

## **Sociocultural and Psychological Acculturation Strategies of South African International Students in a Flemish University in Belgium: A Photovoice Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Due to an increase in mobility programs, the number of South African international students is on the rise. Despite this increase there is a lack of research on South African international students. The acculturation challenges of South African international students, studying in Flanders, Belgium in a non-Anglophonic context was investigated. A Photovoice method explored barriers and facilitators in their adjustment process. Participants captured their experiences through a visual lens. Focus groups conducted, utilized images as prompts to the narratives. The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The two main themes identified were related to Sociocultural and Psychological adjustment. We adapted Berry's bidimensional acculturation model, used it as an overarching framework and merged it with an Ubuntu African perspective. The data suggest that for facets of the host nation superficially rooted and easy to adapt to, participants generally adopted an assimilation strategy. Whereas a separation strategy was adopted for facets of the host nation that were deeply ingrained such as worldviews.

*Keywords:* acculturation, COVID-19, Erasmus, international students, mobility exchange, South Africa, ubuntu,

### **INTRODUCTION**

Prior to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic international student mobility was on the rise. The landscape of international student mobility has seen some changes due to the pandemic. UNESCO (2016) defines an international student as:

An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin.

Recent OECD statistics depict that more than 5.6 million international students had crossed borders to study in 2018 (OECD, 2020). Consequently, the upsurge of the COVID-19 pandemic will have a remarkable effect on international student mobility trends (Rumbley, 2020) impacting more than 3.9 million

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international students globally, thus far (UNESCO, 2020). It is forecasted there will be a decrease in international student mobility as concerns regarding travel bans, visa restrictions and health and safety measures continue (Mok, Xiong, Ke, & Cheung, 2021) coupled with host nations' ability to care for the well-being of their foreign guests (OECD, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is predicted to impact the push pull factors of study destinations. In 2019 China was the biggest sender of international students comprising 518,300 students (New Oriental, 2020) and this may fluctuate as regional destinations are being considered in lieu of English-speaking destinations (Mok et al., 2021). As English is the lingua Franca in the globalised world, many international students pursue their studies in Western English-speaking destinations such as the USA, UK, and Australia (OECD, 2020). International students are lucrative to host nation economies. During the 2019-2020 academic year international students contributed 38.7 billion to the US economy (NAFSA, 2020), a 4.4% drop from the previous academic year. Current international policies such as the US immigrant policies and Brexit are impacting mobility trends with more students opting for alternative destinations. Mobility trends will also be influenced by the governance of countries regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD 2020). Belgium has a popular appeal for international students due to a strong research culture, home to the European Union, is a multilingual nation and centrally located to other European cities (Kuleuven, 2021). Belgium has an ageing community and international students develop a country's human capital and innovation capacity (OECD, 2020). Belgium and South Africa have a long history based on close cultural and linguistic ties. The bilateral relation between Belgium and South Africa is strong and exports between these countries in 2011 constituted 14.6 billion (Embassy South Africa, 2021). Belgium ranks 6th in the world in terms of foreign direct investment in South Africa and is one of the leading countries in the management of ports and transport, with extensive cooperation between the ports of Antwerp and Durban. Acculturation and Adjustment are terms that are often used interchangeably in research. The process of acculturation involves an interactive process between an acculturating individual and a multi-layered environment (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). When international students engage in behaviours that benefit socio-cultural adjustment such as engaging in intercultural interactions then this positively impacts psychological adjustment which in turn impacts their levels of perceived social support (Shu, Ahmed, Pickett, Ayman & McAbee, 2020). This study will investigate the acculturation strategies of South African international students. Berry's (1980) bidimensional acculturation model is used as an overarching framework merging it with an Ubuntu perspective (Metz, 2013, Tutu 1999). Ubuntu is best described by the Zulu maxim *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* translated as, a person is a person through other persons. A person is socialised to think of themselves as inextricably bound to others (Munyaka & Mothlabi, 2009, p. 69,71,72). Ubuntu is seen as a moral ethical theory and is the ideal through which Nelson Mandela encapsulated this ideology (Mandela, 2013, p. 227).

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW: THE SOUTH AFRICAN CASE**

South Africa is a heterogenous country, termed the "rainbow nation" due to its multiculturalism and eleven official languages (Oliver & Oliver, 2017; Tutu, 1999). Racial classifications are still used in many South African, scientific studies. Three dominant categories are Caucasian, Black, and Coloured. The term Coloured, previously Cape Coloured is a person of hybrid African ("black") and European ("white") or Asian ancestry (Britannica, 2021). Their origins can be traced back to the arrival of the Dutch in South Africa, with the offspring of the Dutch and Malay slaves further hybridized by the Dutch intermingling with the KhoiKhoi, the San and the Xhosa people (Oliver & Oliver, 2017). As per the guidelines in the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) racial classifications can be viewed as negative, dated

