Introduction to JCIHE 16(5) 2024 Issue

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Dear Readers –

I am pleased to share with you the JCIHE 16(5) 2024 Special Issue *Conceptualizing Micro-Level Narratives in Thematic Constructs of Internationalization* with Special Guest editors: Fakunle Omolabake & Fiona Hunter. The articles in this issue examine the micro-level dimension in the internationalization of higher education (IHE), that is situated at the individual level. While of importance, the micro level of IHE has been under-studied. This is problematic since there is an inherent connection between the participation and contribution of individuals who enable and sustain internationalization at classroom, institutional, national, and transnational levels. Individuals are influenced by the various rationales associated with the field of IHE and knowingly or unintendedly use that lens to design and oversee classroom and institutional strategies (see Raby & Kamyab, 2023). A Micro focus of internationalization can be on a range of stakeholders including, but not limited to, faculty, staff, and students. The articles in this issue focus on how IHE influences learning and agency for individuals, i.e. the micro-level narrative. The Winter Special Issue 2024 includes 12 articles with author institutional affiliations in eight countries: Italy; Netherlands; Oman; South Africa; Scotland, Sweden; Turkey; United Kingdom; United States. The JCIHE 16(5) 2024 issue also includes two book reviews. Lisa Nakahara reviews *A History of Temple University Japan* by Richard Joslyn and Bruce Stronach. The second books review is by Vanesa Polastri who reviews Aprender en Comunidad: Prácticas Colaborativas para Transformar la Evaluación (Learning in Community: Collaborative Practices to transform Assessment) by Lorena Basso, Magdalena Cardoner, Paula De Bonis, Mariana Ferrarelli, Stefanía Martínez León and Pedro Ravela.

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<h1 style="text-align:center">16(5) Special Issue Themes</h1>

There are three main themes that are found in all the articles in Issue 16(5) that intersect with **Fakunle Omolabake's** framework that conceptualizes centrality in micro-level internationalization through a decolonial approach.

International Students

Megan Siczek examines lived experiences of international students over a ten-year period. **Hayley Weiner & Peter Ghazarian** examine international student experiences in seeking employment while studying in the United States. **Bhavika Sicka & Arzu Atajanova** use critical autoethnography to examine learned experiences of two international women students participating in a virtual exchange program. **Patience Mukwanbo, Faith Mkwanazi & Winter Seshoka** examine African international students' experiences studying in South Africa during a COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown.

Mobility and Racial Learning

Mianmian Fei examines international students of color racial learning experiences while studying in the United States. **Durak Tugay** examines the Whiteness Threshold experienced by long-term Turkish international academics while working in the United Kingdom.

Institutional Practices

Allison K. Yap examines how decolonial interventions enables U.S. domestic study away students in Hawai'i with their negotiation as a student and as a visitor to Hawai'i. **Lucie Weissova, Jeanine Gregersen-Hermans, Darko Pantelic** examine academic perceptions of why continuing professional development initiatives in intercultural learning in the classroom are challenged and what strategies for success are needed. **Abass B. Isiaka & Yusuf D. Olaniyan** examine the impact of virtual mentors on decision-making prospective international students to study in the UK. **Said Al Furquani and Lomer** examine faculty perspectives in Oman about internationalization in concept and in practice showing Westernization as more valued than local knowledge. **A. Eltayb & Jennifer Valcke** explore how a Collaborative Online International Learning teacher training course results in personal and professional growth in perspectives, pedagogical approaches, cultural humility, and professional practices.

<h1 style="text-align:center">Special Issue Articles</h1>

Omolabake Fakunle (*Scotland*) **and Fiona Hunter** (*Italy*). **Conceptualizing micro-level internationalization from empirical and conceptual constructs: Adding the human dimension.**
This Article introduces the Special Issue theme of micro-level internationalization that uses new lens based on individual narratives as a tool to assess dimensions of engagement in internationalization. The primary dimensions found in micro-level internationalization are Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context, and Conceptual Framing.

Abass B. Isiaka (*UK*) **& Yusuf D. Olaniyan** (*UK*). **Below the Radar Agents: Roles of Virtual Mentors in the Decision-Making Process and Cultural Awareness of Prospective International Students**
This article examines the impact of virtual mentors (VM) on international student decisions to study abroad. A specific focus is on the relationship between Bourdieu's cultural intermediation and Barad's new materialism. Findings show that prospective students deem the roles of VM crucial in their international education journey, with technology enhancing their access to resources facilitated by these mentors. However, students express a need for greater cultural awareness in virtual mentorship interactions.

Siczek, Megan, (*USA*). **The lived experience of internationally mobile students: A longitudinal study,**
This article examines lived experiences of two international students, one from Inner Mongolia, China and the other from Ecuador who are studying in the United States. Four key themes emerge from how these students describe

their mobility experience overtime: 1) study abroad as self-initiated and self-fulfilling; 2) key moments shape experience; 3) mobility aids in construction of self; and 4) complex perceptions relating to "home." Each of these students display agency in the context of their mobility experiences.

Patience Mukwanbo (*Scotland*), **Faith Mkwanazi** (South Africa) & **Winter Seshoka** (South Africa). **The Policy and Practice of Internationalization in the global-South: African international students' experiences in South Africa during COVID-19**
This article focuses on the recruitment and teaching of international students at two South African universities between 2020-2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown. The study draws on Ubuntu and affiliation as key capabilities for understanding global South practices of higher education internationalization. Findings reframe internationalization as a reciprocal relationship based on mutual interconnectedness and mutual values that does not just respond to broader neo-liberal narratives but ought to foster student and institutional flourishing.

Allison K. Yap (*USA*). **Troubling Paradise: Exploring the Experiences of National Student Exchange Participants to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.**
This article examines a less discussed aspect of student mobility, domestic study away in which U.S. students travel to other parts of the U.S. to study. This article focuses on lived experiences of U.S. students who study in Hawai'i. Decolonial interventions were given to the students to help students navigate and experience Hawai'i as foreign and familiar as they negotiate their place here as both students and visitors/tourists.

Bhavika Sicka (*USA*) & **Arzu Atajanova** (*Turkey*). **Global South Sisterhood in a Virtual Exchange: A Critical Autoethnography**
This article is an autoethnography of two women international students who critically reflect on their intellectual, emotional, linguistic, and cultural growth during a virtual exchange COIL program offered during COVID-19 pandemic. Using critical internationalization perspective, findings show improvement in English language skills while resisting a deficit orientation of English language learning and call for equitable, transformative exchanges that honor southern epistemologies. Through friendship, the authors learned more about their Turkmenistan and Indian cultures and personalities within the exchange context.

Lucie Weissova (*Sweden/Italy*), **Jeanine Gregersen-Hermans,** (*Netherlands/Italy*), & **Darko Pantelic** (*Sweden*). **Academic Voices: Continuing Professional Development for Teaching in Internationalized Classrooms.**
This article examines how academics need continuing professional development (CPD) to maximize the benefits of international classrooms while lacking necessary competence, resources, and tools. Universities that offer CPD initiatives often suffer from low enrollment and high drop-out rates. Academic perceptions and CPD needs show the importance of immersive international experiences of staff over disciplinary affiliation, reveal a disconnect between perceived challenges for teaching in the international classroom and academics' interest in CPD, and underscore the importance of adopting an andragogical adult learning centered approach in the design and delivery of CPD.

A. Eltayb (*Sweden*) & **Jennifer Valcke** (*Sweden*) **Insights from Glocal Educators: Unveiling the transformative journeys of Educational Developers**
This article explores the impact of micro-level individual dimensions in the Internationalisation of Higher Education (IHE) on a teacher training course for Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Findings show how COIL can build personal and professional growth in perspectives, pedagogical approaches, cultural humility, and professional practices.

Hayley Weiner (*USA*) & **Peter Ghazarian** (*USA*). **From the Personal to the Professional: International Student Experiences of Seeking Employment in the United States**
This article examines international students in U.S. higher education who pursue work and who must balance personal and professional pressures while seeking employment. A focus is made on learning about personal growth, navigation of economic pressures, and experiences of seeking employment of international students. Results show that international students share similar experiences with their domestic counterparts. Yet they also are navigating a new cultural context, dealing with economic pressure, and navigating barriers to their employment search.

Said Al Furquani (*Oman*) and **Sylvie Lomer** (United Kingdom). **Faculty Constructions of Internationalization: Practice and Perception in Omani Higher Education.**

This article draws on a policy document analysis and interviews with academic staff members at a college in Oman to explore how academics and leaders conceptualised and adopted internationalisation to their pedagogical practices while acknowledging tensions about adopting 'global standards' that reflect inequalities of power shaped by coloniality. Findings show that faculty were positive towards internationalization in general, but identified tensions, such as English over Arabic, lower value on local forms of knowledge, and reliance on globalized curricula and materials.

Durak Tugay (*UK*). **Passing the Whiteness Threshold: The Lived Experiences of UK-based Turkish Academics**

This article examines implications of long-term international academic mobility on the lives of Turkish academics working in the United Kingdom (UK). The findings share how ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect to shape the academics' experiences working at a UK higher education institution. Findings show that professionally, opportunities and challenges of an academic career in the UK was important, while socially, a "Whiteness threshold" impacts integration and success of Turkish academics.

Mianmian Fei, *(USA).* **Re-Examining Fries-Britt's Learning Race in a U.S. Context Emergent Framework Drawing on the Micro-Level Narratives of International Students in the United States**

This essay examines micro-level narratives of international students of color regarding racial learning experiences using a literature review. The findings show that the Fries-Britt et al.'s (2014) Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) emergent framework is generally applicable but can benefit from incorporating the following revisions: 1) broadening the scope of racial encounters and experiences; 2) emphasizing the impacts of home country context; and 3) leaving the outcomes of racial learning open.

Fakunle Omolabake *(Scotland*). **Conceptualizing Centrality in Micro-level Internationalization Through a Decolonial Approach.**

This essay introduces a holistic framework for examining individual narratives within the internationalization processes. Using centrality as the conceptual framework and adding a decolonial approach, four dimensions are identified: Broadening Epistemological approach to knowledge, Cultural inclusivity, Representation and Targeted allyship. An ARC (Active involvement – Recognition – Contribution) model is provided to support a practical application of centrality framework..

Book Review by Lisa Nakahara, USA

Richard Joslyn and Bruce Stronach. *The History of Temple University Japan: An Experiment in International Education*. Temple University Press, 2023.

Book Review by Vanesa Polastri, Argentina

Lorena Basso, Magdalena Cardoner, Paula De Bonis, Mariana Ferrarelli, Stefanía Martínez León and Pedro Ravela. *Aprender en Comunidad: Prácticas Colaborativas para Transformar la Evaluación (Learning in Community: Collaborative Practices to transform Assessment*. Grupo Magro Editores, 2023.

About the Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education (JCIHE)

Conceptualizing micro-level internationalization from empirical and conceptual constructs: adding the human dimension

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Abstract

This Special Issue explores 'micro-level' internationalization' using individual narratives as a conceptual framework for examining different dimensions of engagement in internationalization. It sheds light on the human dimension through the unrecognised and unintended positive and negative impacts of internationalization policies and practices at international, national and institutional levels. It addresses the gap in current knowledge through 10 empirical studies and 2 conceptual frameworks using diverse methodological approaches that have been written by both researchers and practitioners in a wide range of global contexts. It advances a conceptualization of micro-level internationalization through five dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context, and Conceptual Framing.
Thus, micro-level internationalization offers a new lens to explore the human experience of internationalisation and provides an opportunity and call for action for better policy decisions and improvement of practice that can lead to an enhanced experience for all those involved.

Este número especial explora la internacionalización a "nivel micro" utilizando narrativas individuales como marco conceptual para examinar diferentes dimensiones de la participación en la internacionalización. Arroja luz sobre la dimensión humana a través de los impactos positivos y negativos no reconocidos e imprevistos de las políticas y prácticas de internacionalización a nivel internacional, nacional e institucional.Aborda la brecha en el conocimiento actual a través de 10 estudios empíricos y 2 marcos conceptuales utilizando diversos enfoques metodológicos que han sido escritos tanto por investigadores como por profesionales en una amplia gama de contextos globales. Promueve una conceptualización de la internacionalización a nivel micro a través de cinco dimensiones de movilidad, aprendizaje transformacional, desarrollo, contexto y marco conceptual. Por lo tanto, la internacionalización a nivel micro ofrece una nueva perspectiva para explorar la experiencia humana de la internacionalización, y brinda una oportunidad y un llamado a la acción para tomar mejores decisiones políticas y mejorar la práctica para conducir a una mejor experiencia para todos los involucrados.

This Special Issue

We were delighted that the open call and invitation to contribute to a special issue on 'micro-level internationalization' resonated with many across the globe, leading to over 70 submissions. For a year, the papers went through three stages of rigorous and systematic peer review. Initial submissions of 500-word proposals were subject to double peer review by the Special Issue editors, in line with the criteria listed in the call for papers. A total of 25 papers were selected at this stage, with authors invited to submit full papers for the Special Issue(SI). The full papers were subject to between 2 to 4 blind peer reviews, leading to15 papers being selected. After a third and final round of double peer review, we proudly present the 12 papers selected for this Special Issue. We gratefully acknowledge the work of the reviewers, and the support from the Editor-in-Chief throughout this process.

The papers in this SI provide rich and insightful glimpses into research and work in different global contexts through individual narratives and theoretical postulations. The keen interest in the SI speaks to the longstanding omission of a conceptual framing of these individual conceptions in discursive texts that did not necessarily provide a holistic overview of activities in the field. This raises a crucial point about inclusivity and accessibility, which the SI contributes to addressing in the call for papers. The open call enabled submissions from scholars, academics, practitioners and administrators, addressing the current lack of explicit publication spaces to connect scholarly research and the work of practitioners. The call was open to all academic career levels from Early Career researchers (ECRs) to more experienced academics. An inclusive and holistic approach to disseminating internationalization research and activities has the potential to offer insights from all contributors to internationalization processes (Fakunle, 2021a), and this informed the inclusive ethos adopted for this SI.

The SI contains twelve papers that provide a range of individual narratives from ten empirical studies and two conceptual frameworks. The empirical studies cover the range of student and staff engagement in different aspects internationalization processes including recruitment, experiential learning and career advancement. These papers adopt a range of epistemological, methodological and theoretical approaches, including, critical qualitative inquiry, phenomenology, constructivist inquiry, intersectionality, autoethnography, narrative inquiry, international student rationales framework, Global South epistemologies, mixed methods, decolonial approaches, and a longitudinal study. The researchers and practitioners originate from countries in different global contexts. The two conceptual papers include a systematic literature review of studies on international student mobility to advance previous theorization, and the presentation of the concept of centrality through a decolonial lens. This editorial paper draws on existing literature and the papers in this issue to advance a conceptualization of micro-level internationalization under the following five dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context, and Conceptual Framing.

Introduction

Micro-Level Internationalization as a concept

Longstanding discussions and changing definitions of internationalization continue to explore different dimensions of internationalization in an attempt to capture the diverse rationales and complexities of a constantly evolving phenomenon (de Wit and Altbach, 2021; Fakunle, 2019, 2023; Hunter et al, 2021; Marginson, 2023; Ng, 2012). Yet, there remains the absence of a holistic framework for conceptualizing individual narratives about their engagement in internationalization processes. This Special Issue (SI) aims to address this gap by introducing 'micro-level' internationalization' using individual narratives as a conceptual framework for examining different dimensions of engagement in internationalisation. The micro-

level conceptual framing at the individual level seeks to bring to the fore an oft less discussed, but fundamental point about how the participation and contribution of individuals enable [and sustain] the functioning of internationalization at the institutional, national, and international levels.

A case in point is the lack of evidence as to whether or how international students' rationales for internationalization underpin the development of internationalization strategies (Fakunle, 2021b) The paradox of the visibility of international students in internationalization discourses around student recruitment mainly from economic imperatives has been discussed elsewhere (Fakunle, 2019). This feeds into a persisting neglect of the humanising aspect of internationalization, drowned within dominant neoliberal marketized constructs. Arguably, in the last three decades scholarly observations regarding the conceptual fuzziness and limitations around internationalization definitions (de Wit and Altbach, 2021; Majee, 2020; Marginson, 2023; Teichler, 1999) also reflects the missing voices of individuals at the heart of internationalization.

An explicit focus on the human aspect of internationalization offers the opportunity to expand our understanding about the transformations that internationalization portends in advancing human development and flourishing. This, in turn, offers insights into how these transformations may be actualized, and the challenges overcome. This paper makes a contribution to advance our understanding of the human dimension in internationalization. Accordingly, this introductory editorial paper draws on the extant literature and papers in this Special Issue to inform a conceptualization of micro-level internationalization under five dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context, and Conceptual Framing.

Mobility dimension in micro-level internationalization

As is well discussed in the literature, international student mobility (ISM) remains the most visible focus of discourses and policy focus in internationalization studies. This relates largely to data monitoring of ISM as a measure of their economic contributions to host institutions and countries. The quantitative aspect of mobility is well developed in terms of the datafication of student mobility captured in country and international datasets including UNESCO Institute of Statistics, OECD, Higher Education Statistics Agency (UK) and the Institute of International Education Open Doors (USA). The absence of Global South countries in monitoring ISM data is a notable gap and a potential area for future research.

The political aspect of the discourses on ISM reflects governmental immigration policies, which are not under the remit of institutions. This is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, worth restating that the current framing of the dominant economic and political discourses does not reflect micro-level voices. Nonetheless, students and staff are central to these discourses. A micro-level framework on mobility can help to bring to the fore what individual participation involves, and how these relate to dominant presentations of internationalization.

The Mobility dimension encapsulates different aspects of individual cross border movements. There is a plethora of research on student mobility exploring wide ranging themes such as, patterns and trends, determinant, issues and rationales, to name a few (Bista, Sharma, & Gaulee, 2018; Choudaha, 2017; de Wit, Ferencz & Rumbley, 2018; Kritz, 2015; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Rizvi, 2011; Wei, 2013). The aim of this paper is not to delve into the different themes in existing research on student mobility, as this is covered by existing literature reviews (Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, 2024), although there remains scope for future research to examine the extent to which individual voices are reflected in 'mobility' studies in internationalization. This informs our focus on papers in the SI as examples of individual narratives within a framework of micro-level internationalization.

Accordingly, from the perspectives of students and mentors, the paper by Isiaka and Olaniyan (2024) examines what happens in the pre-mobility phase when potential students are applicants. The responsibility of recruiting international students is usually invested in university marketing departments. Large universities would normally have a dedicated team in their international/global offices dedicated to these recruitment efforts. However, in their paper, Isiaka and Olaniyan capture an underexplored aspect of internationalization by focusing on the activities of international academics who serve as 'virtual mentors' and voluntary and informal cultural liaisons to prospective international students. Having successfully navigated the terrain; these virtual mentors seek to support the mobility intentions of prospective international students. Drawing on McCabe et al.'s, (2010) notion of 'below the radar' agents, their mixed methods study

conducted in the UK used survey and autoethnographic narratives to offer broad understanding and insights from mentees and mentors respectively. The research shows the impact of virtual mentorship on the decision-making processes of international students. Crucially, the mentoring relationship from the mentors (who were former international students in the UK) enabled them to share the cultural knowledge gained within the host society to support prospective students in navigating the system from the early days of considering the choice of institutions. The authors attest to the importance of access to resources to support the provision of competitive bursaries for the mentees.

The analysis of the micro-level narratives from both mentors and mentees demonstrates the hidden processes that contribute to internationalization recruitment work within the institution. This informal structure of virtual mentorship attests to the potential contribution of academics to supporting the early stages of international student recruitment. This proposes a way of envisaging international student recruitment as a humane, transformational and mutually rewarding journey. Overall, putting a spotlight on the role of virtual mentors raises the question of how this largely invisible work captured by a micro-level conceptualization of mobility can be recognized and mainstreamed in internationalization policy at the macro level.

Longitudinal studies are rare in internationalization studies. Siczek's (2024) paper reports the findings of a decade-long study with a constructivist epistemological framework that affords a holistic view of the international student journey. The focus is on two international students from Inner Mongolia, China and Ecuador, and their experiences of studying in the US. The paper highlights their intentions, subsequent experience, and the impact on their personal aspirations and their families. Siczek examines how international student agency drives their self-determination, actions and assessment of the impact of their mobility pre- and post-graduation.

The paper by Siczek highlights how international student mobility is not necessarily one dimensional. Enabled by a 10-year longitudinal study, the paper sheds lights on underpinning rationales for initial mobility in line with the wider literature but goes further to explore a second return to studying again, after leaving the former destination country. The findings provide a rich tapestry of the complexity inherent in the pursuit of international education and the life-changing effect on individuals across multiple points in time. Hence, while the focus is on the construction of student mobility experiences, the paper goes further, problematizing notions of mobility as a linear movement from one national context to another, and within a spatial period of time. Furthermore, echoing Fakunle (2015) the findings problematize the notion of 'home' in a global world, which is a less discussed topic.

Drawing on Siczek's research, we suggest that within a mobility dimension in a micro-level internationalization framework, the concept of an 'international student loop' may offer insights on international student returnees to host destinations. This concept is exemplified by the case of Lora, one of the participants in Siczek's research. Lora can be described as within an 'international student loop'. Her initial study abroad experience in the US and a potential future was interrupted by Covid-19 pandemic, but she returned later as an international student with similar educational and aspirational rationales (Fakunle, 2021b), ostensibly to restart her interrupted dream to live and work in the US. The findings suggest that the underpinning experiential rationale for engaging in international study and the perceived benefits do not abate with the passage of time.

Understanding the micro-level engagement with internationalization processes thus affords a lens for deeper understanding of the phenomenon of returning international students and underpinning factors. Additionally, reflecting previous work, Siczek's paper belies tendency for homogenous grouping of international students within nationality. Student agency was evident throughout the life course of their pedagogical or other encounters. The paper illustrates how international students can develop expanded networks outside their home countries and the dominant home student population. The findings reiterate the transformative growth that international study affords and the challenges that constrain agentic capabilities (Fakunle and Pirrie, 2020; Raby, Singh and Bista, 2023). Echoing other research in this SI, they stress the importance of using a humanizing lens to examine individual micro-level narratives in internationalization. This offers ways to examine how internationalization strategies and initiatives can align with student expectations towards enabling transformative experiences.

Whilst the papers by Isiaka and Olaniyan, and Siczek focus on the more common research interest in mobility from the Global South to the Global North, the third paper discussed in this section by Mukwanbo et al (2024) put their attention

on intra-regional mobility, which is less explored in the African context (unlike for example, extensive studies conducted on the European Higher Education Region). Mukwanbo et al's paper adopts a phenomenological approach to share insights on ISM from African countries to South Africa. Citing the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), the authors highlight how over one-third of global migration occurs in Global South countries. Their research contributes to addressing gaps around under-theorisation of internationalisation in the global South, and they add to a broader understanding of mobility in international higher education.

The authors combine the concepts of capabilities perspective (Sen, 1999) and Ubuntu philosophy. They focus on critical affiliation to inform a theorisation of a relational framework of interconnectedness to understand human interactions in a different academic environment. They propose Ubuntu affiliation as an approach that encompasses the connectivity and collectivity of a shared humanness to promote human flourishing and inclusivity for all contributors to internationalization activities. The student narratives in their research findings point to the limitations of current normative policy approaches to internationalization that lack the humanistic dimension. The proposed reimagining of internationalization foregrounds the reciprocity of intrinsic and instrumental values recognized by the institutions and the students.

They further suggest the need to recognize and redress existing inequalities that hinder Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) from delivering the support needed by their students, largely from minoritized racial and social communities. Hence, their paper highlights how prevailing educational inequalities in the host country have a significant effect on international students. Although the focus is on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning, the disconnect between policy and student experience is well illustrated in Mukwanbo et al's paper. They highlight the implication of a void in internationalization policy and implementation to enhance the international student experience. Their research highlights the real-life ramifications of a lack of understanding mobility at the point of integrating students into a new academic environment, and the impact on their learning experience and potential study outcomes.

Unlike the cross-border feature in the mobility-focused studies discussed so far, Yap's (2024) paper explores opportunities of study away programs within a national context (USA). This further problematizes normative correlation between international mobility and intercultural learning. In this sense, Yap's research highlights student's rich intercultural learnings during a mobility program within a national context.

The disconnect between notions of abroad and local has implications for developing and valuing cultural learning in local contexts. This was evident in Yap's study which examined US students' experience in Hawai'i as part of a National Student Exchange (NSE) domestic study away program. The participants from mainland US describe Hawai'i as a place that was both familiar and foreign, and so culturally different from their lived experiences that it felt like they were abroad. Study Away thus offers an opportunity for engaging with difference locally. As Yap points out, this has implications for pedagogy, cultural learning and decoloniality.

Yap utilizes a critical qualitative inquiry methodology to critique the dominant research focus on international mobility that involves crossing national borders. By contrast, Yap draws attention to "Study Away" encompassing student mobility within a national context. The paper highlights Anderson's (1983) contention that constructions of 'abroad' are underpinned by assumptions of a nation state. Invariably, this less explored area of student mobility, points to the possibilities inherent in an expanded lens of micro-level framework for analysing international education and student mobility. Yap uses a decolonial lens to problematize the dichotomy in the positioning of the 'abroad' as distinct from the 'local'. This points to the value of study away domestic mobility as a valid, albeit an understudied aspect of engaging with intercultural exchanges which are largely construed within study abroad discourses. This adds a timely contribution around the engagement with diversity and multiculturality within a national/local context.

Drawing from Kinginger (2010), Yap's paper reiterates the importance of stated objectives to foreground engagement with local communities within the curriculum in study away programs. She proposes that study away participants can consider their Kuleana, a Hawaiian concept that translates to "right, privilege", concern and responsibility" (Pukui and Elbert, 1986, 179) as a form of self-reflective ethos to assess their engagement with the study away program. This offers an opportunity for deep and critical learning which is reflected in the narratives from the participant's research. This example resonates with research in other contexts underpinning the stance that study away offers opportunity for self-reflexivity, inherent in students' agency (Fakunle and Pirre, 2021). Yap offers possible ways to consider how we

conceptualise and 'sell' study abroad through the lens of the host destination. This offers a decolonial lens of seeing the destination as place where the knowledge offering can foster a meaningful reciprocal exchange of knowledges. She proposes that the concept, huaka'I, offers such an opportunity to reimagine conceptions of what study away programs can offer. Hauka'I is described as a purposeful journey that demands that the sojourner remains open to what they might learn about themselves and the place.

Yap's research and other authors in this SI use the individual voices and their experience of mobility in higher education to remind the need for an analytical framework of micro-level narratives within internationalization studies. Highlighting these micro-level narratives reveals the gap in mainstream interpretations and definitions of internationalization. This points to the need for future work that develops inclusive frameworks connecting the micro and macro-level discourses and processes as a next level for growing scholarship in the field.

Transformational learning dimension in micro-level internationalization

Yap describes the transformative learning experiences of the students who took part in courses during their Study Away program. This was especially important for students who expressed interest in making a distinction between the learning focus of their study away program and what was described as the less wanted label of a 'tourist gaze'. Their perceptions were informed to an extent by their experience which differed from their pre-study assumptions about the place at a tourist destination. Drawing on Grünzweig & Rinehart (2002), Yap suggests a reframing of student mobility programs to situate disequilibrium that arises from engagement with difference as a key intended learning outcome. This illustrates the importance for such programs to include courses about the study away location and engagement with the community, and to embed reflective learning spaces to facilitate truly transformative learning that mobility from a familiar education can offer (in national and international contexts). Yap further suggests that these pedagogical engagements can be facilitated through a decolonial lens, echoing others in this SI.

Sicka and Atajanova's (2024) paper narrates the intercultural learning encounters afforded to two Early Career Researchers (ECRs) through virtual mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic. The two researchers were based in Turkey and in the USA. The latter is Indian, and the basis of their learning exchanges were framed by a sense of sisterhood forged by their Global South origins. Sicka and Atajanova emphasize the humanizing dimension of a Virtual Exchange (VE) program. Their autoethnography account expounds the potential and the benefit of VE as a viable platform to promote international learning and intercultural exchanges across borders without physical mobility. As self-described scholars from the Global South, their paper points to a sisterhood beyond national boundaries. They provide a rich account of their respectful dialogue that celebrates difference and values which they deem to reflect cross cultural understanding as necessary components of international education.

Sicka and Atajanova share connectivity amongst Global South participants in internationalization discourses. Their interactions reveal their similarities in their colonial and imperial histories, the cultural differences that enriched their learning process, and breaking stereotypes about the 'other'. Their VE echoes discursive notions of 'home' in Siczek's paper, and challenges faced in their different host communities in the USA and Turkey, such as an 8-hour time difference based on their respective locations. This imposed constraints on valued real-time interactions. Their observations have practical implications for VE design to be synchronous, asynchronous or a combination of both (Healy & Kennedy, 2020). While the emphasis in the paper is on students, and educators, it is important to also consider the impact on learning and teaching administrators who provide support for online platforms, and their accounts of the practical challenges, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamilton & Chalmers, 2021).

From their arguments about the value of embracing a sisterhood relationship during their VE experience, Sicka and Atajanova point to possibilities inherent in a humanizing framing of international learning encounters, refraining from dominant ideologies that centers around individualism and competition. They highlight the challenges with time which is less discussed in VE. Their reflections about complicities and silences remain an open question with no easy answers.

Nevertheless, micro-level narratives highlight differences and commonalities in ways of being that underpin the rich tapestries of culture that unfold within the affordances of internationalization, the endless learning possibilities about places that can be lived through the eyes of the other, and its enriching dimension for a rounded educational experience.

Generally, discussions about learning and pedagogy in internationalization focus on students. This is unsurprising as educational initiatives are designed for learners. However, everyone can be a learner in an internationalized classroom. This speaks to the focus in the paper by Weissova et al. (2024). The authors reiterate the need for explicit Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for academic staff who are 'key players' in international classrooms. Their empirical study involves 121 academic staff in a Swedish university. They adopt an andragogical approach to examine the CPD needs of academic staff. This approach situates the staff themselves as learners in the international classrooms, whilst acknowledging their professional roles. Their paper highlights the relatively lack of CPD courses that specifically support staff teaching in international classrooms.

A key takeaway from Weissova et al.'s paper is the need to focus on the needs of academic staff in developing CPD courses on teaching in international classrooms. As noted by Forrest & Peterson, (2006) addressing problematic issues provides learning opportunity in the classroom. This echoes Yap's point about the transformative learning potential that can be facilitated by the disequilibrium that occurs when students encounter difference in a foreign learning environment. In the context of an international classroom, Fakunle (2020) uses the example of a critical incident to buttress the point about the gap in training offerings to prepare academics to deal with incidences when teaching culturally diverse learners. The research by Weissova et al. provides an important contribution to this less researched area. The study identifies three main micro and macro-level challenges regarding teaching in international classrooms: language proficiency, inclusive learning for all students, and lack of institutional support. Although the study is based in Sweden the language issue centred around English, underscoring the prevalence of the English language as the lingua franca of international higher education. In addition to issues around equality of contributions to group work, the authors point to the challenge of creating an inclusive learning environment where diverse perspectives are welcome. This is especially challenging when students come from multiple local and international contexts. Their findings also point to the lack of institutional commitment, manifest in different ways such as "low organizational priority, resistance to curriculum internationalization, resource limitations, institutional pressure for homogenization, limited tools and time constraints". Their study, therefore, highlights the importance of institutional support to develop appropriate CPD opportunities for academics involved in teaching in internationalized classrooms.

Development dimension in micro-level internationalization

Professional and personal development are key themes also reported in the research by Weissova et al discussed above. As noted, the andragogical lens of looking at staff CPD courses is framed from the point of an adult learner. Their paper provides discussion about the developmental opportunities for teaching in an international classroom. Another study conducted in Sweden by Eltayb and Valcke using narrative interviews with participants from Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Brazil, Italy, and Poland explores developmental opportunities for educational developers (EDs), a rarely discussed group in internationalization research. ED roles as facilitators of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) courses appear to put them in the margins of internationalization discourses. To address this gap, Eltayb and Valcke's paper unveils the personal and professional development of educational developers while facilitating a transnational virtual exchange course on skills and competences for working in the glocal classroom.

Their findings suggest that the COIL classroom fostered a collegial environment for participants to compare their pedagogic experiences and to reflect on their own practices, such as their role to foster a sense of belonging for their students in their glocal classrooms, and to enhance awareness of global issues. The ED narratives about their experience of facilitating COIL courses provides valuable insights into the transformative possibilities inherent not only for students but also practitioners in engaged in internationalisation activities, linking to the micro-level dimension of transformative learning. Notably, the ambiguity around the notion of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) remains an area that requires

further interrogation, and this relates also to Fei's suggestion (discussed later) about the need for an expanded transnational lens in evaluating normative frameworks in internationalization.

Weiner and Ghazarian's (2024) phenomenological study explore how international students in the USA navigate the barriers around seeking employment. They do so from a humanizing perspective that considers the students' personal growth and development as they deal with the challenges they encounter. The authors use the international students' rationales conceptual framework (Fakunle, 2021) to explore and understand the educational, economic, experiential and aspirational dimensions of participants personal and professional journeys in the United States.

The intimate portrayal of the experiences of navigating the employment seeking process helps to capture the humanity behind the figures and the objectification of international students. This is a key goal in establishing micro-level internationalization as an important framework for understanding internationalization processes. Weiner and Ghazarian's research corroborates previous findings about the benefit of international higher education for personal growth, including expanded ways of thinking and developing their intercultural competence, especially while living in a different cultural context. They reiterate important points about the psychological pressure that results from the restrictions of the work opportunities and attendant economic pressures that had a negative impact on their well-being and overall student experience. Although the international students share common experiences with home students, they have the added pressure of being unaccustomed to the cultural norms in the host society. This is where the reports of little or no culturally relevant support from their institutions becomes problematic.

The issue around the shortcomings of careers support for international students is well discussed (Fakunle, 2021c; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Limitations of career services in relation to international student employability prospects in the UK (Fakunle 2021c) and Australia (Gribble, Rahimi and Blackmore, 2017) is reflected in the USA context reported in the findings. It is unclear why there seems to be little traction in institutions in addressing this gap that has been reported over decades. This challenge contradicts the idealised notion of international students as cash cows, as it does not fit with the struggles that international students face. The current crises in university funding highlights the danger of reliance on assumptions of perpetual elastic demand for international education without understanding micro-level rationales that can drive or constrain growth. Better understanding will ensure that both macro and micro level priorities are aligned to deliver benefits for actors involved in internationalisation processes.

The micro level narratives from both staff and students reveal gaps in institutional support for training and career advancement. This underpins the need for adopting an inclusive approach to internationalization that recognizes international staff and students' needs and how institutions can develop strategies to enable transformative experiences.

Context dimension in micro-level internationalization

Context matters. International education is hosted in a particular context. This enactment of micro-level internationalization examines how context impacts the constructions or experiences of internationalization from the perspectives and the experiences of individuals. This informs a broader understanding of internationalization as a lived experience and goes beyond dominant Western constructions.

Al Furquani and Lomer's (2024) paper focus on Oman, a non-Western context. The paper examines conceptualization of internationalization and the impact on the curriculum in Oman. The timeliness of their work is restated as the Middle East becomes a growing hub for internationalization activities. Al Furquani and Lomer challenge the uncritical adoption of Western frames for internationalization in non-Western contexts. This echoes Al-Atari's (2016) question about the conundrum that follows the interest in internationalization in the Arab context, without impinging on regionalization and nationalization. The same question could be applied to other non-Western contexts (for example, see Majee, 2020). The authors adopt a decolonial lens to examine the emergence of Western dominated higher education since 1986, and the yet unexamined tensions between the western-informed internationalist teaching and nationalist promulgation of the Omani identity. For instance, the limited applicability of international curriculum materials for the local communities was considered as problematic by the study participants who are Omani academics. In a similar vein, the lack of input from local cultures in the curriculum was faulted. As has been well reported, the participants critique the use of English as a medium

of instruction and "over-reliance on Western models and textbooks which students often find hard to relate to", underpinnings perceptions of neo-colonialism in Omani HE. Recommendations include adopting inclusive and decolonial practices in curriculum, accreditation and policy making for all staff and students.

In sum, Al Furquani and Lomer provide an overview of the development of internationalization in higher education in the Oman context. They reiterate the need for a decolonial approach in the growing field in line with national policy and priorities, and in recognition of cultural tensions that accompany an uncritical adoption of Western norms in non-Western educational contexts. Their paper unearths staff insights regarding internationalization and structural gaps, and the paper shows how these micro-level narratives are disconnected from institutional policy.

The challenges with understanding "micro-level internationalization in context" is not confined to what happens outside Western contexts. Dugay's paper highlights the opportunities and challenges faced by international academics in the UK context. The author adopts a social constructivism methodology and intersectionality to explore the interconnectedness of the professional and the social amongst Turkish academics at different career levels in UK universities. They discuss how ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect to impact the professional lives of academics. The notion of a 'Whiteness threshold' is put forward as a dividing line that determines whether the academics have a positive or negative experience, based on their personal and social characteristics. Interestingly, the 50 research participants are Turkish, hence they have the same nationality. This group affiliation usually informs normative policy categorizations of international staff (and students). But the research invites a critical interrogation of the personal and social distinctions that impact the experiences of international academics, regardless of their group nationality affiliation. As noted by the author, this calls for policy considerations that recognize and reflect the nuances in the diversity that international academics bring into the different context of working abroad. The micro-level narratives in western and non-western contexts point to the need to re-examine existing narrow lens of conceptualizing what internationalization entails. The final section explores this further.

Conceptual framing dimension in micro-level internationalization

Also alluding to the importance of context, Fei's paper reminds us of an important distinction between previous work on race and racism that focuses on individuals born in the USA versus international students whose conception (or lack of) is borne from outside the US-race logic but are nonetheless subsumed into racialized discourses by virtue of their choice of study destination. Fei examines the well-cited Fries-Britt et al. (2014) Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) emergent framework to ascertain the extent to which subsequent work further contributes to understanding of the racial learning experiences of international students. The systematic review of 11 studies involving 207 international students from Africa and the Carribean (similar to cohort for the LRUSC study), Europe, South Asia, East Asia, South America, Central America (Canada & Mexico), and the Middle East (Oman) reveals micro level narratives about the development of awareness of race and racial discourses in the US context. The papers reviewed reiterate the precarity of international student status as a major reason for not engaging in racial encounters in the public sphere (Yao 2022b). Fei further suggests that a revised LRUSC framework should include a transnational lens that considers students' home context, the impact of Whiteness ideology on racial thinking, and how the outcomes of racial learning may be mediated by students' plans for their future.

In Fei's paper the expanded perspectives from the wider range of international students add important nuances to the LRUSC framework. For example, the review reveals a complex picture of how racialized tropes from home countries can filter into host destination campuses, in this case, in the USA (Jiang, 2021; Ritter, 2016), and this should be considered in efforts to address racism in international education. Furthermore, the review supports the ideal of 'Integrative Awareness' denoting that students achieve an understanding of their racial-ethnic identities within the U.S context, and avowal to ending racial injustice is deemed possible. However, other outcomes were identified, as students resisted seeing their sense of being through US-centric interpretations of race. Hence, Fei's paper demonstrates the importance of utilizing research into micro-level narratives to underpin the development of conceptual frameworks, in this case using a meta-level systematic literature review. Other micro-level informed conceptual models are also evident in other papers in this Special Issue (Eltayb and

Valcke; Isiaka and Olaniyan; Mukwanbo et al.). Additionally, Weiner & Ghazarian utilize an existing students' rationales framework (Fakunle, 2021) as a theoretical underpinning for their research (Kivunja, 2018). Possibilities to advance conceptual frameworks in micro-level internationalization look promising.

Fakunle proposes the concept of centrality through a decolonial lens. The paper highlights how the experiences and erasures of international academic staff in internationalization begs the dismantling of normative discourses as to the centrality of Western-centric hegemonic epistemology. By contrast, the paper directly addresses how epistemicide entailing the exclusion of knowledge of racially marginalized persons from the Global South (Santos, 2014) and historicide, that ensures the erasure of their cultural history (Dube and Moyo, 2022) are linked to manifestations of perpetual subalternity that impacts their personal and professional experiences as international academic staff (and students). The proposed conceptualization of centrality offers a framework that affirms the legitimacy of the knowledges, lived experiences and agentic capabilities of racially minoritized people. This addresses the epistemic injustice underpinned by hegemonic epistemological posturing of Eurocentrism and Western-centric knowledge that undermines and undervalues other knowledges.

Crucially, Fakunle points to the several allusions about centrality in extant literature, in different disciplines and epistemological paradigms. On the one hand, the discourses arise from a well-established positivist paradigm in theoretical postulation in various disciplines in the social sciences. On the other hand, there are extensive allusions to centering/ de-centering and re-centering in extant work in decolonialization (Dube and Moyo, 2022; Santos, 2014). The paper proposes centrality as a conceptual framework as a "metacognitive, reflective and operational element" informed by underlying thinking and consideration (Kivunja, 2018, 47) across different disciplinary and epistemological paradigms.

Through a decolonial lens, centrality offers a framework that can reframe approaches to addressing the racial marginalization of non-Western knowledges and the people that embody them, who remain in the shadows in decolonization work. The paper reaffirms call for White allyship (Santos, 2014) to jointly dismantle the shackles of coloniality which refers to 'the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system' (Grosfoguel 2007, 219). The paper broaches the topic of positionality, which recent debates (Savolainen, et al, 2023) point to its insufficiency to address what research, such as Arday, Belluigi, & Thomas's (2021) find as the persisting issue of coloniality, and the consequent racism, micro-aggression and erasure of knowledges of racially marginalized staff that beset the academy. Centrality is well aligned to the decolonial lens adopted in papers in this SI, and it offers a potential framework for examining issues of racialized marginalization revealed by the micro-level narratives in Western and non-Western contexts in this SI, and beyond.

Conclusion

The papers in this Special Issue shed light on the micro-level narratives of internationalization and highlight different dimensions that are rarely, if ever, captured. While the stories they tell offer the opportunity to enrich our understanding, this Special Issue wishes to serve as a call to action. The papers have been grouped under the 5 dimensions of Mobility, Transformational Learning, Development, Context and Conceptual Framing, and each of these dimensions offers its specific insights that point to new ways forward in our understandings and enactments of internationalization. The micro narratives reveal gaps in mainstream thinking and point to future action needed for the development of frameworks connecting the micro and macro levels that will enable institutions to address the disconnect between policy and individual experience and develop more inclusive strategies and practices.

A micro-level framework can help to bring to the fore how different individuals experience internationalization, and how their narratives relate to dominant presentations of internationalization. They can highlight real life ramifications of issues that are currently under the radar and risk being subsumed under dominant priorities, raising the need to rethink internationalization beyond economic rationality (Fakunle, 2021). As many authors in this SI have put forward, a transnational lens underpinned by decoloniality can help to understand the individual experience more deeply and use that knowledge to humanize the experience of internationalization

Micro-level internationalization: Mobility

While it is unsurprising that mobility runs as a thematic thread throughout the papers, important nuances are noted. Students navigate the trenches of unfamiliar international education landscapes, encountering multiple issues in the decision-making and application processes, integration into the new academic environment during their time abroad, and in the re-entry phase and beyond. The narratives also add the dimension of study away as an alternative construction of meaningful exchange of knowledges without crossing borders. Whether in national or international contexts, in the search for better ways of supporting the student mobility experience, the call to action is to use a humanizing lens to promote student agency and transformative growth that mobility affords.

Micro-level internationalization: Transformational Learning

This dimension highlights the need for learning spaces that facilitate truly transformative learning, not only for students, but also for academics and administrators, not only in physical but also in virtual spaces. Such spaces have the potential to offer endless enriching learning possibilities if designed with a view to promoting respectful dialogue and cultural understanding through a co-construction of knowledge and expansion of worldviews. The challenges to creating such spaces are manifold and solutions can be found only when institutions are willing to make it happen and commit the necessary human, financial and time resources.

Micro-level internationalization: Development

Institutional support is key in providing opportunities for development – personal or professional – to students, academics and administrators, and requires a willingness to examine and re-imagine a more inclusive approach to policies and practice. The micro-narratives highlight how lack of institutional support puts international students and staff at a disadvantage as they navigate complex and unfamiliar administrative processes. Conversely, the micro-narratives demonstrate how creating a humanized environment promoting a sense of belonging and reflection practice can lead to genuine development for participants.

Micro-level internationalization: Context

The micro-narratives narratives of context highlight how institutional policies are often disconnected from the individual experiences of internationalization, highlighting the narrowness of the lenses used to define the international dimension. This highlights the need for policies that are meaningful in the local context rather than uncritical borrowing of policies and norms from other education contexts that can lead to cultural tensions, or the adoption of policies that group individuals according to national affiliation rather than consider their diversity of needs and experiences. This implies thinking more carefully about how policy implementation is experienced by individuals.

Micro-level internationalization: Conceptual framing

The papers in this Special Issue have made an initial contribution to the promising development of a micro-level conceptual framing that can reframe understandings and reshape practices for the humanization of internationalization. It goes without saying that internationalisation processes are impossible without the contribution of individual actors whether students, academics or administrators. It therefore remains curious as to the persisting limited focus on individual narratives in internationalization studies, and the lack of conceptual frameworks to guide the way forward. This Special Issue aspires to start a new conversation that can lead to improvement in the lives of all who experience internationalization in its multiple forms and dimensions.

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

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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.

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.

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.

Mentor-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).
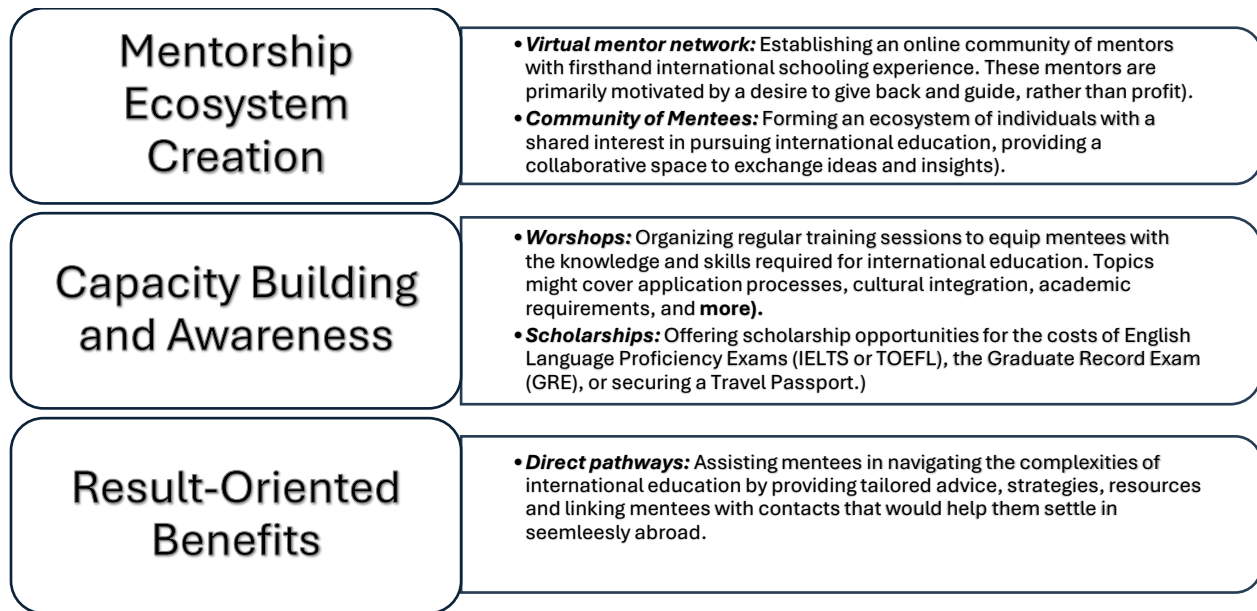
Results

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

Mentorship Ecosystem Creation	• *Virtual mentor network:* Establishing an online community of mentors with firsthand international schooling experience. These mentors are primarily motivated by a desire to give back and guide, rather than profit). • *Community of Mentees:* Forming an ecosystem of individuals with a shared interest in pursuing international education, providing a collaborative space to exchange ideas and insights).
Capacity Building and Awareness	• *Worshops:* Organizing regular training sessions to equip mentees with the knowledge and skills required for international education. Topics might cover application processes, cultural integration, academic requirements, and **more).** • *Scholarships:* Offering scholarship opportunities for the costs of English Language Proficiency Exams (IELTS or TOEFL), the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), or securing a Travel Passport.)
Result-Oriented Benefits	• *Direct pathways:* Assisting mentees in navigating the complexities of international education by providing tailored advice, strategies, resources and linking mentees with contacts that would help them settle in seemleesly abroad.

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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The Lived Experience of Internationally Mobile Students:
A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

In response to calls for more individualized research on international student mobility (ISM), this article reports on a hermeneutic phenomenological study into the lived experience of two participants, one from Inner Mongolia, China and one from Ecuador, who migrated internationally for higher education. Within a constructivist epistemological framework, this study reveals how these participants describe and interpret their international mobility experience across four semi-structured interviews over a ten-year period. Four key themes were identified through interpretive data analysis: (1) study abroad as self-initiated and self-fulfilling; (2) characterizations of key moments shaping the ISM experience (10-year lens); (3) construction of self through international student mobility; and (4) complex perceptions relating to "home." A key contribution of this research is substantiating how individuals display agency within the context of ISM, both in their practical responses to circumstances and in their growing sense of self-actualization.

Keywords: hermeneutic phenomenology, international student mobility, U.S. higher education

Introduction

In line with this special issue's aim to humanize individuals within the context of internationalization by providing micro-level perspectives, this research article elevates the voices of individuals who have migrated globally for higher education. Literature on international student mobility (ISM) is often focused on mobility trends (Bista, Sharma, & Gaulee, 2018; Choudaha, 2017; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007), internationalization rationales and practices (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit & Altbach, 2021), international students' migration decisions (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), and challenges around acculturation (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Such research, though valuable, may fail to consider the importance of micro-level perspectives (Fakunle, 2021) and "oversimplify a highly complex and dynamic experience and overlook the concept of 'self' in the context of transnational student mobility" (Siczek, 2018, p. 7).

To provide a more in-depth narrative account of this complex phenomenon, this article traces the international student mobility experience of two individuals (one East Asian and one South American) over a ten-year period. This longitudinal study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (van Manen, 2016), an approach rooted in the "lifeworld of lived experience" that invites individuals to describe and intentionally interpret—or make sense of—an experience. Through this study, I sought to understand how these individuals constructed and revealed their international

student migration experiences at four points in time: twice during their first year of study at a private university in Washington, DC, United States (2014); during their final year of university study (2016-2017); and approximately five years after they graduated (2023). These narratives of self over a decade of time help answer my core research question: How do globally mobile individuals describe and interpret their experience with international student mobility over a ten-year life trajectory?

Literature Review

Motivation to Pursue Higher Education Abroad: Push-pull Orientations

In research on what motivates students to migrate internationally for higher education, the push-pull model is frequently applied. Mazzarol and Souter's (2002) often-cited research identifies push factors such as seeking a better education or opportunities compared with one's home country as well as pull factors such as the characteristics of the host country and institution. A more recent summary of research themes by Shkoler and Rabenu (2023) builds on this framework with an interesting emphasis on the "push" factor of psychological capital (e.g., hope, optimism, efficacy); they also elaborate a series of conditions that moderate decisions to study abroad, including legal considerations, financial resources, and social networks. Gutema, Pant, and Nikou (2023) conducted a systematic literature review of 43 scholarly works published between 2010 and 2022 that further develop the push-pull model by identifying emergent themes in the literature such as betterment of life, return to home country, and the role of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and individual factors. Applying a push-pull framework to ISM decisions, however, has been critiqued as limited because it establishes an incentive/disincentive binary to motivations to migrate for higher education and "frames students and their families as strategic calculating actors" (Lipura & Collins, 2020, p. 354) rather than taking the holistic and nuanced view that can be derived from longitudinal qualitative inquiry into individuals' experiences. A more nuanced view of motivations is reflected in the foundational research for the current study, in which Siczek (2018) drew on data from a series of in-depth interviews with ten international students at a U.S. university and identified three themes common to their decision to study abroad: family influences and interconnectivity, perception of leaving a constrained system, and the pursuit of opportunities. Notably, in their consideration of opportunity, participants ascribed their decision to pursue higher education abroad as a form of "self-actualization and moving beyond the borders of their previous lives" (p. 48).

