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# Below the Radar Agents: Roles of Virtual Mentors in the Decision-Making Process and Cultural Awareness of Prospective International Students

Abass B. Isiaka[a*] and Yusuf D. Olaniyan[b]

[a]*University of East Anglia, UK,*
[b]*University of Bath, UK*

[*]Corresponding author (Abass B. Isiaka) email: a.isiaka@uea.ac.uk
Address: University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom

**This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology**

## Abstract

*In this paper, we investigate the impact of virtual mentors (VM) on the decision-making process and cultural awareness of prospective international students. Through a theoretical dialogue between Bourdieu's cultural intermediation and Barad's new materialism, we seek to understand the translative function of virtual mentors from the Global South as they shape international education choices and serve as cultural ambassadors for universities in the Global North. Using a mixed-method approach, we show the motivations behind this work, drawing from our experiences as mentors and why prospective international students who cannot afford in-country education agents seek mentorship and guidance from these virtual mentors who work 'below the radar'. While students acknowledge that virtual mentorship interactions sometimes provide cultural awareness about international education, it doesn't prepare them well enough for the cultural demands placed on internationally mobile students from the Global South, as some expressed the desire for more tailored activities towards cultural intelligence and awareness.*

Keywords: agents, decision-making, information, international students, virtual mentorship

## Introduction

As universities strive to internationalize their campuses and attract a diverse student body, the role of technological advancements and information access in the decision-making processes of prospective international students becomes increasingly significant. While existing research has examined how universities strategically highlight their prestige through means such as education fairs and international recruitment teams (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Slack et al., 2014), there remains an underexplored source of information and support. In this study, we identify this source as the work of "below-the-radar" agents (McCabe et al., 2010) whose interests diverge from those of market-driven international recruitment agencies (Yang et al., 2023). Following McCabe et al. (2010), we adopt the term "below the radar" as a shorthand for small voluntary organizations, community groups, and more informal or semi-formal activities that do not fit neatly into traditional private or public organizational classifications.

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We seek to explore how these agents function as "virtual mentors," influencing international education choices and serving as non-commissioned cultural ambassadors for universities in the Global North. In this study, we use the term "virtual mentors" to loosely describe individuals who provide informational guidance and cultural support to prospective international students through digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and other closed social media groups. We explore the motivations behind this work and examine why prospective international students, who cannot afford in-country education agents, seek mentorship and guidance from these virtual mentors. We analyse the interpretive and translative roles these virtual mentors play in the broader context of international education, elucidating their impact on the "cold, hot, and warm" decision-making processes of prospective international students (Slack et al., 2014, p. 208).

This paper employs the theory of intermediation (Bourdieu, 1984) and new materialism (Barad, 2003) to establish a dialogue between the cultural capital of virtual mentors and the role of digital spaces in facilitating intermediation. It reviews some traditional information sources available to international students, focusing on the emerging role of digital mentorship and the identity transformation of both mentors and mentees. To enrich our analytical perspective, we incorporate autoethnographic narratives, providing personal accounts and reflections from our experience as virtual mentors actively guiding and supporting prospective international students. Additionally, we present findings from surveys administered to prospective international students, addressing the following questions:

1. How do mentees perceive the role of virtual mentors in their decision-making process for international education?
2. Does VM have an impact on the integration and identity of students seeking international education?
3. How do mentees perceive the roles of digital platforms in mentorship?

The autoethnographic segment of this paper reveals the lived experiences of the authors as we explore our identity transformation journey from being prospective international students to international students, and eventually to mentors. These personal accounts provide a unique lens for readers to engage with the challenges, motivations, and evolving roles of mentors in this study, highlighting why this "invisible work" is often overlooked in the literature. In addition to these reflections, the survey data contribute quantitative insights into the perceived impact of mentorship on international student decision-making processes, cultural awareness, and adaptation. We conclude that while mentorship in higher education is not a novel concept, it has undergone a radical transformation in the digital age. Traditional face-to-face guidance models have given way to virtual mentorship, characterized by accessibility, immediacy, and sometimes, anonymity. In this digital context, virtual mentors amalgamate traditional mentorship values with the advantages of digital tools, such as social spaces like WhatsApp and other closed media groups.

## Theoretical Framework

We examine Bourdieu's work on cultural intermediation and habitus in connection with Barad's new materialism to develop a theoretical framework for disentangling the roles of virtual mentors and digital spaces in the decision-making processes of prospective international students. While most studies have employed agency theory as a lens for understanding this phenomenon (Nikula et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2016), we argue that virtual mentorship assumes a post-humanistic dimension, necessitating a shift towards exploring how non-human apparatuses shape mentorship relations. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural intermediation describes how certain cultural intermediaries shape patterns of taste and consumption in a society. These individuals bridge the gap between cultural producers and consumers, exercising their power by promoting specific cultural products and ideas through the use of their cultural capital—non-financial social assets that promote social mobility—and significantly impact market trends and social hierarchies. Barad's (2003) New Materialism, however, posits that matter and meaning are inseparable and co-constitutive. It challenges the primacy of human agency, asserting that all entities—human and non-human—emerge through their intra-actions. Barad introduces "agential realism," which emphasizes that reality is not fixed but continually reconfigured through material-discursive practices. The intersection of cultural intermediation and new materialism becomes particularly useful when considering the discursive nature of digital interactions in the mentorship process. This framework uniquely offers a novel perspective on how digital spaces transform the exchange and manifestation of cultural capital.

