaction into portable meaning through brief written recaps and concise decision logs. Participants consistently emphasised that written records were not treated as mere administrative formalities, but as purposeful tools that helped to preserve interpretation, clarify accountability, and ensure that those who were not present in the room inherited the same understanding as those who had participated in the

discussion. In this sense, the documentation worked as an extension of the meeting, rather than as an afterthought.

“Follow up in writing ... to pre-empt misinterpretation” [P6; support] illustrated a common practice: sending a brief written recap shortly after a meeting to confirm the agreed-upon meaning. Another participant explained the rationale more directly: *“If it’s not written down, people remember it differently”* [P2; support], which indicated how easily verbal agreements could diverge in multilingual or cross-functional environments. This alignment function was echoed by another participant: *“A short summary avoids later arguments”* [P7; support], suggesting that documentation served as a preventive measure against later disagreement.

Participants also highlighted the importance of establishing responsibility in a clear and visible way. *“Put it in the log so everyone knows who owns what”* [P3; support] pointed to the decision log as a central reference point that captured the decision, the responsible person, and the expected timing. A consistent language policy underpinned this practice. *“Meetings and emails must be in English so they can be shared with anyone”* [P1; support] demonstrated how using a lingua franca, understood here as a common working language for formal communication, helped to ensure that written artefacts remained intelligible and shareable across linguistically diverse teams. Another participant added, *“When it’s written, second-language speakers understand better”* [P9; support], which highlighted the accessibility function that written documentation played for those working in a second language.

Viewed collectively, these extracts pointed to a two-part mechanism. First, the back-brief, which was a concise, plain-language written summary sent soon after a discussion, helped to confirm shared meaning while the interaction context was still cognitively active. Because it was sent promptly, it allowed for quick correction before subsequent steps were taken. Second, the decision log, a standing register that recorded the decision, the responsible owner, and the relevant time frame, anchored the agreement in a stable artefact. In this regard, participants felt that it reduced what they described as re-litigation, that is, the unnecessary reopening of previously settled matters due to uncertainty about meaning, ownership, or timing.

This practice also reflected several dimensions of CQ in a fairly practical way. Metacognitive CQ was visible in the decision about when a verbal discussion needed to be externalised into written form. Behavioural CQ was expressed through the effort to rephrase decisions concisely and neutrally, and by explicitly naming decision-makers and setting time frames. Cognitive CQ supported the use of a lingua franca to promote the accessibility and portability of written artefacts. Motivational CQ was reflected in participants’ willingness to seek or provide clarification, even when doing so could have exposed their own uncertainty.

Two qualifications refined the boundaries of this mechanism. First, documentation appeared to lose its value when it became unnecessarily elaborate or overly procedural. *“I prefer a natural approach, not rigid checklists”* [P8; academic] suggested that the strength of documentation lay more in its clarity and timeliness than in its volume or formality. Second, the mechanism was constrained when participants felt unable to signal misunderstanding. *“Sometimes you just agree on email because you don’t want to look slow”* [P4; academic] revealed how face-risk, in the sense of concern about appearing incompetent or uninformed, could inhibit correction and leave written inaccuracies unchallenged.

Overall, documentary alignment seemed to operationalise CQ beyond the immediate meeting by making comprehension visible, embedding accountability, and ensuring that agreements were communicated accurately across teams and over time. Participants consistently linked same-day written recaps and decision logs to fewer misunderstandings, reduced rework, clearer ownership, and more stable delivery trajectories. In multicultural and hierarchy-laden environments, documentary alignment therefore functioned as a practical expression of CQ that supported coordination and strengthened project outcomes.

4.4.3 Sub-theme 1.3: The formal–informal language boundary

Sub-theme 1.3 reflects a pragmatic communicative practice that enables teams to maintain clarity and accessibility while preserving relational ease. Participants described a clear boundary between formal communication, where a lingua franca is consistently used, and informal interaction, where multilingual expression is intentionally permitted to support connection and participation.

“Meetings and emails must be in English so they can be shared with anyone” [P1; support] illustrates the rationale behind using a common language for all formal artefacts such as minutes, emails, and decision records. The intention is to ensure that written material remains accessible across linguistically diverse team members and can be forwarded without risk of exclusion. A second participant reinforced this logic: *“If it’s not in English, some colleagues won’t follow the details”* [P6; support], emphasising the role of standardised language in safeguarding shared meaning.

Alongside this formal boundary, teams preserve space for multilingual expression in informal, relational exchanges. *“Informally, people can use their own languages ... formal communication must be uniform”* [P1; support] demonstrates how linguistic flexibility in non-recorded moments supports belonging. Informal code-switching, defined as shifting between languages or language

varieties during conversation, was commonly used for greetings or short interpersonal exchanges: *"We greet in Setswana first, then switch; it just feels natural"* [P7; support]. Participants noted that such brief multilingual practices lower participation barriers for second-language speakers and help maintain rapport without compromising the clarity of the formal record.

Taken together, these accounts reveal a coherent mechanism: one language for formal records to ensure shareability, accuracy, and continuity, and multiple languages for interpersonal connection to support belonging and ease of contribution. The lingua franca boundary functions as a risk-control device by ensuring that minutes, decisions, and email trails remain stable and comprehensible across roles, units, and campuses. The bounded space for multilingual exchanges recognises that inclusion and comfort are often expressed through familiar greeting forms, idiomatic expressions, and culturally patterned interactional cues.

This mechanism reflects several dimensions of CQ. Cognitive CQ was visible in the shared understanding that formal documents had to be intelligible across linguistic boundaries. Behavioural CQ was enacted through deliberate register shifting, using English for formal artefacts and switching languages more freely during informal interactions. Metacognitive CQ appeared in the judgement about when uniformity was required and when relational, multilingual expression was appropriate. Motivational CQ was reflected in the willingness to accommodate colleagues' linguistic preferences while still protecting the clarity of the shared record.

Two boundary conditions appeared to delimit the effectiveness of this mechanism. The first arose when informal linguistic practices spilled over into formal artefacts. As one participant explained, *"When people start writing minutes in mixed languages, others get lost"* [P5; support]. Under these circumstances, traceability, understood as the ability to track meaning accurately across time and actors, weakened and the distinction between formal and informal communication no longer protected clarity. The second boundary appeared when informal multilingual practices were regulated too tightly. *"If you stop people from using their language even in small talk, they stop talking"* [P9; support]. Over-regulation constrained participation, particularly for second-language speakers who tended to orient into interaction through short, familiar phrases and greeting sequences, often referred to as phatic exchanges, which are brief expressions that establish social connection rather than convey new information.

A workable balance, therefore, involved making the boundary explicit at the outset of the meeting and then reinforcing it through subtle chairing cues whenever slippage became apparent. In this way, formal artefacts remain standardised, while culturally meaningful relational interaction is still allowed in appropriate moments.

Overall, the formal–informal language boundary operationalised CQ by securing clarity in formal communication while maintaining dignity and comfort in interpersonal exchanges. Participants consistently linked this boundary to more accessible records, improved voice behaviours, and more stable co-ordination. In this sense, culturally intelligent language practices appeared to support both procedural coherence and interpersonal inclusion within multicultural project teams.

4.4.4 Sub-theme 1.4: Safety before speed

Sub-theme 1.4 reflects a deliberate communicative practice in which teams prioritise a face-safe environment, understood here as interactional conditions that protect dignity and minimise embarrassment, over speed in order to surface misunderstandings early. Face-risk refers to the interpersonal risk of appearing unprepared, uninformed, or incompetent in the presence of others, particularly in multilingual and hierarchical settings. Participants described intentional efforts to lower this risk so that members feel able to ask questions, clarify expectations, and disclose uncertainty without negative social consequences.

“Build an environment where questions ... can be asked without fear of offence” [P4; academic] demonstrates the importance of explicitly licensing inquiry as part of routine interaction. Another participant illustrated the barrier clearly: *“People may hesitate to admit they don’t understand ... fear of seeming incompetent”* [P9; support], underscoring how face-risk can suppress genuine alignment. Participants emphasised the value of predictability in signalling openness. *“Explicit clarification ... and creating space to share would help”* [P9; support] reflects the desire for structured moments in which uncertainty can be addressed directly.

Additional accounts illustrated how silence is often misread as agreement. *“Sometimes people nod, but they are actually lost”* [P6; support], showing how apparent alignment can mask misunderstanding. Another participant described the interpersonal burden of asking for clarification in a multilingual environment: *“Asking again feels risky when English is not your strongest language”* [P7; support]. These observations highlighted that the problem was not only cognitive but also social. In such contexts, routine-based mechanisms that deliberately reduce the social cost of seeking clarity become important for day-to-day functioning.

Read together, the data pointed to a relatively straightforward mechanism: lowering interpersonal risk improved informational accuracy. First, participants recognised that in multilingual and status-layered settings, silence could not automatically be taken as a sign of comprehension. Without explicit permission to query, second-language speakers and junior members tended to limit their questions so as not to expose themselves. Second, teams tried to create “affordances” for

clarification, that is, brief, predictable opportunities that made it easier to reduce uncertainty without drawing unwanted attention. Examples included invitations to state expectations out loud, short pauses to ask ‘*Any corrections?*’, or chair-led prompts that actively encouraged participants to raise concerns. Third, these opportunities were usually time-bounded and placed at specific points, for example after goal statements, procedural instructions, or complex hand-offs, so that clarification could happen without derailing the meeting entirely.

Importantly, psychological safety was anchored not only in tone but also in shared responsibility. Chairpersons were expected to model query-friendly behaviour by asking their own clarification questions and responding neutrally when others did so. At the same time, participants were explicitly tasked with raising constraints or non-negotiable conditions that might affect delivery. Through this joint responsibility, teams maintained what several participants referred to as the working frame, namely the shared and mutually validated understanding of objectives, constraints, and required actions. When this working frame was actively negotiated rather than assumed, teams reported fewer downstream surprises and less need for remedial work.

This mechanism aligned closely with CQ dimensions. Motivational CQ was visible in individuals’ willingness to engage across differences, even when querying involved social risk. Metacognitive CQ appeared in the ability to notice when clarification was needed and to insert an appropriate opportunity for it, for example by pausing at a hand-over point. Behavioural CQ was demonstrated through the use of neutral, low-pressure invitations such as ‘*Any corrections?*’ or ‘*State your expectations*’, together with non-penalising responses when uncertainty was voiced. In practice, these behavioural moves translated cultural sensitivity into concrete interactional habits.

Two boundary conditions limit the effectiveness of the mechanism. The first concerns the need for visible modelling by senior staff. Without such modelling, signals of openness can appear rhetorical, and participants revert to self-censorship. The second boundary appears when the concept of safety is misapplied as permission to disregard standards or timelines; in such cases, momentum suffers, and the mechanism becomes counterproductive. Safety before speed, therefore, requires balance: it must remain safety in service of clarity, not safety at the expense of co-ordination.

Overall, prioritising safety over speed operationalises CQ by transforming potential face threats into structured opportunities for shared meaning. By incorporating brief, predictable clarification points and normalising expectation-sharing, teams co-construct understanding rather than assuming it. Participants consistently linked this mechanism to fewer misunderstandings, steadier hand-offs, and improved day-to-day working relationships, demonstrating how culturally intelligent climates enhance both team dynamics and delivery reliability

4.5 Theme 2: Inclusivity through leadership and representation

Inclusivity through leadership and representation converts authority and due process into practical mechanisms for voice, legitimacy, and disciplined follow-through. The theme unfolds through three sub-themes that operate as a coherent routine: *Multi-level representation* (curating who is in the room and who is brought into the room, so that perspectives shape design and not merely symbolise diversity), *Diplomatic boundaries* (pairing anticipatory protocol literacy with calmly enforced institutional limits to protect dignity and standards), and *Policy as a fairness guardrail* (translating values into inspectable expectations that prevent convenience dominance, that is, situations where the preferences or habitual practices of the most powerful or administratively convenient group override equitable participation and stabilise participation).

4.5.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Multi-level representation

Sub-theme 2.1 captured a deliberate practice through which project teams thought quite carefully about who was present in decision-making spaces, and who was brought in at particular points in the process. In this regard, representation was treated as part of the design of the work itself rather than as a symbolic gesture. Participants repeatedly described representation as a way of widening the range of perspectives in the room, strengthening legitimacy, and, in a more practical sense, improving the quality of decisions.

“On large rollouts, I ensure representation from different campuses ... their input shaped how we adapted approaches” [P1; support] illustrated internal representation as a design tool. Here, the presence of colleagues from different campuses not only signalled inclusivity, but it also changed the details of what was decided, for example, how approaches were sequenced or adjusted. Another participant reinforced this point: *“Having someone there from the unit affected changes how you think about the process”* [P5; support]. This comment showed how the internal voice could shift both the framing of a problem and the content of the eventual solution.

Representation also acted as a kind of credibility anchor. *“When stakeholders saw they were represented ... it increased trust and legitimacy”* [P1; support] captured how the visible presence of relevant constituencies signalled that the process was procedurally fair. A second perspective emphasised what followed afterwards: *“People support the rollout more when they see their own people helped shape it”* [P9; support]. In this sense, representation was linked to lower resistance and fewer escalations, because staff recognised that people who understood their context had been involved in shaping the outcome.

Teams further described a type of external bridging, where insights from other institutions or professional communities fed back into local practice. *“We built a broad community ... including other universities locally and internationally”* [P3; support] highlighted how comparative learning helped to counter an inward-looking, campus-only focus. Another participant noted, *“We asked colleagues at another campus what worked for them so we don’t repeat mistakes”* [P2; support], suggesting that drawing on external perspectives reduced the risk of narrow or purely context-bound solutions.

In combination, these accounts depict multi-level representation as an intentional mechanism with three interrelated functions. First, the internal voice ensures that members from different campuses, operational units, or professional categories contribute to various aspects of the solution. Their presence influences communication plans, design specifications, training content, and workflow sequencing. Second, visible representation signals fairness to those who must work with or be governed by an outcome. Such visibility reduces perceptions of exclusion and strengthens the social licence needed to implement change. Third, external bridging expands the team’s learning horizon, allowing them to draw on comparative experience, alternative framings, and practical precedents that enhance design quality.

This mechanism reflects several CQ dimensions. Cognitive CQ is demonstrated in understanding stakeholder ecologies and recognising whose presence is necessary for decisions to gain legitimacy. Behavioural CQ is enacted in the concrete acts of inviting, authorising, and integrating diverse voices into the design process. Metacognitive CQ appears in the judgement of when and how to widen the representational circle, for example, during scoping, piloting, or rollout stages. Motivational CQ underpins the sustained effort required to work constructively with differences, even when achieving consensus may be slower.

Two checks refine the limits of this mechanism. First, representation cannot resolve all relational or task-based tensions. *“Issues often arise within the same culture rather than between different ones”* [P3; support] indicates that existing hierarchical or interpersonal dynamics may re-emerge unless supported by facilitation and clear norms for contribution. Second, representation without decision rights fails to achieve its intended effects. *“Cultural days ... low impact if one-offs”* [P4; academic] highlights how symbolic activities without substantive influence do not build legitimacy and may generate cynicism.

Overall, multi-level representation operationalises CQ as both a design tool and a legitimacy mechanism. By ensuring that the appropriate individuals are convened early, empowered to contribute meaningfully, and connected to external sources of insight, the practice improves the quality of decisions and the acceptance of outcomes. Participants consistently linked multi-level

representation to stronger design logic, broader stakeholder buy-in, and reduced resistance, demonstrating how CQ-informed leadership enhances team dynamics, decision quality, and implementation traction.

4.5.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Diplomatic boundaries

Sub-theme 2.2 reflects a deliberate practice through which teams manage culturally sensitive interactions by combining diplomacy with clearly held boundaries. In this context, diplomacy referred to tactful engagement that sought to preserve dignity in the moment, while boundaries pointed to institutional or ethical limits that could not simply be adjusted away. Participants described how culturally intelligent practice, in their experience, meant anticipating where misunderstandings might arise and preparing people beforehand through short pre-briefings, that is, preparatory conversations that clarified expectations before an encounter took place.

A support participant illustrated this quite concretely: *“Visiting dignitaries declined to shake women’s hands ... pre-briefings could have prevented misunderstanding”* [P5; support]. This quotation demonstrates protocol literacy, meaning awareness of cultural norms and the ability to anticipate points of friction, such as greeting conventions, forms of address, or gendered expectations. Another participant highlighted the role of hierarchy in navigating these encounters: *“Decisions are often channelled through senior figures ... respecting boundaries is key”* [P7; support], a perspective that shows how recognising institutional authority structures enables constructive rather than obstructive collaboration.

Participants also emphasised the normative frame that guides boundary-setting in public institutions. *“Public institutions must respect everyone’s space, even when disagreements exist”* [P5; support] indicates that inclusivity does not entail unlimited accommodation. Instead, it involved structured engagement in which the dignity of all parties was preserved, while organisational values and non-negotiables remained steady. A further comment underlined the value of explicitness under conditions of cultural difference: *“When people know what the limits are, it’s easier to work together”* [P2; support]. Here, clarity about boundaries was experienced as enabling, not restrictive.

Seen in combination, these accounts suggested a two-step mechanism. First, anticipatory diplomacy involved identifying likely pressure points, such as greeting rituals, dietary or faith-related practices, or expectations around seniority, and then preparing both hosts and guests through brief, neutral pre-briefs. These establish ‘what good looks like’ and reduce the likelihood of surprise or offence. Second, boundary-holding occurs when institutional principles, such as

gender dignity, safeguarding, or decision-making rights, are applied. These limits are communicated early, in neutral language, and enacted consistently. This approach is not deference; it is calibrated accommodation, which means adjusting appropriately while retaining essential standards.

Participants described how these practices prevent escalation. One support participant noted: *“If you explain beforehand, people don’t take offence—they know why you are doing it”* [P6; support]. Another explained how structured escalation protects both respect and clarity: *“You can disagree, but you follow the right channel so it is taken seriously”* [P3; support]. These observations point to the traceability of challenge, defined as the ability to record, revisit, and act upon dissent constructively.

This mechanism reflects several CQ dimensions operating at the same time. Cognitive CQ is visible in understanding relevant cultural protocols alongside organisational constraints. Behavioural CQ appears in enacting respectful alternatives in practice, for example, substituting a handshake with a verbal greeting or adjusting forms of address to fit the context. Metacognitive CQ is evident in the timing and design of pre-briefs, as well as in the judgment of when a line must be drawn rather than negotiated further. Motivational CQ underpins the willingness to maintain composure and to uphold standards when situations are potentially sensitive or emotionally charged.

Two boundary conditions emerge from the data. First, diplomacy without clear limits can weaken accountability. One participant observed that *“If leaders insist on authority without understanding the work, it creates confusion”* [P7; support], implying that tactful language cannot replace substantive clarity and competence. Second, symbolic gestures alone do not generate substantive inclusion. *“Cultural days ... low impact if one-offs”* [P4; academic] suggests that diversity events have limited value if they are not linked to ongoing influence over decisions and everyday practices.

Overall, diplomatic boundaries operationalise CQ by combining respect for cultural difference with consistent adherence to institutional norms. Teams prevent avoidable offence through targeted pre-briefing and use respectful alternatives where needed, while simultaneously upholding essential standards so that roles, decisions, and expectations remain clear. Participants linked this mechanism to fewer protocol-related misunderstandings, clearer pathways for voice, and greater trust in the process, demonstrating how CQ-informed leadership stabilises collaboration and supports effective project delivery in diverse settings.

4.5.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Policy as a fairness guardrail

Sub-theme 2.3 reflects the patterned use of organisational values, policies, and procedural codes as fairness guardrails, that is, structural mechanisms that make inclusive participation a routine expectation rather than something that depends on individual goodwill or dominant cultural norms. In the interviews, participants described policy not only as a compliance instrument, but as an enabling structure that distributes voice and clarifies expectations in advance.

“Shared values ... policies help prevent one culture from dominating” [P5; support] illustrated how formal values statements and policy frameworks worked as explicit counterweights to majority-default behaviour. Another participant stressed that inclusivity should be woven into everyday work, not only highlighted on special occasions: *“Inclusivity is important, not only in projects, but also in meetings and everyday activities”* [P3; support]. A further account reinforced this point: *“Policies guide who should be in the meeting so no one feels left out”* [P2; support]. In this way, structural rules shaped who sat around the table and, indirectly, whose concerns and perspectives were likely to be heard.

Taken as a whole, these accounts suggest that policy functions both as a signal and as a scaffold. As a signal, values statements, representational norms, and codes of conduct set out the organisation’s non-negotiables, such as equitable participation, respectful challenge, and the expectation that communication is accessible, often through the use of a shared working language. As a scaffold, the associated procedural expectations translate these commitments into routine practices, for example how agendas are compiled, how decisions are recorded, how dissent is raised, and how stakeholders are invited or represented when issues affect them.

The mechanism is preventative rather than primarily punitive. Clear policy narrows the discretionary space in which exclusionary practices can develop, for instance, informal gatekeeping, selective information-sharing, or the formation of linguistically homogeneous sub-groups that make others feel peripheral. By standardising processes through minutes templates, representation rules, and formalised escalation routes, policy reduces reliance on individual champions and supports continuity when project roles change. Participants also highlighted the value of auditability: *“When the process is the same each time, it is easier to see when something is missing”* [P7; support]. Here, consistency makes gaps visible, allowing teams to correct procedural drift before it becomes entrenched.

This pattern reflects several CQ dimensions. Cognitive CQ appears in understanding which structural levers, such as codes, meeting norms, or decision pathways, enable equitable engagement across cultural lines. Behavioural CQ is enacted through the consistent application

of these structures in daily interactions, rather than only at formal milestones. Metacognitive CQ is visible in determining when codification is necessary (for example, in language expectations or representation rules) and when reinforcement is required. Motivational CQ supports sustained adherence to inclusive norms even under operational pressure.

Two cautions refine the mechanism's boundaries. First, a policy without routine enactment has a limited effect. "*Cultural days ... low impact if one-offs*" [P4; academic] demonstrates that symbolic events or displayed value statements do not substitute for embedding expectations in daily workflows. Second, policy alone cannot generate CQ. "*CQ cannot be created by policy alone*" [P6; support] signals that structures must be accompanied by modelling, facilitation, and clarification practices (as described in Theme 1 and Sub-theme 2.1). Without these, compliance becomes performative and informal exclusion persists.

Overall, policy-as-fairness-guardrail operationalises CQ by translating inclusivity from an aspirational value into a predictable, enforceable routine. By codifying representation norms, decision-making pathways, and communication expectations, organisations move equitable participation from a preference to a practice. Participants linked this mechanism to reduced gatekeeping, clearer expectations, and more legitimate participation, demonstrating how CQ-informed structures stabilise team dynamics and enhance implementation reliability.