Agentive Motivations

The present study is similarly informed by recent scholarly work challenging neoliberal rationales for international student mobility and instead centering identity and self-development in the context of ISM. Fakunle (2021) and Lo (2019) critique the literature's focus on economic and instrumentalist rationales for study abroad, drawing on a capability approach that takes into account student well-being, experience, and capacity to develop in a way that embodies their values and aspirations. Tran's research (2016) characterizes international student mobility as a form of becoming, an "investment in the self" (p. 1269), a construct later theorized as "agency in mobility" (Tran & Vu, 2018). Marginson's work (2014, 2023) has emphasized international students' autonomy and agency as they pursue self-formation. Marginson (2014) notes that when students migrate internationally, they "deliberately alter the conditions of their own self-formation" (p. 6). In calling for more agency-based investigations into ISM, Oldac (2023) emphasizes the importance of positioning international students as individuals who engage in self formation *through* their own agency when they decide to pursue higher education abroad. In line with the premise of the current study, I aim to explore how the sense of self determination that influences the decision to study abroad shapes individuals' larger experiences, actions, and understandings of their mobility over time.

Approaches to Understanding International Students' Experiences in Higher Education

Despite a growing emphasis on individualized motivations and actions, the literature on the experiences of international students in U.S. higher education tends to focus broadly on challenges and struggles international students face as they acculturate, such as social isolation, stress, language proficiency, and academic adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Brunsting, Zachry, & Takeuchi, 2018; Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). A key flaw in the acculturation literature is its seeming assumption that international students prefer to assimilate to the status quo environment of the host country and institution, which devalues the role of the individual and the ways in which they might demonstrate agency in navigating this new socio-academic terrain and in articulating their own identities (Tullock, 2018). The theme of agency is echoed in recent editorials calling for research that develops more holistic understandings of international students' self-formation and agency (Oldac, 2023; Page & Chahboun, 2019). To this end, a recent literature review found a growing interest in research on international student agency over the

past 20 years (Inouye, Lee, & Oldac, 2023), emphasizing the importance of foregrounding students' voices in examinations of study mobility with a particular call for more longitudinal studies. Deuchar (2022) similarly calls for a "reanimating" of research into not only international students' experiences but also their practices, allowing scholars to explore the "ethical stances and values that their practices reveal" and recognize "the strength and resilience of the international student body" (p. 514). The present article answers these calls by honoring and examining the lived experiences of study participants over a ten-year period, drawing on qualitative data to deepen and humanize our understanding of international students' migration experience.

Methodology

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Because this qualitative study centers the experiences and perspectives of globally mobile individuals, I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to illuminate what participants share in common as they experience the phenomenon of international student mobility. This research tradition is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and uses interviews to elicit participants' construction of meaning as they describe and interpret their own experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Through this research, I am interested in not only revealing the "essence" of ISM as experienced by participants but also how their "evolving senses of self relate to the communities to which they belong or desire to belong as well as how [they] exercise human agency to construct and negotiate identities across time and space" (Tullock, 2018, p. 263). This journey of the self is captured in the longitudinal nature of this study and in participants' rich description and interpretation of their ISM experiences over time.

Participants

The phenomenon under consideration for this study was international student mobility, and a direct and sustained experience with this phenomenon was the key criterion for the selection of participants; as Seidman (1998) noted, in in-depth phenomenological research, there can be "enormous power [in] the stories of a relatively few participants" (p. 48). The two participants for the current study, one from Inner Mongolia, China and one from Ecuador, were initially recruited as part of a qualitative study into the lived experience of ten degree-seeking international students in a first-year writing course in a private U.S. university in Washington, DC in 2014. For that study, they participated in a series of semi-structured interviews over the course of an academic semester. They were then re-interviewed at two additional points in time: their final year of study at the U.S. university and approximately five years after they had graduated. When they consented to be a part of the study, both participants selected pseudonyms, Lora and John, which are used to refer to them throughout this article.

Researcher Positionality

In-depth qualitative research necessitates consideration of researcher positionality. My work with international students and my observations of how these culturally and linguistically diverse students navigate higher education certainly influences my understanding of this phenomenon and my stake in this research. In addition, when recruited for the original study, both participants had taken a class in my university program, and one (Lora) had been taught by me, so my position as a U.S. university faculty member—in particular a teacher of English to international students—should be acknowledged. Despite an early power asymmetry, the relationship between me and the participants grew more reciprocal over time, and I believe my stake in the issue came to be viewed a source of trust. More broadly, my approach to this research aligned with van Manen's (2016) claim that subjectivity involves being "*strong* in our orientation to the object of study in a unique or personal way … avoiding being carried away by our unreflected preconceptions" (p. 20). For me this meant asking open-ended questions without losing focus on the core phenomenon of inquiry, allowing participants to tell their own story of ISM and co-construct knowledge with me, and relying heavily on their own words in categorizing themes and representing key findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

As is common practice in hermeneutic phenomenological research, the primary source of data for this study derived from interviews with these participants; through "in-depth and multiple interviews" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79), we can gain deeper insights into what it means to experience a phenomenon such as international student mobility. The first three interviews took place in person during an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved study while participants were pursuing

their undergraduate degrees at the U.S. university. The fourth interview took place on Zoom approximately five years after participants had earned their undergraduate degree and were living in different U.S. cities. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was recorded with the participants' permission. Recordings were then transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. In addition to interview transcripts, complementary sources of data included researcher generated-memos and interview notes as well as participant-written reflections of excerpts from transcripts of their earlier interviews. A summary description of the context for each data source can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1:

Data Sources and Key Foci

Data source	Timing	Main aspect(s) of international student mobility targeted
Interview 1	January 2014 (first year of university)	Background, decision to study abroad, initial experiences in U.S. higher education
Interview 2	May 2014 (end of first year of university)	Reflection on decision to study abroad
Interview 3	Winter 2016-17 (final year of university)	Reflection on decision to study abroad
Interview 4	Winter 2023 (approximately five years after graduation)	Reflection on decision to study abroad; description and interpretation of participants' path is it relates to ISM
Reflective participant memo	Winter 2023	Review of ISM related transcripts from interviews 1, 2, and 3 to provide written reflection on any points that strike participants as significant or that they would like to reflect on

Data analysis began with a reexamination of interview data from the previous study (interviews 1, 2, and 3), isolating excerpts of the text that focused on how participants constructed and revealed their international student mobility experience. These transcripts, along with new interview data collected in December 2023 (interview 4) and my notes from all interviews, were then inductively analyzed to identify key themes that embodied participants' experience of ISM as well as "statements or phrases that seem particularly revealing" in shaping our understanding of this phenomenon (van Manen, 2016, p. 93). Through this inductive analysis, four broad themes emerged, which then became my tentative coding structure. For example, theme 1 related to participants' description of the decision to study abroad and how they reflected on it; theme 2 related to information they chose to focus on when describing what shaped their experiences; theme 3 related to how they thought they had grown and changed through ISM; and theme 4 related to what they said about "home."

With this structure in mind, I reviewed interview transcripts multiple times to identify and number (1-4) passages and illustrative quotes that reflected each theme, eventually refining my description of each of the themes. Phenomenological research aims to illuminate the essence of an experience as lived, so it was important that the final description of the four themes reflected key aspects of *both* participants' ISM experiences but were still inclusive enough to incorporate each participant's unique experience/interpretation within each thematic category. Finally, with the four finalized themes in mind, I inductively analyzed the reflective memos generated by participants after interview 4, which enabled me to strengthen my data interpretation and further embed the perspective of participants in this research. Because the voices of participants are key to our understanding of the phenomenon of ISM, the representation of findings contains a number of the direct quotes that were identified in the thematic analysis of data.

Findings

Participant Vignettes

This study is premised on humanizing and giving voice to the experiences and perspectives of individuals within the internationalization sphere, so it is important to provide a brief portrait of each of the participants.

Lora
Lora is originally from Baotou, a city in the Inner Mongolia region of China, and grew up speaking Mandarin. At the time of her first interview in early 2014, she was 19 years old. She is an only child and described her family as "quite normal … not super rich or super poor," with her mother working as a medical doctor and her father managing a steel company. Lora attended a traditional public high school in her hometown and matriculated in the arts and sciences college of a private university in Washington, DC in 2013—it was her first time in the United States. In 2017, she graduated with a

degree in interior architecture and design and was then accepted to a master's program in architecture. During that degree program, Lora remembers "a lot of late nights staying up until 3:00AM building models" but also notes that that "in the end, it paid off" because she was offered work as an architectural designer. Unfortunately, the year of her graduation coincided with the COVID pandemic, and she ended up moving back to China to be closer to her family—working and living in Shanghai—for several years. At the time of interview 4 in December 2023, Lora was back in the United States on another non-immigrant student (F-1) visa, pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree in New York City because after working in the field of architecture, she was interested in "learning about the business side" of the industry. Her hope is to secure a non-immigrant work (H1B) visa or a permanent resident card, which would enable her to legally work and reside in the United States, and possibly start her own business in the future.

John

John's hometown is Guayaquil, Ecuador, and he grew up speaking Spanish exclusively at home. Like Lora, John was 19 years at the time of interview 1. He is the eldest of three brothers and has an extremely close relationship with extended family. John's family, which he described as being in the "upper class" in Ecuador, was well-traveled, even spending many summers in Miami. They worked in a family-owned shrimp export business that his grandfather had started; John said he "idolized" his grandfather because he only had a third-grade education and started "from the bottom" to "buil[d] an empire" over the course of his life. John also admired his father, who spoke five languages and had lived in a several different European countries. John attended the same school from kindergarten through high school in Guayaquil, an international school offering a Cambridge diploma. After graduating from high school, he matriculated in the business school at the U.S. university with an interest in sports management. John ended up earning his degree in international business marketing in 2017 and worked at a boutique digital agency for the maximum term of one year under the Optional Practical Training (OPT) provision of his student visa. Similar to Lora, John also sought a master's degree, his in project management in New York City. He finished his master's in late 2021 and took a job at an energy management startup. John also got married during 2023 to a woman that he had gone to high school with in Ecuador; they had "reconnected in college" because she was also studying at a nearby university in the United States. They currently live in Boston while his wife is in law school, but he is open to various possibilities in his future. Because John's field is project management, which he describes as "industry agnostic," he sees a lot of opportunities either in the U.S., Europe, or even back in Ecuador.

These profiles reveal the uniqueness of each participant and their contexts, but in consideration of the phenomenological intent of this study, my goal is that the findings of this study illuminate commonly-held experiences and interpretations that relate to participants' decision to pursue higher education in the United States. Through an inductive analysis of transcripts and researcher memos and notes, four key themes emerged: (1) study abroad as self-initiated and self-fulfilling; (2) characterizations of key moments shaping the ISM experience (10-year lens); (3) construction of self through international student mobility; and (4) complex perceptions relating to "home." The final section of the findings section highlights trends in the participant-written memos that were generated at the end of interview 4.

Theme 1: Study Abroad as Self-initiated and Self-fulfilling

An early question from interview 1 during their first year of university study in the United States was what motivated their decision to study abroad. Both participants commented that the decision was self-initiated. Although Lora's parents had never been to the United States, Lora remembered being 16 when family friends, who were U.S. citizens, came to dinner at their home one evening; she was "inspired" by what she learned about their experiences abroad and it reinforced her view that China's colleges were "more like kindergarten." She described the decision to study abroad as her own idea. Although her mother had some hesitancy, her father wanted her to "get a better education and experience more and feel the world" and supported her plan. Once the decision was made that Lora would go to university in the United States, she moved on her own to Beijing and Shanghai, where she studied in preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) for admission to a U.S. university because there were limited opportunities for this kind of preparation in her hometown; in fact, Lora said that "in my hometown, it's not a common thing to go abroad to study." John also indicated his certainty about studying in the U.S. at a young age, in interview 1 commenting that "When I was 14 years old, I told my dad when I grow up, I'm going to go out." When the time came, his parents were highly supportive, recognizing that "in Ecuador, the higher education system is not so good" and that John should expand his horizons. Like Lora, he spent significant time preparing for the SAT and TOEFL, although he had a stronger support system for this from his parents than Lora did. John had some hesitancy about leaving his comfortable life with his family, but in the end, he decided "I have to go…it's the best for me."

Participants were also asked to reflect on this decision in subsequent interviews, and they described what motivated the decision in remarkably similar terms despite the time that had gone by. When asked during interview 2 about the decision to study in the U.S., Lora emphatically had "no regrets." In interview 3 during her final year of university study, she said "I

think it's the best decision I made in my life…I feel like I belong here because people are more open and acceptable, and I can have my own voice here." And even five years after finishing her undergraduate degree, there are echoes of the same: "the best decision I ever made in my life because I wouldn't have grown into the person I am right now…I wouldn't be as brave or be able to take on a lot of challenges if I stayed back home and just listened to what my parents tell me." John characterized his decision in similar terms. In interview 2, when reflecting on the decision to study in the U.S., John said "there couldn't be any better decision." In interview 3 during his final undergraduate year, he was similarly firm about the decision, saying "The best decision I ever made was to convince myself that I need to go out…to go experience something new." By the time of the final interview, which took place ten years after interview 1, John reflected "I think it's the best decision I've made, especially just getting out of my shell from back home … being able to get everything that I have based on my effort and on what I bring to the table." The consistency of these comments from both participants highlights not only the level of individual initiative that motivated the decision to migrate internationally for higher education but also the sense of personal fulfillment that resulted from this decision.

Theme 2: Characterizations of Key Moments Shaping the ISM Experience (10-year Lens)

In interview 4, participants were asked to describe three key moments that shaped their international mobility experience. This open-ended question was asked to elicit what stood out in participants' minds as significant or transformative in their overall experience. Table 2 below summarizes their responses, accompanied by illustrative quotes from interview transcripts.

Table 2:

Characterizations of Key Moments Shaping the ISM Experience (10-year Lens)

Sub-theme	Lora	John
Developing relationships with diverse international peers	Getting to the university; developing friendships within an Asian American sorority ("I have a lot of friends supporting me and starting to let me be confident.")	Getting to know my friend group ("They helped me detach from my home community.")
Realizations based on challenges	Applying to graduate school in 2016; studying for the GRE and compiling an application portfolio ("I did everything all by myself … that's honestly one of my greatest achievements.")	Wake-up call before senior year/job pressure; identifying project management career interest ("Nothing is handed to you.")
The effect of external circumstances	Decision to return to China during the pandemic ("It was a very difficult decision to move back to China, and I'm glad that I was able to put myself back together again [afterwards].")	Visa rejection ("I don't belong here unless I earn my way in … if I want to stay here, I need to put in the work.")

As Table 2 above shows, both Lora and John's responses identified key moments along similar thematic lines, although the specific details were different. For example, each mentioned how pivotal their friend group was to their international student mobility experience, with Lora emphasizing the diverse network of Asian American students she connected with when she joined a sorority and John emphasizing his transition from having a random group of friends during his early university years to developing a tight-knit group of friends from the larger South American community. In both cases, their core social group did not comprise friends from their hometown or even necessarily their home country; John and Lora both grew comfortable and confident as a result of this community support.

Both participants also similarly faced a significant challenge around the end of their undergraduate studies, and the realization gained through this challenge shaped their sense of self and their future trajectory. Lora undertook a very stressful and complicated application procedure for graduate studies in architecture, handling the entire enterprise entirely on her own. Similar to how she prepared for the SAT and TOEFL on her own in China, she managed this challenge independently, feeling a strong sense of accomplishment as a result. John faced a "wake-up call" in his senior year when his friends were getting jobs and he felt he was falling behind. He ended up hustling to get an internship that later turned into a full-time job;

although John was initially a sales marketing intern, through the course of this work, he became intrigued about the role of project managers in the company and thought "I think I will be better there…I like how they are involved, how they plan everything out." He advocated for a shift in his work responsibilities, which set him on the path for his graduate degree in project management and current career in Boston.

The third pivotal moment participants recounted also shared a common theme: how the effect of an external circumstance—for Lora the COVID-19 pandemic and for John the rejection of his work visa—shaped their ISM experiences. Lora described the decision to return home during COVID as incredibly difficult. Although she wanted to be closer to her family, she ended up being locked down in Shanghai: "I was basically just locked in my home for two whole months and not allowed to step out of my apartment for that entire time." Lora characterized her feelings after this as similar to "PTSD," later saying "I'm glad I was able to put myself together again [and] apply for another program here." She is currently pursuing an MBA degree in the United States. John, after two years of working as an intern and then a full-time employee at a U.S. company, learned that his work visa had been rejected; he said: "Getting that rejection and having to stop work the day after that was such a disappointment and kind of a reality check…I don't belong here unless I earn my way into it." The visa rejection prompted John to go back to school for a graduate degree in project management, which led to his current job with the energy management start-up. For both participants, the external setback was met with a pivot that created a new opportunity and extended their paths in the United States.

Theme 3: Construction of Self through International Student Mobility

The third key theme that emerged from data analysis was participants' growing sense of self through ISM. Although, as can be seen in themes 1 and 2 above, both John and Lora had a clear sense of vision and purpose when it came to ISM— as well as a persistence in working through challenges—both described themselves as shy when they were in high school and indicated that they gained confidence and a stronger sense of self through the experience of ISM. For example, in interview 3 at the end of her final year of university study in the U.S., Lora said she "grew a lot in every aspect… I have become a better person because I have more friends now and I know how to treat other people better and not discriminating [against] other people…opening up to new things…more comfortable with the group I am in right now." In interview 4, she clearly attributes her growth to her international student mobility experience, noting "being alone in a foreign country at a very early age helped me with my independence and just solving a lot of problems on my own." For John, the college experience in the U.S. was similarly transformative: "the development that you have as a person in college is tremendous and I've seen it in myself…I know how to differentiate myself from the rest of the people…to find what my interests are…what's my moral compass…how I've been able to handle myself in a mature way" (interview 3).

When asked how they had changed as a result of their international student mobility in interview 4, similarly defining features were revealed in the interview data. John described himself as "a completely different person to the kid who came to DC." Being a planner and having to do things independently—without the help of his parents—enabled him to grow more self-sufficient. John also noted that the experience of migrating internationally for higher education "really, really changes your life and your perspective, your outlook for yourself or where you are in the world as opposed to the bubble where you grew up." According to Lora, "I have grown tougher…more open-minded…know all kinds of people (diversity)… a completely different person to the kid who came to DC." While relaying various anecdotes, it was clear that Lora had also become a strong self-advocate, not afraid to speak up; for example, when she went back to China during COVID, Lora said she was able to stand up to her employer on a legal issue, which was something she "learned in America."

Interviews also reflect a sense of integrity and coherence in participants' self-perception, one they maintained throughout all of their international mobility experiences. John talked about how important it is to "get your moral compass or rules, your inner rules, set in stone," and Lora mentioned the importance of "keeping a line in the back of your head" and knowing how to do the right thing. Both seemed to exercise this moral clarity not only as a means of self-actualization but also of self-preservation in the shifting and often challenging context of life outside of their home environment.

Theme 4: Complex Perceptions Relating to "Home"

Another key theme that emerged from data analysis was how each participant characterized "home." During their first year of study at the U.S. university, both John and Lora talked about trips home, with Lora saying she was "excited" to go home for the summer after her first year and John taking taken two trips to Ecuador during the school year, for his brother's first communion and his mom's birthday. For Lora, however, her views of home became more complex over time. By interview 3 during her last year of undergraduate study, she talked about being "bored and unhappy" while she was in China for that first summer and noted that she had stayed in the U.S. in subsequent summers. Lora said she did not want to stay too long at home because of the pressure to conform in Chinese society and the fact that her family did not seem to understand her anymore, even claiming she was "too Americanized." Lora's response to this was "Why would I change

myself only because of other's opinions?" Over time, she grew more resolute in her determination to live in the U.S. permanently, noting "I can't fit in the Chinese society anymore… I'm just not the person who would stay there." John also underwent an evolution in his thinking by the time of his final year of undergraduate study. Like Lora, he saw constraints and pressures within his hometown: "You're restricted to the way society is…you're limited by it, in a good or bad way." And in interview 3 he also observed a growing "cultural difference" between life back home and in Washington, DC, "like you're in no man's land." Unlike Lora, however, for John, Guayaquil was still "home," and he did not want to lose the connection to his culture, so he seemed equally open to a life in the U.S. or a life in Ecuador.

In the final interview ten years after the first one, both participants were asked to describe how their lives would have been different if they had stayed in their home country and not gone to the U.S. for university. In both cases, they narrated details of an imagined life that was routine and boring. John said he would probably have married because "there's nothing to do and [people] just want to get out of their parents' house"; he would also likely be working at his family's company and following the "same routine…eating at the same three restaurants, going around with the same group of people." Lora's imagined life was similar: "I would have married an average guy…working at a government job that I don't like and stuck there, wondering why my life had become like this." They also each brought up—unsolicited—how they would not have developed into the people they became had they not gone abroad for higher education. John commented that if he had simply ended up working for his family's company, he would have a different type of feeling than the one he had now: "a feeling where I would not earn what I had based on my merits, based on my achievement, based on my sacrifice." John felt he would have had "less self-awareness" and "would not have tested himself." Lora similarly emphasized that if she was stuck in that boring job and depressing life in China, she wouldn't be able to "assert" for herself or "be an independent woman."

When it comes to prospects for return, Lora was also adamant that she would not move back to China again. By the time of interview 4 in 2023, Lora asserted that she was "not moving back to China anymore" because she was more accustomed to U.S. culture, had her friend group in the U.S., and had developed her own professional identity and path. John, on the other hand, had married a woman from his hometown in Ecuador and had a sense of obligation toward his family business, so he would consider living in his hometown again but only "on his own merits" and not facilitated by his family name.

Looking Back: Participant Reflections on Interview Transcripts

As a final element of data collection, I invited each participant to review transcripts from interviews 1-3 and share additional reflections on anything that struck them as significant on their ten-year journey with ISM. Interestingly, although language was not the focus of this study, both participants opened their memo by noting that they picked up on improvements in their use of language or ability to express themselves in English over time. It was also evident that their previous responses to interview questions still rang true, even if they would contextualize them differently from a distance. For example, throughout the interviews, both John and Lora commented on their decision to study abroad being self-initiated, but in his reflective memo, John acknowledged the role his father played in realizing his dream: "As much as I was sure I wanted to go, my dad could have just dismissed the idea, and my life would be radically different."

Participants' reflective memos also captured what stood out in the longer-term trajectory of their ISM experience and what was forgotten or seen as funny or a minor blip. Lora said reading the transcripts of the earlier interviews felt like "living through the moments of my college life again, seeing the clips of the situation I described I was in at each time. I feel I can see myself growing and changing a lot throughout the years." John noted that "Some of these day-to-day struggles are fun anecdotes now but back then I was annoyed." They also viewed the interview transcripts as a lens for understanding their current lives, for example by emphasizing missed opportunities—or turning points—that they did not necessarily notice while they were happening but that shaped the trajectory of their lives in significant ways. For Lora, these examples included her independent management of graduate school applications and her return to China—and the subsequent lockdown—during COVID, which led her to realize "I can only thrive in America." Despite this realization, upon returning to the United States in 2023, she felt "everything is harder this time around." For John, he noted that changing his major from sports management to marketing represented a "reality check" that later helped him settle into what he called a "more stable career path." Both participants also emphasized the legal challenge of seeking work in the United States post-graduation and what they wished they had known about visa-related work opportunities earlier in their undergraduate studies. For both participants, the obstacle of getting a work visa was met with determination and resilience, as reflected in Lora's comment that even though U.S. citizens have a clear advantage in being hired, "my education and professional experience did prepare me to deal with tough situations, so I am not lost and afraid as when I just started college ten years ago."

Some of the tension around "home" that I elucidated in theme 4 of my findings was also prominent in these reflective memos. When reflecting on interview 1 from January 2014, John mentioned "It's funny how excited I was to go back

[home] for the first time and see my friends, but as the years started to pass, I started to go less and less and the time I spend there is mostly with my family now." The locus of his life also shifted once John married, and his decisions about where to live—and why—are now considered through this lens. As evidenced in the interview transcripts, John's main struggle with identity, in fact, seemed related to distinguishing himself from his family on his own terms. Lora, on the other hand spent more time reflecting on her identity and acknowledged it as an ongoing struggle in the interviews as well as her reflective memo:

> I think over the years I had a lot of struggle about my identity as a Chinese person being an international student in America. I like American culture, but apparently, I am not a U.S. citizen, so I face a lot of struggles as a lot of international students face. Some think I am not American enough and some think I am not Chinese enough. Sometimes I feel rejected by both worlds. But I somehow just have some blind optimism and confidence coming out of nowhere that support me through these struggles. I think I will be able to get what I want and find my place and my own identity in America one day as long as I don't give up and just keep working towards it.

I include this long quote as the final point of my findings section because it not only captures who Lora *is* but also powerfully captures hermeneutic phenomenology's balance of description and interpretation of an experience as lived.

Discussion

This study explored how globally mobile individuals described and interpreted their experience with international student mobility over a ten-year period. Because it applied a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach, the findings articulate commonly- shared experiences and understandings with the aim of characterizing the ISM phenomenon more broadly. Four thematic findings were identified through interpretive data analysis: (1) study abroad as self-initiated and self-fulfilling; (2) characterizations of key moments shaping the ISM experience (10-year lens); (3) construction of self through international student mobility; and (4) complex perceptions relating to "home." The qualitative and longitudinal nature of this research enabled me to trace these themes over time, with participants making deeper meaning of the experiences—and their self-understandings —at various stages in their lives.

The findings of this study generally align with a push-pull motivation for pursuing higher education abroad (Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, 2023; Shkoler & Rabenu, 2022; Mazzarol & Souter, 2002) as both participants and their families saw constraints and limitations in their respective home country's higher education system as well as better academic and professional opportunities in the United States. However, a key finding of this research was that the decision to study abroad emerged from an individual desire to broaden their horizons, experience something different, and expand their own capacities in ways that were meaningful to them, which is reflected in recent research conceptualizing a "capability approach" as opposed to a market-driven one in considering rationales for international student mobility (Fakunle, 2021; Lo, 2019); a capability approach takes into account multiple and overlapping influences on ISM, including "educational, experiential, aspirational, and economic" (Fakunle, 2021, p. 683) with a focus on individual well-being.

This individual-level research also reveals the extent to which deeply personal motivations drove the decision to study abroad. Both Lora and John describe the idea as self-initiated, one they carried to their parents who—despite some initial hesitation—supported and helped facilitate the decision. In neither case was there a sense of familial pressure or even peer pressure, and the sense of agency participants applied to the decision-making and preparation for going to university in the United States became a driving force that shaped their entire ISM experience. Data analysis for this study also conveys the self-awareness and agency these individuals demonstrated in navigating their transnational experiences in transformative ways, as illustrated in how participants overcame challenges, displayed resilience, made independent decisions, and negotiated their identity across time and space (Tullock, 2018). This aligns with recent research emphasizing self-actualization (Siczek, 2018), becoming (Tran, 2016), agency in mobility (Tran & Vu, 2018), and self-formation (Marginson, 2014, 2023) among international students. Reflecting Marginson's (2014) point, in the context of ISM, Lora and John acted as "self-forming agents [who] choose their agendas from the menus of the possible" (p. 11).

In a ten-year journey like this, it is natural that stresses related to adjustment would be evident in participants' characterization of the experience, but a key benefit of longitudinal studies like this is that we can see the extent to which these stressors endure over time. One point of difference from some of the acculturation literature in which international students report feeling socially isolated or having negative cross-cultural interactions (Andrade, 2006; Brunsting, Zachry, & Takeuchi, 2018; Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) is that participants recalled finding a home with a set of peers that was neither from the dominant domestic student population nor from their home country as a key factor that shaped their experience—even five years after completing their undergraduate studies. They indicated that this gave them a stable support network of peers who had a comparable understanding of how it feels to be in-between as an international student. This is an area of inquiry I would encourage future longitudinal

qualitative research in, for example considering shifting patterns of peer interconnectivities during international students' term of study and the extent to which peer networks are sustained over time.

Another sustaining factor in both participants' ISM experience was a highly grounded sense of self, in other words the manner in which both participants were guided by their "moral compass." This was evident in their determination to study in the U.S. as teenagers and the numerous ways they demonstrated self-sufficiency and agency across multiple points in time and experiences. This links to Deuchar's (2022) caution not to consider international students' a "vulnerable group" but instead to recognize the myriad ways these diverse students demonstrate agency in the "ethical stances and values that their practices reveal and articulate [and] the strengths and resilience of the international student body" (p. 514). The findings of this study also affirm calls for centering international students' voices and actions in research on ISM (Deuchar, 2022; Inouye, Lee, & Oldac, 2023; Oldac, 2023; Page & Chaboun, 2019).

One particularly interesting finding was the extent to which external factors shaped participants' international mobility experience. Research on international students' motivations has discussed legal considerations (Shkoler & Rabenu, 2023), and visa-related issues have been found to mediate individuals' ISM experience (Crumley-Effinger, 2023). The findings of this study substantiate these impacts; visa issues were invoked across multiple interviews, and for both Lora and John legal requirements were the source of challenge and disappointment. Yet at the same time, the legal setbacks John and Lora encountered were converted to opportunities, demonstrating their commitment to realizing their academic and professional goals in the United States and the agency they demonstrated as they navigated these challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on Lora's ISM trajectory and is starting to become a generative area of inquiry (e.g., Bista, Allen, & Chan, 2022) and a worthy phenomenological pursuit. In the context of this study, however, it is important to note that—despite the geographical and emotional dislocation of moving back to China during the pandemic—Lora was persistent in finding her way back to herself and to the life she aspired to in the United States. And although both participants independently and proactively managed these and other challenges to chart their own path, it should be noted that they were undergirded by familial and financial support that other international students may not have access to.

Although some of previous research emphasizes how earning a degree abroad improves one's capacity and prospects upon return home (Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, 2023), the findings of this study revealed how complex that homecoming can be. For Lora in particular, the distance between who she had become and the expectations of her home country had become insurmountable. Although John traveled home significantly less often as time went by, his strong ties to family and the fact that he had married a woman from his hometown, made him open to the prospect of return some time in the future. Having said that, John was determined that his return would be in his own terms, earned through his own efforts, rather than facilitated through his family name. We see in these individuals' descriptions and interpretations the complex interplay of factors that shaped their consideration of return to their home country, including their sense of identity vis-à-vis their home communities

Implications and Conclusion

With the goal of humanizing and giving voice to individuals' experiences with internationalization, this research elevates the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have pursued higher education in the United States to answer the research question: How do globally mobile individuals describe and interpret their experience with international student mobility over a ten-year trajectory? The overarching finding is that these participants demonstrate self-awareness and agency in navigating their international student mobility across multiple points in time and experiences. This sense of agency is embodied both in their practical responses to circumstances as well as in their growing self-actualization. Because I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the research, I was able to isolate key themes that characterized the experience for both participants, adding to our understandings of ISM and providing a framework for future research that further explores the themes that were identified in this study. The present research study also expands the research base on ISM because of the scope of time and experience it covers as well as the significant input of study participants in constructing and revealing their international mobility experiences. Encapsulating a key contribution of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, van Manen (2016) notes "The essence and nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows is the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner" (p. 10). It is my hope that because participants' voices and interpretations are so deeply embedded in this article, it will fulfill this key goal of phenomenological research and illuminate readers' understanding of what it means to "live" the experience of international student mobility.

Within the larger context of internationalization at national and institutional levels, international students are often regarded generically, for example as data points or subjects of acculturation. Motivations for pursuing higher education abroad also tend to be represented generically, for example with a focus on instrumentalist or economic rationales. This research helps us consider internationalization at the individual level, with participants' motivations to study abroad described as highly personalized as well as consistently rendered across multiple points in time. Both participants also

demonstrated a clear commitment to *remaining* in the United States after their graduation and persisted in this goal despite the challenges they faced. Seeing their experience through this longer-term lens provides insights that would be lost had the research only focused on a narrower period of time during their undergraduate studies in the United States.

These narratives capture what these individuals have gained through a ten-year trajectory of their ISM experiences: confidence, self-awareness, agency, and resilience. At the same time, this research reveals complicated understandings of what was left behind, especially regarding participants' changing perception of home. For John, his life no longer centered on his family and home community in Ecuador, but marrying a woman from his hometown opened back up a path for him to live there again. Lora's ties to home—with the exception of her relationship with her parents—became increasingly tenuous, so much so that she never wanted to return to live in China. In both cases, however, participants made decisions on their own terms as they navigated their ISM and post-graduation experiences and identities over time. In line with the purpose of this special issue, these micro-level perspectives reinforce the transformative potential for self-development through international student mobility.

In terms of limitations, although both participants came from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds—Lora from a region of China in which few students pursue education abroad and John from South America—both had the financial and familial support to matriculate in a private university, pursue graduate-level education in the United States, and weather a number of challenges. Also, despite the fact that the interviews allowed for a deep and substantive phenomenological exploration of their lived experience with ISM, this study only involved two participants. Future qualitative research would benefit from drawing on a broader range of participants from a variety of diverse backgrounds and in a variety of study abroad settings to further conceptualize the phenomenon of international student mobility. I also recommend continuing to explore the important role identity, agency, and understandings of self play in individual experiences, in particular by focusing on in-depth longitudinal research as opposed to point-in-time studies of what it means to be an international student. Finally, I'd like to conclude by honoring the input of my participants. Their willingness to participate in interviews with me across a ten-year time span and the perspectives and insights they shared elucidate this experience and add to our collective understanding of the phenomenon of international student mobility, and this research would not have been possible without them.

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The Policy and Practice of Internationalization in the Global-South: African International Students' Experiences in South Africa during COVID-19

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Abstract

Understanding higher education internationalization is challenging as it includes different dimensions with varied implications for universities. This paper focuses on the recruitment and teaching of international students. It explores the experiences of African international students at two South African universities between 2020-2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Informed by the capabilities approach, the paper draws on Ubuntu and affiliation as key capabilities for an expansive conceptualization of internationalization. The study's findings reveal the intersecting and underlying constraining contexts for international students, exacerbated by the pandemic. Such a micro-level study contributes towards a nuanced understanding of the practice of higher education internationalization in the global South. It highlights the need to reframe internationalization as a reciprocal relationship based on mutual interconnectedness and mutual values that do not just respond to broader neoliberal narratives but foster student and institutional flourishing.

Introduction

Migration scholarship is generally skewed towards the Global North, where most research is commissioned, theories are crafted, and focus areas are decided (Crawley & Teye, 2024). Despite the dominant focus on global South-North movements, more than one-third of all international migration in 2020 occurred in global South countries, more than the share of South-North migration (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). By focusing on global South-South international student migration, this paper contributes to broader debates on migration and the role of higher education (HE) in the global South. The term "global South" is used in this paper as a descriptor in contrast to the global-North. It is not meant as a geographical category but a relational category that considers "historically grown marginalisations within international hierarchies and their epistemological implications" (Berger, 2020, p. 2001).

Internationalization is a complex and expanding area in HE. It includes various dimensions such as the recruitment and instruction of international students, the establishment of international branch campuses, student and staff exchange

programs, internationalization of the curriculum, and partnerships with regional and international institutions (Ali, 2014). We focus on the former. Comprehending international student mobility in HE therefore poses a challenge, given the multifaceted nature of internationalization, and its diverse uptake and implications for universities. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded this complexity as universities had to adapt and ensure the continuity of learning (Du Plessis et al., 2022; Wills & van der Berg, 2024) in a context of educational inequalities worldwide. Universities' reactions to the pandemic were sometimes "fragmented, uncoordinated, and fraught with conflict and ambivalence" (Wang & Sun, 2022, p. 13). For many international students, the impact of the pandemic was worsened by circumstances in their home countries, such as political and economic instability. Consequently, their needs around accommodation, safe return home, and exposure to the pandemic were sometimes overlooked by their host countries (Chen et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020).

Student mobility has increased in recent years with the number of international students growing globally, from 2 million in 2000 to over 6.4 million in 2021 (Migration Data Portal, 2024). This is a result of several factors including the evolution of the knowledge economy, shifting attitudes toward HE, and enhanced job market opportunities for students. Globally, international student migration contributes skills and economic benefits to host countries and universities. Although the commodification of HE driven by a neoliberal ideology, is foregrounded in internationalization practices (Švarc & Dabić, 2017), the impact of international students extends beyond their economic contribution to host countries. Ideally, international students encourage the cultivation of "intercultural understanding and skills for personal, professional and citizenship development" (Knight, 2007, p. 216). Students also aspire to attend tertiary institutions with global recognition (Fakunle, 2021) and for self-formation (Marginson, 2014). Despite the advantages, there is a tension in policy and practice between international students being 'desired' because of their status and economic contributions, and 'unwanted' because of the need for migration control (King & Raghuram, 2013).

Using international student narratives from two South African universities between 2020-2022, this paper theorizes the concept of internationalization from a global South perspective, and how universities can reimagine it in pursuit of a more meaningful student experience. Based on the findings, it argues for a more expansive understanding and implementation of internationalization in HE, characterized by a "move from the eurocentrism of contemporary academic migration scholarship" (Landström & Crawley, 2024, p. 84).

Internationalization in South Africa

Before 2019, South Africa had no internationalization policy and universities implemented individual strategies. Although practiced by all universities, internationalization was of low priority for rural-based and/or historically disadvantaged universities (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022). Following the apartheid policy of separate development, historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) were established to serve non-whites, and their marginalization has continued to date. Comparatively, historically advantaged universities (HAIs) were established to serve the white population and have better infrastructure, funding, more teaching and research experience, and generate more research outputs and graduates (Myeki and Temoso, 2019). Although non-whites can now access any university, differences prevail in institution's historical, geographical, and operational contexts, priorities, and levels of financial and human resource capacity allocation in general, and for internationalization. Chasi and Quinlan (2021) note that these institutional differences in the funding and type of services for international students depend on the priority assigned to internationalization. For some universities, internationalization is central to institutional strategy, while for others, it competes with more pressing everyday challenges. Thus, HAIs tend to practice and benefit more from internationalization.

The 2019 national policy framework for HE internationalization provided legitimacy and guidelines for the process. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2019, p. 9), internationalization is "an intentional or steered process to incorporate intercultural, international and/or global dimensions into higher education in order to advance the goals, functions and delivery of higher education and thus to enhance the quality of education and research". Despite the policy framework being relatively new, and its implementation affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have highlighted its limited consideration of the South African context (Chasi, 2021; Heleta, 2021; Quinlan & Singh, 2022; Heleta and Chasi, 2023). This is akin to Fakunle, Kalinga, and Lewis' (2022, p. 25) observation that internationalization policies in the UK are "disconnected from the racialized lived experiences of students, faculty, and administrators". Illustrating the disjuncture between policy goals emphasizing economic imperatives and those advocating for transformative pedagogies in support of students' cross-cultural learning and global connectedness (Lehtomäki et al., 2019), Heleta (2021, para 13) also notes that the policy's current framing prioritizes "linking up with institutions in the global North, [and] profiling South African universities abroad to attract international students and make money". To some extent, this creates tension with the transformation agenda foregrounded in South African HE policy to redress the ills of colonialism and apartheid (Council on Higher Education, 2022). Thus, universities become "caught between the logic of incorporating within a competitive global economy and national concerns for redress and racial equity" (Majee & Ress, 2020, p. 470) which magnified the disruptions, inequalities, and inequities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this

complex context, practicing internationalization "in a Global South context needs to be deliberately interrogated and contextualized in response to local needs and realities" (Chasi, 2021, p. 34).

As with most African HE policies, South Africa's national policy framework for HE internationalization is informed by generic ideas conceptualized in the global-North and are not always applicable to other contexts. For instance, the most accepted definition of internationalization as "the process of integrating the international dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of an institution of higher education" was proposed by Knight (1994, p. 3). Despite the criticism that this definition is inapplicable to most global South contexts, Knight (2003, p. 1) highlighted that a definition should "not specify the rationales, benefits, outcomes, actors, activities, or stakeholders of internationalization as these elements vary across nations and from institution to institution". However, some scholars underscore the importance of definitions in "influenc[ing] and guid[ing] strategic directions of higher education systems and institutions" (Heleta and Chasi (2023, p. 262-263). For example, Marginson (2023, p. 2) observes the challenges with "universalising" internationalization and how Knight's definition "contains a tautology (internationalisation integrates the international) and conceals a raft of assumptions, judgments, problems and issues". It illustrates how seemingly apolitical and generic definitions are founded on unequal and hierarchical Eurocentric knowledge bases (Heleta and Chasi, 2023; Marginson, 2023) that perpetuate "hegemonic neoliberal capitalist-driven globalization" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021, p. 78). To better suit other contexts, there has been a shift from commonly accepted definitions of internationalization as largely Anglo-Saxon and predominantly English-speaking concepts (Ge, 2022, p. 231). This is key in post-apartheid global-South countries like South Africa where HE policy aims include social justice goals. In contrast dominant ideas of globalization and neoliberalism in HE result in internationalization being framed as a "commodity in the globalised higher education marketplace" (Heleta and Chasi, 2023, p. 266) for which all countries compete equally.

Because HE internationalization in South Africa occurs in a challenging environment characterized by inequality and underfunding (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021), Heleta and Chasi (2023, p. 269) propose a more contextually appropriate definition, aligned with this study's normative focus. They conceptualize internationalization as "a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all". Such conceptualizations can foster international collaboration based on solidarity, tolerance, equity, fairness, and equality (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016) which we believe are encapsulated in the idea of Ubuntu.

Regardless of the initial lack of national policy and challenges with the current framework, South Africa is one of the leading African destinations for international students (Ratshilaya, 2021). According to Quinlan and Singh (2022), the DHET (2021) notes how the number of international undergraduate students dropped from 5.93% in 2015 to 3.09% by the end of 2020 while international postgraduates dropped from 15.82% to 12.94% because of the COVID-19 pandemic, bureaucratic challenges, and xenophobic violence. Despite the falling numbers, South Africa is Africa's major education hub, enrolling close to 41,000 international students in 2019, mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa (ICEF Monitor, 2023) and the 16 Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. While no current statistics reflect post-pandemic enrolments, we can assume that despite the drop in numbers, most international students still originate from SADC countries. South Africa "owes a moral debt" to most SADC countries that supported the struggle against apartheid, and supplied migrant labour, and investments (Majee and Ress, 2020). Thus, SADC students are treated as home students in terms of fees and accommodation as specified by the SADC Protocol on Education and Training which aimed at promoting regional integration in priority areas of education, training, research, and development (SADC Protocol, 1997). They also live "in a relatively economically and culturally integrated region dominated by South African influence" (Tagliabue, 2022, p. 6). Thus, examining these, and other African students' integration as part of an international learning experience is crucial to understanding not just educational arrangements, but also broader socio-political relations. This is important given that the policy framework for internationalization "gives some expression to the centrality of Africa as a key theme of decolonisation of higher education on the continent" (Chasi, 2021, p. 34).

Students' desire for experiences in cultural diversity, and the recognition of international education in enhancing global job market opportunities attracts them to countries with relatively well-developed universities like South Africa (Majee and Ress, 2020). By providing learning opportunities to students from different countries, South Africa benefits economically and develops the much-needed human resources in Africa (Mkwananzi, 2021). This positions universities as key contributors to migration, development, and HE. Despite the benefits, several studies illustrate challenges faced by international students including building relationships (Dunne, 2013; Robinson, et al., 2019); feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and general well-being (Sehoole, 2015; Guo & Guo, 2017; Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Soong and Maheepala, 2023); and the digital divide (Bashir, 2021). These challenges were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. On 26 March 2020, South Africa implemented a Level 5 lockdown. This was the highest form of lockdown that prohibited gatherings and the closure of non-essential activities including universities, and national borders. The pandemic caught universities off-guard, although some were better prepared than others. Some universities had in place business continuity plans arising from the challenges of the 2015/16 #Feesmustfall movement while others did not (du Plessis et al., 2022). The business continuity plans outlined

the provision of adequate online teaching and learning resources for staff and students, student residences, the continuity of essential services on campus, and financial sustainability issues (Universities South Africa [USAf], 2020). Institutional operational policies and procedures also directed universities on issues such as student residences (Ibid.). While the lockdown affected both local and international students, the latter were arguably more affected by the restrictions. Thus, this paper examines African international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown.

The theoretical and methodological approaches that guided the study are presented next, followed by the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

In Africa, many interactions are centered around the practice of communalism and individual interconnectedness known as Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a worldview and moral philosophy based on the idea that "Umntu ngumntu ngabantu" meaning that "a person is a person through other people" or "I am because we are" (Shutte, 1993, p. 46). According to Mutanga (2024, p. 4), Ubuntu is anchored on interdependence, human dignity, respect, and collective problem-solving. Researchers have used Ubuntu to understand individual and collective social experiences of inclusion and their impact on human well-being. While Mutanga (2024) argues that some of the actions observed during the COVID-19 pandemic reflected a spirit of oneness, we are interested in how these played out in international HE. To understand student's well-being, we draw on Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) and specifically the capability for affiliation to theorize practices of Ubuntu for students during the pandemic. According to Walker and McLean (2013), the capability for affiliation is about social relations, mutual respect, valuing diversity, and understanding one's obligations to others. Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas (2023, p. 242) posit that while Ubuntu offers a moral compass and normative description for developing one's humanness, the CA offers a normative and evaluative framework for wellbeing. They further argue that in HE, the capability for critical affiliation strongly speaks to the principles of Ubuntu such as mutual cooperation, reciprocal support, and community affiliation. We therefore consider Ubuntu a valued capability for student wellbeing, especially important for international students. Combining Ubuntu and the capability for affiliation provides a relational framework applicable to explaining human interconnectedness. In this paper, we are interested in how students i) were able to live with and behave toward others, and ii) experienced a sense of solidarity and mutual respect from others.

The paper examines the role of universities as social institutions that shape HE access, learning, and everyday experiences of solidarity, respect, oneness, and kindness towards international students. It argues for a reframing of the process of internationalization as a reciprocal relationship between universities and students. This requires locating the discourse of internationalization within "broader historical, economic, academic, political, and administrative contexts to question prevailing assumptions and imagine alternative possibilities" (Garwe and Thondhlana, 2023. p. ix). It assigns universities the responsibility to foster more equitable opportunities for internationalization based on social justice and reciprocity, beyond mere rhetoric. In a reciprocal relationship, HE internationalization is seen "as a means of freedom or an instrument for attaining wellbeing, justice, and development" (Lo, 2019, p. 261). To theorize the capability for affiliation for international students through an Ubuntu lens, we focus on the opportunities for these students to form relationships to enhance their learning experience away from home.

Ubuntu and Affiliation as a Capability

Our conceptualization of this capability draws on mutual interconnectedness and values.

Mutual Interconnectedness

Ubuntu provides a cultural and intellectual foundation for affiliation by espousing a worldview that promotes interconnectedness and community well-being. Such inclusive practices denote respecting the values of presence, participation, acceptance, and achievement (Lephoto and Adigun (2024, p. 71), all of which are key dimensions of student well-being in our case with African international students. Nussbaum (2000, p. 232) explains the capability for affiliation as being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction, to be able to imagine the situation of another, and to have compassion for that situation. It offers a framework that can assist in making Ubuntu ideas a reality in both policy and practice. As did Calitz (2019), we found that students viewed affiliation as social networks, recognition, identity, and belonging. This capability is expressed through supportive relationships with university staff and peers, and to be recognized as members of the academic community. For international students who are away from home, this capability, as Calitz (2019) argues, is important for integration and navigating a new (and sometimes) different learning environment. Therefore, an Ubuntu and affiliation-inspired approach would include expressions of compassion, kindness, and generosity to and from others. From an institutional perspective,

leaders would make decisions that show empathy, kindness, and compassion to all students. This is especially important if we view HE institutions as communities with common and shared values.

Mutual Values

Ubuntu promotes inclusivity based on self-respect and treating others with dignity and equal worth. This means not discriminating based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality. Both Ubuntu and the capability for affiliation emphasize the importance of interpersonal connections and the intrinsic value of relating to others. Integrating these ideas into understanding the experiences of international students provides the opportunity to identify empathy and the recognition that human flourishing is embedded in people's ability to engage meaningfully and respectfully with others. HE internationalization should, therefore, be about creating reciprocal relationships that allow both universities and students to flourish. While universities benefit economically and contribute to the public good, students learn disciplinary knowledge, about others, themselves, and how they can contribute to the common good (Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas, 2023). Therefore Nussbaum (2000, p.234) argues for everyone to be "a bearer of value, and an end" without giving primacy to some over others. In this case, foregrounding the economic benefits to universities over international students' valued ends becomes akin to "exploitation", which is about treating "a person as a mere object for the use of others" (Ibid.).

The 1997 SADC Protocol on Education and Training is an example of the centrality of connectedness and intercultural affiliations in South Africa, which is not reflected in international definitions and policies. Although focused on education, the protocol was aimed at promoting regional integration and cooperation. As set out in the protocol, SADC students do not fit the profile of self-funding international customers who pay international fees, despite not being South African (Majee & Ress, 2020). This illustrates the reciprocal and normative value placed on connections and social relations in South Africa, and in HE, which is absent in broader internationalization policies. In the current framing and practices of internationalization, the sense of responsibility and need to ensure international students' well-being is sometimes overlooked.

Methodology

This study used a phenomenological research design. Neubauer et al., (2019, p. 91) define phenomenology as "an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it." From the many forms of phenomenology, this study adopted the transcendental approach which emphasizes the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Ibid.). This design was appropriate for participants to fully describe their lived experiences as international students at South African universities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purposive sampling was employed to select international students from two South African universities, University A, a HAI, and University B, a rural HDI. To better reflect on their experiences, 15 African international students in their final year in 2023 were selected. See Table 1 for student information. Individual semi-structured interviews, consisting of closed- and open-ended questions accompanied by probes, were used to collect data on students' experiences. Data was collected over two months, after obtaining permission from the universities and students. All the students were above the consent age of 18 years, and informed consent was sought only after they understood the study details. Despite the students being from different linguistic backgrounds, there was no language barrier as the participating institutions used English as the medium of instruction.

Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) data analysis steps, data was anonymized and analyzed thematically. The research team read through the transcripts numerous times, highlighting words and phrases with key themes relating to the study objective. This open coding was used to classify meaningful data from the transcripts. After the open coding process, the codes were categorized, with codes that reflected comparable concepts or patterns combined into a single category. Finally, emerging themes were labeled after the observation of trends and patterns in the categories. The themes were then analyzed using the Ubuntu-affiliation capability framework, which enabled us to draw out those relevant to our study. The research team discussed the different codes, categories, and themes to ensure a common understanding and consensus regarding the analysis process.

Guided by excerpts of students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the next section presents the themes emerging from the interviews.

Table 1

Participants Profiles

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Course registered for	Year of study at time of interview	University
Charmaine	Lesotho	Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Communication Science	3rd	A
Jerome	Namibia	Bachelor of Arts Honours in Governance and Political Transformation	3rd	A
Daniel	Lesotho	Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Communication Science	3rd	A
Mary	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Arts in Law	3rd	A
Bobby	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Arts in Governance and Political Transformation	3rd	A
Edgar	Ghana	Bachelor of Science Honours in Forensic Genetics	3rd	A
Toby	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Arts in Social Work	4th	A
Jonathan	Nigeria	Bachelor of Science in Life Sciences	3rd	B
Hilda	Kenya	Master of Agriculture	3rd	B
Agnes	Nigeria	Bachelor of Law	4th	B
Noah	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Science in Water and Sanitation Sciences	4th	B
Nick	Zimbabwe	Master of Agricultural Management	3rd	B
Aletta	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Development, Planning and Management (Honours)	3rd	B
Sarah	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Laws	4th	B
Damaris	Zimbabwe	Master of Economics	3rd	B

<center>**Results**</center>

This section presents three key themes shaping student experiences. The first theme relates to the impact of the COVID-19 policy implementation with sub-sections on accommodation requirements and online learning. The second theme examines the bureaucratic challenges experienced by students, while theme three examines the lack of institutional support for international students in the implementation of the policy framework for HE internationalization in and outside teaching. These themes underscore the importance of universities' awareness of the different needs of international and local students in the support they provide. The excerpts denote the anonymized student's name and university, eg. Mary- A.

Impact of COVID-19 Policy Implementation

This theme focuses on how policies related to COVID-19 affected students' accommodation arrangements and online learning.

Accommodation Requirements

The abrupt request to vacate campus created challenges for international students, some of whom had no alternative accommodation in South Africa and had to return to their home countries. Although there were slight differences between the time given by the two universities for students to vacate campus, students highlighted challenges in the manner it was done:

> International students were not allowed to stay. They were given 24 hours to vacate the university. If you find that the number of international students this year has dropped, that could be one of the reasons. They had to go home. And then lockdown happened. They could not study from home. I don't know whether they were able to access Blackboard. They couldn't fetch their gadgets. And remember the borders were locked for a very long time. Those students could not come back. (Agnes- B).