### Bourdieu's Cultural Intermediation and Habitus

Bourdieu's theory of cultural intermediation posits that agents, or intermediaries, actively engage in the social space to bridge the divide between producers and consumers of cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1984). In the context of this study and internationalization discourses, these intermediaries are virtual mentors, educational consultants, recruitment agents, student ambassadors, and digital platforms themselves, all functioning within a dynamic field of both tangible and intangible power relations and capital exchanges (Bourdieu, 1986). Virtual mentors, often students or alumni themselves, embody cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986)—accumulated privileges stemming from their international education experiences. They serve as

mediators, connecting prospective international students with the cultural and academic norms of their target institutions abroad.

As later shown in this paper, this intermediation is not merely informational but deeply interpretative, requiring mentors to help students decode and negotiate the implicit cultural, linguistic, and institutional capitals necessary for successful integration into new academic environments (Bourdieu, 1986). Moreover, the role of these mentors aligns with Bourdieu's concept of habitus within the framework of cultural intermediation, which refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through life experiences (Bourdieu, 1986). Virtual mentors, drawing on their experiences as international students, develop a habitus that aligns with the challenges faced by prospective international students. This shared habitus allows them to offer guidance that is non-market oriented, empathetic, and relevant, influencing the decision-making process and enhancing the induction and integration of these students into new academic and cultural environments.

### New Materialism

Barad's (2003) New Materialism offers a critical lens to understand the materiality of the digital platforms that facilitate virtual mentorship. According to Coole and Frost (2010), this theory holds that matter itself possesses agency and that human-nonhuman interactions are crucial in shaping social phenomena. Building on this concept, the platforms used for virtual mentorship—social media, university forums, and other digital communication tools—are not just passive channels. Instead, they actively shape the nature and efficacy of the mentorship. The immediacy, accessibility, and anonymity provided by these platforms enable a form of mentorship that transcends traditional geographical and temporal boundaries, allowing for a more fluid and dynamic interaction between mentors and mentees (Barad, 2003; Bierema & Merriam, 2002). Virtual mentors, through digital platforms, engage in a form of cultural translation that is immediate and far-reaching, impacting the decision-making processes of prospective international students (Tuin & Dolphin, 2012). Digital intermediation involves more than just information transfer; it is a process of cultural and material negotiation, where mentors and mentees co-construct meanings and understandings in a shared digital space. Additionally, the digital platforms themselves, in line with new materialist ontology, are not neutral but actively contribute to shaping the mentor-mentee relationship. The design, functionalities, and algorithms of these platforms influence how interactions occur, the type of information shared, and the dynamics of the mentoring relationship. This perspective challenges the traditional view of technology as a passive instrument, highlighting its role as an active participant in the cultural mediation process (Hui, 2016).

## Literature Review

### Information Sources for International Students

This section reviews studies on information sources available to prospective international students and how these sources influence their decisions regarding where to study and what to pursue (Gai et al., 2016; Lubbe & Petzer, 2013). These sources, ranging from official institutional websites and materials to informal peer interactions, contribute to multiple factors influencing prospective international students' decisions (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Maringe, 2006). The digital revolution, in particular, has expanded these sources, introducing a dynamic virtual space that includes telementoring, social media, forums, and educational portals (Chen & Zimitat, 2006). In their netnographic study, Gai et al. (2016) examined how a "virtual consumer forum" influences the decision-making process of Chinese applicants for master's degrees at American universities. They found that Chinese students use this platform not only to gather information about prospective institutions and receive feedback from alumni but also to seek advice and opinions from peers going through the same application process, aiding them in their decision-making.

Some studies suggest that students now prefer these forums over university websites, which were traditionally viewed as primary information sources for prospective students seeking details about schools and programs. In their research on Swedish universities, Opoku et al. (2008) and Clayton and colleagues (2012) found variations in how universities express their unique brand identities through their websites to attract prospective international students. Due to inconsistent marketing and navigational challenges on many university websites, international students often find virtual communities a more effective and efficient alternative for their university search process (Gai et al., 2016).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) previously noted that international students, in their quest for a suitable academic destination, struggle with the abundance of information, leading to a state of paradoxical choice—where more sources lead to greater decision-making dilemmas, as not all sources hold equal influence. Tran and Marginson (2018) highlight that peer influences, including word-of-mouth and alumni testimonials, carry substantial weight, serving as a compass guiding prospective international students through complex decisions. This aligns with Slack et al. (2014), who argue that "key

factors in supporting applications to HE have been identified as family influence, personally knowing others of a similar background in HE, and school and college support" (p. 206), in addition to university prospectuses. This shift towards democratic, peer-reviewed information channels introduces a layer of complexity in how decisions are made, knowledge is exchanged, and trust is established within the internationalization space.

The concept of "social proof," as defined by Cialdini (2006), is particularly relevant in this context, referring to the reliance on others' feedback and actions to determine what is correct and valid. For international students, this social proof often emerges through digital narratives and discussions shared by mentors, peers, and alumni, which are perceived as more relatable and trustworthy due to their experiential nature (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). This trend raises critical questions about the authority and reliability of traditional informational gatekeepers, such as universities and formal recruitment agencies. As these agencies typically have vested interests, their narratives and promotional materials are sometimes met with skepticism by prospective students (Yang et al., 2023). The power dynamic has ostensibly shifted, as students now have more autonomy and resources to corroborate or challenge the claims made by commissioned recruitment experts.