and need to be addressed with sensitivity. In this study we worked with these racial classifications from a diversity perspective, rather than a post-Apartheid perspective. We considered a recent critique from Hendricks and colleagues (2019) that the use of the concept race may enforce an existing mechanism of stigma, discrimination, and racism (Hendricks, Kopano & Kramer, 2019) rather than facilitate understanding through a variety of different perspectives. Africa is a vast and diverse continent and often there is a proclivity to treat Africa as a homogenous continent (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). Therefore, it was decided to focus on South Africa separately as a target group.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do South African international students experience student life in Belgium?
2. What are the challenges that hinder or facilitate the acculturation of South African international students?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this study two theoretical frameworks were applied to link the findings on acculturation. Our primary theoretical framework is Berry's bidimensional acculturation model (1980), and the secondary framework is the African moral ethic of Ubuntu (Metz, 2013; Tutu, 1999). The most used definition of acculturation is "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals, having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups..." (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). The compatibilities or incompatibilities in norms, attitudes, and cultural values between two cultural groups need to be examined first, to understand the acculturation taking place (Sam & Berry, 2010). A sojourner's stance toward cultural continuity and cultural change may result in four acculturation strategies. These four orientations are defined in Berry's Bidimensional acculturation model as: Integration, Assimilation, Marginalization and Separation (Berry, 1980). The Assimilation strategy refers to individuals embracing the host culture at the expense of their own cultural group. The integration strategy is when individuals retain their personal and cultural values while adapting to the host culture. The separation strategy is when an individual engages in their own culture of origin but do not embrace the culture of the dominant host nation. Marginalization occurs when an individual disconnects from both their host and home culture due to negative perceptions they have of both cultures (Berry, 1980;1997). Our secondary theoretical framework is Ubuntu which values interdependence, community, collective responsibility, interdependence, and hospitality among people (Assie-Lumumba, 2017; Murove, 2014). Ubuntu is referred to by Letseka as fundamental to African socio-ethical thought, as illuminating the communal rootedness and interdependence of persons, and highlighting the importance of human relationships (2000, p. 179).

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

From an initial scoping of the literature, it was discovered that most studies conducted on international students either utilized a quantitative or a traditional qualitative method (Mok et al., 2021; Shu et al., 2020). This project applied a visual qualitative research framework using the photovoice methodology created by Wang and Burris (1997). The three main goals of Photovoice are: 1. Reflecting and recording the strengths and concerns of their communities, 2. Promoting knowledge and dialogue and, 3. To reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997, p.370). Photovoice has been used to examine groups such as vulnerable women (Miled, 2020); mental health (Vansteenkiste, Morrens & Westerhoff, 2020) and international students (Nokwedi & Khanare, 2020). Through photovoice, researchers can visualize an

individual's perception regarding their social realities through images (Miled, 2020). Images also articulate silenced voices. Photovoice promotes critical analysis, empowering individuals through knowledge constructions and fostering change through innovative solutions (Wang, 1999). Photovoice enabled us to have a better understanding of the acculturation processes of South African international students and aid in potential policy solutions.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted at the university of Leuven in the Flemish region of Belgium. KU Leuven is one of the oldest Universities in Europe established in 1425 (KU Leuven, 2021). It is situated in a small city called Leuven in the Dutch speaking region of Flanders. Belgium is divided into the Flemish and French community (OECD, 2017). Kuleuven, during the 2019-2020 academic year registered 58000 students with 9686 being international students (KuLeuven, 2021).

### **Sample**

Six South African postgraduate Erasmus Mundus to South Africa scholarship recipients (EMA2SA) participated in this study. A convenience sampling method was employed, and participants reflect this sample (Wang, 1999, p.,187). It comprised of four females and two males. At the time of the study five of the participants were completing their master's degree and one participant was a doctoral candidate. The age of the participants ranged from 26 to 42. Three of the participants lived in 50/50 % mixed residence comprising of Belgian and international students, one lived in a 95 % predominantly Dutch residence and two had lived in a private residence as a couple. For the older participant (6), it was an adjustment to live in a student residence away from her husband and children. All the participants received a monthly stipend, which funded their accommodation and subsistence. Student were able to use their stipends at their own discretion. Most of the participants utilized the remainder of their stipends for home necessities like bedding as well as travel expenses. Many joined local sports clubs and cultural organizations like Pangaea. The South African participants came from different socioeconomic backgrounds due to the remnants of the Apartheid system of racial inequality. The research sample reflects this multiculturalism comprising of 3 Caucasian South Africans of Afrikaans Dutch descent, 2 Black South Africans (Xitsonga and IsiXhosa tribes) and one Coloured participant (Khoisan). The grant recipients were some of the top scholars in their field and more privileged as scholarship recipients. The South African students prior to receiving the scholarship had entered the job market or were already in employment. Some had shorter periods of mobility such as 3- 6 months whereas others had longer periods including 12-36 months. For practical convenience, an ideal group of participants in a photovoice study would be between 7 and 10 people to allow for in depth discussion. The sample size is comparable to other photovoice studies utilizing smaller samples (Wang, Leen & Hannes, 2018, Wang & Hannes. 2014).

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**Table 1**  
*Information On The Research Participants*

No	Sex	Age	Degree	Mobility	Race	Language	Faculty
1.	Female	29	PhD	36 months	Caucasian (Dutch descent)	Afrikaans	Faculty of Science
2.	Female	28	Masters	12 months	Black (isiXhosa descent)	IsiXhosa	Faculty of Architecture
3.	Female	26	Masters	12 months	Black (Xitsonga descent)	Tsonga	Faculty of Architecture
4.	Male	30	Masters	12 months	Caucasian (Dutch descent)	Afrikaans	Faculty of Architecture
5.	Male	31	Masters	12 months	Caucasian (Dutch descent)	Afrikaans	Faculty of Science
6.	Female	42	Masters	12 months	Coloured (Khoisan).	Afrikaans	Faculty of Education and Psychology

### **Ethical briefing**

An introductory interactive information session regarding the goal of the study, the concept of photovoice and ethical concerns was conducted. Issues related to privacy, informed consent and confidentiality were discussed. Each participant signed a consent form in which the potential benefits and harms of the study were explained. Three participants participated in the ethics session. Those who could not attend were briefed on an individual basis. During the ethics sessions a range of images were presented to illustrate which photos might raise some ethical dilemmas. Suggestions were given to bridge this. The ethics session increased awareness of the potential ethical pitfalls. Consent forms in the shape of wallet slips were given to all participants to distribute to potential photographic subjects. Participants were informed that permission was needed by subjects who had visible logos or identifiable facial and or bodily features. Obtaining permission from subjects created discomfort. Consequently, participants opted for the safer choice of capturing photos that had minimal ethical impact, with a preference for taking metaphorical photos (Hannes & Parylo, 2014). Photos with identifiable features of the participants also needed consent and these were signed and returned to the lead researcher.