> In March, before the university closed, we were told that we were going to have online classes. That was when we, as international students, me especially, felt the rift or the gap. Because we got an email that said all students need to evacuate their residences. We said okay, but we're international students. It's going to take some time to make arrangements. Then you are told that you have about three days to leave. Borders were already closed for some countries, so it put extra expenses on us to be able to leave the country. We had to pay extra money because flights were more expensive, and traveling was more expensive. I think the university could have given a little bit more time to international students or provided alternatives. To just say if you are struggling with travel arrangements, you can stay in the residence until you can leave. Because that's what I saw other universities do. (Jerome- A).

Online Learning

Another challenge stemming from the need to follow COVID-19 protocols was the move to online learning. Universities had to implement various strategies to save the academic year. While both universities initially faced challenges, University A improved faster than B.

> The 2020-year group had I think the worst experience in terms of online learning whereby everything was still being trialed and tested and chopped and changed. By 2021, the university had a certain level of stability in terms of their communication, and it was a bit easier for them to integrate us into some other learning software such as Blackboard and sometimes Microsoft Teams. They (lecturers) were also a bit more comfortable with what they were teaching us. (Toby- A).

> I think it being so traditional (University B), not engaging with technology, and not moving with the trends, affected it because everyone now was trying to figure out what was happening. Even the lecturers also had some challenges when they had to present slides, they didn't know how to share their screens, those kinds of things. It was the first time everyone utilized the platform. Because you've never seen an app or website like that, you're stressing about the content that you've been taught. And at the same time, you're stressing about how to utilize the app when you must write. We never had tutorials on how to utilize it or how to access the questions, we had to figure it out. (Nick- B).

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Bureaucratic Challenges

Although the bureaucracy associated with international students did not start with COVID-19, it worsened after the pandemic and the resultant lockdown at both universities. Students noted challenges associated with study visa applications at national and university levels. Although necessary, these processes could have been made easier with stronger institutional support. For example, students reported:

Registration is crazy as an international student. I feel like it's not fair, the fact that international students and non-international students are given the same time to complete their registration. Meanwhile, international students are required to present more documents, and some of these documents take long to get. So, sometimes you have a week to register, and you've applied for a study permit, which is probably going to come out in a month. And now you have to tell these people well in advance that you don't have a study permit, that you can't register. So, it's mainly registration for me, because it's the one thing that rocked me for these whole three years, even after COVID. You need a study permit, you require other documents to apply for a study permit like your police clearance, your doctor's form, we must take tests. All those things take time, they're not things you can apply for and then get tomorrow. (Bobby- A).

So, you must apply for a study permit via the Department of Home Affairs. And once you apply, Home Affairs takes a while to respond. And then that permit is required by the university for them to unblock you on their system so that you can register for that year. So, how do you do that? Because personally, this year, I submitted my permit renewal application in January. I still haven't received it till now (in May). And the international office threatened to deregister me because I hadn't submitted a valid permit. And I was like, how is that my fault? I submitted and Home Affairs is taking time. You, as the international office of the university, have to contact Home Affairs and say, okay, these are international students, they need to study, please assist them. However, they didn't do that. I had to start sending emails to Home Affairs, like, hey, I'm still waiting for my study permit, it's required by the university. I mean, I did everything I was required to do as an international student. (Aletta- B).

As an international student, you had to have your papers ready and valid. So, by the time you get your things together, already school has opened. Unlike a citizen who's just registered online and then it's done. For us, you had to go through these million processes. And even if you submit your documents, they take ages to reply. So yes, it affected most international students. Because back then (during the pandemic) you wouldn't go to the offices to renew your permits. It had to be online. And you know online, like I was saying, it's not always that somebody replies to immediately. So, everything was just passive and slow for us. By the time you get registered, it's been three weeks since they opened. You go to class, they're now on chapter four. (Nick- B).

Lack of Institutional Support

In addition to lacking institutional support when applying for visas or during registration, international students also felt that their universities did not provide adequate administrative, technical, and academic support. While the university offices, including the international office, were closed due to the pandemic, communication was said to be conducted online. This theme presents students' experiences of lack of institutional support in general, and then more specifically within the context of online learning. Students explained:

I remember one time I wanted a letter from the international office that stated that I was done with my extended program. I struggled to get that letter because they were not responding to my calls and emails. I even went straight to the international office. There was no one. (Mary- A).

When it comes to support, the university hasn't really communicated with international students in the sense of asking us what we want or about the challenges we are facing. They haven't reached out to us. So, it's a matter of whatever it is that they are doing, we just go along with it. But for them to cater to international students specifically, there hasn't been any specific support. I also didn't think that I had the right to enquire about anything. Because we are not well informed of what as international students, we can have access to or the rights we have. So, most things, if it doesn't come to us, we just keep quiet. (Sarah- B).

The work they do (the international office) is said to be centered around internationalizing the university rather than catering specifically to international students. Although they are said to assist with programs that are run by the School Representative Council International, there is always an emphasis that the programs must have an element of cultural integration that aligns with not only international students but with other local students. But I have not

seen them really assist besides during registration. That is when they are the most active. Other than that, in terms of social support et cetera et cetera, I have not seen it. (Jonathan- B).

Teaching and Learning

Online learning requires the use of technological tools such as computers, software, and the internet, which are normally provided by universities to enrolled students. However, the pandemic disrupted service provision and while universities provided some support, it was directed towards students in South Africa and local students. Although this benefitted some international students who remained in the country, those who returned home were sidelined.

> The university came up with a program that allowed students to collect laptops. While local students' laptops would be paid for by the government, international students like me had to pay. It was not advisable for me to take the laptop because, at the end of the day, it would add to my fees, which I could not pay. So, I mostly used my phone for online learning. (Noah- B).

> When COVID started and we had to go online, there was the provision of Global Protect and data for students. But international students weren't accommodated . Whenever I downloaded the Global Protect app, it wasn't working. I remember sending an email in April to ICT to let them know that Global Protect was not working for me because I was not in South Africa, and they only got back to me I think in October. And they could not help. I think there is a misconception that international students have enough money to be able to cater for themselves. And it's a very, very biased misconception. Because we already cough up enough as it is. So, it kind of made me realize how unfair it is in this world. I kind of felt excluded at that moment. (Charmaine- A).

> I was staying in Zimbabwe. So, I could not receive the data provided for students. I had to buy my own data, which was very expensive, and I ended up selecting which lectures to attend and which to miss. (Damaris-B)

> Online learning was hectic because I had challenges, especially when it came to resources. One would say, oh, you're coming from the city, which is Maseru (Lesotho), so everything is close. But that was not the case. I didn't have a laptop at that time, which was a challenge when it came to studying. I feel like somehow the university could have given us support. They did say they're going to give us… They're going to lend us laptops and there were some forms we had to fill in. But that never happened. It was just a promise. (Daniel- A).

Cultivating Intercultural Relations

This theme presents the challenges students faced in fostering social interactions which are central to an international educational experience. Students mentioned struggling with isolation, anxiety, and abandonment, regardless of COVID. While this was a commonly reported theme in the literature on the impact of COVID-19 in any population, for international students, these feelings were amplified by being in a foreign country.

> It was hard because I am used to physical interactions with people. I am a very outspoken and outgoing person. So now I had to shrink myself in and not interact as much. My international status for sure did make it challenging, because as an international student sometimes you do get lonely in terms of having to speak your home language. You are in a space where now you cannot even try and find someone else who comes from the same country as you. I do know that within my residence and even in my class when we were asked if there were international students, I was the only one. So, it does make some interactions a bit difficult because we do not relate in the same manner and do not get the same experiences whether financial or otherwise. (Edgar- A).

> I was not even able to socialize, even with the people that I was staying with, because of the language barrier. I speak English and I didn't understand any other local languages. So then to converse, to socialize with others, to ask help from others, it was just difficult because also as a person that comes from my culture, asking things from people, especially people you don't know personally is very difficult. (Hilda- B).

> However, in her second year, Hilda was paired with a local student "from whom she got help, which made things easier".

> When I got here, it was quite difficult because I was struggling with almost everything, financially, and mentally, I was not okay. I didn't know anyone at the residences. I didn't know how things work in the residence because I've always stayed at home with my mom doing everything. Now I'm all alone, and I'm expected to be an adult and look after myself. There's no one out here in South Africa with me. (Mary- A).

> To circumvent some of these challenges, students noted how others from the same countries supported each other:

If I speak to some of my friends in other universities, they have a little bit more support because they have formed organizations that provide support for each other. Whereas here, Namibian students are very dispersed. There's no unity per se and it's always difficult to get in touch with other Namibian students so that we can form our little community. (Jerome- A)

Discussion

This discussion is based on the themes presented above. Universities A and B approved business continuity plans in 2020 with varying levels of success (USAf, 2020). Although similar, the challenges identified by students illustrate some differences in institutions' levels of support . While some of the problems predate the pandemic (such as well-being issues including loneliness; bureaucratic visa processes; and lack of institutional support during registration), others were a result of it (having little time and support in vacating campus; and online learning complications). Combined, these challenges illustrate how internationalization efforts in South African HE are "determined by the realities of the multilayered asymmetrical context in which we are located" (Quinlan and Singh (2022, para. 7).

Although we agree with the DHET (2019, p. 21) that HDIs might generally have low levels of international relations and are not yet "benefiting from internationalization to the degree that they could", our findings add another dimension. Building on Chasi and Quinlan's (2021) observation that in HDIs, internationalization can be overshadowed by the competition for limited resources with other institutional priorities, we argue that to some extent, the challenges stem from how internationalization is conceptualized in an apolitical and generic way that does not engage with the country's contextual reality. Ubuntu and affiliation therefore provide a starting point in reframing internationalization in the global South, using South Africa as an example.

Ubuntu and Affiliation as A Capability

Including ideas of Ubuntu and affiliation in the conceptualization of internationalization would assist in thinking about practices foregrounding wellbeing concerns and interconnectedness between, and among universities and students without over-emphasizing economic benefits to HE institutions. As this study has shown, student narratives before and during the pandemic reveal limited integration in universities. This is also explored in literature from within, and beyond South Africa highlighting the bureaucracy and delays in the verification of qualifications by the South African Qualification Authority, accreditation recognition, and visa processing (Quinlan and Singh, 2022); and feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and isolation (Sehoole, 2015; Guo & Guo, 2017; Alharbi and Smith, 2018), which were exacerbated by the pandemic (Soong and Maheepala, 2023). Literature has also examined how friendships between international and host-national students are often segregated by nationality or other socio-demographic factors (Dunne, 2013; Sandel, 2014; Robinson, et al., 2019). In such instances, the "social segregation of international students threatens the availability of diverse ideas, knowledge, and resources" (Robinson, et al., 2019, p. 65). The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing university reactions placed international students in "a more isolated position abroad with less access to public resources due to monetary, informational, language, or cultural barriers" (Chen et al., 2020, p. 1). As part of the university, students should have been assisted in overcoming the challenges they faced. Because Ubuntu and affiliation emphasize mutual respect, compassion, and non-discrimination, national and institutional policy must reflect the need to provide care for those in a condition of extreme dependency (Nussbaum, 2002). This would direct universities on how to uphold their social and ethical responsibility to care for international students and protect their human rights as people prone to insecurity, vulnerability, and precarity due to being in a foreign country (Tran, et al., 2023).

Illustrating the importance of studying in a multicultural environment to expand their educational, social, and cultural horizons (Fakunle, 2021), students' narratives also reveal the value of creating friendships and achieving affiliative functionings. For example, they valued being part of a mutually supportive community and friendships with those from within and outside South Africa. However, these "meaningful forms of affiliation" were sometimes hindered by exclusionary practices (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 106), which the pandemic exacerbated. Although communities comprising students from the same country can provide support, it limits interaction between local and international students (Ratshilaya, 2022), to some extent, defeating one of the purposes of internationalization. The limited support by international offices in fostering affiliative and social relationships exemplifies how universities seem to focus on attracting international students but lack the strategies to ensure their well-being, integration, and cultural exchange once they are enrolled. In this way, universities miss out on possible intercultural exchanges that "may create spaces for critical reflection on personal involvement in education as well as collective actions, practices and policies that sustain as well as constrain education and educational development" (Lehtomäki et al., (2019, p. 219-220). Overlooking student wellbeing maintains a deficit approach where international students are positioned to earn an international degree, and universities benefit economically.

The study therefore highlights the limitations of the existing deficit approach to policy and underscores the need for a different approach to reimagine HE internationalization.

Reframing Higher Education Internationalization in South Africa

Although national policy should not be overly prescriptive and ought to allow room for institutional differentiation, it needs to provide context-specific guidelines equally informed by extrinsic and intrinsic national and HE values. Currently, the broad framing of internationalization provides little contextual understanding of the state of HE in South Africa. It is assumed that individual institutions will craft and implement contextually relevant policies that foster more sustainable and reciprocal international and institutional relations that adequately protect and support international students. However, institutional internationalization policies and practices are sometimes "ad hoc, with low strategic approach and limited impact" (Majee & Ress, 2020, p. 475). Thus, this study's findings can assist in reimagining internationalization directly and indirectly. The direct approach entails reconceptualizing internationalization policies at the national and institutional levels as a reciprocal process with instrumental and intrinsic benefits to universities and students. The indirect approach requires national policy directed towards redressing existing inequalities by availing institutional support for HDIs, enabling them to equally practice internationalization in a way that fosters development. We discuss these ideas in greater detail, starting with the latter.

South African universities still face inequalities, systematic exclusion, marginalization, and subtle forms of discrimination (Council on Higher Education, 2022, p. 12). It is in this already contested terrain that internationalization is practiced, and sometimes "resentment by South African hosts usually emanates from a sense of insecurity and entitlement, triggered by competition for resources and opportunities (Tomaselli, 2023, p. 2). Internationalization therefore intersects with and reinforces "longstanding patterns of racialized educational inequalities" (Majee & Ress, 2020, p. 464) which in turn, affects international students. Universities attract international students through marketing and recruiting, which require funding and national support. Increased marketization and prominence in rankings then favorably sell universities as international. This is a drawback for HDIs whose capacity development for internationalization is insufficiently addressed in the policy framework which assumes a level playing field for all universities (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022). Despite universities establishing international offices, their positioning within the institution, function, size, capacity, role, and funding models vary. This determines the extent of the services availed to students (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). As a HDI, University B was referred to as "*traditional*", with limited technology and know-how compared to University A, a HAI. Thus, to some degree, HAIs like University A were able to switch and adapt to online learning faster than HDIs. Given fewer resources, the latter were also disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022; Mtshweni, 2022). Such universities therefore require more targeted support for their daily functions, and to participate at par with other local and international institutions. While well-resourced and independent international offices can comprehensively facilitate internationalization, from initial marketing and student recruitment to graduation, the activities of smaller offices are limited. Although the lack of resources can explain the limited assistance provided to international students, especially at UB, students from UA also noted similar challenges. This points to factors other than the lack of resources, such as policy limitations. This leads us to the direct approach.

Foregrounding the instrumental value of internationalization in policy and practice can result in "a collection of fragmented and unrelated activities" driven by economic and political foundations without a corresponding increase in the importance of academic and social/cultural motivations (Knight & de Wit, 2018, p. 3). The limitations of a minimalistic understanding of internationalization are also noted by Fakunle, Kalinga, and Lewis (2022, para. 10) who through a UK case study, observe how "Western, Anglocentric conceptualizations of internationalization are rarely challenged". Thus, HE internationalization ought to go beyond a technical and procedural process to being a liberatory and rehumanizing project (Da Silva & Pareira, 2023). A direct approach to reframing internationalization therefore entails reconceptualizing it as a reciprocal process that emphasizes mutual benefits and wellbeing values, alongside economic imperatives for both universities and students.

Although peripheral in the international sense, South African universities are central in their regional contexts (Majee & Ress, 2020). This positions them to lead in policy and practice. For instance, HE internationalization should aim to create "value for the parties involved, including, for example, the development of knowledge and capacity; cultural enrichment; and the development of a global citizenry" (DHET, 2019, p. 23). In practice, this can be linked to Article 7(B) 1(d) of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training which underscores the need "to promote student and staff exchange programme[s] negotiated on a bilateral and multilateral basis by the sending and receiving universities for educational purposes and to promote cultural ties and engender commitment to the region" (p. 12). While current practices encourage student and staff exchange, as this study has shown, the advertised intercultural exchange is, in practice, limited. This is similarly highlighted in Tagliabue's (2022, p. 20) study which revealed "the often-neglected experiential aspect of international student life at South African universities" where students felt marginalized and denied a voice. While

international relationships are not always easily initiated and at times not desired by students (Robinson, et al., 2019), they need to have the option to choose them if they wish. If informed by Ubuntu and affiliation values and their emphasis on community and interconnectedness, internationalization processes would not be delegated to the international office alone. Because HE internationalization affects international and local students, national governments, and academic and non-academic staff, its practice requires connections between various actors at different national and institutional policy levels (Ge, 2022, p. 230). It would thus require wide stakeholder consultation, buy-in and collaboration to overcome some of the challenges experienced by international students, including those highlighted in this study. As Marginson (2023, p. 14) highlights, the lack of a relational structure is one weakness in Knight's definition of internationalization, and by extension, in the South African policy. Continuing with the example of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training, involving different stakeholders such as representatives of SADC member states, the DHET, South African HE, local and international student representatives, and those from key ministries such as the Department of Home Affairs would help to align South Africa's internationalization goals with those of other member states in contribute towards value creation . Drawing on such existing links to center wellbeing and foster mutual interconnectedness would help to reimagine policy and practice.

Conclusion

This paper examines the disjuncture between HE internationalization policy and practice using international students' experiences. It highlights the gaps where the potential of internationalization in fostering a knowledge of and experiences of different cultures, interconnectedness, and wellbeing is advertised but not fully realized. In practice, there are limited structures to support this, if at all. The paper has highlighted the need for more a contextual conceptualization and practice of internationalization. . This can be achieved by an awareness of the multiple realities of international students and their inclusion in teaching and non-teaching university activities. Understanding international students' HE experiences helps to identify conditions that support their flourishing and enables universities to contribute to human development. In this way, universities do not just adopt policies and respond to broader neo-liberal narratives but reshape them in support of more contextually inclusive forms of development and affiliations. This would contribute to the conceptualization of internationalization as a reciprocal relationship where international students bring money and their experiences, improve university rankings and practices of institutional inclusion while also getting an education and an intercultural experience that enables them to flourish and live a life that they have reason to value. Reframing internationalization as a reciprocal process fostering the expansion of all universities and international students' wellbeing would equip global-South countries to participate in and contribute to global HE on their own terms.

Acknowledgments

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Troubling Paradise: Exploring the Experiences of National Student Exchange Participants to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

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Abstract

This research seeks to contribute to an understudied aspect of student mobility, domestic study away within the U.S. national context. It presents a case study of one such program and focuses on the experiences of students from the continental U.S. who participated in an exchange to Hawai'i. Critical Qualitative Inquiry was utilized to foreground a decolonial critique of both student mobility practices and popular conceptualizations of Hawai'i. The findings indicate that participants imagine and experience Hawai'i as foreign and familiar as they negotiate their place here as both students and visitors. Not wanting to be thought of as tourists, participants emphasized the importance of being respectful while on exchange, and many demonstrated that by taking courses which focused specifically on Hawai'i. As a result of these classes, many participants were able to develop a more complicated and nuanced understanding of Hawai'i which troubled notions of this place as an idyllic paradise. The article concludes with suggestions for study away practitioners to support decolonial interventions in student mobility programming, particularly in Hawai'i.

Keywords: decoloniality, exchange, Hawai'i, student mobility, study away

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly being called upon to engage in comprehensive internationalization, which the American Council on Education (ACE) defines as "a strategic, coordinated framework that integrates policies, programs, initiatives, and individuals to make colleges and universities more globally oriented and internationally connected." Arguably the most visible component of the internationalization efforts that HEIs engage in is student mobility (White & Lee, 2020). Referred to as education abroad or, more commonly, study abroad, there is a wealth of research, programs, and organizations which focus on international student mobility. For example, there is a journal dedicated to education abroad research and scholarship (Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad) and thousands of study abroad programs for U.S. students to choose from (offered by colleges and universities as well as program providers, such as AIFS: American Institute for Foreign Study; API: Academic Programs International; CIEE: Council on International Educational Exchange; IES Abroad; IFSA: Institute for Study Abroad; ISA: International Studies Abroad; SIT: School for International Training). There are also numerous U.S. professional organizations for international educators (for example: AIEA: Association of International Education Administrators; CIES: Comparative & International Education Society;

Diversity Abroad; Forum on Education Abroad; IIE: Institute of International Education; NAFSA: Association of International Educators). In contrast, there is much less attention given to other types of student mobility.

This qualitative research explores an often overlooked and understudied aspect of student mobility programming - domestic study away within the U.S. national context. One such program, National Student Exchange (NSE), is highlighted, in particular the experiences of students from the continental U.S. who spent one or two semesters living and studying in Hawai'i. By consciously foregrounding the specificity of place - Hawai'i - the voices and lived experiences of individual student participants in this domestic study away program are contextualized. Critical Qualitative Inquiry is utilized to provide a decolonial critique of both student mobility practices and the manufactured tourist gaze in Hawai'i.

The findings explore the unique positionality of Hawai'i as both foreign and familiar and the ways in which participants negotiated their dual roles of students and visitors. The importance of being respectful was emphasized by participants, and many demonstrated this by consciously taking classes which focused specifically on Hawai'i. This allowed participants to have a deeper, more complex, and nuanced understanding of Hawai'i, troubling popular notions of this place as a multicultural paradise. Animated by a desire to disrupt the circuits of coloniality that are immanent to student mobility practices and to conceptualizations of Hawai'i, this article concludes with some thoughts and suggestions for practitioners.

Literature Review

Problematizing the Abroad/Domestic Dichotomy

As stated earlier, student mobility research and practice in the United States tend to focus primarily on study abroad or education abroad. By their very names, these ubiquitous terms privilege foreign or international destinations deemed "abroad." Abroad then functions as a type of shorthand and stand-in for what is deemed foreign, different, and other. The construction of abroad as distinct from the domestic presumes a coherence around nation states which may not be warranted (Anderson, 1983). Buckner & Stein (2019) write "that when 'international' is defined as 'abroad' or 'foreign,' there is an implicit assumption about identities assumed to be 'local' or 'national.'" (p. 12). The positioning of abroad as distinct from the domestic assumes a specious homogeneity in both places and spaces. Further, it essentializes people and cultures, both abroad and at home, and elides the fact that there can be substantial differences within a given country. The abroad/domestic dichotomy has also led to the privileging of international experiences over domestic ones in the field of student mobility. The exotification of abroad positions it as distinct from domestic experience (Doerr, 2016) and has led to a bias in the field which valorizes that which is deemed abroad over domestic locales, which are too often seen as somehow lesser. Miller (2015) affirms this, writing that student mobility tends to "privilege exotic destinations over transformative learning potential and underestimate the value of programs much closer to home" (p. 223).

The construction of abroad as fundamentally different from the domestic reifies a belief in the foreign other as distinct from the self and fails to recognize the possibilities for encountering and engaging with difference domestically. Is it, for example, necessary to travel to another country in order to engage with diverse communities? Twombly et al. (2012) argue that students can "make gains in cross-cultural awareness without crossing an international border" and raise the possibility that a "semester in Appalachia" (domestic) could conceivably be more productive for a student from Seattle, Washington than a semester in nearby Vancouver, Canada (international) (p. 10-11). When the student mobility field prioritizes and privileges international experiences over domestic ones, "we are limiting our students' opportunities to also learn locally and regionally" (Sobania, 2015b, p. 21). Given the diversity within the United States, it is certainly possible for students to experience difference, engage with diverse cultures, and learn valuable cross-cultural skills, even while staying within the nation's borders. Reilly & Senders (2009) question "how much longer it will be tenable to hold, as we have in the past, that the term 'abroad' represents a meaningful difference" (p. 262). Olson et al. (2007) argue that "the domestic and the global need to be in conversation with each other" (p. vii), and Sobania & Braskamp (2009) make the case for rethinking the terms study abroad and education abroad and instead adopting the language of study away. This larger umbrella term recognizes and affirms the value of both international and domestic student mobility programs and is "a more inclusive way to label all academic credit-earning off-campus study programs, whether they took place overseas or here in the United States" (Sobania, 2015a, p. 2).

Domestic study away programs have the potential to expose U.S. students to the "wide array of global cultures, religions, languages, and practices" within the United States and encourage cross-cultural engagement and development, which are so desperately needed in the nation today (Weinberg, 2015, p. xii-xiii). Perhaps we need to shift our energies in the field of student mobility away from the traditional focus on *where* students go (geographical differentiation) to *how* students go (the ways in which they engage with difference, regardless of their program location). In this vein, Buckner and Stein (2019) argue for internationalization as "a way to 'encounter difference differently,' that opens up possibilities for examining and re-examining biases, stereotypes, and hegemonic assumptions about ways of being and knowing" (p. 14), which can happen both abroad and domestically.

Recognizing the value for U.S. students of both international and national student mobility, this paper consciously employs the language of study away and presents the findings from a qualitative research study focusing on a domestic exchange undertaken by students from the continental U.S. who spent one or two semesters on exchange in Hawai'i. By focusing on domestic study away, an understudied topic, I seek to challenge the often-perceived notion that domestic student mobility programs are somehow lesser than international ones. I argue that domestic mobility, as study away, has the potential to widen our view of the student mobility field and to trouble the neat borders and demarcations between notions of home and away, self and other, local and foreign.

Contextualizing Study Away to Hawai'i

This research focuses on National Student Exchange (NSE), a domestic study away program which provides accessible, collegiate exchange opportunities for undergraduate students at over 175 member colleges and universities throughout the U.S., Canada, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Of all the campuses available within the NSE consortium, one is by far the most popular choice for students – the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), which I will be focusing on.

Prior to coming on exchange to UHM, the participants in this study, who were from the U.S. continent, knew little about Hawai'i beyond what they saw in the media – films (i.e.: Lilo and Stitch, Moana), television (i.e.: NCIS Hawaii), and increasingly, social media. People now have the opportunity, as Mostafanezhad and Norum (2018) state, "to know places intimately despite living very far away from them – or by having very little, if any, actual contact with them" (p. 31). Participants in my study, like most visitors, come to "know" Hawai'i before they ever set foot in the islands through popular culture, media representations, and what Urry (1990) refers to as the "tourist gaze." Hawai'i is always, already over-inscribed and marked by the tourist gaze (Aikau & Gonzalez, 2019; Bacchilega, 2006; Buck, 1993; Gonzalez, 2013; Lyons, 2006; Miller-Davenport, 2019; Skwiot, 2010; Sperb, 2022; Strain, 2003). This research explored how the manufactured tourist gaze circulated among NSE students and the ways in which they may have either reaffirmed or resisted this.

The tourist gaze is shored up by the state's tourism apparatus (Strain, 2003), and tourism continues to be the dominant industry in Hawai'i. The Hawai'i Tourism Authority (HTA), has cultivated and marketed Hawai'i to the world, and their brand marketing makes the bold statement that "Hawai'i is a destination paradise." Buck (1993) discusses the "production of paradise" as "an all-encompassing code" in Hawai'i that permeates all aspects of life in the islands (p. 179). However, the invocation of paradise, which celebrates the natural beauty of the islands and promotes a sense of pleasurable escape, occludes a darker history. As Cachola (2019) states, "beneath the facade of paradise are histories of upheaval, war, and displacement" (p 283). Trask (1999) reminds us that "(t)he myth of an unspoiled paradise somewhere in the Pacific is belied, of course, by the realities of nuclear poisoning, impoverishment, racism, and exploitation" (p. 51).

Yet the paradise trope is ever present in relation to Hawai'i and obscures the far more complicated and less photogenic reality of Hawai'i, one which includes the illegal overthrow and continued occupation of the Hawaiian Kingdom, continued disenfranchisement of Native Hawaiians, an exorbitant cost of living, high rates of homelessness, prolific environmental degradation, and an overreliance on tourism and the military, to name a few examples. Despite this, Hawai'i continues to be overdetermined, laden with signifying practices that imagine this place as a tropical, exotic, paradise with endless sunshine, beautiful beaches, breathtaking scenery, fruity tropical drinks, and hula girls who willingly offer up a lei (a garland, usually of flowers, that is typically worn around the neck and given to mark a greeting, celebration, love, or friendship). In addition to being constituted as a multiracial paradise (Sperb, 2022), Hawai'i has been marketed to the world as an exotic place (Stodola, 2022), and a stepping stone to Asia (Desmond, 1999). In this way Hawai'i is marked as a foreign place. Yet, as part of the United States, it is also seen as a familiar space. I argue that it is the positionality of Hawai'i as both foreign and familiar which draws so many visitors, including students, to our shores. Visitors to Hawai'i can get a taste of the exotic, the foreign, and the other, but do so within an overall context that is still safely familiar and (somewhat) American. Hawai'i, as the most racially diverse state in the U.S. (Hubbard, 2021), has been marketed "as an exotic, almost foreign destination" but one that is "safely under American control" (Pierce, 2004, p. 135-136). With its majority Asian population, Hawai'i is often seen a "gateway for Americans into the realm of the foreign" and "a space between the domestic and the global" (Miller-Davenport, 2019, p. 121).

While imagined and experienced as markedly different from the continent, Hawai'i is also situated (often uncomfortably and definitely problematically) within the United States, due to the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, annexation, and statehood. As the 50th state, Hawai'i boasts most of the familiar trappings of American culture, while at the same time being markedly different from the other 49. You do not need a passport or visa to travel to Hawai'i from the continental U.S. and once here, you can experience difference (the exotic, the foreign, the other). It is around this lure of both the foreign and the familiar that Hawai'i is often constructed, imagined, and experienced.

Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by decoloniality, which Mignolo & Walsh (2018) state "is not a new paradigm or mode of critical thought. It is a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis" (p. 5). In other words, decoloniality is a multi-faceted approach, working simultaneously through different circuits. While there have been calls to decolonize places and people, attention has also been focused on the need to decolonize minds (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986), methodologies (Smith, 2021), and practices (Stein et al., 2021). Decoloniality must be advanced on all of these fronts and in all aspects of life in order to resist coloniality (Mignolo, 2020). As such, it is an ongoing process that is never finished.

How might student mobility practices be informed by decoloniality? Study abroad, in particular has been rightly criticized as performing a kind of colonial (re)enactment (Sharpe, 2015; Woolf, 2021; Tekle, 2021; Adkin & Messerly, 2019; Arvanitakis & Ogden, 2021; Caton, 2011; Caton & Santos, 2009; Ogden, 2007; Zemach-Bersin, 2007; and Zemach-Bersin, 2009). For example, Arvanitakis and Ogden (2021) make the link between colonialism and study abroad participation explicit when they write:

> Like early colonials, education abroad students today yearn to be abroad, to travel to worlds different from their own, and to find excitement and see new wonders. Like children of the empire, education abroad students all too often arrive with a sense of entitlement as if the world is theirs for discovery and consumption (p. 43).

While Arvanitakis and Ogden are discussing study abroad, I argue that the colonial mindset they describe is also applicable to study away, particularly to Hawai'i. Despite idealistic underpinnings (i.e.: invocations of intercultural exchange, cross-cultural understanding, and global citizenship), student mobility programs often end up reinscribing oppressive relations between hosts and visitors and enabling problematic othering practices. We might also want to consider how study away could be part of a larger conversation around what Sheller (2018) calls mobility justice. She states that "(h)ow, when, and where people, goods, and capital move is, in all respects, a political question" (Sheller, 2018, p. xii). Who has the resources and opportunities to be voluntarily mobile for education and leisure? Who does not? Despite calls to diversify study abroad, U.S. participants continue to be quite homogeneous and not reflective of the larger population (Hamir & Gozik, 2018; Lorz et al., 2016; Salisbury et al., 2009; Salisbury et al., 2011; Woolf, 2021). The historical data from the Open Doors report on study abroad show that the largest number of participants identify as White (68.6% for 2023 data collected for academic year 2021-2022). The next largest group of participants identify as Hispanic/Latino (11.9%). Other groups are in the single digits in terms of percentages. While there is increased awareness of the need to expand access to study abroad, there has not been a corresponding or significant change in who participates, and students of color remain underrepresented.

Additionally, Chakravarty et al. (2020) remind us that despite the glorification of travel, it is also "historically associated with invasion, colonialism, annexure, slavery, human trafficking, and spread of infectious diseases" (p. 131). In the context of Hawai'i, for example, travelers brought with them introduced diseases which led to what Stannard (1990) calls the "great population collapse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" of Native Hawaiians (p. 336). Thinking about mobility and travel to Hawai'i means confronting the ongoing historical legacy of colonization (Trask, 1993) and settler colonialism (Fujikane, 2008; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013) in these islands. As Aikau and Gonzalez (2019) point out, there is a long and troubling history of "overstaying, ill-behaved, and overreaching 'visitors' to Hawai'i" whose presence has had disastrous implications for the land and the indigenous population of Native Hawaiians (p. 9). This project, then, argues for decolonial interventions on two fronts: 1) in relation to student mobility, and 2) with regard to thinking about Hawai'i. This research, at the intersection of both of these, is a call for us to consider how we might support and engage decoloniality, particularly with student mobility programming to Hawai'i.

Methodology

The methodological framework for this project was grounded in Critical Qualitative Inquiry and the work of scholars such as Agyepong (2019), Cannella (2015), Cannella and Lincoln (2015), Carspecken (2019), Denzin (2015), Kincheloe et al. (2012), Koro-Ljungberg and Cannella (2017), Leistyna (2012), Pasque and Perez (2015), Shields (2012), Steinberg (2012), Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017), White (2015), and Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019). Four key aspects of Critical Qualitative Inquiry guided this study: 1) an attention to issues of power and privilege, 2) a commitment to social justice and change, 3) an embrace of open-ended, fluid, and creative research, and 4) a recognition that critical inquiry is an ongoing practice. I endeavored to implement these guiding principles in my study in all stages of the research process, from designing the interview protocol, conducting the interviews, analyzing the data, interpreting the results, and writing up the findings.

The research questions for the project focused on the ways in which the specificity of place, namely Hawai'i, shaped the assumptions and expectations of participants and informed their perceptions and experiences while here. In-depth interviews were utilized as the research method, which Hesse-Biber (2017) describes as a "collaborative process" between

the researcher and the participants "based on mutual interest, respect, and compassion" (p. 122). The interviews were framed as an opportunity for participants to talk story about their exchange. Talk story, according to Steele (2012), "is a Creole English phrase referring to the casual exchange of narrative with a sense of mutuality" (p. 39). Talk story is also described as "a communal practice of sharing stories" (Rosa, 2014, p. 105) and one that is "intimately tied to local identity" in Hawai'i (Rosa, 2014, p. 5). The use of talk story aligned well with my methodology of Critical Qualitative Inquiry since it is grounded in a sense of reciprocity and relationship building and is particular to Hawai'i.

One way in which I utilized talk story was how I started each interview. I asked participants ahead of time to bring something to our talk story session that they felt signified their exchange experience to Hawai'i. Participants brought and shared various items (photos, mementos, souvenirs), as well as stories and memories with me. Beginning the interviews with the students taking the lead and sharing what they thought was important and meaningful provided an opportunity for them to actively participate in and direct our talk story conversations. Our resulting talk story journeys took us to new and often unexpected places, which is in keeping with the open-ended, fluid nature of Critical Qualitative Inquiry.

Additionally, utilizing talk story was a conscious choice and an effort to disrupt some of the inherent power differentials between interviewer and interviewee. Talk story is a collaborative meaning making venture and is "different to the formality of the interview process" (Cook, 2023, p. 6). Therefore, talk story was a way for me to also embody Critical Qualitative Inquiry's attention to power and privilege.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited from former National Student Exchange (NSE) students from the continental United States who completed an exchange to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa between Fall 2021 and Fall 2022. All participants signed an informed consent letter, acknowledging that their participation in this research was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty to them. To maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of those in the study, all participants were assigned a pseudonym. Thirty-nine former NSE participants were contacted about participating in this study, and fourteen agreed to take part in the research project. In-depth, semi-structured interviews, which included talk story, were conducted with these fourteen participants. They were done using Zoom since I was in Hawai'i and most of my participants were on the continent, and interviews ranged from forty-five to ninety minutes.

The majority of the participants in the study (85.7%) identified as female, which is keeping with the overall trend in NSE and student mobility generally, both of which are overrepresented by women. My sample was more diverse than the overall NSE population. For 2022, 60.4% of all NSE participants identified as White, but in this sample, six of the fourteen participants self-identified as White (42.8%). Two participants identified as Asian, one as Black, and one as Hispanic/Latino. Three participants identified with multiple categories, and one student chose not to self-identify. Participants were drawn from various host campuses across the continental United States (Boise State University, Iowa State University, Queens College CUNY, Rutgers School of Arts & Sciences, Stony Brook University, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and University of Minnesota Twin Cities) and were majoring in a variety of different fields (Art, Art History, Business, Communications, Event Management, Gender Studies, Marketing, Mathematics, Psychology, Public Health, Sociology, and Undecided).

Results

A number of themes emerged from the interview data with the NSE participants. The first theme affirmed that Hawai'i, as discussed in the literature review, was imagined and experienced by the participants as both foreign and familiar. The second theme examined how participants negotiated being students and visitors, while simultaneously not wanting to be viewed as tourists. This led to a discussion of the importance of being respectful student visitors to Hawai'i and the ways in which participants endeavored to embody this.

Hawai'i as Foreign and Familiar

As noted earlier, Hawai'i is particularly appealing as both foreign and familiar, and the interview data affirmed this. Located approximately 2,500 miles from the California coast, Hawai'i is geographically removed from the continental United States and often conceived of being abroad. This physical distance appealed to many of the participants in my study. For example, Sarah stated that she chose Hawai'i because of "the fact that it was off the mainland and like it was just like, it was just far away." Ashley said, "I just chose it, because also, like I didn't wanna be, like, close to home." Helen commented that she was "very excited to try, to like, go to new places. And it's funny, Hawai'i is the, like, farthest place I could have chosen."

In addition to physical distance, many of the participants specifically noted the cultural differences in Hawai'i, which marked it as a foreign place. For example, Hannah recalled that "when I started looking into exchange, I kind of was looking at campuses that would provide the biggest impact culturally, so I would kind of be able to get, like, a sense of a different culture." Similarly, Rebecca also chose to go to Hawai'i because "it was just, just a different culture." Madison commented "Hawai'i is so different, like, the culture here is so different and it's just, like, it's nothing like anywhere in the United States, anywhere else like on the mainland." Olivia also noted "how much, like, Hawaiian culture is different from just the mainland." Hannah stated that in Hawai'i there is "definitely more of a mix of all different cultures, races, ethnicities there, and here I feel like my home specifically is very kind of whitewashed, a lot of, like European descent. So that was very different to see a bunch of different cultures kind of colliding." John also remarked on "definitely a big culture difference" in Hawai'i and how "there's not as much diversity on the mainland as there is in Hawai'i for sure." Cai discussed how "the racial makeup, and the experience is just so different there, and you don't know until you actually go there." As Patricia said, "Yeah, there's so many differences… so many different views there and yeah, way different ways of, like, living, in day to day." Denise stated, "as for differences, there's so many!" In comparing where he was from and Hawai'i, John also reflected that "they're just so different."

This very difference contributed to Hawai'i being viewed as a foreign place by so many of the students from the continental U.S. When asked why she chose Hawai'i for her exchange, Ashley said, "I thought it would be really cool to be on an island and study abroad, like still in the U.S., but far enough where it was like it didn't feel like home. Like a very different atmosphere." Ashley framed her NSE experience as "study abroad" but also "still in the U.S." She further explained:

When people think traditionally, like, study abroad they are, like, oh, did you go to Europe or Spain or, you know, somewhere over there? And I was like, no, I went to Hawai'i. And they were like, oh, okay, that's cool. But like, it's still kind of abroad, because it's not like in your home place. Even though it is like, owned by the U.S., it's still kind of abroad.

In reflecting on her exchange to Hawai'i, Hannah stated, "I've been kind of on the East Coast my whole life, and that's kind of how, what I identify the U.S. as, is kind of just like life over here, so I kind of just wanted something that felt like I wasn't at home." In selecting UHM for her exchange, Hannah said she was "just kind of trying to get somewhere I would feel like I was not in the United States basically" and that while in Hawai'i, "I definitely felt like I was abroad."

John, who is Native Hawaiian and part of the Hawaiian diaspora, made the point that Hawai'i should feel abroad. He asserted: "It should feel abroad, because you are. You cannot go to Hawai'i and act like how you do back on the mainland, back home. You just can't go to Hawai'i and just think that you're home or where you were living, because it's not the same. It's just, not." Related to this sentiment that Hawai'i should feel abroad, Hannah stated:

I kind of put myself in the position where I was taking classes and talking to other students that really identified more with Hawai'i as a nation rather than as a state. So, I think I kind of positioned myself in the place where I could feel like I really was somewhere else, and not in the U.S.

Negotiating Being Both a Student and a Visitor

The data illustrated that NSE participants to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) negotiated two often contradictory roles - visitor, here primarily for pleasure, and student, here presumably to learn. On the one hand, NSE students shared many of the same motivations of tourist visitors to Hawai'i, specifically the pursuit of pleasure. Tourism has commodified Hawai'i as a "pleasure zone" (Desmond, 1999, p. 463), and the NSE students I interviewed sought out the sights and sites here and pursued pleasure at every turn. Participants regaled me with the different and pleasurable activities they engaged in, such as surfing, skydiving, swimming with sharks, hiking, zip lining, sailing, stand-up paddleboarding, camping, beaching, and traveling to other Hawaiian islands.

Yet, NSE participants were also positioned as students and differed from tourists in a number of ways. First, as students attending UHM, the participants in my study were here for more than just a ten-day vacation, instead spending a full semester and sometimes two semesters in Hawai'i. The longer length of their stay in the islands is one thing that distinguished NSE participants from tourists. Kristen made note of the length of time she spent in Hawai'i on exchange as different from a typical tourist trip. She said:

It's obviously one thing to kind of visit a place, but then being able to, I mean, I know that I didn't like live in Hawai'i for like years or anything, but I kind of got like the opportunity to, like, live there for a more extended period of time and, like, get into kind of like a routine. I think it's, I think that's kind of cool compared to just, like going somewhere for a week or something.

In addition to the length of time NSE participants spent in Hawai'i as compared to typical tourists, the academic nature of NSE also marked student visitors somewhat differently than tourists. NSE participants were in Hawai'i and attending UHM to learn and take classes towards fulfilling an academic degree. Madison made a distinction between her

previous vacation to Hawaiʻi as a tourist and her NSE exchange as a student. She said, "So when I went on vacation a long time ago, it was very like, you know, we did all the tourist stuff, and, like the normal, Hawaiʻi vacation." Madison contrasted this with her exchange, of which she said, "I don't know, I tried to do as much as I could that was just, like, not like a lot of touristy stuff."

Not Wanting to be Seen as a Tourist

While participants in the study negotiated the roles of both students and visitors, they also expressed an ambivalence about being viewed as tourists and sought to distance themselves from being seen as such. The word tourist often has negative connotations, and many people instead seek to describe themselves as travelers or visitors (Crawshaw & Urry, 1997). D'Eramo (2021) discusses "the disdain which every tourist feels toward tourists" and the "anxious concern" to differentiate and conceive of oneself instead as a "traveller" as "just one of the countless ways in which individuals perceive themselves as taking up a different position to the one they really occupy in social space" (p. 159). Indeed, several participants made a point to distinguish themselves from tourists and their accompanying touristy attitudes and behaviors.

For example, in relation to her exchange, Helen stated: "I didn't wanna come in and just seem like a tourist or something." Madison said, "I never wanted to come to this island and just be like all the other people who come here." Hannah said, "I didn't want people to feel like I was a tourist, kind of coming in and like taking things." As a result of his exchange to Hawaiʻi, John talked about how he and his friends decided that "they just hate being like, being a tourist" and "they just don't want to be a tourist anywhere" because so many tourists "don't understand there's a culture, don't understand, like to respect it" and how that was "embarrassing to watch almost." Hannah expressed the desire for her future travel to be more than just tourist trips. She stated:

> Even though I want to travel, I definitely want to dive into more, more cultures rather than just doing a trip with touristy things, and visit, you know, what you are supposed to do when you go to a place. So, I think I'm definitely more intrigued to see what different parts of the world, you know, have as their culture and what their backgrounds are, and to be able to experience it firsthand rather than doing touristy things.

NSE participants not wanting to be viewed as tourists in Hawaiʻi is understandable given recent sensational stories of these types of visitors behaving badly here, including a man urinating and making obscene gestures atop Mauna Kea, which is considered sacred (Dukelow, November 18, 2022), thirty-three swimmers filmed harassing a pod of dolphins (Alund, March 29, 2023), and a man urinating at Kīlauea, which is home to the goddess Pele (Martinez, January 8, 2023). During the interviews, students brought up examples of misbehaving tourists in Hawaiʻi and sought to distance themselves from them. For example, Ashley said of tourists: "They're either like touching the seals or they're like stressing out the animals, or they're like bringing non-safe sunscreen into the ocean and killing the coral and stuff like that, stepping on the coral, literally. I literally saw someone, like, stepping on the coral at Hanauma Bay." Madison recalled how "we went, like on a kayaking tour and everything out to the Mokes (Mokulua islands), and we, like, heard this story about how like a monk seal came up on shore and then this guy was like throwing rocks at it, so that was kind of crazy." Amy commented on when "going and swimming places you see people like, just like, walk on coral or like, walk in certain areas, and you're, like, is that right? Like can we do that, cause like you just see a lot of videos of, like tourists doing whatever they want, and it's, like, questionable."

These types of behaviors by tourists have led many in Hawaiʻi to rethink our overreliance on the tourist economy and the accompanying problems that accompany over-tourism (Bourlin, March 26, 2021; Lyte, May 11, 2021; Compton, June 23, 2021; Blair, July 15, 2021; Stinton, September 13, 2022; Wong, October 1, 2022; Dethlefsen, February 15, 2023). The Spring 2022 Hawaiʻi Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism (DBEDT) Resident Sentiment Survey found that 92% of residents agreed that "visitors need to be educated about protecting Hawaii's natural environment and cultural resources" and 67% agreed that their island is "being run for tourists at the expense of local people" (Yee, August 26, 2022). This survey also voiced serious concerns about the impact of tourism in Hawaiʻi, including issues of overcrowding, damage to the environment, higher prices/higher cost of living, traffic problems, and tourists' lack of respect for culture/tradition/land. Given these views of tourists and tourism, it is understandable that NSE participants did not want to be associated with or identified as tourists.

The Importance of Being Respectful Visitors to Hawaiʻi

Acknowledging that many tourists to Hawaiʻi engage in behaviors which demonstrate a lack of respect for the cultures, peoples, and places here, some NSE participants sought to distance themselves from that. John, the only Native Hawaiian in the study, talked at length about how many tourists and even other NSE students were not respectful and even became defensive about their behavior in Hawaiʻi. He said:

I realized how arrogant a lot of tourists and some NSE students were at first when they were called out by locals for behaving improperly or disrespectfully. They got defensive about it and made some comments about how this is America, and they did not think they were in the wrong because they thought Hawaiʻi was THEIR paradise instead of the home to an indigenous population. Personally, if I were in a place where there was a unique culture and I was behaving in a way that was wrong and got called out for it, I would be open and listen to why I was in the wrong and learn from it. Instead, a lot of tourists that come to Hawaiʻi are unfortunately so out of touch and uneducated about the history of our islands, and I hope people educate themselves before deciding to vacation or come to Hawaiʻi.

John spoke about the need for visitors to "educate themselves" and indeed, prior to coming to Hawaiʻi, most participants expressed knowing little beyond the tourist focused tropes of Hawaiʻi. For example, Amy admitted, "I knew, like, absolutely nothing besides it was a tropical vacation spot for people." Ashley stated, "I thought everyone just, like, wakes up, eats breakfast, goes surfing, like, hangs by the beach all day."

One way in which participants sought to "educate themselves" was to embrace their role as students and consciously take classes which focused on Hawaiʻi in order to learn about the places and peoples here. I was pleased that of the fourteen participants in this research study, twelve of them took at least one course which focused on Hawaiʻi, which is strongly recommended by the UHM NSE faculty coordinators. Seven of the fourteen students took an introductory Hawaiian studies course, which provides an overview of the unique aspects of the native point of view in Hawaiʻi and in the larger Pacific with regards to origins, language, religion, land, art, history, and modern issues. Participants also took courses focusing on indigenous politics, Hawaiian language, indigenous women's health, Polynesian surf culture, Pacific Island studies, and racism and ethnicity in Hawaiʻi.

Kristen took a Hawaiian studies course which she said, "kind of, like changed the way of like, how I would like, kind of just view or like move through my daily life." She went on to discuss how the class and what she learned made her realize:

It's like a privilege that I was able to kind of just be there just because of, like the issues that I was learning about in the class. It kind of just gave me a different perspective of Hawaiʻi and like, how to move throughout my day just trying to be like, just very respectful of the locals and the natives and everything.

Kristen further discussed how taking classes which focused on Hawaiʻi while on exchange at UHM made her reflect on "how I view my position, like in terms of maybe like Hawaiian society" and made her be "extra respectful and extra, like, cautious about things, just because I don't want to offend anyone."

Hannah explained why she took two Hawaiʻi-focused courses while on exchange to UHM. She said:

I really just wanted to immerse myself in the culture as much as I can, and I'm definitely glad I did, because I really think that I did that more than some of my peers did that were on exchange. But I yeah, I really just wanted to learn about where I was, and kind of pay respect to that. Because I knew that I, that's what I would have been doing if I was going somewhere else. So, I kind of figured just because I'm in the United States, why shouldn't I do that?

Amy, who took a Hawaiian studies course, shared a similar sentiment, saying:

I think it was only respectful to go into, like a persons, like place, like land and community, that it would be ignorant to like not try to learn the culture or understand the history. I think that's very important for any place you go to, so that motivated me. Plus, I knew nothing of it before besides it's like colonized land. And then, just, I think it was very educational. I knew no information before so just, it kind of enlightened me, and I like now just share information I learned about that with just anyone, if it, like, comes up in conversation.

Madison took four classes which focused on Hawaiʻi and expressed the following: "I knew that, you know, if I had just taken random classes I don't care about, like it wouldn't have done as much for me. But just being able to, like find ways, like to connect with the island and like the people here was, like, super important to me when coming here." Helen said:

I didn't wanna come in and just seem like a tourist or something and not learn anything about where I was. Because yeah, coming into it with not a lot of knowledge I wanted to learn, and I especially wanted to like, be the most respectful or right, not just like come in and just like live there and go to the beach every day and be like that was cool and then not come home and know anything about where I'd been.

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Urry (1990) details how travel and tourism are motivated by a desire for "pleasurable experiences" and "different scenes… which are out of the ordinary" (p. 1). The unique positionality of Hawaiʻi as simultaneously foreign and familiar provided student participants an opportunity to explore and experience both the difference and the pleasure which Urry

discusses. In many ways, difference is experienced <u>as</u> pleasure, as long as it is not too threatening. Hence, the familiarity of Hawai'i, as part of the United States, was in many ways an ideal space for students to experience and engage with difference.

All of the study's participants remarked on the differences of Hawai'i from the continental U.S. I was interested in the ways in which students, particularly those who took Hawai'i-focused courses, were able to move beyond just experiencing difference as pleasure and were able to engage with difference in more complicated and oftentimes uncomfortable ways. Many participants who took these courses were exposed to an alternative viewpoint besides the manufactured tourist gaze, which marks and markets Hawai'i as a multicultural paradise infused with aloha (which Pukui and Elbert, 1986, translate variously as "love," "affection," "compassion," "kindness," and "greeting.")

For example, from taking Hawai'i-focused courses, students reported learning about such things as militarism in the islands (Amy); the bombing of Bikini Atoll (Denise and John); the importance of names (Hannah); colonization (Rebecca); the water contamination by the military at Red Hill (Ashley); the centrality of and relationship to the land (Sarah, Helen, and Olivia); how Hawai'i illegally became a state (Hannah); the opposition to the 30 meter telescope on Mauna Kea (Kristen); the importance of the local and Hawaiian culture (Jessica); the fight for sovereignty (Cai); and the out-migration of Native Hawaiians to the continent for economic reasons (Rebecca). Arguably these students may not have learned about these things which subvert the tourist focused gaze on the islands if they had not taken the Hawai'i-focused classes. The knowledge participants gained as a result of these courses helped many of them contextualize and better understand the experiences they were having in Hawai'i and to consider the impact of visitors like themselves to the islands.