### Digitization of Mentorship

The debate around mentoring has witnessed a tectonic shift due to the advent of technology. Bierema and Merriam (2002) noted that "telementoring, virtual mentoring, or e-mentoring" describe computer-mediated mentoring relationships (p. 219). Similarly, post-COVID studies on the digitization of mentoring have shown the benefits and challenges of virtual mentorship and even consider it "a guide to navigating a new age of mentorship" (Junn et al., 2023, p. 1; Hall et al., 2021; Mullen, 2021). As observed in this study, online mentorship platforms, social media, and various communication tools have become crucial in facilitating mentor-mentee relationships, enabling continuous and instant communication despite geographical barriers (Garvey et al., 2021) and creating "the possibility for relationships that cross boundaries of time, geography, and culture unlikely under the classical model" (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 220).

Traditionally, mentorship was limited by physical proximity and the availability of mentors within one's immediate environment. However, digital platforms have dismantled these barriers, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds, especially those in remote or underserved regions, to connect with mentors globally (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Global connectivity and digitization drive virtual mentorship, potentially bridging cultural and socioeconomic divides and providing a more inclusive approach to mentorship.

### M**entor-mentee Relationship**

The mentor-mentee relationship is not only fluid but also a power-laden relationship that could be altered as prospective international students, initially mentees, become mentors during or after their international education experience. As Zhou and colleagues (2008) highlight, the mentor-mentee relationship facilitates the acquisition of cultural knowledge and the development of coping strategies for cultural and educational transitions. This is reinforced by Smith and Khawaja (2011), who emphasize the crucial role of mentorship in enhancing the academic and social integration of international students.

Moreover, this type of mentorship—where former mentees become mentors for new mentees—plays a significant role in fostering a supportive and sustainable community. This transition from being guided to guiding others fosters a sense of agency and empowerment, contributing to identity shifts (Phinney & Ong, 2007). This identity shift is a process Bochner (1982) describes as "cultural mediation"— where sojourners synthesize both cultures and acquire bicultural or multicultural identities. For instance, Chew and Nicholas (2021) found that in indigenous mentorship relationships in higher education, mentorship helps navigate academic expectations and cultural assimilation, leading to more confident and autonomous academic identities. Similarly, Girmay and Singh's (2019) research on Indian students in the United States highlights the role of mentorship in shaping professional identities aligned with global career aspirations. Thus, virtual mentorship significantly enhances the process of becoming an international student, altering how students perceive themselves and their roles in the global educational and professional landscape. This transformation is multifaceted, influencing not only academic development but also cultural adaptability and professional identity formation.

## Methodology

In this research, we used a mixed-method approach, coupling qualitative and quantitative tools to deepen our understanding of how virtual mentors influence the decision-making and cultural adaptation of prospective international students, as well as the role of digital platforms in this mentorship. Specifically, we employed a concurrent triangulation design, one of the core approaches in mixed methods research (Creswell, 2014). This design involves simultaneously

collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, which we then integrated during the analysis phase to draw conclusions. The use of concurrent triangulation is particularly appropriate for our study because it allows for robust data validation through cross-verification from multiple sources (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Our qualitative approach, autoethnography, is rooted in our experiences as international PhD students who also served as virtual mentors for prospective international students. Autoethnography is a research and writing method that aims to comprehend cultural experience by systematically describing and analyzing personal experiences. The term "auto" refers to personal experience, while "ethno" refers to cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). The autoethnographic narratives present our personal journeys into virtual mentorship, exploring our roles as mentors, our motivations, the challenges we faced, and the perceived impact of our work. We collected these narratives through written reflections and digital storytelling to elicit detailed and personal accounts of our mentoring experiences. Autoethnographers argue that personal experiences are shaped by political and cultural norms, and expectations as we actively engage in self-reflection to explore and analyze the connections between our own experiences and the societal factors that influence them (Adams et al., 2017).

To complement our personal reflections, we administered a self-developed questionnaire to survey 69 international students who received mentorship across three online platforms, gathering data on their perceptions and experiences. Importantly, the quantitative data does not aim to validate the autoethnographic reflections; rather, it serves to highlight patterns and trends in the mentees' responses, which are then juxtaposed with our qualitative reflections to offer a comprehensive and somewhat distanced view of the mentorship process. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to analyze the survey data in SPSS, providing a quantitative dimension to our qualitative insights. These descriptive statistics allowed us to summarize and understand the central tendencies and variability within our quantitative data. They also provided a clear, statistical overview of the mentees' responses, which is essential for assessing the effectiveness and impact of virtual mentorship. The survey included an open-ended "Other" option at the end of every section, allowing participants to provide open-ended responses. However, given the limited number of responses received, we quoted selected comments to directly complement our quantitative analysis. These quotes were chosen based on their relevance to the corresponding quantitative findings and their potential to clarify specific trends or discrepancies. They also deepen our understanding by adding a layer of subjective interpretation and explaining possible reasons behind these statistical outcomes. However, given the limited sample size, we recognize that the statistical conclusions drawn must be interpreted with caution, and assertions based on this data are moderated accordingly.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the autoethnographic narratives to identify, code, and analyze emerging themes related to our mentoring experiences, which were organized into the International Education Mentorship Matrix (IEMM). These themes were then compared and contrasted with the quantitative survey data to inform our overall analysis. This approach allowed us to integrate the qualitative and quantitative findings, ensuring a holistic interpretation of the data.

