

LEADERSHIP APPROACHES FOR FOSTERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF SHINAWATRA UNIVERSITY AND SDG 4

**Dr. Benyapa Kongmalai^{1*}, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Piyapun Santaveesuk²,
Dr. Malashchenko Vadim³, Dr. Asokan Vasudevan⁴**

¹Shinawatra University, Thailand

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6623-4912>

²Shinawatra University, Thailand

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7083-4815>

³International Institute of Management and Business, Belarus

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0473-6480>

⁴INTI International University, Malaysia

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9866-4045>

benyapa.k@siu.ac.th¹

piyapun.s@siu.ac.th²

vadim.mal3214@gmail.com³

asokan.vasudevan@newinti.edu.my⁴

*Corresponding author's Email: benyapa.k@siu.ac.th¹

Abstract

This study investigates leadership approaches that foster inclusive educational environments at Shinawatra University (SIU), Thailand, with a particular focus on international students. Guided by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education), the research employed a qualitative case study design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with international students and faculty members, focus group discussions, and document analysis of institutional policies. Thematic analysis revealed four major insights: (1) SIU leadership demonstrates a visible commitment to internationalization and diversity; (2) international students experience academic, social, cultural, and financial challenges that hinder their integration; (3) leadership practices, particularly related to support services and cultural competency training, have a significant impact on student outcomes; and (4) emerging themes emphasize mentorship, tailored services, intercultural engagement, and leadership self-efficacy. These findings echo recent evidence on hybrid leadership's role in advancing sustainable outcomes in other domains. The study recommends enhancing awareness of support services, expanding cultural competency training, and developing structured mentorship programs. The research contributes to higher education leadership discourse by linking inclusive leadership practices with global policy agendas on diversity, equity, and sustainability.

Keywords: inclusive leadership, international students, higher education, SDG 4, Thailand, diversity and equity

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

In an increasingly globalized academic landscape, higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to cultivate inclusive environments that embrace diverse student populations. Internationalization is no longer limited to cross-border mobility but also encompasses curricular transformation, intercultural engagement, and leadership practices that enable students from varied backgrounds to thrive (Azadi et al., 2025; Prieto-Gutiérrez, 2023). Shinawatra University (SIU), established in 1999, positions itself as a hub for international education in Thailand,

hosting students from Asia, Africa, and beyond. Its International Office provides services in admissions, visa support, and orientation programs (SIU Strategic Plan, 2024).

Despite these initiatives, international students often face barriers to academic success and social integration. Language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and limited awareness of support mechanisms continue to impede inclusivity (Tejavaniya, 2021). The ability of institutional leaders to foster equity and a sense of belonging is therefore essential. Inclusive leadership, characterized by openness, cultural competency, and shared responsibility, is vital in addressing these challenges (Kezar & Holcombe, 2020).

Recent studies also highlight the role of **hybrid leadership**, a combination of self-leadership, shared leadership, and opinion leadership in promoting sustainable outcomes in entrepreneurial and educational contexts (Hossain et al., 2025). This suggests that fostering inclusiveness in higher education requires leaders who can balance vision-setting, distributed responsibility, and participatory decision-making.

1.2 Research Problems

Although SIU's policies emphasize diversity and global engagement, the extent to which these strategies translate into inclusive student experiences remains underexplored. International students report mixed outcomes: while some benefit from cultural exchange opportunities, others struggle with social isolation, financial burdens, and lack of tailored support. Faculty training in cultural competency and inclusive pedagogy is limited, and awareness of institutional services is inconsistent.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To identify leadership practices at SIU that foster inclusiveness for international students
2. To examine how international students perceive inclusivity within their academic and social environments
3. To provide recommendations for leadership-driven institutional policies aligned with SDG 4

1.4 Research Questions

1. What leadership approaches are currently employed at SIU to support international students?
2. How do international students perceive inclusive in their educational experiences?
3. What challenges hinder inclusiveness, and how can leadership strategies address them?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research provides insights for university leaders, faculty, policymakers, and students. For SIU, the findings highlight areas for improvement in student services, leadership training, and policy implementation. For the broader higher education sector, the study illustrates how leadership approaches can advance SDG 4 and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Moreover, by drawing parallels with hybrid leadership evidence in entrepreneurial contexts (Hossain et al., 2025), the study broadens theoretical discussions on inclusive leadership across domains.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks on Leadership and Inclusivity

Inclusive leadership has emerged as an essential framework for advancing equity, diversity, and student success in higher education. It emphasizes openness, fairness, and cultural awareness in decision-making processes while ensuring that marginalized voices are represented in institutional governance (Kezar & Holcombe, 2020; Ryan, 2020). This leadership model is

directly aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2023).