Hannah, who took three Hawai'i focused courses, stated, "I feel like a lot of people, especially for where I'm from, kind of think of Hawai'i as a vacation rather than a, you know, land with its own people. So, it's kind of telling the people from home what I was learning about and kind of the effects they have." Ashley spoke about how visitors need to consider how their actions matter and affect Hawai'i. She said, "There's a lot of stuff that I feel like people who are non-native don't know or don't seem to understand I guess about the island, about people who travel into it, about the way that, like the things that you do on the island matter and like, affect everyone, basically, which I think is, like, so important." Cai expressed the importance of understanding what your presence as a visitor in Hawai'i means, saying, "I truly do believe you cannot see and appreciate the beauty and the resilience and the care, the love of Hawai'i and its people, until you understand or like, begin to engage with the cost of you being here, and the cost of people being here."

These student statements above challenge the overwhelmingly individualistic focus so common in study away, which emphasizes the impact of the experience on the participants (what they gain, how they grow, what they learn, what they discover). Instead of this rampant individualism, students were able to shift ever so slightly to center not only themselves, but also the space and place they were in. Many were able to consider the effect and the impact of visitors and themselves on and in Hawai'i, gaining an appreciation of the values of place and community in Hawai'i, which are so important.

Those who took Hawai'i-focused courses especially grappled with reconciling the touristic depictions of Hawai'i as a multicultural paradise and pleasure destination with less pleasant realities of this place, including the lack of affordable housing, exorbitant cost of living, environmental degradation, and ongoing legacies of colonialism and settler colonialism. As Cai stated, "I think it's important to hear not just all the pretty stuff" about Hawai'i. By consciously taking Hawai'i-focused courses, many of the participants learned about and came to understand that Hawai'i is not just an idyllic paradise overflowing with sunshine, surf, sand, and smiles. Scratch the surface and there are certainly tensions and fissures, which most visitors to Hawai'i do not see or want to acknowledge.

This research demonstrated that study away students do have a desire to move beyond being just tourists and to engage with the particularity of place in more complicated and nuanced ways. Many students were able to critically examine the role of visitors, including themselves, to Hawai'i, and their impact on the islands. This self-awareness can be a crucial first step in resisting the individualistic and extractive focus of study away and challenging the colonial mindset inherent to most student mobility programming.

As a result of this research and as a scholar/practitioner in the field of global education, I offer up the following suggestions to encourage student mobility programming, particularly to Hawai'i, to be more reciprocal, responsible, and ultimately, decolonial.

Critically examine how we are marketing study away programs to attract student participants

There is increased awareness and concern over how study away and especially study abroad programs are marketed and promoted to students (Adkin & Messerly, 2019; Tekle, 2021; Zemach-Bersin, 2007; Zemach-Bersin, 2009). Consumerism has suffused both higher education and study away programming, and both compete for ever increasing numbers of students. The study away marketplace is a crowded one, with programs vying for the attention of students and their accompanying fee-paying dollars. This has led to ever more sophisticated advertising and marketing for student

mobility programs, which too often tend to "endorse attitudes of consumerism, entitlement, privilege, narcissism, and global and cultural ignorance" (Zemach-Bersin, 2009, p. 303).

In promoting student mobility to Hawai'i there is an added layer of troubling representational practices to contend with. Problematic tourist tropes which reaffirm Hawai'i as a multicultural, tropical paradise abound. For example, the NSE consortium uses the actual language of paradise to market "spotlight destinations," including Hawai'i. The NSE consortium features a webpage entitled "Beaches. Paradise Found" and which has the tagline "Classes. Sand. Rinse. Repeat." Additionally, a NSE consortium promotional poster entitled "The Islands are Calling" features Hawai'i and states:

> NSE's island universities deliver a multicultural global experience in a tropical learning environment. Let your exchange adventure begin where beaches are endless and palm trees grow. Pack your sunscreen and contact your NSE coordinator today!

While these marketing materials may seem harmless, the language of "paradise," "multicultural," "tropical," "beaches," and "palm trees" is in fact reaffirming and reinscribing stereotypical tropes and touristic fantasies of what beaches and islands, and by extension, Hawai'i, can offer. It is important to remember that representational practices matter and are never innocent. As Hall (1997) tells us, "we give things meaning by how we represent them" (p. 3).

Scholars and practitioners in the field of student mobility could benefit from asking ourselves questions which may be difficult, such as: How are we marketing our programs? What messages are we conveying? How are we conditioning the expectations and experiences of students? Might there be other ways that we can market our study away programs which do not reify problematic tropes and othering practices?

In thinking about NSE to UH Mānoa and Hawai'i, for example, we can invoke more than just palm trees, beaches, sand, sun, surf, aloha, and paradise. For example, since NSE is an academic program, we could highlight the course offerings at UHM, many of which are unique and offered nowhere else in the world. We could also focus on UHM's stated goal of becoming a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning and what this might mean for student visitors who come here.

Encourage and support students in engaging with local places and peoples

Kinginger (2010) says that "American students abroad are often placed in programs that do not foreground the importance of engagement in local communities" (p. 219). While Kinginger is speaking about study abroad, the same can be said about study away programs like NSE to Hawai'i. The nature of student mobility programming has changed from that of the past, in part due to technology and the widespread ease of communication. The ubiquity of mobile phones and the corresponding attachment to them, especially among young people, means that they can always be connected to friends and family from back home even while studying away. Participants can, as Kinginger (2010) asserts, "choose to screen out their local environment, and the people in it, in favor of extensive interactions through an electronic umbilical cord, with people they already know" (p. 223). This works to discourage local engagement with people and place.

Additionally, too often students who participate in study away programs, instead of engaging with the local place and local community, choose to interact primarily with other participants in the program, thereby creating a safe bubble for themselves (Citron, 2002; Craik, 1997; Engle & Engle, 2002). If participants never fully disconnect from their friends and family back home and surround themselves and interact primarily with students also on exchange, how does this contribute to cross-cultural engagement and mutual understanding, which are the stated goals of study away? If the point of these programs is for participants to experience and engage with a different campus, different geographical location, different culture, and people different from themselves, how are we ensuring this happens? It is not guaranteed that cultural learning will happen, "particularly if students are confined to their own cultural perspectives in making sense of differences" (Talburt & Stewart, 1999, p. 173). Thus, it is not surprising that so many study away participants are "experiencing the local culture through sunglasses, camera viewfinders, and bus windows" (Arvanitakis & Ogden, 2021, p. 47).

How can we work against this tendency in study away? How might we encourage students to get out of their bubbles and safe spaces and to actively engage with difference, to interact with local communities and local peoples? Consciously centering the places and peoples in the host locations students travel to is one way to disrupt the consumer focused and individualistic tendencies in study away. Situating participants in relation to places and their peoples means encouraging, supporting, and guiding students to do more than merely occupy a place, in this case, Hawai'i. Johnson (2021) argues that it is the responsibility of student mobility professionals "to ensure that students engage with place, people, and environment responsibly and intellectually, with a sense of history and an eye to the future" (p. 206). Ideally, study away practitioners would consciously build into their programs both formal and informal opportunities for participants to interact with, learn about, and learn from local places and peoples they visit. They could also provide opportunities for participants to decenter themselves and give back to the local peoples and communities. I argue there needs to be more of a sense of reciprocity in study away, rather than the one-sided, extractive practices which undergird most student mobility programming.

Consider kuleana

Pukui and Elbert (1986) translate kuleana as "right," "privilege," "concern," and "responsibility" (p. 179), and this Native Hawaiian concept is one that I argue could be applied to student mobility practices writ large. As Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (2013) says, "kuleana can be a concept that drives learning when posed as a question (what is my kuleana?) and when the learner is open to deep self-reflection" (p. 154). Both study away participants and practitioners would benefit from considering kuleana. What is the kuleana of mobile students to the places and peoples they visit? What is the kuleana of professionals like me working in the field?

In the context of this research project, there is the added layer of thinking about one's kuleana in and to Hawaiʻi. Kajihiro (2021) reminds us that one's kuleana varies, depending on one's position – "Kānaka ʻŌiwi, local residents or various differently situated visitors" (p. 148). While our kuleana might not be the same, all of us, if we are in Hawaiʻi, have kuleana to this place and to the indigenous people here. As Fujikane (2021), says, "(w)e need to help shoulder the kaumaha (weight, burden, grief) of settler colonialism by doing the difficult work that Indigenous people do against and beyond the settler state" (p. 15). Kajihiro and Fujikane both write and situate themselves as Asian settlers in Hawaiʻi and ask other settlers to think about their kuleana to Hawaiʻi and the "Kānaka ʻŌiwi people.

Keeping this in mind, what is the kuleana of NSE students from the continent who come to Hawaiʻi on exchange? What is my kuleana to the NSE students who exchange to UHM and as a scholar/practitioner in the field of student mobility? Finally, what is my kuleana as a local, hapa (person of mixed ancestry, according to Pukui and Elbert, 1986) settler in Hawaiʻi? These various situated identities of mine do not always or necessarily align. For example, in my role as a NSE faculty, part of my job is to market UHM and Hawaiʻi to recruit more students. Yet as a local settler committed to decoloniality, I wonder whether Hawaiʻi needs ever more visitors, even if they are students.

Perhaps we need to rethink the dominant messaging in the field of student mobility that more is necessarily better. Instead of focusing on how many students come to UHM, we could look at how these students do their exchange and how we might encourage decolonial engagement. The reality is that the NSE program is not going to stop sending students to Hawaiʻi, and in fact the UHM program is being called on to increase the numbers of students who come to our campus. Similarly, tourists are going to keep arriving by the planeload to Hawaiʻi. So where does that leave us? This research has demonstrated that many student visitors to Hawaiʻi do have a desire to be more than mere tourists and do want to consciously engage with place. The question is how to do this in the face of pervasive representations of Hawaiʻi as a multicultural tourist paradise, full of friendly locals and natives. In addition to these popular and troubling narratives about Hawaiʻi, students must also contend with the dominant messaging in study away, which encourages individualistic, consumeristic, and extractive practices. The combination of both of these often makes it difficult for students to negotiate a different relationship with Hawaiʻi without some sort of intervention.

It is all too easy to be lulled by tourist tropes about Hawaiʻi and by problematic conceptualizations of study away. To disrupt the pull of these forces requires concerted energy and effort, both on the part of the students and on the part of practitioners. How might we make the sort of decolonial interventions which would trouble both the foundational narratives of study away and the touristic tropes of Hawaiʻi? It is here that I think kuleana can be instructive. By invoking kuleana, we can consider how we can contribute to making both study away programming and Hawaiʻi more pono (translated by Pukui and Elbert, 1986 as "goodness," "uprightness," as well as that which is "fitting," "proper," "fair," and "just"). This, in turn, relates back to one of the guiding principles of Critical Qualitative Inquiry, a commitment to social justice.

Reframe study away as a huakaʻi

One way we might reimagine student mobility, in particular to Hawaiʻi, is through the Native Hawaiian concept of huakaʻi, which Kajihiro (2021) defines as "a journey with purpose, entailing relationships and mutual responsibilities between traveller and resident" (p. 145-146). Further, Aikau and Gonzalez (2019) write:

> A huakaʻi is not an empty itinerary or a list of must-dos, but rather a journey defined by intention. A huakaʻi
> is not meant to be an easy walk in the park or a leisurely stroll along the beach. It is demanding. It demands
> that your journey be deliberate and purposeful, and that you remain open to what you might learn about a
> place and yourself (Aikau & Gonzalez, 2019, p. 246).

A huakaʻi, as "deliberate," "purposeful," and "demanding," is perhaps what student mobility programs should aspire to. Tourist sojourns are designed to maximize the ease and pleasure of the visitor. In the same way, study away programs tend to be constructed to cater to the desires of the student participants and to make their journeys as smooth as possible. With the competitive study away marketplace and the increasing commodification of these experiences, professionals involved in programming go to great lengths to make the journeys of mobile students as stress-free, painless, and pleasurable as possible. Yet is this necessarily and ultimately a good thing? Grünzweig and Rinehart (2002) argue that this trend to make study away programs pleasant and stress-free for students in effect reduces "the potential for learning and growth that

derives from direct interaction with the foreign environment and experiencing the disequilibrium induced by that experience" (Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2002, p. 17). They contend that it is through the negotiation of difference and the resulting "disequilibrium" that students truly grow, learn, and develop in meaningful ways. Perhaps we can rethink study away as an opportunity for a huakaʻi, which is attentive to kuleana and which encourages deeper engagement and learning, both with people and place.

Trustworthiness, Contributions, and Limitations

In this section I address issues of trustworthiness, as well as the contributions and limitations of this research study. In terms of trustworthiness, being explicit about one's own positionality in relation to the research can be "a mechanism to make us aware of our own assumptions and biases" and "an important step toward improving the rigor and trustworthiness of our qualitative work" (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, p. 10-11). Keeping this in mind, I attempted to be ever cognizant of my own positionality in relation to the participants and in the context of Hawaiʻi and to engage in critical reflexivity in order to increase the trustworthiness and validity of this study.

Glesne (2016) argues that "thick description allows readers to understand the basis for the claims you make" and can lead to increased trustworthiness (p. 153). In my results section, I sought to use "thick description" and the participants' own voices to bolster the trustworthiness of the findings. Additionally, Glesne says that "(t)ime observing, participating, conversing, and building sound relationships all contribute to data that are more trustworthy" (Glesne, 2016, p. 154). As stated in the methodology section, I took the time to talk story with my participants, building rapport and listening deeply to what they each had to say. I believe this also helped increase the validity and trustworthiness of the research.

This study makes several contributions to the field of global education, particularly as it relates to student mobility. By focusing on domestic exchanges, an understudied segment of the student mobility field, this research underscores the need for a broader and more expansive understanding of how, why, and where students travel for educational purposes. Embracing the language of study away as opposed to study abroad widens our understanding of student mobility and works to challenge the foreign/domestic and global/local dichotomies which are rife in the field, and which tend to privilege international over domestic travel. An important contribution to the literature is my emphasis on place, in particular, Hawaiʻi. By consciously centering place, I sought to disrupt the individualistic and extractive tendencies in the field which prioritize participants over place. Situating this study in Hawaiʻi also provided a unique lens through which to view student mobility. Students are an undertheorized and growing segment of visitors to Hawaiʻi, and this research adds to our understanding of what their presence here means. My hope is that this project will add to the scholarship on Critical Qualitative Inquiry, study away, and decoloniality.

Despite the contributions of this study, there are several limitations. The findings of this research are limited to my particular sample, the time the data was collected, and the context of NSE in Hawaiʻi. The findings, therefore, are not meant to be generalizable. Instead, this study, bounded though it may be, offers an additional voice to the conversations around what it means to be a mobile student in the world today. Despite these limitations, I believe this research raises important questions and issues for global education and student mobility, which are particularly urgent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as the field continues to grapple with its colonial tendencies and works to redefine its role and relevance moving forward.

Conclusion

This research project highlighted data collected from semi-structured interviews with former NSE participants from the continental U.S. who completed an exchange to UHM and Hawaiʻi between Fall 2021 and Fall 2022. In addition to exploring the lived experiences of individual NSE participants, this study also sought to foreground and consciously center place - Hawaiʻi - in an effort to disrupt the circuits of coloniality which are evident both in student mobility practices and in Hawaiʻi. The findings indicate that participants imagined and experienced Hawaiʻi as both foreign and familiar while they negotiated their roles as students and visitors. Seeking to distance themselves from tourists, NSE participants emphasized the importance of behaving in responsible and respectful ways in Hawaiʻi. In particular, those students who took courses which focused on Hawaiʻi were able to trouble the narrative of this place as a multicultural paradise and to develop more nuanced and complicated understandings of Hawaiʻi. They were also able to resist the tourist gaze in Hawaiʻi and consider the impact of visitors (including themselves) on the islands, which I argue can be a sort of decolonial intervention, which is sorely needed both in the field of student mobility and in Hawaiʻi. As Aikau & Gonzalez (2019) remind us, "(u)nless we actively work to dismantle this infrastructure and refuse the tourist imaginary, we will (wittingly or unwittingly) contribute to reproducing the occupation and colonization of these places, people, and practices" (p. 3).

This research has demonstrated that I, as a study away scholar and practitioner, and as a settler, have more work to do to support decoloniality, both in the student mobility field and in Hawaiʻi. While I am asking study away participants and the student mobility field to change, it is clear that I also must change. As McArthur (2022) states,

> For genuine transformative change to occur, which is the core purpose of decolonialisation, we all need to change, and this includes western scholars. Indigenous thought tells us this. Critical theory tells us this. This is the ultimate plateau on which we must join as fellow travellers. How do we know if we have reached this place? We know because we see changes in ourselves, in our practices, our relationships – and our most treasured beliefs – and not simply see change as something that happens to others (p. 1690).

Applying a critical gaze back at myself and what I do is necessary, even if "the work of unlearning colonial desires and practices, and learning to be and relate differently, is often difficult, slow, uncomfortable, unpredictable, and even painful" (Stein et al., 2021, p. 4). Yet this is my kuleana, and as Tengan (2005) says, "kuleana also entails the responsibility and willingness to be unsettled ourselves" (p. 253).

As a result of this research, I hope to encourage student participants, the study away field, and myself to engage in practices that are less individualistic, transactional, and extractive and instead more respectful, responsible, and reciprocal. I view this project, and the suggestions made as an opening, a way to begin a much-needed conversation about how we can contribute to decolonization efforts, both in the field of student mobility and in Hawaiʻi.

Mahalo nui loa (thank you very much).

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Global South Sisterhood in a Virtual Exchange: A Critical Autoethnography

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Abstract

We are two women international students from the Global South, situated in Turkey and the U.S. respectively. In this article, we utilize autoethnography to critically reflect on our intellectual, emotional, linguistic, and cultural growth during a virtual exchange program that we participated in during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this co-exploration, we re-reflect on and analyze our experiences as participants in a COIL program to consider, more broadly, the evolution and trajectory of virtual mobility in an uneven knowledge landscape. Collectively, we improved our English language skills through our exchange, while simultaneously resisting a deficit orientation of English language learning. We also expanded our epistemic and discursive horizons, learning about the vibrant and thriving cultural traditions, thought traditions, and religious/spiritual traditions of Turkmenistan and India, our home countries. Through technologies such as Zoom and WhatsApp, we discovered each other's personalities and backgrounds, centering sisterhood along the way. We framed our analysis through a critical internationalization perspective, delineating the challenges and limitations of virtual exchanges and arguing for equitable, transformative exchanges that honor southern epistemologies.

Introduction

I, Kavya (pseudonym) and my co-author, Züleyha (pseudonym), are two international women graduate students from Asia. I am an international student in the United States, originally from India. Züleyha is an international student in Turkey, originally from Turkmenistan. Our story dramatizes the opportunities and challenges to international higher education that came to the fore because of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regards to virtual exchange (VE) evolving as a viable alternative to traditional education abroad. Prior to the pandemic, I was scheduled to participate in a study abroad program in 2022. I, along with my classmates, who were graduate and doctoral students of higher education and community college leadership at a large public university in the U.S., were slated to travel to Turkey. However, COVID-19 was wreaking havoc in the U.S. and globally, with travel restrictions and border closures implemented to curb the spread of the virus. These restrictions made it difficult or impossible for students to travel to their intended study abroad destinations, leading to the suspensions and cancellations of many study abroad programs (Medel, 2023), including mine.

The cancellation of educational abroad trips brought to the fore entrenched issues with short term study abroad programs and challenged educators to reconsider the 'abroad' in 'study abroad' (Gaitanidis, 2020).

The pandemic encouraged practitioners and experts in the field of internationalization to connect students across borders during a time of mass disconnection (Sebastian & Souza, 2022). Colleges and universities in the U.S. witnessed increased attention to creating virtual partnerships with other institutions, resulting in 'virtual' and 'digital' gaining momentum in internationalization (Erdei et al., 2023; Goodman & Martel, 2022). Many instructors transitioned traditional teaching methods into virtual educational environments (Mospan, 2023), repurposing unused funds from canceled education abroad programs toward financing VE initiatives (Fischer & Cossey, 2021). VE is defined as "activities involv[ing] some form of exchange across geographic borders where knowledge and ideas are internationally mobile with the support of technologies, rather than the students themselves" (Mittelmeier et al., 2021, p. 269). My professor was amongst these forward-thinking educators, reconfiguring her canceled study abroad program as a VE. She redesigned her program as a special topics course, embedded within which was a collaborative online international learning (COIL) component (Fischer, 2022). This was done in partnership with a professor from a university in Turkey, who was also a member of the COIL network. Our professor's aim was for us to experience a VE firsthand, know its advantages and disadvantages, and gain cross-cultural communication skills, cultural empathy, and awareness (Fischer, 2022).

I was disappointed at the missed opportunity of visiting Turkey but was grateful for VE emerging as a silver lining. While students of canceled study abroad programs during the pandemic missed out on embodied dimensions of overseas experiences (Di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020), many students in online exchanges gained a deeper understanding or appreciation of the essence of study abroad (Barkin, 2021). VEs are founded on values such as reciprocity and mutual learning, offering a pedagogical platform to engage with multiple perspectives on particular issues or disciplinary areas (Helm & Beaven, 2020). VE is an effective alternative to traditional study abroad, allowing students to 'study abroad' without going abroad (Krishnan et al., 2021). VEs can also expose reductionist perceptions of 'Other' cultures and humanize that 'Other' through community-generated dialogue (Dorroll & Dorroll, 2020; Galina, 2020), reducing our anxieties and misconceptions about 'the Other' (Lee et al., 2022). VE, because it combines the benefits of digitalization and internationalization (Oggel et al., 2022), offers students means to develop intercultural competencies regardless of travel constraints, financial impediments, or disease outbreaks (King & Bochenek, 2021). This was also the case with me, as I was paired with Züleyha, an undergraduate international Turkmen student, during our COIL exchange.

Over the course of a spring semester, Züleyha and I communicated via emails and WhatsApp text and voice messages. We 'met' via Zoom, documenting our learnings in Apple Notes and Google Docs. As we navigated this digital arena, touching base regularly through video conferencing and multiplatform messaging apps, we journaled how our experience shaped us individually and collectively during a period of global uncertainty. Additionally, we submitted formal assignments to Blackboard and organized our learnings via Padlet's virtual bulletin boards, gathering ample sources of qualitative data. Two years after the completion of our COIL program, Züleyha and I reconnected to embark on an autoethnographic exploration and share our learnings with academe. Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). We opted for autoethnography because it serves as particularly useful for international students to tease out their multidimensional identity constructions beyond the formal curriculum (Xu, 2023), including identity and agency formation and the acquisition of knowledge and culture (Lin et al., 2022). Autoethnography also considers intersecting identities and honors international students as multifaceted individuals (Shokirova et al., 2022).

We structured this article as follows: First, we lay out our positionalities and the purpose of this study. Next, we provide an overview of the literature on VE, underscoring the potential for VEs—particularly COIL programs—to broaden perspectives, promote mutual understanding, and cultivate a sense of global citizenship among students. By reviewing the existing body of research on the evolution of VE, we contextualize our experiences within its broader landscape. In the third section, we offer a theoretical framework, reflecting on VE through a critical lens. Instead of perpetuating unequal power dynamics in international collaborations, critical VE (CVE) seeks to foster fair, co-creative, and meaningful partnerships and collaborations. As Global South students, we make a conscious decision to frame our VE journey through a critical lens, to underscore respect, reciprocity, and shared decision-making among international partners and emphasize the human[izing] aspects of internationalization. Fourth, we present our methodology, detailing how we used autoethnography to document and critically reflect on our exchange. As data, we utilized Zoom and WhatsApp conversations, personal journal reflections, and formal assignments submitted as course requirements. In the final sections, we list our findings, followed by limitations and implications for future research and practice.

Positionality and Purpose

While generalized, top-down analyses of trends such as internationalization [at home] can offer efficiency and structure, they may overlook the richness of individual experiences or fail to capture the nuances present in diverse contexts.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the discourse on the effectiveness of VE in fostering cross-cultural understanding, from a student-oriented and Global South-oriented perspective. International students are homogenized in higher education systems and processes (Gargano, 2009) and often presented as monolithic, flattening the intersections of our multiplicitous and intersectional identities (Hutcheson, 2020). The perspectives of Global South women are particularly invisible in the discourse on international students, considering the overlapping effects of structural racism, sexism, and imperialism within systems of global higher education (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). The pandemic revealed the need to particularize and humanize the international student experience by recentering the diverse and intimate stories of students, particularly from the Global South (Bali et al., 2021). "In the micro-narratives of everyday teaching and learning, higher education is refracted through multiple lenses of experience and encounter" (Saltmarsh, 2011, p. 115). Our aim is to elevate the significance of Global South stories within the broader narrative of internationalization [at home] and contribute a more grounded and nuanced perspective to virtual migrancy in higher education.

Internationalization requires critical cultural awareness and understanding of ourselves, our positionalities, and our worldviews and values (Wimpenny et al., 2022a). Positionality refers to the researcher's awareness and critical consideration of their own social, cultural, and personal context, including markers of relational privilege, such as race and class, which can influence perspectives and impact the research process (Maher & Tetreault, 1993). By laying out our positionality, Züleyha and I seek to make transparent the loci of our enunciation and acknowledge the inherently value-laden, perspectival nature of knowledge. Both Züleyha and I identify as middle-class cis women in our twenties and thirties respectively. Züleyha is an undergraduate student, and I am a doctoral candidate. We are Asian: I am South Asian (Indian) and Züleyha is Central Asian (Turkmen). We are international students: I am pursuing higher education in the U.S. and Züleyha in Turkey. We both have backgrounds in English: While I hold undergraduate and graduate degrees in English literature and creative writing, Züleyha is pursuing a baccalaureate in English. We are multilingual: I speak English, Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu. Züleyha speaks Turkmen, Turkish, Russian, English, and German. I identify as a Savarna Hindu and Züleyha a Muslim. While I am relatively fluent in English, Züleyha is an English learner.

Literature Review

Definitions of VE

With the rise of technological developments such as the Internet and social media, virtual mobility increasingly entered internationalization (Deardorff et al., 2012), with 'online intercultural exchange,' 'virtual mobility,' 'virtual exchange,' and 'collaborative online international learning' emerging as part of internationalization at home (de Wit, 2016). There can be confusion surrounding what VEs mean, as VE is often used synonymously with telecollaboration, etandem learning, and other virtual knowledge exchanges. O'Dowd (2020) comprehensively defined VE as:

> a pedagogical approach that involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programs and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. (p. 478)

While virtual mobility broadly encompasses virtual stay abroad, virtual campus models, joint curricular designs, virtual seminars, virtual projects, etc., VE is a specific type of virtual mobility (Novoselova, 2023). VE "promotes partnered teaching on a virtual platform, combining students and faculty from "away" and home campuses in both synchronous streaming classroom experiences and virtual group or partnered projects" (Di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020, p. 336).

Simply put, a VE involves two willing professors connected by technology who identify a mutually beneficial assignment in a structured educational program, even if their students hail from separate academic disciplines (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). While VE is often showcased as a new approach to learning and teaching across cultures, educators have used such exchanges since the 1990s to bring classes into contact with geographically distant partner classes to foster authentic communication, meaningful collaboration, and a first-hand experience of engaging and learning with diverse cultural partners (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). One of the earliest such initiatives to pioneer global linkages was iEARN, a network originating from the New York/Moscow Schools Telecommunications Project (NYS-MSTP). What is 'new' about VEs is its exponential growth in the past five years and the convergence of a community of scholars, practitioners, and funders who now place different VE models under the umbrella term of VE (Guth, 2020). VEs are increasingly adopting diverse formats and cutting across different knowledge fields (Barbosa & Ferreira-Lopes, 2023), emphasizing content, interaction, and dialogue that is primarily learner-led (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). In recent years, various approaches have evolved in different contexts and areas of education, with diverse organizational structures and pedagogical objectives (O'Dowd, 2018), often to complement rather than replace student mobility (O'Dowd, 2023).

Benefits of VE

The new demands of our contemporary era call for lifelong learners, multiliterate world citizens who can think critically and work collaboratively in multicultural and multilingual contexts (Antoniadou, 2011). VEs facilitate emotional intelligence (Salomão & da Silva, 2023) and intercultural learning by enabling students to share and discover the deep emotional narratives that structure their views of Self and Other (de Castro et al., 2019; Dorroll & Dorroll, 2020). Bringing videoconference technology into the classroom, linking with an international partner, and guiding student conversations can encourage students to expand their networks, look outside of their cultures, understand the values and beliefs of counterparts, and mediate multiplicitous worldviews (Aquino et al., 2023; Commander et al., 2022; Lipinski, 2014; Millner, 2020). VEs can also foster collaborative problem solving, critical thinking, communication intelligence, increased awareness and mindfulness of global and cultural dynamics, learner autonomy, transformative and active self-regulated learning, networked learning, and electronic and digital literacy skills (Duffy et al., 2022; Hauck, 2019; Helm & Velden, 2021; Radke et al., 2021; Rajagopal et al., 2020; Sadler & Dooly, 2016; Salomão & Zampieri, 2022). VEs can forge global solidarity and civic-mindedness (King de Ramirez, 2021; Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2021), empowering students to leverage intercultural knowledge to address global uncertainties (Blaber et al., 2023).

VEs broaden access to cultural learning experiences and make global knowledge more readily available to students who cannot afford to travel (Alonso-Morais, 2023), including historically disprivileged students (Bryant et al., 2023). This potentializes the inclusion of more languages, peoples, and knowledges into internationalization (Guimarães et al., 2019). Students gain access to materials not available on campus and learn about alternative forms of knowledge production (Rogers, 2020). VEs also promote language proficiency and foreign language learning (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Luo & Yang, 2022; Machwate et al., 2021; Pertusa-Seva & Stewart, 2008; Salomão, 2022; Tang et al., 2021; Van Maele et al., 2013), supporting meaningful interactions between learners of different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Dooly, 2017). VEs can promote language equity (Robbins, 2023) and authentic language use (Júnior & Finardi, 2018), helping participants see skills in multiple languages as assets, not as handicaps (Hilliker, 2020, 2022). VEs that integrate plurilingualism can help participants reconsider their language ideologies and question the hegemony of English and monolingualism in educational settings (Schmid et al., 2023). Additionally, VEs can serve as third spaces where Black, Chicana, and other pedagogies and conversations thrive (Company et al., 2023) and the knowledge agency, curricular and pedagogical needs, and resource requirements of Global South partners are honored (Glenn & Devereux, 2023).

COIL Programs

COIL, a specific modality of VE, has been adopted as an innovative pedagogical approach to offer students global learning opportunities from their homes (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021; Nava-Aguirre et al., 2019). COIL was first established in 2006 at the State University of New York (SUNY) but has grown in popularity for faculty worldwide (Rubin, 2016). COIL was effective and witnessed renewed impetus during the pandemic (Ikeda, 2022; Garcia et al., 2023; Rubin & Guth, 2023). Courses are co-developed and co-taught by instructors from two countries, and students usually collaborate on group projects virtually (Guth & Rubin, 2015). COIL courses foster synergy between coursework and international relationships that may be lacking in traditional faculty-led study abroad programs (Wood et al., 2022), often centering active learning (Doscher, 2023) and empowering students to co-learn course content, co-build knowledge, and co-develop diverse personal relationships through the negotiation of meaning (Fowler et al., 2014). Students work through dissonant, contrapuntal experiences and seek the conceptual knowledge needed to solve problems (Harasim, 2012; Motley & Sturgill, 2013). COIL courses can sustain a global learning space in a post-COVID era (Cotoman et al., 2022), decolonizing fields (de la Garza & Maher, 2022) and internationalization (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Technological innovation can enhance internationalization by providing opportunities for students to intersect and interact across cultures (Pitts & Brooks, 2017). Opportunities for social connection can cleave open a transformative third space where students can engage in meaningful and productive dialogic exchanges (Pitts & Brooke, 2017). However, mere opportunity for connection can perpetuate normative internationalization, resulting in superficial exchanges and the reification of Global North-South imbalances (Pitts & Brooke, 2017). Global higher education is unequal (Altbach, 2004), and globalization perpetuates historical inequalities and colonial legacies (Sicka & Hou, 2023). Andreotti and de Souza (2008) warned that educators who uncritically attempt to bring the world into their classrooms through VEs can unwittingly reinforce notions of supremacy and universality of Western epistemologies and ontologies, undervaluing other knowledge systems. The foundation upon which VE is evolving is intricate, shaped by issues related to gender, race, and age, institutional constraints such as inequities in support, technological shortcomings, geopolitical realities, and the

pervasiveness of Western hegemonies (Alami et al., 2022). To approach internationalization [at home] without critical awareness ignores relative power dynamics between participating countries, peoples, languages, and institutions. Without serious engagement with context, space/place, and positionality (Díaz et al., 2021; Klimanova & Hellmich, 2021), VEs run the risk of commodifying cultural knowledge and stabilizing unequal relations of dialogue and power.

Therefore, Züleyha and I were guided by CVE, a nascent field in VE practice and research that critically assesses topics regarding language, positionality, and power in VE. CVE draws from critical pedagogy, a theoretical approach that unsettles power and seeks to develop students' critical consciousness. CVE goes beyond surface-level interactions and cultural exposures in VE and focuses on fostering critical understandings of power dynamics, social justice issues, and cultural complexities (Hauck & Helm, 2020). CVE explores issues of inclusion and exclusion in VE-based efforts to internationalize higher education curricula (Alami et al., 2022) and recenters students who are often underrepresented in internationalization (Hauck, 2023). CVE also centers topics informed by and aligned with sustainable development goals (Hauck, 2023) and addresses shared planetary challenges such as access, democracy, gender, social justice, climate, disease for humanity, food, and hunger, by building bridges between linguacultures to find common pathways forward (Pegrum et al., 2022). CVEs encourage VE educators and participants to critically examine societal norms and power relations and promote critical digital literacies (Satar et al., 2023), defined as the awareness of how meanings are represented in ways that maintain and replicate relations of power (Darvin, 2017). CVEs can serve as safe/brave spaces where students critically reflect on the what, why, and how of global differences (Glimäng, 2022).

Methodology

Our method of choice was autoethnography, which blends autobiography and ethnography by examining how the self/auto is situated within larger cultural or social groups/ethno (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography entails "turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). Autoethnography involves doing self-conscious, deliberate identity work (i.e., the formation, understanding, and presentation of self), to understand or represent some phenomenon that exceeds the self (Butz & Besio, 2009)—in this case, virtual internationalization. Autoethnography is cultural analysis through personal narrative, involving the auto ethnographers researching themselves in relation to others (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Autoethnography, further, allows minoritized subjects, who have historically been operationalized by hegemonic discourses, to self-represent themselves (Butz & Besio, 2009). Züleyha and I undertook a collaborative autoethnography, where multiple researchers or participants come together to collectively examine and interpret their shared experiences within a certain context. Collaborative autoethnography can be used by international students to give voice to social and cultural concerns by pooling their autobiographical materials and undertaking a co-exploration of experiences and identities and a joint meaning-making endeavor (Shokirova et al., 2022).

However, uncritical autoethnography that focuses solely on independent experiences and learning outcomes can jeopardize attention to larger cultural issues and reify power-imbalances (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Therefore, Züleyha and I ensured that our autoethnography was critical, "to understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 8-9). Critical autoethnography dovetails with CVE by challenging scientific notions of truth as objective, problematizing what counts as knowledge (Ellis et al., 2011), and rendering the personal as political (Griffin, 2018). Stylistically, critical autoethnography challenges dominant ways of articulating knowledge in the academy through its preferred mode of first-person narrativizing (Chawla & Rodriguez, 2008). Critical auto ethnographers are transcultural communicators who "scrutinize, publicize, and reflexively rework their own self-understandings as a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660). Critical autoethnography is an empowering academic discourse for international students to resist racisms and linguicisms in higher education and center their unique ways of learning and being, through dialogue between Self and Other (Cho et al., 2023).

Data Collection

Over the course of a four-month semester, Züleyha and I engaged in a multifaceted approach to data collection. Our weekly Zoom meetings, each lasting 5 minutes to an hour, served as dynamic sessions for real-time communicative exchanges. These virtual encounters were not only opportunities to 'meet' but also sources of qualitative data. In addition to synchronous meetings, our asynchronous communications on WhatsApp provided a rich dataset. Sharing texts and emojis became a unique form of non-verbal communication, capturing our emotional states, reactions, and shared enthusiasm for the project. We also followed each other on the social media platform Facebook, which offered vignettes into each other's lives and personalities outside of the course. We submitted weekly assignments to Blackboard, which served as tangible data points and provided a structured means to track our growth. Each assignment focused on a different dimension of our

exchange. Finally, we informally jotted down our reflections on Notes and Docs, maintaining a narrative record of our learnings. Two years later, we 'met' again over Zoom to revisit our course and re-reflect on our learnings, recording our session for additional data. We were guided by the following research questions: What were the benefits and challenges of our VE? How did we center friendship in our VE?

Data Analysis

First, we immersed ourselves in our data, reading and rereading our journal entries, Zoom transcripts, and assignments to become familiar with the content. I took the lead in data analysis, mentoring Züleyha along the way, as this was her first time conducting a formal qualitative study. We conducted line-by-line coding, breaking down our qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences, as advised by Corbin and Strauss (2014). We identified significant phrases, events, and emotions in our narratives, assigning codes. A code is a label assigned to some piece of data (Shaffer & Ruis, 2021). The goal of initial coding was to remain open to all possible theoretical directions suggested by our interpretations of our data (Charmaz, 2006) and reflect on the contents and nuances of our data (Saldaña, 2021). Next, we employed values coding to capture and label our subjective values, attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives (Saldaña, 2021). We kept intersectionality at the heart of our research process (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022), acknowledging that the intersections of our respective religions, languages, ethnic affiliations, and educational backgrounds, etc., influence our sense-making. We presented our findings with an eye toward relating the micro details of our autoethnography to the macro implications of ideas and concepts in education (Starr, 2010).

Trustworthiness

Despite their value, embodied methodological praxes can raise concerns around trustworthiness, particularly in the minds of readers inclined towards research paradigms prioritizing 'objectivity' and generalizability. As Reed-Danahay (1997) pointed out, autoethnography synthesizes a postmodern autobiography (in which the notion of the coherent, individual self is called into question) and postmodern ethnography (in which realist conventions and objective observer positions are called into question). In taking a leap of faith beyond the conventional boundaries of research, we conducted our inquiry in a personalized, feminized, emotional, open, and vulnerable manner, eschewing Western, hegemonic, and masculinist research norms of research objectivity, rationality, disconnectedness, and universality (Allen-Collinson, 2013). We ensured trustworthiness not through criteria derived from positivistic or post-positivistic paradigms but through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2008; Le Roux, 2017). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, and transferability addressed by providing thick descriptions of context, to allow readers to assess the applicability of our findings to their own contexts. Dependability and confirmability were maintained by documenting our decision-making processes and ensuring that findings emerged from the data and not from unsubstantiated predispositions. Additionally, reflexivity was foregrounded through transparent disclosure of and ongoing engagement with our positionalities in relation to the data (Pitard, 2017).

Findings

Affirming Global South Epistemologies through VE

I knew very little about Turkmenistan before speaking with Züleyha, and the country and its cultures had seemed exotic, faraway, and elusive to me. Similarly, Züleyha primarily knew about India from Bollywood and global news, hardly ever from first-hand accounts. VA served as a window into our respective backgrounds and cultures. Through Züleyha, I was offered a window into Turkmenistan's rich and complex history, interwoven with Persian, Mongol, and Turkic influences going back millennia. "I'm happy to introduce my country to you," Züleyha exclaimed. "My country is really, really small, and most people don't know anything about it." Through Züleyha, I learned that Turkmenistan used to be a part of the Soviet Union, gaining its independence in 1991. Züleyha, proud of her country's independence, shared how October 27th, the date commemorating Turkmenistan's independence, is marked with patriotic events and parades. On my turn, I told Züleyha about India's rich history, including how India gained its independence from the British Raj in 1947 on August 15th, an occasion commemorated with flag-hoisting and ceremonies in India and its diaspora. Through discussing our countries' respective colonial and imperial histories and independence movements, we learned about self-determination, self-assertion, and collective pride, sentiments shared by many Global South communities.

Züleyha and I also learned about each other's religious, ethnic, and cultural traditions. For example, I learned that the cultivation of melons has a long tradition in Turkmenistan, with Melon Day celebrated as a time of pastoral vibrance and plenty. Züleyha described how, on this day, her town's streets are lined with melon stalls and locals partake in melon-

tasting, contests, and agricultural fairs. Listening to her narrate fond memories of Melon Day over my computer screen, her face expressive and animated, I found myself transported to her town, the scent of fresh fruits and the bustle of bazaars coming to life. Züleyha also spoke about the Turkmen festivals of Eid al-Adha (Kurban Bayram) and Novruz Bayram, the latter a spring holiday with its roots in Zoroastrianism. Eid and Navroz are celebrated in India, too, primarily because of India's Muslim and Parsi populations, but through our VE, I was reminded how festivals take on different cultural expressions, shades, colors, and meanings across contexts. Züleyha knew of Indian festivals like Holi and Diwali, but through our VE, she learned about lesser-known regional Indian festivals, such as Durga Pujo—a Bengali festival involving spirited rituals such as dhunuchi naach, sindoor khela, and the visarjan of Ma Durga's idol in the Ganges.

Further, Züleyha and I learned about shared aspects of our cuisines. Both Turkmen and Indian cuisines include a variety of flatbreads: In Turkmenistan, flatbreads like çöreks and yufkas are staple, whereas in India (and its neighboring countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh), rotis, naans, kulchas, and parathas are commonly consumed. Turkmens use local adaptations of clay ovens and grills to bake breads, much like the traditional tandoors commonly used in South Asia. Our cultures also have long traditions of meat-based dishes: In Turkmenistan, lamb and beef are commonly used in meals preparations, with dishes like shashlik being popular; in India, various meat dishes, such as seekh kebabs, tikkas, sabjis, curries, and tandoori preparations are widely enjoyed. I am a vegan and do not consume meat, and Züleyha thoughtfully shared names of plant-based Turkmen dishes. She asked me to try dolma—a dish traditionally prepared by stuffing grape leaves with a mixture of rice, minced meat, onions, herbs, and spices—with a stuffing of pine nuts and dried fruits instead of meat, and my mouth watered at the thought! We also discovered a shared love for tea: In Turkey and Turkmenistan, çay holds a special place in the hearts of people, like how masala chai is a cultural cornerstone in India.

Züleyha and I also discovered that the fabrics of our cultures are braided through with a common spiritual thread, despite our religious heterogeneities. We noted that Sufism—the mystical dimension of Islam—has had a profound impact on the landscapes of both our countries/regions. Sufism emphasizes an intimate and direct experience of the divine, and Sufi poets often use their verses to express their spiritual journeys and promote messages of harmony, love, tolerance, and non-materialism. Magtymguly, an 18th-century Sufi poet and spiritual teacher, is a nationally celebrated cultural icon in Turkmenistan and is often considered the father of Turkmen literature. Similarly, in India, Sufi poets—like Punjabi Sufi reformist and philosopher Bulleh Shah—are admired for their revolutionary verses that challenged social hierarchies and emphasized the unity of religions. Züleyha and I also discovered that our cultures cherished similar values. For example, both Turkmen and Indian festivities also often use lamps, fire, and candles, reflecting a shared emphasis on the symbolism of light. Züleyha informed that, on Novruz, her community members build a bonfire and jump over it, signifying purification of their souls and forgiveness of their sins by God. Similarly, we, as Hindus, light aartis; we cup our palms over the flames, which we raise to our foreheads, to cleanse ourselves and form a oneness with the Divine.

Contesting Damaging Stereotypes and Humanizing the Other through VE

Illiberal and conservative discourses and mainstream media narratives often pathologize the differences between racial, religious, linguistic, and ethnic communities, demonizing the Other (particularly the figure of the Muslim) through difference (Silva, 2016). In India, for instance, the rhetoric and ideology of Hindutva frames 'the Muslim' as a foil and a threat to the Hindu body politic (Anand, 2005). Many of these demeaning, dehumanizing, and deficitizing stereotypes can seep into the public imagination, driving people to hold biases and assumptions of Other communities. Through our VE, Züleyha and I were able to contest reductionist perceptions about our communities commonly perpetuated by populist and xenophobic discourses. For instance, I used to believe, quite wrongly, that Muslim women in Central and Middle Eastern countries were closed-off, religiously conservative, and male-dominated. However, Züleyha was friendly, open, and amiable in her demeanor. While being religious, she was also moderate and progressive in her views, caring deeply about issues pertaining to individual freedom, social justice, and the upliftment of her community. She was opinionated and spoke strongly about holding governments accountable and minimizing corruption in our countries. She was also educated and career-motivated, single-handedly shattering orientalizing and homogenizing stereotypes of Muslim women.

The context of the pandemic heightened the effectiveness of our VE, and let us look out onto the world, but to do so together. This was a time when everyone, everywhere, was struggling. The contagious Omicron variant of the virus was pushing India into a third wave of the pandemic (Chavda et al., 2023), and my parents, relatives, and elderly grandparents contracted the virus. I was often sick with worry but unable to travel overseas to be with my family. Züleyha was also away from her family, and while her family members did not contract the virus, she was also constantly stressed, as her parents were relatively old and high-risk. "Health is everything in life; without health, everything is meaningless," she said, wistfully. "Our time is so short. We have to look after ourselves and each other." Our VE helped us empathize with each other, reminding us that our hardships are shared. We discussed how structural inequities determine who has access to what, when, how, and how much. We also unpacked and took stock of our privileges, reflecting on ways we may have benefited

through unwitting alignments with systems of power. For instance, as a voluntary, Savarna migrant, I had better access to healthcare and mobility during the pandemic than involuntary domestic migrant workers in India.

Centering Sisterhood and Friendship through VE

As our VE progressed, Züleyha and I often referred to each other as "penpals" and "friends," suggesting growing warmth, companionship, familiarity, and camaraderie. Our relationship transformed from an obligatory academic exchange-ship to a sisterly friendship. Sisterhood, according to hooks (2015), rejects shallow and superficial notions of bonding to center bonding that shares resources and strengths. Sisterhood is a lifelong journey (Reynolds et al., 2021) that breaks through ideologies of neoliberal, white feminism (hooks, 2015), affirming all women—including and especially women of color—as collective knowers, whose different epistemologies, ontologies, and lived realities are accounted for (De Sousa & Varcoe, 2021). As Züleyha and I delved into our stories about our transcultural, transnational, and translingual experiences, we stumbled upon common ground in the challenges and triumphs we faced as women immigrants in our respective educational contexts. For instance, we both observed that we occupied liminal spaces, as international students, which on the one hand, granted us the freedoms to discover new cultures/countries and new versions of ourselves, but on the other hand, also pressured us to conform to the norms of new societies into which we were transitioning. "We have a double perspective on the world," she said brightly, implying an interstitial positionality.

In a learning environment that can be individualizing, soul-stripping, and competitive (Grant et al., 2023; Reynolds et al., 2021), Züleyha and I rejected the dominant ideologies of self-interest, self-promotion, and individualism to center critical sisterhood, allyship, and care in our VE. While we operated within a quantification paradigm, submitting assignments to Blackboard in return for grades and course progress, many of our insights surpassed the limitations of quantification. While our professors offered us guideposts and laid out parameters for our discussions, Züleyha and I let our discussions flow organically from these prompts, enriching our understandings beyond a structured academic framework. Our relationship also centered mentorship, as I am older than Züleyha and felt responsible in providing her with guidance. Züleyha wished to pursue higher education in the West, partly why she was keen to improve her English fluency through this VE. On more than one occasion, she asked for my advice on how best to prepare for Western higher education. I shared my learnings, highlighting the educational and professional opportunities I was afforded in the U.S., while also remaining transparent about the exclusions I had faced as a female student of color and early-career scholar.

I provided Züleyha with suggestions to improve her spoken English (like watching English television shows with subtitles on); English language learning was a core course outcome for Züleyha. However, I was careful not to suggest that being intermediate in English is necessarily a deficiency. ESL students, non-'native' speakers, and international students often experience a sense of deficit, otherness, and inferiority as a result of English hegemony in higher education (Tavares, 2023), and I did not want Züleyha to view herself as operating from a position of lack. I admired her familiarity with multiple linguistic and semiotic repertoires, and I did not want our VE to carry a deficit remedial English-learner mindset but strove to frame our multilingualisms as strengths. Together, Züleyha and I critically reflected on the richness and complexities of our multilingual language journeys and the factors that influence dispositions towards language and language learning in our cultures. These explorations not only broadened our linguistic horizons but also deepened our appreciation for the role language plays in shaping and being shaped by social, historical, and political contexts. Our sisterhood promoted transnational, multilingual, and intercultural thriving (Grant et al., 2023). Züleyha said:

> That we can meet after one point five years like this, it's a really, really super thing for me. That I know you, I can contact you, talk to you in a relaxed way [...] and have a new person in my life, who is from another culture, these reasons are really, really important for participating in exchange programs. What is important [in an English-learning VE] is not just improving your English but improving your friendships.

Limitations

Despite the affordances provided by VE, Züleyha and I faced challenges which are important to highlight, to problematize narratives that uncritically glorify VEs in internationalization. The most significant limitation, particularly for Züleyha, "was the difference of the hours," eight hours. This time gap often made it inconvenient to 'meet' at ease. While it was easier for me to attend our Zoom meetings during my mornings, Züleyha had to set time aside during her evenings. After Züleyha's classes transitioned online, she took up a full-time job to supplement her income. If our meetings took place on weekdays, they ended up extending her workday. Time gaps between partners' time zones can pose a significant logistical hurdle for students in VEs (Jaya & Saputri, 2023) and need to be considered by VE educators, when considering whether exchanges will be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of the two (Healy & Kennedy, 2020). There were times when Züleyha or I had scheduling conflicts which had to be worked around, or responsibilities that compromised real-time interactions, fragmenting our exchange and impeding the spontaneity of our interactions.

The second limitation of our VE was missing out on the corporal, sensory, and immersive aspects of an on-site exchange. Züleyha reiterated, on multiple occasions, that she would have liked to meet me in person. "I wish I could show you around Turkey and Turkmenistan," she said. I, too, felt that our VE could never truly replicate in-person conversations, and at times I wished I were sitting in a brick-and-mortar cafeteria with Züleyha, having coffee. I yearned to visit the town squares of Turkey, taste local dishes, participate in local gatherings, take photos of Turkey's architectural wonders for my Instagram, and interact with locals. Students who missed or were sent away early from canceled study abroad programs during the pandemic lost out on embodied dimensions of overseas experiences, such as hands-on internships, site visits, volunteering work, in-person research projects, cuisine tasting, and nightlife (Di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020). According to Liu et al. (2022), the personal cultural immersions and associated embodied learnings of complex nuanced cultural instances cannot be replaced by virtual programming. Keeping these realities in mind, Züleyha and I pursued our VE not as a stand-in for an in-person exchange but as a unique modality of knowledge exchange.

The third limitation of our VE, particularly in the context of critical internationalization/CVE, was not having critical-enough conversations. Social justice is not a simple, technical process achieved through calculative rationality, as is often assumed within internationalization's neoliberal paradigm. Change requires grappling with the complexities of the social world and the attendant complexities of achieving educational and social change (McArthur, 2010). Züleyha and I treated our VE primarily as an exchange geared toward improving our language skills, building global competence, getting good grades, and improving our academic and professional portfolios. Only sometimes did we question power dynamics, and we particularly avoided discussing power imbalances within the Global South. We skirted around difficult and uncomfortable conversations, like the rise of religious and ethnic neonationalisms and neoliberal populisms in Central and South Asia, or religious and ethnic persecutions and censorships by illiberal governments. Züleyha suggested steering clear of "politics," and I adhered. Also, our professor did not design our course as critical, so any criticality we introduced went over and above course requirements. While it is crucial to push past superficiality toward genuine cultural learning (Pitts & Brooks, 2017), there remain challenges to confronting our own complicities and silences.

Finally, there were times when our technologies failed, our cameras froze, our Wi-Fi connections were disrupted, and our meetings had to be postponed. Poor Wi-Fi connections, outdated devices, and other technological challenges can make VE engagement hard, if not impossible (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). Züleyha and I were fortunate, overall, to have the finances to afford internet bandwidth, the digital literacies to navigate technological hurdles, and the physical learning spaces (such as a workstation or desk) to carry out our VE. Technological glitches and non-access, while present, were temporary and easily fixable, not posing any significant barrier to our exchange. However, students from less privileged backgrounds may not have access to the tools, equipment, timetables, learning spaces, or even knowhow required for fruitful VE interactions (Filius et al., 2019). Not everyone's home is as camera-ready as others' (Bali et al., 2021). Moreover, Züleyha and I were relatively unburdened and unencumbered by familial duties, in the sense that neither of us were parents to children or caring for sick or elderly relatives. In fact, my husband worked full-time from home, providing me with opportunities to free up my time for my VE. But everyone is not so privileged; family conditions, including child/parent care responsibilities and family health, may be barriers for some students in VEs (Cahapay, 2020)

Conclusion and Discussion

Engaging in a VE program during the spring of 2022, amidst the challenges to health and mobility posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, provided Züleyha and me with a profound lesson in shared humanity, sisterhood, and friendship. Harnessing our capacities as collective knowers and drawing from our respective knowledge banks and histories, together we embarked on a life-changing journey of intercultural exchange. We learned about the vibrant and thriving spiritual, cultural, religious, and intellectual traditions of our respective countries (Turkmenistan and India). We also learned about our international student journeys in Turkey and the U.S. respectively. Given our experiences in different transnational trajectories that involved multiple discourses, we brought to the VE table many different strands of thought. Along the way of our VE, we dispelled misconceptions and stereotypes about race and gender in the Global South, confronted and contested Islamophobia, and saw humanity in each other. We also built confidence in our identities as Asian women—situated along different positionalities (Züleyha, a Turkmen Muslim, and I, an Indian Hindu)—by recognizing our shared histories, struggles, and aspirations as migrant women of color. Global South women are often portrayed as homogenous, static, and lacking in agency (Mohanty, 1984), but our VE helped us understand the nuances of our subjecthoods.