We employed a non-probability convenience sampling method to select mentees from three virtual mentorship platforms to ensure their experiences directly informed the research questions. This study relied on the readily accessible or sequentially linked nature of the participants (Emerson, 2015). However, this sample may not be representative of the larger population or be generalizable, unlike random sampling, which provides a more unbiased selection process by minimizing potential sampling biases (Singh & Masuku, 2014). To ensure diverse representation of mentee experiences across various digital platforms, we sampled three digital platforms, one of which we mentor on. The other two groups also consist of mentors and prospective international students who meet the characteristics and goals defined for this study.

As researchers who also serve as mentors on one of the digital platforms being studied, we were acutely aware of the possible power dynamics that could influence the research process. To manage these interactions and prevent potential bias, we maintained a clear boundary between our roles as mentors and researchers by informing mentees that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. We stressed that their participation, or lack thereof, would have no bearing on the mentorship they received. Furthermore, all survey responses were collected anonymously, allowing individuals to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of repercussions or favoritism. We also critically reflected on our dual roles throughout the research process, engaging in ongoing self-examination to detect and address any unconscious biases that could result from our mentoring positions.

In total, 69 responses were received. The majority (75.4%) were between 18 and 28 years old, indicating a young population commonly associated with undergraduate and early postgraduate courses (Snyder et al., 2019). This aligns with global educational patterns, where "close to 40% of 25-34 year-olds now have a tertiary education, a proportion 15 percentage points larger than that of 55-64 year-olds" (OECD, 2015, p. 2). Additionally, most participants (84.1%) held a bachelor's degree and were seeking international education for a master's degree, followed by a smaller proportion with master's degrees (14.4%) seeking higher degrees, and 1.4% with other qualifications such as PhDs. These trends are consistent with Schartner's (2023) research on international students, showing that most international students engage in postgraduate studies, with 41% enrolled in taught programs such as MA and MSc, and 27% participating in research-oriented programs like PhD and MPhil.

The majority of respondents (73.9%) identified as male, reflecting the global trend of gender gaps among

internationally mobile students (OECD, 2022). This significant gender disparity may be partly explained by the higher enrollment of male students in STEM-related programs, which tend to attract more male than female students (Myers & Griffin, 2019). In some countries, like Germany, the predominance of mobile student enrollments in STEM fields contributes to the higher share of male students compared to countries like the United Kingdom (Donkor et al., 2020). The dominance of male mentees seeking international education in our study may also be attributed to certain cultural or socioeconomic factors, corresponding to research findings that suggest a higher proportion of male students pursuing overseas education opportunities (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Research indicates that in some societies, men are more likely than women to leverage the cultural capital gained from studying abroad to succeed in the labor market back home (Holloway et al., 2012).

## Results

### Becoming a Virtual Mentor

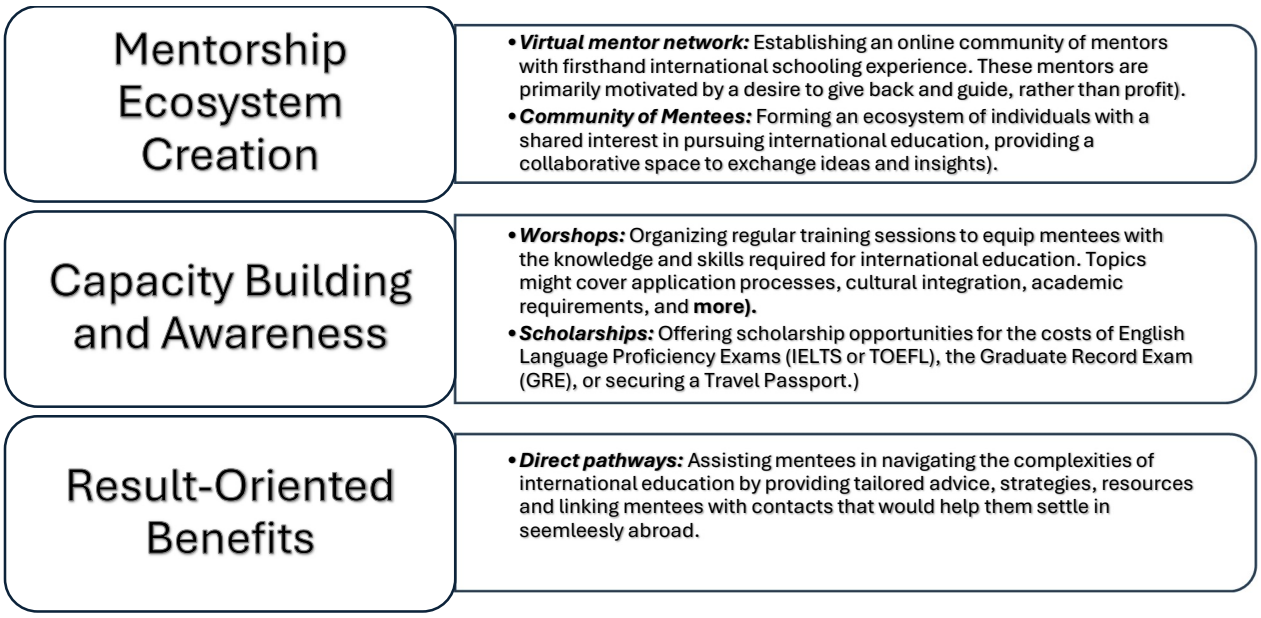
Becoming a mentor requires a significant commitment, a deep understanding of international education, and first-hand experience studying abroad—a form of cultural capital that is available to only a few. Our journey into mentorship began after we were awarded postgraduate scholarships in the United Kingdom. This achievement caught the attention of the administrators of a virtual space, leading to a personal invitation from the group's facilitators to join the mentorship community. The criteria were clear and specific: "recent accomplishment of winning an international scholarship and currently pursuing your studies abroad." We were informed that the purpose of the group was to "share opportunities and resources with penultimate and final-year students and graduates of the University of Arewa (pseudonym), Nigeria, who are interested in international education" (Personal communications between mentors, 2020).