### **Data Collection**

Two rounds of photo collection, interviews and focus groups took place over a period of 10 months. The first round provided two months' time to capture photos. During the first stage, the participants were in the initial phase of adjustment and had been living in Flanders for a period of three months. Participants were tasked to take photos about their general experiences being international students in Flanders. They were instructed to take ten to fifteen photos each for the first-round submission. The photos selected were sent to the lead researcher before the first focus group took place. Five participants participated in the first focus group. A PowerPoint slideshow represented each photo the participants had submitted. The

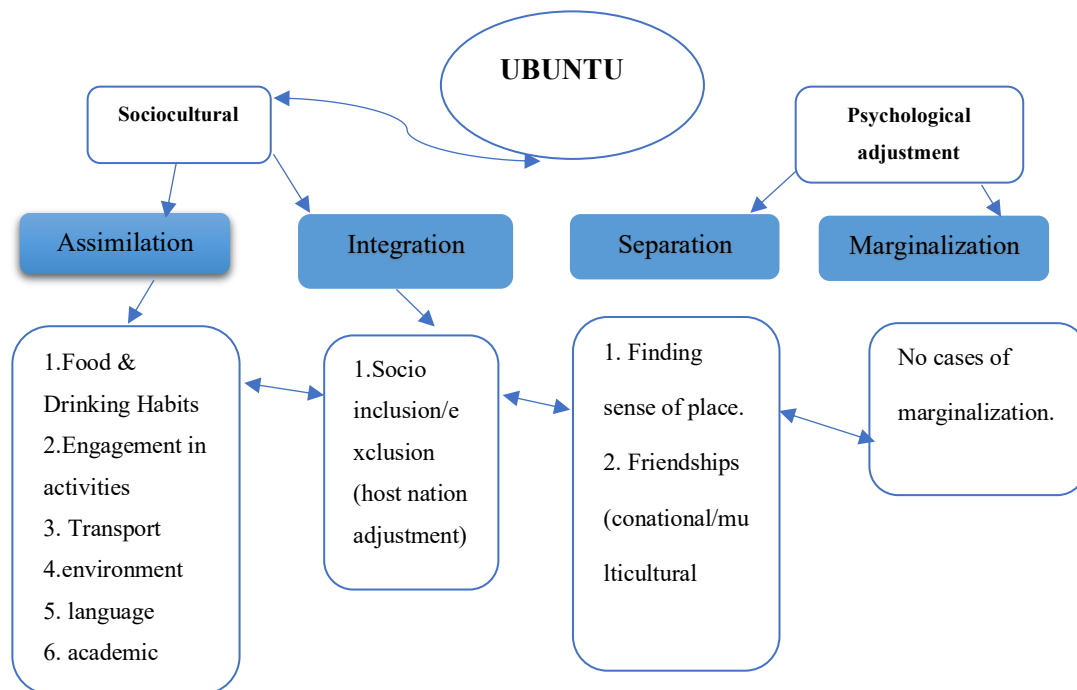
participants were then asked individually to describe the meaning behind their photos. Questions that were used as prompts included:

1. What is the main idea behind this photo?
2. Why did you send in this photo?
3. What message do you want to convey with this photo?

A general inventory regarding the experiences and challenges of all the international students were taken during the first round. Upon transcriptions of the focus groups, certain themes emerged and were clustered into two umbrella themes: Sociocultural and Psychological guided by research done by (Searle & Ward, 1990). Under the umbrella theme of sociocultural adjustment, seven subcategories were founded which included: 1. Food and drinking habits, 2. Engagement in activities, 3. Transport, 4. Environment 5. Language 6. Academic Assimilation and 7. Host nation adjustment. Under the umbrella theme of psychological adjustment, the follow subthemes emerged 1. Finding a sense of place and 2. Friendships.

**Table 2**

*Overview On The Interconnection Between The Four Acculturation Strategies*



The theme of Sociocultural adjustment produced the most subthemes and consequently utilized as the main prompt for the second round of photo submission. Participants in the second round were guided by the following prompt: Which opportunities and challenges from a sociocultural perspective are you experiencing as a South African international student in Flanders? The students had 2 months to submit photos related to this question.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was applied to examine the photos. Thematic analysis is a procedure that methodically identifies, organizes, and offers insight into “patterns of meaning” across a data set and permits the researcher to make sense of “collective or shared memories and experiences” (Braun, 2012, p. 57). It involves a process of identifying themes through analyzing and reading data meticulously. The

photos were analyzed and then grouped into different categories highlighting the narratives and later categorized and coded based on similarity. The transcripts were read rigorously. Fundamental thematic outlines were extracted from previous studies conducted in similar contexts and were used as a guide to inform concepts to construct initial findings. These were later fine-tuned based on the content that emerged through an iterative method of coding and categorizing.