Our VE also allowed us to test, to some extent, the confines of neoliberal, normative intercultural exchange. By tapping into the disruptive power of digital third spaces, we were able to write, think, meet, collaborate, ideate, and produce at our own pace. We prioritized our moral, social, and emotional growth, engaging in knowledge production and sharing beyond measurable markers of intercultural development. We recognized that, despite our diverse backgrounds, we shared common hopes, fears, and dreams, particularly dreams to pursue higher education and build meaningful lives for ourselves and our communities. Much like our classmates in this VE, both Züleyha and I grew in cultural self-awareness and global

perspectival expansion (Fischer, 2022). We honed our spoken English skills while simultaneously thinking critically about hegemonic norms of language and learning and asserting pride in our multilingualisms. The future of internationalization requires an approach that demystifies faraway places and focuses on enriching international interventions without fetishizing embodiment (Barkin, 2021). This VE helped me 'travel' to Turkey, without the costs or the carbon footprint involved, and to do so through the stories and personal narratives of my international partner. Turkey is no longer a faraway and foreign place shrouded in oriental lore, but a familiar place with Züleyha's face.

Our experiences suggest that VE should be seriously contemplated by higher education leaders, not as a stopgap for study abroad but rather as a unique and promising form of mobility, in and of itself. VE might potentially overcome some of the traditional barriers and exclusions that have historically existed in internationalization by reaching a wider and more diverse range of participants, particularly those from the Global South, and facilitating exchanges of novel ideas and curricular materials. However, current VEs still operate from a modern, capitalist paradigm, and there is need for more critically oriented, decolonial VEs that move away from exploitative, extractive, or hierarchical partnerships toward fair, co-creative, and equitable partnerships that honor the needs and knowledges of Global South learners. There is also a need to decolonize definitions, categorizations, and philosophical underpinnings of VE, and to include students in these conversations. The landscape of VE is rapidly evolving, and scholars are recommended to continue to map its trajectory. We also recommend future VE scholarship exploring ways to destratify knowledge exchanges, share resources, and focus on the needs of Global South partners. Centering sisterhood in VEs could enable a shift from a competitive to a cooperative paradigm, nurturing mutual empowerment among partner institutions, facilitators, and students.

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Academic Voices: Continuing Professional Development for Teaching in Internationalized Classrooms

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Abstract

Contemporary higher education institutions are marked by diverse, internationalized classrooms that bring together various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, realizing the full potential of this diversity poses challenges, as academics, key players in maximizing the benefits of international classrooms, often lack the necessary competence, resources, and tools. Despite universities offering continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives, these suffer from low enrollment and high drop-out rates. Past research highlights the oversight of academics' input in the design of CPD initiatives. In our study, conducted at a medium-sized university in Sweden, we surveyed the perceptions and CPD needs of academics. The findings emphasize the importance of immersive international experiences of staff over disciplinary affiliation, reveal a disconnect between perceived challenges for teaching in the international classroom and academics' interest in CPD, and underscore the importance of adopting an andragogical adult learning centered approach in the design and delivery of CPD.

Introduction

Globalization and internationalization of higher education (HE), coupled with heightened migration, bring about greater linguistic, cultural, and educational diversity on campuses worldwide. This phenomenon is evident not only in the diverse composition of learners in the classrooms but also in universities' efforts to internationalize their curriculum, aiming

to equip all students for the globalized job market and society (Clarke & Kirby, 2022). Whether by choice or circumstance, academic staff frequently find themselves thrust into a new reality of teaching in internationalized classrooms. Lauridsen and Gregersen-Hermans (2023) characterized an internationalized classroom as a dynamic learning environment, encompassing diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, both in physical and virtual settings. This description transcends mere demographic factors, highlighting the integration of global perspectives into the curriculum and the cultivation of intercultural competencies to facilitate impactful collaboration among students.

One could argue that diversity has been a constant presence, suggesting no imperative for adjustments to the current learning environment (Elmgren & Henriksson, 2015). Nevertheless, documented common challenges faced by academics teaching in internationalized classrooms attest to a different reality (Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2015). Numerous authors agree that unlocking the potential of diversity in the classroom and creating learning experiences that enhance students' global competencies require specific teaching skills (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Cozart & Gregersen-Hermans, 2021). Understanding and developing these teaching competencies is crucial for academics to navigate the complexities of an internationalized classroom successfully.

Recognizing the necessity of preparing academics for teaching in internationalized classrooms, several higher education institutions (HEIs) have implemented a range of continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives (Gregersen-Hermans & Lauridsen, 2021). However, these opportunities often remain limited and lack a systematic approach (Lauridsen & Gregersen-Hermans, 2022). There is a pressing need for greater support and the sharing of effective practices to help academics foster inclusivity in increasingly internationalized classrooms (Fakunle, 2020). In response to these challenges, Swedish HEIs have made strides in increasing CPD provision in the past five years (Weissova, forthcoming 2025). A persistent challenge lies in the limited engagement of academics in CPD and internationalization efforts. While several reasons contribute to this challenge, we refrain from an in-depth exploration in this paper, recognizing that it merits dedicated attention separately. A notable observation we made is the neglect of involving academics in the stages of planning and designing, which is a critical step in CPD (Siddiqui, 2006). Frequently, academic voices are not included in the conversation, and their needs and learning preferences are overlooked when HEIs invest in planning and delivering new professional development.

Acknowledging this gap, the overarching research question driving this study is: What are the academics' needs and preferences for CPD in the context of teaching in internationalized classrooms? Several related questions naturally arise: What challenges do academics encounter when teaching in internationalized classrooms? What competencies do they find important to foster? Do they perceive adequate support from their institutions for teaching in internationalized settings? Are they interested in participating in CPD? What motivates their engagement in such activities? What factors hinder or enable their participation? Additionally, what learning modes do they prefer for CPD? By addressing these research questions, the paper aims to offer practical implications for HEIs seeking to develop CPD activities that align with the specific needs of academics, promoting increased engagement and uptake.

Literature Review

Academics' Perception of Teaching in Internationalized Classrooms

Understanding academics' perspectives on teaching in internationalized classrooms is essential for developing effective professional development learning initiatives that cater to their needs and enhance the overall quality of education in multicultural settings. However, several factors can significantly influence their perception, e.g. the level of preparation and support received by academics (Zadravec & Kocar, 2023), their prior international experience (Lauridsen & Gregersen-Hermans, 2022), institutional approach toward professional learning (Kennedy, 2014), and even the specific disciplinary context (Zou et al., 2023) in which they operate.

Research indicates a strong awareness of intercultural issues and a positive attitude towards diversity in the classroom among academics (Ohajionu, 2021). Nonetheless, challenges such as lack of knowledge, time constraints, insufficient incentives, fear of failure, and negative course evaluations often deter academics from fully engaging with diversity (Inamorato et al., 2019). A Finnish study further highlights the gap between recognition of the necessity of internationalization and the lack of necessary competencies, resources, and tools among academics to adapt their teaching styles to diverse learning environments (Renfors, 2019, p. 77).

The increased diversity in the classroom has sparked discussions among academic staff on the best approaches to address it. Sawir's (2011) study of 80 academics at an Australian HEI revealed differences in willingness to adapt teaching for diverse learners across disciplines, with humanities and social science academics showing more openness compared to those in science and technology fields. However, Zou et al. (2023) suggested that a critical view on internationalization exists across disciplines, indicating that disciplinary affiliation may not fully explain individual approaches. Subsequent studies confirmed that disciplinary belonging influences how the internationalization of teaching is approached by

academics (Bulnes & de Louw, 2022; Zadravec & Kočar, 2023) and perceived by students (Alexidaou et al., 2023). Multiple studies have led to the conclusion that there is a need for tailored CPD development that would support academics in managing the challenges and opportunities presented by internationalized classrooms (Ryan et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2020). Other studies prescribed the competencies academics teaching in internationalized classrooms should possess (Ambagts-van Rooijen, Beelen, & Coelen, 2024; Cozart & Gregersen-Hermans, 2021; Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Teekens, 2003).

One notable model aiding academics in enhancing their teaching across diverse cultures is Dimitrov and Haque's (2016) 'Intercultural Teaching Competence' (ITC). This model encompasses foundational, facilitation, and curriculum design competencies, totaling 20 specific competencies. ITC is described as "the ability of instructors to interact with students in a way that supports the learning of students who are linguistically, culturally, socially, or in other ways different from the instructor or from each other" (Dimitrov et al., 2014, p. 89). This study employs the ITC model to gauge the perceived importance of various competencies among academics, selected for its alignment with research on the experiences of international students in university classrooms (Arkoudis et al., 2013).

Continuing Professional Development

In recent years, there has been a heightened focus on improving the quality of education in the European Higher Education Area. This emphasis is evident in the 2018 Paris Communiqué, where European ministers committed to promoting pedagogical training, CPD, and enhanced recognition of innovative teaching (EHEA, 2018). Building on this commitment, the 2020 Rome Communiqué suggested specific measures to enhance the CPD of academics, including cross-border exchanges and the creation of collaborative national structures (EHEA, 2020).

While the LOTUS (Leadership and Organization for Teaching and Learning at European Universities) project reported that pedagogical CPD is prevalent in 93% of HE systems across 28/30 countries (Zhang, 2022), initiatives specifically addressing internationalization are sparse (Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2015). In Sweden, HEIs generally mandate ten weeks of full-time studies in HE pedagogy, but the acquisition of this requirement is flexible. The Association of Swedish HEIs outlined seven goals for qualifying university pedagogical education, with internationalization emphasized in goal number 6 together with other significant concepts such as democracy, gender equality, equal treatment, and sustainability (Karlsson et al., 2017, p. 5). While the importance of integrating internationalization into mandatory HE pedagogical courses has been recognized, the degree to which this integration occurs, as well as the specific topics covered, varies considerably (Weissova, forthcoming 2025). Despite this variation, in recent years, several Swedish HEIs have made significant progress in developing specialized CPD courses designed to facilitate the internationalization of teaching. However, these initiatives have seen limited uptake despite these efforts (Weissova, forthcoming 2025).

Most studies on CPD for the internationalization of teaching for academics have been published within the last decade, underscoring the recognition of this area as an emerging research field. Most of them have been conducted in English-speaking countries and focus on individual interventions in specific educational contexts without paying attention to the conceptual framework (Lauridsen & Gregersen-Hermans, 2023), decades of research and recommendations on internationalization (Hoare, 2013) or the complexity of academics' engagement in CPD and the institutional context in which CPD is embedded (McKinnon et al., 2019).

The disciplinary differences can be seen not only in the way academics respond to internationalization but also in how they perceive CPD. Some professions prefer non-formal learning over the formal one (Becher, 1999). It is claimed that academics prioritize development opportunities within their own discipline (Clegg, 2003). This argument is supported by the claim that it is within the discipline where knowledge and professional identity are formed (Henkel, 2005). However, as Roxå and Mårtensson (2012) pinpointed, disciplines are constantly developing entities with no clear boundaries and categorizing them blindly into hard/soft and pure/applied categories can be misleading. Some research also confirms that it is the context of the disciplines, rather than an institution, that has a prevailing influence on the everyday life of academics (Klein, 1996). Havnes and Stensaker (2006) argued that CPD has a higher status in disciplines such as health and business than, for instance, engineering.

In their article, Lauridsen and Gregersen-Hermans (2022) underscored the importance of constructive alignment, emphasizing the incorporation of intercultural and global competencies throughout learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment. Taking this a step further, when designing CPD initiatives, HEIs should prioritize understanding the unique characteristics of adult learners. Educational developers and CPD facilitators often engage with adult learners, each bringing diverse professional and life experiences that can be leveraged to enhance the learning experience for all participants.

Theoretical Framework

According to Ioannou (2023), academics are considered adult learners and are a crucial factor in improving educational quality, which leads us to the concept of andragogy. Andragogy, as defined by Savicevic (2008, p. 361), refers to the study of the learning and education of adults.

Upon revisiting the history of andragogy, numerous scholars, including Terehoff (2002), Tezcan (2022), and Tsuda et al. (2019), have advocated for the andragogical approach to CPD. Its effectiveness has been affirmed, particularly in the CPD of academics, as evidenced by studies such as those conducted by Chaipidech et al. (2021) and Kelly (2017). We can argue that effectiveness is anchored in understanding the needs of learners, which according to Savicevic (1992), is one of the key requirements of an andragogical approach. According to Knowles et al. (2020) the adult learner is defined by goals and purpose for learning, as well as individual and situational circumstances that need to be acknowledged.

Following the idea of academics as adult learners, we argue that a potential route for improvement of CPD practices can come with changing the assumption about learners from pedagogy to andragogy. Without participating in a debate (Forrest & Peterson, 2006) about the delineation of pedagogy (as art, science, or practice of teaching children) and andragogy (teaching adults) – we find andragogical postulates to better reflect circumstances and needs of academics in HE, as well as respond to identified obstacles. According to Forrest and Peterson (2006, p. 114), andragogy does not necessarily reflect the age of the learner but rather the fact that an adult is an "individual who has taken on adult roles in society", particularly performing the professional role, hence the connection between professional development and andragogy. In the following section, we will discuss the fitness of andragogical postulates (Knowles, 2005) in the context of CPD for teaching in internationalized classrooms.

Adult learners *need to know why they need to learn something*. The value of learning is associated with the improvements in work performance and/or quality of life of the learner (academic in our case). Therefore, learners' needs take central place in designing CPD. This justifies the approach of investigating learning needs - in our context CPD needs of academics. As mentioned earlier, the research shows strong awareness and positive attitude towards intercultural issues and diversity among academics – at the same time, obstacles are identified that generate anxiety or stress that could be addressed by providing appropriate learning opportunities.

The adult learners' self-concept is strongly favoring *independence*, making their own choices about how they will learn. Educational formats that deny them this (like a rigid curriculum, teacher-centred, non-flexible formal courses) are not desirable. The psychological tension if treated like dependent (children), according to Knowles (2005, p. 65), results in a desire to "flee from the situation". This could eventually explain the high rate of absenteeism or drop-out rate from CPD activities. Adult learners, according to Jones et al. (2019, p. 1172), "assume greater responsibility and autonomy for learning outcomes vis-à-vis traditional pedagogical approaches". This means that academics will prefer a more active approach to learning (hands-on, problem-solving, learning by doing, experiential learning). The nature of managing an internationalized classroom fits well with this approach – given that academics expect to receive useful and applicable knowledge. Within this context, CPD facilitators are not assumed to have a monopoly on knowledge. They serve as "mentors and guides who help students develop" and facilitate individual and collaborative learning through discussion (Forrest Peterson, 2006, p. 116). This leads to the next point – mobilizing experience in the learning process.

The role of the learners' experiences – "the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves" (Knowles, 2005, p. 66). In the context of the internationalized classroom, participants' experiences with the learning opportunity serve a dual purpose. On one hand, they provide cases, stories, issues, and a living laboratory of examples of how culture and diversity manifest in an educational setting, turning these experiences into valuable learning material. On the other hand, it also represents alternative solutions, ideas, and approaches to be shared among learners living/working in similar contexts. Jones et al. (2019) consider adult learning to be participatory, experiential (Jarvis, 2012; Kolb & Kolb, 2018), and collaborative (Helle et al., 2006). Leveraging learners' experiences fosters engagement, making learning more meaningful and relevant (Terehoff, 2002). This relevance is closely connected to the learners' readiness to learn.

The readiness to learn is conditioned by the requirement that the learning opportunity is designed to deliver an instrumental benefit. The outcome is an academic equipped with answers or strategies applicable to own daily routines. Henschke (2013, p. 70) asserts that "readiness to learn is tied closely with their needing to know or do something new in their life situation," particularly in the context of academics as adult learners, where readiness is driven by the aim "to improve classroom practices" (Ajani, 2021, p. 297).

Orientation to learning is an andragogical postulate that argues the immediacy of need. Learning is not for future use; learning addresses present issues directly. We can argue that the extent of the diversity in the classroom and the (pressing) need to address it would be essential for both the recruitment of academics for learning opportunities and for reducing the drop-out rate. Forrest and Peterson (2006) bring out one of the most important points in arguing for the pedagogical approach to be quintessential for preparing academics for internationalized classrooms. In the pedagogical

approach, problem-based, real-life anchored, context-driven learning does not necessarily have a solution, especially not a single correct one. The process of addressing problems is a learning experience of its own, "the unresolvable issue becomes the foundation for learning rather than an obstacle" (Forrest & Peterson, 2006, p. 120). The learners' interest is not in the subject but in using the learned insights to address a problem or improve performance.

Finally, learners' ***motivation is intrinsic***. Pursuing educational opportunities in CPD will be driven by internal motives to improve rather than extrinsic awards. Several authors claimed that intrinsically motivated academics are more likely to participate in CPD (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Academics' autonomous motivation is enhanced by meeting their basic psychological needs, which are comprised of the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness (De Wal et al., (2020).

 It is worth noting that while the concept of andragogy is well established in practice, it still faces criticism for its lack of empirical evidence and theoretical development (St. Clair & Käpplinger 2021). We are aware of existing criticism of andragogical postulates (Sandlin, 2005) and various interpretations of andragogy, yet in this paper we interpret andragogy as the teaching of adult human beings. Early works on andragogy by Rosenstock-Hussey define andragogy from a strong social perspective, describing it as "aimed at solving social problems and moving toward a better future" (Loeng, 2018, p. 2). In our context, dealing with culturally diverse classrooms and benefiting from them aligns well with this perspective.

Methodology

The literature review highlights a significant gap in addressing academics' needs and preferences for CPD. In order to comprehensively explore this gap, we employed a mixed-method methodology. Our approach involved the development of an exploratory survey comprising 21 closed-ended and one open-ended question, allowing for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Exploratory surveys are particularly valuable for gaining initial insights into a phenomenon, context, or population, especially in areas with limited prior research (Anderson & Lightwood, 2022). This methodological choice aligns well with the objectives of our paper, as it enables us to gather data that elucidates academics' needs and preferences. Ultimately, this research aims to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in crafting targeted CPD initiatives that cater closely to the individual requirements and preferences of academics.

Survey Design and Implementation

The survey design was guided by the research questions outlined in the introduction, which pertained to academics' CPD needs and preferences. Following andragogical principles, the structure prioritized participant engagement, relevance, and autonomy in the learning process. This approach ensured that the survey effectively addressed the study's objectives while promoting active involvement and meaningful responses from participants.

The first section of the survey focused on demographic information of the participants, including their academic roles, disciplines, seniority, teaching and international experiences, and pedagogical qualifications. This section is aligned with the andragogical principle of leveraging academics' prior experiences, as understanding participants' backgrounds helps tailor CPD initiatives to their specific contexts and needs. The second section delved into academics' perceptions of the importance of intercultural teaching competencies (ITC; Haque & Dimitrov, 2016), rated on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (= not at all) to 5 (=very much). Furthermore, participants were encouraged to articulate their specific challenges when teaching in internationalized classrooms via an open-ended question. This approach recognizes that it might be easier for individuals to express the difficulties they encounter rather than explicitly state the competencies they require. This section addressed the andragogical principle of immediacy of need, recognizing the importance of participants' current challenges. In the third section, academics assessed their perceived level of support from the university and school/faculties (Likert 5-point scale), expressed their interest and preferences for CPD, and outlined potential obstacles to CPD participation, as well as motivating factors. This section reflects the andragogical principle of readiness to learn by identifying specific needs and preferences that will help shape more effective CPD programs. The survey's emphasis on understanding the support available and barriers to participation aligns with the need to create CPD opportunities that meet the autonomy and practical needs of adult learners.

The survey was developed in English and distributed using esMaker software. It underwent a pilot phase, during which it was reviewed by two academics. Based on their feedback, adjustments were made to refine and finalize the survey before its distribution. Subsequently, the survey was sent to academics via email from the heads of academic departments.

Participants

Academics with teaching responsibilities at a mid-sized Swedish HEI were invited to participate in this study. The study acquires additional complexity within the Swedish context, given the nation's notable diversity. With 19% of the population born in foreign countries (SCB, 2022), Swedish classrooms reflect this multicultural landscape, serving as microcosms of the broader society. This participating HEI is a university college distinguished by its international profile, encompassing four distinct schools or faculties: Education and Communication, Business, Engineering, and Health and Welfare. The institution has a student body of approximately 7,850 registered full-time equivalent students, with 2,400 among them being international students. It is supported by a teaching staff of around 470 individuals, with an even distribution across the four schools.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Survey Participants

Sample Characteristics	Actual sample	
	n	% (of the total sample)
School affiliation		
School of Business	39	32.2
School of Education and Communication	24	19.8
School of Engineering	7	5.8
School of Health and Welfare	51	42.1
Gender		
Male	46	38
Female	67	55.4
Non-binary	1	0.8
Prefer not to disclose	5	5.8
Native language		
Swedish	75	67,6
English	9	8.1
Spanish	5	4.6
German	4	3.6
Other	15	13.5
Bilingual	3	2.7
How young are you		
30 years or younger	4	3.3
31- 40 years	30	24.8
41-50 years	31	25.6
51-60 years	43	35.5
61-70 years	10	8.3
Older than 70 years	2	1.7
I wish not to share	1	0.8
Employment profile		
Permanent or tenured	108	90.8
Temporary, contract-based	1	0.8
PhD student	13	10.9
Academic title		
Adjunct instructor	21	18.6
PhD candidate	13	11.5
Research assistant	0	0
Lecturer	20	17.7
Assistant professor	42	37.2
Professor	17	15

Table 2

Demographic and Teaching Profile of Survey Participants

Sample Characteristics	Actual sample	
	n	*%*
Formal Swedish HE pedagogical Qualification (15 ECTS)		
Yes	81	66.9
No	23	19
In progress	17	14
Years of teaching experience		
I have not yet been teaching	0	0
Less than 2 years	14	11.61
2- 5 years	19	15.7
5 - 10 years	33	27.3
10 - 20 years	31	25.6
More than 20 years	24	19.8
Time devoted to teaching duties		
Less than 25%	32	26.92
25%-50%	27	22.7
51%-75%	32	26.9
Greater than 75%	28	23.5
Attained international experience		
I lived (or I am currently living) abroad	77	63.6
I studied abroad as a student (degree or credit mobility; undergraduate, master or phd)	61	50.4
I completed a postdoc abroad	19	15.7
I have taught abroad	70	57.9
I have taught courses in a language(s) other than my native language	84	69.4
I have conducted research abroad	62	51.2
I have attended a conference(s) abroad	95	78.5
None of the above	6	5

In total, 121 academics participated in the survey (confidence level 95%, margin of error 6,7%) with 63 also completing the open-ended question. The schools are of equal size, yet the response rate was unevenly distributed. Health disciplines (51) and business (39) had the highest participation levels, while education and communication (24) and engineering staff (7) showed lower participation. The higher response rate at the School of Health and Business may be attributed to two authors of this paper having affiliations there. The majority of the respondents were in their 50s (36%), female (55%), native Swedish speakers (68%), held permanent positions (91%), and assistant professors were the largest respondent group (37%). Almost 70% possessed a formal higher education pedagogical qualification. Teaching duties were evenly distributed across the categories of less than 25%, 25-50%, 50-75%, and more than 75%. A large portion of participants had extensive teaching experience, with 45% having over 10 years of experience and 72% having some kind of experience with working or studying abroad with varying levels of immersion. More information on the participants' demographic and teaching profile is included in Table 1 and 2.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through the survey were analyzed in two ways. For the open-ended question we applied a thematic analysis approach to identify the perceived challenges to teaching in the internationalized classroom. Initially, the plan was to code responses on the challenges according to the ITC model (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016), but this proved unfeasible as the data did not align with the model's framework. Following instead an inductive thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the first author initially assigned codes to qualitative data based on emerging patterns. The second author independently reviewed and revised the codes, leading to a collaborative third round where consensus was reached, enhancing the reliability and rigor of the identified themes. The coding table is presented in Table 3. While thematic analysis primarily focuses on identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data, we also tracked frequencies of emerging themes to understand their prevalence within the dataset. Then a Fisher Exact Probability test was used to

identify differences in perceived challenges between the participating academic schools. A Fisher Exact probability test allows for statistical testing of small samples with frequencies of categorical data. Despite the small number of respondents from the Engineering School, their responses to the open question were included in the qualitative analysis. As indicated in the section on the limitations of this study, the responses to the open question provide an impression of the experiences of the participating academics and as such are worthwhile to consider.

Table 3

Coding Table

Categories	Subcategories & sub-elements				
Teaching in a multilingual and multicultural environment	Language issues	Implementing intercultural competence (IC) - Awareness (cognitive) - Empathic understanding (attitude) - Collaborative engagement (behavior/ skills)			
Designing and delivering a suitable learning environment	Motivating students	Challenges in inclusivity Understanding students' educational backgrounds			Facilitating intercultural learning
Group work	Motivating students to work together	Facilitating intercultural learning	IC cognitive	IC attitude	IC behavior/skills
Institutional Commitment	Time	Resources	Institutional priorities	Staff attitudes	Practical constrains

For the closed questions descriptive statistics were applied. This analysis offered a view on the respondents of the survey and their demographic and teaching profile. Next, we identified possible relationships between the demographic and teaching variables of the respondents and their CPD interests, the extent to which they perceived challenges when teaching in an international classroom and their training needs. Applying a Spearman Rank Correlation test, the correlation coefficients were calculated for the questions with a Lickert scale format to determine the direction and strength of the relationships (if any) between the variables/questions in the survey and tested for significance using SPSS 29. Unless otherwise indicated, all significance levels reported in the section on the findings are two-tailed.

Limitations

Potential limitations of the study include sampling bias due to uneven response rates among different academic schools, potentially impacting the generalizability of findings. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Moreover, the English language used in the survey may exclude academics not proficient in English, affecting the diversity of perspectives. The standardized survey instrument may have limitations in capturing nuanced challenges. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and may guide future research to address the shortcomings mentioned.

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Findings

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In this section, we present the outcomes relevant to our research inquiries. We delve into the findings regarding the challenges academics face in internationalized classrooms, the competencies they prioritize for development, their inclination towards participating in CPD activities, perceptions of institutional support in internationalized teaching contexts, preferred modes of CPD learning, factors hindering or enabling their participation and the factors shaping their participation decisions.

**Perceptions of Teaching Challenges in Internationalized Classrooms**

We asked academics to what extent they find teaching in an internationalized classroom challenging. The overall findings revealed that over 60% of academics considered teaching in such a setting challenging (n=73). No statistically significant differences were identified in the reported challenges in relation to age, gender, years of teaching, formal pedagogical qualification, or whether English is their native language. However, we did find that respondents with higher academic titles reported significantly fewer challenges ($\rho = 0.34$; $p=0.01$). For example, professors experienced fewer

challenges teaching in an internationalized classroom compared to lecturers. Further, a significant difference was observed based on deeply immersive international experiences, namely living abroad ($\rho = 0.18$; p=0.05) or doing a postdoc abroad ($\rho = 0.27$; p=0.01). Academics with these experiences found teaching in an internationalized classroom less challenging. Moreover, academics in health-related disciplines experienced challenges to a greater extent than their counterparts in other disciplines ($\rho = 0.24$; p=0.01). The data further suggest that respondents from health disciplines encountered significantly more language challenges than their counterparts in other disciplines (p=0.007), whereas academics from the business and engineering disciplines reported significantly more challenges with group work (p = 0.009).

Of the 63 responses to the open-ended question 95 distinct challenges were identified. Figure 1 presents the reported challenges that emerged during the coding process and their frequencies.

Figure 1

Frequencies of reported challenges for teaching in the internationalized classroom

Frequencies of reported challenges for teaching in the internationalized clasroom (n=95)
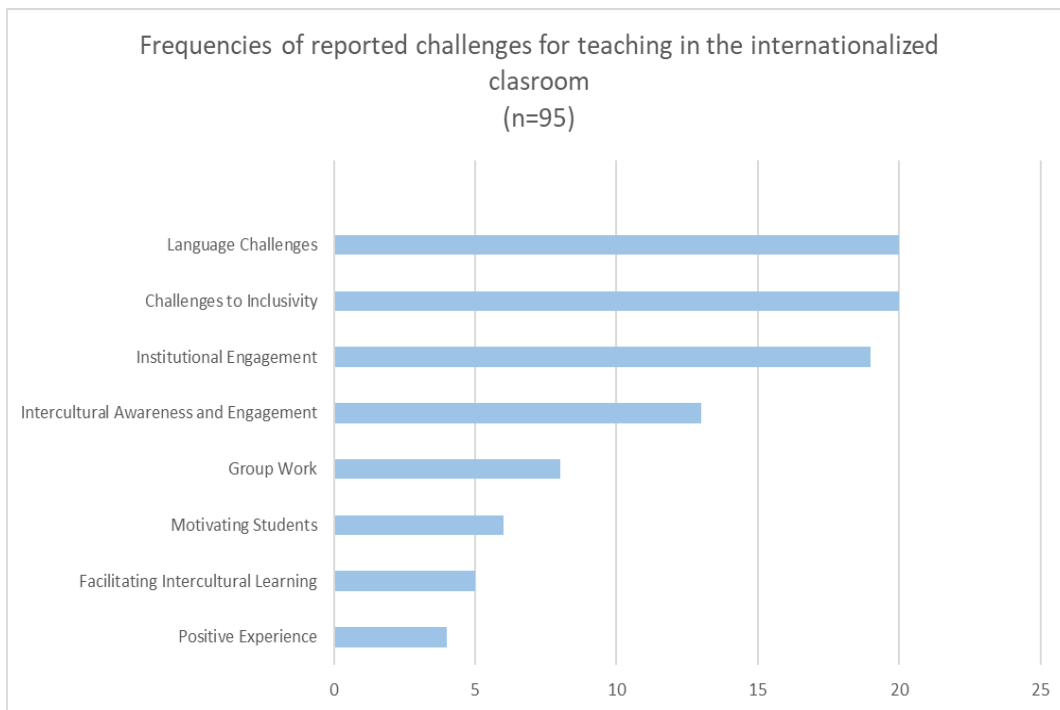
Upon closer examination of these challenges, we found that English language issues (n=20) and challenges in providing inclusive learning experience for all students (n=20) were the most prevalent, along with a lack of institutional commitment (n=19).

Concerning language issues, academics frequently expressed difficulties such as a lack of vocabulary, language barriers affecting comprehension and expression, and insufficient English language proficiency among students. As one academic noted, *"It is difficult to get the same depth in the discussions with the students. It sometimes falls a little flat."* (Resp. 8). Regarding challenges related to creating an inclusive learning experience, academics highlighted several issues. These included fostering equal participation, preventing discrimination, avoiding situations where students do not contribute their fair share to group work (i.e., students' free riding), incorporating diverse perspectives, ensuring students feel comfortable sharing their experiences, and acknowledging the inherent variations in how inclusive academics are in their teaching practices. Additional difficulties involved understanding students' diverse educational backgrounds, guiding them in independent learning, setting common expectations, and managing varied knowledge backgrounds and learning styles. The following example illustrates this issue: *"I have good knowledge of the Swedish students' previous knowledge in my subject since they all attended Swedish schools. In a class with students from many different countries it's always a challenge to get them on the same page, because their previous knowledge tends to differ quite a lot."* (Resp. 51).

Lack of institutional commitment emerged as the third most frequent challenge. This includes issues such as low organizational priority, resistance to curriculum internationalization, resource limitations, institutional pressure for homogenization, limited tools and time constrains. One of the comments highlighted this issue: "n*ot enough hours [are] allocated to properly engage with the students, understand their different needs and provide for them."* (Resp. 51).

Another academic questioned the responsibility for preparing students for a new learning environment: "*Also, teaching is done with few resources, and I do not fully believe that it is me as a lecturer who has to 'teach' students how to navigate in the Swedish teaching and learning culture.*" (Resp. 40).

Further issues related to navigating intercultural awareness and engagement (n=13) included managing cultural diversity and addressing intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings. Academics also faced challenges with varying power relations, gender-based resistance, title-centric biases, the often-overlooked value of diverse perspectives, and the need to address sensitive global topics, all of which added complexity to the teaching landscape. For instance, one academic remarked: *"It depends on the topic - if the topic is religion, gender, cultural studies - it can be sensitive, and various sources of knowledge, and emotions, are coming into play."* (Resp. 47).

Challenges in facilitation of multicultural group work (n=8) involved motivating diverse students to collaborate effectively, managing cultural conflicts, addressing gender-related collaboration issues, handling conflicts arising from diverse working styles, and dealing with marginalized students including free-riders and those lacking ambition to learn. Issues related to the assessment of group work were also mentioned as the following quote illustrates: "*In some groups if you have students from the same country in the same group it can be difficult as a teacher to identify who is doing the work, since some cultures have an internal hierarchy and if the group consists of different hierarchy levels from the home country, it is easy for the students to not adopt to the Swedish system.*" (Resp. 68). Some academics (n=6) mentioned difficulties in motivating students from diverse cultural backgrounds, including challenges in promoting collaboration, dealing with absenteeism, fostering engagement, and addressing varying levels of ambition and disinterest in cultural learning. As one academic noted: "*Students are not interested in learning difference in cultures*." (Resp. 6).

Challenges in intercultural learning facilitation (n=5) involved encouraging international students to avoid national clustering, systematically incorporating pluricultural and international dimensions into teaching and moving beyond a Western academic mindset. One respondent highlighted this issue: *"Usually, when given the freedom to do so, international students cluster together according to their nationality. Then it is difficult to promote intercultural learning."* (Resp. 34). Even though, the question focused on challenges, academics (n=4) also highlighted positive experiences in an international classroom in their comments, such as embracing a non-Western academic mindset as a strength, fostering collaboration with international universities, and viewing teaching in an international setting as an enjoyable and rewarding experience. As one academic wrote: "*Nothing [is challenging], it is the best experience ever."* *(*Resp. 87).

The Importance of Intercultural Teaching Competencies

As part 2 of the survey, academics were asked to assess the importance of 20 intercultural teaching competencies (ITC; Haque & Dimitrov, 2016) in their teaching. Most academics unanimously recognized the importance of these competencies, with no significant variations among disciplinary affiliations. Across all four schools, the participants considered each of the 20 teaching competencies as important (with an average range score of 4 out of 5 on a Likert scale). Perceived importance of tolerance for ambiguity exhibited a negative correlation with perceived challenges (ρ = -0.19; p= 0.01), indicating that as respondents rated this competence higher in importance, they experienced fewer challenges in teaching within the international classroom. Conversely, competencies related to including concrete learning outcomes for intercultural and global competence showed an opposite trend (ρ = 0.2; p= 0,05); as respondents considered these competencies more important, they reported facing more challenges in the classroom.

Surprisingly, no correlation was found between the importance of the 20 intercultural teaching competencies and the extent to which academics felt challenged by teaching in the internationalized classroom. Further, only one academic explicitly referenced the listed intercultural teaching competencies in the open question. This raises questions about whether the competency framework effectively addresses the practical challenges faced by academics. The discrepancy suggests a potential mismatch between the competencies outlined and the real-world experiences of academics, emphasizing the need for user-friendly resources closely aligned with academics' everyday concerns.

Continuing Professional Development: Perceived Support, Interest, Preferences

Only a small percentage of academics felt supported by the institution (5%) or their respective schools (11%). Additionally, 52% of academics were unaware of any CPD opportunities provided by the institution. Notably, there was a positive correlation between feeling supported and being aware of CPD opportunities (ρ =0.25; p=0.05). In disciplinary responses, academics in the business school who felt more challenged also reported feeling more supported by the school (ρ = 0.25; p=0.01).

While the discrepancy between perceived importance and practical application highlights the need for user-friendly resources, our findings also shed light on academics' receptivity to professional development. Significantly more

academics (54%) expressed interest in engaging in CPD to enhance their competencies for internationalized classrooms, while 30% were undecided, and 16% were not interested (p=0.01; one-tailed). Academics in health-related programs demonstrated higher interest (61%) compared to other disciplines, and among different academic ranks, lecturers expressed the greatest interest, along with female academics. No significant differences were observed based on the language spoken.

We found a positive correlation between interest in CPD and the perceived importance of 16 intercultural teaching competencies (ρ varying between 0.19 and 0.38; p varying between 0.01 and 0.05). This suggests that academics who find ITC important are also more interested in attending CPD opportunities. However, the extent to which academics experience challenges was not correlated with awareness about existing CPD opportunities or interest in participating in such CPD, suggesting that academics may not link their key challenges with the potential solution provided by CPD.

The primary motivation for attending CPD was the hope of improving teaching in an internationalized classroom (69%), followed by a personal interest in the topic (62%), utilizing opportunities arising in internationalized classrooms (38%), and addressing language challenges (34%). Significant differences in reasons for participation in CPD were noted among academics in health-related disciplines (ρ = 0.32; p= 0.01), where managing language challenges emerged as their main motivation, aligning with qualitative data analysis findings. When asked about factors that would enable their participation, academics mentioned allocated time (61%), a clear institutional strategy for the internationalization of teaching (41%), and collective engagement within a teaching team (41%). Funding held minimal priority among academics. This aligns with the obstacles academics perceive to their participation, with 75% citing a too-high workload as the primary obstacle to their CPD participation. Other recorded obstacles included conflicting priorities (45%), low departmental support (22%), and institutional support (20%).

Concerning CPD preferences, only 11% of academics favored a course format. Those opting for this option preferred cross-disciplinary credit-bearing courses up to 7.5 ECTS (approx. 200 hours) and in hybrid format. Workshops and seminars were the most preferred learning format, chosen by 48% of respondents. Specifically, a series of workshops or seminars was favored by academics across most academic positions and disciplines, with the exception of those in education and communication. The second most preferred option was learning from and with colleagues (23%), with a specific preference for communities of practice, scheduled discussions with colleagues within the same study discipline, peer learning and scheduled discussions with colleagues across different study disciplines. The preference for mentoring (as a part of learning from and with colleagues) was positively correlated with a "no/do not know answer" on interest in CPD, indicating that academics unsure about CPD are more inclined toward mentoring. Self-learning through organized resources (15%) and conferences on related topics (3%) were less frequent choices for academics.

Discussion

Our key findings emphasize the importance of staff composition over disciplinary affiliation, the value of immersive international experience, and the disconnect between perceived challenges and academics' interest in CPD. They also highlight the crucial role of institutional commitment and reveal the misalignment between academics' CPD preferences and current offerings.

While past studies have emphasized differences across disciplines (Bulnes & de Louw, 2022), our findings highlight the pivotal role of staff composition over mere disciplinary affiliation. Initial observations suggested disciplinary disparities between the Business School and the School of Health. However, further analysis revealed that factors such as language proficiency (Swedish/English) and differences in immersive experiences were more significant explanatory variables. It becomes clear that staff composition, rather than disciplinary distinctions, is of greater importance. This conclusion is supported by Aškerc Zadravec and Kočar's (2023) study conducted in Slovenian higher education.

Although we anticipated that prior teaching experience abroad or in a foreign language would reduce perceived challenges in internationalized classrooms, our study found no significant impact of these experiences on academics' perceptions of the difficulties they face in such settings. Surprisingly, immersive international experiences, such as living abroad or completing a postdoc internationally, may be significant for HEIs when recruiting staff for teaching in international environments. This aspect could be considered and potentially integrated into institutional recruitment policies. Sawir's (2011) findings confirmed the positive association between previous international experience and increased cultural awareness among academics, linking together personal and professional practice. Nevertheless, this connection may not be as straightforward, as indicated by studies that have concluded that academics might face challenges in effectively translating their international experience into their teaching practice (Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007). Yet, academics' previous experiences in the internationalized classroom serve as valuable learning material, providing rich examples of cultural diversity and alternative solutions for learners, aligning with the andragogical principle on the role of learners' experiences.

The fact that academics do not link the challenges they experience with possible solutions through CPD is, to some extent, worrying. Following andragogical principles—such as understanding why academics want to learn, allowing them

the independence to choose their learning methods, and clearly articulating the benefits—HEIs should develop strategies to effectively engage academics and promote CPD opportunities. Involving academics early in the CPD planning and design process could be one effective strategy.

Echoing findings in previous research (Czerniawski et al., 2017), our findings reveal a notable interest among academics to participate in CPD activities, with a stronger interest observed among female participants. In line with andragogical principles, academics demonstrated their readiness to learn, with the primary motivation for attending CPD being the aspiration to enhance teaching in an internationalized classroom. Moreover, many academics indicated their interest in the topic as a motivating factor, highlighting the intrinsic motivation. However, this interest may not necessarily translate into future participation, given the known influence of factors such as heavy workload, conflicting priorities, etc. Therefore, the role of institutional commitment to supporting academics' CPD, or the absence thereof, warrants greater attention.

Another contributing factor to the low uptake, as evidenced in Sweden (Weissova, n.d.), is a mismatch between the current offerings and the preferences of academics. Despite being the most frequently offered format by Swedish HEIs, only 11% of respondents favored a course as a form of CPD. The inclination towards collaborative CPD opportunities among academics suggests a connection to the learner's experience in andragogy, emphasizing the importance of sharing experiences and learning from and with colleagues. Given that academics encounter diverse challenges, it is reasonable to infer varying CPD types and solutions, aligned with the principle of independence.

In this context, the significance of institutional commitment to the internationalization of teaching and support of the academics cannot be overstated. Our findings highlight the various challenges academics face in participating in CPD activities, including heavy workloads, conflicting priorities, and limited departmental and institutional support. Despite these obstacles, a clear institutional strategy for internationalizing teaching emerges as a crucial motivating factor for engagement. Additionally, collective engagement within teaching teams proves instrumental in fostering participation. These insights underscore the importance of robust institutional support structures in facilitating CPD engagement and enhancing teaching practices in internationalized classrooms. To increase CPD uptake for teaching in internationalized settings, CPD offerings must align with academics' preferences and address their barriers. Approaching CPD development through andragogical principles, combined with strong institutional commitment, appears to be a promising way forward. CPD offers must align with academics' preferences and address their barriers. Approaching CPD development from the principles of andragogy, coupled with firm institutional commitment, seems to indicate a way forward.

Implications and Conclusion

Our study highlights the complexity of challenges faced by academics in internationalized classrooms and emphasizes the importance of a nuanced understanding of individual experiences and resulting needs and expectations. Between personal interest and the desire to create value for (and from) the internationalized classroom, and the fact that there is a lack of institutional support, there is an additional obstacle that has come to the fore in this study: CPD is not tailored to the needs and preferences of academics. The resources available are spent on content and formats of CPD that do not capture attention or sustain interest. Torn between many priorities, academics do not engage with or do not finish offered CPD initiatives.

Reflecting on our findings, we can conclude that an andragogical approach would be a good fit for CPD design and delivery. There are a couple of significant points that offer a reasonable assumption that teacher-centered pedagogy should be substituted with adult learner-centered andragogy. CPD should prioritize staff composition over disciplinary affiliation and address the unique challenges faced by different staff groups. Success lies not in standardizing content but in understanding the specific contexts of academics. The varying needs of our respondents indicate that CPD formats and content must be tailored to address relevant issues, such as language proficiency in the health school or group work in the business school. This approach argues against rigid curricula and one-size-fits-all solutions. Adult learners want to decide what is to be learned. Formats of collaborative learning and collegial sharing of experiences also suggest that andragogically anchored learning opportunities are better in line with learners' needs and expectations. Despite the factors that are seen as obstacles for CPD, there is intrinsic motivation and personal interest to pursue opportunities in an internationalized classroom. Finally, there is an obvious need for HEIs' management to increase the commitment of resources to further advance the transition towards inclusive internationalization through supporting academic staff in their pursuit of CPD. There is a valuable lesson for designers and deliverers of CPD in academia: listen to the needs of your audience, involve them early in design and delivery, acknowledge their experience, and build a foundation of collaborative learning opportunities.

Future research endeavors could delve into the effectiveness of CPD initiatives in supporting academics in teaching in internationalized classrooms. Specifically, investigating the varying degrees of success among different CPD activities and discern the factors contributing to their efficacy. Understanding why certain CPD initiatives outperform others would

provide valuable insights into designing more impactful CPD. Additionally, exploring the multitude of factors influencing academics' engagement in CPD is crucial, with a particular focus on the intricate dynamics of the role of institutional support within this broader context. A cross-institutional comparison emerges as a promising avenue to deepen our understanding of CPD preferences and needs among academics across diverse higher education settings. Such research could offer a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between institutional frameworks, individual motivations, and the overall landscape of CPD in the context of teaching in internationalized classrooms.

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Insights from Glocal Educators:
Unveiling the Transformative Journeys of Educational Developers

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of micro-level individual dimensions in the Internationalisation of Higher Education (IHE) on educational developers in a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) teacher training course. Focusing on 10 educational developers (EDs), the study utilizes narrative interviews to delve into their personal and professional growth. Through storytelling, transformative processes emerge, revealing shifts in perspectives, pedagogical approaches, cultural humility, and professional practices. The study highlights facets such as cultural humility, global citizenship, and a sense of belonging. Inductive thematic interpretation underscores the COIL course's role as a crucible for understanding internationalisation dynamics. The research contributes valuable insights into educational developers' growth, positioning them as pivotal in the global transformation of higher education.

Keywords: global competencies, educational developers, Internationalisation of Higher Education (IHE), pedagogical approach, personal and professional development.

Introduction
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The call for the Internationalisation of Higher Education (IHE) highlights how the multilingual and multicultural learning spaces of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) today need to be leveraged explicitly in pedagogical strategies to facilitate transformative learning among students and those who teach them (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Through internationalisation practices, there have been numerous calls for a new model of learning whereby formal education must be transformed to enable new forms of learning that are needed to tackle complex global challenges (Leask, 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2021, p.44).

Transformative learning is a process that involves developing autonomous thinking and bringing about a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions (Mezirow, 1997). It transforms frames of reference, such as fixed assumptions and expectations, to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally capable of change (Mezirow, 2003). This type of learning results in a holistic change in how individuals experience and understand the world, particularly in personally developmental, socially controversial, or healing situations (Yorks & Kasl, 2006). Transformative learning supports educators and educational developers (EDs) in developing a more encompassing professional identity through personal development and active citizenship (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). It requires competency in a range of new literacies and corresponding skills necessary to integrate them into practice (Maury, 2023). To bring about transformation, educators and EDs must be able to justify their pedagogical decisions and actions, ensuring they are evidence-informed, based on humanistic values, and open to dialogue.

To achieve this vision, a varied set of competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) are needed for educators and EDs to act as "change agents" who can positively impact their classrooms and communities (Savvinov, 2021). Despite this, research on the impact of IHE has often remained exploratory or descriptive in nature, with only a smaller number of studies designed to evaluate demonstrable impacts on students, let alone on educators (Sánchez-García, 2023), and even less their EDs. Most research on IHE also focuses within single contexts, with few cross-contextual or multidisciplinary studies which demonstrated how individual efforts for internationalisation might be scaled up or transferred across borders, whether geographical or disciplinary (Mittelmeier et al., 2022).

The (Glocal) Collaborative Online International Learning course

The COIL course considered in this study is designed as a transnational teacher virtual exchange course for in-service university educators aiming to enhance their pedagogical skills, linguistic competence, and cultural awareness within the glocal classroom. In this context the glocal classroom is viewed as a multilingual and multicultural learning environment, where both course participants and educational developers (EDs) navigate a glocal learning space - a space shared by people with different knowledge systems, cultural backgrounds, academic backgrounds, disciplinary backgrounds, and diverse linguistic backgrounds (Valcke et al., 2022).

The primary focus of this COIL course revolves around reflective practice. Course participants are matched according to their English language proficiency in tandems with a participant from another country and discipline through an online platform and each tandem is facilitated by an ED. The course participants adopt a reflective approach which involves analysing pedagogical topics related to internationalisation and the glocal classroom, while sharing thoughts and experiences with other participants online. The COIL course has existed since 2014 and has involved up to 30 participants in each iteration, from up to 12 HEIs situated in different countries mostly situated in Europe, with the recent addition of a partner in Brazil. Course participants are paired according to similar language proficiency levels with a partner from a different discipline – from medicine to engineering, from gender studies to literature.

Despite the COIL course's positive course participant feedback, its impact on the personal and professional growth of the EDs facilitating the course has yet to undergo analysis. This study represents an initial effort to explore the COIL course's influence on the personal and professional growth of its EDs through narrative inquiry to investigate its transformative potential.

The Role of Educational Developers (EDs)

EDs play a crucial role in higher education by contributing to the quality of teaching and learning practices within academic institutions. They are responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating educational programmes and initiatives to improve student learning outcomes and overall educational experiences. Educational developers work closely with educators to incorporate innovative teaching methods, technologies, and pedagogical approaches into the curriculum (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). In some HEIs, particularly in northern Europe, the role of EDs is well-established. However, in southern and eastern European countries, this position may not exist in the same form. Instead, individuals carrying out educational development responsibilities may come from diverse backgrounds such as language teaching or educational sciences and are commonly known as teacher trainers or pedagogical advisers (Sánchez-Garcìa & Dafouz, 2020).

EDs are instrumental in fostering sustainable development through education (Krayneva et al., 2021). They contribute to the integration of sustainability principles into educational frameworks, thereby equipping educators with the knowledge and skills necessary for addressing global challenges (Burmeister et al., 2012). Additionally, they contribute to the development of values and attitudes in higher education, which are essential for students' holistic growth and success

(Álvarez-Huerta et al., 2022). Moreover, EDs are pivotal in inclusive education, collaborating with stakeholders, problem-solving, and facilitating professional development to ensure that inclusive education programmes are effectively implemented (Murphy, 2018). Their involvement is critical in creating an inclusive educational environment that accommodates diverse learning needs and promotes equity. EDs work to ensure that curricula are accessible to all, including those with disabilities, language barriers, or other challenges. This requires a deep understanding of inclusive pedagogical practices and the ability to advocate for necessary resources and support.

Inclusive education is not merely about integrating students with different needs into mainstream classrooms, but about transforming the educational system to be more responsive to the diversity of student populations. EDs play a crucial role in this transformation by supporting educators within inclusive teaching strategies, developing accessible learning materials, and promoting a culture of inclusivity within the institution. They help to identify and dismantle barriers to learning, ensuring that all educators and students can succeed.

Despite the critical importance of EDs in shaping and enhancing the educational landscape of HEIs, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies focusing on the evolving nature of their roles and the professional development necessary to support their transition. To address this gap, the research question guiding our inquiry is as follows: What are the micro-level individual dimensions of IHE within a COIL programme that significantly influence educational developers personally and professionally?

The study will first provide an overview of existing literature on micro-level individual dimensions within IHE. Next, it will lay out the concepts and theories used to analyse the data and describe the research design. Finally, the main findings will be presented, and their implications discussed. The study will conclude with implications for the CPD initiatives designed by EDs.

Literature Review

The literature review explores the foundational principles guiding the design of our course, showcasing a rich tapestry of interconnected frameworks and pedagogical approaches. Collectively, these frameworks and approaches were used to encourage a deeper understanding of global issues, promote empathy and cultural humility, and enhance professional practices. The deliberate integration of these pedagogical approaches in our COIL course was not only comprehensive and robust but also transformative, providing participants with the tools and insights necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world as shown in Figure 1. The figure lays out the specificities of the different theoretical frameworks that were implemented to support educators in creating more inclusive learning spaces, facilitating transformation, and contributing to wider social change. In turn these outcomes led to the pedagogical content of the 6 modules in the COIL course.

The integration of these frameworks and approaches underpinned the development of our COIL course, ensuring that each pedagogical approach complemented and reinforced the others. This interconnectedness facilitated a holistic learning experience that addressed the multifaceted challenges of a glocal classroom. By leveraging COIL, we provided participants with a platform to engage in meaningful international collaborations (Appiah-Kubi, et al., 2020, p. 109), enhancing their global awareness and cultural sensitivity (Zandi et al., 2014). The Communities of Practice (CoP) framework served as a conduit for community building, widening international perspectives and fostering critical friendships essential for skills development and broader international collaboration (Altinay et al., 2020).