It can be deduced that to become a virtual mentor, one must possess academic and international education experience, have a genuine passion for giving back, and be committed to supporting prospective international students while upholding altruistic values. This assertion aligns with the findings of Crisp and Cruz (2009), who emphasize the value of mentorship in higher education. Their research indicates that effective mentors often have a deep-seated commitment to the personal and academic growth of their mentees, driven not by personal gain but by a sense of community and the desire to contribute positively to others' educational journeys. This also resonates with Gai et al. (2016), who found that a "virtual consumer forum" influenced the decision-making process of Chinese applicants for master's degrees in American universities more than university websites.

As alumni and scholarship recipients, we began to see ourselves as mentors, ready to guide and assist aspiring students in their quest for international education. During our postgraduate studies abroad, we encountered significant barriers: limited access to information, a lack of guidance, and uncertainty regarding the reliability of available information sources. While university websites and official documents are often the "first port of call" for information, they frequently do not reflect the on-the-ground reality. Our experiences revealed the gap between "what is said" and "what is seen." Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) describe "what is seen" as the "quiddity" of a university brand—its true nature, functionality, and performance, as opposed to what is promised in marketing materials (p. 88). This disconnect often made the application process more difficult than it needed to be, a phenomenon described by some students in Yang et al. (2023) as "fuzzy" and "laborious." These struggles fueled our willingness to join the mentorship group, envisioning a borderless space that transcends "boundaries of time, geography, and culture" (Bierema et al., 2002, p. 220) to dismantle the hurdles we once faced. Our primary goal is to pave a smoother path for those eager to study abroad, ensuring they have easy access to vital information and experienced mentors. In essence, this virtual mentorship space is more than just a repository of information; it is a community where students can find mentorship, guidance, and encouragement to navigate and make informed decisions about their international education journey without encountering the same challenges we did.

We map our translative roles through a framework we describe as the "International Education Mentorship Matrix" (IEMM). See figure 2 below:

**Figure 2**
International Education Mentorship Matrix




Source: Authors' description of virtual mentorship community

The transformative journey of the virtual mentorship community is etched in our memory with vivid detail as we reflect on its inception, operation, and success, as well as our understanding of how our actions have shaped the international educational choices of many mentees. The cornerstone of this mentorship is the online ecosystem where mentors, who are either current international students or have experienced studying abroad, selflessly contribute to and influence the international education choices and academic and personal growth of mentees. Bierema et al. (2002) recount the efficacy of e-mentoring in providing guidance and support to students navigating the complexities of international education. They highlight how virtual mentorship transcends geographical barriers, offering accessible and diverse mentorship opportunities, which are particularly beneficial for those seeking international educational experiences. Their research emphasizes the importance of digital platforms in facilitating mentor-mentee relationships across borders. These digital platforms offer a communal space for mentees who share a passion for international education, further fortifying their sense of belonging. We observed that this commonality catalyzes profound conversations, fostering a robust support system where experiences, challenges, and aspirations intermingle.

While community and mentorship are vital, the mentorship group also recognizes the importance of building capacity and awareness among our mentees. This recognition stems from the realization that international education, with its myriad opportunities and challenges, can be overwhelming for many. Shalka et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of capacity building and awareness enhancement in international education, which can be effectively managed through mentorship programs. They highlight the need to equip mentees with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate international education. Regular training sessions and workshops aimed at demystifying the intricacies of international education become invaluable. During these sessions, we witness the transformation of hesitant students into confident graduate school and scholarship applicants. However, awareness and community are only part of the equation. Realizing the dream of international education often requires resources that are out of reach for many prospective students in developing countries. The platforms also offer bursaries for mentees through peer-reviewed essay competitions. These bursaries cover essential costs incurred during the application process, such as fees for English proficiency tests (IELTS, TOEFL), the Graduate Record Exam, and travel passports, helping alleviate some of the financial burdens prospective students face.

Supplementing this support, workshops and resources stored in a shared "Google Drive" serve as a treasure trove of experiential knowledge and reflections. From understanding the intricacies of university applications to navigating the cultural and academic landscapes of foreign universities, these resources bridge knowledge and informational gaps. Additionally, materials covering how to craft compelling statements of purpose or motivational letters, academic CVs, and recommendation letters, along with an essay review platform, provide our mentees with practical tools to enhance their applications. The platform also includes a directory of virtual mentors, detailing their faculties, scholarships, research areas,

and contact information. This directory offers mentees networking opportunities and tailored mentorship experiences. A mentee exploring a specific research field can connect directly with a mentor in that area, ensuring the guidance received is as relevant as possible. From an uncertain student to a confident international scholar, the transformation we witness is both rewarding and evidence of the interpretive and translative roles virtual mentors play in the "cold, hot, and warm" (Slack et al., 2014, p. 208) decision-making processes of prospective international students.