Recent studies have applied established leadership theories to inclusiveness in higher education. Transformational leadership, which inspires shared vision and collective growth, has been shown to enhance diversity and collaborative practices. Moreover, good governance principle must be applied to increase sustainable development in higher education institutions (Wang et al., 2021; Channuwong, 2018). Distributed leadership emphasizes shared accountability among faculty, staff, and students, creating structures where international students can more meaningfully contribute to institutional life (Nguyen et al., 2022). Connective leadership highlights the building of partnerships across cultural and institutional boundaries, a key competency in globally engaged universities (Shen, Zhang, & Liu, 2023). Situational leadership, which emphasizes adaptability, allows leaders to tailor their approaches to the specific cultural and academic needs of diverse student groups (Northouse, 2021).

More recently, scholars have introduced the concept of hybrid leadership as a model that integrates self-leadership, shared leadership, and opinion leadership. Hossain et al. (2025) demonstrated through a mixed-methods study that hybrid leadership contributes significantly to sustainable women's entrepreneurial performance by combining self-discipline, collaborative governance, and influence based on credibility. Although their study focused on entrepreneurship, the framework is highly transferable to higher education, where leaders are similarly required to inspire individuals, distribute responsibilities, and mediate cultural dynamics to support international students effectively.

2.2 Cultural Competency and Sense of Belonging

Cultural competency is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of inclusive education. Deardorff et al. (2021) describe intercultural competence as the ability to engage ethically and effectively across cultural differences, emphasizing the need for both personal reflection and institutional commitment. Leaders who embed cultural competency into faculty development and student services cultivate more equitable environments, allowing all students to thrive.

The concept of belonging is closely related to cultural competency. Strayhorn (2019) defines sense of belonging as the degree to which students feel socially supported and connected within their academic communities. More recent studies confirm that international students who experience a sense of belonging report greater academic motivation and well-being, while those who feel excluded are more likely to withdraw or experience poor outcomes (Glass & Westmont, 2021; OECD, 2023). Leadership is therefore critical in cultivating a sense of belonging, whether through intercultural events, peer mentorship schemes, or increased accessibility of student support systems. Azadi et al. (2025) further argue that belonging should be viewed not only as a psychological outcome but also as an institutional responsibility that requires leaders to embed inclusivity into the core of higher education policy.

2.3 Internationalization of Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education has shifted from focusing primarily on student mobility to adopting comprehensive strategies that integrate global perspectives into curriculum, teaching, research, and governance (Beelen & Jones, 2020; Prieto-Gutiérrez, 2023). Current debates distinguish between internationalization abroad, such as student exchanges and overseas campuses, and internationalization at home, which involves intercultural learning opportunities and inclusive curricula for all students.

Effective internationalization requires leadership strategies that move beyond recruitment toward addressing student welfare and integration. Shen et al. (2023) emphasize that internationalization is only successful when supported by strong leadership capable of translating policy into practice through faculty training and equitable support services. Similarly, Azadi et al. (2025) highlights that without careful leadership intervention, internationalization risks reinforcing inequalities instead of promoting diversity.

Within Thailand, internationalization is both a survival mechanism and a reputational strategy in the context of declining domestic enrollments (Jampaklay & Pattanapanchai, 2022). Smaller institutions such as SIU face resource constraints, making leadership innovation essential for delivering meaningful internationalization aligned with SDG 4.

2.4 Challenges for International Students

International students face persistent barriers to inclusiveness in higher education. Academic challenges often arise due to language proficiency issues and differences in pedagogical expectations, which limit their ability to perform at their full potential (Martirosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon, 2021). Social integration remains a critical concern, as international students frequently report limited interaction with domestic peers, resulting in feelings of isolation and exclusion (Glass & Westmont, 2021). Cultural adaptation presents another challenge, as students experience stress while navigating new social norms and academic expectations (OECD, 2023). Financial difficulties, including the increase in tuition fees and restrictions on part-time employment, further exacerbate their vulnerability and negatively impact overall well-being (Prieto-Gutiérrez, 2023).