**Table 3**

*Overview Of The Steps For Thematic Analysis*

Heading	Interpretation
1. First impression/non-objective interpretation of the data	Upon receipt of the photos, the lead researcher interpreted the photos from her own perspective. This was done intentionally to affirm the importance of the meaning attached to the accompanying narrative and photos. It demonstrated that an image does not only lie in its physical construction but in how the individual who has taken the photo interprets it (Berger, 2011, p.95). Contemporary approaches to visual data now determine that visual data are not only seen as reflections of reality instead the construction of meaning is by the creator (Miled, 2020) as images often demonstrate subjective reality.
2. Systematizing the data or codifying the data	After the first focus group session the lead researcher systematized each photo with its accompanying narrative to create structure and coherence.
3. Searching for themes	Axial coding took place initially as the researcher continuously compared axial codes to search for links with other codes. Images were then searched for themes and placed under a code. Once all the codes were retrieved the researcher interpreted the codes to find common themes.
4. Clustering of Themes	Themes were clustered and re-evaluated. After this the final main themes and subthemes were formed. This was a time-consuming process as some themes overlapped such as socio-connectedness which falls under both Sociocultural and Psychological adjustment.
5. Direction for continuation of study	As participants in photovoice become co-creators, it was decided to focus solely on the theme of socio-cultural adjustment being the dominant theme. Participants were prompted by the following question: "What were the challenges and opportunities both positive and negative they experienced as South Africans adjusting socio-culturally into a foreign context?"
6. Re-clustering of second-round themes	The second-round photos were further categorised into different themes based on the clustering of data such as socio connectedness, differences in worldviews, host nation adjustment and social networks
7. Creating the report	A report was created on their experiences.

## RESULTS

Sociocultural and Psychological adjustment were the dominant themes in previous research (Shu et al 2020; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) hence they were utilized as umbrella themes to structure the narrative. The following categories discussed below pertained to Berry's assimilation strategy except for host nation adjustment which focused on the integration strategy.

### Food and Drinking Culture

#### *Opportunities*

All the participants (6 out of 6) had all sent in photos (a collection of 30 photos) regarding the food and drinking habits of the locals. They learnt about local Belgian food culture by frequenting local bars and restaurants where local people assembled, by observing them, and trying out the local cuisine. Participants sampled the Belgian beer (as Belgians have a rich beer heritage) and familiarized themselves with this culture. Participant 2 discusses the variety of the local beer culture (see Figure 1):

I think that was the first week we were here actually and not being a beer drinker back home, because we don't have so many beers. I usually drink wine so to find something that was accommodating me as well was a big thing for me. Belgium has turned me into a beer drinker, but I will drop the beer when I leave: Because I won't have Kriek (Belgian beer).

**Figure 1**

*Belgian Beer*



Source: photograph of Participant 2

#### *Challenges*

Some of the challenges associated with the local food culture was the lower quality of fresh produce. This was attributed to exporting, as exported food deteriorates quicker. Some of the participants (5 out of 6) had commented that they were unable to afford better quality food due to the higher cost of living. Participant 1 (see Figure 2):

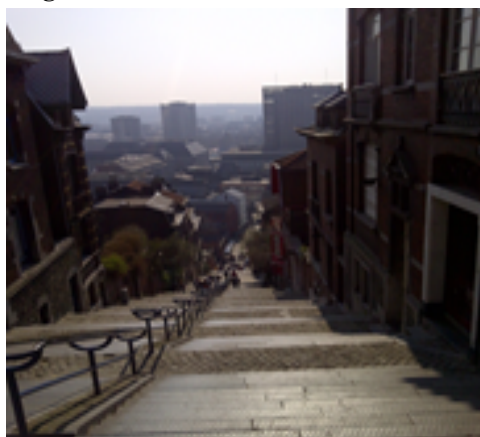
In South Africa we go to the farmers market quite a lot. I am a farm girl...Farming here is so industrialized. I would never pay so much for food in South Africa, and I think that the quality of the food here sucks, that's why they have to buy it off of Spain. I think we have some really nice stuff at home.



**Figure 2***Farmer's Market**Source: photograph of Participant 1***Engagement in Activities*****Opportunities***

Engaging in activities was divided into two subcategories: 1. Participating in Sporting and Cultural Events and 2. Travelling. Five of the participants discussed the different sports clubs they joined such as field hockey and rock climbing and the different cultural events, they attended such as art exhibitions, music concerts and museums. These activities offered the participants an opportunity to learn about the host culture. Travelling was deemed an important past time in getting to know the European culture and (32 photographs) were collected on this theme. Many commented on the convenience of travelling in Europe as it is a smaller country compared to South Africa, e.g. Participant 2 (see Figure 3).

A few weeks ago, me and (Participant 6) decided to explore a bit more. We spend a lot of time here in Flanders, so we went to Liege for the day, and it was quite striking how different the two cities are to each other. I wanted to show how enthusiastic we were exploring the city that we ended up doing the typical touristic things like climbing three hundred stairs.

**Figure 3***Liege**Source: photograph of Participant 2****Challenges***

There were no challenges reported regarding engagement in activities.

## New Modes of Transport

### *Opportunities*

One of the dominant modes of transport in Belgium is cycling. Participant three used the opportunity to relearn how to ride a bicycle. Several of the participants mentioned the health benefits of cycling and walking and its eco-friendliness. Several photos (25 photos) were submitted regarding this theme. Most of the participants were accustomed to travelling by private transport in South Africa. However, many noted the impracticality of cycling as primary transport in South Africa due to slopes. Participant 2 stated (see Figure 4):

It was the first time. I think I had not been on a bicycle in many moons. I had to make a shift mentally and I remember saying to you that this kind of really made me miss my car. But in retrospect I walk everywhere now, or I take the bus...I really love that I am more active and walking more I really appreciate that about Europe.