4.6 Theme 3: Cultural adaptation and emotional literacy

This theme highlights the micro-adjustments through which teams convert potentially fragile, status-laden, or problematic second-language encounters into workable collaborations. The theme unfolds across four interlocking sub-themes: *Situated tailoring* (role, locale, faith/diet), where messages, logistics, and recognition cues are fitted to audience and setting; *Tempo and tone calibration*, where pace is briefly modulated and disagreement reframed to preserve comprehension and dignity; *Private-then-public repair*, where sensitive misalignment is corrected in low-exposure spaces and then normalised neutrally in plenary; and *Narrative and exemplar alignment*, where visuals, benchmarks, and stories externalise meaning so that groups move from positions to shared pictures.

4.6.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Situated tailoring (role, locale, faith/diet)

Sub-theme 3.1 reflects a patterned practice through which teams adjust what is communicated and how it is delivered based on the composition of the audience and the setting in which interaction occurs. Participants described tailoring along three primary axes (role group, locale,

and faith/dietary observance) so that messages, logistical arrangements, and recognition cues align with, rather than work against, contextual features.

Role-sensitive tailoring was evident in the adjustment of delivery to different professional groups. *“Adapting approaches for different user groups—academic staff, support staff ...”* [P1; support] illustrates how communication is framed differently for academics, whose work is often structured around epistemic autonomy, and support professionals, who orient towards service reliability, timelines, and risk management. Another participant elaborated on this distinction: *“Academics think differently; you can’t brief them the same as operations”* [P5; support], which suggests that framing, examples, and even the way requests are formulated need to match the audience’s everyday working logic if they are to gain traction.

Locale-sensitive tailoring brings place-specific knowledge into design decisions in a deliberate way. *“We brought in people familiar with local campus cultures ... their input shaped how we adapted”* [P1; support] shows how local language habits, student profiles, and campus legacies serve as design information rather than noise. Another participant explained: *“Each campus has its own way of doing things; timing and tone must match”* [P7; support], demonstrating how adjustments to scheduling, communication channels, and forms of address improve acceptance and comprehension.

A third axis of tailoring concerned faith- or dietary-based observances, which participants framed as practical rather than symbolic. *“Accommodating dietary preferences ... culturally inclusive activities”* [P8; academic] demonstrates how small logistical decisions signal respect and support participation. Another noted, *“We plan around prayer times so no one feels excluded”* [P6; support], showing how routine observances are incorporated into planning to reduce friction.

Taken together, these accounts evidence situated design rather than generic rollout. Along the role axis, tailoring ensures that teams present information using value propositions and examples that resonate with distinct professional groups. Along the locale axis, local representatives provide continuous input that refines timing, channel selection, and interactional norms, resulting in design choices that are contextually appropriate. Along the faith/diet axis, practical accommodations, such as menu adjustments, prayer breaks, and event timing, remove low-level barriers to entry and signal that participation is anticipated and supported.

Mechanistically, tailoring reduces cognitive dissonance (the misalignment between a message and audience expectations) and identity dissonance (the misalignment between practices and individuals’ cultural norms). When messages arrive in a familiar register, and logistical arrangements align with everyday realities, participants are less likely to withdraw silently or view

the intervention as misaligned with local conditions. As one participant noted: *“People engage more when it feels like it was designed with them in mind”* [P2; support].

This mechanism reflects multiple CQ dimensions. Cognitive CQ appears in understanding audience roles, local histories, and observances well enough to identify where tailoring is needed. Behavioural CQ is enacted through the adjustment of examples, communication channels, schedules, and protocols in concrete interactions rather than only in high-level plans. Metacognitive CQ is evident in deciding which tailoring axis is most relevant in a given interaction and how far adaptation should go. Motivational CQ is reflected in the willingness to invest the additional preparation that tailoring requires, even under time pressure.

Two constraints, however, delimit the scope of this mechanism. First, tailoring can become counterproductive when it extends beyond appropriate boundaries. *“There is a risk of over-compensating ... a pendulum effect”* [P4; academic] indicates that adaptation must remain consistent with non-negotiable standards such as quality, safety, and organisational integrity; otherwise, the underlying purpose of the project is diluted. Second, not all cultural cues warrant emphasis in every setting. *“Don’t constantly emphasise cultural differences ... context determines when to highlight CQ”* [P8; academic] signals that an excessive focus on cultural distinction can start to obscure task clarity. In this sense, discretion in when and how to tailor forms part of the capability itself.

Overall, situated tailoring operationalises CQ by aligning message, register, and logistics with the specific roles, locales, and observances present in the team. Participants linked this practice to higher comprehension, reduced resistance, improved attendance, and more consistent adoption of project decisions. In this way, CQ-informed adjustments support co-ordination and strengthen implementation traction in multicultural project environments.

4.6.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Tempo and tone calibration

Sub-theme 3.2 captures a disciplined communicative practice through which team members adjust their pace and tone in order to maintain comprehension and uphold interpersonal dignity in multicultural interactions. In this regard, participants described how tempo, understood as the speed at which information is delivered, and tone, understood as the manner or affective quality of verbal communication, are not left to habit. Rather, they are consciously modulated to protect clarity and to encourage constructive engagement.

“Slower pace ... deeper integration of ideas” [P8; academic] showed how deliberate deceleration supported comprehension, particularly when discussions became complex or involved several

functional areas. By slowing down, participants gave one another time to process new information and to connect it with their own responsibilities. Another participant explained the cognitive basis for this deceleration: *“Switching to English ... a lag in thinking and efficiency”* [P4; academic]. This remark pointed to second-language processing load, where additional time is required for encoding, interpretation, and formulating a response. Taken together, these comments indicated that a slower cadence did not simply “drag out” meetings but helped to reduce silent misalignment and improve the accuracy of shared understanding.

Tone calibration also emerged as important for sustaining participation. *“Challenging constructively rather than confrontationally”* [P8; academic] illustrated how queries and dissent were framed in neutral, non-threatening formulations so that face-risk remained limited, especially for junior members and second-language speakers. A further comment added a practical dimension: *“You can correct someone without embarrassing them”* [P6; support]. This emphasised that a respectful tone made it possible to surface necessary clarification or disagreement, while still preserving the dignity of the person being challenged.

In conjunction, these extracts point to a calibrate-to-clarify pattern. First, pace is adjusted to reflect cognitive and linguistic realities, rather than the tempo implied by the agenda alone. Short, purposeful moments of slowing down, such as pausing after new requirements, taking more time during complex hand-offs, or inviting a brief reflection before a decision, create space for tacit uncertainty to become explicit questions. Second, tone is managed in a deliberate way. Participants reported using neutral phrasing such as *“Help me understand how X fits Y”* to frame a challenge as a contribution rather than a personal attack, which helps to sustain voice and reduce defensiveness. Third, tempo and tone operate together. A moderated pace opens conversational space within which constructive challenge can occur; constructive challenge, expressed in a measured tone, reduces the likelihood of escalation and allows the group to move forward with clearer alignment.

This pattern reflects several CQ dimensions. Metacognitive CQ appears in the judgement of when to slow down, when it is appropriate to move on, and how firmly to pitch a disagreement in a given moment. Behavioural CQ is enacted through rephrasing, timing pauses, and adopting neutral formulations that lower face-threat in practice, not only in principle. Cognitive CQ underpins awareness of the demands associated with second-language processing and with respectful communication in multicultural settings. Motivational CQ is visible in the willingness to exchange some immediate speed for longer-term clarity, even when time pressures are present, and it might be easier to “push through”.

Two boundary conditions qualify this practice. First, over-accommodation can weaken standards. *“There is a risk of over-compensating ... a pendulum”* [P4; academic] suggests that adjustments in tempo and tone must remain within non-negotiables such as quality, safety, and ethical requirements; calibration cannot result in avoiding difficult decisions or lowering expectations. Second, some contexts, for example crisis decision-making or situations of entrenched resistance, allow limited tolerance for extended deliberation. In such instances, teams described using a shortened calibration routine: a brief pause for clarification, followed by a precise summary or a decision log entry, in order to restore momentum while still protecting basic understanding.

Overall, tempo and tone calibration operationalise CQ by aligning communicative delivery with cognitive load and cultural expectations, thereby protecting comprehension and interpersonal dignity. Participants linked this practice to fewer escalations, clearer decision-making pathways, and steadier hand-offs. In this sense, CQ-informed modulation of pace and tone forms part of the everyday discipline through which multicultural project teams sustain co-ordination and continuity.

4.6.3 Sub-theme 3.3: Private-then-public repair

Sub-theme 3.3 reflects a structured interactional practice through which teams correct misunderstandings in low-exposure settings before returning the clarified position to the wider group. This approach protects interpersonal dignity, particularly in hierarchical, gendered, or multilingual environments, by ensuring that points of disagreement or error are addressed without placing individuals at reputational risk.

“Address respectfully, often one on one” [P8; academic] illustrates the preferred initial forum for addressing sensitive issues. A second contribution reinforces the procedural logic: *“Address issues in smaller groups to avoid exposing individuals”* [P8; academic], pointing to the use of small-group settings as safe spaces for calibration. The risk underlying these practices was noted clearly by another participant: *“Questioning leaders ... can cause offence”* [P7; support], suggesting that when concerns are raised with those in authority in an open forum, this may provoke defensiveness and, in turn, dampen people’s willingness to speak up.

Viewed collectively, these extracts show a repair-then-re-enter mechanism. First, the initial corrective move typically takes place privately, usually in a one-to-one or very small-group conversation, where pace, tone, and framing can be calibrated to the interlocutor’s comfort and status. This is particularly important where face-risk (the perceived risk of embarrassment or diminished standing) makes public correction difficult. Second, the private exchange is framed as co-sense-making, using phrasing such as ‘Help me understand...’ to encourage explanation or

reframing without penalty. Third, once alignment is reached, the clarified understanding re-enters the public forum through a neutral summary, such as ‘For clarity, we will proceed as follows...’, or a brief written back-brief or decision log. This step ensures that bilateral repair becomes a shared resource, preventing knowledge asymmetries between participants who were present in the private discussion and those who were not.

The sequencing performs dual work: it avoids the interpersonal strain associated with public confrontation, while ensuring that the wider team inherits a clear and accurate working frame. As one participant explained, *“Fix it offline, then bring it back without making it personal”* [P6; support], demonstrating how this practice preserves both momentum and cohesion. Another added, *“After you align privately, the group moves on more easily”* [P2; support], highlighting its effect on continuity.

This mechanism reflects several CQ dimensions. Metacognitive CQ is evident in the judgment that an interaction requires a shift into a private setting, and in the planning of how and when to reintroduce the clarified position to the plenary space. Behavioural CQ appears in the micro-moves used to execute the sequence, such as a softened tone in the private conversation, careful phrasing that separates the issue from the person, and neutral public summaries that avoid attribution. Cognitive CQ is reflected in knowledge of local status codes, offence triggers, and preferred interactional norms, which inform decisions about who should be approached, by whom, and in what manner. Motivational CQ underpins the willingness to undertake this additional, largely invisible work of quiet repair, rather than opting for faster but more exposing forms of correction.

Two boundary conditions qualify the scope of this mechanism. First, private repair must not be allowed to evolve into private rule-making. If outcomes are not promptly normalised in the wider group, or recorded in the artefact system, corrections can appear opaque and give rise to perceptions of exclusion or ‘decisions behind closed doors’. Second, privacy should not be used as a substitute for accountability. In cases involving repeated boundary breaches or ongoing misalignment, calmly facilitated public correction may be more appropriate, as it signals shared norms and protects the integrity of the collective process.

Overall, private-then-public repair operationalises CQ by combining respect for interpersonal dignity with transparent, collective realignment. By addressing sensitive issues in low-exposure settings and then returning the clarification to the group in neutral form, teams sustain trust while maintaining a shared working frame. Participants consistently linked this practice to fewer escalations, clearer expectations, and smoother task progression, indicating that CQ-informed sequencing strengthens co-ordination and continuity in multicultural project environments.

4.6.4 Sub-theme 3.4: Narrative and exemplar alignment

Sub-theme 3.4 reflects a situated practice through which teams resolve conceptual ambiguity by externalising meaning. Rather than relying solely on verbal explanation, team members bring the concept 'into view' by using visuals, comparative exemplars, and brief narratives. In doing so, they move from individually held interpretations towards a shared working definition that is visible, discussable, and open to collective refinement.

One participant noted “...using visuals, benchmarking examples, and pre-agreed ground rules” [P7; support], which illustrates how multimodal tools are used to clarify abstract ideas. These tools include simple diagrams, workflow sketches, or schematic models, combined with concrete examples of acceptable practice and clear operational rules. Another participant described how comparative framing can convert contested ideas into workable standards: “*Reconcile different definitions of privacy ... robust ethical solution*” [P7; support]. Here, side-by-side comparison allows the team to place different understandings of a sensitive concept, such as privacy, next to one another, and to work towards a negotiated position that is experienced as robust rather than imposed.

Narrative also plays a role in reducing misunderstanding. “*German nuns ... worked continuously; African nuns ... conversation and jokes ... each side saw the other as misguided*” [P8; academic] exemplifies how short stories are used to surface the value logics that sit behind behaviour. In this account, the narrative functions as a reframing device: it externalises the different assumptions (continuous productivity versus relational interaction) so that members can see the source of disagreement without allocating blame. Another participant reinforced this point: “*Stories help people see where the other group is coming from*” [P3; support], indicating that narrative supports interpretive empathy by making another group's reasoning intelligible.

Collectively, these accounts point to a depict → compare → codify mechanism. First, the team depicts the concept through a visual artefact, such as a diagram, mock-up, or schematic representation. This externalisation creates a shared reference point that anchors discussion and reduces the abstraction of the topic. Second, the team compares this depiction with relevant benchmarks, drawing on internal or external exemplars to calibrate expectations and distinguish acceptable from unacceptable variations. In this way, benchmarking helps to translate general ideals into operational thresholds (for example, 'closer to A than B' or 'acceptable if it meets X or Y'). Third, once convergence is reached, the team codifies the outcome through a short, neutral definition, a ground rule, or an entry in the decision log. Codification allows the aligned interpretation to persist across hand-offs and reduces the likelihood of later re-litigation,

understood here as the unnecessary reopening of previously agreed decisions because meanings have become misaligned over time.

This mechanism enacts multiple dimensions of CQ. Cognitive CQ is visible in understanding the value logics, cultural schemas, and interpretive frames brought by different groups. Behavioural CQ appears in producing visuals, selecting appropriate exemplars, and using reframing narratives that clarify rather than polarise. Metacognitive CQ is demonstrated in determining which medium (visual, benchmark, or narrative) will resonate with a particular audience at a given moment. Motivational CQ underpins the willingness to invest additional time in aligning interpretations before proceeding.

Two limitations qualify the mechanism. First, visuals or stories used without subsequent codification lack traction. As one participant remarked in a related context, “*Cultural days ... low impact if one-offs*” [P4; academic], indicating that representational artefacts must be embedded within a routine of decision capture to have effect. Second, poorly chosen narratives or exemplars can reinforce stereotypes rather than generate insight. When a story essentialises group behaviour or elevates a prestigious comparator uncritically, the mechanism reverses: instead of opening interpretive perspectives, it narrows them. The effective middle ground is careful selection of visuals and examples that fit the audience and immediate task, followed by prompt codification to stabilise the shared picture.

Overall, narrative and exemplar alignment operationalise CQ by making meaning visible, thereby reducing interpretive ambiguity and interpersonal tension. By depicting contested concepts, benchmarking them against relevant examples, and codifying the agreed-upon definition, teams move from individual positions to a single, intelligible reference point that can be applied across the project’s ecosystem. Participants linked this mechanism to faster convergence, reduced misunderstanding, and improved design quality, demonstrating how CQ-informed ‘showing and comparing’ enhances team dynamics and decision clarity in multicultural project environments.

4.7 Theme 4: CQ as a strategic and institutional imperative

CQ as a strategic and institutional imperative translates CQ from individual discretion into auditable routines that stabilise participation, pace, and quality. The theme unfolds through four mutually reinforcing sub-themes: *Everyday CQ infrastructure*, which embeds lean, repeatable habits and forums so inclusion is enacted in every meeting, recap, and hand-off; *Convene and correct*, which collocates the right parties to clarify contested specifications and captures the fix in portable artefacts; *Learning-first stance*, which normalises friction, converts it into insight, and

locks gains into the delivery system; and *Goal-centred discipline*, which protects non-negotiable outputs while legitimising plurality in method as freedom within a frame. Together, the sub-themes show how strategy-level commitments and institutional routines make CQ durable: they specify where and when these practices are enacted, ensure corrections are captured and communicated across the system, and align effort to shared outcomes without erasing differences.

4.7.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Everyday CQ infrastructure

Sub-theme 4.1 reflects how teams embed culturally intelligent behaviours into the ordinary rhythm of work so that inclusivity becomes a predictable and observable feature of everyday interaction rather than an aspirational ideal. In this sense, participants locate CQ less in once-off campaigns or flagship projects and more in the ordinary rhythm of how people speak to one another, start a meeting, close a discussion, or record a decision.

“Inclusivity is important, not only in projects, but also in meetings and everyday activities” [P3; support] illustrates that CQ is expected to be present in routine forums, not just on formal ‘diversity’ occasions. Another participant emphasised the structural side of this work: *“CQ should be embedded in institutional frameworks and strategic imperatives”* [P5; support]. Here, routinisation is not seen as a matter of personal goodwill alone; it requires anchoring in agendas, procedures, and expectations so that it does not depend on one or two committed individuals. Everyday behaviours were described as particularly stabilising. *“Simple basics: on time, respectful greeting, equal treatment, make the biggest difference”* [P6; support] suggests that ordinary courtesies, when they are applied consistently, help to sustain equitable participation across hierarchies and language groups.

Participants also pointed to specific, small practices that shape daily interaction. *“Start meetings with a quick check-in; then everyone feels part of it”* [P2; support] illustrates how a brief opening round normalises voice from the outset and makes it easier for people to speak later in the discussion. Another participant noted, *“Short recaps help keep us aligned, especially across campuses”* [P1; support]. In that account, routine clarification at the end of a discussion, even if it is only a short summary, prevents misunderstandings and supports shared interpretation in distributed teams.

Taken together, these accounts indicate a mechanism of habitualisation combined with structured venues. First, inclusive routines are placed at predictable points in the workflow, for example at the start of the agenda, at transitions between items, when a decision is captured, and when a meeting closes. In this way, inclusion becomes a standard step in the process rather than a

discretionary extra that depends on the mood in the room. Second, the routines themselves remain purposefully modest: a short greeting, consistent turn-taking, explicit invitations to quieter contributors, and concise written back-briefs after key decisions. Their influence lies in repetition. Because these practices recur, they reduce uncertainty, signal what is expected, and create a social contract that is legible to newcomers, junior staff, and second-language speakers. Third, the routines are designed to be efficient. Their brevity keeps CQ practices manageable in settings where time and attention are constrained, which makes it more likely that people will still follow them when pressure increases. Fourth, institutional anchoring strengthens sustainability. When agendas, minutes templates, decision registers, and chairing guidelines encode these practices, CQ becomes part of the system rather than a reflection of one person's style. As one participant observed, *"If the process stays the same, it's easier for everyone to know when to speak and when things will be decided"* [P7; support]. Standardisation, in this sense, supports clarity and lowers participation barriers.

This pattern reflects several CQ dimensions. Metacognitive CQ appears in the deliberate structuring of when and where inclusive behaviours should occur, rather than leaving them to chance. Behavioural CQ is enacted in the routines themselves: greeting protocols, patterns of turn-taking, invitations to contribute, and short recaps that close the communication loop. Cognitive CQ is visible in participants' emphasis on clear communication and on artefacts (minutes, decision logs) that can be shared across teams and campuses without losing meaning. Motivational CQ underpins the consistency with which these routines are applied, especially when competing demands make it tempting to skip steps in order to move faster.

Two conditions qualify this mechanism. First, policy without routine enactment has limited effect. As one participant cautioned, *"CQ cannot be created by policy alone"* [P6; support]. Values statements or isolated campaigns do not translate into equitable practice unless they are carried through into everyday interactions. Second, routine without purpose risks slipping into procedural formality. If templates or rituals are used without a clear link to functional outcomes, such as clarity, shareability, or predictable next steps, people tend to comply superficially, and the inclusion signal weakens. Participants' descriptions suggest that effectiveness depends on brief routines that are tied to tangible operational pay-offs, rather than on expanding the administrative burden.

Overall, everyday CQ infrastructure turns CQ from an individual disposition into a system habit, a stable operating rhythm that supports reliability in multicultural project environments. By embedding small, repeatable behaviours into the cadence of meetings and hand-offs, teams make participation more predictable and accountability more inspectable. Participants linked

these routines to steadier engagement, clearer ownership, fewer escalations, and a smoother progression from discussion to execution, indicating that routinised practice strengthens both team dynamics and delivery reliability.

4.7.2 Sub-theme 4.2: Convene and correct

Sub-theme 4.2 reflects a structured practice through which teams bring the relevant parties together, either physically or virtually, to identify and resolve misunderstandings before they propagate through the project. Convening functions here as a purposeful forum in which clarification is achieved collectively, so that contested specifications are corrected while the issue is still contained and manageable.

“Hold sit-down sessions with users and providers to clarify requirements” [P2; support] illustrates the value of replacing extended asynchronous exchanges, which are often prone to misinterpretation, with real-time, multi-party discussion. In the same account, the action component of this practice was made explicit: *“If a service provider misunderstands ... revisit specifications”* [P2; support], indicating that convening was expected to result not only in talk, but in concrete re-specification. Participant 1 described the desired outcome as avoiding content being *“lost in translation”* [P1; support], a phrase used to denote the risk that definitions or requirements may shift unintentionally across roles, systems, or language backgrounds.

When viewed in conjunction, these accounts point to a convene → clarify → codify mechanism. First, teams recognise that there is a point at which asynchronous channels, such as email chains or distributed comments in documents, are no longer sufficient to resolve interdependent misunderstandings, particularly where users, vendors, or cross-functional partners are involved. At that point, a short, structured session is convened with all relevant interfaces present. Second, the session is organised around the contested artefact itself: a definition, data field, workflow step, or requirement, rather than around general discussion. Participants compare interpretations, surface assumptions, and work towards a clarified version that all parties can accept. Third, the clarified outcome is captured immediately in plain language, for example as an amended specification, an updated requirement, or a concise decision log entry. In this way, downstream teams inherit a stable and intelligible framework, rather than a patchwork of partial understandings.

Participants emphasised the efficiency of this approach. *“An hour together saves days of fixing later”* [P6; support], one participant observed, suggesting that concentrated clarification prevents cycles of rework and repeated escalation. Another added, *“Once everyone hears the same*

explanation, it settles quickly” [P3; support], demonstrating that co-location, whether physical or virtual, supports rapid convergence and reduces the risk of parallel but inconsistent understandings forming in different parts of the system. By anchoring the outcome in a shareable artefact, such as a revised requirement or a decision log entry, teams also prevent renewed disagreement when the issue resurfaces at a later stage.