In Thailand, these barriers are further compounded by administrative challenges, including complex visa procedures, limited institutional support, and inadequate student services in smaller private universities (Tejavaniya, 2021). These realities underscore the need for leadership-driven strategies to mitigate inequalities and enhance the educational experiences of international students.

2.5 Leadership Responses to Inclusivity Challenges

Leadership has been consistently identified as the central factor in addressing the challenges of inclusivity. Recent research highlights the effectiveness of structured orientation programs, which provide international students with clear guidance on academic expectations and available support services (Nguyen et al., 2022). Peer mentorship programs have also proven effective in bridging cultural gaps and fostering interaction between domestic and international students (Glass & Westmont, 2021). Faculty development in cultural awareness and inclusive teaching practices is another critical area that requires leadership support (Frawley, Russell, & Sherwood, 2020).

Curriculum reform to integrate global perspectives reduces the marginalization of minority voices and ensures that diversity becomes normalized within academic discourse (Deardorff et al., 2021). Similarly, language support programs are indispensable in providing international students with the tools to succeed academically in environments where English or local languages are not their first language (OECD, 2023).

Findings from entrepreneurship research further reinforce the importance of leadership in advancing inclusivity. Hossain et al. (2025) demonstrated that hybrid leadership practices, which combine personal accountability, distributed responsibility, and credibility-based influence, significantly improved sustainable outcomes. When applied to higher education, this approach

suggests that leaders who adopt hybrid models are more capable of sustaining inclusive initiatives and enhancing the success of international students.

2.6 Thai Higher Education Context

The Thai higher education system is currently navigating significant demographic and policy shifts. A declining birth rate has led to lower domestic enrollment, resulting in financial and structural pressures for universities (Jampaklay & Pattanapanchai, 2022). Consequently, international student recruitment has become a strategic priority. The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI) has promoted policies aligned with global sustainability and labor market needs, but implementation has been uneven across institutions (Tejavanija, 2021).

SIU distinguishes itself by hosting a relatively diverse student body, considering its size. The university's strategic plan (2024–2029) explicitly highlights inclusivity and intercultural engagement. However, gaps persist between stated policy and practice, particularly in terms of faculty preparedness, visibility of support services, and systematic monitoring of inclusive outcomes. These challenges underscore the need for innovative and hybrid leadership practices to bridge institutional aspirations with student realities.

2.7 Gaps in Literature

Although research on inclusivity and internationalization in higher education has expanded significantly in recent years, several gaps remain evident. Few studies between 2020 and 2025 have focused on private universities in Southeast Asia, where resource constraints present unique challenges. Leadership theories are often discussed in isolation from practical, inclusive outcomes, and only a limited number of studies explicitly link leadership practices to Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, the emerging framework of hybrid leadership, despite its demonstrated success in entrepreneurial contexts (Hossain et al., 2025), remains underexplored in educational environments.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing leadership approaches at SIU through the lens of inclusivity and by situating its findings within the global policy frameworks of SDG 4 and SDG 10.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

1. This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate leadership approaches that foster inclusivity at Shinawatra University (SIU). A qualitative case study was selected because it allows in-depth exploration of social and organizational dynamics within a bounded setting. Inclusivity in higher education involves complex interactions among leaders, faculty, and students, making qualitative inquiry appropriate for capturing multiple perspectives.
2. The design aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by emphasizing equitable access and inclusivity, and with Sustainable Development Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by examining leadership practices that reduce barriers for international students.

3.2 Research Site and Context

Shinawatra University, a private university in Thailand, was selected due to its relatively high proportion of international students. According to the institutional strategic plan (2024–2029), the university prioritizes inclusivity and cultural exchange as core values. However, gaps

persist between policy aspirations and actual practices, particularly in faculty training and the visibility of student support. This makes SIU a suitable site for examining leadership-driven inclusivity within the Thai higher education landscape.