**Decision-Making Process**

The data from Table 1, based on a sample size of 69 (N=69), indicates a strong positive impact of virtual mentorship on the decision-making process of prospective international students. The highest mean score (M=4.61, SD=0.878) suggests that respondents strongly agree that virtual mentorship provides clear and concise information on application steps. The data also shows a high level of agreement regarding the role of virtual mentorship in enhancing cultural awareness (M=4.33, SD=1.133) and fostering a supportive environment (M=4.55, SD=1.022). The overall weighted mean of 4.45 underscores the perceived effectiveness of virtual mentorship in international education. However, the relatively higher standard deviations, particularly in cultural awareness (SD=1.133) and the recommendation for virtual mentorship (SD=1.169), suggest some variability in responses, indicating differing levels of agreement among participants.

**Table 1**
Impact Of Virtual Mentorship on Decision Making of Prospective International Students

| Decision-Making Items | N | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The virtual mentorship I have received through the group provides clear and concise information about the specific steps involved in the international education application process. | 69 | 4.61 | 0.878 | 1 | 5 |
| Virtual mentorship has enhanced my awareness of diverse cultural aspects, helping me prepare for the cultural challenges associated with studying abroad. | 69 | 4.33 | 1.133 | 1 | 5 |
| Virtual mentorship contributes to a supportive and encouraging environment for the international education journey. | 69 | 4.55 | 1.022 | 1 | 5 |
| I believe every individual considering international education should consider virtual mentorship. | 69 | 4.32 | 1.169 | 1 | 5 |
| Weighted Mean | | 4.45 | | | |

*Note: Weighted Mean Interpretation (0.1–2.49 = Low, 2.50–5.0 = High)*

**Impact of Virtual Mentorship on Decision-Making**

We asked prospective international students to comment on the impact of virtual mentorship on their decision-making process. A thematic analysis of the responses revealed that virtual mentorship significantly aids decision-making by providing guidance and support during the application process, offering unlimited access to multimedia resources online, and fostering a sense of community and motivation within the virtual group. Regarding guidance and support, students noted that the availability of multiple mentors on the digital platform enables essay and application reviews, reducing the stress associated with pursuing international education. One of the mentees shared:

> The practical virtual lecture on how to craft effective and compelling essays played a crucial role in shaping my graduate school applications. Additionally, the prompt responses from other mentors significantly reduced the stress associated with the application process and ensured that I was well-informed at every step—especially when dealing with terms specific to the U.S. education system, like 'county' and 'CEEB code (Mentee's Survey, 2024).

This excerpt highlights some of the translative work that virtual mentors undertake on these platforms. Their role as cultural intermediaries involves supporting students with application-related concerns and providing prompt feedback throughout the process. International universities have also adopted similar "live" feedback mechanisms through their online international student ambassador schemes and recruitment offices. However, while these official support outlets are driven by recruitment goals, virtual platforms like this one offer objective and disinterested perspectives on students' questions and decisions regarding where and what to study.

## Cultural Awareness and Adaptation

The data from Table 2 suggests a generally positive impact of virtual mentorship on prospective international students' cultural awareness and adaptation (N=69). The highest mean score (M=4.52, SD=0.885) indicates strong agreement that virtual mentorship fosters integration into the academic and social aspects of international education. Other items, such as establishing a sense of identity and belonging (M=4.25, SD=1.193), understanding and acceptance of cultural differences (M=4.12, SD=1.312), and enhancing self-confidence in a multicultural environment (M=4.06, SD=1.423), also reflect positive perceptions, although with slightly lower mean scores and increasing standard deviations. This pattern suggests a less uniform agreement, particularly regarding self-confidence and identity in a multicultural context. The overall weighted mean of 4.24 reinforces the beneficial role of virtual mentorship in cultural awareness, yet the variability in responses, especially for the latter two items, indicates a range of experiences among the respondents.

**Table 2**

Impact Of Virtual Mentors on Cultural Awareness And Adaptation of Prospective International Students

*Weighted Mean Interpretation: (0.1–2.49 = Low, 2.50–5.0 = High)*

| Cultural Awareness and Adaptation Items | N | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I believe that virtual mentorship has positively influenced my sense of integration into the academic and social aspects of the international education community. | 69 | 4.52 | 0.885 | 1 | 5 |
| I feel that virtual mentorship has played a role in helping me establish a sense of identity and belonging in the context of my international education experience. | 69 | 4.25 | 1.193 | 1 | 5 |
| Virtual mentorship has contributed to my understanding of cultural differences inherent in international education. | 69 | 4.12 | 1.312 | 1 | 5 |
| I believe virtual mentorship has positively impacted my self-confidence and sense of identity in a multicultural academic environment. | 69 | 4.06 | 1.423 | 1 | 5 |
| Weighted Mean | | 4.24 | | | |

The question on cultural awareness and adaptation generated three key themes: awareness through live webinars, confidence building, and anxiety about host destinations. Student mentees noted that activities such as webinars, where mentors currently studying abroad share their experiences on applying for admission, securing funding, settling into their programs, and adjusting to the realities of their host countries, help them better understand what to expect from international education. Students also emphasized that learning from current students about how they overcame challenges related to cultural adaptation builds their confidence to pursue international education. While students agree that the platforms offer cultural awareness, some also expressed the desire for more activities tailored to cultural intelligence and adaptation, noting that most discussions are informal, and cultural issues are less frequently addressed. One mentee captured this sentiment in their response:

These virtual mentorship platforms consist of not just applicants and mentors but also scholars currently studying abroad, those who have studied abroad, and so on. The exchanges on these platforms provide empirical information—things like the level of cold, teaching methods, student assessments, writing skills, and computer skills you need to practice. These insights helped me adapt culturally. I remember reading messages from multiple scholars on the weather and classroom dynamics, which really prepared me (Mentees' Survey, 2024).