This mechanism engages multiple CQ dimensions. Metacognitive CQ appears in recognising when distributed communication has reached its limit and when a convergence forum is required. Behavioural CQ is reflected in what happens inside the convened session: direct clarification, careful rephrasing, and the collaborative redrafting of the contested item. Cognitive CQ is evident in identifying which stakeholders, data owners, or decision-makers need to be present so that the issue can be genuinely resolved. Motivational CQ underpins the willingness to temporarily pause forward movement in order to invest in shared clarification, even under pressure to deliver.

Two boundary conditions qualify the mechanism. First, convening without codification is ineffective. If a session ends without a revised definition, recorded change, or clear follow-up note, the convergence remains informal and ambiguity re-enters the workflow. Second, excessive reliance on convened sessions can create unnecessary process overhead. Participants noted that minor ambiguities can often be resolved through a brief written clarification. A balanced pattern, reflected across the data, is to reserve convene-and-correct for substantive mismatches, for example where errors would affect cost, data integrity, safety, or quality, and to ensure that outcomes are promptly captured in the relevant artefact.

Overall, convene-and-correct operationalises CQ as structured convergence: bringing the appropriate parties together, focusing on the contested artefact, arriving at a shared definition, and capturing the outcome in a form that can circulate across the project. Participants associated this mechanism with fewer repeated errors, reduced rework, and more predictable hand-offs, indicating that CQ-informed convergence stabilises team co-ordination and improves delivery quality in multicultural project environments.

4.7.3 Sub-theme 4.3: Learning-first stance

Sub-theme 4.3 reflects a disciplined approach through which teams treat friction and emerging misunderstandings as opportunities for refinement rather than failure points. Participants described an approach that combines an expectation of difficulty, the early identification of issues, and the rapid integration of lessons into the project’s artefacts and routines.

“Projects never go 100% smoothly ... plan for problems” [P1; support] illustrates an explicit expectation of disruption, which removes the stigma associated with error and reduces defensive responses when issues arise. Another participant emphasised the importance of early identification: *“Often, they lead to rework or setbacks ... if caught early, they become learning experiences”* [P2; support], illustrating how timely clarification can convert potential obstacles into opportunities for improvement. A further comment normalised friction as part of ordinary project work: *“They happen in almost every project, at least once or twice”* [P2; support]. Together, these remarks position misunderstanding as routine rather than an exceptional occurrence.

Viewed collectively, the accounts indicate an expect → capture → codify mechanism. First, teams expect areas of potential misunderstanding, such as language misinterpretations, ambiguous role boundaries, or mismatched assumptions between users and vendors, and make these possibilities explicit at the outset. This expectation helps to reduce surprise and supports emotional steadiness when problems surface. Second, teams capture misalignment early through concise debriefs, brief summary checks, or artefact-centred clarifications. These exchanges rely on descriptive rather than accusatory language, which protects psychological safety and encourages honest disclosure. Third, teams codify the learning by updating the relevant artefact, for example by refining a definition, adjusting a process step, or adding an entry in the decision register, so that the refinement becomes visible, shared, and portable across subsequent hand-offs.

Participants consistently described how these micro-learning loops reduce unproductive backtracking. *“A quick correction early saves a lot of time later”* [P6; support] points to the way in which learning-first practices stabilise expectations and reduce rework. Another participant explained the functional value of codification: *“When the lesson is written down, the next team doesn’t repeat the mistake”* [P3; support], underscoring how documented adjustments maintain continuity in distributed project environments.

This pattern reflects several CQ dimensions. Metacognitive CQ is evident in monitoring interactions for weak signals of misunderstanding and in recognising when a brief pause for clarification is required. Behavioural CQ appears in the micro-moves that carry the routine, such as short retrospectives, neutral rewording of definitions, and immediate updates to documents and logs. Cognitive CQ is reflected in understanding where misunderstandings typically arise across cultural and functional boundaries, for example at interfaces between campuses, units, or professional groups. Motivational CQ sustains the willingness to slow the pace momentarily in order to secure clearer alignment and prevent future friction, even when delivery pressures are present.

Two boundary conditions refine the scope of this mechanism. First, a learning orientation must not dilute standards. *“There is a risk of over-compensating ... a pendulum”* [P4; academic] suggests that adjustments should reinforce clarity and quality rather than erode expectations in the name of flexibility. Second, learning structures require observable behavioural follow-through. *“CQ cannot be created by policy alone”* [P6; support] highlights that value statements or reflective exercises, without visible change in practice, risk fostering cynicism instead of trust. In addition, face-risk remains a limiting factor. *“People may hesitate to admit they don’t understand ... fear of seeming incompetent”* [P9; support] indicates that without a face-safe climate, as described under Theme 1.4, early signals of potential misunderstanding may not surface, and the mechanism collapses into avoidance rather than improvement.

Overall, a learning-first stance operationalises CQ as system refinement: teams anticipate areas of potential confusion, address them promptly, and embed the resulting clarification into artefacts that structure future work. Participants link this routine to fewer repeated misunderstandings, more precise requirements, reduced interpersonal strain, and steadier project progression, suggesting that CQ-informed learning loops help to stabilise team dynamics and improve delivery quality in multicultural project environments.

4.7.4 Sub-theme 4.4: Goal-centred discipline

Sub-theme 4.4 reflects a disciplined practice through which teams protect the integrity of shared objectives while allowing variation in method. In this sense, teams hold certain outcomes as fixed, while leaving room for groups or individuals to decide how they will work towards those outcomes in their own settings. Non-negotiables are understood as the essential standards and conditions that must be met for an output to be accepted as complete. This balance between fixed ends and flexible means enables collaboration across culturally diverse and functionally distinct groups without sacrificing delivery quality.

“Creating space for different approaches without compromising deliverables” [P6; support] illustrates how methodological flexibility is intentionally combined with firm expectations regarding outputs, timelines, and decision rights. Another participant emphasised the centring function of shared objectives: *“Focus on the shared goal, without distractions”* [P9; support]. Here, the team routinely refocused discussion on the agreed-upon aim when competing preferences or identity-linked practices risked diverting attention. A further comment reinforced the importance of clarity at the outset: *“Transparency from the outset ... share no-go areas”* [P9; support]. No-go areas, in this context, referred to clearly articulated boundaries, whether ethical, legal, procedural, or equity-related, that could not be relaxed during implementation.

Taken together, these accounts indicate a frame → flow → re-anchor mechanism. First, teams establish the frame by stating the non-negotiables at the start of the work: what the deliverable must achieve, which constraints apply, and which limits, such as data integrity, accessibility requirements, or safety conditions, are fixed. This frame provides a visible reference point that all participants can recognise. Second, teams allow flow within this frame. Individual academics, support units, or technical teams may choose different tools, pedagogical styles, or sequences of action, provided that their approach remains traceably aligned with the shared goal. In practice, this means that variation in method is acceptable, but variation in outcome is not. Third, when disagreement emerges, for example over preferred working styles, interpretive differences, or territorial boundaries, chairs re-anchor the discussion by invoking the shared objective and asking which option most reliably achieves it. The next step is then codified in neutral form, for instance as a brief rule, clarified definition, or decision-log entry, so that the resolution is transparent and portable.

Participants described how this approach reduces conflict and supports efficiency. *“When the goal is clear, decisions follow more easily”* [P2; support] illustrates how a shared frame reduces interpretive ambiguity and enables teams to navigate contested issues more efficiently. Another participant observed, *“Different teams can work their own way, but the milestone dates keep us aligned”* [P1; support]. In this account, autonomy is anchored by visible milestones and by acceptance criteria, understood as explicit, pre-agreed conditions that determine whether an output is complete and acceptable.

This pattern reflects several CQ dimensions. Metacognitive CQ is evident in the judgment of when to tighten the frame, when to allow greater flexibility, and how to recentre the discussion on shared outcomes without unnecessarily constraining legitimate variation. Behavioural CQ appears in concrete practices, such as the clear articulation of non-negotiables, the use of neutral language to redirect conversations back to the agreed goal, and the systematic recording of decisions that need to be communicated across units or campuses. Cognitive CQ is reflected in knowledge of which standards are mission-critical in the specific context, for example regulatory requirements, institutional policies, or cross-campus alignment demands. Motivational CQ sustains the effort required to prioritise shared objectives over preferred personal or departmental methods, particularly when local habits are strong and time pressure is present.

Two boundary conditions refine the mechanism. First, emphasis on shared goals must not be used to dismiss legitimate concerns about operational constraints or stakeholder perspectives. Without complementary practices such as early articulation of no-go areas or brief convene-and-correct discussions, important issues risk being reframed as peripheral. Second, method flexibility

can dilute standards if not linked to visible milestones. As one participant noted, “*There is a risk of over-compensating ...*” [P4; academic], indicating that variation must remain consistent with core requirements to prevent drift.

Overall, goal-centred discipline operationalises CQ as freedom within a frame: safeguarding standards and outputs while recognising that culturally and professionally diverse teams may legitimately pursue different routes to the same destination. Participants consistently linked this practice to fewer repetitions of debates, reduced style-based conflict, clearer accountability, and more steady progress in delivery, demonstrating how CQ-informed framing enhances team dynamics and strengthens implementation quality in multicultural project environments.

The following section discusses the CQ facets in relation to the themes.

4.8 Themes in relation to CQ facets

Table 6 illustrates how each theme is underpinned by, and expressed through, specific facets of CQ. By mapping the primary and secondary CQ facets to the sub-themes within each theme, the table clarifies the psychological capacities most closely associated with the practices described by participants. Theme 1, centred on communication, is driven primarily by metacognitive and behavioural CQ, as team members continuously monitor interactional cues and enact precise communicative moves, while cognitive and motivational CQ provide secondary support. Theme 2 foregrounds inclusivity through leadership and representation, drawing chiefly on cognitive and behavioural CQ as leaders navigate institutional ecologies and enact practices of representation and boundary management, supported by metacognitive and motivational awareness. Theme 3, focused on cultural adaptation and emotional literacy, reflects the behavioural enactment of adaptation and the metacognitive monitoring of context, with cognitive understanding and motivational engagement reinforcing these practices. Theme 4 highlights CQ as a strategic and institutional imperative, expressed through the structured placement of routines, the disciplined maintenance of interactional standards, and the creation of system-level scaffolds that ensure consistent CQ enactment across roles and time. In synthesising these links, the table demonstrates that CQ-in-practice is distributed across multiple facets, with particular emphases shifting depending on the functional demands of each thematic domain.

Table 6: Themes by CQ facet emphasis (own compilation)

Theme	Primary CQ facets	Secondary CQ facets	Practice-based justification
1. Communication as the core of CQ	Metacognitive, behavioural	Cognitive, motivational	Closed-loop work hinges on monitoring when to intervene and enacting succinct moves (read–adapt–verify; back-briefs), with a formal–informal language boundary maintaining portability and inclusion.
2. Inclusivity through leadership and representation	Cognitive, behavioural	Metacognitive, motivational	Leaders read stakeholder ecologies and protocols, then enact inclusion via multi-level representation, diplomatic boundaries, and policy as a fairness guardrail.
3. Cultural adaptation and emotional literacy (3.1 – 3.4)	Behavioural, metacognitive	Cognitive, motivational	Adaptation is performed through situated tailoring, tempo- and tone calibration, private-then-public repair, and narrative–exemplar alignment, guided by judicious monitoring of context.
4. CQ as strategic and institutional imperative	Metacognitive, behavioural	Cognitive, motivational	Everyday CQ infrastructure, convene-and-correct, a learning-first stance, and goal-centred discipline specify where and when routines are activated and ensure disciplined follow-through.

The next section provides an integrative summary of the findings.

4.9 Integrative summary

This section synthesises the four themes to show how CQ is enacted as a coherent system of mechanisms within multicultural project teams. Rather than operating as isolated categories, the themes reveal an interdependent set of practices like communication routines, representational structures, contextual adaptations, and institutional scaffolds that work together to stabilise coordination, protect participation, and maintain delivery reliability in a multilingual and governance-intensive university environment.

Theme 1 (Communication as the core of CQ) demonstrates how teams maintain shared meaning through a sequence of micro-practices: reading interactional cues, adapting delivery in real-time, verifying understanding through summary checks and back-briefs, distinguishing between formal

and informal language spaces, and prioritising psychological safety. These routines reduce misalignment, manage face-risk, and ensure that meaning is transmitted intact across roles, campuses, and languages.

Theme 2 (Inclusivity through leadership and representation) shows how leaders curate who is present and how boundaries are established. Multi-level representation allows diverse constituencies, such as campuses, units and stakeholder groups, to shape decisions rather than merely observe them. Diplomatic boundaries and fairness-oriented policy ensure tactful engagement and principled limits to avoid avoidable offence while safeguarding institutional values. In combination, these practices strengthen trust, broaden the perceived legitimacy of decisions, and reduce resistance because those who are expected to implement an outcome have had a substantive role in its formation.

Theme 3 (Cultural adaptation and emotional literacy) illustrates how teams calibrate interaction to their immediate context. Situated tailoring aligns message, register, and logistical arrangements with audience roles, local histories, and faith- or dietary-based observances, rather than relying on a single default mode of delivery. Tempo and tone calibration protect comprehension and dignity under conditions of second-language processing and hierarchy, particularly when difficult messages are being conveyed. Private-then-public repair addresses misalignment in low-exposure settings first, and only then returns the clarified position to the wider group, which limits reputational risk. Narrative and exemplar alignment uses short stories, visual depictions, and comparative examples to clarify contested concepts. Across these practices, cultural difference is treated as a source of design information that can be worked with, rather than as a problem located in particular individuals.

Theme 4 (CQ as strategic and institutional imperative) highlights how CQ becomes reliable only when embedded in system routines. Everyday CQ infrastructure distributes inclusive practices across meetings and hand-offs. Convene-and-correct concentrates clarification at critical junctures to prevent misinterpretation from propagating. A learning-first stance transforms minor errors into refinements through brief debriefs and immediate artefact updates. Goal-centred discipline maintains freedom within a frame: protecting outputs while permitting variation in method. Together, these practices ensure that CQ persists beyond individual personalities and remains stable under pressure.

Across the themes, a clear pattern emerges: CQ-in-practice operates as a behavioural operating system, comprising small, repeatable routines that stabilise collaboration in multicultural environments. Closed-loop communication maintains meaning alignment; representational practices secure legitimacy; adaptive behaviours facilitate cross-cultural interaction; and

institutional routines ensure consistency. The radial mechanism map in Figure 5 depicts these interconnections, showing how specific practices such as summary-checks, diplomatic pre-briefs, tailored delivery, and decision codification reinforce one another to support co-ordination, inclusion, adaptation, and institutional alignment. Figure 5 thus visually represents CQ as a behavioural operating system comprising interdependent mechanisms rather than isolated skills.

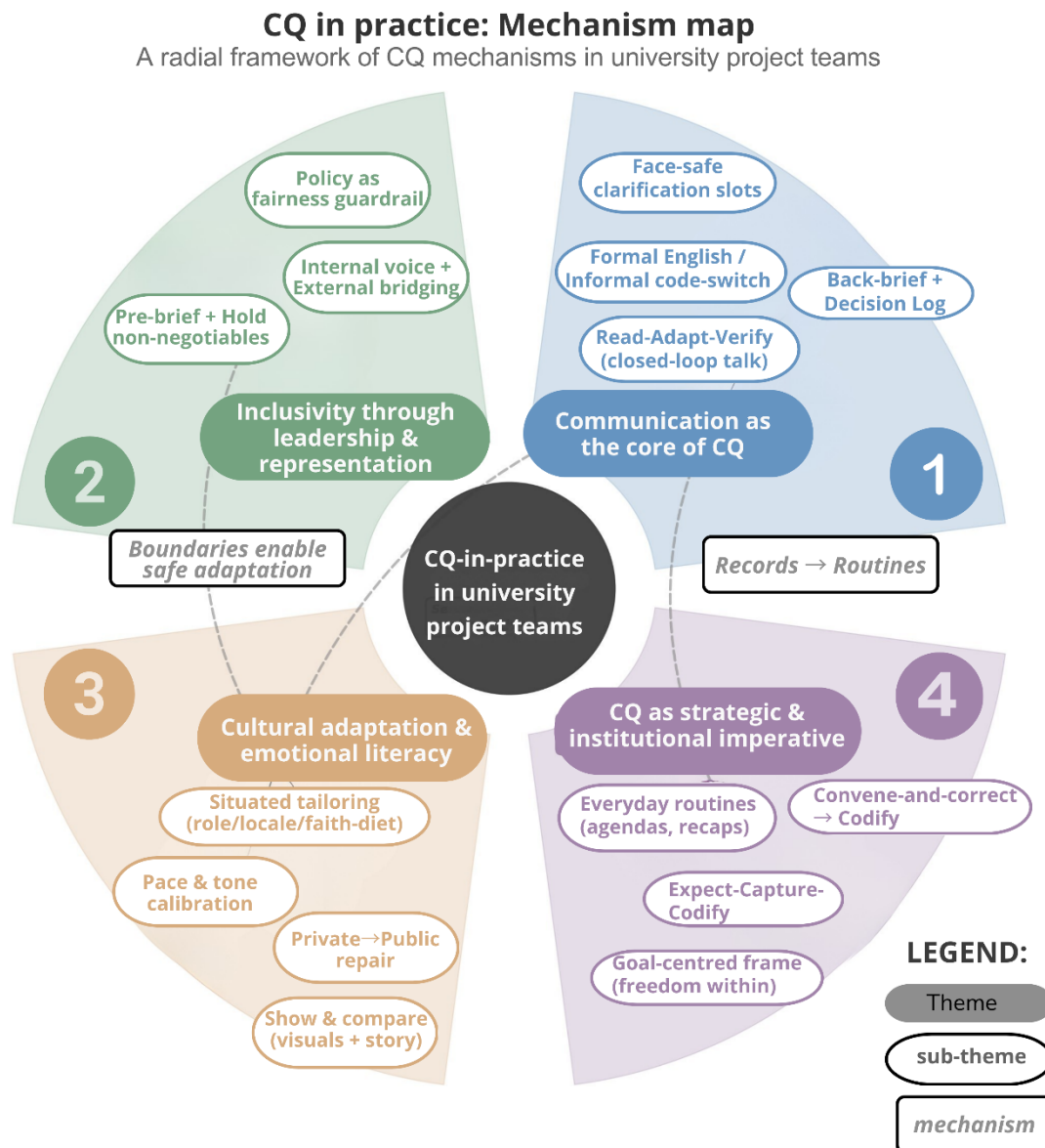


Figure 5: Theme map (own compilation)

The matrix in Table 7 links each theme to the six research questions, indicating whether the theme provides primary explanatory material ('Main') or a secondary, corroborative contribution ('Supporting'), along with a brief description of the mechanism evidenced in the dataset. When

read across the rows, Theme 1 (Communication) supplies the principal empirical material for addressing RQ1 to RQ4, drawing on findings related to language choice, closed-loop communication, checking understanding, back-briefing, and face-safe clarification supported by written traceability. Theme 1 also contributes in a supporting role to RQ5 and RQ6 by illustrating how meeting choreography and recap routines reduce interpretive drift. Theme 2 (Inclusivity through leadership and representation) provides primary explanatory support for RQ2 and for RQ4 to RQ6, with the data highlighting modelled turn-taking, fairness routines, private realignment conversations, trust-building, and role clarity; it also offers supplementary insight relevant to RQ1 and RQ3. In this way, the matrix demonstrates how each research question is grounded in the specific empirical patterns captured within the themes. Theme 3 (Cultural adaptation and emotional literacy) provides the primary body of evidence relevant to RQ2, RQ3, and RQ5, particularly through findings on mitigating disagreement, selecting suitable communication channels, and adjusting interaction in status-sensitive contexts. Theme 3 also offers supporting insight for RQ1, RQ4, and RQ6 through accounts of recovery routines and emotion-labelling that help stabilise interaction following misalignment. Theme 4 (CQ as strategic and institutional imperative) contributes centrally to RQ1 and RQ4 to RQ6 by showing how teams institutionalise CQ practices, such as back-briefs, decision logs, onboarding scripts, and recognition practices, in ways that shape routine coordination. It offers supportive contributions to RQ2 and RQ3 through data indicating how uneven implementation and policy–practice gaps influence day-to-day engagement. Together, the matrix in Table 7 organises these linkages by indicating, for each research question, which themes provide primary explanatory material and which offer corroborating insight, thereby anchoring the RQs in the concrete mechanisms evidenced in the dataset.

Table 7: Theme and research question matrix: Main/supporting (own compilation)

Theme	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	RQ4	RQ5	RQ6
1. Communication as the core of CQ	Main: Language and closed-loop talk enable inclusion	Main: Checking understanding; back-briefing routines	Main: Politeness–directness tension; second-language cognitive load	Main: Face-safe candour and written traceability	Supporting: Reduces drift; faster shared consensus	Supporting: Meeting choreography; recapping scripts
2. Inclusivity through leadership and representation	Supporting: Leaders legitimise voice and participation	Main: Modelling turn-taking; inviting quieter voices	Supporting: Hierarchy and tokenism can mute dissent	Main: Fairness scripts; private realignment conversation	Main: Trust/commitment rise; conflict contained	Main: Embed rules of engagement; clarify roles
3. Cultural adaptation and emotional literacy	Supporting: CQ enacted via micro-adjustments	Main: Softening disagreement; channel choice	Main: Status, age, and gender norms create strain	Supporting: Gentle challenge; mediated repair	Main: Relationships preserved; learning after friction	Supporting: Recovery micro-routines; emotion labelling

Theme	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	RQ4	RQ5	RQ6
4. CQ as strategic and institutional imperative	Main: CQ tied to delivery, credibility, equity	Supporting: Routines shape day-to-day practice	Supporting: Policy–practice gaps; uneven uptake	Main: Institutionalise back-briefs & decision logs	Main: Quality, reliability, epistemic access	Main: Onboarding scripts; recognition of enablement

Table 8 summarises how each sub-theme contributes analytically to answering the six research questions, thereby making the link between the thematic structure and the study’s aims explicit. The rows list the sub-themes, grouped under their respective parent themes, while the columns (RQ1 to RQ6) indicate the relative weight of each sub-theme in addressing a particular research question. A score of 2 denotes that the sub-theme provides a main contribution to that research question, whereas a score of 1 indicates a supporting but still meaningful contribution; a score of 0 (not present in this table) would indicate no direct analytic link. For example, the communication-focused sub-themes (1.1 to 1.4) make a primary contribution (2) to answering all four mechanism-oriented questions (RQ1 to RQ4) and a supporting contribution (1) to answering the outcome-oriented questions (RQ5 to RQ6), reflecting their central role in CQ-in-practice. By contrast, the institutional and strategic sub-themes (4.1–4.4) primarily address questions dealing with organisational scaffolding and outcomes.