3.3 Participants

The study included two categories of participants. The first group consisted of 20 international students representing undergraduate and postgraduate programs across diverse countries in Asia and Africa. The second group consisted of 10 faculty members and administrators responsible for academic instruction and student services.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure diversity of experiences. This sampling approach is appropriate when participants must possess direct knowledge of the phenomenon under study, such as inclusivity and leadership practices (Martirosyan, Bustamante, & Saxon, 2021).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through three methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with international students and faculty. The interview protocol focused on leadership practices, academic and social experiences, and perceptions of inclusivity. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in either English or Thai, depending on the participant's preference.

7. Second, focus group discussions were organized with two groups of international students, each comprising six to eight participants. These discussions encouraged collective reflection and elaboration of shared challenges and solutions.

8. Third, document analysis was conducted to review university policies, strategic plans, and student handbooks. This provided insights into the institutional discourse on inclusivity and the extent to which official commitments were translated into practice. The use of multiple data sources strengthened triangulation and enriched the analysis (Glass & Westmont, 2021; OECD, 2023).

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) updated six-phase model of thematic analysis. The transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity. Initial codes were then generated to capture relevant ideas regarding leadership behaviors, student experiences, and institutional support. Clustering codes constructed themes into broader patterns such as mentorship, support services, and intercultural engagement. The themes were refined for coherence and distinctiveness, then clearly defined, and finally reported in relation to theoretical frameworks and SDG objectives.

10. NVivo software was used to manage data coding and to support transparency in the analytical process. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of both converging and diverging perspectives across participant groups.

3.6 Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, four criteria of trustworthiness were applied. Credibility was established through triangulation of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, as well as member checking, where participants verified summaries of findings. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of SIU's institutional context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar institutions. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting methodological decisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling to mitigate researcher bias. These measures are consistent with recent

recommendations in qualitative higher education research (Nguyen et al., 2022; Glass & Westmont, 2021).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained through the institution's review protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured that their identities would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. These procedures align with contemporary ethical standards for educational research (Frawley, Russell, & Sherwood, 2020).

3.8 Limitations of the Methodology

A case study design is limited in its generalizability beyond the immediate context of SIU. The findings, therefore, reflect localized experiences that may not be directly transferable to other institutions. Language barriers presented another limitation, as some participants were less fluent in English or Thai, potentially constraining their ability to articulate complex experiences. Nonetheless, triangulation and careful analysis enhanced the reliability of the results.

3.9 Methodological Innovation

Although the present study used a qualitative approach, it acknowledges the growing potential of hybrid methodological designs in leadership research. Hossain et al. (2025) demonstrated the utility of combining partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to capture the complex dynamics of leadership. While this study relied on thematic analysis, future research on inclusive leadership in higher education could benefit from mixed-method designs to explore both statistical patterns and in-depth narratives.

4. Findings

The analysis of interviews, focus groups, and institutional documents revealed several themes that explain how leadership at Shinawatra University (SIU) influences inclusivity for international students. These themes include leadership commitment to inclusivity, the challenges faced by international students, the impact of leadership practices on student experiences, and emerging areas such as mentorship, intercultural understanding, and leadership self-efficacy.

4.1 Leadership Commitment to Inclusivity

Leadership at SIU demonstrates a strong formal commitment to inclusivity, as articulated in the university's strategic plan for 2024–2029. The institution has positioned diversity, cultural exchange, and global engagement as core elements of its mission. Administrators consistently described inclusivity as central to SIU's identity as an international university. Faculty members acknowledged that leadership has promoted policies to support international students and encourage cultural diversity.

Despite these intentions, students' accounts indicated inconsistency in practice. Some international students described supportive experiences, particularly with the International Office and student affairs activities. Others reported difficulty accessing services or expressed limited awareness of available support. Faculty members also acknowledged that training in cultural competency and inclusive pedagogy remained insufficient, resulting in variable classroom experiences. These findings suggest that while leadership commitment is visible at the policy level, translation into consistent practice is uneven. This reflects a broader challenge identified in higher education, where leadership declarations require systematic mechanisms to achieve

meaningful inclusivity (Shen, Zhang, & Liu, 2023). The hybrid leadership model described by Hossain et al. (2025) is relevant here, as it highlights how self-leadership, shared governance, and credibility-based influence can strengthen institutional follow-through on policy commitments.