Incorporating cultural humility equipped participants with the skills to navigate and appreciate diverse cultural contexts, promoting a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment. Developed by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998), the concept of cultural humility contests the belief that one can become competent in another culture; rather, it is a practice of and ongoing commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique by professionals for the purpose of rebalancing power inequities. By emphasizing continuous self-reflection and a commitment to understanding power dynamics (Abe, 2020), cultural humility promotes inclusive and equitable education, aligning with the evolving needs of higher education settings.

Transformative learning theory was pivotal in encouraging students to reflect deeply on their perspectives and assumptions, leading to profound personal and professional growth. It enabled perspective transformation through critical reflection, social learning, and experiential knowledge, fostering profound shifts in beliefs and perspectives (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Transformative learning theory is thus a potent tool to enhance teacher effectiveness and bring about dissemination of changes (Mei et al., 2022), since the integration of individual and social learning allows for the transformation of everyday experiences (Fleming, 2022). It can be used to create opportunities for emancipatory learning and offers a unique integrated model with distinct dynamics (King, 2004). The documented benefits of integrating

transformational learning theory, such as enhanced teacher effectiveness, opportunities for emancipatory learning, and the dissemination of changes, also applicable to the online environment, highlight the relevance and potential impact of this theory for our COIL course.

Figure 1

Linking theory to practice in the COIL course: From frameworks to outcomes and course content.
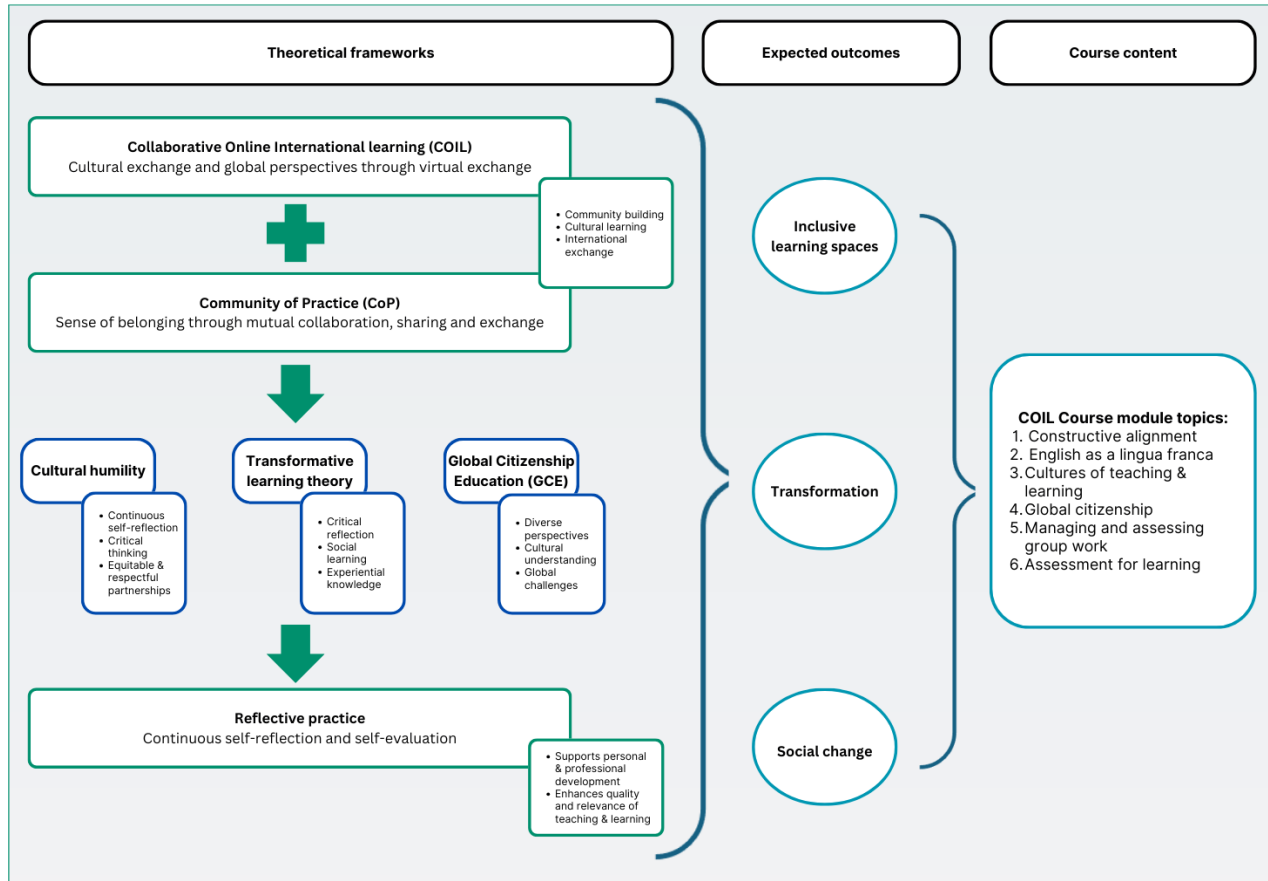
Global Citizenship Education (GCE) has emerged as a tool for educators to equip students with the necessary skills for critical thinking, empathy, and a profound understanding of global issues (Schalkwyk et al., 2019). Within this framework, there are significant debates regarding conflicting visions, diverse interpretations, and criticisms, reflecting the complex nature of GCE as it navigates through various ideological, cultural, and educational landscapes (Estellés & Fischman, 2020). These debates underscore the need for a critical examination of GCE, its underlying assumptions, and its implications for shaping individuals' perspectives on citizenship, social justice, and global interconnectedness. Nonetheless, GCE promises to encourage transformation by incorporating diverse perspectives, promoting mutual understanding, and addressing global challenges within teaching practices (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

Finally, reflective practice was built into the COIL course to encourage self-examination and evaluation to enhance future action. It plays a pivotal role in fostering effective teaching skills through critical self-reflection and evaluation (Blanc, 2015). Educators advocating for reflective practice, not only in students but also in themselves, can significantly impact the quality and relevance of teaching and learning experiences (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022). This emphasis on reflective practice aligns well with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which strives to advance inclusive and equitable education for all (Boeren, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

In this study, a narrative inquiry approach (Connelly, 1990) was used to collect and analyse the stories and personal narratives of ten EDs. This method requires developing close, empathic relationships with participants, which is not possible

in quantitative studies (Creswell, 2007). The strength of this methodology lies in its inter-subjectivity, as it humanises individuals' life circumstances and fosters imagination and meaning making among readers (Barabasch, 2018; Chase, 2011). Unlike quantitative research, narrative inquiry involves open-ended and exploratory research questions. This approach aims to understand the lived experiences of individuals through their stories, rather than testing specific hypotheses or measuring variables. As a result, many aspects of the inquiry are not predefined, and there is no underlying hypothesis (O'Toole, 2018). Our exploration included how participants described their experiences, the challenges they faced, transformative moments, and the impact of COIL training on their personal and professional growth. Narrative inquiry uniquely combines biography, history, and social processes, centring on individuals' life experiences as they narrate them (Phillion & He, 2008).

The narrative inquiry approach aligned seamlessly with the relevant theoretical perspectives described in Figure 1:
1. The creation of a CoP promoted collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and the cultivation of a supportive learning community among the EDs (Weinberg et al., 2021).
2. Transformational learning theory enabled EDs to develop a deeper understanding of global issues and diverse cultural perspectives (Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020).
3. The emphasis on cultural humility and GCE equipped EDs with the necessary skills, values and attitudes to promote inclusivity and understanding within the COIL environment (Valcke, et al., 2022).
4. The integration of reflective practice allowed EDs to critically evaluate their experiences (Peteraf et al., 2013).

Methodology

Study Design

A qualitative study design was conducted using a narrative inquiry approach that focused on studying and understanding the EDs' lived experiences through the stories they tell. It was adopted to explore changes in perspectives, attitudes, values, and beliefs about themselves and their profession. This approach often aims for an "epistemic openness" and enables the participants' stories and meaning making processes to guide the interview process.

Participants: The Educational Developers (EDs)

All ten EDs who facilitated the COIL course, and were invited to participate in the study, consented to be interviewed. These EDs brought a diverse array of experiences, which encompassed teaching students, providing teacher training, engaging in research, and pursuing various professions. They come from multiple disciplines and have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as shown in Table 1. Additionally, they have served in different capacities within various educational institutions. The EDs' experiences in facilitating the COIL course also varied significantly: while some had recently joined the course and participated in only two iterations, others had been involved in as many as seven iterations, with one iteration per academic year.

Table 1

Information about the participating Educational Developers.

Participant	Country	Position	Teaching Experience	Training Experience	Iterations of COIL course taught
ED1	Belgium	Lecturer	25 yrs	5 yrs	5
ED2	Sweden	Associate Professor	32 yrs	19 yrs	6
ED3	Denmark	Educational Developer	11 yrs	5 yrs	5
ED4	Spain	Associate Professor	16 yrs	7 yrs	7
ED5	Brazil	Assistant Professor	10 yrs	2 yrs	2

ED6	Spain	Associate Professor	30 yrs	10 yrs	6
ED7	Italy	Postdoctoral Fellow	23 yrs	7 yrs	3
ED8	Belgium	Educational Developer	15 yrs	10 yrs	6
ED9	Poland	Educational Consultant	20 yrs	15 yrs	2
ED10	Italy	Professor	25 yrs	25 yrs	4

Data Collection

The study was conducted in 2023, and data was collected through online interviews via Teams and participants received both written and spoken details about the study prior to the interviews. They were assured that their involvement was both voluntary and confidential. An interview guide was created with open-ended questions prior to the first interview. The focus of the interviews was to answer the research question: *"What are the micro-level individual dimensions of IHE within a COIL course that significantly influence educational developers personally and professionally?"* It was further broken down into 3 subsidiary questions:

1. To what extent have EDs developed a sense of belonging and community through the facilitation of a collaborative online international course?
2. In what ways have EDs' discussions and reflections within an online teaching community transformed their teaching practice?
3. To what extent have EDs experienced shifts in perspectives, attitudes, values, and beliefs about self and profession?

Data Analysis

The data underwent qualitative analysis, with open-ended questions examined through thematic analysis. This method allowed the exploration of commonalities and differences in how EDs articulated their experiences and constructed identities through their narratives (Botha & Nell, 2022). The analysis was conducted in six stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarisation with the data set, coding and comparing the data, theme development, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, writing up a detailed analysis.

The narrative inquiry approach employed in this study involved a rigorous process of data collection and analysis, culminating in the identification of key themes aligned with the theoretical frameworks described above. This approach captured the experiences of EDs. Data collection was performed through interviews, while data analysis through thematic analysis enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the research question.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data revealed one overarching theme, "Transformative and Inclusive Education through COIL community engagement: Embracing diversity, reflective practice, and Global Citizenship for continuous professional and community growth", along with three subthemes which emerged from data analysis and coding. This overarching theme, and the three sub- themes and codes are visually represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Data analysis with an overarching theme and corresponding sub-themes.
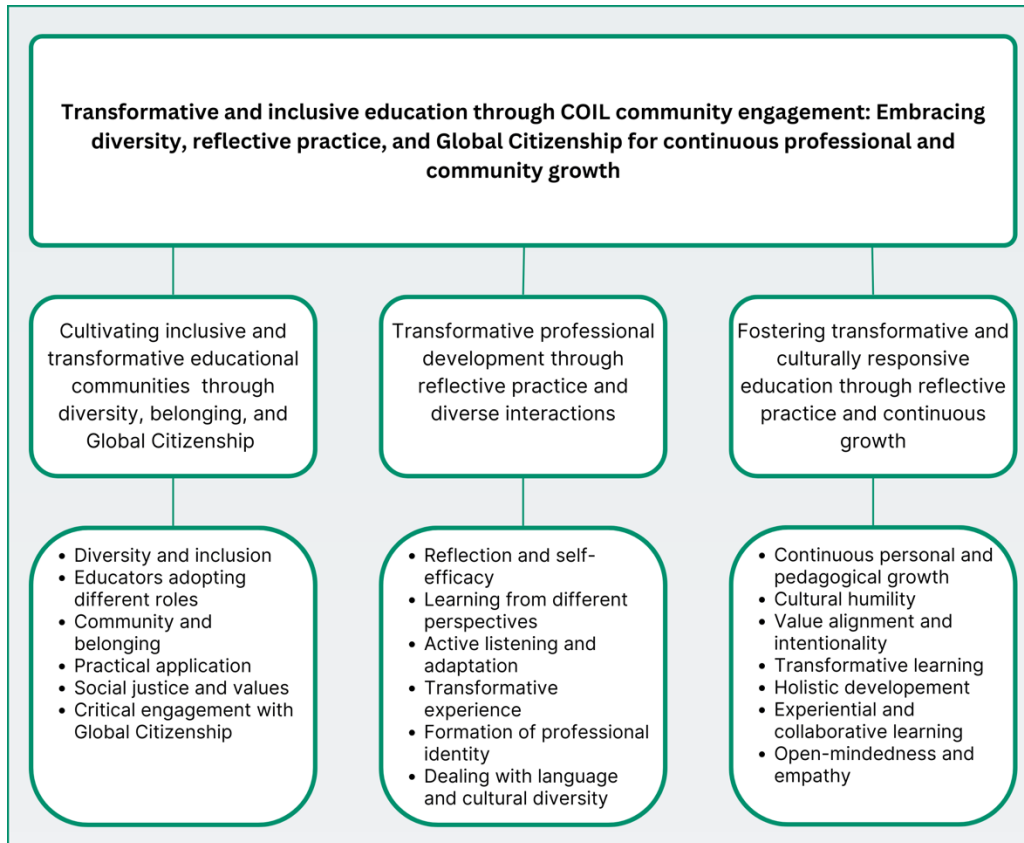
Sub-Theme 1: Cultivating inclusive and transformative educational communities through diversity, belonging, and Global Citizenship.

During the interviews, a majority of EDs expressed their belief in the success of COIL in establishing an interconnected community and in fostering a sense of belonging among its course participants and its facilitators. One ED articulated this sentiment by stating, "The COIL course make the facilitators feel at home and immediately from the very beginning. It's like a community and I think that this aspect of community is so important and so worthwhile" (ED1). This highlights the perceived effectiveness of COIL in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for its participants (Waghid, 2023).

Furthermore, our findings suggest that online discussions and Global Citizenship Education (GCE) experiences can foster a sense of belonging and community among educators and students, promoting knowledge sharing and connection within the learning environment. Some EDs shared their experiences related to meaningful learning and the development of a sense of belonging within the COIL framework. Some EDs acknowledged the need for time to comprehend the significance of a diverse classroom and its influence on classroom dynamics and learning outcomes. They viewed the COIL course as a platform that facilitates the creation of a safe learning environment, with one ED expressing:

Well, I think that in many aspects you can take these new experiences and put them into your own environment and realise that, oh, we've got this, they've got that. How can we approach our students with this knowledge? It all comes down to diversity, inclusion and sense of belonging, I think. Well, that we as teachers and educators have an obligation to make students feel a sense of belonging, even though they're very different from one another (ED5).

This indicates the recognition of the role of diversity and inclusion in the teaching and learning processes within a COIL context. These aspects are crucial in cultivating a sense of belonging and community, as they encourage individuals to critically engage with diverse perspectives and develop a deeper understanding of global issues. Addressing interconnected global issues is often complex and it can be challenging to break down these issues in ways that are accessible and engaging for students particularly in diverse contexts (Coelho et al., 2022).

Moreover, some EDs emphasised the importance of equity in meaningful teaching, with one ED stating, "Through COIL we lead to creating space for discussion and sharing vulnerabilities, make some communities visible" (ED4). This underscores the role of COIL in promoting open dialogue, inclusivity, and visibility of diverse communities within the educational context (Ahmadi et al., 2017).

EDs play a crucial role in promoting quality education in universities by transforming the educational environment, increasing faculty and student engagement in teaching and learning, and driving educational change (Savvinov, 2021). They also contribute to building a critical mass of educators and fostering a culture of innovation and sustainability within higher education institutions. For example, one ED voiced their opinion on the role of EDs as change agents for social justice:

> What struck me is, of course, and I say of course, the aspect of white supremacy that we can find all over the place and within the educational system as well, and the strong belief that we can be change makers as educators and this is something that I really cherish (ED3).

This activity, well-known for raising awareness about privilege and its impact on individuals, has been adapted in various educational settings, including pharmacy, nursing, and medical education, to introduce students to the social determinants of health and promote deep reflection on social justice and equity (Brown & White, 2020). The ED's experience with the Privilege Walk Activity resonated with the significance of aligning with their own values and the transformative potential of such activities within the context of GCE.

The perspectives of EDs on GCE not only brings attention to the challenges associated with its implementation but also emphasised the potential of impactful teaching and learning activities to cultivate critical reflection and awareness of social justice issues within educational settings. These perspectives underscore the intricate nature of GCE and its implications for educators and students in navigating complex GCE concepts and practices within the educational landscape. Furthermore, the role of fostering a sense of belonging, empathy, and the relational dimension of GCE in establishing an open and supportive environment for learners has been highlighted (Saleem et al., 2022). The findings of this study emphasise the capacity of COIL courses to facilitate connection and empathy, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a sense of belonging and community among participants. Lastly, the cultivation of a sense of belonging in educational settings strongly aligns with the concept of cultural humility, emphasising the importance for EDs to critically engage with their own cultural identities and confront unfamiliar constructs, thus highlighting the significance of effective and inclusive teacher identity practices and relationships (Arndt, 2018).

Sub-Theme 2: Transformative professional development through reflective practice and diverse interactions.

In general, EDs have reported that sharing experiences, engaging in discussions, reflecting, and examining various experiences have had a positive impact on their professional growth. Several quotes emphasise the importance of reflecting on one's teaching practices and continuously seeking self-improvement. One ED shared an enlightening experience, stating:

> One experience was very interesting, when a tandem of professors in Psychology and Anaesthesiology were trying to integrate topics from the COIL course in their courses, their discussions made me reflect and consider what I do in my own courses. And you know, listening and discussing with them was interesting because of their different perspectives then I could think, do I do this in my courses or maybe I don't. For me it was an incentive to consider how do I do it or even if they were lost and they couldn't think of ways of doing it, then I would maybe give some examples (ED10).

The ED thus pointed out the transferability of a different perspective and its capacity to influence own practice. In this way, the ED acknowledges the potential to enhance self-directed learning and application of experiences to understand and solve problems (Anderson & Or, 2023). Another ED described a similar learning opportunity: "The COIL course has generated internationalisation insights" (ED9)

Most EDs indicated that the connection with their own experiences and empathising with others' experiences fostered significant transformation. They emphasised that the ability to connect and empathise with their own and others' experiences served as a motivating element for significant transformation. The sense of gratification they received propelled them to persist in their facilitation of the COIL course. One ED articulated:

Actually, I have to think about it to summarise, because I think I've had these insightful conversations in every single iteration. It's been, uh, transformative experience for me from the very beginning and up to now. And that's one of the many reasons why I continue to do this COIL course, because every single iteration I learn new things. So even though we are managing the very same topics but there is not a single iteration in which I do not learn something new. So that is a value that I take with me and that I'm very grateful for that (ED1).

The EDs reported the development of various skills, such as active listening and adaptability, for example: "Learn how to be a good listener and deal with issues that are not directly connected to our teaching context" (ED2). One of the reasons for choosing a COIL framework was to enhance EDs and course participants' cultural communication skills and cultural humility (Hackett et al., 2023). Specifically, many EDs highlighted the improvement of their active listening skills during the facilitation process. One ED expressed:

It's also developing skills such as listening and what it means to listen, to actively listen to others. I think this has changed me a lot, I think it has helped me to develop that skill or even it kind of raised my awareness about the importance of active listening, in the COIL course especially because I was often facilitating pairs which were struggling in English. Most of the time I was there as well during the discussion, I was taking a step back and just listening to what they were saying and so it's completely different roles that I adopted. So, I had to learn myself how to do that (ED4).

During the interviews, numerous EDs explored a variety of concepts discussed throughout the course. They reflected on the profound influence on the personal and professional self that delving deeper into these specific concepts had. The EDs mentioned these concepts helped empathising with others' viewpoints, which in turn confirmed their teaching methods, pedagogical understanding, and contributed to the formation of their professional identities. One ED reflected on the impact of culture on their teaching:

When it comes to cultural awareness and I realised the importance of culture, and what is a culture or what do cultures mean again, I think the COIL course really gave me the tools on a more professional perspective to highlight its importance. I used to take these things for granted, you know, that's cultural awareness (ED4).

Another specific topic that was raised was how the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF) can enhance the cultural competence of educational developers, enabling them to design CPD programmes that foster inclusive and authentic interactions, guided by values of mutuality, inclusivity, and equity (Wimpenny et al., 2022). As one ED explained:

The English as a lingua franca, that was a change for me as well. At the very beginning I was struggling myself as saying as a non-native speaker and now I think I'm not so hard on myself, and that's what has happened with many other topics (ED1).

Our study thus points to the fact that learning about English as a lingua franca equips EDs with the skills to raise the visibility of linguistic diversity within educational contexts and promote positive attitudes to language, contributing to the creation of open and supportive environments for professional development (Rodríguez et al., 2016).

Finally, some EDs did express uncertainty regarding the source of their professional growth, questioning whether it was solely attributed to the COIL course or if other activities also contributed to their development. One ED articulated this uncertainty, stating, "It's difficult to say what comes from facilitating the COIL course and what comes from all of those other perspectives" (ED9).

The evolution of teaching practices through EDs' self-reported accounts represents a significant area of interest. The discussions with EDs on the concepts of cultural humility and cultural competence, particularly within the framework of COIL, yield valuable insights into this evolution. The COIL course is also typically designed so that EDs collaborate to resolve challenges and construct knowledge through social interaction, while also assuming the role of facilitator for the course participants. In this way, the study further highlights the potential for COIL courses to contribute to the development of self-efficacy and resilience, which are essential factors in building a supportive and inclusive learning community (Björklund et al., 2020). In summary, the findings of the second sub-theme underscore the transformative impact of discussions and reflections about culture and empathy on teacher identity formation in shifting own teaching practices. These results emphasise the significance of integrating collaborative and culturally humble approaches to enrich educational experiences and outcomes for all.

Sub-Theme 3: Fostering transformative and culturally responsive education through reflective practice and continuous growth.

When asked about the impact of taking part in the COIL course as facilitators, EDs disclosed that the online collaborative discussions prompted them to reassess their personal beliefs, values, principles, and viewpoints, and to form connections by identifying with others' experiences. In trying to create pedagogical impact and change, the significance of ongoing development for educators to enhance their pedagogical development must be highlighted, to indicate a continuous process of growth and transformation (Witterholt et al., 2012). For example, one ED shared their experience of engaging in discussions that aligned with their values, which impacted professional practice through confirmation of being on the right track: "The COIL course was an eye opener, discussions on glocal aspects such as bringing in the social justice aspect. It's one of my values, even beyond being a teacher, discovering and confirming being intentional about your values" (ED3). This type of reshaping of teacher identity through critically reflecting on pedagogy indicates the potential for transformative change in teacher identity and practice (Sardabi et al., 2018).

Indeed, such CPD initiatives should be apprehended as transformative territory, shedding light on the potential for significant growth and transformation among EDs engaged in transnational teaching (Smith, 2009). One ED acknowledged this transformation: "I think that what I see, the change, I think it's more in having to do with this cultural thing, whether it's cultural competence or cultural humility, in a way, I think that is what I've developed" (ED1).

We also found that one ED reflected on the cultural learning they experienced when thinking about the fact that students had diverse linguistic backgrounds:

Sometimes English for students is their second or third language and that they are excellent speakers of languages that I don't speak. This is where they know things about other cultures that I don't know. It became more of it's like a space for sharing experiences. I realised the importance of cultures as disciplinary culture. If I have done anything differently or if I'm doing anything differently because of, you know, what I have been exposed to through COIL in relation to culture and it is on pedagogical level and on a personal level (ED7).

Another ED even dived deeper by challenging prejudice and ways of thinking:

We are conditioned to think in certain ways, but we also have the power to stop thinking that way. We can be open minded, empathetic, and curious but can find ourselves thinking through stereotypes and that's OK if we don't act on it. I mean, you have to realise that this is the moment (ED6).

In general, most EDs identified COIL as a platform that augments knowledge and heightens awareness on various subjects:

I was facilitating, yes, maybe, but I was learning a lot throughout the COIL course and just by you know, many of the readings or some of the readings were new to me and then discussions with the whole group discussions I became more aware. I don't know if you would call this a pedagogical realisation or a personal realisation. I think it's difficult to separate one from the other (ED7)

The EDs in our study highlighted the fact that facilitating the COIL course prompted them to reflect on their personal beliefs, values, principles, and viewpoints, and to form connections by identifying with others' experiences. They shared their experiences of personal and professional transformation, emphasising the significance of sharing with others in supporting their transformation.

These diverse narratives collectively provide evidence of the ways in which EDs' personal and professional growth or transformation can occur within various educational contexts, highlighting the importance of ongoing development, community-building, and personal growth initiatives in shaping EDs' personal and professional journeys (Huang et al., 2023).

Conclusion: Implications for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Initiatives and for Educational Developers (EDs)

In the context of this Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) experience, Educational Developers (EDs) have self-reported certain micro-level individual shifts in perspectives, which in turn cultivate a nuanced set of competences. This transformative potential underscores the importance of various frameworks in developing essential competences among EDs and the educators they train. Firstly, the integration of COIL provides a platform for EDs to develop interpersonal skills, fostering empathy among them and creating a supportive learning environment. This not only enhances their professional development but also enriches their capacity to support inclusive educational practices.

Secondly, COIL is also identified as transformative, indicating that EDs engaged in transnational teaching undergo significant growth and development. This experience not only contributes to professional development but also broadens EDs' perspectives on teaching and learning in a glocal context. The transformative nature of COIL courses highlights the need for EDs to continuously reflect on and adapt their pedagogical approaches.

Thirdly, the emphasis on community-building, empathy, and the relational dimensions of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) underscores the importance of fostering a sense of belonging. However, it is important to note that GCE remains an ambiguous term, and EDs do not fully understand its meaning or how to implement it effectively. Despite this ambiguity, GCE serves as a valuable concept for discussion and reflection. Engaging with diverse perspectives facilitates the development of critical thinking and empathy, prompting EDs to consider glocal issues more deeply. This critical interrogation of GCE within COIL courses not only enhances the sense of community and belonging, but also pushes EDs to refine their understanding and application of these principles, further enhancing their competences.

Fourthly, the exploration of cultural humility in educational settings prompts EDs to critically examine their identities, promoting an openness to diverse perspectives. Such experiences become transformative as they allow EDs to model inclusive teacher identity practices and enhance cultural understanding and global perspectives. This critical engagement with cultural and linguistic diversity is vital for the professional growth of EDs and the development of their competences.

Finally, the emphasis on the transformative potential of critically engaging with pedagogy highlights the continuous reflection needed for reshaping professional identity. This shift in perspective involves EDs actively reevaluating their pedagogical approaches, aligning their practices with inclusive, global, and transformative educational strategies.

The implications drawn from this study underscore the critical role of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiatives in shaping the educational landscape for university educators. As we navigate an ever-evolving educational environment, it becomes evident that EDs should integrate innovative elements into CPD initiatives to enhance the overall educational experience and outcomes for learning communities, as well as consider their own professional development in the process. These findings have led us to identify eight good practices to support EDs in the design and implementation of quality CPD initiatives by integrating:

1. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): CPD initiatives should integrate COIL experiences as transformative for professional development. EDs should engage in transnational teaching to promote significant growth and transformation.
2. Communities of Practice (CoP): CPD initiatives should recognise the importance of a sense of belonging, empathy, and the relational dimensions of GCE in creating inclusive learning environments.
3. Global Citizenship Education (GCE): EDs should incorporate discussions and activities around GCE in their CPD initiatives to encourage the development of critical thinking, empathy, a sense of belonging, and community.
4. Opportunities to reflect about the world critically: CPD initiatives should highlight the significance of GCE in cultivating critical reflection, social justice awareness, and transformative learning among educators and students. EDs should harness the potential of CPD in encouraging individuals to engage with diverse perspectives and develop a deeper understanding of global issues.
5. Opportunities to reflect on cultural and linguistic diversity: CPD initiatives should address the concepts of cultural competence and humility and the need for educators to reflect critically on linguistic diversity. EDs should model inclusive teacher identity practices to enhance cultural understanding, language awareness, and global perspectives.
6. Opportunities to develop self-efficacy and resilience: CPD initiatives should focus on building self-efficacy and resilience among educators, as these factors are essential in creating a supportive and inclusive learning community.
7. Opportunities to transform teaching practices: CPD initiatives should highlight the transformation of teaching practice through reflective engagement.
8. Opportunities to engage critically about pedagogy: EDs should consider the transformative potential that critically engaging with pedagogy has on reshaping professional identity. CPD initiatives should encourage educators to engage in continuous critical reflection to bring about informed changes in identity and practice.

In conclusion, the insights gleaned from this study not only underscore the pivotal role of CPD initiatives in IHE, but also provide a roadmap for EDs to build competence for an ever-evolving educational landscape successfully. As educators grapple with the challenges of fostering inclusive and transformative learning environments, the identified eight good practices above emerge as crucial guidelines for EDs in designing and implementing quality CPD initiatives. In essence, this study calls for a paradigm shift in CPD approaches, advocating for responsiveness to the dynamic educational landscape and the incorporation of collaborative, global, and transformative practices to elevate the educational experiences and outcomes for all learning communities, including EDs themselves.

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From the Personal to the Professional: International Student Experiences of Seeking Employment in the United States

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Abstract

International students in U.S. higher education who pursue work must balance personal and professional pressures while seeking employment. While much attention has been given to their experiences of acculturation, stress, and psychological well being, further work is needed to document their personal growth, navigation of economic pressures, and experiences of seeking employment. This phenomenological study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore international students' experiences of personal growth and change, economic pressures, and seeking employment in the US. The results indicate that international students share many experiences of personal change with their domestic counterparts. Yet they are simultaneously navigating a new cultural context, dealing with economic pressure, and navigating barriers to their employment search. These barriers are rooted in the lack of clear information, misaligned support resources, personal shortcomings, employer perceptions, and visa restrictions.

Keywords: employment, international students, rationales for study abroad, student development, student services, student visas

Introduction

To understand today's globalized world of higher education, one must examine the micro-level experiences of individuals who navigate its varied passages. While past work has examined experiences of acculturation and stress (Jackson et al., 2019; Rai et al., 2021), COVID-19 (Aucejo et al., 2020; Ghazarian et al., 2023), and psychological well-being (Browning et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019), work remains to better understand international student experiences of economic pressures and the search for work. This study explores the lived experiences of international students in the U.S. related to their personal growth, external pressures, and search for employment. In doing so, the study contrasts the humanizing experiences of studying abroad with the economic imperatives that international students must face.

The article will delve into the complexities faced by international students undergoing personal change, navigating economic pressures, and seeking work in the U.S. context. Past research that has been done on these experiences has examined motivations behind pursuing Curricular Practical Training (CPT) (Renz, 2023) or the human geography of where Optional Practical Training (OPT) has been pursued (Kaemmerer & Foulkes, 2022). This study will provide insight into the lived experiences around maintaining good status for visa regulations, undergoing CPT or OPT authorization processes, and the social barriers that international students describe from their professional lives. These social barriers can affect the confidence and engagement of international students both as they experience the humanizing aspects of studying abroad and while they act to gain footing in their professional lives.

This phenomenological study captures and presents the lived experiences of individuals who came to the US as international students. The study will focus on the following three research questions:

(1) How do international students describe their experiences of personal growth and change as a result of studying abroad?

(2) How do international students describe financial or economic pressures they experience?

(3) How do international students describe their experience of seeking employment in the US?

The findings provide a better understanding of how current policies around international students play out for these individuals and inform recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

Literature Review

The US remains the top destination for international students, in part due to the disproportionately large number of highly ranked colleges and universities located there (Bound et al., 2021). A variety of evidence demonstrates that this kind of experiential learning abroad contributes to cognitive development, behavioral change, skill development, and increased employability (DeLoach et al., 2021; Fakunle, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). In addition to these benefits, many international students pursue study in the US for their professional opportunities and advancement. Student visas, unlike work visas, are not capped, encouraging those interested in entering the U.S. labor market to do so through its higher education system (Rosenzweig, 2006; Bound et al., 2014). Employment regulations, such as OPT (Optional Practical Training) and CPT (Curricular Practical Training) in the US, have a profound impact on the experiences of international students (Chen & Li, 2023; Coffey et al., 2018; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017). These regulations play a fundamental role in shaping the employment experiences of international students who pursue an academic journey through systems of 'edugration' (Coustere et al., 2023), "the recruitment and retention of post-secondary international students as immigrants" (Brunner, 2021, p. 26), as part of a global competition for talent. This literature review explores findings related to international student employment, examining their challenges, benefits, plans, and outcomes.

Job Search

Throughout their years of studying, as well as post-graduation, international students navigate unfamiliar circumstances in an attempt to seek employment. These circumstances include acclimating to the American culture, society, and job market (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). International students often arrive in the US with few professional contacts. Evidence supports the importance of networking with locals (or bridging social capital) for international students seeking work in their host country (Alho, 2020). These relationships can help international students become aware of more opportunities and improve their chances of success in pursuing them.

International students' strengths over local students include multilingual abilities, intercultural competence, and their flexible perspectives (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011), but they need opportunities to develop their employability within their host country (Fakunle, 2021). Some evidence suggests that benefits may vary based on the particular field and sex of an individual (Niu et al., 2022). Sangganjanavanich et al. (2011) outlined how international students differed from their domestic counterparts, altering their behaviors in an attempt to be viewed similarly to domestic applicants. Behaviors that international students adjust in coping with acculturation include their definition of appropriate dress and manner of speech such as adjustment of accents and use of different phrases (Spencer-Rogers, 2000; Zunz & Oil, 2009). Thus, as international students seek employment, they may experience personal changes as they adapt to their perceived expectations of the job market.

Resources for International Student Employment

The necessity of resources and support for international students seeking employment in the US is vital due to various external factors such as employment regulations, and restrictions, as well as public policies that identify the rights of international student workers (Tay, 2022). As international students often face challenges in identifying resources unique to their career goals, tailored support in the form of career counseling centers is essential in higher education institutions (Chen & Li, 2023; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). International students may need additional support beyond career services, as some evidence suggests that changing regulations and the subsequent uncertainty can be barriers to international students' psychological adjustment and well-being while studying in the US (Park & Shimada, 2022). Addressing the multifaceted external factors, including cultural adjustments, and the plausible need for career counseling assistance in navigating the U.S. job market is essential for fostering the professional success of international students (Chen & Li, 2023).

Plan versus Reality

International students have to contend with a variety of pressures as they pursue professional goals. These pressures can come from acculturation, work authorization regulations, and economic pressures with which they are confronted during their time as a student and alum. International students with longer durations of study (as determined by program length) tend to formulate plans to remain in the US for longer periods of time post-graduation (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007) and seek out more information related to immigration regulations, visa requirements, and career guidance.

In seeking to control external factors affecting their employability, international students often experience inevitable divides between their professional plans and reality (Schlesinger & Daley, 2014). For example, U.S. work authorization programs of Optional Practical Training (OPT) and H-1B visa acquirement present systemic barriers for international students seeking post-graduate employment. Despite being utilized by many international students, OPT serves as a temporary work authorization for only one year, or three years for STEM students. The limited timeframe to search for a job position, become acquainted with a given workplace, and work with an employer for a potential H-1B application significantly impacts international student success finding a permanent position in the U.S. job market (Monahan, 2018; Ruiz & Budiman, 2018).

The limited time for employers to decide about OPT participants can itself be a significant barrier. Tay (2022) described an instance of an international student who applied for post-graduation employment and was denied merely for holding an international student status, explaining that from a legal standpoint, international students are not protected from citizenship discrimination under 8 USc. § 1324b7 (Office of Special Counsel for Immigration-Related Unfair Employment Practices, 2014). Formidable challenges arise for international students seeking employment in the US as they experience misalignment between their preplanned professional goals and the realities of available professional opportunities. Further work is needed to document the experiences of these students, the economic pressures placed upon them, and the impact of visa regulations on their lives.

Conceptual Framework

This study applies Fakunle's (2021) model of international students' rationales for studying abroad as the framework to explore and understand the competing personal motivations and professional pressures that international students must navigate. Fakunle (2021) organizes international student rationales for studying abroad into four categories: educational, aspirational, experiential, and economic rationales. Educational rationales include academic outcomes and experiences. Experiential rationales consist of intercultural exposure and novelty seeking. Aspirational rationales are comprised of perceived opportunities for personal, professional, or moral development, distinctly emphasizing the pursuit of self-actualization and professional fulfillment beyond mere economic gains or status. Economic rationales include anticipated costs and the expected returns for pursuing a degree abroad. Fakunle's (2021) framework provides a model for interpreting international students' rationales for studying and seeking employment abroad.

Methods

This phenomenological study presents the lived experience of international students in U.S. higher education. The study examines how international students' experiences relate to their personal and professional rationales for pursuing higher education abroad.

Positionality

The researchers approach this study with a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 2010) and constructivist epistemology (Piaget, 1967). Both researchers have extensive experiences working with international students providing student services; one in the US and the other both in the US and other contexts abroad. One of the researchers also has studied abroad as a U.S. student overseas. While it can be difficult to discretely define researchers as an insider or outsider (Acker, 2000), the researchers in this study approach this topic predominantly as outsiders. The researchers may have struggled, as a result, to gain quick and rapid acceptance by participants during the data collection, participants may have been less willing to share the whole of their experiences, and the researchers may have missed inferences due to a lack of insider, contextual knowledge (Dwyer & Buckler, 2009). On the other hand, as outsiders the researchers avoid the risks of insider assumptions and the possible distorting effects of similar personal experiences on data analysis.

Participants

This study made use of criterion sampling as a purposeful sampling technique to select participants who were current or former international students at higher education institutions in the Central New York region. The researchers contacted International Education Offices and Offices of Institutional Research at higher education institutions in Central New York state explaining the focus of the research and requesting FERPA directory information of international students at their institution. Potential participants were also identified through social media groups for international students and CPT/OPT professional opportunities. Potential participants were contacted by email, direct message, or in person with a brief message inviting them to take part in the study and a link to an informed consent and audio-visual recording consent form. Participants were selected who had experience seeking employment through CPT, OPT, or other means. Snowball sampling was also used. A total of ten participants were recruited for the study. Their personal characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Sex	Status	Nationality
Aanya	M	Undergraduate	India
Ezra	M	UG Alumni	Malaysia
Jisha	F	Undergraduate	India
Kabir	M	Refused	Nepal
Mahajan	M	Undergraduate	India
Nathaniel	M	Undergraduate	Bahamas
Carla	F	Undergraduate	Nepal
Yerim	M	UG Alumni	Senegal
Heena	F	Undergraduate	India
Kaamma	F	Undergraduate	Nepal

Data Collection

Participants took part in an interview with one of the researchers and chose between an in-person or virtual interview. All but one of the participants chose to conduct their interview virtually. The semi-constructed qualitative interviews were based on an interview guide focusing on themes of personal introduction, growth and change, economic pressures, and employment seeking experiences. All interviews were recorded.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content and deductive analyses (Patton, 2015) informed by Fakunle's (2021) model. In addition to method triangulation, researcher triangulation (Patton, 2015) was used. Each researcher conducted analysis independently before meeting and sharing their findings. After each meeting, the researchers would return to the transcripts and review their analyses before meeting again until consensus was reached in the patterns, codes, and themes identified. The results are presented thematically, drawing on themes that emerged from both the qualitative content and the deductive analysis.

<center>**Results**</center>

Seven themes emerged from the interviews. These included: (1) Aspirational and Educational Rationale, (2) Economic Rationale, (3) Experiential Rationale, (4) Personal Change, (5) Economic Pressure, (6) Barriers to Employment, (7) Resources and Suggestions.

Aspirational and Educational Rationale

Participants expressing an aspirational rationale also often held an educational rationale for their decision to study in U.S. higher education. Many noted that more diverse majors of study are available in the US, which directly contribute to potential career opportunities in niche fields and the ability to pursue one's professional dreams, driven by a desire for personal growth an fulfillment.

"Geology is not really a popular subject back in India. There are very few and limited schooling options that provide geology [as a major of study]. Usually, [schools in India] offer geo-engineering, or some kind of branch to the subject, but not the science [of geology]. This led me to look at different places where geology [majors] were offered" (Heena, India).

Heena's comments demonstrate how the lack of opportunities in particular educational programs in one's home country can drive students to seek opportunities abroad that align with aspirations of professional self-actualization. Others were attracted to the US because they believed the education there would better position them for success in their dream profession.

"I think a big thing is the practical hands-on approach of universities here. My undergraduate [studies] were very hands-on, even though I majored in Anthropology and Global International Studies which are more theoretical. I was able to participate in internships and on-campus employment related to my major, which I could not have done if I was back home in Nepal… [The decision to study in the US] also came from viewing the broader scope of professional opportunities available" (Kabir, Nepal).

Participants holding both an aspirational and educational rationale in the decision to study in the US outlined pathways that consisted of goals related to pursuing a specific field of study and learning in methods that would not be readily available in their home country. These rationales were not mutually exclusive but interconnected, with students seeking an education that offered an attractive education that would position them for success and potentially self-fulfillment in their future careers.

Economic Rationale

In outlining motivations for earning a degree in the US, international students discussed an economic rationale consisting of the investment and opportunities of studying abroad. Discussions of economic rationale pertained to the long-term financial considerations and strategies that justify their investment in their education. Students provided details regarding post-graduation life and work opportunities that become available as a result of earning a degree in U.S. higher education.

"A lot of international students think about the value of a degree earned from the US versus [a degree earned] in their home country" (Nathaniel, Bahamas).

The decision to pursue an education in the US is viewed as an investment opportunity by some participants. They invest money and time in hopes of achieving independence, stability, and even to provide financial support for family back in their home country.

"I wanted to come [to the US] because of the opportunities post-graduation, related to work" (Kabir, Nepal).

These participants shared plans to seek employment in the US after graduation. They plan to leverage the knowledge acquired through their study abroad experience and earn income beyond what they could expect in their home countries.

For others, the economic rationale consisted of dreams for a lifestyle in one's home country that would not have been possible without study abroad experience.

"I was mainly applying for oil and gas companies, because in Senegal, right now, we are getting ready to extract oil and gas. So, my plan was to join BP, British Petroleum. They are extracting oil and gas out of Senegal. My thought process was, if I can work at BP, and ask them to transfer me home, that is the best life I could have" (Yermin, Senegal).

Here, Yermin explained how studying abroad was an opportunity to pursue work at a multinational corporation to transfer his new skills back home. Such narratives underline the broader economic motivations underpinning study abroad among some participants, framing a U.S. degree as a means to an end.

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Experiential Rationale

Some participants' decisions to pursue a study in the US was directly tied to an experiential rationale.

"Yes, studying in America and getting an American degree is a thing. But, like - most of my reason for coming here was to be independent" (Kaamma, Nepal).

Many participants described this same desire for independence and the opportunity to take responsibility for important aspects of their lives such as their finances and decision-making. The allure of a U.S. education was tied up in the pursuit of personal growth and self-reliance through experiencing new cultural settings and circumstances.

These participants expressed a desire to develop a nuanced understanding of the world, acquire life skills, and achieve a level of independence that they felt they could not in their home countries.

"One of the reasons why I wanted to move to a different country was that I wanted to learn [to do] things on my own, like handle my finances. I pay most of my [tuition] fees, or as much as I can on my own, and ask my parents for help on the rest. All of my other expenses, like buying groceries, and other stuff, I do that on my own. It's been a little harder [to do things on my own] as I have to work 20 hours a week and then also be a full-time student " (Jisha, India)

The experiential rationale embeds itself into the fabric of these participants' everyday lives. The motivation to manage one's finances, make autonomous decisions, and undertake daily responsibilities such as grocery shopping represents a significant leap toward self-sufficiency and independence. They shared how the study abroad experience was viewed not just as an academic endeavor, but as a transformative journey that shapes students into versatile, independent, and culturally-aware adults. Reflecting on the impact of this independence, participants highlighted how the process contributed significantly to their growth and development. Many felt that navigating these new responsibilities and cultural landscapes enhanced their confidence, resilience, and adaptability. Personal growth was a recurrent theme, with many indicating that the independence experienced abroad had equipped them with critical life skills and a deeper sense of their own capabilities and potential.

Personal Change

Participants revealed that integration into the U.S. academic and social culture contributed to their personal change. The experiences reported by participants highlighted a spectrum of personal change, underscoring the varied ways in which individuals engage with and adapt to a new cultural environment. Some reported having preconceived strategies for cultural differences, while others navigated their new surroundings without a clear plan, leading to initial challenges.

"The difference in culture and how it affected me is one of the most memorable things. When I came [to the US], I was very hesitant and shy, and even the smallest things would make me anxious and I would be overthinking everything. But, I had some supervisors and professors who helped me let go of that" (Mahajan, India).

Increasing interactions with their U.S. academic and social environments, led participants towards a transition that incorporated U.S. cultural values and perspectives. With this, engagement with U.S. culture can act as a catalyst for personal change, suggesting that immersion in a new cultural environment can influence an individual's identity.

"You observe the thought process [of American peers] and eventually what happens… is you become part of their thinking and like you adopt some new things" (Aanya, India).

The transition towards incorporating U.S. cultural values is not merely superficial but involves a deep engagement with the new culture that reshaped participants' thought process and perspectives. These experiences highlight the transformative potential of cultural immersion, suggesting that exposure to and engagement with a new cultural environment can lead to significant personal change, shaping an individual's identity in meaningful ways.

Some of the personal changes described by the participants were quite similar to what some of their local peers might have shared.

"I also found the best version of myself in America and specifically in [institution name] because I was finally out of my comfort zone and – I got more involved and did the things that I truly wanted to do" (Ezra, Malaysia).

For many in U.S. higher education, the experience includes stepping out of one's comfort zone and engaging in new activities that not only broaden one's horizons but also foster a sense of independence and self-confidence away from home.

"I was working all late night shifts, and it was snowing. One day, it was like snowing really heavily, and my shift ended at like 11:40-ish PM. And I was walking home slowly. I was not rushing, and this reminded me - if I was home, I would be rushing right now in this snow. But, here I have the ability to decide that for myself. Now, I have the ability to be calm and choose what to do, and I actually cried [about this] on my way back home" (Kaamma, Nepal).

Moments of realization highlight the shifts in perspective and priorities that can occur both when living in a foreign culture and when having the traditional residential experience of higher education. The participants' comments revealed how these challenges provide new insights into one's self and the world.

Economic Pressure

Participants described how their status as international students contributed to economic pressures that they felt. Shared concerns arose related to tuition, the cost of living, and other economic pressures associated with studying in U.S. higher education. Students outlined immediate financial challenges and stressors that they faced and the pursuit of on-campus employment as a means to sustain their place in U.S. higher education.

"I was not really thinking about it when I was applying [to attend a U.S. college or university] in Nepal. But, when I came here, it definitely hit me that there is a financial part attached to studying abroad, and you know you have to pay your bills, you have to buy a SIM card, you have to get a bank account, and things like that." (Kabir, Nepal)

For some participants, seeking on-campus employment and/or internships was more than merely gaining professional experience, rather, it was necessary to afford a U.S. education. "It was scary - I would always be checking my bank account like, do I have enough money to pay for the next semester? If I worked during the semester, I would be able to cover my cost. Although everything would entirely go to school, so I would basically have pennies for myself, but it was doable" (Carla, Nepal).

For others, there was a sense of guilt about the cost that they had incurred on their families for studying in the US. "Everything that I do, it's almost always about how to find a job after I graduate because I spent a big chunk of money when I came here, and of course I am hopeful that I can return some of this to my family" (Ezra, Malaysia).

Still others revealed how finding a job in the US was much more than earning money to survive, but was imperative for them to remain in the US. These thoughts dramatically shifted the priorities of participants as they pursued their degrees.

"It's like, instead of worrying about final exams or final papers, I have to also worry about finding a job, because I am graduating. I have 90 days to find a job, or I'll have to legally leave the country and I think it is quite scary" (Aanya, India).

This constant worry about financial stability, coupled with the urgency to secure employment post-graduation within a limited timeframe, underscores the precarious situation in which some of the participants found themselves.

For many participants, graduation and/or semester breaks were a time for increased economic stress. For instance, most participants described how their host institution served as their main residence in the US. Upon completing a given academic term, many were faced with housing insecurity.

"The summer is so stressful, like even now, every time I am not doing something I am thinking about it. Because, I am trying to apply for internships, but I do not think I am going to get one - I do not have a lot of experience with that. If I get [an internship], that's great, but if not, I do not know what I am going to do. That is constantly in my head, and I think that is the one thing stressing me out the most." (Kaamma, Nepal).

Economic realities for international students can significantly diminish their overall educational experience. These economic pressures not only influence their academic performance and personal well-being but also shape their professional trajectories and legal status in the country.

Barriers to Employment

Participants reported various barriers to obtaining employment specifically related to their search for work utilizing the CPT and OPT employment authorizations. Barriers to employment included student ignorance, discrimination, employers, visa regulations, and institutional resources. Upon the determination to pursue employment requiring CPT and/or OPT work authorization, the participants mentioned ignorance on their part as well as a lack of support from their host institutions.

"I feel like a lot of international students are not aware of internships or positions that are offered outside [of the campus]. I would not have applied for a position that I recently earned had it not been for a senior who reached out to me telling me that there was a great opportunity that I should try for. A lot of international students begin looking for internships around their junior or senior year, and it is very hard because career fairs have internships that are intended for U.S. citizens, or that are very limited in the range of majors [that are eligible]" (Heena, India).

Heena's comments illustrate how a lack of information and guidance, compounded by policies that restrict students can hinder ambitions, a sentiment shared by many participants.

In addition, the participants explained how some campus resources can actually act as a barrier in their employment searches.

"Five months before I graduated, I had already started to apply for [post-graduation] jobs, and I realized that my resume needed work, and then I was touching up my cover letter. I was going to the [Career Services Office], to build a better possibility to work in an H-1B sponsored company. And, it was actually extremely difficult because a lot of the guidance in the [Career Services Office] is not directly helpful for H-1B seeking students" (Ezra, Malaysia).

Other participants also shared how they felt most of the career services offered by their institution were geared towards domestic students and that there was very little consideration of international students.

Those participants nearing graduation or recently graduated expressed a desire to obtain employment with H-1B sponsorship. While participants acknowledged their ability to legally obtain employment with OPT, many expressed feeling viewed as an undesirable candidate when disclosing their limited work authorization time-frame.

"When I reach the part [of the interview] where they ask me 'Are you now or in the future looking for an H-1B visa?,' you can see the interviewer's eyes and body language change. You know in that split second, because they realize that I might not be the person that they are looking for, no matter how much they want me or not. Most companies do not hire [international students] because they are not familiar with our situation…[With OPT], there is a constrained cycle that international students are placed in, in terms of finding a job in a short period of time and making life-altering decisions" (Ezra, Malaysia).

A sense of discrimination and disadvantage due to their visa status limited participants' opportunities and as they attempted a constrained job search cycle imposed by their OPT status.

"I have noticed that [employers] look for American citizens. This has been difficult as they don't explicitly say that [in job descriptions], but they also ask you about U.S. citizenship on applications." (Kaamma, Nepal)

Overall, participants' experiences of seeking employment in the US under CPT and OPT authorization revealed significant barriers that affect their ability to secure employment. These barriers were multifaceted, encompassing insufficient information about professional opportunities, discrimination, employer practices, visa regulations, and misaligned institutional support.

Resources and Suggestions

Participants outlined resources and provided suggestions based on their experiences in seeking employment opportunities in the US. Suggestions were provided in response to both institutional and federal policies.

"I want schools to work with more companies - local companies, or any other organization because currently our school has a career services office, and if I am being honest, they are not effective… It is awful because they have always been home [base for career assistance], yet they are not sure about international students" (Aanya, India).

In regard to federal policies, many participants expressed hope for the alteration of the time frames offered for work authorization under the CPT and OPT programs.

"It would be wonderful if I could get a three year OPT instead of one year. It would certainly make things a lot easier coming out of OPT and asking for a visa sponsorship, because companies are more likely to sponsor a senior level or mid level position, not an entry level position." (Carla, Nepal).

The experiences and suggestions of these participants emphasize the necessity for a more supportive and inclusive approach to international student employment in the US.