**Figure 4**

### *Bicycles*



Source: photograph of Participant 2

### *Challenges*

One of the obstacles in cycling was the safety concern regarding extreme weather conditions. Most were unprepared on dealing with the safety issues of frost and snow when cycling. They had to purchase appropriate clothing for the colder conditions and learnt habits such as clothing layering. It was also inconvenient using their bicycles for practical day to day maintenance such as carting groceries in extreme weather, (5 out of 6) participants noted. Participant four below commented:

I can't use my bicycle; I have to walk. But I can't walk on this because if this part becomes ice, then I am going to slip and fall. It's like your whole world gets turned upside down and you kind of think, am I appropriately dressed? do I have all the right equipment? It's something we are not used to back home" (Narrative 1, Participant, 4).

## Environment

### *Opportunities*

Issues concerning the environment like recycling, the impact of the seasons and architecture are discussed. A sample of (35) photos were sent in regarding this theme. The visible changing of the seasons was a new experience for the participants. In the narrative below participant four comments on the quiet ambience created when it snowed and the tendency of the Belgians to retreat indoors. "We always wanted

it to snow and... when it snows it's a lot quieter, it gets frighteningly quiet, it gets quite surreal in a way” (Narrative 2, Participant, 4).

One other important component participant mentioned, was the eco-friendly recycling nature of Belgium (4 out of 6) and below Participant 5 commented (see Figure 5):

This is the heart of the city at night, where very old and new are mixed. Very different from Johannesburg where I grew up. Notice the (near) absence of cars, there are tracks for trams, and bicycles lean against the wall. This city is much cleaner than Joburg. Not only in terms of trash, but also in an eco-friendly way.

### **Figure 5**

*Heart Of The City*



*Source:* photograph of Participant 5

The aesthetic old-world appeal of Europe was visually stimulating to the participants depicting European history. Approximately (27) photos were submitted regarding this theme. A point made by Participant 5 (see Figure 6) below refers to how the old buildings depict the story of European history:

Some of the buildings in Europe were built before Europeans “discovered” Africa. These buildings tell a story of European history. This Dome survived World War 2. I doubt whether some of the more modern buildings will last this long. It is amazing to experience, such, beautiful old buildings. South Africa is a relatively modern country, and we do not have such old architecture in South Africa.

### **Figure 6**

*European Dome*



*Source:* photograph of Participant 5

### ***Challenges***

Originating from a warmer climate, acclimation to the colder weather conditions was an adjustment. All the participants (6 out of 6) commented that the lack of Vitamin D had impacted them negatively. Participant 1 commented that the colder weather conditions had an impact on the outdoor sport of rock climbing (see Figure 7):

We went to Luxembourg to do some climbing; nature is for me super important. In South Africa I would go climbing every single weekend because the weather is amazing. I feel at a loss, in Winter. I felt like what the hell should I do now? Because I can't do my sport. I don't want to go outdoors, because it is too cold, and I came to the realization now that I need another sport.

### **Figure 7**

#### ***Rock Climbing***



*Source:* photograph of Participant 1

### **Language**

#### ***Opportunities***

South Africa has eleven official languages of which English is the lingua franca (Oliver & Oliver, 2017). Courses were conducted in English of which South Africans have a native proficiency. Some of the participants (6 out of 6) took the opportunity to embrace the Flemish language by, reading local Belgian newspapers, taking Dutch courses and attending cultural events organised by the local Belgians. Participant 1 commented (see Figure 8):

This was taken during the Kultuuruur festival, and they did an Art project about sustainability. I am busy looking in the Dutch guide for the next art exhibition to go and see. In my town in Potchefstroom, we have an Art festival called Aardklop which kind of reminded me a bit of Kultuuruur.

### ***Challenges***

Some discomfort was experienced pertaining to the Flemish instruction of signposts, Dutch only library signs and books as well as computers set to the Dutch language. Practical concerns were an issue. Participant three who lived in a predominantly Belgian residence experienced discomfort when important announcements were made in Dutch such as a fire drills and felt a safety concern.

**Figure 8***Dutch Newspaper Guide**Source: photograph of Participant 1***Academic Adjustment*****Opportunities***

Academic adjustment was subcategorised into two categories: 1. Curricular related activities and extra-curricular activities. Extracurricular related study trips offered an opportunity for learning practically and in a different setting. Three of the participants in the same course of Urbanism got the opportunity to go on a study trip to China. “This photo (Figure 9) shows how I have moved from Africa to another different environment” (Participant 3). “And it opened another door to somewhere else” (participant 2). “The three of us all went on that trip, and I don’t think we would have gotten the opportunity like that if we had stayed and continued studying in South Africa”.

**Figure 9***China Study Trip**Source: photograph of Participant 3****Challenges***

Academic challenges focused on learning in official school settings and having to assimilate to a new academic milieu. Some of the students were concerned regarding the protocol of formal academic



settings: “Belgian people behave according to protocol so as soon as you are in a different situation a different protocol is required” (Narrative 3, Participant, 1).

Participant 3 (see Figure 10) explained the challenge of studying a different course in Belgium:

That’s me in studio preparing for the model and this is very diverted from what I have studied, so very different. It was interesting and very challenging for me, because as I said it’s not what I studied in South Africa, so it was very challenging.