4.2 Challenges for International Students

International students at SIU face persistent challenges across academic, social, financial, and administrative domains. Academic adjustment is a recurring concern, particularly for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds who struggle with writing, making presentations, and participating in class discussions. Faculty recognized these issues but admitted that structured academic language support was limited.

Social integration also emerged as a significant challenge. Students reported limited interaction with Thai peers outside the classroom, often describing feelings of isolation. Cultural differences, language barriers, and the absence of structured intercultural activities contributed to these experiences. Some students indicated that they relied heavily on networks within their own national or regional communities, which reinforced cultural silos rather than integration.

Financial pressures have added further difficulty. Rising tuition costs and limited opportunities for part-time work in Thailand created economic stress, which in turn affected students' academic performance and mental health. Administrative challenges compounded these issues, as visa renewals and bureaucratic procedures were often described as confusing and poorly communicated. These findings are consistent with regional studies documenting the vulnerability of international students in Southeast Asia, particularly within private universities where resources for support are limited (Tejavanija, 2021; OECD, 2023).

4.3 Impact of Leadership Practices on Student Experiences

Leadership practices at SIU have a direct impact on the international student experience. Where leadership invested in visible initiatives such as orientation programs, cultural events, and accessible student services, international students reported higher satisfaction and stronger feelings of belonging. Faculty members highlighted that leadership's encouragement of intercultural activities created opportunities for cross-cultural learning, although student participation was often limited.

At the same time, leadership gaps were evident in faculty preparedness. International students frequently reported that classroom practices did not account for cultural and linguistic diversity. Administrators acknowledged that professional development in inclusive pedagogy was limited and not systematically integrated into faculty training. As a result, students' experiences varied significantly depending on the individual instructor's awareness and approach.

The findings suggest that leadership is decisive in shaping either supportive or exclusionary environments. Leadership practices that emphasize visibility, accessibility, and faculty development foster inclusivity, while their absence exacerbates barriers. This conclusion aligns with recent evidence that strong leadership is crucial for aligning institutional policies with the lived realities of international students (Azadi et al., 2025).

4.4 Emerging Themes: Mentorship, Intercultural Understanding, and Leadership Self-Efficacy

Several emerging themes offer insights into future directions for leadership at SIU. Mentorship was consistently identified as a potential strategy to address both academic and social challenges. Students expressed interest in peer mentorship programs pairing international students with senior students, both international and Thai. Such initiatives were seen as

particularly valuable for academic adjustment and social integration. Faculty also emphasized the importance of mentorship to strengthen belonging and facilitate cultural exchange.

Intercultural understanding emerged as another critical theme. Students described SIU's diversity as a potential strength but noted that there were limited opportunities to engage meaningfully with peers from other cultural backgrounds. Faculty emphasized the need for structured intercultural training for both staff and students to minimize misunderstandings and foster inclusive environments. This aligns with calls in the literature for leaders to embed intercultural competency into institutional development (Deardorff et al., 2021).

Leadership self-efficacy was also highlighted in the interviews. Some administrators described confidence in their ability to promote inclusivity, often drawing on personal experiences of studying abroad or working in multicultural settings. Others admitted to uncertainty about how to respond effectively to the needs of international students. This variability underscores the need for leadership development programs that build self-efficacy and cultural competency. The hybrid leadership framework advanced by Hossain et al. (2025) is constructive in this context, as it emphasizes the combination of self-leadership, shared responsibility, and credibility as essential to fostering sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

Summary of the Findings

The findings reveal a complex picture of leadership and inclusivity at SIU. On one hand, the university's leadership demonstrates strong rhetorical and policy-level commitment to diversity and internationalization. On the other hand, students' experiences point to significant gaps in practice, particularly in academic support, social integration, and faculty preparedness. Leadership practices play a decisive role in shaping these outcomes, with positive initiatives fostering a sense of belonging and unaddressed gaps reinforcing feelings of exclusion.