Table 8: Supporting theme–sub-theme analysis (own compilation)

Sub-theme	Theme	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	RQ4	RQ5	RQ6
1.1. Closed-loop communication	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
1.2. Documentary alignment	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
1.3. Formal–informal language boundary	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
1.4. Safety before speed	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
2.1. Multi-level representation	2	1	2	1	2	2	2
2.2. Diplomatic boundaries	2	1	2	1	2	2	2
2.3. Policy as fairness guardrail	2	1	2	1	2	2	2
3.1. Situated tailoring	3	1	2	2	1	2	1
3.2. Tempo & tone calibration	3	1	2	2	1	2	1
3.3. Private-then-public repair	3	1	2	2	1	2	1
3.4. Narrative & exemplar alignment	3	1	2	2	1	2	1
4.1. Everyday CQ infrastructure	4	2	1	1	2	2	2
4.2. Convene and correct	4	2	1	1	2	2	2
4.3. Learning-first stance	4	2	1	1	2	2	2
4.4. Goal-centred discipline	4	2	1	1	2	2	2

Legend:

0 = no link;

1 = supporting;

2 = main contribution

Table 8 thus provides an audit of how each sub-theme was utilised in the analysis, demonstrating that the research questions are addressed by a distributed pattern of evidence across the thematic framework rather than by any single theme in isolation.

Table 6 in Section 4.8 illustrates and discusses how each theme is underpinned by and expressed through specific facets of CQ.

Together, the themes demonstrate that CQ is not a trait residing within individuals, but a distributed capability enacted through interactional, relational, contextual, and structural mechanisms. These mechanisms form a coherent system through which multicultural project teams navigate complexity, maintain cohesion, and achieve shared goals in a multilingual HE setting.

Across the thematic structure, a persistent tension emerges between candour (the need for clear, unambiguous meaning) and face, the interpersonal need to maintain dignity, avoid embarrassment, and protect hierarchical or cultural standing. The findings show that teams navigate this tension through micro-practices that directly reflect the four facets of CQ to stabilise collaboration in multilingual and governance-intensive contexts.

Chapter 5 situates these patterns within contemporary CQ scholarship, showing where the evidence corroborates a metacognitive or behavioural centre of gravity (e.g., monitoring and enactment), and where it nuances or contests prevailing claims (e.g., the practical salience of lingua franca policy and micro-rituals). It also derives implications for routine design: which micro-moves to standardise, which boundaries to make visible, and how to pair autonomy in method with goal-centred discipline. The findings render CQ actionable as a repeatable set of small, auditable moves that stabilise collaboration in multicultural university project teams.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the qualitative findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the research questions and situates them within the debates on CQ in multicultural teams at a South African university. Its purpose is to explain what the patterned evidence means for how CQ is perceived and practised, how teams navigate strain, and how these practices influence team dynamics and project outcomes, linking the study's results to the concerns of multilingual, multi-campus universities working under equity mandates and in a layered context.

CQ is treated as a multi-dimensional sensitising concept, cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural, used to guide attention without predetermining categories. The discussion, therefore, focuses on mechanism and context rather than typology. The interpretation also recognises that CQ's value in teams flows through co-ordination and learning mechanisms (voice, verification, and codification) rather than through cultural knowledge alone.

The flowchart in Figure 6 depicts the four themes as an interacting system rather than silos. Communication, as the core of CQ (Theme 1), produces voice through verification, such as summary checks, back-briefs, and decision logs, which in turn support inclusivity through leadership and representation (Theme 2) by transforming individual contributions into shared, transportable commitments that hold across roles and campuses. Cultural adaptation and emotional literacy (Theme 3) stabilises interaction by calibrating tempo and tone, and using private-then-public repair, making corrections face-safe under a multilingual load and hierarchy. CQ, as a strategic and institutional imperative (Theme 4), consolidates these practices by embedding explicit clarification points and recap segments into meeting agendas, maintaining a single decision register, and preserving a formal-informal language boundary, thereby ensuring that agreements persist beyond individual personalities and isolated meetings. The loop from Theme 4 back to Theme 1 indicates how institutional routines reinforce closed-loop communication in subsequent cycles.

Figure 6 also summarises the dynamic pathway by which the four themes operate jointly in practice. Communication mechanisms (Theme 1) create verifiable records of 'who will do what by when', which enable inclusive leadership to convert voice into authorised commitments (Theme 2). Interaction is stabilised by calibrated tone and tempo, and face-safe repair (Theme 3), limiting escalation and keeping collaboration on track. These practices are then institutionalised as routines, such as embedding explicit clarification points and recap segments in meeting

agendas, maintaining a common decision register, and upholding a formal-and-informal language boundary, so that agreements persist beyond individual actors and isolated meetings (Theme 4). The cycle restarts as institutional routines strengthen the next round of closed-loop communication.

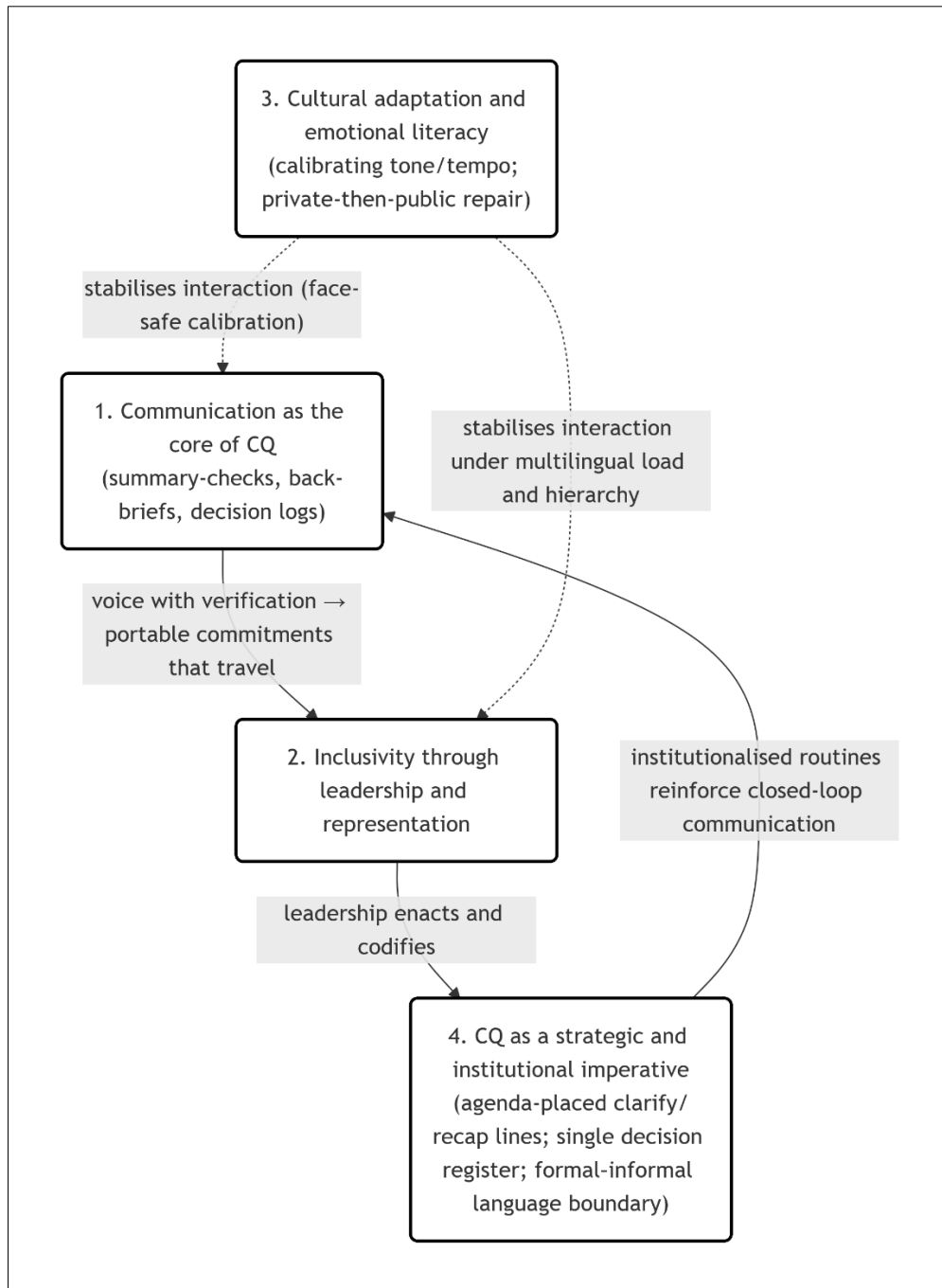


Figure 6: Flowchart: Interacting practices across the four themes (own compilation)

The following discussion is structured around the six research questions. RQ1 considered perceptions of CQ; RQ2 examined practice; RQ3 surfaced challenges; RQ4 analysed resolution; RQ5 traced effects on team dynamics and outcomes; and RQ6 identified strategies for uptake. For each question, the narrative (a) recaps core findings from Chapter 4; (b) engages the literature to confirm, extend, or nuance (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Henderson *et al.*, 2018; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012); (c) identifies at least one tension or boundary (e.g., accommodation vs cadence (Moon, 2010, 2013); (d) articulates the underlying mechanism by describing how particular practices operate and under what conditions they lead to specific outcomes; and (e) integrates the themes. The chapter concludes with a brief synthesis that prepares the ground for the final chapter, which discusses conclusions, managerial implications, limitations, and recommendations.

5.2 RQ1: How do team members perceive CQ and its importance in multicultural project team performance?

This question is consequential in a multilingual, multi-campus South African university because practitioners' conceptions of CQ shape practice. When CQ is understood as a pragmatic discipline for sustaining joint meaning and protecting dignity, it is operationalised in meetings, artefacts and governance. When it is cast as a diffuse 'soft' ideal, it is marginalised and becomes largely invisible in day-to-day delivery (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.2.1 Link to findings

Participants perceived CQ as a behavioural operating discipline that resides in small, repeatable moves. In Theme 1, CQ was *"Active listening, summarising key points for confirmation"* [P7; support], a succinct description of the summary-check, and *"Follow up in writing ... to pre-empt misinterpretation"* [P6; support], a recognition that a brief written back-brief stabilises meaning after the room has dispersed. The same participants emphasised the portability of goals across roles: *"Ensure everyone interprets those goals within the same context"* [P9; support], a pointer to the value of the decision log.

Theme 2 depicted CQ as representation with voice that shapes delivery: *"Ensure representation from different campuses ... their input shaped how we adapted"* [P1; support] signals legitimacy through consequential participation, where those represented influence how approaches are adjusted rather than simply observing outcomes.

Theme 3 located CQ in appropriateness rather than sameness, through calibrated interaction and private-then-public repair. “*Address respectfully, often one on one*” [P8; academic] reflects a face-protective path in which correction or disagreement is routed first through low-exposure settings and only then returned to the broader group.

Theme 4 revealed a formal–informal language boundary: “*Meetings and emails must be in English so they can be shared with anyone*” [P1; support] highlights the need for shareable records that are intelligible across campuses and language backgrounds, while informal, multilingual warmth is retained in non-recorded spaces. One boundary case tempered this picture. “*Cultural days ... low impact if one-offs*” [P4; academic] suggests that symbolic bursts, without connection to routine practice, do not meaningfully shift perceptions of inclusion or CQ.

5.2.2 Alignment with literature

The perception that CQ is anchored in metacognitive monitoring, alongside behavioural closure, accords with the prevailing thrust of the literature (Ang *et al.*, 2007). In mixed-language, role-diverse teams, the decisive factors are when team members perceive emerging divergence and how they enact loop-closing behaviours (Yousef, 2024). Expansive, encyclopaedic cultural knowledge is comparatively less consequential (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Earley & Ang, 2003; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). This alignment is crucial because it situates CQ’s perceived value squarely in teachable practices such as summary checks, back-briefs, and decision entries that can be easily embedded in ordinary meetings (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). The insistence on documentary alignment extends implementation-focused work by naming the specific artefacts that render meaning portable. The practical contribution here is clarity about ‘what to make visible’ (e.g., a one-to-three-line recap and a concise decision log), so that those not in the room inherit the same context (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Participants’ preference for a formal lingua franca for artefacts, alongside informal code-switching for belonging, nuances generic CQ views of language by tying perceived value to the materiality of academic work: minutes and emails must be able to circulate reliably, whereas salutations and side-talk can legitimately serve to maintain rapport (Du Plessis, 2011a; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023). Finally, the perception of representation-with-decision-rights confirms inclusion research that links visible, consequential voice with legitimacy and uptake. This matters because, in the governance-rich university ecology, the social signal of ‘who is in the room’ is part of how CQ is noticed and valued (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

5.2.3 Point of divergence from literature

A typical prescription in diverse teams is more openness and dialogue (Yousoufpourfard, 2010). The present data complicate this context: participants contrasted brief, chair-modelled clarification slots with broad, unstructured invitations to speak, noting that such open-ended discussion periods often produced silence (particularly among junior or second-language speakers) because the face-risk of raising uncertainty outweighed the perceived safety of remaining quiet (Kokt & Sentso, 2024; Van Greunen, 2022). The contextual mechanism is straightforward. In multilingual meetings under hierarchical norms, unbounded openness can raise face-risk for second-language speakers and juniors, encourage polite assent, and prolong ambiguity. In contrast, a 10-second summary check and a one-to-three-line back brief lower the social cost of correction and protect pace (Hall, 1976; Ng *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, a knowledge-centric reading of CQ is tempered by the way participants saw CQ: not as cultural facts, but as micro-routines that keep meanings aligned and artefacts shareable (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Moon, 2010). The study, therefore, reframes the tension by specifying the dose and format of openness that are perceived to work locally: a time-boxed invitation to correct, followed by a neutral recap that is then made portable. Similarly, it positions cultural knowledge as a supporting resource and frames enactment as the primary lens through which difference is noticed, interpreted, and worked with (see Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.2.4 Mechanism

Participants' accounts suggest that perception follows mechanism. They described CQ first in terms of what teams actually did, and only then in terms of how they felt about it. Closed-loop talk in the room was a central starting point. Summary-checks, such as "*Active listening, summarising key points for confirmation*" [P7; support], reduced ambiguity in real time through metacognitive noticing and behavioural rephrasing (Earley & Ang, 2003; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). In practice, this meant that before moving on, someone in the room paused to restate the essence of what had been agreed and invited confirmation or correction.

Documentary alignment subsequently translated spoken interaction into a concise written record. "*Follow up in writing... to pre-empt misinterpretation*" [P6; support] captured a simple but disciplined sequence: summary-check in the meeting, followed by a same-day back-brief of a few lines, and then a short decision log entry. This routine tended to be activated under specific conditions, particularly when second-language load was high, roles were mixed, or the scope or definition of work had shifted. Participants linked this pattern to fewer disputes, more coherent

hand-offs, and a record that remained accessible and meaningful to those who had not been present in the discussion (Moon, 2010; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

In parallel, representation with rights *“Ensure representation from different campuses ... their input shaped how we adapted”* [P1; support] functioned as a legitimacy accelerator. Perceived fairness increased when stakeholder groups could recognise their perspectives within the decision-making structure, rather than seeing decisions as imposed from elsewhere (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). A formal–informal language boundary worked alongside this. *“Meetings and emails must be in English so they can be shared with anyone”* [P1; support] kept artefacts portable across campuses and language groups, while belonging and warmth were sustained informally in multilingual exchanges outside the record (Du Plessis, 2011a; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023).

For delicate corrections, participants relied on private-then-public repair. *“Address respectfully, often one on one”* [P8; academic] indicated that face-threatening issues were first handled in a low-exposure setting. Only once alignment had been reached privately was a neutral public recap offered, which updated the shared record without drawing attention to the earlier misalignment (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

Collectively, these sequences explain why CQ was perceived not as an abstract ideal, but as practical and consequential. The mechanisms: closed-loop talk, written back-briefs, representative participation, language boundaries, and quiet repair, produced visible effects in reduced conflict, clearer records, and more legitimate decisions, and participants’ perceptions followed from these concrete experiences.

5.2.5 Boundary and negative case

Although CQ was widely perceived as a practical operating discipline, participants noted that its effectiveness diminished when clarification practices became overly formalised or when team members were reluctant to admit uncertainty due to face-risk or status hierarchies. Under these conditions, summary-checks were acknowledged but not acted upon, resulting in polite agreement that masked underlying divergence. These instances delineate the boundary within which perceptual alignment remains contingent upon a psychologically safe climate and the disciplined, yet non-bureaucratic, use of closed-loop verification.

5.2.6 South African HE anchor

Within South African HE, multilingualism, equity and transformation imperatives, together with layered governance restrictions, render epistemic access and the visibility of fairness integral to outcome quality (Mabokela & Wei, 2007). In this context, the perceived value of CQ resides in practices that produce a shareable audit trail: summary-checks converted into back-briefs and formal decision entries, and in the public assurance that the appropriate voices were present and possessed decision rights (Du Plessis, 2011a; Van Greunen, 2022; Kokt & Sentso, 2024). The practical dividend is predictable delivery across campuses and constituencies because both meaning and ownership are rendered inspectable (Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

5.2.7 Answering RQ1

Team members construe CQ as a pragmatic operating discipline: read the room, adapt and verify in interaction, then follow with a back-brief and decision log so that meaning remains portable and voice becomes consequential (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Its significance lies in the way Themes 1 to 4, consolidated, limit interpretive drift and mitigate face-risk, while at the same time safeguarding standards and maintaining pace within multilingual university projects (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.3 RQ2: How do members of multicultural teams practise CQ?

This question is central to the present study because, within South African HE, only those practices that can be taught, rehearsed, and inspected are likely to withstand the pressures of multilingual meetings, cross-campus co-ordination, and layered governance (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Greunen, 2022). By clarifying how CQ is enacted in practice, aspiration is translated into dependable routines, and inclusion becomes visible in the day-to-day conduct of projects (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

5.3.1 Link to findings

The findings suggest that CQ practice is concentrated in a small set of repeatable moves distributed across Themes 1 to 4. Theme 1 shows how teams hold meaning jointly through in-room verification and subsequent translation into text. *“Follow up ... to prevent disputes”* [P6; support] captures the same-day back-brief that stabilises agreements once the room has dispersed, while *“Meetings and emails must be in English”* [P1; support] points to the formal–informal language boundary that helps communicative artefacts remain intact as they circulate

across campuses and language groups (Du Plessis, 2011a; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023). Theme 2 evidences leadership acts that render voice consequential. “*representation ... shaped how we adapted*” [P1; support] signals representation curated in such a way that it alters the artefact, rather than merely improving optics, with protocol pre-briefs and principled limits providing the necessary scaffolding (Chen *et al.*, 2012).

Theme 3 addresses the calibration of pace and tone, and the use of private-then-public sequencing for sensitive corrections, so that dignity is protected while the repair still returns to the formal record (Hall, 1976; Moon, 2013). Theme 4 embeds these moves as lean rituals, for example opening rounds and inclusive turn-taking, and convene-and-correct sessions that close with a revised definition and a corresponding decision entry (Ott & Michailova, 2018). A standing caution marks the boundary: “*risk of over-compensating ... a pendulum...*” [P4; academic], hence the need to keep non-negotiables explicit and stable even as adaptation and inclusion are pursued (Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

5.3.2 Alignment with literature

The prominence of read → adapt → verify confirms a metacognitive–behavioural centre of gravity: actors notice divergence and close the loop in the room, rather than depending on culture-general knowledge (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Earley & Ang, 2003; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). This alignment is significant because it locates CQ in small, teachable moves that can be coached, observed, and audited. These are precisely the kinds of practices that can be built into meeting procedures as repeatable steps, rather than remaining at the level of intention or discourse (Moon, 2010).

The emphasis on documentary alignment extends implementation-focused work by specifying the artefacts that convert talk into portable commitments. In this study, that took the form of a one-to-three-line back-brief, sent while the interaction context was still cognitively ‘warm’, paired with a concise decision log that fixes who decided what, and by when (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). This specificity is consequential because portability is the hinge between a productive discussion in one venue and reliable execution across units and over time (Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). The formal–and–informal language boundary adds precision to existing discussions of language in CQ by showing that, in university project environments, language choices directly shape access to the written record: a shared working language for minutes and emails ensures that decisions remain accessible across units, while informal code-switching supports rapport without affecting formal artefacts (Du Plessis, 2011a; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023). Finally, the routinisation of private-then-public repair aligns with scholarship linking psychological safety to concrete micro-

moves, brief invitations to correct and neutral recaps, thereby operationalising candour in status-sensitive rooms. This matters because it translates the ideal of openness into seconds-long interventions that protect both pace and dignity (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Moon, 2013; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.3.3 Point of divergence from literature

The present setting complicates two familiar emphases. First, knowledge-first approaches that favour cognitive breadth risk understating the daily labour of verification and codification. In multilingual meetings conducted under time pressure, the decisive work observed was not encyclopaedic cultural knowing, but the sequence of the summary check, the one-to-three-line back-brief, and the decision entry. The contextual mechanism is that portable meaning, rather than mere fact recall, determines whether downstream actors inherit a shared frame (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Second, generic prescriptions for ‘more dialogue’ can overlook the costs of unbounded talk under hierarchical conditions and second-language load: face-risk escalates, scarce meeting time is consumed, and junior participants remain silent. The evidence here reframes the tension by specifying both dose and sequence: brief, chair-modelled clarification slots followed by immediate codification, such that the form of dialogue is calibrated to local constraints (Hall, 1976; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Greunen, 2022). In short, the study resolves the apparent divergence by showing that capability and safety are enacted as micro-affordances (time-boxed, artefacted, and positioned at predictable moments) rather than as open-ended discussion or displays of knowledge (Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.3.4 Mechanism

The mechanism can be understood as both cumulative and compact. Closed-loop talk first reduces ambiguity in the room. Here, the metacognitive act of reading participation and risk prompts a behavioural summary check, in which a speaker briefly restates what has been said and then invites others to confirm or correct the interpretation (Earley & Ang, 2003; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Documentary alignment then externalises the agreement. A same-day back-brief, “*Follow up ... to prevent disputes*” [P6; support], is sent while the interaction context remains salient, and the decision log records the owner and due date for the agreed action (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). This trio is activated under conditions such as scope or definition changes, or when exchanges involve mixed roles and mixed language backgrounds. The outcome is traceability, in the sense of clarity about who decided what and by when, fewer disputes, and shorter corrective cycles (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

In parallel, leaders curate voice-with-rights so that “*representation ... shaped how we adapted*” [P1; support]. Perceived fairness increases and rework is reduced when stakeholder groups recognise their perspectives within the decision architecture, rather than seeing decisions as externally imposed (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). The formal–and–informal language boundary is grounded in participants’ accounts of multilingual strain, for example the observation that “*none of the members in our project teams are native English speakers... differences in language can easily create miscommunication*” [P4; academic]. A shared working language for formal artefacts keeps minutes, emails, and decision logs accessible across units, while informal code-switching is reserved for relational exchanges that sustain rapport without altering the record (Du Plessis, 2011a; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023). Under status-sensitive conditions, private-then-public repair relocates correction to a low-exposure forum and returns with a neutral recap. In this way, interpersonal dignity is preserved, and the integrity of the shared record is maintained (Moon, 2013; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.3.5 Boundary and negative case

CQ practices were least effective when over-accommodation blurred non-negotiable standards or when goodwill replaced structured routines such as back-briefs and decision logs. Participants highlighted that in these circumstances, inclusivity drifted into inconsistency, and task alignment weakened despite positive intent. These cases confirm that CQ-in-practice requires both adaptive behaviour and explicit procedural anchors to prevent dilution through excessive flexibility or informal sentiment.