Discussion

The results from the study provide insight into experiences of personal growth, financial and economic pressures, and the employment seeking among international students in the US. The results are discussed below in relation to each of the research questions before considering their meaning in terms of Fakunle's (2021) model of international students' rationales for studying abroad.

Research Question 1: Personal Growth and Change

Many changes described by participants were in line with those changes commonly reported by traditional students who take part in higher education – developing competence, becoming autonomous, and establishing identity (Chickering, 1969). Specifically, participants described learning to become more assertive, becoming more comfortable with extroverted behavior, and building independence. One element that may feature more prominently among the participants as international students was a self-reported ability to better practice perspective taking. This outcome of perspective taking is one more commonly associated with study abroad (Çiftçi & Daloğlu, 2021; Holmes et al., 2015) and global learning (Barker, 2020; Kahn & Agnew, 2017) than general higher education. The experiences that international students face throughout

their transformative journey studying in the US are not merely about navigating new social norms or language skills, but also about the deep personal evolution that occurs when individuals engage with cultures different from their own. The results suggest that international students undergo many of the same experiences of personal growth and change that their traditional peers experience, while also practicing perspective taking and other elements of intercultural competence.

The personal change narratives shared by participants indicate that the engagement with U.S. culture significantly impacted the ability to adopt new perspectives. For instance, Mahajan from India highlighted how overcoming initial shyness and anxiety through interactions with supervisors and professors was a crucial part of his personal growth, demonstrating a shift in perspective from hesitance to openness. Similarly, Aanya's experience of observing and eventually integrating the thought processes of his American peers illustrates the dynamic nature of perspective taking, where the immersion in a new cultural environment facilitates the adoption of new viewpoints and ways of thinking. These accounts underline the importance of cultural immersion in fostering perspective taking among international students, thereby contributing to their overall personal development. Ezra's and Kaamma's experiences further exemplify the transformative impact of stepping out of one's comfort zone and the realizations that come with facing challenges independently in a foreign cultural context, showcasing the profound influence of cultural engagement on personal growth and change.

Research Question 2: Financial or Economic Pressures

The participants described feeling differing levels of financial or economic pressure, with some deeply stressed about housing insecurity, others concerned about credit card debt, and a few confident that their parents would be able to help them if they failed to meet their own financial needs. Notably, economic pressures seemed to play a part in shifting the original rationales of individuals for studying abroad. Some participants described how their views of the job market in the US and in their home country caused them to change their course of study. The results add further support to the notion that these pressures on international students can threaten their well-being (Park & Shimada, 2022) by providing an additional burden to this population beyond the stresses of student life. Further, the results demonstrate how restrictions around CPT and OPT create pressure for international students (Chen & Li, 2023; Coffey et al., 2018; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017) and can shape their experiences of studying abroad in the US. Interestingly, one participant described feeling a push towards 'edugration' (Coustere et al., 2023) as they reviewed starting salaries in the US and in their home country and began calculating how they could make their degree economically worthwhile to them in the long run. For some participants, the economic imperatives they would face as international students in the US were something they anticipated; for others, those economic imperatives came as an unhappy surprise, destabilizing their studies and other experiences.

Research Question 3: Employment Seeking

The results revealed a variety of barriers, supports, and suggestions for employment seeking among the participants. The participants most commonly described the employers themselves as a barrier to their employment seeking, particularly their ignorance about and attitudes around hiring individuals who might one day require visa sponsorship. This finding supports past work that also found employers can create problems for international students seeking jobs (Monahan, 2018; Ruiz & Budiman, 2018). Participants also mentioned personal shortcomings, visa restrictions and problems, and discrimination as other barriers to their seeking employment. These findings build on past results indicating that international students need opportunities to develop their employability (Fakunle, 2021), and that their sex can impact the success of their job seeking, with past work finding males benefited more for being in high-demand fields such as engineering than their female counterparts (Niu et al., 2022).

Participants described the need to find mentors both on campus and during mentorship to guide employment seeking activities, to draw on support from career services and advisors in the face of repeated rejections, and the need to keep open lines of communication with the institution and the resources that they provide to be successful in their employment seeking activities. These results further emphasize past work that demonstrated the need for support from the institution for international students who take part in an employment search (Chen & Li, 2023; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Participants described their frustration that many of the resources that are available on campus are targeted more toward traditional, local students and often did not apply to international students. Further, they found that many campus resources beyond (and sometimes even including) their international student support were ignorant of the regulations governing international students and that left them feeling hesitant to start an employment search for fear of violating the terms of their visa. Participants who reported a successful job search either as a part of their OPT or even finding H-1B visa sponsorship credited internship opportunities, mentors, and professional networks for their success, further demonstrating the importance of bridging social capital (Alho, 2020) for international student success in their employment search.

Implications And Conclusion

The results indicate that international students deal with many of the same experiences of personal growth shared with their domestic students, but with the added complication of going through those changes in a new cultural environment. The results indicate that many international students are able to adapt to their new circumstances and successfully grow in their new environment. Further, the results demonstrate international students in the US are confronted with a number of different economic pressures that can impact their personal well-being, academic performance, and search for employment. Some of the barriers that they confront, such as misaligned career services and a lack of information, are within the control of their host institutions to change. Ensuring clear and frequent communication about personal and professional opportunities and support could help to improve their experiences. As career service staff are often untrained regarding the visa regulations governing international students, they may struggle to effectively provide international students with assistance. Having international student service offices work with other student service offices on campus to ensure that foundational knowledge and understanding of international student regulations and challenges could help to better ensure alignment with the student's needs. This work could help to better raise awareness of the need for differentiating the support student services offices provide based on the status and backgrounds of the students they serve. Further, greater training in culturally responsive service across higher education institutions would help to provide more effective services to all students. Other barriers are beyond the ability of host institutions to control, such as employer practices and federal visa regulations. Institutions should be transparent about these barriers to international students and prepare them to make informed decisions about their employment search.

Further research work on international student employment in the US may benefit from focusing on students of particular nationalities or from specific fields of study. These lines of inquiry would help describe differences in the lived experiences of international students based on those factors. Additionally, this study focused on the lived experiences of international students located in the Central New York region. Future work in other regions of the US may also help to define how geographic location might influence the experiences of international students seeking employment.

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Faculty Constructions of Internationalization: Practice and Perception in Omani Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the growing scholarship on internationalization of higher education, particularly in non-Western contexts. Literature in non-Western contexts highlights tensions around adopting approaches seen as 'global standard' where these reflect inequalities of power and prestige, shaped by coloniality. Drawing on conclusions from a policy document analysis, this study is based on a thematic analysis of interviews with 10 academic staff members within one college. This study explored how academics and leaders conceptualised internationalisation, and how they related these conceptualisations to their pedagogical practices in courses, interpreting their responses through a decolonial frame. Faculty expressed positivity towards internationalization in general and commitment to specific aspects such as global employability and competence. However, they also identified tensions, such as the prioritization of English over Arabic, lower value being placed on local forms of knowledge, reliance on globalized curricula and materials, and so on. These speak to implicit understandings of latent coloniality in institutional approaches to internationalization in Oman. These findings have wider relevance to other Arab Gulf countries, as well as to other non-Anglophone countries in the process of internationalizing.

Keywords: internationalisation, curriculum, practice, perceptions, pedagogy, teaching, international

Introduction

While Western institutions have dominated discourse and research related to internationalization, recent studies have called for more critical, contextualized, and varied global perspectives (Stein, 2017; Knight, 2004). iThis includes critique of neo-imperialistic and neoliberal economic paradigms dominating in policy and practice, particularly when imposing external standards and paradigms (Le Grange, 2018; Altbach & Knight, 2007). Literature in non-Western contexts highlights tensions around adopting approaches seen as 'global standard' where these reflect inequalities of power and prestige (Mignolo, 2011; Behari-Leak, 2019). Decolonial approaches frame these inequalities as part of a historical legacy begun during colonialism and perpetuated through ideological regimes that centre the 'West' as normative (Mignolo, 2011). This scholarship illustrates how the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2007) operates through contemporary internationalization. However, empirical evidence from the Gulf region remains limited, with few in-depth qualitative studies of institutional dynamics and stakeholder perspectives of internationalization at the micro-level. Given that several

Arab Gulf countries, including UAE and Qatar, aim to establish themselves as regional hubs for transnational and international education, this limitation is significant to the field (Al-Atari, 2016).

Based on a doctoral research project, this paper helps address this gap through analysis of academic staff views at a leading Omani university. It provides an empirical basis for debates on navigating tensions between global competitiveness and local identity in internationalizing higher education in Oman. The insights on faculty enactment of institutional internationalization policies also advances understanding of how policy intents translate into classroom practice at the micro-level.

Drawing on conclusions from a policy document analysis (Al Furqani, forthcoming), this study is based on a thematic analysis of interviews with 10 academic staff members within one college. This study explored how academics and leaders conceptualised internationalisation, and how they related these conceptualisations to their pedagogical practices in courses.

Literature Review

Internationalization has not been a static concept , despite reliance on Jane Knight's 2003 definition as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p.2). As de Wit et al. (2015) highlight, it has rather become a broad umbrella term for all wider global engagement, encompassing student and staff mobility, as well as global citizenship concerns "Internationalisation at Home" emerged in 2001, as a term used to cover internationally related activity going beyond mobility and embracing cultural diversity (Beelen & Jones, 2015). "Internationalization of Curricula", reviewing the materials with which students interact and how they're taught to develop internationalist perspectives and intercultural competence, is taken to be a broader concept (Garza, 2019; Hudzik, 2011; Huitt, 2013). Indeed Jos Beelen (2019) argues the distinction has fallen away or become meaningless as all internationalisation "starts with" the curriculum; although, given the continued and in some areas increasing importance of academic structures, governance and administration, this argument only holds in certain contexts (Cheng, 2019; Ourania & Witte, 2019). Yet most of these framings continue to rely on nationalist assumptions, the idea that internationalization means bringing the global or exotic into the other national container, which is otherwise parochial or self-referential (Marginson, 2023). Within the extensive literature base on internationalization in higher education, there are several strands of critique focusing on issues such as neocolonialism and what are termed deficit narratives (Bamberger et al., 2019; Author 2, forthcoming; Majee & Ress, 2020).

More recently, the term "critical internationalization studies" has become prominent in the literature base, as a term encompassing the scrutiny of the underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and impacts of mainstream internationalization practices in higher education, challenging their often-unexamined neoliberal and neocolonial underpinnings (Stein, 2021; Stein et al., 2016). This field emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, social justice, and the decolonization of knowledge and practices in international education (Andreotti, 2011). This branch of internationalization studies is rooted in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, drawing on the ideas of philosophers such as Hegel and Said. Hegel's concept of the "Other" informs the way postcolonial scholars examine the relationship between colonizer and colonized (Brons, 2015; Canales, 2000; Jensen, 2011). Said's concept of Orientalism informs the way postcolonial scholars analyse the representation of colonized people in Western discourse, extending Said's original literary analysis into media and education. Said also argues that this process of "Othering" the East, or constructing it as fundamentally different and inferior to the West, is both a matter of scholarly inquiry, and deeply embedded in cultural, political and economic structures (Mani & Frankenberg, 1985; Pasha, 2005; Prakash, 1995; Said, 1978, 2014). This centrality and analysis of culture has been embedded in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship of internationalization in higher education (Pashby, 2020; Behari-Leak, 2019; Ocholla, 2020) and such 'Othering' underpins deficit narratives that frame particular countries, cultures, or marginalised groups, such as international students, as lacking something with reference to the normative 'West'. Quijano (2007) further explains that coloniality (i.e. the system of thought attached to both historic colonialism and contemporary neocolonialism) entails the repression of modes of knowing, delegitimising all save the epistemic models of the colonizers.

This phenomenon is termed epistemicide—the systematic undermining or erasure of certain forms of knowledge, particularly those from non-Western or indigenous cultures. Global education, as advocated by hegemonic forms of internationalization, is shaped by colonial histories and neoliberal agendas, marginalizing and suppressing diverse epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2015). As a practice of global higher education, internationalization reveals dynamics and effects that can be understood through decolonial lenses. As Marginson (2023) points out, relations of coloniality are fundamental to the practices and structures of internationalization. This enables authors to actively re-imagine internationalization in a way that is more inclusive, equitable, and respectful of a plurality of knowledges and experiences (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Paraskeva, 2016). More broadly, decolonial scholarship on education and internationalization works to expose and address past inequalities and injustices, and to challenge the hegemony of Western knowledge, pedagogical practices, and research agendas (Breit et al., 2013; Du Preez, 2018; Marginson, 2022; Thondhlana et al., 2021; Wimpenny

et al., 2021). A decolonial internationalization would therefore be a model of relations in higher education based on equal respect and reciprocity (Marginson, 2023). It would also likely entail a move away from universality into the 'pluriversity', towards multiple co-existing epistemologies through contextualised knowledge that recognises the unequal division of intellectual and academic labour and resource (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Lecturers are a group of stakeholders that are arguably most affected by internationalization policies, and they are also responsible for the systemic and planned integration of international and intercultural strategies into the curriculum (Leask & Carroll, 2011). Studies of staff concepts of internationalization often find that internationalization is perceived as a top-down initiative imposed by the management of an institution (Barton et al., 1994; Zou et al., 2020). Kirk et al. (2018) found that internationalization strategies are often perceived to serve the economic interests of universities rather than the ideals of global citizenship that are used to justify them rhetorically; a frame of resistance-to the imposition of internationalization (Ghazarian, 2020). Other studies focus upon awareness of internationalization, as well as how institutional and disciplinary pedagogies, language use, organizational context and personal experiences each shape individual concepts of internationalization (Almeida et al., 2019; Leask & Bridge, 2013; Radjai & Hammond, 2019; S.-M. Renfors, 2021). Even in situations where awareness is found to be high, with relatively coherent concepts across an institutional context, and there is no apparent lack of willingness, implementation still varies due to institutional and national factors (Mertova, 2012; S. M. Renfors, 2019; Robson et al., 2018).Therefore, if we are to understand how internationalization is conceived and practiced, local studies are necessary.

Literature on internationalization in the Arabic-Islamic World is sparse, considering the size of the higher education sector and its growth over recent years (Al-Agtash & Khadra, 2019). In general, the justifications for the significance of internationalization often align with themes commonly found in Western literature, for instance Zgheib & Van Loan (2021, p. 94) note that internationalization may contribute to "undo stereotypes and promote cross-cultural learning, moving students from entrenched parochialism into an international worldview". Others focus on skill development. While this may be a rationale for internationalization in other contexts, it is a critical necessity for a region that has been heavily dependent on expatriates to fill many skilled positions in recent years (Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021). The challenge of mobility has made it difficult, but in conjunction with the shared cultures across the Muslim world, Khaleed & Ali (2020) propose that internationalization within this sphere, especially through partnerships with other Muslim institutions, presents a workable approach for Muslim students who have traditionally not been highly mobile. According to Al Atari, the most pressing question concerning internationalization in the Arab context is this: "How to be internationalized without being de-regionalized and de-nationalized (or de-contextualized)?" (Al-Atari, 2016, p. 6).

Omani Internationalization in Context

This question is particularly pertinent to the Omani context. Oman's journey in higher education reflects its unique geographical and cultural context. While the nation itself has never been colonized and is the oldest independent country in the Arab world (Gonzalez, 2008), two extended periods of partial suppression left their mark. The first under the Portuguese ran from the 1507 occupation of Muscat through to its liberation in 1650. Following this liberation, the Omani Empire adopted the Portuguese model and adapted it to their own needs, taking control over key trade routes and establishing themselves as a renowned naval and diplomatic power in the region. However, their influence waned as the British East India Company's grew (MacDougall, 2017). A series of treaties between Oman and Britain throughout the 19th century, although seemingly between peers, then essentially transformed Oman into a British protectorate. In exchange for military protection, Britain gained significant influence over Oman's foreign affairs (Onley, 2005, 2009). As Omans's economy weakened and pre-existing internal tensions rose, its trade and diplomatic network broke down and it became an increasingly isolated country. The discovery of oil in the region in the early 20th century further increased British interest in maintaining influence in and stability of Oman (Onley, 2009).

It was not until the rise of Sultan Qaboos bin Said in 1970, decades after the discovery of oil, that the country began to develop a modern-style institutional education system. The era of Sultan Qaboos, who received his education in England and came to power with a take-over tacitly supported by the British (Bradshaw & Curtis, 2023), marked a significant turning point, initiating extensive modernization across all sectors, including education, funded by the extraction of oil and gas. This modernisation relied mostly on expatriate labour, which was involved not only within governmental circles but also among the higher paid jobs throughout the economy. An education system was built from scratch; first primary facilities were established, then secondary, and finally in 1986 the first institute of higher education, SQU. SQU symbolizes the peak of Oman's educational renaissance. As the country's first public university, it became a central figure in Oman's educational landscape. SQU was not just an educational institution but a representation of Oman's aspirations for a modern, knowledge-based society (Gonzalez, 2008).

The establishment of further higher education institutions was prioritized to reduce reliance on expatriate labour, diversify the economy, and improve living standards. Langthaler, Wolf, and Schnitzler (2022) highlight the ongoing

necessity for cultivating local skills in Oman. This need becomes particularly crucial given the context of diminishing oil reserves and the shift from a rentier state heavily dependent on expatriate labor to one that prioritizes local employment in the private sector. The decades that followed the establishment of SQU in 1986 saw the proliferation of higher education institutions. In 2009, there were 80,000 students in the higher education system. In 2020, there were 160,000 (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2021). Through this period, new institutions were mostly private, and obligated to partner with foreign universities (Ameen et al., 2010). This is not the only way in which Omani higher education drew on foreign expertise, particularly from Western nations (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). This influence is evident in the curriculum, teaching methods, and administrative structures of Omani higher education institutions. The use of English in higher education, for example, is seen as an essential tool of individual and national development, and a means of attaining national business opportunities (Al-Lamki, 2009).

Collaboration with Western universities was intended to raise educational standards and align them with international benchmarks. In the case of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only national university in Oman, over ten different external accreditation bodies (established by the institution) are involved, with plans in place to expand this portfolio. The problem of economic diversification remained; solutions included the introduction of quality assurance measures and accreditation processes, modelled largely after Western standards; and the internationalization of the higher education curriculum, largely in collaboration with Western universities. These are actions that clearly illustrate Oman's policy of borrowing; all aimed at enhancing the quality and standards of Omani higher education, as well as the competence and competitiveness of Omani graduates in the national, regional, and global markets (Al'Abri, 2016). Largely, literature has chronicled this borrowing and its implementation on a practical level (Brandenburg, 2012; Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021; Albusaidi, 2020) there is no existent decolonial critique. It is notable that despite this effort to appeal to and meet international standards, the number of international students coming to Oman remains low: of entrants to higher education in Oman in 2021, only 2% were non-Omani (National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2021).

There is a stated aim in national policy in Oman "to promote the importance of the Omani identity" (Oman Vision 2040, n.d.). Yet, the tension between the internationalist teaching outlined in SQU and CEPS's strategic documents and Omani identity remains unaddressed (Al Furqani, forthcoming). This mirrors a broader pattern in the region's higher education sector: there are many words in strategic documents to the effect of encouraging a unique regionalized Arab education system and calls for the GCC to become leaders in the creation of a new (humanistic rather than utilitarian) education system (Al-Atari, 2016; Badry & Willoughby, 2016). Yet in practice, it is the Western education model which remains dominant as the sector has expanded, with the consequent tensions remaining unaddressed (Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021).

There is limited scholarly research on the internationalization of higher education in Oman, and none that we have identified adopting a decolonial approach. Al-Shikaili (2019) delves into the role of international partnerships and teaching quality assurance in private institutions, while Al-Waail (2020) uniquely examines SQU's role in reflecting Oman's foreign policy in the internationalization of higher education. Similarly, Brandenburg (2012) discussed SQU's internal policy-making, and highlighted the influence of British and American models. Albusaidi (2020) explores the widespread use of English in Omani higher education institutions, analyzing the impact of English as a Medium of Instruction and globalization on the sector through the lenses of World Systems Theory and Dependency Theory. Of the literature on internationalization in Omani HE, only Al Abry (2018) focuses on staff perceptions, specifically within Transnational Higher Education, in his case solely in private higher education institutions. Al Abry reveals a general satisfaction but also pinpoints areas of concern such as financial constraints, socio-cultural challenges, and communication issues among key stakeholders. Some of these concerns are practical, others drawing more explicitly on the decolonial scholarship outlined above hint at cultural tensions which have emerged through the widespread adoption of Western models in Omani HE. However, none of these previous studies have explored how staff conceptualise and seek to bring about internationalization, reflecting a wider lack of scholarship in GCC literature and practice. The interconnected histories and contemporary realities of GCC states like Oman, located at the junction of Asian and Middle Eastern spheres of influence, emphasize the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of the region within higher education research (Teferra, 2013). As Kinoshita and Okamoto note, institutions in non-Western contexts "face different challenges or issues surrounding internationalization" compared to Western establishments where most literature has focused (2021, p. 152). GCC states have common historical roots to the Ottoman empire and experiences of European colonial influence that continue to have an impact on their modern tertiary education systems (Owen, 2004). Region-wide factors like the expansion of private education affiliated with Western institutions (Wilkins, 2011), shifts towards English as medium of instruction (Dearden, 2015), and reliance on expatriate labour (Brewer, 2007) have shaped common policy directions. Previous studies on mobility, branch campuses and the labour market have all found similarities between different Gulf nations (Al-Agtash & Khadra, 2019; Bensaid & Brahimi, 2021). Conceptualizations of internationalization would likely also be broadly similar; as would staff tendencies to push back and prefer a more humanistic, rather than utilitarian, approach to education (Badry & Willoughby, 2016).

This paper focuses on staff perceptions in a single college within SQU, recognizing that lecturers are ultimately responsible for using of international and intercultural strategies into the curriculum (Leask & Carroll, 2011). The concepts they hold of internationalization are one key factor in how they realise internationalization in their pedagogy (Foster & Carver, 2018). To investigate the interplay between staff conceptualization, and pedagogy, this paper investigates "how academic staff in the College of Economics and Political Science (SQU) conceptualize internationalization in Higher Education, and how this shapes their pedagogy." Through the investigation of this question, we will see the tensions between the Western conceptualization of internationalization which predominates in Omani HE policy, and the concepts and practices of individual academic instructors.

Methodology

Based on a constructivist research paradigm, this project undertook a qualitative case study of SQU, specifically the College of Economics and Political Science, to understand the unique ways in which internationalization is construed and constructed within this specific academic setting. As an employee of this institution, though not of the College, Author 1 has been closely immersed in the multi-layered policy context and staff experience.

Qualitative case studies manifest two pivotal strengths: particularism and thick description (Merriam, 1998). This study therefore took SQU as a particular site, with unique characteristics, and aimed to generate thick description through document analysis, to provide institutional lenses, and staff interviews to generate a grounded perspective of how internationalisation is enacted within classrooms. SQU is recognized as the Omani university with the most significant international exposure. CEPS has been selected as the focus of this study because it is the sole college within the university dedicated to humanitarian studies that possesses a clearly documented Internationalization Policy on its website, marking it as the college most committed to internationalization.

The study is based on the Progressive Focusing (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972) approach for data collection, which is carried out in interconnected phases. Data collection in such a research process is about contextualising the theory and data. As such, it is a flexible, fluid and seamless process. The Progressive Focusing approach delivers the prospect of comparing theory with empirical data, which is its main advantage (Stake, 2010). The study was initiated with a focused framework, questions and methodology derived from the literature. Modifications to provisional plans were based on the data collected in each phase to inform the subsequent phase.

The first phase of data collection involved compiling all internationalisation-related documents at three levels: within the School CEPS, through the institution of SQU, and at national level in Oman. This involved snowballing techniques and thorough research to identify documents not publicly available. Initial inductive thematic analysis highlighted key themes in relation to quality, benchmarking, and results of this study are reported in Al Furqani (forthcoming). This also involved stakeholder conversations.

The second phase of data collection, conducted during the 2021 COVID-19 lockdowns and travel bans, relied on online semi-structured interviews, which form the basis for this paper. Most participants, as well as the research team, were accustomed to engaging in online video settings. Online interviews were also deemed the most ethical choice given concerns about potential COVID-19 exposure, and proved to be effective in this study.. The data collection was managed by the principal investigator, who occupied an insider/outsider role in the institution, as an SQU member of staff, but not a member of the CEPS, and current PhD researcher outside the country. This dual role lent valuable knowledge in terms of institutional structures, yet enabled an outsider's perspective to be adopted during interviews.

The 10 participants interviewed for this study were all Omani nationals. All participants were involved in teaching business courses at the undergraduate or graduate level at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). The participants all held a PhD and studied abroad for their graduate degrees, in English-speaking Western countries like the UK, US and Australia, fully funded by Omani scholarships intended to internationalize the staff of SQU and the elite of Oman more generally. Their teaching experiences after their doctoral education ranged from 3 years to over 25 years, with an average of 13 years. While the participants had many commonalities, their individual trajectories were expected to shape their perspectives on internationalization. For example, some were more established academics while others were early-career lecturers. All had studied abroad, but the length and depth of their experiences in international contexts varied. Their positions at SQU also differed, with some holding leadership roles related to internationalization initiatives. As such, the researcher expected that their varied contexts might shape the perspectives they held.

Interview questions were formulated to be open-ended, exploratory, and layered. They were structured to elicit both descriptive and reflective responses, targeting various facets of internationalization in higher education, from conceptual understandings to pedagogical implications, and informed by the analysis of the policy documents analysed. Clarifications and interpretations were sought throughout.

Recordings were processed through Zoom to auto-generate verbatim transcripts. All participant names were removed to safeguard individual identities, and transcripts were reviewed for clarity and accuracy. Here, we report quotes

using participant numbers to help obscure individual identities. We have retained the real name of the college and university, however, considering that they would be easily identified by the contextual information needed to interpret findings with any validity. All sensitive or potentially identifying information shared in the context of the interviews has been redacted.

Using qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti), from inductive coding (Saldaña, 2016), reflexive thematic analysis was conducted (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The method aims to identify nuanced patterns of meaning across a data set, informed by the researchers own reflexivity. A reflexive journal was kept to acknowledge and interrogate the first author's role, assumptions, and influence on the analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Coding practices and key examples were shared periodically with the research team to enhance reliability. Thematic maps were developed at specific stages of the analytical process. These maps served as a dynamic and evolving representation of the identified themes, capturing the relational and hierarchical structure. Sense-checking of analysis was conducted with wider institutional stakeholders.

Results and Discussion: Internationalization in Tension

Definitions of internationalization given by staff centred upon taking ideas and frameworks from international contexts and adapting them for use in Oman and specifically within CEPS, to give students skills associated with being a "global graduate". As illustrative examples, Participant 1 described obtaining ideas for active learning techniques at international conferences and then modifying them for use in their classroom. Participant 3 recalled being at "Leiden University, Rotterdam University, and … really intrigued by what they call problem-based learning." These show the impact of international pedagogy on how participants taught within CEPS. Participants presented the apparent aim of this style of teaching, and of internationalization, as the creation of "global graduates" equipped with both professional and personal competencies. Importantly, they should be interculturally competent and flexible, able to apply "whatever he or she learned in the classroom, in any organization, whether this organization is in Oman or outside Oman" (P8). Internationalization thus focuses on personal attributes which enable this global outlook, which should be prioritized because "if you are not equipped with those personal attributes, you wouldn't be able to be professionally equipped or fit in the working environment" (P2).

A broad commonality between participants was the regular occupation of a pragmatic middle ground in assessing internationalization efforts, recognizing both advantages and drawbacks. Participant 4 valued aligning with global standards but critiqued partnerships that lack meaningful exchanges. Participant 7 saw benefits in student experiences abroad but noted that financial barriers limit access. Participant 4 for instance critiqued the focus on "collaboration with other universities" rather than "curriculum-based internationalisation and student experience." These balanced and nuanced perspectives characterize a general mentality of critically evaluating policies in action, rather than accepting or rejecting them outright. Indeed, the complexity of their overall perspectives aligns with research showing academics take a more reflective stance on internationalization policy aims versus administrators (Buckner & Stein, 2020).

As part of this reflective stance, staff also held counter-narratives to the generally positive conception of internationalization. While they recognized the benefits of international standards, collaborations, and student experiences abroad, some critiqued the underlying motivations as being driven by competition and reputation rather than educational quality per se. According to these, accreditation is "the game of the international community" (P3) aimed at giving SQU a "global name and brand" (P10) to attract investment and compete in rankings, which favour Western universities. Despite these reservations, most staff agreed accreditation had positively impacted teaching and students through exposure to higher expectations and global mobility.

Emulating the West: benchmarks, exposure, English and textbooks

The idea of emulating the West has been central in the development of teaching at CEPS, mediated through Benchmarking. Benchmarking was described by staff, especially in its early stages, as heavily inclined towards American and, to a lesser extent, Western curricula. Participant 6 was actively involved as a translator between international standards and the college-level curricular setup: "we picked accredited universities in the United States, a couple of universities in Australia, one university within the region within the Middle East. So altogether, we had 20." Hence "The curriculum of the college was modelled after a typical American business school." (P10) While participants recognized that benchmarking against high-ranking international institutions elevates standards, the implicit message is that American or Western standards are inherently superior, which subtly perpetuates epistemicide by erasing or marginalizing indigenous Omani or regional educational traditions and practices (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Thondhlana et al., 2021). This benchmarking process, in essence, represents a form of neo-imperialism: the imposition of Western pedagogical structures onto Omani educational institutions (Ghani et al., 2022). Even the subsequent diversification of benchmarking towards other global institutions, as described by the participants, leans heavily towards the West, perpetuating the same concern.

Staff Diversity

Staff diversity at SQU is a fact of life and policy objective, and although recently there has been a turn towards Omanisation at a national level, it is not referred to in SQU policies (Al Furqani, forthcoming). Participant 6 notes that they are part of a very diverse department, with international faculty members constituting about 80% of the staff. Participant 8 describes their department as dynamic, with people constantly coming in and out, contributing to that diversity. However, they noted "you can find one department which is totally all Omanis, almost the same age" and noted that diversity varied considerably on a departmental basis. When speaking about the university as a whole, academics considered staff diversity to be adequate, but some participants argue there would be benefits to a greater proportion of Western staff. While staff diversity at SQU is celebrated, there's an undertone of hierarchy in the preferences—wanting more Western staff, which implies a certain hierarchy in valuing international faculty based on origin. Is there an implicit assumption that these staff bring "better" or "more global" perspectives? This unintentionally conveys the idea of superiority of specific nationalities and cultures, thereby sustaining comparable colonial perceptions. A similar narrative on a global scale underpins the reason given for a lack of Western students studying in the Middle East: cultural barriers (as well as financial) and the consequent under-ranking of Omani universities compared to European/American counterparts (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016).

Prioritizing English

The prioritization of English as the primary language of instruction acts similarly as both a tool of internationalization and a potential agent of cultural erosion. Participant 1 believes that English is best for instruction because "having a strong or very good English, spoken and written, really helps in meeting that international standardization or standards in education." Similarly, P5 believes that English is "commonly used all over the world … Even if you go to Europe, they speak German or Spanish, but still, they can understand English." The business school is "effectively international because teaching is done mostly in English" and students "automatically gain that extra language besides the Arabic" (P4). While it may facilitate wider communication, it risks the decrease of Arabic language proficiency among students and further alienates them from their cultural roots (Du Preez, 2018; Thondhlana et al., 2021). Three participants would clearly prefer a greater use of Arabic within SQU, and not just for the practical reason that some incoming students find English hard. Participant 2 believes that "our mother's tongue should be used in our education". This was tied to the development of Omani identity; "English can be an obstacle" hindering one's ability to understand their own culture and identity and "represent Oman". Participant 4 echoed these sentiments, adding that they believe it is better to "think critically in one's language". Again, this speaks to decolonial concerns about the profound connection between language, culture, and epistemology (Wa Thiong'o, 1992).

International Curriculum Materials

The use of international textbooks was considered more problematic by staff. Participant 8 noted that "the curriculum starts with the textbook always." As some participants narrated, international textbooks provide global case studies, resources, and alignment with curricula worldwide; this is internationalization in action (P3, P5, P8, P10). However, many staff critiqued the Western, and particularly American, focus of these materials as limiting applicability in the Omani context, emphasizing that they did extra work themselves to incorporate the Omani context. The staff here are in alignment with the literature arguing internationalization should balance local relevance with global perspectives (Altbach & Knight, 2007). While not using the language of decoloniality explicitly, staff raised many concerns which echo decolonial critiques. For instance, the Arabized version of Harvard Business Review was referred to as a "gloss over" as the refers to the "same research" as the "US and Europe" (P4); the Arab cases are not viewed as authentic. Participant 7 was the most clearly critical, stating that they have "this Arab world edition, which I don't like at all and I'm totally against them" based on the idea that American textbooks embed on American norms for "political and economic reasons - to lead the world with its culture". This argument supports a line of academic literature discussing education as soft power (Ghani et al., 2022; Author 2; Satterthwaite & Atkinson, 2005), and further exemplifies a neo-colonial mindset in Omani education. By primarily highlighting Western case studies and contexts, these textbooks not only sideline non-Western knowledge systems but also spread a specific worldview where Western values and ways of acting are positioned centrally (Yende, 2020).

Essentially, epistemicide refers to systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge systems in favour of dominant Western epistemologies. This is evident in the remarks made by the Participants about internationalisation, particularly as they underscored the over-reliance on Western models and textbooks which students often find hard to relate to. When participants emphasize the "need for local content," this can be viewed as a response to the epistemic marginalization that has characterized their experiences with Western-centric curricula. The act of "borrowing" from international curricula and the subsequent need to "customize it to fit" the local context is a clear manifestation of this epistemic tension. Neo-imperialism, as a conceptual lens, allows us to understand the structural and ideological forces that underpin this epistemic

sidelining. The global educational landscape, driven by a marketplace of ideas, often champions Western paradigms as the gold standard. SQU's, and particularly CEPS's pedagogical landscape seems no exception. Yet, there's a simultaneous pushback, a desire to reclaim and re-centre Omani values and experiences. The move to contextualize "Christmas" as "Eid Al Adhha" or to substitute the "Beer Distribution Game" with the "Vimto Juice Game" viewed through this lens is perhaps not merely a superficial replacement; it is a minor act of resistance against the erasure of cultural and epistemic identities.

Pedagogy: student-centric, employability, international values and local contextualization

The interviews revealed that pedagogy at SQU, as with curricular development, is heavily influenced by Western models of education, reflecting Oman's ongoing neocolonial relationships and the desire of the Omani leadership to modernize. Faculty explicitly cite experiences studying abroad in "Western" universities as shaping their teaching philosophies towards more student-centered, critical thinking approaches. This demonstrates the continued dominance of Western epistemology (Said, 1978; Spivak, 2013) in shaping what is considered "good" pedagogy, with non-Western ways of teaching and learning rendered largely invisible in our discussion. SQU policy documents mention the use of international instructional materials, technology-enhanced learning, and student-centered pedagogy as ways to enhance educational quality and develop globally competent graduates. This aligns closely with literature that presents internationalization of the curriculum as a process of incorporating intercultural and international perspectives into course content, materials, and instructional methods (Huitt, 2013), and was largely mirrored by staff members talking about how internationalization fed through to their pedagogy.

Student-Centred Learning

Interviews revealed that staff associated active, skills-based techniques with their own international experiences and a willingness to adapt teaching to student needs. Most broadly, the pedagogic ideals that our participants had taken away from their experiences abroad focus on student-centred learning:
"Students should be in the centre of the teaching. They should also be active learners. They should be educated on how to learn themselves, instead of just being spoon-fed, as we used to be." (P5)
At the centre of most of the participants' pedagogy was practice. Participant 3 recounted a particular trip to Holland as part of an Omani award for distinguished students; and "was really intrigued by what they call problem-based learning in Rotterdam. So basically, and I was like, wow. They said, we have these students, and they work in Rotterdam ports, they work there and there, I'm like, wow, so it is education by doing" (P3). While no participants recounted creating similar work-experience pathways for their students, many used simulated practice through competitions. Participant 1 states that students "are involved in competitions, they're involved in doing their own business, they're involved in doing proposals." Other participants embed internationalization more deeply within similar practices: Participant 8 gave an example of the X-Culture Competition which is "like an international competition between our students and students from universities around the world". Guest speakers are also utilized for a similar reason, to broaden student minds. Participant 2 invites guest speakers who are "exposed to different experiences… I never ever chose someone who came from one side only, from one sector, for example, or from one job."
All staff noted ways in which they worked actively to integrate internationalization into curriculum and pedagogy, for instance by exposing students to international situations without necessitating travel, as Participants 2 and 8 did through international competitions. Participants 7 and 10 both used international classrooms; Participant 5 brought in international (mostly Western) guest speakers. This work was particularly pronounced for those with administrative responsibilities beyond the classroom. Participant 6 brought firsthand experience with internationalization from previous roles, which they leveraged as Director of a postgraduate program to provide insights on implementation at SQU. Some participants seemed to view themselves as mainly implementing institutional directives related to internationalization. Participant 5 described following guidelines for incorporating international perspectives into courses, saying "we have to consider how it's structured" based on accreditors' standards. Yet, this highlights a driver for the active integration of internationalisation. The apparent provider-receiver nature of the top-down communication on internationalization meant staff saw themselves as implementers, rather than active co-creators of the institutional vision of internationalization.

Local Knowledge

When participants make the additional effort to include more Omani and Gulf-based perspectives, they do so to make education relevant to the local context (Ocholla, 2020). However, they perceive barriers in accessing local companies and guest speakers, as compared to when they make similar efforts to engage with Western businesses. The assumption that local businesses are uncooperative when it comes to research originates from a lack of cross-cultural understanding, as

norms around knowledge sharing differ. As one example, when students want to collect data or interview business organisations "to complete part of their course requirements, they find resistance" as business organisations in Omani don't see value in giving information and are not very welcoming of research interviews in the way Westerners are perceived to be (P6).

Combined with that issue, participants note that the curriculum places a lower value on local knowledge as compared with exemplary case studies and problems from the West which better reflect the business theories being taught (Hawawini, 2016; Ohajionu, 2021). Furthermore, the extra labour required of faculty to source non-Western materials and experiences places an unnecessary burden on them as individuals, rather than the institution. According to P2, it takes "personal effort" and "a lot of time and effort" to get and edit local resources as there is no "database that has all the cases for students". Similarly, P4 doesn't "depend on university resources alone" but goes out to "find more and learn more" by engaging industry experts and the business community. Participant 5 stresses the importance of doing so, emphasising that contact through local industries benefits students: "They will start getting better consultancies from companies that need some sort of help. And they will get to know the local."

All staff members interviewed mentioned the tension between local values and internationalization, which was the most prominent silence identified in the analysis of the policy documents surrounding internationalization at CEPS, SQU and Oman. Except for a few cases, the staff emphasized the significance of preserving Omani language, culture, and values in the context of internationalization. They expressed that the current trajectory was inadequate to achieve this goal. The comparative silence in institutional documentation may stem from a predominant focus on meeting international standards and rankings to enhance the university's profile and reputation. This Western-centric approach is seen to overlook local perspectives even within the institution.

Creating Balance

The interview quotes reveal differing, and nuanced perspectives among staff on how to balance localization and internationalization. Participant 7 highlights the need for students to be aware of and accept cultural differences, while still upholding their own values and identity: "So I don't lose my identity when I accept others. And I am at peace with what others do in their own regions, you see." Participant 4 seems to view incorporating local Omani content as an important part of internationalization, stating "I don't think we should differentiate it. Because besides the cultural aspects and the national identity that adds value to the relevance of what you do at university or college and how you can contribute in society."

Furthermore, participants noted a lack of formal guidelines for incorporating international perspectives, leaving it up to individual faculty to decide how to "internationalize" their courses. "It is left to us with the trust that you will know what to do" (P7). Participant 6 stated that "there are no written guidelines". Internationalization's incorporation into classroom practices relied heavily on informal peer sharing, with staff feeling as though they were left interpreting institutional aims independently. This results in a potentially uncritical adoption of Western case studies, theories, and materials which are taken as the norm in the curriculum, as discussed above, without sufficient engagement with non-Western or local knowledge (Le Grange, 2016). Reliance on Western textbooks and examples from American/European companies presume the universality and neutrality of Eurocentric business knowledge rather than recognizing its cultural specificity (Hawawini, 2016; Moscovici, 2001). The examples from our study in which participants added local or regional examples demonstrate it is possible to critique and contextualize the Westernized business curriculum, but the default is not to do so. This serves to centre and normalize Western epistemology and business while marginalizing other worldviews.

Implications and Conclusion

Of course, a micro-study is by its nature limited and most of the findings are not generalizable without significant caveats. Yet, despite these limitations, this micro-study of a single college at a single institution offers both findings of value to educational literature and recommendations for more successfully integrating internationalization within the context of Omani higher education.

SQU faculty views reveal nuances around motivations to internationalize, with some critiquing the focus on rankings and accreditation in local and institutional policy over educational quality. In teaching, staff balance international perspectives and active learning with local contextualization. They emphasised the human elements of internationalization, prioritising collaboration, and 'exposure' to global influences.

While staff at CEPS recognize the positive impacts of accreditation and international standards on teaching, they are critical of the overemphasis on metrics and global rankings. The educators also emphasize the need for balancing international elements with local content, voicing concerns about the dominance of Western norms and the potential loss of cultural diversity. The paper highlights a concern that internationalization strategies, frequently presented as solutions for

enhancing educational quality and reputation, may inadvertently conceal the risk of epistemicide by sidelining of local knowledge.

A range of seemingly practical, yet fundamentally epistemological issues were raised, including: the lack of availability of discipline-specific textbooks from Arab or Gulf area scholars; the predominance of English language instruction; and preference being given to 'Western' staff at the recruitment level. Staff also discussed adopting 'student-centred teaching approaches' as a key element of internationalization, and often linked this to their own international education biographies. While not using the language of decoloniality, many participants raised concerns which echo those centred in decolonial scholarship. Findings also demonstrate that staff did privately push-back against the uncritical adoption of Westernised concepts of internationalisation and pedagogy, and offered specific ways in which the College might do so, but the norm was set by policymakers.

While not using the language of decoloniality, many participants raised concerns which mirror those centered in decolonial scholarship. This study's findings build on Brandenburg's (2012) observation that SQU's policymaking, particularly in terms of internationalization, is heavily influenced by Western educational models, predominantly from British and American systems. This reliance on Western precedents is similar to that found elsewhere in the world by postcolonial scholarship, which critically examines the continuation of colonial legacies through the imposition of Western academic and cultural norms (Stein, 2021; Said, 1978). The present research uncovers a palpable tension between the internationalization efforts at SQU, modelled after Western standards, and the institution's declared aim to bolster Omani identity as outlined in Oman Vision 2040.

We can therefore make a set of concrete, if broad, recommendations to institutional and national policymakers and senior leaders. Firstly, promote a balance of international curriculum content with locally relevant material. Secondly, while the motivations to focus on rankings and accreditation are unavoidable, they can be mitigated with a focus on quality of classroom teaching. Thirdly, support and promote discipline-specific textbooks to be developed by Arab and/or GCC area scholars. Fourthly, allow and promote the use of Arabic in classrooms where English is not necessitated by the presence of international students. Fifthly, avoid giving preference to 'Western' staff as visible symbols of internationalization at a cost to local staff .

This paper highlights the distinct challenges and experiences of GCC states like Oman in the context of internationalization, differing from Western contexts. These are novel contributions to academic literature, because previous work on lecturer conceptualizations of internationalization in Oman has only taken place in the very different context of private institutions (Al Abry, 2018), and there is limited equivalent literature in other Arab Gulf states. Additionally, it conceptualises decoloniality as an area of implicit practice amongst faculty, who recognise tensions between normative internationalization and local, national and regional forms of identity and knowledge.

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Passing the Whiteness Threshold: The Lived Experiences of UK-based Turkish Academics

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Abstract

This paper examines the underexplored implications of long-term international academic mobility on the lives of Turkish academics in the United Kingdom (UK). Within this international context, the study probes how ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect to shape these migrant academics' experiences while working at UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Grounded in social constructivism and employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the methodology entails 50 semi-structured interviews analyzed through NVivo to uncover thematic insights into the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics. This paper discusses the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics across two distinct yet interconnected spheres: the professional and the social. The professional sphere centers on the opportunities and challenges associated with an academic career in the UK, while the social sphere critically examines the societal dimensions of this career path. Here, intersecting identities emerge as pivotal forces, shaping these academics' experiences in profound and nuanced ways. The main finding reveals a "Whiteness threshold" impacting the integration and success of Turkish academics. Those who pass this threshold experience professional recognition and inclusion, while others face discrimination, isolation, and estrangement. This study contributes to comparative and international higher education by offering fresh insights into the diversity of migrant academic experiences, which are intricately shaped by various intersecting characteristics and identities. Consequently, the study advocates for nuanced policy considerations that recognize and address these diverse experiences.

Keywords: experiences, internationalization, mobility, UK, Turkish academics, Whiteness

Introduction

The benefits of international academic mobility, including career advancement, prestige, and capital accumulation, are well-documented (Ackers, 2005, 2008; Bauder et al., 2017), particularly for short-term mobility. However, the consequences of long-term mobility, i.e., migration, have received less attention and have complicated implications. Scholars have begun critically exploring the profound consequences of long-term mobility, including loss of stability, deterritorialization, and diminished national identity (Morley et al., 2018). These aspects are associated with job instability and precarity (Richardson & Zikic, 2007; Turculet, 2022) and discrimination against ethnic-minority migrant academics (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013; Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal & Chapman, 2019; Ramadan, 2021). Comparatively, through international

academic mobility, social class and prestige may be (re)produced in which masculinity and whiteness play a key role (Sang & Clavard, 2019). Nonetheless, discussions often overlook how factors like migrant status, race/ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect to shape international academics' diverse experiences, particularly in the UK.

Considering the UK accommodates more than 70,000 international academic staff, accounting for nearly one-third of its total academic workforce (HESA, 2024), there is a pressing need to understand the diverse experiences of these international academics. This study focuses on academics from Turkey, a country uniquely positioned at the crossroads of East/West and Global North/South resulting in diverse characteristics among its scholars concerning educational background, skin color, religious affiliation, and gender. Such intersecting traits distinctly influence their experiences within the UK higher education sector.

The emerging body of literature has examined the experiences of international academics in the UK (Morley et al., 2018; Pustelnikovaite and Chillas, 2022). Some studies have specifically considered the role of ethnicity, race, gender, and religion in shaping these experiences. For example, Fernando and Cohen's (2016) study on Indian academics, Hsieh's (2012) research on Chinese academics, Ramadan's (2021) study on Muslim academics, and Sang et al.'s (2013) research on woman migrant academics have all contributed to this body of scholarship. Despite the growing presence of Turkish scholars in the UK, from 390 in 2017 to 945 in 2023 (HESA, 2024), their experiences remain underexplored. By examining the experiences of Turkish academics in the UK through the lenses of ethnicity, gender, and religiosity, this study aims to enrich our understanding of the varied experiences of international scholars and their integration into local academic cultures.

Adopting a qualitative methodology grounded in social constructivism and employing intersectionality as a theoretical lens, this study seeks to understand how Turkish academics in the UK interpret and perceive their experiences. Through 50 semi-structured interviews, this research explores Turkish academics' professional and social trajectories in the UK, their triumphs, and challenges, and how their social identities influence their experiences. This approach allows for a thorough examination of how ethnicity, gender, class, and other social identities intersect to create unique experiences for (Turkish) migrant academics in the UK.

Literature Review

International academic mobility encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences marked by potential advantages and considerable difficulties. This review examines the experiences of migrant academics, underlining the complex nature of their professional journey.

The extant academic literature suggests that international academic mobility offers various benefits to international scholars. These benefits include opportunities to collaborate with world-renowned scientists, work at prestigious institutions with access to extensive social networks, and foster global connections (Ackers, 2005, 2008) Additionally, mobile academics can accumulate intellectual capital, acquire enriching scientific perspectives, experience diverse working environments and scientific practices inherent to a new academic culture, enhance intercultural competencies, cultivate a sense of global citizenship, and ultimately broaden their professional and personal horizons (Balasooriya et al., 2014; Bauder, 2015; Bauder et al., 2017; Morley et al., 2018).

Comparatively, international scholars encounter challenges when transitioning into new academic environments, especially when long-term mobility is considered. While temporary adaptation issues include securing accommodation, integrating into social contexts, and adjusting to different educational methodologies, curriculum preparation, and student supervision (Balasooriya et al., 2014; Kreber & Hounsell, 2014; Pherali, 2012), more enduring challenges such as casualization can continue to influence their experiences in complex ways.

The casualization of academic employment, characterized by short-term contracts within increasingly corporatized higher education systems, presents a dual-edged sword of opportunity and insecurity. This precarity is especially pronounced among early-career and international academics (Kim, 2010; Turculet, 2022). It has been identified as a contributor to the challenge of forming stable professional relationships and long-term planning (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). International academics are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation, as in many countries, permanent contracts are predominantly reserved for local academics (Turculet, 2022), and they face challenges in comprehending and meeting the often implicit and informal requirements associated with academic positions in different countries (Bauder, 2015; Musselin, 2004). In the UK, for instance, while only 17 per cent of UK academic staff work on temporary contracts in full-time positions, this percentage rises to almost double for international academics (AdvanceHE, 2023).

Ethnic marginalization in international academia has complex repercussions. While some individuals may utilize international mobility to acquire cosmopolitan capital and transnational esteem (Morley et al., 2018), they are not immune to stereotypes and discrimination. This is evident in the experiences of Roma academics and the broader Black and Minority

Ethnic (BAME) community within the UK, who face both overt scrutiny and subtle marginalization (Bhopal, 2016; Morley et al., 2018; Pilkington, 2013). Nevertheless, not all narratives are of discrimination; some East Asian academics in the UK attribute their professional advancements to merit rather than ethnicity (Kim & Ng, 2019). Despite these varied experiences, there is a pervasive sentiment among BAME academics of covert discrimination and undervaluation, particularly in contexts that privilege whiteness (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019).

Additionally, the academic trajectories of migrant women are characterized by resilience and agency, as evidenced by Sang et al. (2013), who found that first-generation immigrant female professors in the UK often utilize diaspora networks and research niches to achieve success. However, religious identity introduces another layer of complexity, as seen in the experiences of hijabed Muslim academics, who contend with additional visibility and exclusion (Ramadan, 2021). Such intersectionality exposes the layered challenges and opportunities for migrant women in academia.

In conclusion, the international mobility of academic staff represents a dynamic interplay of opportunities and vulnerabilities. Factors such as language, employment conditions, and social capital play significant roles in the adaptation processes of migrant academics. Furthermore, the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and religion adds complexity to their experiences, underscoring the intricate navigation required through international academia.

Theoretical Framework

To interpret the nuanced experiences of UK-based Turkish academics, this study incorporates the intersectionality framework as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991). Intersectionality acknowledges that social identities such as race, gender, and class converge to create unique meanings and experiences (Warner, 2008). Critical to this concept is the understanding that individuals' identities are not merely a cumulative result of their social group affiliations. Instead, each identity category interacts in complex ways to produce experiences that cannot be solely attributed to a single group (Warner, 2008). Özbilgin et al. (2011) advocate for intersectionality as an insightful perspective for examining the impact of diverse social identity categories on the lived experiences of migrant academics. Within this perspective, intersectionality provides a crucial framework for understanding the multiple forms of privilege and disadvantage (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012).

Whiteness, as both privilege and property, is essential for understanding how intersecting characteristics influence the experiences of migrant academics. Initially established as a racial identity, whiteness later evolved into a form of property (Bhopal, 2022). According to Leonardo (2002), whiteness functions as a racial discourse, while the category "white people" represents a socially constructed identity, typically based on skin color. This racial perspective is globally supported by material practices and institutions that grant certain privileges exclusively to white individuals, making whiteness valuable and a form of property (Harris, 1993). In the UK higher education sector, universities remain predominantly "white" administratively, normatively, habitually, and intellectually (Runnymede Trust, 2015). Within this context, "whiteness" functions as a valuable source of privilege in British academia (Ahmed, 2012).

Following Crenshaw's (1991) arguments, which highlight the unique experiences of Black women, the term is often applied to understanding multiple forms of disadvantage. For instance, to comprehend the lived experiences of BAME women academics (Stockfelt, 2018), BAME academics (Bhopal, 2022), international minority ethnic academics (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019), and Muslim women academics (Ramadan, 2021), intersectionality offers insights into the complex disadvantages these academics face. Conversely, emerging scholarship has identified intersectional privilege (re)generated through migration. For example, Sang et al. (2013) argued that migrant women academics, contrary to expectations, navigate disadvantage by leveraging aspects of identity, performance, and career strategy inherent to their status as outsiders. Furthermore, Sang and Calvard (2019) identified whiteness as a form of privilege in international academic mobility, noting that white international academics experience relatively more straightforward transitions, better treatment, and higher positional value.