### **Figure 10**

#### *Studio Work*



*Source:* photograph of Participant 3

### **Integration Strategy**

The integration strategy (Berry, 1997) refers to host nation adjustment, where participants maintain some of their own cultural elements while also being disposed to learning about the host nation. The cultural component in socio-cultural refers to the norms, values and beliefs of a host nation and can refer to the deeper and invisible sense of a culture ingrained in their ways of being and language (Taulean, 2015).

### ***Host Nation Adjustment***

Occasions to learn about the local culture through observation gave participants an opportunity to view facets of the host nation from a different perspective. One such opportunity is related to differences in worldviews regarding the social organisation of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). Participant six had visited a local Belgian friend who willingly chose to exclude herself from her community and gained a new perspective noting below:

I visited a Belgian friend in that town, and I asked her to show me what they typically do on a weekend. It’s a good quality of life they live, it’s just that socio-culturally I feel that she is a bit isolated, and it makes me understand her and Belgians a bit better. I just found her choice of exclusion and not being included in the community she lives in, very different. It’s a different way of social organization compared to back home (Narrative 4, Participant, 6).

Ubuntu means that our humanity is inextricably linked to another’s humanity (Tutu, 1999) and individualism is usually seen as its antithesis. Identity and solidarity are two themes that appear in Ubuntu (Metz, 2011). When one fails to identify with another, this can be construed as alienation, and can undermine a group’s value. Solidarity focuses on ways of mutual aid where there is an expectation that one can help another to a certain degree. Failure to exhibit solidarity could at worst be depicted as ill-will (Metz, 2011). For Participant 4 it was a strange way of social organisation that bordered on not being connected to a community and alienating oneself.

Belgium has a more balanced socioeconomic structure with the majority pertaining to the middle class. All participants noted that Belgium was a safer country with less crime. For Participant 6 it was a culture shock when asked to leave her coat at a coat stand (see Figure 11):

That photo was a cultural shock photo to me. I have been to a dinner at the faculty club, and we were advised to go and hang our coats in the cloakroom. So, we go and hang our coats in the cloakroom, and I think that oh, my coat is going to get stolen here. So, everybody hangs their coats and after a while well after dinner we go back and fetch our coats, and like most of the people have left and I thought that ... only in Africa you can expect your coat to be stolen. Everyone just confidently hangs their stuff, their possessions are not under threat of being taken and there was a fellow African, she is from Kenya, and she says to me; “This still shocks me,” I said what? So, she said “that my coat is always there once I come back.”

**Figure 11**

*Coat Stand*



*Source:* photograph of Participant 6

This suggests that although South Africans have their doubts about something based on their personal experiences, their actions are brought into alignment with the behaviour of the host nation.

### ***Challenges (Social Barriers)***

A major obstacle to the South African international students' adjustment was the difficulty in acquainting the locals. They attributed this to the perception that the Belgians were reserved and cautious in allowing foreign people access into their social circles. All the participants noted a social barrier. Participant 1 stated (see Figure 12):

This was taken at Kultuuruur (Culture hour) it's an Art installation. Each potato has something to do with networks and each potato is connected to another potato. It has something to do with the way people form groups and the way the groups interact with each other... In Belgium people are a little bit more cautious to reveal themselves.... Although there are some people that I think I can be friends with, but we are going to need some time to let them let their guard down... They are not cold but there is a certain kind of barrier.

**Figure 12***Art Installation*

*Source:* photograph of Participant 1

In Ubuntu, a human being is an intrinsic communal entity rooted in the context of the interdependence of social relationships and is never seen as an atomistic, isolated individual (Gyeke, 1987). All the participants (6 out of 6) had experienced a social barrier. They experienced an inaccessibility of entering the Belgian social circles despite attempts at joining. Participant three stated that in the beginning she felt socially excluded and unwelcome from her primarily Belgian residence when no one had welcomed her. She eventually took the stance that this is how Belgians are culturally and adapted accordingly. Participant 6 noted that there was an exclusion not based on race but an exclusion that you are not Belgian stating (see Figure 13):

I have not experienced first-hand any racist kind of incidents here and I find that there is a lot of social exclusion but not based on race like it would be in South Africa. The social exclusion is that you are not Belgian, so you are not quite assimilated into the conversation around the table or the conversation at the pub. You always must listen and try and rely on your Afrikaans to try and follow the conversation and so it is an exclusion of a different kind.

**Figure 13***Leuven Hates Racism*

*Source:* photograph of Participant 6

Participant six refers to an exclusion of a different kind, not racial but based on being non-Belgian. There are various terms of discrimination that exist such as Islamophobia, Xenophobia and Afrophobia that might



not necessarily pertain to race but may be linked to an anti-immigrant sentiment (Michael, 2017). Feeling socially excluded is also antithesis to Ubuntu as it has an emphasis on community and hospitality (Waghid,2014). Participant four below expresses his feeling of social exclusion and lack of hospitality. He felt unwelcome in the group stating:

Half of my teammates are Dutch speaking, and the other half are French speaking, and I'm the only first language English speaker...This was probably the hardest thing for me to deal with because a lot of the guys in the team won't make the effort to speak English to me or to kind of make you feel welcome in the group. You kind of get treated like an outsider.