5.3.6 South African HE anchor

Within South African HE, multilingualism, equity obligations, and multi-campus distribution mean that epistemic access and fairness visibility are operational requirements, not niceties (Du Plessis, 2011b; Van Greunen, 2022; Koko & Sentso, 2024). Practices that secure a shared understanding across sites (such as back-briefs and decision logs written in a common working language) and ensure that participation has decision-making influence (representation with decision rights) improve predictability across campuses and stakeholder groups, because both context and ownership are inspectable (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). The practical benefits include reduced re-litigation, more transparent accountability, and a steadier cadence through governance chains (Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.3.7 Answering RQ2

CQ is practised as brief, codified routines: summary checks in the room, then back-briefs and decision logs, paired with protocol pre-briefs and private, then public, repairs to maintain dignity while fixes are made portable (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018). In combination across Themes 1 to 4, these moves ensure that understanding is portable, inclusion has practical effects, and execution remains steady despite the complexity of multilingual and multi-campus contexts (Du Plessis, 2011b; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.4 RQ3: What challenges do team members experience in practising CQ?

This question is relevant to the present study because identifying where and why intercultural work strains or delays is a prerequisite for designing practical mechanisms that prevent interpretive misalignment, offence, and rework. In South African HE, multilingual, multi-campus, and governed through layered committees, unresolved friction is costly in both legitimacy and throughput. Understanding the fault lines, therefore, directly supports credible and predictable delivery (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.4.1 Link to findings

Chapter 4 identified four recurrent friction points across Themes 1 to 4 that together delineate where multicultural project work tends to strain. First, second-language or within-English ambiguity combines with face-risk to suppress questioning. *“People may hesitate to admit they don’t understand ... fear of seeming incompetent”* [P9; support] captures how concern about competence, particularly in multilingual and hierarchical settings, inhibits clarification. This pattern speaks directly to Theme 1.4’s ‘safety before speed’ affordances, in which deliberate clarification slots and neutral invitations to query are used to counterbalance the tendency to remain silent (Hall, 1976; Ang *et al.*, 2007). Second, protocol flashpoints around greeting, hierarchy, and faith or dietary practices can generate avoidable offence when they are not anticipated. *“Pre-briefings could have prevented misunderstanding”* [P5; support] points to the value of short, anticipatory briefings, implicating Theme 2.2’s diplomatic boundaries as a mechanism for preparing both hosts and guests and for holding principled limits without unnecessary confrontation (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976).

Third, over-inclusion without decision discipline invites misalignment or drift: *“There is a risk of over-compensating ... a pendulum”* [P4; academic], a boundary case that presses for Theme 4.4’s goal-centred frame, understood as an orientation in which decisions, participation, and task

allocation are consistently structured around an explicitly shared end-state rather than around individual preferences or procedural symmetry (Sousa *et al.*, 2023). Fourth, a policy–practice gap persists: “CQ *cannot be created by policy alone*” [P6; support], a reminder from Sub-themes 1.1 and 4.3 that laminated values must be translated into lean, recurrent routines (Ott & Michailova, 2018). Together, these sub-themes characterise challenges as predictable failure modes in multicultural project work, not anomalies, and point to small, teachable counter-moves rather than grand fixes (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

5.4.2 Alignment with literature

The evidence that face-risk, status gradients, and second-language processing load suppress voice reinforces the notion that CQ’s leverage resides in metacognitive monitoring coupled with behavioural closure. The key is the judicious placement of brief clarification moves within the rhythm of the meeting (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). The importance of anticipatory pre-briefs in etiquette- and hierarchy-sensitive settings lies in linking inclusion to concrete communicative practices, such as ensuring that everyone can access the minutes, that greetings are appropriate across cultures, and that disagreement can be expressed respectfully, rather than to abstract statements (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976). The finding that once-off events and policy statements have limited effect unless translated into routine practices refines implementation-focused accounts by specifying the artefacts, such as brief written follow-ups and centralised records of decisions, and micro-practices (e.g., short clarification pauses, neutral recaps) through which inclusion becomes observable in everyday work (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Finally, the caution about over-accommodation without clearly signalled non-negotiables confirms the need to anchor flexibility to explicit expectations of quality, safety, and timelines so that participation supports, rather than dilutes, delivery (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

5.4.3 Point of divergence from literature

Two established emphases are complicated by these data. First, a knowledge-first reading of CQ risks overstating the value of cultural facts where the binding constraint is the portability of meaning. In multilingual, multi-role meetings, progress versus rework often depends on whether a summary check is followed by a one-to-three-line back-brief and a decision entry, rather than on recalling abstract cultural categories such as Hofstede’s (2001:16) cultural dimensions (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Moon, 2010). The contextual mechanism is simple: a shared and clearly stated meaning determines whether those who work with the output later rely on the same interpretive

frame (Ott & Michailova, 2018). Second, generic calls for greater openness overlook the costs of unbridled discussion, particularly when hierarchy and second-language load are salient. Such dialogue escalates face-risk, consumes scarce time, and can still leave junior members silent. A dose-and-sequence solution, brief, chair-modelled clarification moves followed immediately by codification, aligns with CQ's metacognitive-behavioural core under these constraints (Hall, 1976; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.4.4 Mechanism

The challenges unfold along a tractable chain. Where second-language load or status asymmetry is visible, Theme A describes the insertion of a brief summary-check, followed by the conversion of talk to text through a same-day back-brief and a decision log entry. In this configuration, the operative sequence is summary-check → back-brief → decision entry. The triggering condition is potential scope or definition misalignment under mixed roles and languages, and the outcome is early correction, fewer disputes, and cleaner hand-offs (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

Where greeting protocols, hierarchical expectations, or observance norms are likely to create misunderstanding, Theme 2.2 indicates the need for pre-briefs that establish respectful alternatives and clarify non-negotiable boundaries. In these instances, the triggering condition is a foreseeable point of cultural or status-sensitive tension, and the outcome is reduced offence and steadier interactional momentum (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976).

When disagreement emerges in situations where status dynamics or linguistic vulnerability may make correction difficult, Theme 3.3 points to private-then-public repair. “*Address respectfully, often one on one*” [P8; academic] captures how clarification is initially heard without embarrassment in a low-exposure setting, and is then reintroduced to the wider group through a neutral recap that keeps the record intact (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Moon, 2013). Finally, Sub-themes 1.1 and 4.3 embed these counter-moves as lean routines, so that safety, pre-briefing, and codification are not left to memory or individual goodwill (Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.4.5 Boundary and negative case

The challenges identified prove most difficult to manage when unbriefed hierarchical or culture-sensitive expectations are amplified, causing participants to withhold questions even when misunderstandings are apparent. Similarly, policy-practice gaps emerge where institutional values are articulated but not translated into weekly routines, resulting in episodic rather than

sustained CQ enactment. These cases illustrate that CQ-related challenges persist when predictable points of friction are neither anticipated nor scaffolded by clear routines.

5.4.6 South African HE anchor

In South African HE, multilingual classrooms, equity mandates, and distributed campuses raise both the frequency and cost of the frictions described here. Integrating brief clarification points and prompt codification into the meeting flow enhances epistemic access by ensuring that those who engage with the work later rely on the same articulated understanding. Providing protocol-sensitive pre-meeting guidance and making non-negotiables explicit strengthens perceptions of fairness, while recording decisions in a shared working language supports predictable implementation across governance structures that span faculties and campuses (Du Plessis, 2011b; Kokt & Sentso, 2024; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.4.7 Answering RQ3

The principal challenges identified in the data relate to ambiguity arising from second-language use and within-English variation; unbriefed protocol expectations at hierarchy, for example, unspoken norms about greetings, deference, or who may speak first, which, when not clarified in advance, produced unintended offence or hesitation in culturally mixed or status-sensitive settings; gender- and faith-related touchpoints; over-inclusion without corresponding decision rights; and persistent gaps between formal policy and everyday practice. These challenges are most effectively addressed through a set of small, codified practices: brief clarification points, succinct written back-briefs and decision-log entries, protocol-sensitive pre-meeting guidance, and private-then-public correction. Operating together across Themes 1 to 4, these practices reduce face-risk, create a shared and stable understanding of meaning, and sustain momentum by resolving uncertainty early and consistently (Moon, 2010; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.5 RQ4: How do the project team members manage or resolve CQ-related challenges?

This question is crucial because naming challenges (RQ3) without specifying a practicable resolution would leave teams with insight but no traction. In South African HE, which is multilingual, multi-campus, and governed through layered committee structures, the cost of unresolved friction is borne both in legitimacy and in throughput (Mabokela & Wei, 2007). When

points of strain are not addressed, decision processes lose credibility and project timelines extend. Understanding how teams resolve such strain therefore directly supports more predictable delivery and fairer process (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.5.1 Link to findings

The findings portray resolution as small in scale, but sequenced and codified. Sub-theme 4.2's convene-and-correct process addressed substantive misalignment by bringing the relevant parties into the same conversation (users, providers, and cross-functional partners) to clarify requirements and revise specifications where needed. *"Hold sit-down sessions with users and providers to clarify requirements ... revisit specifications"* [P2; support] illustrated how extended asynchronous exchanges gave way to a short, structured forum in which contested items were worked through jointly. The outcome of this joint clarification was a revised definition or agreed-upon requirement, which was then formalised through a brief written follow-up and an updated decision log entry. In this way, the clarified meaning remained accessible to those engaging the work at a later stage and could be inspected, rather than inferred, as the project moved forward (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Routine drift, which is the gradual loosening or inconsistent application of previously agreed communication practices, is addressed by Sub-themes 1.1 and 1.2 through the rapid clarify → back-brief → decision-entry sequence (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Sub-theme 2.2 combines anticipatory tact with principled firmness: pre-briefs and respectful alternatives are coupled with clear limits: *"Public institutions must respect everyone's space..."* [P5; support], so that dignity and standards can be upheld together (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976). Sub-theme 3.3 protects face through private-then-public repair: *"Address respectfully, often one-on-one"* [P8; academic], followed by a neutral public recap that keeps the record intact (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Moon, 2013). Finally, Sub-theme 4.3 indicates the normalisation of friction (*"Plan for problems"* [P1; support]) and turning it into small, durable improvements by codifying the lesson, thereby ensuring the team is not surprised twice by the same failure mode (Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.5.2 Alignment with literature

The learning-first loop: expecting noise, capturing it early, and codifying the fix, confirms that psychological safety yields performance when instantiated in concrete, placed moves rather than in exhortation (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Ng *et al.*, 2012). This is consequential because it translates a valued climate into seconds-long actions, such as a time-boxed clarification slot or a one-line

definitional update, that protect cadence rather than disrupt it. The evidence further shows that co-ordination improves when ambiguous talk is converted into portable commitment. The combination of a same-day back-brief and a decision log reduces re-litigation by making ownership inspectable, a critical requirement in multi-stakeholder projects where memory misalignment is common (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

In addition, pairing anticipatory diplomacy with principled limits complicates generic prescriptions to 'be culturally sensitive' by demonstrating that both prevention and backbone are necessary. Dignity without standards induces misalignment, whereas standards without dignity invite offence and resistance (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). Finally, private-then-public repair aligns with status-safe voice work by locating disagreement in a low-exposure forum and returning to plenary via a neutral recap, thereby preserving face while keeping the shared record intact (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Moon, 2013).

5.5.3 Point of divergence from literature

Two familiar emphases are problematised by these findings. First, prescribing more dialogue as a blanket remedy underestimates the cost of unbounded talk in multilingual, status-layered rooms. Without time constraints and codification, dialogue can raise face-risk, consume limited time, and still leave juniors silent. The underlying mechanism is relatively simple. When teams deliberately build in short moments to check understanding, and then reinforce these with a brief written summary, it becomes easier and less socially risky for members to correct one another, while the pace of the discussion and project work is maintained (Hall, 1976; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Greunen, 2022). Secondly, invoking a so-called 'learning culture' that celebrates reflection and retrospectives can easily become a licence for repeated mistakes if it is not anchored in clear boundaries and tangible changes to the formal artefacts of work, such as procedures, templates, or decision records. Team members reported that progress occurred only when the loop concluded in a clearly defined rule, definition, or recordable entry that could be carried forward and applied consistently (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). This study addresses both tensions by clearly specifying when and how to intervene. For material misalignment, it proposes a short, tightly focused correction process built around the relevant artefacts, where the team convenes, aligns, and then moves on. For everyday slippage in understanding, it recommends a standard rhythm of clarify → back-brief → enter the decision, with each cycle constrained by clear non-negotiables and closed off by updating the formal record so that the new understanding is captured in practice.

5.5.4 Mechanism

Resolution in multicultural project teams operates through two primary sequences. For substantive misalignment, the process begins with detecting a discrepancy, convening the relevant users and providers, and examining the contested requirement side by side. This joint clarification results in a revised definition or specification, which is promptly documented through a brief written follow-up and an updated decision log entry. The triggering condition for this sequence is cross-role or cross-context translation loss, for example, mismatches between vendor and user interpretations or divergent understandings of key terms, and the outcomes are reduced rework and more stable hand-offs because the clarified requirement is immediately formalised and made accessible (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

A second sequence addresses routine drift, understood as the gradual loosening or inconsistent application of previously agreed communication practices. Here, resolution follows a rapid clarify → back-brief → decision-entry pathway, activated when scope boundaries, definitions, or responsibilities risk becoming unclear in mixed-role or multilingual exchanges. This sequence facilitates early correction, minimises disputes, and shortens the cycle between misunderstanding and alignment (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

Both sequences are supported by additional practices that prevent avoidable friction and protect dignity during correction. Pre-meeting guidance that anticipates etiquette-, hierarchy-, or faith-related protocol sensitivities (Sub-theme 2.2) reduces the likelihood of unintentional offence (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976). When disagreement or correction carries heightened face-risk, Sub-theme 3.3 directs teams to shift the interaction into a low-exposure setting. “*Address respectfully, often one-on-one*” [P8; academic] captures this move, in which clarification is sought privately before the aligned understanding is reintroduced to the wider group through a neutral public recap that preserves interpersonal respect and the integrity of the record (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Moon, 2013). Across both sequences, resolution is sustained by the combined effect of metacognitive timing (recognising when to convene or pause), cognitive clarity (specifying what must be documented), motivational steadiness (holding agreed boundaries when pressure arises), and behavioural precision (using neutral phrasing and succinct recaps) (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

5.5.5 Boundary and negative case

Resolution efforts faltered where private correction did not re-enter the shared record, creating opacity and enabling rumours about ‘decisions behind closed doors’. Likewise, convene-and-

correct sessions lost impact when they failed to culminate in a revised definition or decision entry, leaving teams without a durable reference point. These boundary cases demonstrate that effective resolution relies on pairing face-to-face dialogue with rapid, visible codification to maintain both dignity and traceability.

5.5.6 South African HE anchor

Within South African HE, multilingualism, equity commitments, and distributed campuses amplify both the frequency and the cost of the challenges identified under RQ3. Embedding brief clarification and codification into the meeting rhythm improves epistemic access because those not in the room inherit the same frame. Conducting protocol pre-briefs and making non-negotiables explicit increases the visibility of fairness. Recording decisions in a lingua franca register, moreover, renders delivery more predictable across governance chains that traverse faculties, services, and sites (Du Plessis, 2011b; Koko & Sentso, 2024; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.5.7 Answering RQ4

Challenges are resolved through paired, codified sequences: convene-and-correct for substantive misalignment, and the clarify → back-brief → decision-entry routine to prevent the gradual erosion of agreed practices (what the data reveal as routine drift). These mechanisms are reinforced by protocol-sensitive pre-briefing, clearly articulated non-negotiables, and private-then-public correction. Operating in combination across Themes 1 to 4, these practices surface divergence early, protect dignity during correction, and ensure that agreed adjustments are formally recorded and accessible for subsequent stages of the work (Moon, 2010; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.6 RQ5: How do team members' CQ influence team dynamics and contribute to successful project outcomes within the university?

This question is consequential because, in a multilingual, multi-campus institution with layered governance structures, outcomes depend on whether interactional skill is converted into clearly recorded commitments, visible fairness, and a consistent progression from discussion to execution (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Clarifying the specific ways in which CQ reshapes team climate and delivery thus forges a direct link between micro-practices and institutional reliability (Moon, 2010; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.6.1 Link to findings

Chapter 4 demonstrated that CQ enhanced team dynamics and outcomes when it produces clearly recorded decisions, visible participation, calibrated interaction, and goal-centred frames. Clearly recorded decisions emerge when teams move promptly from talk to text, as seen in the example of *“Follow up ... to prevent disputes”* [P6; support]. Maintaining a standing decision log ensures that hand-offs rest on a shared understanding (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Visible participation arises when representation carries genuine decision-making influence: *“When stakeholders saw they were represented ... it increased trust and legitimacy”* [P1; support]. Perceptions of fairness increase because stakeholder groups recognise their perspectives within the decision architecture (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). Calibrated interaction reduces tension and enables synthesis through deliberate pacing and neutral challenge seen in *“Slower pace ... deeper integration of ideas”* [P8; academic], thereby sustaining broad, constructive participation (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Moon, 2013). Finally, goal-centred discipline re-anchors plurality within a shared outcomes frame. *“Focus on the shared goal, without sideshows”* [P9; support] exemplifies how returning discussion to the agreed objective constrains re-litigation and limits diversion into secondary disputes (Moon, 2010; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). A boundary case tempers this picture. Symbolic, once-off events, such as *“Cultural days ...”*, do not shift outcomes unless they are accompanied by ongoing practices and concrete artefacts that embed inclusion in daily work (Balbinot *et al.*, 2024).

5.6.2 Alignment with literature

The finding that CQ enhances effectiveness through co-ordination mechanisms corroborates the broader view that performance gains arise when interaction is converted into portable commitment. A succinct back-brief, coupled with a decision log, curbs memory misalignment, reduces disputes, and enables smoother hand-offs and faster closure (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). The observation that visible voice, endowed with decision rights, increases legitimacy likewise aligns with work linking inclusion to uptake. It is consequential participation, rather than mere presence, that shifts both climate and compliance (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023; Van Greunen, 2022). The association between calibrated interaction and productive debate aligns with evidence that brief, predictable pauses and neutral challenge enable a ‘go slower to go faster’ effect, improving synthesis without escalating interpersonal heat (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Moon, 2013). Finally, the chapter extends practice-oriented accounts by specifying a simple design rule (freedom within a frame) where explicit, non-negotiable standards (quality, safety, equity, timelines) safeguard the framework

while permitting methodological pluralism. In this way, CQ converts diversity into execution rather than drift (Moon, 2010; Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

5.6.3 Point of divergence from literature

Two emphases are nuanced by the data. First, generic claims that more dialogue improves outcomes tend to understate the cost of unbounded talk in multilingual, status-layered rooms. Without time constraints and codification, extended discussion raises face-risk, consumes scarce time, and may still leave junior or second-language speakers largely silent. By contrast, the data indicate that brief, chair-led clarification moments like short pauses in which the chair restates the emerging interpretation and invites confirmation or correction, followed by a concise written recap, adjust both the amount and placement of dialogue in ways that protect dignity and maintain progress (Hall, 1976; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Greunen, 2022). Second, perspectives associated with agile or autonomy-first approaches often imply that allowing team members to use whichever method they prefer will, by itself, enhance performance. The evidence here nuances this view: diverse methods contribute positively only when they operate within clearly articulated acceptance criteria and decision rights. In this formulation, boundaries are not bureaucratic constraints, but rather the conditions that enable a diversity of approaches to translate into coordinated and reliable delivery (Moon, 2010; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). The study therefore resolves the tension with a calibrated set of practices: brief, scheduled clarification and codification; representation that carries decision-making influence; and explicit non-negotiables that connect autonomy to shared outcomes.

5.6.4 Mechanism

Four linked sequences show how CQ translates into discernible effects on climate and delivery. First, externalising decisions through a same-day back-brief and a standing decision log converts discussion into portable commitment. Under conditions of cross-unit hand-offs and mixed roles and languages, this combination curbs disputes, shortens cycle time, and reduces re-litigation because ownership and timing are inspectable (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

Second, seating arrangements and participation structures that ensure representation by those with decision-making rights provide a visible signal of fairness. Where stakeholders are required to endorse, implement, or live with the change, this configuration is associated with reduced resistance, higher adoption, and shorter escalation loops as perceived legitimacy increases (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

Third, calibration of tempo and tone enables challenge to be expressed in a neutral, non-threatening way. When second-language processing load, hierarchy, or contested items are salient, a moderated pace and careful phrasing mean that questions are asked earlier, interpersonal heat declines, and synthesis improves, consistent with the observation that “*Slower pace ... deeper integration of ideas*” [P8; academic] (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Moon, 2013).

Fourth, goal-centred discipline operationalises freedom within a clearly defined frame. In contexts of method plurality and inter-professional work, anchoring discussion in the agreed objective reduces diversions triggered by hierarchy, role ambiguity, or misinterpretation and results in clearer acceptance criteria and steadier movement towards delivery: “*Focus on the shared goal, without sideshows*” [P9; support] (Moon, 2010; Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

Across all four sequences, effectiveness is sustained by a shared CQ profile: metacognitive timing (the capacity to recognise when to pause, slow the interaction, or summarise), cognitive clarity (agreement on what must be documented and communicated onward), motivational steadiness (maintaining boundaries and expectations under pressure), and behavioural precision (neutral phrasing, succinct recaps, and consistent follow-through) (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

5.6.5 Boundary and negative case

CQ’s positive effects on team dynamics weakened when symbolic events were not accompanied by durable routines, leading to short-lived improvements without sustained behavioural change. Participants also noted that, in the absence of clearly articulated non-negotiables, efforts to be inclusive resulted in an unstructured variety of approaches, causing methodological diversity to drift into inconsistency rather than supporting coherent, disciplined collaboration. These situations underscore that CQ impacts outcomes only when supported by consistent artefacts, clearly articulated expectations, and routine-based reinforcement.