Emerging themes highlight mentorship, intercultural understanding, and leadership self-efficacy as critical areas for future development. Together, the findings suggest that inclusive leadership requires both vision and implementation. Hybrid leadership, which integrates personal accountability, shared governance, and credibility, offers a promising model for bridging the gap between policy and practice. Aligning SIU's leadership strategies with the frameworks of SDG 4 and SDG 10 can strengthen the institution's capacity to provide equitable and inclusive education for all students.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal both the strengths and limitations of leadership practices at Shinawatra University (SIU) in advancing inclusivity for international students. While the university demonstrates a visible commitment to diversity and internationalization at the policy level, implementation is inconsistent, leaving many international students without adequate support. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, considers their implications for practice, and situates them within the context of global sustainability goals, particularly SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 10 on reducing inequalities.

The first major theme concerns leadership's rhetorical commitment to inclusivity and the gap between policy and practice. The SIU strategic plan reflects a strong vision for inclusivity, echoing transformational leadership principles in its emphasis on cultural exchange and global engagement. However, student experiences show that these visions are not always operationalized. This inconsistency supports the view of Shen, Zhang, and Liu (2023), who argue

that leadership declarations are insufficient without institutional structures that enable systematic implementation. In the case of SIU, the lack of faculty training in inclusive pedagogy and limited visibility of student services illustrate the importance of distributed and connective leadership approaches that engage multiple stakeholders in translating policy into practice.

The challenges reported by international students reinforce the centrality of leadership in shaping educational outcomes. Academic barriers such as language proficiency and pedagogical adjustment remain pressing, as do social integration difficulties, financial stress, and bureaucratic hurdles. These findings align with recent global studies that document the vulnerability of international students in private universities, particularly in Asia, where resource constraints often limit institutional support (Tejavaniya, 2021; OECD, 2023; Channuwong et al., 2025). They also highlight the need for situational leadership, which emphasizes adaptability to diverse contexts. Leaders who can adjust their strategies to the cultural and academic needs of their students are more likely to reduce inequalities and align institutional practices with the objectives of SDG 10.

The impact of leadership practices on student experiences provides further evidence of leadership's pivotal role. When SIU leaders invested in initiatives such as orientation programs and cultural events, students reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging and satisfaction. These examples illustrate how inclusive leadership can foster the conditions for international students to thrive, consistent with Azadi et al. (2025), who argue that inclusivity must be embedded in institutional practices rather than left to the goodwill of individual faculty members. Conversely, the absence of systematic faculty development created uneven experiences, underscoring the role of leadership in ensuring consistency across the institution.

The emergence of mentorship, intercultural understanding, and leadership self-efficacy as cross-cutting themes points to important directions for institutional development. Students and faculty identified mentorship as a promising mechanism for academic adjustment and social integration. This finding aligns with Glass and Westmont (2021), who demonstrated that peer mentoring improves belonging and reduces cultural isolation among international students. Leadership can play a decisive role in institutionalizing such programs, ensuring they are adequately resourced and integrated into student affairs structures.

Intercultural understanding represents another crucial area. SIU's diversity offers opportunities for rich cultural exchange, yet students reported few structured opportunities for engagement across cultural groups. This gap underscores the importance of connective leadership, which fosters collaboration across boundaries and encourages mutual learning. Deardorff et al. (2021) emphasize that intercultural competence must be cultivated not only among international students but also among faculty and domestic peers. Leaders who prioritize intercultural training contribute directly to SDG 4 by ensuring equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities for all students.

Leadership self-efficacy emerged as both a strength and a limitation. Some administrators expressed confidence in their ability to promote inclusivity, often citing personal experiences in multicultural environments. Others acknowledged uncertainty, reflecting uneven leadership capacity. This variation underscores the importance of leadership development programs that prioritize self-efficacy and cultural competency. As Hossain et al. (2025) argue in their work on hybrid leadership, effective leaders combine self-leadership, shared leadership, and opinion leadership to create sustainable outcomes. Applying this model to higher education suggests that

leaders who develop personal accountability, distribute responsibility, and influence others through credibility are better positioned to address inclusive challenges.

The implications of these findings extend beyond SIU to the broader context of Thai and regional higher education. Thailand's demographic decline has intensified competition for international students, making inclusivity a strategic priority for institutional survival (Jampaklay & Pattanapanchai, 2022; Sutthadaanantaphokin et al., 2025). However, without leadership-driven mechanisms to support international students, universities risk undermining their internationalization goals. The SIU case demonstrates how hybrid leadership approaches could be applied to bridge the gap between policy and practice, creating structures that not only attract but also retain international students.