#### **Figure 14**

##### *Belgian Hockey Club*



*Source:* photograph of Participant 4

Most Belgians have an English proficiency and participant four is proficient in Afrikaans which is mutually intelligible with Dutch (Gooskens & Bezooijens,2006). This could be linked to linguistic exclusion, however there is something more deeply embedded. The linguistic exclusion could be attributed to not having mastered the native language yet, meaning the host nation may not automatically default to English. He felt a lack of Ubuntu traits such as interconnectedness and hospitality where an individual is accountable from a moral point of view to others (Murove, 2014). Some of the personal characteristics of this participant included that he was very outgoing, sporty, and self-assured. The lack of community could be attributed to his more communalistic Ubuntu worldview as opposed to the individualism of the Belgians (Hofstede, 1980). Cultural value conflicts result from the struggle between the values and behavioral expectations present in the host culture to that of a sojourners home culture (Constantine et al., 2005). However, it is possible that cultures can both possess degrees of individualist and collectivistic traits. Participant four being Caucasian, his non-visibility should have counted in his favor, yet he still felt treated like an outsider. There are still levels of Xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe (Michael, 2017; Nwabuzo, 2016). The European network against racism coined the term Afrophobia to describe instances of discrimination and exclusion, targeting people of African origin (Nwabuzo. 2016).

#### **Psychological Adjustment**

##### ***Separation Strategy***

##### *Opportunities*

Finding your sense of place was one of the themes and (5 out of the 6) participants had sent in photos on this theme. Photos submitted, illustrated navigating their way in their new surroundings and

trying to find their place as Africans. As a solution they sought African ties such as searching for African speciality stores or connecting with other South Africans. Participant 4 (see Figure 15) discussed this longing for home:

This bar reminds me a bit of home and I feel a bit at home here. When you speak to people about the giraffe... they take it a bit for granted they don't know what it's about. For them it's just a bar for me it's a bit more than that. It's the combination of real Belgian elements because they've got the big range of Belgian beers and then you've got this African element which is represents the wealth and relates to this idea of the watering hole.

**Figure 15**

*The Watering Hole*



Source: photograph of Participant 4

Some saw the challenge of finding a sense of place as an opportunity to learn more about their own African identity. Participant 3 started learning to play a traditional Venda instrument noting that she appreciated learning about her culture while in Europe (see Figure 16): “I forgot what it's called because it's actually a Venda instrument, and it was just amazing for me to learn about it here in Europe that's why I put it there, like learning about SA while in Europe” .

**Figure 16**

*Venda Musical Instrument*



Source: photograph of Participant 3

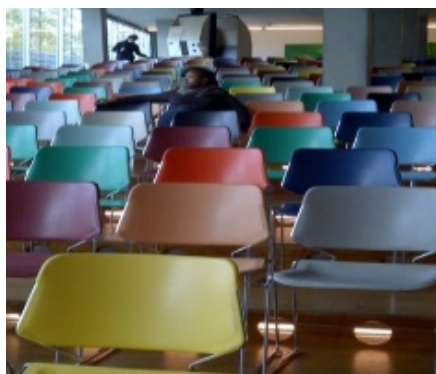
### *Challenges*

The psychological challenges are linked to Berry's separation and marginalization strategy (1980) and these challenges were linked to loneliness and feeling out of place. Participant 2 commented (see Figure 17):

I think that photo kind of represented all the empty chairs around. When I looked at it, I thought wow, that is kind of how I felt, when we first got here. There is a whole sea of people who are so different from me, but you still stand alone.

### **Figure 17**

#### *Sea Of People*



Source: photograph of Participant 2

### **Friendships**

#### *Opportunities*

The opportunity to acquaint with people from different cultures was valued. South Africans were able to learn from other cultures and see things from a different perspective. Participant 3 stated below (see Figure 18):

We were celebrating our friend's birthday. It was a sunny day, and she had no idea We've become quite a close-knit group of friends in our class. I thought that was something else. There are no Belgians in our class, there are two Africans, and the rest are all from Europe and we have really become a close-knit group of friends so that was special.

### **Figure 18**

#### *Friend's Birthday*



Source: photograph of participant 6

### *Challenges*

Due to difficulties gaining access to the host nation, the South Africans opted for alternative avenues of social support and networks. Subsequently, they gained access with fellow co-nationals also referred to as the monocultural network and international students from different countries known as the multicultural network (Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham, 1985). The monocultural network offers an important role in the expression of collective, cultural, and ethnic value whereas the multicultural network provides recreational and mutual support (Bochner et al., 1985).

### **DISCUSSION**

In this paper we discovered that Berry's assimilation and integration strategy is linked to Searle and Ward's (1990) sociocultural adjustment and Berry's separation and marginalization strategy as linked to Searle and Ward's (1990) psychological adjustment (Berry, 1980). We discovered that South African international students adopt either an assimilation or integration strategy as it pertains to some facets of their sociocultural adjustment and take on a separation strategy concerning other aspects of their psychological adjustment. An assimilation strategy was adopted by the South Africans for aspects of the host nation that were superficially rooted such as assimilating to the food culture or changing a transport mode. This is a choice and obtainable by trying out the local food culture or changing a habit. Conversely, intangible issues such as deeply rooted Flemish culture would only appear if one spent a considerably longer time in this setting. The findings demonstrate that the integration strategy was the least accessible strategy due to perceived social barriers constructed by the Belgians. This is consistent with other research done respectively on other sojourners in Belgium (Wang et al., 2018; Figueiredo, Oldenhove & Licata, 2018). This study is also consistent with other research on African international students struggling to negotiate cultural value conflicts of individualist and collective traits (Okusolubu, 2018; Bofo-Arthur, 2014). Consequently, the South African sample took on a separation strategy when it came to connection. This study is consistent with other research that Berry's integration strategy (1980) like Bochner et al's Bicultural network (1985) is the least utilized strategy pertaining to host nation adjustment whereas Berry's separation strategy similar to Bochner et al's (1985) monocultural network is the most utilised as it pertains to connecting with fellow conationals followed by the multicultural network with fellow international students. No cases of marginalization were reported as this applies more to refugees, who unlike international students did not voluntarily enter the acculturation process (Maringe, Ojo & Chiramba, 2017).