5.6.6 South African HE anchor

Within South African HE, multilingualism, equity mandates, and campus dispersion mean that epistemic access and the visible enactment of fairness are integral to performance (Mabokela & Wei, 2007). Back-briefs and decision logs, maintained behind a formal–informal language boundary, help to ensure that those who were not present in the room inherit the same interpretive frame as those who participated. Representation that carries decision rights signals procedural justice across stakeholder groups, while calibrated tempo and tone sustain inclusive meetings

without stalling progress (Du Plessis, 2011b; Kokt & Sentso, 2024; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023; Van Greunen, 2022). The practical effect is fewer disputes, cleaner hand-offs, and more predictable delivery through governance structures that cut across faculties and campuses (Ott & Michailova, 2018; Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

5.6.7 Answering RQ5

CQ enhances team dynamics and outcomes by making commitments portable, voice consequential, interaction calibrated, and goals firmly framed (Moon, 2010; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Working in concert across Themes 1 to 4, these practices reduce disputes, elevate perceived legitimacy, and sustain steadier delivery in multicultural university projects (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Greunen, 2022).

5.7 RQ6: What strategies do members of multicultural teams apply to embrace CQ?

In South African HE, strategies must be specific, teachable and time-efficient if they are to survive the realities of multilingual meetings, cross-campus delivery, and layered governance (Du Plessis, 2011b; Kokt & Sentso, 2024; Van Greunen, 2022). Naming which strategies work, and why, turns cultural aspiration into dependable routines that can be embedded in agendas, artefacts, and chairing practice (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.7.1 Link to findings

The findings reveal that effective strategies converge into a cohesive, mutually reinforcing set across Themes 1 to 4. Under Sub-themes 1.2 and 4.1 (documentary alignment and everyday CQ infrastructure), teams standardise back-briefs and decision registers so that meaning and ownership are captured: *“Follow up ... to prevent disputes”* [P6; support] functions as the same-day recap, while the decision log fixes who decided what should be done by when (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). Under Sub-themes 2.1 and 2.3 (representation and policy guardrails), rules for representation with decision rights make voice consequential: *“When stakeholders saw they were represented ... it increased trust and legitimacy”* [P1; support] (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023). Under Sub-theme 2.2 (diplomatic boundaries), protocol pre-briefs paired with principled limits prevent avoidable offence: *“Visiting dignitaries declined to shake women’s hands ... pre-briefings could have prevented misunderstanding”* [P5; support] (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976). Under Sub-themes 3.3 and 4.2 (repair and convergence), teams use private-then-public repair (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Finally, under Sub-theme 4.4 (goal-centred

discipline), teams endorse “*Creating space for different approaches without compromising deliverables*” [P6; support]. A standing caution marks the boundary: “*Cultural days ... low impact if one-offs*” [P4; academic], indicating that symbolic or episodic gestures do not shift outcomes unless accompanied by ongoing practices and durable artefacts (Balbinot *et al.*, 2024; Yousef, 2024).

5.7.2 Alignment with literature

The findings support the view that CQ is most effective when it is embedded in concrete co-ordination mechanisms. When interaction is translated into clear, portable commitments, there are fewer opportunities for disagreement and re-litigation, and colleagues who were not present are more likely to work from the same underlying understanding (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). The findings extend implementation-oriented accounts by identifying the artefacts that make strategy auditable, including one-to-three-line back-briefs and a single decision register, clarifying what to make visible and where it should reside (Moon, 2010; Ott & Michailova, 2018). The explicit strategy of a formal–informal language boundary for the record nuances generic language prescriptions by tying access to the materiality of minutes and emails: a lingua franca for artefacts secures epistemic access, while informal code-switching protects rapport without contaminating the record (Du Plessis, 2011b; Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023). The routine use of private-then-public repair aligns with work relating CQ to status-safe voice by specifying a low-exposure forum for correction, followed by a neutral recap to maintain the record's integrity (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018). The ‘how’ matters here, because it translates psychological safety into seconds-long, teachable moves. Finally, the goal-centred discipline strategy refines inclusion practices by coupling method plurality with explicit non-negotiables (quality, safety, timelines), thereby demonstrating how CQ turns diversity into execution rather than drift (Sousa *et al.*, 2023; Yousef, 2024).

5.7.3 Point of divergence from literature

The present findings refine two common emphases in the CQ and diversity-training literature. First, they challenge the tendency of many interventions to position once-off or stand-alone training sessions as the main mechanism through which CQ or intercultural competence is to be developed and strengthened (Fang *et al.*, 2018; Holgate, 2020; Ng *et al.*, 2012). The data indicate that capability-building easily remains at the level of positive intention if it is not anchored in explicit expectations about when and where particular practices are to be applied in day-to-day work. In other words, without clear guidance on the concrete points in the workflow where these

behaviours are required, development efforts risk producing awareness rather than sustained behavioural change. In multilingual, time-pressed teams, brief, chair-led clarification moments and the presence of a back-brief or decision entry in the record do more practical work than general awareness alone. In this sense, strategies are effective when they are made visible in meeting agendas and in concrete artefacts (Ott & Michailova, 2018).

Second, the frequent call in intercultural communication scholarship for ‘more dialogue’ requires calibration. In status-layered contexts with second-language processing demands, unstructured, open-ended discussions can heighten face-risk and consume time without improving understanding (Hall, 1976; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Greunen, 2022). The present findings instead point to a dose-adjusted approach: short, chair-led opportunities to check understanding, followed immediately by codification in the form of a concise written recap or decision entry. In this way, the study reframes both emphases by specifying strategy in terms of micro-routines with clear outputs (such as a revised definition or logged decision) and by linking dialogue to brief, scheduled clarification points at critical decision moments (Moon, 2013; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

5.7.4 Mechanism

Across the dataset, these strategies consistently operate through four compact sequences, each defined by a specific condition, a coordinated set of actions, and a corresponding outcome. The first sequence centres on the summary-check, back-brief, and decision-entry routine. Here, the relevant condition is any change in scope or definition, or an exchange involving mixed roles and languages. Under these conditions, a brief summary-check surfaces ambiguity, a same-day back-brief confirms the clarified meaning, and an updated decision-log entry anchors the agreement. The outcome is that the clarified meaning is consistently available later, repeated disputes decline, and cycle time shortens (Moon, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

The second sequence involves pairing representation rules with decision rights. The triggering condition is the presence of stakeholders who must endorse, implement, or live with the change. In such instances, ensuring that represented voices hold genuine decision-making influence signals procedural fairness rather than symbolic inclusion. As Participant 1 observed, “*When stakeholders saw they were represented ... it increased trust and legitimacy*” [P1; support]. The outcome is reduced resistance and improved adoption, because stakeholder groups can see their perspectives reflected within the decision architecture (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2023).

The third sequence comprises protocol-sensitive pre-briefs, respectful alternatives, and clearly articulated limits. The relevant condition involves predictable sensitivities related to etiquette,

hierarchy, or faith. When these sensitivities are anticipated and addressed in advance, offence and escalation diminish. This is illustrated by the account in which visiting dignitaries declined to shake women's hands: "*pre-briefings could have prevented misunderstanding*" [P5; support]. The outcome is smoother interaction at known pressure points and a reduction in preventable conflict (Du Plessis, 2011b; Hall, 1976).

The fourth sequence concerns private-then-public repair and convene-and-correct practices. The condition here arises when correction involves status-sensitive relationships or when there is material misalignment in requirements. In these situations, sensitive clarification is first handled privately to protect dignity, after which the aligned understanding is reintroduced to the group via a neutral public recap. Where the misalignment is substantive, convening the relevant parties to examine and revise the artefact ensures that the correction is captured in the formal record. The outcome is that dignity is protected offline and the agreed fix re-enters the collective record in a stable form (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Ott & Michailova, 2018).

Across all four sequences, their effectiveness rests on the coordinated use of metacognitive timing (recognising when to pause or convene), cognitive clarity (identifying which definitions must be documented and communicated), motivational steadiness (upholding agreed limits under pressure), and behavioural precision (using neutral phrasing and concise recaps), which together sustain reliable, inclusive, and efficient project coordination (Ang *et al.*, 2007; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012).

5.7.5 Boundary and negative case

CQ strategies proved ineffective when framed solely as awareness-building initiatives rather than embedded as auditable micro-practices within meetings, artefacts, and governance structures. Over-reliance on dialogue without paired codification also reduced strategic traction, allowing ambiguity to persist across hand-offs. These limits affirm that sustained CQ requires visible procedural placement, through agendas, decision registers, and structured repair sequences, rather than episodic or symbolic interventions.

5.7.6 South African HE anchor

Within South African HE, multilingualism, equity mandates, and campus distribution make epistemic access and fairness visibility part of performance (Du Plessis, 2011b; Van Greunen, 2022). Strategies that install a formal–informal language boundary for artefacts, place a clarify or recap line in every agenda, and require a single decision register ensure that people not in the

room inherit the same frame (Lezar & Van der Walt, 2023; Ott & Michailova, 2018). Pairing representation rules with decision rights and running protocol pre-briefs signals procedural justice across diverse publics, while private-then-public repair and convene-and-correct protect dignity and pace (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Moon, 2010). The practical pay-off is predictable delivery through governance chains that span faculties, services, and sites (Sousa *et al.*, 2023; Yousef, 2024).

5.7.7 Answering RQ6

Teams embrace CQ through auditable micro-routines. These include a summary-check → back-brief → decision-entry sequence that stabilises meaning, representation explicitly paired with decision rights, protocol pre-briefs coupled with principled limits, and private-then-public repair or convene-and-correct practices, all operating within a goal-centred frame (Ott & Michailova, 2018; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2012). In combination, these strategies secure a shared understanding across roles and languages, translate voice into recorded decisions, and sustain fair and reliable delivery in multilingual university projects (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Van Greunen, 2022).

A consolidated view of the boundary conditions identified across RQ1–RQ6 is presented in Table 9 below. This table synthesises the limiting conditions that qualify the operation of the mechanisms discussed in Sections 5.2 to 5.7, providing a cross-cutting analytic reference point prior to the overall integrative synthesis.

Table 9: Negative and boundary cases (own compilation)

Theme / Sub-theme	Boundary case	Evidence snippet	Analytic delimitation
1. Communication → Safety before speed	Face-risk suppresses clarification	<i>“People may hesitate to admit they don’t understand ... fear of seeming incompetent”</i> [P9; support].	The mechanism weakens when psychological safety is insufficient for uncertainty to be voiced.
1. Communication → Documentary alignment	Bureaucratic saturation	<i>“Prefer a dynamic, natural approach rather than rigid checklists”</i> [P8; academic].	The value of documentation diminishes when formalisation becomes excessive or perceived as an administrative burden.

1. Communication → Formal–informal boundary	Code-switching contaminates record	<i>“Formal communication must be uniform”</i> [P1; support]	The boundary fails when informal linguistic practices spill into formal artefacts that must remain accessible across audiences.
2. Inclusivity → Representation	Symbolic presence without influence	<i>“Cultural days ... low impact if one-offs”</i> [P4; academic].	Representation ceases to have legitimacy effects when it does not shape substantive decisions.
2. Inclusivity → Representation	Within-group tensions	<i>“Issues often arise within the same culture”</i> [P3; support].	Multi-level representation cannot resolve interactional strain when intra-group hierarchies remain unaddressed.
2. Inclusivity → Diplomatic boundaries	Deference blocking challenge	<i>“Questioning leaders ... can cause offence”</i> [P7; support].	Diplomatic accommodation reaches its limits where hierarchical norms constrain upward voice.
3. Cultural adaptation → Tempo & tone	Over-accommodation	<i>“Risk of over-compensating ... pendulum”</i> [P4; academic].	Adaptation becomes counterproductive when deference overrides clarity, timelines, or institutional standards.
3. Cultural adaptation → Tempo & tone	Harmony–efficiency tension	<i>“Respect and social harmony matter more than efficiency”</i> [P8; academic].	Adaptation loses effectiveness when relational expectations conflict with procedural or task requirements.
3. Cultural adaptation → Situated tailoring	Stereotyping	<i>“Younger staff ... less committed”</i> [P2; support].	Tailoring misfires when cultural or generational assumptions replace evidence-based interpretation.
4. CQ as institutional imperative → Infrastructure	Policy without practice	<i>“CQ cannot be created by policy alone”</i> [P6; support]	Structural provisions do not translate into behavioural change when routines are not internalised.
4. CQ as institutional imperative → Infrastructure	Over-reliance on goodwill	<i>“Teams ... form a ‘family’”</i> [P9; support].	Informal cohesion cannot substitute for consistent procedural expectations under pressure.
4. CQ as institutional imperative → Convene-and-correct	Missing codification	<i>“Despite explaining repeatedly...”</i> [P2; support].	Realignment does not persist when corrected meanings are not stabilised through shared artefacts.

The next section presents an integrative synthesis and conclusion.

5.8 Integrative synthesis and conclusion

This section integrates the findings discussed in Sections 5.2 to 5.7 by synthesising how the study collectively answers RQ1–RQ6, thereby addressing the overarching research question. The purpose is to move beyond thematic exposition and to articulate how the evidence forms a coherent explanation of how CQ is perceived, practised, challenged, enacted, and institutionalised within multicultural project teams in a South African university.

Perceptions of CQ (RQ1) converged around the understanding that CQ is not an abstract interpersonal trait, but a disciplined set of operating practices. Participants described CQ as a series of micro-routines that keep meaning joint and portable (that is, stable across people, roles, and time) in diverse team environments. These perceptions were shaped by the benefits these routines offer under conditions of face-risk (the interpersonal risk of embarrassment or loss of standing) and status asymmetry (hierarchical differences within the team). Brief summary-checks, same-day back-briefs, and concise decision entries reduced interpretive drift and created records that could be reliably referenced by team members across sites, reinforcing the perception of CQ as a practical, outcome-oriented capability.

In relation to practice (RQ2), CQ was enacted through a compact set of repeatable behaviours positioned at predictable points in meetings and hand-offs. These included verification in the room, rapid translation of discussion into written commitments, representation that carries genuine decision rights, protocol-sensitive pre-briefing for culturally or hierarchically sensitive situations, calibration of tone and tempo (the deliberate adjustment of pacing and interactional style to maintain comprehension and dignity), and private-then-public repair (correcting misunderstandings in a low-exposure setting before returning the agreed version to the broader group). These practices demonstrate that CQ in this environment is primarily behavioural and metacognitive, and that its value lies in the disciplined placement and timing of these routines, which serve as safeguards against drift, ambiguity, and unintended offence.

Regarding challenges (RQ3), the findings highlighted four recurring fault lines: ambiguous communication and second-language processing demands create conditions in which questions are suppressed, and meaning is unstable. Second, unbriefed cultural or hierarchical protocol expectations, for example, around greeting, seniority, or observance, introduce avoidable strain. Third, over-inclusion without decision discipline, where participation is broad but authority and decision rights remain unclear, slows progress and blurs accountability. Fourth, persistent gaps between policy and practice mean that stated commitments to inclusion and CQ are not always

mirrored in daily routines. These challenges are structurally embedded in South African HE, where multilingualism, equity commitments, and distributed campuses heighten the interpretive load placed on project teams and make disciplined CQ practice a practical necessity rather than an optional enhancement. Each challenge aligned with a specific interactional pressure point: comprehension, participation, identity, or procedural clarity, and each proved manageable through small, well-placed CQ routines rather than through extended discussion alone.

Resolution practices (RQ4) took the form of paired and codified sequences. Substantive misalignment, such as divergent definitions, specifications, or role expectations, was addressed through convene-and-correct cycles, during which relevant parties met to inspect the contested artefact, clarify meaning, and re-specify requirements. Routine drift (the gradual erosion of previously agreed practices) was resolved through the clarify → back-brief → decision-entry sequence, which restored a shared frame while protecting pace. Protocol-sensitive pre-briefing minimised avoidable offence at known pressure points, while private-then-public repair enabled face-safe correction when hierarchical or linguistic vulnerabilities made public challenge risky. Together, these mechanisms demonstrate that effective resolution depends on the early detection of divergence, respectful correction, and the rapid codification of the agreed-upon outcome.

The stabilising influence of these routines mediated the effects of CQ on team dynamics and outcomes (RQ5). By externalising meaning through concise and accessible artefacts (for example, back-briefs and decision logs), teams reduced re-litigation (the repeated revisiting of previously settled issues), shortened cycle times, and ensured that downstream colleagues inherited a consistent interpretive frame. Representation that carries decision-making authority strengthened perceptions of procedural fairness and legitimacy, which in turn reduced resistance and improved adoption. Calibrated interaction, particularly through deliberate pacing and neutral challenge, reduced interpersonal strain and supported sustained engagement. A goal-centred frame (clarity regarding non-negotiable outcomes, coupled with flexibility in method) enabled diversity of approach while maintaining standards. Collectively, these practices enhanced cohesion and reliability of delivery in multicultural project environments.

Strategies for embracing CQ (RQ6) were most effective when embedded in artefacts, agendas, and institutional routines, rather than relying on individual goodwill or one-off interventions. These strategies included placing a clarification or recap line in agendas; providing same-day back-briefs; maintaining a single decision register containing acceptance criteria (explicit indicators of what constitutes an acceptable outcome); establishing representation rules that linked voice to

decision rights; conducting protocol-sensitive pre-briefs paired with principled limits; and integrating private-then-public repair into the normal flow of work. Symbolic events or isolated cultural activities had a limited impact unless they were connected to these durable routines. The evidence, therefore, demonstrates that CQ is strengthened through auditable micro-practices (observable behaviours that can be monitored, coached, and replicated) embedded in everyday project coordination.

Considered together, the integration of RQ1–RQ6 demonstrates that CQ functions as an interconnected system of verification, participation, calibration, and institutionalisation, rather than as an individual-level attribute. Table 10 illustrates how these elements work in combination: meaning stabilises when talk is converted into written commitments; fairness and legitimacy arise when representation is tied to decision authority; collaboration becomes sustainable when interactional risks are managed through culturally attuned behaviour; and reliability increases when these practices are routinised in agendas, artefacts, and governance processes.

Table 10: Mechanism sequence with trigger conditions and outcomes (own compilation)

Mechanism	Sequence	Condition (trigger)	Outcome (observable effect)	Themes involved (1-4)
Acceptance-criteria discipline	draft criteria → test with users → lock in decision	Before build/roll-out; risk of scope creep	Expectations aligned; scope creep ↓	2, 4
Chair-led clarification slot	invite questions → time-box replies → summarise stance	Silence or face-risk after new info	Questions surface; confidence ↑	1, 3
Closed-loop confirmation	read room → summary-check → back-brief	New information or decision; ambiguity	Shared frame; disputes ↓	1, 4
Consequential voice	map stakeholders → seat empowered reps → weave inputs	Cross-site impact; legitimacy at stake	Resistance ↓; ownership ↑	2
Documentary alignment	capture key points → back-brief → update decision log	Any commitment made in a meeting	Portable record; re-litigation ↓	1, 4
Formal–informal language boundary	greet in home language → switch to English → send minutes	Mixed-language interactions; need audit	Inclusion ↑; record consistency ↑	1
Goal-centred reset	name shared aim → test options vs criteria → confirm path	Drift/"sideshows" emerging	Focus restored; momentum ↑	4

Mechanism	Sequence	Condition (trigger)	Outcome (observable effect)	Themes involved (1-4)
Learning-first safeguard	note misstep → agree safeguard → bake into template	Recurring friction or error	Future errors ↓; capability ↑	4
Narrative-benchmark alignment	surface frames → show visual/example → agree definition	Conceptual ambiguity; contested meaning	Shared criteria; conflict heat ↓	3, 1
Private-then-public repair	request 1-to-1 → co-frame fix → neutral public summary	Hierarchy or identity risk is salient	Dignity preserved; alignment ↑	3, 1
Protocol pre-brief	map sensitive norms → agree do/don't → model behaviour	Divergent rituals/status expectations	Offence ↓; smoother starts	2
Tempo calibration	flag second-language speaker/complexity → slow/resequence → check grasp	Second-language speaker processing load; complex hand-offs	Comprehension ↑; rework ↓	3, 1
Convene-and-correct	bring actors together → inspect artefact → re-specify	Repeated misinterpretation; blocked progress	Clean hand-off; clarity ↑	4, 1

In sum, CQ in multicultural university project teams is best understood as a practice-based capability, enacted through small, disciplined routines that expand epistemic access (equitable access to shared meaning), protect dignity, and align diverse contributors around shared commitments within a multilingual and governance-rich institutional landscape.

This concludes the discussion of the findings. The next chapter offers recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION, MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter brings the study to its close by synthesising the empirical findings and interpretive discussion, deriving managerial implications, acknowledging limitations, and outlining a focused agenda for further research. Chapter 4 presented the evidence base, and Chapter 5 interpreted those findings in relation to the literature and the South African HE context. This final chapter translates that synthesis into practical guidance, delimitations, and recommendations intended to enhance the functioning of multicultural project teams.

The study set out to understand how CQ is perceived and practised in multicultural project teams in a South African university, and how these practices shape team dynamics and project outcomes. Guided by an interpretivist stance, the inquiry addressed an overarching question and six research questions spanning perceptions, practice, challenges, resolution, effects, and strategies. The analysis consolidated four cross-cutting themes that are interdependent rather than operating as silos: Theme 1, Communication as the core of CQ; Theme 2, Inclusivity through leadership and representation; Theme 3, Cultural adaptation and emotional literacy; and Theme 4, CQ as a strategic and institutional imperative.

Read together, Chapters 4 and 5 show that CQ is operationalised through a set of recurring mechanisms. First, closed-loop communication in the room, followed by a summary check, back-brief, and decision log, transforms discussion into portable commitments that can be applied consistently across campuses and roles (Theme 1). Second, representation with decision rights, supported by diplomatic pre-briefs and principled limits, turns inclusion into visible fairness and smoother adoption (Theme 2). Third, tone and tempo calibration, as well as private-then-public repair, protects dignity while enabling correction, especially under a multilingual context and hierarchical structure (Theme 3). Finally, routine institutionalisation through agenda-placed clarification lines, a single decision register, and a formal–informal language boundary ensures that these practices persist under pressure and become part of the institution’s operational architecture (Theme 4). A consistent tension exists between accommodation and cadence, which teams resolve by time-boxing clarification and codifying outcomes immediately, thereby preserving both pace and epistemic access.

The next section discusses the managerial implications of the findings, followed by the limitations of this research, together with recommendations for future research.

6.2 Managerial implications

The managerial task is to convert the evidence into a lean operating system that department heads, project leads, and governance bodies can implement without imposing unnecessary bureaucracy. CQ is enacted through a four-stage process: the establishment of standard practice (routines and artefacts), the development of team capacity (skills and coaching), the creation of a governing environment (light standards), and the management of risk and boundaries.

6.2.1 Practice (routines and artefacts)

The findings indicate that psychological safety is an important precondition for the effective enactment of CQ. When team members fear embarrassment or hierarchical repercussions for speaking up, they tend to withhold both tentative input and corrective feedback. This withholding weakens the verification processes that are needed to maintain a shared understanding of the task. Under such conditions, managers need to cultivate an open, collaborative climate in which they model uncertainty, invite clarification explicitly, and treat corrective contributions as a normal component of competent joint work rather than as a challenge to authority.