At the global level, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions on the role of higher education in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. By addressing barriers faced by international students, leadership practices at SIU align with SDG 4's emphasis on inclusive and equitable education. At the same time, leadership strategies that reduce inequalities in access, belonging, and outcomes among diverse student groups contribute to SDG 10. Furthermore, by fostering partnerships between students, faculty, and institutional leaders, the case resonates with SDG 17, which highlights the importance of collaboration in achieving sustainable development.

The study also highlights several practical implications. First, leadership must move beyond rhetorical commitment to inclusivity and develop mechanisms that ensure consistent practice across the institution. This includes systematic faculty development in inclusive pedagogy and intercultural competency. Second, mentorship programs should be institutionalized to support both academic and social integration. Third, intercultural training must be extended to domestic students and staff to create an environment of mutual understanding. Ultimately, leadership development programs should prioritize building self-efficacy and fostering hybrid leadership capacities among administrators and faculty.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has limitations. The case study design limits generalizability beyond SIU, and language differences may have constrained the depth of some student responses. Nonetheless, triangulation of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings. Future research could expand the analysis by applying mixed methods approaches, such as those used by Hossain et al. (2025), which integrate qualitative insights with quantitative modeling to uncover complex causal relationships. Such approaches would further enrich understanding of how leadership practices influence inclusivity in higher education.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights that leadership at SIU is both a facilitator and a barrier to inclusivity. While strategic visions and policies articulate firm commitments, implementation gaps remain. The study emphasizes the importance of hybrid leadership in bridging these gaps, suggesting that leaders who combine personal accountability, shared responsibility, and credibility-based influence are best positioned to foster inclusive environments. By aligning leadership practices with SDG 4 and SDG 10, SIU and similar institutions can strengthen their role in promoting equitable, sustainable, and globally engaged higher education.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined leadership approaches that foster inclusivity for international students at Shinawatra University (SIU), with a particular focus on their alignment with Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 10, specifically quality education and reducing

inequalities. The findings reveal that while SIU demonstrates strong rhetorical and policy-level commitment to inclusivity, implementation remains inconsistent. International students continue to face barriers in academic adjustment, social integration, financial stability, and administrative processes. At the same time, the study highlights that leadership practices, when effectively implemented, can significantly enhance students' sense of belonging and educational success.

The research contributes to the growing literature on inclusive leadership in higher education by emphasizing the importance of hybrid leadership, a framework that integrates self-leadership, shared leadership, and opinion leadership. As demonstrated by Hossain et al. (2025) in entrepreneurial contexts, hybrid leadership provides a model for combining personal accountability, distributed governance, and influence through credibility to achieve sustainable outcomes. Inclusivity in higher education, this framework emphasizes that leadership for inclusivity necessitates both a visionary commitment and practical mechanisms for consistent implementation.

The conclusion of this study can be summarized in three key points. First, inclusive leadership is not merely a policy aspiration but a practical necessity for universities that seek to attract and retain international students. Without consistent and visible leadership practices, inclusiveness remains uneven, leaving students vulnerable to exclusion. Second, the challenges faced by international students at SIU reflect broader global trends, indicating that universities in Thailand and beyond must strengthen their leadership strategies to achieve the aims of SDG 4 and SDG 10. Third, hybrid leadership presents a promising approach for bridging the gap between institutional policy and student experience, thereby ensuring that inclusivity is embedded at all levels of university life.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen leadership practices for inclusivity at SIU and similar institutions.

One key recommendation is to invest in systematic faculty development. While SIU's leadership articulates commitment to diversity, faculty members acknowledged limited training in inclusive pedagogy and cultural competency. Providing ongoing professional development in these areas would enable faculty to adapt teaching strategies to the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students. This aligns with recent scholarship that emphasizes the importance of equipping educators with intercultural competencies to enhance learning outcomes (Deardorff et al., 2021).