It's important to note that "cultural adaptation" is often used interchangeably with terms like "cultural integration" or "adjustment" in the literature. This ambiguity, or what Schinkel (2018) refers to as a "conceptual quagmire," necessitates a critical examination of what it means for an international student to integrate into the host culture amid the ongoing call for decolonizing universities and critical internationalization. International students' adjustment has been defined as the "process that students go through to perform their tasks and achieve comfort in their psychological, sociocultural, and academic aspects while pursuing education in the host university and living in the host country" (Malay et al., 2023, p. 448). This suggests that cultural adjustment cannot be understood in isolation but must be linked to psychological and academic adjustments. Factors contributing to successful integration include cultural intelligence, self-efficacy, and resilience against

often racialized aggressions (De Araujo, 2011; Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; Malay et al., 2023;). One mentee reflected on this by stating:

> The personal stories shared by mentors during virtual meetings, especially those addressing challenges like understanding intonation and coping with harsh weather conditions, serve as powerful narratives of resilience. Knowing that others have faced similar challenges and successfully adapted instills confidence that I, too, can navigate and overcome these obstacles. The virtual mentorship to a large extent helped paint a nearly perfect picture of what studying abroad is like.

However, the prevailing deficit discourse on integration often frames it as an "individual responsibility," aligning with neoliberal ideologies that overlook the structural and systemic barriers international students face, such as discrimination and cultural distance. This perspective can reinforce neocolonial narratives that position international students and migrants as needing to adapt to the host culture, rather than recognizing the value of their diverse cultural perspectives. The findings in our study highlight how the social science of immigrant integration plays a crucial role in problematizing migrant communities. Online platforms like ours have the potential to challenge or reinforce the "factual architecture" within which such problematizations take shape (Schinkel, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, a new integration framework is needed—one that moves beyond simplistic notions of cultural adjustment that marginalize international students and perpetuate racialized discourses.

**Effectiveness of Digital Platforms**

Similar to the previous question, Table 3 presents data on the perceived roles of digital platforms in facilitating virtual mentorship for prospective international students (N=69). The findings indicate a strong positive perception of digital platforms in supporting mentorship during the application process. The highest mean scores are tied (M=4.64) for both the enhancement of resource sharing and the overall positive impact on the mentorship experience, with relatively low standard deviations (SD=0.785 and SD=0.685, respectively), suggesting a high level of agreement among respondents. The mean scores for effective communication (M=4.48, SD=1.009) and satisfaction with accessibility and convenience (M=4.28, SD=1.136) also indicate favorable views, although with slightly higher variability in responses. The overall weighted mean of 4.51 reinforces the significant role of digital platforms in supporting mentorship for international education, reflecting a consensus on their effectiveness and positive influence on the mentorship process.

**Table 3**

Roles of Digital Platforms in International Education Choices of Prospective Students

| Digital Platform Items | N | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I believe digital platforms have facilitated effective communication between me and my mentors during my application process. | 69 | 4.48 | 1.009 | 1 | 5 |
| I am satisfied with the accessibility and convenience of using digital platforms for mentorship interactions. | 69 | 4.28 | 1.136 | 1 | 5 |
| I think digital platforms have enhanced the sharing of resources, information, and guidance within the mentorship relationship. | 69 | 4.64 | 0.785 | 1 | 5 |
| I feel that the use of digital platforms has positively impacted the overall mentorship experience and outcomes. | 69 | 4.64 | 0.685 | 1 | 5 |
| Weighted Mean | | 4.51 | | | |

*Weighted Mean Interpretation: (0.1–2.49 = Low, 2.50–5.0 = High)*

The third question on the effectiveness of digital platforms for virtual mentorship was designed to understand student perspectives on whether microblogs like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Telegram are effective in fostering an online community. Students generally agree that digital platforms facilitate community building and knowledge sharing, provide easy access to resources, and enhance learning from diverse perspectives and global connectivity. They feel that while traditional one-on-one mentorship offers access to a single mentor, being on a digital platform like this allows access to many mentors with varied expertise and experiences, free from geographic constraints—a benefit one student described as the "icing on the cake" of mentorship.

First, it helps make you feel that you are not alone. Also, it provides a place to share your experiences for advice and guidance. It is very effective, especially because it is not just traditional one-on-one mentoring (which exists too) but

also a place where mentorship is provided by many scholars at the same time depending on the issues. Digital platforms are the icing on the cake of mentorship. While physical connections cannot be overemphasized, digital connections make it easier to share information and get feedback regardless of the location of those involved (Student Mentees' Survey, 2024).

This section presents our findings on the three research questions raised at the beginning of this paper. The empirical evidence presented here complements the autoethnographic accounts of student mentors regarding the process and need for mentorship in pursuing international education. Notably, the Cultural Awareness and Adaptation variable scored the lowest mean value (M=4.24) among other variables tested, which suggests that prospective students may not fully appreciate the cultural dimensions of virtual mentorship until they become international students facing culture shocks and adaptation challenges. However, responses from the open-ended survey also show that students have a nuanced understanding of cultural awareness and that personal stories from mentors offer what one student referred to as "powerful narratives of resilience," helping prepare them for the journey ahead.