The analysis also suggests that documentation can hinder CQ when it is experienced as administratively burdensome. Documentation and verification processes require careful calibration so that they provide sufficient stability to shared meaning without generating 'procedural fatigue'. Lightweight templates and brief, focused entries help to ensure that documentation supports project work rather than overwhelming it. At the same time, managers must remain alert to how cultural and hierarchical norms shape voice behaviour. In the absence of clear behavioural expectations for respectful challenge, teams tend to revert to silence or superficial agreement, particularly in multilingual and status-sensitive environments. Such routines strengthen fairness, improve traceability, and reduce re-litigation of previously settled matters.

6.2.2 Capacity (skills and coaching)

Strengthening capacity is equally important. Chairs and project leads require coaching to perform neutral challenge, calibrate tempo, select the appropriate forum for addressing sensitive issues, and manage convene-and-correct sessions when definitions or requirements diverge. These are teachable micro-skills that can be reinforced through brief chairing clinics, targeted peer shadowing, and the use of structured templates. New or rotating staff benefit from observing experienced chairs and from receiving clear guidance on back-briefing and decision-entry

practices. Because perceptions of fairness increase when participation influences decision content, training should also emphasise the use of acceptance criteria at the point of decision.

6.2.3 Governance (light-touch policy and standards)

Governance structures must support these practices through light-touch standards that normalise the routines while preserving flexibility. A formal–informal language boundary is essential to maintaining artefact accessibility and preventing code-switching from obscuring the written record. A minimal decision-register standard with clearly defined fields enhances consistency across projects, and representation with decision-making authority at key design points strengthens legitimacy. Documentation thresholds should remain deliberately modest: back-briefs must be concise, decision entries should clearly identify the responsible owner and acceptance criteria, and convene-and-correct discussions must result in a revised definition being recorded in the log. When these measures, as indicated in Table 11, are applied consistently, they reduce dispute rates, improve closure timelines, and contribute to perceptions of procedural justice.

Table 11: Practice-centred CQ: what to institutionalise and why (own compilation)

Mechanism	Why it works (evidence-based)	Indicative practice pattern
Clarify/recap slot	Early alignment under time and second-language load	Ten-second summary + explicit consent
Back-brief (≤ 3 lines)	Converts talk to portable commitment	Same-day note with decision/owner/date
Decision log	Behavioural stabiliser; prevents drift	Decision identifier + acceptance criteria + check date
Private → public repair	Preserves face; keeps record whole	Brief one-to-one + neutral public recap
Representation with rights	Legitimacy; faster adoption	Names and decision rights visible at gates

6.2.4 Risk- and boundary management

Risk and boundary management remain a critical dimension of the managerial role. Expanding participation without a well-defined decision frame can lead to loss of focus and blurred standards, particularly when cultural accommodation is misinterpreted as permissiveness. Clarification points help distinguish between items that require broad input and those that require a decision. Open-ended discussion can inhibit participation from junior or second-language speakers, and

this risk is mitigated by neutral chairing and the disciplined use of brief clarification slots. Routines may degrade over time without clear custodianship; assigning responsibility for maintaining the decision log and recognising enabling work in performance discussions helps counteract this. Policy statements that are not translated into artefacts weaken credibility; therefore, each insight should be accompanied by a concrete update, such as a revised definition or dated decision entry. Collectively, these practices enable managers to shift from value statements to observable behaviours that enhance clarity, accountability, and progress.

The next section reviews the limitations of the study.

6.3 Limitations of this research

The findings of this study are subject to several limitations that constrain the scope and transferability of the conclusions. The research was conducted within a single university characterised by its own governance structures, language dynamics, and project contexts, and the mechanisms identified may operate differently in institutions with distinct organisational cultures or accountability chains. Moreover, the data were derived from interviews rather than observations of real-time project interactions, making the analysis vulnerable to recall bias and limiting insight into the micro-timing of interactional routines. The study did not incorporate longitudinal or quantitative measures of delivery outcomes such as cycle times or dispute frequencies, and consequently could not establish strong causal relationships between CQ routines and project performance.

The interpretivist stance adopted in the study also shaped the analysis. By foregrounding meaning-making and locally grounded mechanisms over prediction and measurement, the study privileged analytic transferability over generalisability. Mitigation strategies were employed, including cross-role triangulation, negative-case analysis, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling. Nonetheless, the findings should be interpreted as patterns that require careful contextual assessment before application in other settings.

The next section offers recommendations for future research in this domain.

6.4 Recommendations for further research

It is recommended that future research should evaluate the causal influence and transferability of the mechanisms identified in this study. Micro-experiments can test whether the summary-check → back-brief → decision-entry sequence directly reduces misalignment compared to business-

as-usual practices. Longitudinal studies should examine whether inclusion routines reliably precede improvements in delivery, using repeated measures of perceived representation, adherence to verification practices, and indices of project reliability.

Comparative studies across campuses or institutions could assess the portability of the formal–informal language boundary, examining how different linguistic regimes influence access to shared meaning and the incidence of miscommunication. Research exploring whether micro-skills coaching for chairs and leads, rather than inherent traits or stable team composition, drives improvements in co-ordination would clarify the role of skill acquisition in sustaining CQ. A stepped-wedge intervention design, complemented by audits of meeting artefacts, could illuminate how coaching influences chairing competency, meeting duration, repair cycle time, and the completeness of decision logs.

Together, these strands would test the causal mechanism (Does the routine itself work?), the temporal pathway (Do inclusion practices precede delivery gains?), the contextual conditions (Does the formal–informal language boundary yield similar benefits elsewhere?), and the skill component (Do coached micro-moves account for co-ordination improvements?). A practice-centred approach to CQ in South African HE would offer visible, inspectable levers that uphold both belonging and standards while strengthening legitimacy and delivery without adding unnecessary bureaucracy.

Figure 7 outlines a four-strand, staged research programme to test the robustness, causal status, contextual portability, and skill-based mechanisms of the proposed practice-centred approach. Each strand targets a different inferential challenge: experimental tests of the decision routine, longitudinal validation of the inclusion-to-delivery pathway, comparative analysis of formal–informal language boundaries across settings, and a stepped-wedge evaluation of CQ-related micro-skills.

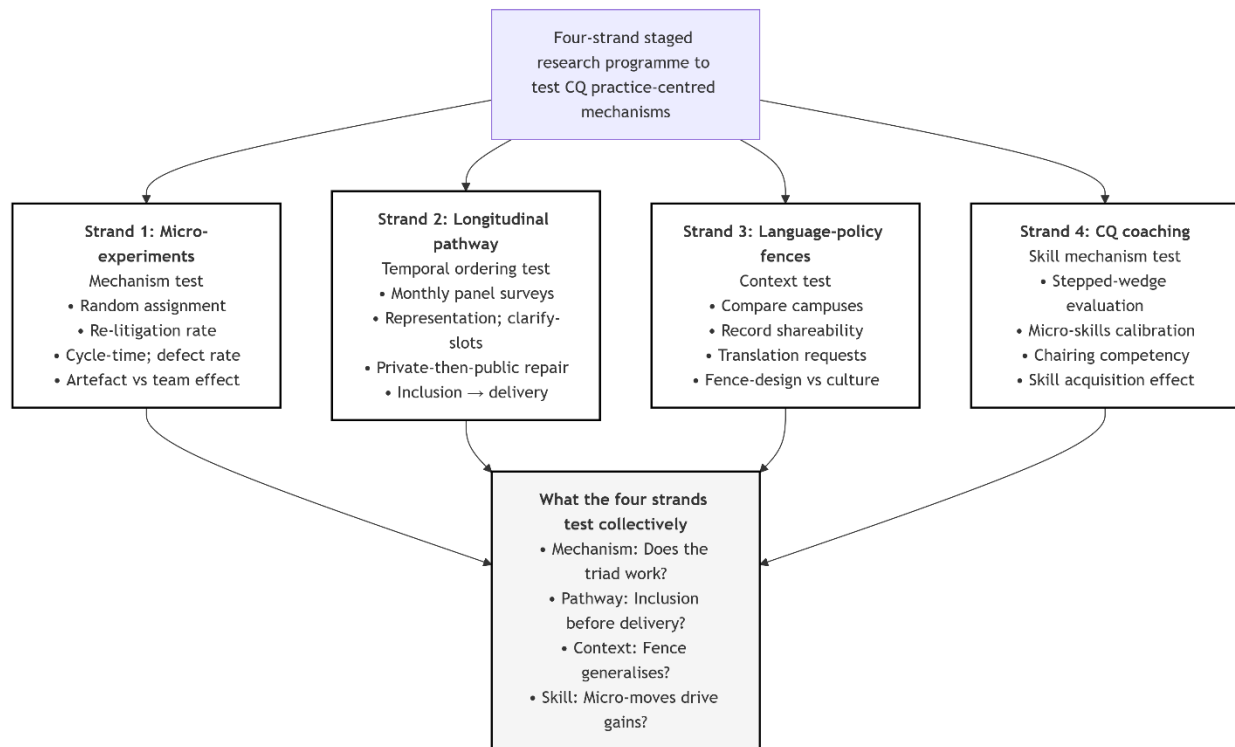


Figure 7: Proposed practice-centred approach (own compilation)

Together, the strands provide a coherent, multi-method approach capable of adjudicating between competing explanations and determining the portability and practical value of the mechanisms identified in Chapter 4 and synthesised in Chapter 5.

6.5 Conclusion

This study set out to understand how CQ is perceived and practised in multicultural project teams within a South African university, and how such practices shape team dynamics and project outcomes. The findings demonstrate that CQ operates as a practical discipline that stabilises meaning, protects dignity, and ensures that commitments remain consistent across hand-offs. In a context marked by multilingual communication, layered governance structures, and equity obligations, CQ practices enhanced both perceived fairness and delivery reliability by rendering meaning inspectable, decisions auditable, and responsibility traceable.

The core contribution lies in showing how the four CQ dimensions translate into brief, repeatable routines with project-relevant effects. Metacognitive CQ underpins closed-loop communication through summary-checks, same-day written back-briefs, and the maintenance of a living decision log. These routines clarify meaning early, reduce instances in which issues need to be revisited, and ensure that subsequent work proceeds from a shared understanding. Cognitive CQ sustains

protocol literacy and supports a formal–informal language boundary, allowing multilingual relational engagement to coexist with a uniform written record. This ensures that minutes, emails, and decisions remain intelligible across roles, units, and campuses. Motivational CQ enables individuals to invite correction despite the hierarchical differences and linguistic vulnerabilities that often suppress voice in multicultural settings, allowing uncertainty to surface early enough to be useful. Behavioural CQ calibrates tone and tempo, supporting a private-then-public repair sequence that protects dignity while maintaining the integrity of the shared record.

In combination, communication (Theme 1) establishes verification and documentation; inclusivity through representation (Theme 2) ensures that participation meaningfully influences decision content; cultural adaptation and emotional literacy (Theme 3) stabilise interaction so that clarification can be offered and received without interpersonal threat; and the strategic and institutional imperative (Theme 4) embeds these practices so that they persist under workload, pressure, and personnel turnover. The productive overlap between Themes 1 and 2, where verified communication meets consequential voice, anchors scope, ownership, and timing in artefacts that remain consistent across hand-offs. Where scope or definitions shift, brief micro-routines placed at decision points move discussion into written form and reduce the need for later dispute or re-interpretation.

The findings collectively address the study's research questions. Participants perceived CQ as a practical operating discipline rather than a soft ideal. In practice, teams rely on established routines, such as clarification and recap points in agendas, a single decision register with owner and date, protocol-sensitive pre-briefs for predictable points of cultural or hierarchical tension, and time-stamped private-then-public repair, that make accountability visible. Challenges clustered around within-English ambiguity, unbriefed cultural or hierarchical expectations, broad inclusion without decision discipline, and gaps between policy and practice. Each challenge proved tractable once addressed through small, codified affordances. Improvements occur when decisions are externalised, representation carries decision-making authority, and interactional patterns facilitate the emergence of questions earlier, thereby reducing the incidence of conflict. Crucially, strategies persist when rendered auditable in agendas and artefacts; symbolic events without routine translation fade quickly.

Theoretically, the study extends CQ scholarship by demonstrating how micro-routines stabilise behavioural CQ: decision logs and back-briefs act as material anchors that transform metacognitive noticing into shared commitments. In the South African HE context, it offers a workable compromise for epistemic access: interaction is characterised by multilingual relational engagement, while a standardised written record underpins the process and can circulate across

languages and campuses without loss of meaning. Practically, the benefits include more consistent progression from discussion to implementation, enhanced perceptions of fairness, and smoother hand-offs across governance structures, because these routines standardise decisions at the point where meaning is negotiated, and responsibility is assigned.

In conclusion, CQ-in-practice offers a cost-effective means of enhancing institutional reliability and expanding epistemic access in South African universities. By ensuring that participation influences decisions, meaning is shared, and commitments remain consistent across hand-offs, CQ supports day-to-day project delivery in ways that align with the sector's multilingual and equity obligations, while maintaining operational efficiency.

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ANNEXURE A: ETHICS CLEARANCE FORM



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520
Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>
Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 018 299-484
Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

11 June 2025

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) on 11 June 2025, the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-REC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title:	Exploring members' perception and practice of cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams within a selected South African HEI																															
Study leader/Supervisor (Principal investigator/Researcher):	Prof Y. du Plessis	University no.:	24047597																													
Student:	Y. Labuschagne	University no.:	10745807																													
Ethics number:	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>N</td><td>W</td><td>U</td><td>-</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>6</td><td>6</td><td>1</td><td>-</td><td>2</td><td>5</td><td>-</td><td>A</td><td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="4">Institution</td> <td colspan="4">Study number</td> <td colspan="4">Year</td> <td colspan="2">Status</td> </tr> </table> Status: S = Submission; R = Re-submission; P = Provisional authorisation; A = Authorisation			N	W	U	-	0	0	6	6	1	-	2	5	-	A	4	Institution				Study number				Year				Status	
N	W	U	-	0	0	6	6	1	-	2	5	-	A	4																		
Institution				Study number				Year				Status																				
Application type:	Single study - Postgraduate research	Risk level:	Low/minimal risk																													
Commencement date:	6/11/25																															
Expiry date:	6/11/26																															
<i>Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.</i>																																

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

The study will require NWU RDGC clearance.

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principal investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the EMS-REC:
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the EMS-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and EMS-REC reserves the right to:
 - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
 - to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;
 - withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;
 - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the EMS-REC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
 - submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or
 - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.
- EMS-REC can be contacted for further information or any report templates through the secretariat. Botlenyana Maluleka (Botlenyana.Maluleka@nwu.ac.za / +27 18 2852436) or the chair Prof Diana Viljoen-Bezuidenhout (Diana.Viljoen@nwu.ac.za / +27 16 9103403).

The EMS-REC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the EMS-REC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Prof Diana
Viljoen-
Bezuidenhout

Digitally signed by Prof
Diana Viljoen-
Bezuidenhout
Date: 2025.06.17
08:49:02 +02'00'

Prof Diana Viljoen-Bezuidenhout

Chairperson: NWU Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee

ANNEXURE B: RESEARCH DATA GATEKEEPERS APPROVAL LETTER



Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Research Support Department
Tel: 061910344
Email: Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

Economic and Management Sciences
Research Ethics Committee (EMS-
REC) on behalf of Research Data
Gatekeeper Committee (RDGC)

NWU RDGC PERMISSION GRANTED LETTER

Based on the documentation provided by the researcher specified below, on 16 July 2025 Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC), on behalf of the North-West University (NWU) Research Data Gatekeeper Committee (NWU-RDGC) hereby grants permission for the specific project (as indicated below) to be conducted at the NWU:

Project title:	Exploring members' perception and practice of cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams wi				
Project leader					
Title:	Ms	Initials:	Y	Surname:	Labuschagne
Project team					
Title:	Prof	Initials:	Y	Surname:	du Plessis
Title:		Initials:		Surname:	
Ethics clearance information					
Ethics reference no.:	NWU-00661-25-A4		Institution:	North-West University	
NWU EMS-REC reference no.:	NWU-00661-25-A4				
Approval date:	6/11/25			Expiry date:	6/11/26
Specific conditions of approval:					
None.					

General Conditions of Approval:

- The NWU-RDGC and EMS-REC will not take the responsibility to recruit research participants or to gather data on behalf of the researcher. This committee can therefore not guarantee the participation of our relevant stakeholders.
- Any changes to the research protocol within the permission period (for a maximum of 1 year) must be communicated to the EMS-REC and NWU-RDGC. Failure to do so will lead to withdrawal of the permission.
- The EMS-REC and NWU-RDGC should be provided with a report or document in which the results of said project are disseminated.

Please note that under no circumstances will any personal information of possible research participants be provided to the researcher by the EMS-REC and NWU-RDGC. The NWU complies with the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA) as well as the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI). For an application to access such information please contact Ms Annamari De Kock (018 285 2771) for the relevant enquiry form or more information on how the NWU complies with PAIA and POPI.

The EMS-REC and NWU-RDGC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the EMS-REC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Prof Diana
Viljoen-
Bezuidenhout

Digitally signed by Prof
Diana Viljoen-
Bezuidenhout
Date: 2025.07.16
10:33:43 +02'00'

Prof Diana Viljoen-Bezuidenhout

Chairperson: Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)

ANNEXURE C: INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW

Dear participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study titled "Exploring members' perception and practice of cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams within a selected South African HEI." This study seeks to explore how members of multicultural project teams perceive and apply cultural intelligence (CQ) in their project duties and the impact of these perceptions on team cohesion, communication effectiveness, and overall project success. Your participation will involve sharing your experiences and insights on this topic, which will contribute valuable perspectives to the research.

This study aims to understand the importance and utilisation of CQ in diverse project teams within a higher education context. By examining how project team members perceive, appreciate, and use CQ in their daily interactions, the study aims to provide insights into how cultural intelligence can enhance teamwork and project outcomes. This investigation is expected to help improve cultural cohesion and effective collaboration in project teams, ultimately contributing to better project success rates.

Please read the following information carefully before deciding whether to participate:

This study has been approved by the NWU Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) and will be carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines and principles of the North-West University, as well as international ethical standards applicable to this research.

Study title: *Exploring members' perception and practice of cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams within a selected South African HEI.*

Institution: NWU Business School, North-West University (NWU)

Researcher: Yvette Labuschagne (MBA candidate)

Supervisor: Prof. Yvonne du Plessis (North-West University)

Ethics Approval Reference Number: (NWU-EMS-REC #, if available)

Names and contact details of project staff

	Supervisor	Researcher
Title, name & surname	Prof Y du Plessis	Mrs Y Labuschagne
Full names	Yvonne	Yvette
Function in project	Principal investigator	Researcher
Telephone	083 305 6227	018 299 4616
Email	yvonne.duplessis@nwu.ac.za	yvette.labuschagne@nwu.ac.za

Participant's role:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to share your experiences as a member of a multicultural project team. This will typically involve a one-time interview of approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview may take place in person or via an online platform, at a time and private location that is convenient for you. During the interview, I (the researcher) will ask you some questions about your background and your experience working with team members from different cultures. The format will be semi-structured, meaning I have prepared questions but will also encourage you to speak freely and elaborate on points you feel are important. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure that your responses are

captured accurately. If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable, you are free to pause or stop the interview. You may also choose not to answer any question that you feel is too personal or intrusive.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. This means that it is your choice whether to participate or not. If you decide not to take part, or if you initially agree but change your mind later, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. You do not have to give a reason, and there will be no negative consequences or penalties if you choose to withdraw. Declining or withdrawing will not affect your relationship with the university, your academic standing, or your employment status (if applicable). Likewise, you are free to skip any interview question you do not wish to answer. The researcher will respect your decisions throughout the process.

Confidentiality and anonymity:

Anything you share during this study will be handled confidentially. Your name and personal details will remain anonymous in all the research data and results. Instead of using your real name, I will assign a code or pseudonym (for example, Participant 1) to your responses. Only the researcher and the supervisor will know the link between your real identity and this code, and we will not disclose this information to anyone else. All interview recordings and notes will be stored securely (for example, on a password-protected computer or in a locked cabinet) to prevent unauthorised access. When the findings of the study are written in the mini-dissertation or any report, no identifying information will be included. Direct quotes from your interview may be used in the report or publications, but they will be attributed to a pseudonym (e.g., *"Participant 1 (Project Manager)"*) so that your identity is protected. In short, *the information you provide will be kept private, and your anonymity is assured.*

Protection of Personal Information (POPIA Compliance):

This research will comply with the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013 (POPIA), which is South Africa's law on safeguarding personal data. In practice, this means:

- You are not obligated to provide any personal information that you do not wish to share. If the interview or forms ask for details like your age, position, or other demographic information, you may choose not to answer.
- There are no negative consequences if you refuse to provide personal details. Your decision to skip any such question will not affect your participation in the study or how you are treated.
- You have the right to access your personal information that you do share with me. If you wish to review, correct, or update any of the information you've given, you can contact me to do so.
- Your data will be stored securely in accordance with POPIA. All electronic data will be password-protected, and any hard copies will be kept in a locked file. The data will be retained for at least five years (as per NWU policy) after the study is completed. This retention allows for any audits or academic reviews. After this period, the data will be permanently deleted or destroyed in a way that no one can access your personal information.

By following these measures, I will ensure that your privacy and personal data are fully protected in line with legal requirements.

Risks and benefits:

Potential risks: There are no anticipated physical risks in participating since the study only involves an interview/discussion. You will not be asked to do anything physically demanding or dangerous. The interview will centre on your personal and professional experiences in a team setting. While I don't expect the questions to be upsetting, it's possible that reflecting on workplace or interpersonal experiences could cause slight emotional discomfort or stress. If you feel uncomfortable with any question or topic, you have the right to decline to answer or to end the interview at any time. The researcher will also be attentive to any signs of discomfort and can take breaks or move to a different topic if needed. There are no other foreseeable risks beyond the possibility of mild emotional strain; however, if you experience any distress related to the study, you can let the researcher know and appropriate steps will be taken to address your concerns.

Potential benefits: There is no direct personal benefit or reward to you for participating. You will not receive any payment or compensation. However, many participants find value in the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences. Your input will contribute to a better understanding of how multicultural teams function. This could help universities and other organisations develop strategies to improve teamwork and communication in diverse groups. In the long term, the knowledge gained from this study may benefit project team members and leaders by fostering more inclusive and effective work environments. You will also be making an important contribution to academic research on cultural intelligence. If you are interested in the results, you may request a summary of the findings (as noted below), which can be a way to learn what the study discovered about the broader group's experiences.