A second recommendation is to institutionalize mentorship programs. International students expressed strong interest in peer mentorship arrangements, where new students are paired with experienced international and domestic peers. Such programs could facilitate academic adjustment, promote social integration, and alleviate feelings of isolation. Glass and Westmont (2021) found that peer mentorship fosters a sense of belonging and strengthens cross-cultural connections, which are crucial for student success. Leadership must play an active role in designing, resourcing, and sustaining such initiatives to ensure they become integral to the student experience.

A third recommendation involves expanding opportunities for intercultural engagement. Although SIU hosts a diverse student body, opportunities for meaningful intercultural exchange remain limited. Structured intercultural events, collaborative projects, and dialogue programs can foster mutual understanding among students of different backgrounds. Faculty and administrators also emphasized the value of intercultural training for staff, which would contribute to a more supportive institutional climate. Leaders who prioritize such opportunities

align directly with SDG 4's call for inclusive learning environments and SDG 10's goal of reducing inequalities in access and participation.

A fourth recommendation is to enhance the communication and accessibility of support services. Students reported inconsistent awareness of services provided by the International Office, suggesting that leadership should invest in stronger information dissemination strategies. Centralized platforms, multilingual resources, and regular orientation updates could ensure that students are better informed. Improved communication also extends to administrative processes such as visa renewals, where more explicit guidance and proactive support would significantly reduce stress for international students.

A fifth recommendation is to develop leadership capacity through targeted training programs. Leadership self-efficacy emerged as a mixed area, with some administrators expressing confidence in their ability to promote inclusivity, while others admitted to uncertainty. Leadership development programs should focus on building skills in cultural competency, inclusive governance, and hybrid leadership approaches. As Hossain et al. (2025) argue, hybrid leadership enhances sustainable performance by integrating self-discipline, shared responsibility, and influence through credibility. Universities should adapt this framework to the higher education context to strengthen leadership at all levels.

Recommendations for Policy

Beyond institutional practices, the findings suggest broader policy implications for Thai higher education. The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI) has emphasized internationalization as a strategic priority, but support structures for international students remain underdeveloped. Policies should require universities to demonstrate not only recruitment success but also evidence of inclusive practices that promote retention and student well-being. Regular audits of inclusive measures, along with the provision of funding for intercultural initiatives, could incentivize universities to prioritize this agenda.

Additionally, policies could encourage collaboration among universities to share best practices in inclusiveness. Partnerships between private and public institutions, or between Thai universities and international partners, could generate models for mentorship, intercultural training, and inclusive governance. Such collaboration resonates with SDG 17 on partnerships for sustainable development and would strengthen Thailand's higher education sector.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study also points to directions for future research. While the qualitative case study design provided in-depth insights into leadership and inclusivity at SIU, it is generally limited in terms of generalizability. Future research could adopt mixed methods designs, integrating qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys to capture broader patterns across institutions. The methodological approach of Hossain et al. (2025), which combined PLS-SEM and fsQCA, provides an example of how complex relationships between leadership practices and outcomes can be examined. Applying similar approaches in higher education could enrich understanding of how leadership fosters inclusivity in diverse contexts.

Another direction for research involves comparative studies across institutions and countries. Given the global relevance of inclusivity and internationalization, cross-national studies would provide valuable insights into how leadership strategies vary across cultural and policy contexts. Such studies would also contribute to the development of global benchmarks for inclusive leadership in higher education.

Conclusion

The case of SIU demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of leadership in fostering inclusive educational environments. Leadership commitment to diversity is visible in policy documents and strategic goals, but inconsistencies in implementation limit the effectiveness of inclusive efforts. International students continue to face barriers, yet the findings also reveal that positive leadership practices can significantly enhance belonging, integration, and success.

By adopting hybrid leadership approaches that combine personal accountability, distributed governance, and credibility-based influence, SIU can bridge the gap between policy and practice. Faculty development, mentorship programs, intercultural engagement, improved communication, and leadership training are practical steps toward inclusiveness. At the policy level, stronger national frameworks and collaborative initiatives can further advance the goals of SDG 4 and SDG 10.

Ultimately, leadership for inclusiveness is both a moral and strategic imperative for higher education institutions. By aligning leadership practices with the Sustainable Development Goals, universities such as SIU can play a transformative role in creating equitable, sustainable, and globally engaged educational environments.

Declarations

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

The corresponding author solely contributed to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this manuscript.

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