## Discussion

As shown in our analysis, the cultural intermediation work (Bourdieu, 1986) carried out by these "below the radar" agents is not merely informational but interpretative. It requires mentors to help students decode and navigate the often implicit cultural, linguistic, and institutional capital necessary for successful integration into new academic environments. Students largely agree that virtual mentorship plays a significant role in their decision-making, with these platforms not only reducing the stress associated with applications but also helping them make informed choices about where and what to study. This highlights the influence of virtual mentors in shaping the social organization of the international education experience. Our study builds on the findings of Slack et al. (2012), who noted that "many students put most credence on 'hot' knowledge from persons in their social grapevine" to supplement "warm" knowledge from fleeting acquaintances at university open days, as "university-provided knowledge is often distrusted" (p. 204). However, it is noteworthy that this process of virtual mentorship may reinforce the structuration role of habitus, as not every student willing to pursue international education has access to these groups or the resources to act on the information and support provided through the platform.

Beyond universities' visions and missions, other competing factors influence students' decision-making regarding university choice. Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) note that these factors may include how universities cater to students from non-traditional backgrounds. Our study aligns with their findings, revealing that prospective international students on these digital platforms are aware of the cultural adaptation challenges that current international students face. This awareness may steer them toward countries and institutions where the international education experience is reported as favorable and welcoming. While some studies argue that international students' cultural adjustment differs from that of expatriates and more permanent immigrants in terms of motive (Zlobina et al., 2006), choice power, and duration of stay (Guðmundsdóttir, 2015), international education is rapidly becoming a "social function" within the broader framework of immigrant integration. It is evolving as part of state apparatuses in which "immigrant integration" sustains a classed and racialized form of dominance over international students (Schinkel, 2018).

Although this study has shown that virtual mentorship impacts students' decision-making and cultural awareness regarding their destination country or school, it also highlights how this phenomenon is negotiated in an organic digital space where diverse interests, values, power dynamics, and cultural relations converge. Supporting the premise of new materialism as advanced by Karen Barad, our research builds on the notion that technological apparatuses "matter" in the network of interaction and intra-action that enables the phenomenon of virtual mentorship for international education. Barad's (2003) elaboration on agential realism asserts that "phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of 'observer' and 'observed'; rather, phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components'" (p. 815). We argue that the advent of digital technologies has redefined mentorship as a phenomenon, especially within the internationalization ecosystem, shifting it from face-to-face interactions to virtual platforms that offer flexibility, accessibility, and broader reach (Bierema et al., 2002) for both prospective international students and mentors.

## Implications and Conclusion

In this paper, we contribute to understanding micro-narratives within the global discourse of internationalization by foregrounding the role that virtual mentorship plays in the decision-making process, cultural awareness, and adaptation of prospective international students. We based our study on previous research exploring how international students seek information when deciding on their education journey, the evolution of digital mentorship, and the role of technology in shaping this power-laden interaction. We also considered the identity rupture inherent in the process of "becoming" an international student or a mentor with experience to share, which keeps the mentorship scheme in constant transformation and rotation.

We build on this by reflecting on our own experiences of becoming virtual mentors and our ambassadorial roles in translating international education experiences into bite-sized information and tips for prospective international students. To complement this enacted reflexivity, we present students' views on the roles of virtual mentorship in decision-making, cultural awareness, and the effectiveness of digital platforms. The findings illuminate the dialectic role of virtual mentors in international education initiatives, shedding light on their often-unrecognized positioning within broader internationalization narratives. Our autoethnographic accounts reveal the complex interplay between personal experiences, cultural awareness, and the mentoring process. Survey data highlight the importance of mentorship in shaping the recruitment of international students, emphasizing the need for continued investment in mentorship programs where prospective students can receive personalized and tailored support in their journey toward international education.

While most respondents agreed that digital platforms enable accessibility, we recognize that these platforms may also exacerbate the impact of the existing digital divide on access to education locally and abroad. By employing a mixed-methods approach, we contribute to the growing body of literature on student mentors in international education by providing an understanding of their impact, challenges, and roles. The unique approach of this study lies in combining autoethnographic narratives with survey-based data to compare and triangulate the experiences and perceptions of both mentors and their mentees.

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**Abass b. Isiaka** is a Research Associate at the Centre for Higher Education Research Practice Policy and Scholarship (CHERPPS) at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom. His PhD research looked at inclusion and equity issues in higher education policy in Nigeria, focusing on how universities enact disability inclusion policies and the role of institutional cultures in the policy process. He is interested in the sociology of higher education policy, internationalization strategies, institutional ethnography, decoloniality, disability inclusion, and students' experience. Email a.isiaka@uea.ac.uk

**Yusuf Damilola Olaniyan** is an ESRC/SWDTP-funded PhD student at the University of Bath, United Kingdom, researching access, institutional and graduate outcome experiences of Nigerians moving from rural to urban for University Education. He also works as a Research Assistant at the Department of Education, University of Bath. His research interests include the educational and graduate outcome experiences of the marginal beyond the city, global inequalities and social injustices, mobility, decoloniality and internationalization. Email: ydo22@bath.ac.uk