### **UBUNTU**

From a universalist approach the word community refers to an ideal to strive for when relating to others in society and not an existing society already present in the world (Metz & Gaie, 2010). This community can consist of both interpersonal, biological, and non-biological bonds (Gyeke, 1987). Community can be observed as an objective standard, guiding a majority in what they want (Metz, 2013; 2017). Each individual adds their own knowledge, experience and abilities to the final social goal negotiated through indabas to reach a consensus (Metz & Gaie, 2010). This means that the communal character of Ubuntu does not subordinate the rights of an individual but instead an individual pursues their own good through pursuing a common good (Metz, 2017). With the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on international mobility, it will now be more important for international institutions to find ways of interconnection and understanding the other as this will impact push pull impact trends of international students. One of the factors the international students will look at will be how the host nation takes care of its foreign guests (OECD, 2020).

One thing we learnt from other Africans living in Belgium at that time, is that exposure to exclusionary mechanisms, although not directly linked to race, may have deeper roots in a colonial past. Whether it is foreigners undergoing medical screenings with Belgian-approved doctors only, or intrusive tests to gain visa acceptance, bank records checked, police clearance, or policing by authorities verifying paperwork or by simply opening a bank account. This was perceived by fellow Africans as a lack of trust from the host nation towards them. Afrophobia and other forms of discrimination still exist (Nwabuzo, 2016) and there is still a lack of recognition on the role colonization has played (Ngongo & Landmeters, 2019). Colonialism has caused great damage to some African nations and the refugee crisis is at an all-time high (Butticci, 2020). There remain visual markers of colonialism in societies. In South African universities, symbols of colonial culture in post-colonial African societies remain (Chowdhury, 2019) and in Belgium, establishments such the Royal Museum for Africa have also been charged with promulgating colonial propaganda; however, steps have been made to include a postcolonial analysis (Ngongo, & Landmeters, 2019). The removal of the Rhodes statue of the Rhodes must fall movement at the University of Cape Town sparked much controversy, however it opened a dialogue for the examination of deeper moral concerns regarding the preservation of colonial symbols (Chowdhury, 2019) showing that deeper seeded invisible markers of oppression are still present in institutions of higher and international education. Though bringing awareness, the removal of statues does not solve the ingrained problem of invisible forms of oppression that are still present today with its roots in deeper colonialist issues. A space needs to be created in higher educational institutions where dialogues of decolonisation in Academia need to be implemented which would add greatly to the value of exchange. This space of dialogue of colonial pasts should lead to suggestions on how to best relate to it, share it and to move forward. We posit this space should incorporate Ubuntu principles to create an atmosphere of open dialogue and humanity. This space can be related to third sphere hybrid space that Hendricks et al (2020) posit, which enable cultural identity and boundaries to be re-negotiated. This space offers a strategic meeting place, fostering collective change which could lead to a more inclusive and equitable society combined with an Ubuntu ethic. The value of an exchange program should not only be evaluated in terms of its economic advantages, or the extent international students assimilate or integrate. It should be evaluated based on how it contributes to a better understanding of each other and our different viewpoints. The ideal conditions for an international exchange would be to strive to create a greater interdependence between the integration and separation strategy under the moral ethic of Ubuntu. The power of exchange is perhaps in not taking a position (marginalization, separation, and integration but in learning to be more interdependent with others. By applying Ubuntu ethic to Berry's model there is a greater fluidity between categories.

The world we live in is governed by categories, whether racial, ethnic or by nationality, and we need to go beyond these labels leading towards a more universal moral ethic Ubuntu perspective. Looking at it from the Post humanist perspective of Braidotti (2019) in the Zoe/Bios continuum, Zoe speaks to a post anthropocentric worldview of life as radical interdependence where generic life in all its forms is valued which ultimately moves us away from bios as the life of humans organized in society. This sentiment is echoed with the Ubuntu totemic system where an individual sees themselves as interrelated not only with other humans but also with nature and the spiritual order (Metz, 2017; Gade, 2012). Our world is contiguous and co-constructed meaning that all people and life forms matter and are of equal importance (Koole, 2020). Combining an Ubuntu perspective to Berry's model allows us to unite the West, East, North and South and might lead us to abandoning the four categories that have situated the acculturation

experiences of international students for so long and allow us to introduce a more Ubuntu influenced approach in its place. Ubuntu is along the same lines of thought with Braidotti's post humanist critique where we reconceptualize our existence and way of thinking.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

By incorporating an Ubuntu ethic into international mobility programs, this could foster more exchange. This could be done by re-evaluating modules and introducing new courses with Ubuntu principles. By involving the Belgian community in university exchange programs could aid in mutual exchange. A dialogue between Belgium and South African higher institutions regarding their aims for policy exchange in a post pandemic sense needs to be initiated. New support strategies need to be implemented especially from an online perspective. Mobility programs with an Ubuntu element can foster bilateral initiatives, closer ties and cultural diplomacy (soft power). This global interconnectedness of academic fields with Ubuntu components would provide higher education institutions with a powerful mechanism for infusing internationalization into the core activities of higher education. Future research could investigate how a more feminist perspective might help us shift the focus from successful acculturation perceived as integration to a more holistic type of exchange where the boundaries between the categories can move where one can oscillate between the different categories or redirect us to a different category or a different positioning. ]

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### **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to my late Dad John Ryan Swarts. Thank you for always believing in me and for giving me wings to fly like an eagle.