Dissemination of findings:

The information collected from you and other participants will be compiled and analysed by the researcher (Yvette Labuschagne). The findings will be presented in a mini-dissertation as part of the requirements for the Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree at North-West University. The dissertation is an academic document, and it may be accessible through the university library or repository once completed. The researcher may also share the results in other formats, such as academic articles, conference presentations, or lectures. In all forms of dissemination, your privacy will be protected: individual participants will not be named, and any illustrative quotes or examples will use pseudonyms with no identifying details. The focus will be on overall trends, themes, and insights gathered from the group of participants.

If you would like to know the outcome of the study, you can indicate this to the researcher. Upon request, a concise summary of the key findings can be provided to you after the research is completed. This summary would give you an overview of what the study found and any recommendations or conclusions drawn, without revealing any participant's identity.

Contact information for questions:

If you have any questions, concerns, or require more information about this study at any point (before, during, or after your participation), please feel free to contact either the researcher or the supervisor:

- Researcher: Yvette Labuschagne – Email: yvette.labuschagne@nwu.ac.za | Phone: 082 482 5220
- Supervisor: Prof. Yvonne du Plessis – Email: yvonne.duplessis@nwu.ac.za

You are welcome to reach out to *either* of the above contacts. If you have questions about the research process, your rights as a participant, or if you experience any issues, we encourage you to get in touch. We will do our best to address your questions and concerns. Additionally,

please remember that participation is voluntary – contacting us to ask questions does not obligate you to take part.

Consent and signatures:

By signing below, you indicate that you have read and understood the information in this informed consent form. You acknowledge that all your questions about the study have been answered to your satisfaction. You further understand that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. By signing, you agree to participate in this research study under the conditions described above.

Participant name: _____ (print)

Participant signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher name: Yvette Labuschagne

Researcher signature: _____ **Date:** _____

ANNEXURE D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Study: *Exploring members' perception and practice of cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams within a selected South African HEI*

1. Introduction and warm-up:

Express gratitude for the participant's willingness to take part. Reassure them that the research is being conducted in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) of South Africa. This means that their responses will be kept confidential and that any personal identifiers will remain anonymous.

Confirm with the participant that they:

- completed and submitted the consent letter; and
- has experience in a multicultural project team.

Introduce yourself and explain that the outline purpose of the interview is to explore the participant's personal experiences, perceptions, and practices regarding cultural intelligence (CQ) within multicultural project teams at a South African HEI, and to understand how these factors influence teamwork and project outcomes. Clarify that the discussion aims to explore *cultural intelligence (CQ) in multicultural project teams* at the institution.

Briefly explain how the interview will proceed, emphasising that there are no "right or wrong" answers and that you are interested in their honest perspectives and experiences. This interview will comprise of seven (7) sections and will take approximately 60 minutes.

Provide a definition of CQ to the participant and ensure that the participant understands the term 'CQ': *CQ refers to a person's ability to effectively adapt, interact, and work well with people from different cultural backgrounds. It includes four key parts: how we think about cultures (metacognitive), what we know about other cultures (cognitive), how motivated we are to engage with people from different cultures (motivational), and how we behave when interacting across cultures (behavioural).*

Invite the participant to ask any questions or seek clarification on the process before starting with the main questions.

Section 1: Participant background (to describe the participant profile for ease of citations of quotes)

2. Initiate by asking the participant to provide an overview of their role, responsibilities, and involvement within the institution.

Section 2: Understanding and importance of CQ

Answering to: Sub-research question 1

How do team members perceive CQ and its importance in multicultural project team performance?

3. How do you, as a project team member, conceptualise and understand cultural intelligence in the context of multicultural project teams?

Possible probing questions:

- *What comes to mind when you think about "cultural intelligence" in your team context?*
 - *Can you describe in your own words what CQ looks like when practised effectively?*
 - *Could you share a specific experience that shaped your understanding of CQ?*
4. To what extent do you perceive CQ as vital for effective teamwork and project success, and why?

Possible probing questions:

- *Can you describe situations where CQ positively or negatively impacted your team?*
- *What specific aspects of teamwork do you feel are most influenced by CQ?*

Section 3: Application and practice of CQ

Answering to: Sub-research question 2

How do team members practice CQ in multicultural project teams?

5. In what specific ways do you demonstrate or apply cultural intelligence in your daily interactions and project tasks?

Possible probing questions:

- *Are there specific ways that your team members demonstrate CQ in your project team?*
- *Could you describe typical behaviours or actions you take to accommodate cultural diversity?*
- *How do you approach learning about cultural differences within your team?*
- *Can you recall a situation where applying CQ significantly helped your team's effectiveness?*

Section 4: Challenges in practising CQ

Answering to: Sub-research question 3

What challenges (including cultural misunderstandings or communication barriers) do team members experience when practising CQ?

6. What challenges or misunderstandings have arisen in your multicultural project team (due to..?)?

Possible probing questions:

- *How common or frequent are these challenges in your team experience?*
 - *What is the impact of these challenges on your project performance?*
7. How have you and your team addressed or resolved these misunderstandings, and what did you learn from those experiences?

Possible probing questions:

- *Could you share specific strategies your team used to resolve these conflicts?*
- *Which approaches were most effective, and why?*
- *What have these experiences taught you personally about managing cultural diversity?*

Section 5: Impact of CQ on Team Dynamics and outcomes

Answering to: Sub-research question 5

How do team members' CQ influence team dynamics and contribute to successful project outcomes within the SA HEI?

8. How do team members' CQ influence team dynamics and contribute to successful project outcomes?

Possible probing questions:

- *How do you feel CQ influences team cohesion and communication quality?*
- *How do you feel has CQ impacted other team dynamics (like interpersonal relationships, social inclusion).*

Section 6: Strategies

Answering to: Sub-research questions 4 & 6

4: How do the project team members manage or resolve these challenges within their multicultural project teams?

6: What strategies do team members apply in embracing CQ within multicultural project teams?

9. What strategies do you implement, or what strategies do you suggest being appointed to improve CQ?

Possible probing questions:

- *Could you describe any previous experience where implementing these strategies noticeably enhanced teamwork or project outcomes?*

Section 7: Additional reflections

10. Is there anything else related to your experiences of CQ in multicultural project teams that you feel is important but hasn't been discussed yet?

Possible probing questions:

- *Do you have further insights or personal stories that might enhance our understanding of CQ in your team context?*
- *Do you want to emphasise or clarify anything from your previous responses?*

Conclusion:

Thank the participant sincerely for sharing their time, experiences, and insights.

Remind them that their responses will remain confidential and explain that their input is valuable for the study's success.

Inform them of what will happen next (e.g. the information will be analysed, and offer them a summary of findings if appropriate). Thank them again as you officially conclude the interview.

ANNEXURE E: LANGUAGE EDITOR CERTIFICATE

TERESA KAPP

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This serves to certify that I duly edited:

Exploring cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams in a selected South African university

by

Y. Labuschagne

orcid.org/0009-0000-5535-7638

Please note that all editing is done in *Track Changes*, and I therefore have no control over what is accepted or rejected by the author. Furthermore, I have no control over text added at a later stage. Should there be any queries, please contact me on the number provided above.



Teresa Kapp

Independent researcher, editor, copywriter, qualitative data analyst

Clients include: Students and faculty of University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch Business School, University of Johannesburg, WITS, North-West University, NWU Business School, University of Pretoria, GIBS, University of Cape Town, Vlerick Business School (Belgium), UNISA, and Namibia University of Science and Technology (formerly Polytechnic of Namibia), and companies such as Namibia Independent Electoral Commission, Takealot, UN Women, UN Global Compact, FNB, and ABSA, amongst others.

Publications:

EE Elgaronline

Living wage

Anita Bosch and Teresa Kapp

Category: Chapter

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803922065.ch86>

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Equal pay for work of equal value

Anita Bosch and Teresa Kapp

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Gender pay gap

Anita Bosch and Teresa Kapp

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ANNEXURE F: TURNITIN SUMMARY REPORT



Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

DECLARATION WITH REGARDS TO SIMILARITY REPORT

Turnitin (TII) is the plagiarism- prevention service of choice for the North-West University. A thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation/article is submitted to the TII website, to be checked for similarities in the document by comparing submitted papers to several databases/repositories on the World Wide Web. It is important to note that TII does NOT identify plagiarism – only similarities. The aim is to draw students' attention to these similarities so that they improve their academic writing style and reporting of sources before submission for examination.

The undersigned declares that the thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation/article with the title mentioned below, was submitted, assessed and that the issues (if any) have been addressed, and that a satisfactory report has been obtained.

Exploring cultural intelligence in multicultural project teams in a selected South African university

Title of mini-dissertation

Y. Labuschagne

Student (Initials and surname)

10745807 (MBA)

Student number and degree

Prof. Y du Plessis

Supervisor/Promoter (Initials and surname)



ANNEXURE G: SAMPLE CODING DICTIONARY AND MEMO TRAIL

To make the analytic pathway transparent, the coding dictionary in Annexure G provides code definitions, illustrative quotations, and memo excerpts that justify the allocation of extracts to the sub-themes and themes reported below.

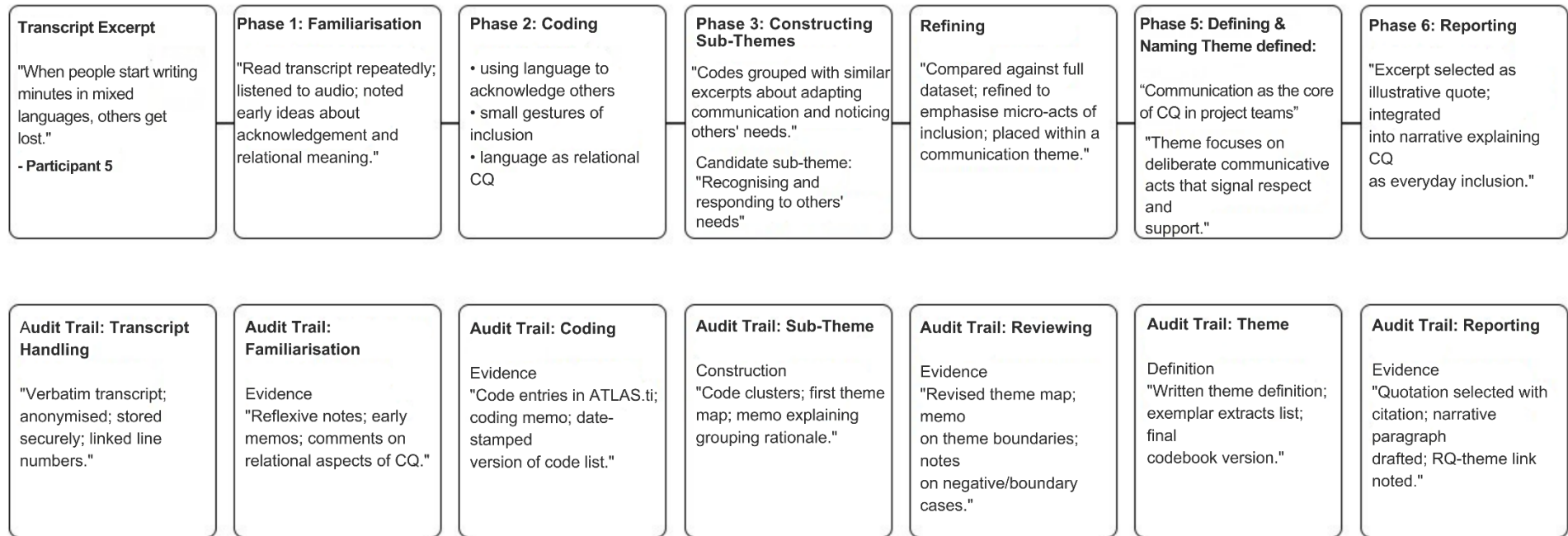
Sample coding dictionary and memo trail for Participant 5

Code name (ATLAS.ti)	Concise code definition	Exemplar quotation (P5)	Sub-theme → Theme	CQ facets (Table 5)	Memo (excerpt, 1–2 lines)
Checking understanding (asking-before-assuming)	Face-safe verification moves that prevent misinterpretation	<i>"I ask questions rather than assume, always with respect."</i>	1.1 Closed-loop communication → 1 Communication as the core of CQ	Primary: Metacognitive, Behavioural ; Secondary: Cognitive, Motivational	Recurrent micro-move across interviews; functions as read–adapt–verify within closed-loop talk.
Informal bridging (off-record sense-making)	Shifting to informal settings to surface sensitive issues safely	<i>"I reach out informally, during meals, coffee, or social events, where sensitive issues can be discussed more naturally."</i>	3.3 Private-then-public repair → 3 Cultural adaptation & emotional literacy	Primary: Behavioural , Metacognitive	Private alignment precedes formal reconvergence ; reduces threat while preserving relationships.
Greeting in partner's language (acknowledgement signalling)	Minimal code-switch to mark respect/belonging	<i>"Language is powerful: even a simple greeting in someone's language shows acknowledgement."</i>	1.3 The formal–informal language boundary → 1	Primary: Metacognitive, Behavioural	Low-cost, high-signal move; bridges formal–informal registers without derailing process.
Situated tailoring (role/locale/partner)	Adjusting conduct to the partner's protocols and setting	<i>"I adapt to protocols ... engaging traditional leaders, government officials, or international partners each requires sensitivity to</i>	3.1 Situated tailoring → 3	Primary: Behavioural , Metacognitive	Encodes context-specific adaptation; separates what must flex from what is non-negotiable .

Code name (ATLAS.ti)	Concise code definition	Exemplar quotation (P5)	Sub-theme → Theme	CQ facets (Table 5)	Memo (excerpt, 1–2 lines)
		<i>their cultural expectations, while balancing institutional requirements.”</i>			
Balancing institutional requirements	Protecting university constraints while adapting to others	<i>“... balancing institutional requirements.”</i>	4.1 Everyday CQ infrastructure → 4 CQ as strategic & institutional imperative	Primary: Metacognitive, Behavioural	‘Guardrail’ logic: align with policy/ethics while maintaining partner respect.
Calibrating opening rituals (tempo & tone)	Selecting inclusive openers (prayer/silence/quotes) to avoid exclusion	<i>“Opening a meeting can create conflict, some want prayer, others silence, others motivational quotes. Balancing this inclusively is difficult.”</i>	3.2 Tempo and tone calibration → 3	Primary: Behavioural, Metacognitive	Rituals are high-signal; careful calibration sets inclusive tone and pace.
Diplomatic boundary-setting (gendered protocol)	Managing conflicting norms through clear boundaries	<i>“Visiting dignitaries declined to shake women’s hands... Pre-briefings could have prevented misunderstanding.”</i>	2.2 Diplomatic boundaries → 2 Inclusivity through leadership & representation	Primary: Cognitive, Behavioural	Boundary-work protects dignity on both sides; anticipate flashpoints and script alternatives.
Anticipatory pre-briefing (protocol notes)	Using pre-briefs/briefs to align expectations and avert offence	<i>“Pre-briefings could have prevented misunderstanding.”</i>	1.2 Documentary alignment → 1	Primary: Metacognitive, Behavioural	Documented pre-briefs marshal facts and roles; back-briefs close the loop post-meeting.

Code name (ATLAS.ti)	Concise code definition	Exemplar quotation (P5)	Sub-theme → Theme	CQ facets (Table 5)	Memo (excerpt, 1–2 lines)
Policy as fairness guardrail	Citing codes/policies to ensure equity when norms clash	<i>“Public institutions must respect everyone’s space, even where disagreements exist.” / “Shared values, ethical codes, and institutional policies help prevent one culture from dominating ...”</i>	2.3 Policy as fairness guardrail → 2	Primary: Cognitive, Behavioural	Policy provides a neutral ‘third point’ that reduces personalisation of conflict.
Leader upskilling (CQ training)	Targeted development to raise leaders’ CQ practices	<i>“Leaders need specific training too, CQ is not automatically innate in leadership.”</i>	4.3 Learning-first stance → 4	Primary: Metacognitive, Behavioural	Normalises continuous learning; signals that CQ is a capability, not a trait.
Convene-and-correct (scaffolded sessions)	Structured sessions to realign norms and repair breakdowns	<i>“Training, workshops, and focus groups raise awareness.”</i>	4.2 Convene-and-correct → 4	Primary: Metacognitive, Behavioural	Convenings act as periodic resets; institutionalise s reflection and recalibration.
Narrative & exemplar alignment	Using lived examples to re-anchor shared understanding	<i>“International exposure is powerful, e.g., visiting Rwanda ... Such lived experiences shape how people later engage professionally.”</i>	3.4 Narrative & exemplar alignment → 3	Primary: Behavioural , Metacognitive	Exemplars make abstractions concrete; experiences become shared reference points.

ANNEXURE H: ANALYTICAL PATHWAY ACROSS PHASES



ANNEXURE I: SUMMARY OF AUDIT TRAIL

Phase of the research process	Purpose of audit trail	What was done and how	Evidence retained (audit-trail artefacts)	Examples
1. Study design and positioning	To document how philosophical stance and design choices were made	Clarified interpretivist stance and use of thematic analysis; specified focus on CQ in multicultural project teams in a South African university; recorded assumptions, motivations and potential blind spots in reflexive notes	Research proposal versions; ethics application; reflexive journal entries on researcher positionality and expectations	Reflexive memo noting the researcher's dual familiarity with HE and project environments and the need to remain alert to 'insider' assumptions about CQ and teamwork
2. Data collection through semi-structured interviews	To record how participants were approached and how interviews unfolded	Recruited participants using purposive sampling aligned with inclusion criteria; scheduled and conducted nine online interviews; wrote brief field notes after each interview on context, rapport, and salient issues raised	E-mail invitations and consent records; interview schedule; dated field-note documents linked to each pseudonym	Field note for Participant 3 described the online setting, initial nervousness, and the way the participant repeatedly linked CQ to "keeping everyone in the loop"
3. Transcription and data management	To ensure a traceable record from audio to text	Audio recordings stored securely and labelled with pseudonyms; each interview transcribed verbatim within 24–48 hours, omitting only non-lexical utterances;	Original audio files; first-draft transcripts; corrected transcript versions with dates; file-naming convention log	Transcript version history for Participant 5 showed minor timing corrections and the removal of identifying references to specific projects

Phase of the research process	Purpose of audit trail	What was done and how	Evidence retained (audit-trail artefacts)	Examples
		transcripts checked while listening to audio; version history maintained when corrections were made		
4. Familiarisation and initial memoing (Thematic analysis Step 1)	To document early interpretive engagement with the data	Read and re-read each transcript while listening to key sections of audio; wrote dated memos capturing first impressions, possible patterns and questions; noted links and contrasts with earlier interviews	Familiarisation memos stored in ATLAS.ti and exported as PDF; annotations in the margins of transcripts	Memo after Interview 2 noted that the participant repeatedly framed CQ as <i>“how you talk in the room”</i> , rather than as abstract knowledge of cultures
5. Line-by-line coding (Thematic analysis Step 2)	To record how raw data were transformed into initial codes	Coded each transcript line by line in ATLAS.ti using gerund labels to capture concrete actions and interactional moves; remained primarily at semantic level while remaining attentive to institutional cues; wrote short code descriptions and attached at least one illustrative quotation to each new code	ATLAS.ti project file; codes list with definitions and example quotations; dated coding sessions	Data extract <i>“taking the temperature of the room and adjusting your approach ... to meet the group where it is”</i> coded as <i>reading the room</i> and <i>adapting communication</i> with an attached memo noting similar descriptions by other participants

Phase of the research process	Purpose of audit trail	What was done and how	Evidence retained (audit-trail artefacts)	Examples
6. Codebook development and updates	To trace how the coding frame evolved over time	Reviewed codes after each interview; merged overlapping codes, split overly broad codes and renamed unclear ones; recorded each change with date and rationale in codebook update memos; exported code lists at key points	Iterative versions of the codebook; code-updated memos; exported code lists with timestamps	Early code <i>clarifying</i> later split into <i>making expectations explicit</i> and <i>back-briefing in writing</i> , with a memo explaining the analytic difference between in-meeting clarification and written confirmation afterwards
7. Constructing sub-themes and themes (Thematic analysis Steps 3 and 4)	To document how codes were clustered into higher-order patterns	Grouped conceptually related codes into preliminary clusters in ATLAS.ti; drafted candidate sub-themes to describe shared meanings; drew theme maps to explore alternative configurations; recorded the rationale for grouping decisions in analytic memos	Code-cluster reports; draft theme maps; theme-level memos; ATLAS.ti network views	Cluster of codes: <i>reading the room, adapting communication, checking understanding</i> , and <i>back-briefing in writing</i> collated into the sub-theme <i>Closed-loop communication</i> , which then fed into the developing theme <i>Communication as the core of CQ in project teams</i>
8. Reviewing, refining and naming themes (Thematic analysis Steps 4 and 5)	To show how themes were tested against the data and refined	Checked each candidate theme against its coded extracts for coherence; re-examined themes against the full dataset; removed or reassigned	Successive versions of theme descriptions; theme comparison notes; saved rejected or reconfigured theme maps; documented final theme definitions and names	Initial broad theme that combined leadership, representation and institutional issues was split, after review, into <i>Inclusivity through leadership and representation</i> and

Phase of the research process	Purpose of audit trail	What was done and how	Evidence retained (audit-trail artefacts)	Examples
		misfitting codes; wrote analytic summaries and refined theme names to capture central organising concepts; saved discarded theme versions with brief justifications		<i>CQ as a strategic and institutional imperative</i> , with a memo explaining why one theme was too heterogeneous
9. Judging saturation and saturation-plus-one	To make sampling decisions transparent and evidence-based	After each interview–coding cycle, reviewed codebook and memos to assess whether new conceptual categories were emerging; noted in memos that, from Interview 6 onwards, data elaborated on existing codes rather than introducing new ones; treated Interviews 7 and 8 as tests of stability; conducted Interview 9 deliberately as a saturation-plus-one case and checked whether any new themes were required	Analytic memos on saturation; summary note on sampling adequacy; coding reports for Interviews 7 to 9 highlighting overlaps with existing codes	Saturation memo stating that, after eight interviews no substantively new patterns were emerging, and coding report for Interview 9 showing that all extracts could be accommodated within the existing themes without modification

Phase of the research process	Purpose of audit trail	What was done and how	Evidence retained (audit-trail artefacts)	Examples
10. Producing the analytic narrative and reporting (Thematic analysis Step 6)	To trace how themes were translated into written findings	Selected illustrative extracts for each sub-theme and theme; wrote chapter drafts linking data extracts with interpretive commentary and CQ literature; revised narrative in response to supervisor feedback while preserving the underlying thematic structure; recorded key decisions about emphasis, ordering, and wording in reflexive memos	Drafts of Chapter 4 with tracked changes; supervisor comments; reflexive memos on writing decisions; final version of Chapter 4	Memo explaining the decision to foreground <i>Communication as the core of CQ in project teams</i> as Theme 1, because participants consistently treated communication practices as the primary way in which CQ became visible and consequential