Considering Turkey's unique position at the intersection of East/West and Global North/South, intersectionality serves as a powerful lens to understand the lived experiences of Turkish migrant academics with varied social identities.

Methodology

This research is inherently exploratory. Anchored in qualitative research, the study adopts a social constructivist philosophy. This philosophical stance posits that reality is not a fixed entity but is rather constructed through social interactions; it suggests the existence of multiple interpretations rather than a single, definitive reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within this framework, individuals strive to comprehend the world by attributing personal meanings to their experiences. These meanings are often the result of social and historical negotiation (Creswell, 2013). Hence, a fundamental

premise of the study is the individual variability in interpreting the migration experience.

Data were gathered from 50 semi-structured, in-depth online interviews with Turkish academics working in the UK between September 2021- May 2022. Online interviewing, imposed by the COVID-19 regulations, enabled the collection of a broader range of perspectives. Participants were recruited from 33 different universities across all four UK nations, as detailed below. Conducted in Turkish to facilitate comfort and understanding between the interviewer and participants, the interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Participants responded to flexible, open-ended questions designed to prompt deep reflection. The questions covered a range of topics, including their upbringing in Turkey, academic life before their UK appointments, and the successes and obstacles they encountered in both countries. Discussions also explored how their gender, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and political beliefs have shaped their UK experiences.

As the author, I navigate insider and outsider roles within the research context. As a male international doctoral student from Turkey studying in the UK at the time of data collection, my academic and cultural background in both countries provided me with professional and cultural familiarity. This insider perspective was crucial for offering fresh insights into understudied communities' lived experiences and building rapport (Johansson & Śliwa, 2016). However, I also positioned myself as an outsider, as I was neither a member of the participants' institutions nor their colleagues. I remained aware of this outsider role and the potential distance it could create. Along with my supervision team (critical outsiders), I took great care to eliminate possible biases during data collection and analysis, though some influence of researcher positionality and bias may persist (May, 2014).

In addition to being mindful of my insider/outsider position, I employed several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. These strategies included member checking, keeping an audit trail of field notes, constantly consulting with my supervision team, and implementing maximum variation sampling to capture diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

After the data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software to identify themes, applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This process involved an initial individual analysis of each participant's experiences, followed by comparative analyses across discipline, gender, contract type, and institutional affiliation. Further, an intersectional approach is employed to explore the influence of gender, religion, political attitudes, and ethnicity on the lived experiences of UK-based Turkish academics.

Throughout the study, we adhered to ethical guidelines set forth by the British Educational Research Association and University College London (UCL), to which UCL granted ethical permission. Further, participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms, and broad identifiers were employed to maintain confidentiality.

Participants

This study aims to examine the experiences of Turkish academic staff in UK universities, employing a methodological approach centered on collecting and analyzing data from a purposefully selected sample. The sample comprised 50 academics of Turkish nationality employed at UK universities, meeting specific inclusion criteria: Turkish nationality, born and educated in Turkey up to at least the undergraduate level, and a minimum of one year's residence in the UK coinciding with their tenure in British academia at the time of data collection.

The selection criteria ensured a diverse representation across several dimensions, including academic rank, institutional affiliation, contract type, discipline, age, length of residence in the UK, gender, and educational background. Educational qualifications among the participants' parents varied from bachelor's to doctoral degrees, highlighting the sample's high educational attainment background. Notably, two-thirds of the participants reported having at least one parent with a university degree, and 15 indicated their parents held doctoral degrees. This suggests that most of the sample belongs to Turkey's educated middle class, with educational attainment surpassing the national average. Only three participants were the first in their families to pursue higher education.

Demographically, the sample showed a slight male majority (27 men to 23 women), predominantly aged between 30 and 45. A significant proportion (38%) had resided in the UK for over 12 years, often due to their educational pursuits, illustrating the long-term engagement of many participants with the UK's academic environment.

The participants represented various academic positions and disciplines across 33 different UK universities. A considerable number were affiliated with the prestigious Russell Group (32), followed by those from pre-92 (non-Russell Group) institutions (10) and post-92 institutions (8). The academic roles ranged from professors (10), senior lecturers (14), lecturers (17), to postdoctoral researchers (9). Notably, a minority (12%) were on fixed or temporary contracts, concentrating on Russell Group universities.

This maximum variation approach to sample selection and characterization provides a robust foundation for

understanding the nuanced experiences of Turkish academics in the UK, facilitating a detailed analysis that considers a wide range of personal and professional backgrounds.

Findings and Discussion

This section explores the experiences of Turkish academics within the UK's academic and social environment, painting a portrait of professional life that is both complex and compelling. Through the narratives of UK-based Turkish scholars, we uncover a landscape where opportunities abound, challenges persist, and personal triumphs are interlaced with systemic intricacies. The voices of these academics—resonant with the joys of freedom, the pride of accomplishment, and the nuanced tones of cultural adaptation—offer invaluable insights into the dynamics of international academic mobility. They navigate a realm where generous research funding, elite international networks, and the freedom to explore sensitive topics create a fertile ground for professional success, starkly contrasting the constraints they may have encountered in their homeland. Simultaneously, their stories reflect a nuanced interplay of identity, belonging, and the subtle yet pervasive forces of politics and perception. This section, therefore, serves as a critical examination of the professional and social spheres, where the individual and the structure intersect, shaping the academic journeys of Turkish scholars in the UK.

Experiences in the Professional Sphere

Overall, participants reported having had positive experiences in the professional sphere in the UK. Most participants indicated that being an academic in the UK afforded them numerous opportunities, such as generous research funding, an extended international network, and the ability to study sensitive topics otherwise impossible in Turkey. Therefore, academic life in the UK paved the way for participants' professional success. For example, Elif, working at a research-intensive university as a female senior lecturer in education studies, shared her happiness about living and working in the UK.

"I am very happy to live and work in the UK. I'm glad I came. If I had stayed in Turkey, I would not have achieved many things that I have accomplished here. If I had stayed in Turkey, I wouldn't have been able to research the topics I'm working on now, and I wouldn't have had this much funding, I wouldn't have had such a wide network, and I wouldn't have been able to get such big projects. In short, I couldn't be that successful."

The migration of Turkish academics to the UK, as evidenced by the experiences of Elif and several other respondents, affords significant career opportunities. These include the autonomy to pursue research without restrictions, the availability of expansive networks, and access to generous research funding, echoing the relevant literature (Ackers, 2005, 2008; Bauder et al., 2017).

Similarly, Ali, a male political scientist at a Russell Group university, praised UK universities' academic freedom and research capability, as detailed in the following excerpt.

"The first thing is that you have quality students here. Second, you are free. While working here, I don't pass my writing through any filters. I can freely say what I think. Since I am a political scientist, I must express opinions on some issues, and I can tell them comfortably here. Third, of course, is financial support. I have a research budget of 2500 pounds per year. I can attend any conference I want. I don't have to search for money. I can get any book when I need it. And the university's prestige facilitates my relations on international platforms as a catalyst."

Political freedom and protective security, exemplified in the form of academic freedom, are pivotal for producing scholarly work without the fear of job loss or other repercussions (Hart, 2013; Sen, 1999). The declining academic freedom and institutional autonomy in Turkey, cited by numerous interlocutors aligning with international statistics (Kinzelbach, Lindberg, & Lott, 2024), stand out as one of the primary reasons for their decision to leave Turkey or opt against returning. In contrast, UK academia allows academic staff to research sensitive issues while getting funded. Consequently, academic life in the UK has provided many interlocutors with a life-enriching academic experience.

Additionally, the perceived efficacy of the UK higher education system, particularly in terms of transparency in promotions and hirings, fosters trust. This sentiment is encapsulated by Ahmet, a male professor in STEM fields at a post-92 university, who articulated the well-functioning nature of the system. Having received his PhD from a Canadian university, Professor Ahmet opted to return to Europe and pursue an academic career. Subsequently, he applied for positions

in the UK. Within a brief timeframe, he secured a position as a lecturer and, shortly after that, was promoted to a professorship at the same university.

> "Everything is clear and transparent. For example, what you should do as a reader, what you need to achieve and what is expected from you when you apply for a readership position are written. When you become a professor, what is expected of you and the conditions you need to meet and reach to become a professor are clearly defined. Everything is systematic, and things proceed through the system, not people. I liked that transparency."

Transparency guarantees assume profound significance within the academic profession since they embody the capacity to trust individuals and institutions, ensuring the reliability and integrity of provided information (Sen, 1999). Moreover, transparency extends to the equitable evaluation of promotions and funding applications, as Hart (2013) posits. Therefore, the perceived transparency and meritocracy prevalent in the UK higher education sector, as highlighted by numerous interlocutors, foster a sense of trust in the UK HE system, a sentiment elaborated above. Further, in alignment with the existing literature (Pustelnikovaite & Chillas, 2022), this trust in the system may be partially attributed to standardized performance metrics in the UK, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), as this standardization inherent in these metrics contributes to transparency and a perception of meritocratic selection.

It is noteworthy to include that the literature suggests that the perceived transparency and meritocracy within the UK higher education sector for academic positions appear to be higher for international academics, such as Asians (Kim & Ng, 2019) and international Muslim academics (Ramadan, 2017), in comparison to their local marginalized counterparts (Bhopal et al., 2016). This perception is rooted in complete trust in the system and the notion of building one's career based on meritocracy, which contrasts the perceived nepotistic attitudes prevalent in their home countries. Additionally, Pustelnikovaite and Chillas (2022) argue that internationally educated academics from North America and the UK are more readily accepted within British higher education. Examining the experiences of individuals like Ahmet, who obtained their PhDs from British or North American HEIs, it becomes evident that their privileged positions partly stem from their degrees and prior experiences in these countries, positioning them as "trusted members of a community of shared professional values" (Pustelnikovaite & Chillas, 2022, p.14) within the British academic community.

Contrary to the positive perceptions about promotions and hiring in the UK higher education sector for academic positions, administrative positions are cited as being less accessible to migrant academics, including international scholars from Turkey. For instance, Mustafa, a male professor, achieved the highest administrative position among the participants by becoming a vice-dean. However, he believes that being a migrant academic from Turkey, and having a name that signals his Muslim background, despite his perceived whiteness, inhibited his chances of achieving higher managerial positions as detailed below.

> "I'm physically too white to be perceived as Middle Eastern, Arab, etc. I am not easily discriminated against until I open my mouth and say, I am Mustafa from Turkey. Mustafa is a very generic Muslim name. It is obvious that you are not English... There are very few minority academics at the dean, provost, vice-provost level, etc. In many departments, it doesn't even exist. These positions are disproportionately White English males. I also worked on administrative tasks and became vice dean and department head. If I were John Smith, I'd probably be a provost."

In most cases, the participants in the study expressed a lack of enthusiasm for taking on managerial positions. Only a few elaborated on the reasons behind this sentiment. For example, Ayşe, a hijabed female lecturer at a Russell Group university, explained that her reluctance is due to the lack of representation in upper administrative roles, as detailed below.

> "It's hard to see a woman in a leadership position. Seeing a migrant woman is even more difficult. It is even more difficult to see a visibly Muslim woman [hijabed woman]."

The existing literature (Arday, 2018; Bhopal & Jackson, 2019; Ramadan, 2017) alongside official statistics (AdvanceHE, 2023; HESA, 2024) highlight a discernible lack of diversity within senior management positions at the UK HEIs, a pattern that aligns with the findings of this study. Specifically, out of 1,320 managerial roles, only 10 per cent are held by international academics, representing over a third of the academic workforce. Additionally, these managerial positions are predominantly occupied by individuals of white ethnicity, as reported by AdvanceHE (2023). This disproportionate representation of UK nationals and white individuals in senior management roles exemplifies the whiteness of the academia (Ahmed, 2012), indicating a systemic issue within UK HEIs regarding inclusivity and diversity at the

highest levels of governance.

Lastly, high expectations, casualization, and redundancy, among other factors associated with the neoliberal dimension of the UK higher education sector, were commonly cited by Turkish academics as making their professional lives challenging. For example, Oğuz, a senior male lecturer at a post-92 university, expressed how challenging it is to meet the high expectations set by the UK HE system.

"We are expected to be all-rounders here in academia. What is this? Article, op-ed, book chapter, conference, impact, REF, TEF… you must be successful in everything. It's very exhausting to do all of them. Also, it's very challenging considering we do all these in a second language while others do them in their mother tongue."

The existing literature suggests that migrant and BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) academics tend to overwork compared to their White British counterparts due to the fear of job insecurity (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019; Fernando & Cohen, 2016; Morley et al., 2018; Pustelnikovaite & Chillas, 2022; Ramadan, 2021). Social scientists, in particular, face additional challenges stemming from a potential lack of language competency (Ackers, 2005), intensifying the pressure to meet the demands, as exemplified by Oğuz. This highlights how factors such as job security concerns and language proficiency can intersect, contributing to the varying work dynamics experienced by academics from different backgrounds.

In short, while an academic career in the UK offers Turkish academics a range of professional and intellectual opportunities—including expanded networks, generous research funding, institutional prestige, transparency, access to extensive resources, and the ability to explore politically sensitive topics—the challenges, such as limited access to managerial positions and demands associated with a highly competitive labor market, cannot be overlooked.

Experiences in the Social Sphere

The study further explores the societal dimensions of an academic career in the UK, particularly focusing on how the intersecting characteristics of UK-based Turkish academic staff play a crucial role in shaping their experiences within the social sphere. Firstly, the majority of participants reported that they had not experienced overt racism or discrimination, with a few exceptions. This was largely attributed to their perceived whiteness and the absence of stereotypes against Turkish people in the UK. For instance, Erdem, a male postdoctoral researcher in Wales, discussed his perspective on why Turkish academics generally have positive experiences while working in the UK.

"As far as I see, there is no negative stereotyping towards Turkish people in and out of academia in the UK. On the contrary, I was met with sympathy when I said I was Turkish."

However, some Turkish academics living in the UK during Brexit had negative experiences as anti-immigration sentiment rose. Outside their university campuses, some participants encountered instances of racism, reflecting the broader societal challenges they faced during this period. For example, Oya, a female senior lecturer at a Russell Group university, shared her experiences as follows:

"My husband and I were subjected to many racist attacks at the time of Brexit. While shopping at [names supermarket], while on the train, there were people shouting, "Here, you're an immigrant; get out of here.""

Aside from the Brexit period, negative experiences were seldom reported and proved challenging to discern. This predominantly favorable representation of academic and social life in the UK was insightfully articulated by Melek, a female lecturer in social sciences at a post-92 university, who attributed her largely positive experiences to specific personal attributes and identity markers.

"I did not experience any discrimination, but it might be because ... as I was sitting in a pub with my English friends the other day, they told me that "You can pass as white." I think this is related to being exposed to English in my early years, being educated in the UK, being a woman, having white skin, and being socialized in the UK."

This example highlights specific physical and social attributes—such as having a lighter skin tone, leading a secular lifestyle, and receiving postgraduate education in the UK—that contribute to the smoother integration of international academics into British academia. These characteristics are colloquially referred to as "passing the whiteness threshold"

within the scope of this study, and they appear to facilitate a positive experience for Turkish academics in the UK. The Turkish academics who passed the whiteness threshold had predominantly reported positive experiences while working in the UK. This finding aligns with Sang and Calvard's (2019) study, which suggests that Whiteness can positively shape the experiences of international academics, in which intersectional privilege is (re)produced through international academic mobility.

Some participants are aware that being white is a crucial asset in shaping their experiences positively. For example, Kamile, a female senior researcher at a post-1992 university in Midwest England, articulated below her perspective on how her perceived whiteness protected her from racism while simultaneously acknowledging the prevalence of racism against ethnically marginalized communities.

"They accept us as whiter. I think that the British people think differently towards Indians and Black people. I think they accept us as white others. That's why I didn't experience much racism."

The participants in this study like Kamile predominantly identify themselves as white. Onay and Millington (2024) argue that British Turks maintain and promote 'whiteness' as a strategy to assimilate into British society and avoid the racial stereotypes encountered by other Muslim groups. However, Turkish academics, including Kamile, predominantly embrace a secular identity. Therefore, I argue that their perceived whiteness is not solely aimed at distinguishing themselves from Muslim communities but also from ethnically marginalized groups.

However, in some cases, the perceived Whiteness of UK-based Turkish academics, which shields them from negative encounters, remains fragile and subject to challenge. The first identity marker that reveals their outsider position, despite their perceived Whiteness, is often their Muslim-sounding names, even when they have no religious affiliation. For example, Muhammed, a male professor based in London, expressed frustration over how his name often prompts others to assume he is Muslim despite his lack of religious affiliation. He shared how this perception has influenced his experiences during his time in the UK.

"Here, everyone thinks I am a Muslim because my name is Muhammed. I was never a Muslim; I had nothing to do with Islam. Muslims want to befriend me because they think I am Muslim. When I say that I am not a Muslim, this time, they start preaching. The English people behave the way they think Muslims should be treated. For example, while we are sitting together, everyone is drinking alcoholic beverages, water is brought to me, they buy halal meat, etc. I am sure they think twice when inviting me to social gatherings."

Evidence suggests that job applications in the UK are adversely affected by names that sound Muslim (Ramadan, 2017). While I did not uncover evidence indicating that Turkish academics with Muslim-sounding names experience such negative consequences in academic job applications, they do encounter barriers in socializing, networking, and potentially in managerial positions as in the case of Mustafa exemplified in the professional sphere, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Additionally, Gholami (2021) suggests the use of the term "religification" to describe how individuals with Muslim backgrounds, even if secular or non-Muslim, have "Muslimness" imposed upon them—whether positively or negatively—by broader society, as observed in the current study. Therefore, it is argued here that Turkish academics with Muslim-sounding names undergo religification, particularly during initial encounters.

However, not every Turkish academic is physically white, brown instead. Also, if they embrace a conservative Muslim life, isolation is the common experience. For example, Osman, a male senior lecturer at a Russell Group university, shared his lived experience in the UK wittily.

"The British man doesn't know what to think when he sees you. He looks at you, "you are brown, you are Turkish etc.". He doesn't know how to behave towards you. He thinks, "Does this guy go to a pub or not? Will he beat me if I say let's go to the pub? Will he be offended by me?" He looks at you like he's looking at animals in a zoo, not because they're bad people, instead, they don't know you. You feel it. It diminishes over time. I should say that I am a man with a pious life. I don't drink alcohol, but the socializing places here are pubs. Not going to the bar prevents you from being a full member of the academic society and the network. I used to go to the bars at first, but I don't go anymore. I do my research and attend meetings; that's it."

Osman believes that his isolated life will continue.

"I feel like I'm in an aquarium. Yes, it is a very luxurious aquarium, but not the ocean. The food is good, there is heating, ventilation, etc., but it is an aquarium. If you want to go there, you can't; it's not yours. And I know it will always be like this."

Osman's comments warrant additional scrutiny, especially since he was the sole participant who explicitly self-identified as "brown". In contrast, most others identified as white, including those with darker skin tones than Osman. This suggests that, in the British context, religious identity and non-white categorization are often intertwined. This distinction is noteworthy, given Ramadan's (2017) argument that even white convert Muslims are re-raced in the UK and positioned as Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) academics. In the case of Osman, being a practicing Muslim not only hinders his capacity to socialize with colleagues but also results in his reclassification as BAME individuals.

Albeit not all practicing (Muslim) male academics experience the same. For example, even though Murat, male senior lecturer in social sciences, also has a pious life, he has a relatively positive experience in the UK, partly due to his white appearance.

"I am a Muslim, and I have not had any problems with this here. On the contrary, there is a very liberal environment. Of course, if the people go to the pub, I'll go, too and drink orange juice. I do whatever is necessary for academic settings."

Echoing Ramadan's (2017) findings, many male practicing Muslim participants in the study, like Murat, are willing to negotiate aspects of their faith identity and adeptly navigate societal expectations. In contrast, the experiences of practicing Muslim women participants in the study, who occupy the intersection of being migrant, Turkish, woman, and Muslim, were notably negative despite their comparable academic backgrounds and fairer skin tones. This is exemplified in the narrative of Ayşe, a female research fellow in social sciences at a Russell Group university and self-identified non-White.

"In England, people know to be kind on the street even if they are racist. But here, too, racism happens at micro-levels. You can't fix them, and you can't talk about them because it's at the micro-level. My problem was not just being exposed to these microaggressions; my problem was not being able to talk about them. I was left with two options: preserving my mental health versus taking it [my hijab] off. I took off my hijab after 25 years." Ayşe

Microaggressions against BAME individuals in British academia have been extensively documented (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013), and similar documentation exists for Muslim academics (Ramadan, 2017, 2021). However, Ayşe's choice to remove her hijab somewhat diminished her othering experiences. This decision contributes to a form of "whitening" in her experiences in the UK, facilitated by her European appearance and Anglo-Saxon postgraduate education.

Moreover, as Ayşe disclosed below, removing her hijab enhanced her credibility in social science scholarship. While existing literature indicates that migrant scholars (Morley et al., 2018), Muslim academics (Ramadan, 2021), and BAME academics (Bhopal & Chapman, 2019) often encounter epistemic injustices, where their contributions to knowledge production are undervalued compared to their White counterparts, Ayşe's case underscores how removing her hijab elevates her standing in the knowledge production.

"Also, taking the hijab off gives you the "privilege of neutrality". If you wear a hijab, people think you lack objectivity and neutrality. After taking off my hijab, I started to be noticed in the academic circles." Ayşe

Ayşe's narrative constitutes a perfect example of the *hypervisibility* dimension of the hijab. Wearing a hijab causes not only discomfort in daily life but also impedes a woman's capability to enter the inner circle and be regarded as neutral in intellectual circles. Some of the other female participants like Özen know how their secular lifestyle makes their life easier in the UK.

"If I were a Muslim, I would have a hard time here because this is an Islamophobic place. That's why I'm glad I'm not a Muslim. If I had been here as a Muslim woman from Turkey, I think I would never have entered the inner circle. Now, I can enter the inner circle here a little. Being able to adapt to the lifestyles of the British, for example, going to the pub and having a beer with them, makes my life easier." Özen

The findings about religion and gender resonate with Ramadan's (2021) arguments that the hijab remains a rarity among Muslim women academics in the UK due to its hypervisibility dimension. This characteristic impedes career advancement and exacerbates the sense of being marginalized. Notably, scholars who wear the hijab find themselves excluded from social gatherings crucial for networking and professional growth, wherein alcohol consumption often serves as a central activity. Hence, considering Ayşe's experiences and Özen's observations, visibly Muslim Turkish women academics face intersectional disadvantages compared to their male counterparts, who navigate their faith identities with greater ease. Consequently, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and gender intersect in complex ways, shaping experiences that cannot be solely attributed to a single group (Warner, 2008).

In summary, the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics in the social sphere present a complex picture. While their perceived Whiteness often facilitates integration into British academia and fosters positive experiences both within and outside the academic environment, this Whiteness remains fragile and susceptible to challenge by factors such as gender, religious affiliation, educational background, and ethnicity. Thus, beneath the surface of apparent success lies a nuanced narrative, interwoven with significant challenges that profoundly influence their academic trajectories.

Implications and Conclusion

This paper thoroughly examines the implications of long-term international academic mobility on the lives of Turkish academic staff based in the UK, focusing on both professional and socio-economic dimensions. It highlights the unique position of Turkish academics, who come from a country at the crossroads of East / West and the Global North/South. Their intersecting identities often result in a range of conflicting dispositions and experiences. Hence, the findings presented in the paper contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of international academics. With the increasing number of Turkish academics in the UK and the previous lack of attention due to their relatively small numbers, this paper provides novel insights that enrich the literature on international higher education.

Firstly, UK-based Turkish academics benefit from participating in international projects, engaging in global networks, and accessing cutting-edge research infrastructure in STEM fields. The relevant literature extensively documents these advantages of international academic mobility. In contrast to existing literature (Ackers, 2005; Rostan & Höhle, 2014), Turkish researchers from the social sciences exhibit greater mobility than their STEM counterparts, as indicated by HESA (2024) statistics. This mobility pattern can be partly attributed to the academic freedom offered by the UK higher education sector, which emerged in many interviews. However, the neoliberal structure of the academic sector imposes an additional workload on international academics coupled with constant pressure to strive for higher achievements to maintain their academic positions. These findings contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the broader effects of neoliberalism on higher education (Mahony & Weiner, 2019).

Secondly, Turculet (2022) posits that international academics are more vulnerable and open to exploitation. Many, including Turkish academics, accept demanding working conditions as a necessary trade-off to secure their positions in the UK. I argue that the more than 70,000 international academic staff in the UK—one of the largest international academic communities worldwide—significantly contribute to the UK's global academic standing despite demanding working conditions. This paper suggests that the UK higher education sector should not exploit the precarious position of international academics, as many international academics are avoiding criticizing the working conditions publicly.

Moreover, the findings indicated that Turkish academics in the UK generally do not face overt racism or discrimination based on their ethnicity. This can largely be attributed to the lack of stereotyping towards Turkish people and the perceived whiteness of Turkish academics. The findings significantly suggest that whiteness is contextual and not solely related to skin color but rather a combination of ethnicity, race, educational background, class, and religious affiliation. The study suggests that while Turkish academics with fair skin color, Western education, upper-class status, and secular backgrounds are perceived as white and consequently have comparatively positive experiences in the UK, others who do not meet this "whiteness" threshold face discrimination, isolation, and estrangement.

An intersectional analysis revealed how gender, class, ethnicity, and religious identity shape the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics, both inside and outside academia. These findings provide a detailed examination of how Turkish academics' intersectional identities influence their experiences positively and negatively, challenging the literature's predominant focus on multiple disadvantages (Bhopal, 2022; Ramadan, 2021; Stockfelt, 2018) by including an exploration of how perceived whiteness can confer privileges upon international academics (Sang & Calvard, 2019; Spangler et al., 2024) despite fixed national markers and migration status.

However, the perceived whiteness of Turkish academics is fragile and can be undermined by various factors such as name, gender, migration status, ethnicity, skin color, or religious affiliation. This fragility underscores the complex

dynamics of privilege and discrimination, revealing that while some Turkish academics may benefit from perceived whiteness, their experiences are still subject to the intersectional influences of other identity markers. Thus, intersectionality provided a valuable lens through which to explore the complex dynamics shaping the experiences of UK-based Turkish academics. Furthermore, applying intersectionality to examine their experiences across multiple intersecting characteristics extends the relevant literature in higher education, where studies predominantly focus on binary identity categories such as gender/race and gender/class, while migration status has received relatively little attention (Nichols & Stahl, 2019).

Lastly, although Turkish academics in the UK are not comprehensively categorized as BAME, the experiences of some mirror those of BAME academics, particularly when they do not pass the whiteness threshold as discussed above. Thus, the data indicates that the experiences of some Turkish academics can resonate with the narratives around BAME academics in the UK (Bhopal, 2016; Ramadan, 2017; Arday, 2018). Consequently, the discourse within this paper advocates for a departure from the tendency in the literature to treat international academics as a monolithic group, arguing instead for a more differentiated and individualistic understanding of their experiences.

In the policy context, the UK government suggests against using the BAME category, recommending instead that ethnic minority groups be referred to individually rather than as a single group. Advance HE further advice that higher education institutions monitor white minority ethnic groups in more detail, acknowledging specific issues faced by staff and students who identify within the 'White other' category. Considering that Turkish academics are largely categorized and self-identify within the 'White other' category, this study elaborates on how intersecting identities, such as religion, intersect with race/ethnicity to marginalize individuals further. The findings, therefore, shed light on the complex interplay of ethnicity, race, gender, and religion, revealing how these categories intricately affect the lives of migrant academics and thereby contribute to unraveling hidden narratives at the micro-level of the internationalization of higher education.

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Re-Examining Fries-Britt's *Learning Race in a U.S. Context* Emergent Framework Drawing on the Micro-Level Narratives of International Students in the US

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Abstract

Fries-Britt et al.'s (2014) Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) emergent framework holds significant prominence in international student literature as the pioneering framework to theorize perceptions of race and responses to racialized experiences among college students of color born and raised outside of the US. This essay reviewed 11 peer-reviewed articles published after 2014 that delve into micro-level narratives regarding racial learning experiences among a diverse set of international students in the US. The aim was to assess the framework's relevance and suggest potential updates a decade after its publication. The findings show that the framework is still generally applicable but can benefit from incorporating the following revisions: 1) broadening the scope of racial encounters; 2) emphasizing the impacts of home country context; and 3) leaving the outcomes of racial learning open.

Keywords: international higher education, international students, race/ethnicity, racial identity, racial learning, racial perception, students of color, United States

摘要

Fries-Britt 等2014年提出的"美国语境中的种族学习（Learning Race in a U.S. Context/LRUSC）"框架在国际学生研究中具有重要地位，这是第一个针对在美国以外出生和成长的有色人种大学生的种族认知和应对种族化经验进行理论化的框架。本文回顾了2014年后发表的11篇同行评议的文章，这些文章深入探讨了在美国留学的多元化国际学生群体中关于种族学习经历的微观叙事。本文的目的是评估该框架的相关性，并在其发表十年后提出潜在的更新建议。研究结果表明，该框架仍然具有广泛适用性，但可以通过以下修订进一步完善：1）扩大种族相遇（racial encounters）的所指范围；2）强调母国背景的影响；3）对种族学习的结果持开放态度。

关键词：国际高等教育，国际学生，种族/民族，种族身份认同，种族学习，有色人种学生，美国

Introduction

According to the *Open Door Report* by the Institute of International Education (IIE) (2024), in the academic year 2023/2024, international students accounted for 5.9% of all students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, signifying a 6.6% increase from the past year. Despite stagnation and decline in the previous years due to anti-immigration policies and the COVID-19 pandemic, the number was bouncing back. International students are expected to maintain a significant presence at U.S. universities and colleges as internationalization has become a key element of the reform agenda in U.S. higher education (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

IIE (2024) revealed that 88.8% of international students came from Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa, which meant the vast majority were non-white individuals who fell into the "people of color" category in the U.S. context. Compared to their White counterparts, international students of color are more likely to experience racism in the US (Dengg, 2022; Lee & Rice, 2007). Notably, there is an emergent but growing stream of literature focusing on these experiences with racism (Yao et al., 2019), especially at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and xenophobic sentiments (e.g., Koo et al., 2021; Mall & Payne, 2023).

However, relatively little research addresses how international students learn about race in the U.S. context and how their perceptions and identities of race evolve after they arrive in the country. As a multiracial, multiethnic country, the US bears a unique racial history shaped by European colonization, African enslavement, and successive waves of immigration. This history has given rise to a pervasive racial hierarchy, with Whites on top and all other populations "of color" beneath, whose legacy remains deeply entrenched in all aspects of American life (Bashi & McDaniel, 1997). The U.S. race logic, as well as the centrality of race in this country (Drummond & Orbe, 2010), are likely to be unfamiliar, if not confusing, to international students. Although several racial identity development models exist, such as Helms' (1995) People of Color Racial Identity model and Sue and Sue's (1999) Racial/Cultural Identity Development model, they predominantly concern native-born individuals raised under the U.S. race logic. In contrast, international students bring their understanding of race from their home countries and are therefore likely to find the U.S. logic incongruent with their own. As race is not understood and experienced uniformly across nations, there is a pressing need to transnationalize the theorization of race and racial identity development (Shome, 2010).

Fries-Britt et al. (2014) pioneered the development of a framework designed to capture how foreign-born students of color perceive race and respond to racialized experiences in the US. (They used "foreign-born students" to reflect the fact that all participants were born and raised abroad, instead of "international students" because of the participants' various citizenship statuses.) To date, this *Learning Race in a U.S. Context* (*LRUSC*) emergent framework has garnered over two hundred citations across disciplines. In the wake of this publication, several empirical studies have emerged to explore the racial learning of international students amidst the worsening racial climate in the US (Horowitz et al., 2019) and heightened discussions on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice on campuses (Buckner et al., 2021). The question is whether the LRUSC framework, developed based on data collected from international students of a single race pursuing a single major over ten years ago, still effectively captures the racial learning experiences of the diverse international student population today.

This essay seeks to address this question by examining literature produced since the release of the LRUSC framework (i.e., since 2014) that addresses the racial learning experiences of international students of color in the US. The focus is on qualitative studies that draw from micro-level narratives of international students hailing from diverse countries of origin studying various majors at higher education institutions across geographic regions in the US. In doing so, the essay strives to assess the framework's relevance and propose potential updates a decade after its publication.

The LRUSC Emergent Framework

Fries-Britt et al.'s (2014) LRUSC framework was derived from data collected from 15 undergraduate and graduate physics students from Black-majority countries in Africa and the Caribbean attending a variety of U.S. higher education

institutions. Through a combination of focus groups and interviews, Fries-Britt et al. (2014) discovered that the students held distinct and nuanced perceptions of race that existing U.S.-based racial identity development models could not fully explain. According to **Figure 1**, Fries-Britt et al. (2014) divided the learning of race in the U.S. context into three categories and proposed that students move from one category to the next through racial encounters (REs) in the US, though not necessarily in a linear fashion. While the "U.S. Context" circle signifies the context for racial learning, it intersects with the "Home Country Context" circle, showing that students begin their racial learning in the US with preconceived racial understandings from their home countries.

Category 1

These preconceived racial understandings, on the one hand, can distance students from their U.S.-born minority peers, whose racial struggles make little sense to them. On the other hand, they may also act as a buffer, allowing students to initially avoid examining their racial-ethnic identities in the U.S. context or addressing any REs. Even when faced with severe racism, students may first turn to their own national and cultural context for understanding, dismissing these incidents as distractions from their academic pursuits—their primary reason for coming to the US.

Category 2

Over time, the frequency and severity of REs lead students to realize that they can no longer ignore their racial minority identities or the broader racial context of the US. Although reluctant, some begin to pay greater attention to race, particularly how their minority statuses are situated within the U.S. racial context, as they find race increasingly salient. Many also use REs as motivations for academic success, reinforcing their purpose of coming to the US to pursue academic endeavors.

Category 3

The last category mirrors the outcome of traditional racial identity development models (e.g., Helms, 1995; Sue & Sue, 1999) designed for individuals born and raised in the US, stating that students achieve integrative awareness when they not only gain a confident understanding of their racial-ethnic identities in the U.S. context but also commit to ending racism and racial injustice.

Figure 1.

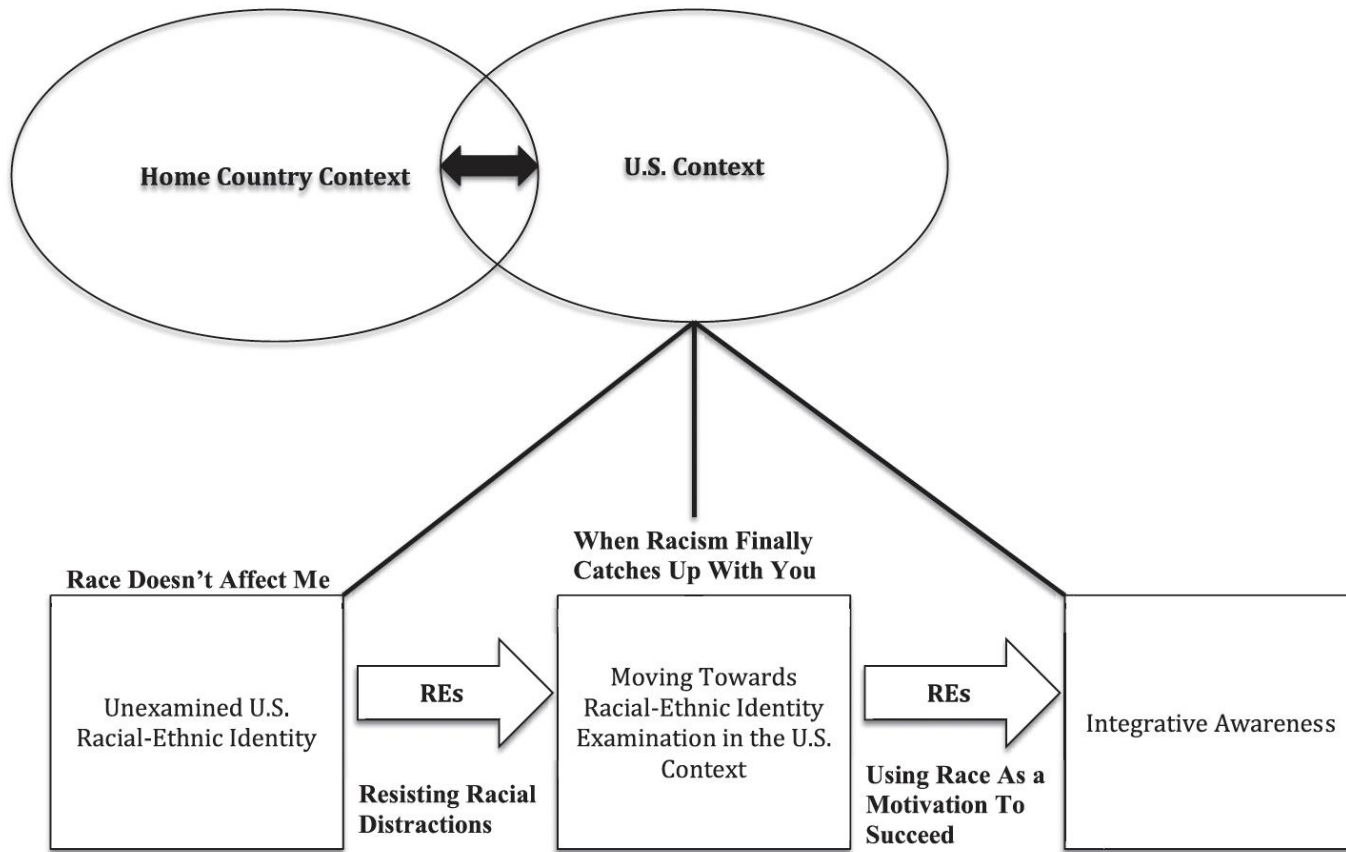*Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC) Emergent Framework in Fries-Britt et al. (2014)*

Table 1.

Information on Fries-Britt et al. (2014) and the Literature Reviewed

LRUSC	Participants	Participants' Origins	Research Focus
(Fries-Britt et al., 2014)	15 Black undergraduate and graduate students in physics at various universities	Africa and the Caribbean (including Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, Senegal, and Haiti)	"How do foreign-born students of color perceive and respond to racialized experiences and their racial minority status in the United States?" (p. 1)
Articles Reviewed	Participants	Participants' Origins	Research Focus with Respect to the LRUSC Framework
(Ritter, 2016)	47 undergraduate and graduate students at the	East Asia	"This study focuses on Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese international students' perceptions of race." (p. 370)

	University of California (UC), Los Angeles	(Including China (23), Japan (13), South Korea (8), Hong Kong (2), and Taiwan (1))	
(Bardhan & Zhang, 2017)	22 students at a midwestern university	The global South (Including Chad, Grenada, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, China, India, Togo, Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Benin, Pakistan, and Taiwan)	"In what ways do international students from the global South in the United States communicate race, in relation to identity, as they transition for the first time into a White settler society environment?" (p. 292)
(Mitchell et al., 2017)	17 undergraduate and graduate students at a midwestern university	Varied (Including Bangladesh, Brazil, China (2), India, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Russia, South Korea (2), Taiwan, Vietnam (2), and Zimbabwe)	"In what ways, if any, do international students learn about the U.S. concepts of race and racism when studying in the United States? In what ways, if any, does learning about the U.S. concepts of race and racism influence the college experiences of international students studying in the United States?" (p. 2)
(Okura, 2019)	15 new graduate students in New York City	China	"This paper aims to examine the process of racialization in the U.S." (p. 148)
(Jiang, 2021)	15 undergraduates at a midwestern university	China, particularly the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone	"I investigate the ways in which race and racialization shape academic and social spaces as well as educational experiences in an era of globalization of higher education." (p. 32–33)
(Feraud-King & Mwangi, 2022)	8 Black undergraduate and graduate cisgender men at various predominately White institutions	Africa and the Caribbean (Including Ethiopia (2), Malawi, Jamaica, Senegal, Ghana, and Rwanda)	"(1) How have foreign-born Black cisgender men collegians' social identities influenced initial perceptions of race/racism in the US? (2) How do their campus experiences facilitate understanding of race, racism, and gendered racism?" (p. 2)
(Yu, 2022)	21 undergraduate students at a UC university	China	"How do Chinese international students think about race and racism before and after arrival in the US?" (p. 2)
(Ham, 2023)	37 undergraduate students at a midwestern university	China (22) and South Korea (15)	"This article examines how East Asian international undergraduate students understand and respond to race and racism." (p. 2)
(Yao et al., 2023)	19 undergraduates at a midwestern university	Central Africa (10), South Asia (4), East Asia (2), South America (2), and Canada (1)	"What are international students of Color's experiences with race and racialization at a PWI? How have the collegiate experiences of international students of Color been shaped by the global politics of race and racism?" (p. 80)
(Yao et al., 2024)	21 undergraduate and graduate students at a southern university	South Asia (8), East Asia (6), West Africa (3), South America (3), and Eastern Europe (1)	"How did international students make sense of racial conflict in the United States during the year 2020?" (p. 2)
(Yu, 2024)	21 undergraduate students at a UC university	China	"How do Chinese students perceive U.S. racial justice movements in pursuit of social and racial equality?" (p. 1)

Literature Review

Literature for this review comprises peer-reviewed journal articles produced since the LRUSC framework's publication (i.e., since 2014). First, I retrieved peer-reviewed journal articles citing Fries-Britt et al. (2014). Subsequently, I supplemented the results with a systematic literature search in two bibliographic databases, Google Scholar and Education Resource Information Center (ERIC). The search combined the terms "international students" and "international students of color" with keywords including "racial learning," "racial perception," "racial identity," and "racial sensemaking." I then removed articles related to international students in non-U.S. countries and institutional discourses on international students and race, as these topics are less relevant to the LRUSC framework. I also removed articles focusing solely on international students' experiences with racism and racial discrimination as this stream of literature primarily attends to the context of these racist encounters and the challenges students face as a result, rather than the evolvement of their perceptions or identities of race through the experiences (e.g., Koo et al., 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mall & Payne, 2023). This process yielded a total of 11 articles for review, as presented in **Table 1**. Notably, all of these studies are qualitative, drawing from micro-level narratives of international students from diverse countries of origin in different fields of study. Except for Mitchell et al. (2017), whose participants included White international students, the remaining studies focused exclusively on international students of color. The following sections analyze these articles with respect to the LRUSC framework.

Category 1: Unexamined U.S. Racial-Ethnic Identity

Literature generally confirms that international students of color initially hold unexamined racial-ethnic identities in the U.S. context (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017). As they can tend to their home countries' racial context for understanding, many are inclined to ignore examining U.S. racial issues or their racial-ethnic identities in the U.S. context (Okura, 2019; Yu, 2024). This is particularly apparent in populations that did not have the opportunity to move physically to the US during the pandemic (Yu, 2022).

Lack of Understanding of the U.S. Racial Context

A prevalent theme across the literature is participants' lack of understanding of race in the U.S. context. For example, all 22 participants in Bardhan and Zhang (2017), hailing from various countries in the global South, found it challenging to grasp the centrality of race in the US, emphasizing that race had never been a lived reality for them in their home countries. Among the 17 participants in Mitchell et al. (2017), nearly half struggled to define race, reflecting their unexamined racial-ethnic identities in the U.S. context.

Concerning awareness of the broader sociohistorical racial context of the US, Yao et al. (2024) observed that some participants' uncertainty about whether the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was racially exclusionary stemmed from their limited grasp of the historical foundations of racism in the US. The authors emphasized that the participants, coming from relatively racially homogenous countries, did not have to contend with the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in their home countries and did not expect to encounter such sentiments in the US.

Reliance on the Home Country Racial Context

Studies focusing on Chinese international students highlighted participants' initial tendency to associate race with Chinese nationality or China's ethnic groups, indicating their reliance on China's racial-ethnic context (Okura, 2019; Yu, 2022, 2024). During the initial interviews with participants who had recently arrived in the US, Okura (2019) discovered that despite their awareness of U.S.-constructed racial categories, none of the participants found the pan-national racial status of Asians meaningful. Instead, they regarded the nationality paradigm as the most salient conceptualization of race and emphasized national differences. Yu's (2022) interviews with a participant who spent the first year of her U.S. higher education in China due to the pandemic provided another example. The participant stated that she would avoid discussing

racial issues for fear of offending others once she moved to the US. She also expressed a preference to "stay in the ethnic Chinese circle" and did not "have the expectations to make friends with Americans." These responses demonstrated that her strategy of positioning herself outside the U.S. racial system was rooted in her understanding of race through nationality and ethnicity, influenced by China's racial-ethnic context and state ideology.

In another article featuring the same set of 21 participants, Yu (2024) delved deeper into how participants' prior socialization in China shaped their knowledge of race. This socialization pertained to China's broader racial-ethnic context and students' ethnic and social positions within China. As members of the Han ethnic majority, they had benefited from state policies that supported the dominant Han culture, and their privileged social class had shielded them from experiencing discrimination within China. Moreover, social movements were often discouraged, if not suppressed, under China's authoritarian government. Consequently, China's racial-ethnic context, along with students' socialization within that context, continued to influence how they perceived race, racism, and racial justice movements when they were in the US.

Racial Encounters (REs)

According to the LRUSC framework, when students initially have REs, which, were all encounters with racism in Fries-Britt et al. (2014), they continue turning to their home countries' racial context, seeing these encounters as distractions and are unlikely to respond. The literature suggests that REs can also encompass various means of acquiring racial knowledge (Ham, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2017; Ritter, 2016; Yao et al., 2024; Yu, 2024), and the reasoning behind the lack of response is more complex (Ham, 2023; Jiang, 2021; Yao et al., 2024; Yu, 2022).

REs Beyond Racist Encounters

Mitchell et al. (2017) broadened the notion of REs to include means of racial knowledge acquisition in the personal and public spheres. Regarding REs in the personal sphere, while racist encounters remained significant themes, Mitchell et al. (2017) detailed how participants learned about race in the U.S. context through media, personal relationships, and formal education. Participants who acquired racial knowledge directly through formal coursework exhibited a more advanced and complex understanding of racial issues in the US. Conversely, those who relied on indirect means such as media and personal relationships reported negative stereotypes toward certain minorities. The effects of learning about race through coursework and interpersonal relations, however, were contested. Like Mitchell et al. (2017), Ritter (2016) found that the East Asian participants who took diversity coursework tended to challenge the racial stereotypes they acquired from their home countries. On the contrary, the East Asian students in Ham (2023) regarded what they learned in the Ethnic Studies class as confirming the hierarchy of race and therefore of little use. Additionally, although Mitchell et al. (2017) cautioned that learning about race through personal relationships might foster racial prejudices, Ritter (2016) emphasized the benefits of building personal relationships through living with roommates of different races on campus, which could prompt reflections on long-held racial stereotypes.

Regarding REs in the public sphere, Yao et al. (2024) and Yu (2024) focused on participants' perceptions of racial conflicts and racial justice movements during the resurgence of the BLM movements in 2020. While none of the participants in Yao et al. (2024) participated in the movements, these events served as critical REs for them, leading to a heightened awareness of racism in the US when witnessed through news coverage.

Refrained From Reacting to Initial REs for More Complex Reasons

According to the LRUSC framework, since students can keep turning to their home countries' racial context for understanding, they often do not react to REs initially. When REs occurred in the public sphere, as observed by Yao et al. (2024), participants took their legal status into consideration and attributed their non-participation to the protection of their fragile international student status.

For the Chinese participants in Jiang (2021) and Yu (2022) and the East Asian participants in Ham (2023), their reluctance to react to REs in the personal sphere was rooted in the influence of the Whiteness racial ideology of the US. Participants in Ham (2023) and Jiang (2021) acknowledged spatial segregation between domestic and Chinese international students on campus but perceived domestic students' indifference toward the Chinese as natural. One participant in Jiang (2021) claimed, "[because] there are TOO many Chinese students." This remark highlighted her internalization of the Whiteness ideology, which contributed to the racialization of students of color, a group to which she belonged. The two online students in Yu (2022) demonstrated that internalizing the Whiteness ideology could occur even before experiencing real-life REs in the US. Both believed they would face discrimination in the US simply by being Asian and Chinese. In short, participants in Ham (2023), Jiang (2021), and Yu (2022) chose not to challenge dominant racial narratives not because they turned to the racial context of their home countries but because they accepted the U.S.-informed global hierarchy of race as a social fact, even before some had set foot in the US.

Seeing Initial REs Not Just as Distractions But As Results of Their Problems

The Chinese participants in Jiang (2021) echoed the "REs as distractions" rationale employed by students in Fries-Britt et al. (2014). Carrying high familial expectations, these participants often chose not to make a big deal out of their encounters with racism. For example, one participant expressed discomfort about an overt racist encounter but decided to let it go, focusing instead on more important priorities like academic pursuits. Additionally, while many participants felt annoyed by the escalating xenophobic narratives during the US-China trade war, they perceived it not as particularly troubling but as a necessary challenge to endure in exchange for a U.S. education.

In addition to regarding REs as distractions and brushing them away, participants in Ham (2023), Jiang (2021), and Yu (2022) sometimes found problems in themselves in response to REs. Participants in Ham (2023) and Jiang (2021) attributed the marginalization of international students to factors such as their insufficient English skills, introverted personalities, and cultural differences. When experiencing microaggressions in class and campus employment, two participants in Yu (2022) initially responded with self-blaming without realizing they were being discriminated against. Due to their limited understanding of the racial context in the US, it was challenging for the students to recognize racism as a structural issue, leading them to shoulder the burden of integration on campus (Jiang, 2021).

Category 2: Importance of Experiential REs

Okura (2019), Yao et al. (2023), and Yu (2022) underscored the importance of experiential REs in transitioning participants from an unexamined U.S. racial-ethnic identity (Category 1) to a stage of racial-ethnic identity examination in the U.S. context (Category 2). The longitudinal design of Okura (2019) and Yao et al. (2023) enabled them to highlight this importance by comparing interviews from different time points. Despite being well aware of their racialized status as "Asian" before moving to the US, the Chinese participants in Okura (2019) only began examining their racial identities in the U.S. context after experiencing racialization firsthand in the country. Okura (2019) attributed significant shifts in understanding of race between the two interviews to participants' extensive exposure to U.S. society, particularly meaningful interactions and friendships with Americans. The importance of experiential REs was also evident in the different racial ideologies between respondents based in China and the US in Yu (2022). While the online students in China viewed race as a nationality-based identity, those studying on campus in the US understood it as a phenotype-based imposed category, a perception shaped by their experiential REs and more closely aligned with how race is perceived in the U.S. context.

Notably, while the LRUSC framework suggests that students reaching Category 2 and engaging in racial-ethnic identity examination in the U.S. context would use future REs as motivation for academic success, this theme is not explicitly featured in the reviewed articles.

Impacts of the Home Country Context

As depicted in **Figure 1**, students' racial learning occurs in the U.S. context and is represented by a solid line leading to three categories. The home country context intersects with the U.S. context but does not directly connect to any of the categories, indicating that the framework considers the home country context as a background influence of students' racial learning. However, the literature suggests that students' home country context can exert a much more significant impact on their racial learning in the US, to the extent that racial ideologies from their home countries can be employed to racialize other minorities on campuses (Jiang, 2021; Ritter, 2016).

Jiang (2021) and Ritter (2016) revealed that international students may bring racial stereotypes from their home countries to American campuses. The Chinese participants in Jiang (2021), all identified with the majority Han ethnic group, applied China's Han-dominated ideology and racial discourses to racialize Asian American and African American communities in town. Mainstream Chinese discourse about the world order led many participants to see Asian Americans and African Americans as "un-American." The Hmong, the largest Southeastern Asian group in town, were viewed unfavorably, likely linked to their marginalization in China as an ethnic minority. Similarly, the East Asian participants in Ritter (2016) acknowledged their hierarchical views on race before coming to the country. Many reported negative attitudes toward African Americans and Southeast Asians due to prior influence from media, family/friends, and historical precedents. Ritter (2016) expressed concern about these long-held racial stereotypes among East Asian students as they could be detrimental to the university's efforts to create a racially tolerant campus.

Is Category 3 Necessarily Integrative Awareness?

Only one participant in Fries-Britt et al. (2014) reached integrative awareness, a category mirroring the outcome of traditional racial identity development models in which students understand their racial-ethnic identities in the U.S. context with confidence and commit to ending racial injustice. The authors claimed that foreign-born students of color were, in fact, unlikely to achieve this outcome due to their different racial experiences in their home countries. Feraud-King and Mwangi (2022) stands out as the sole reviewed study where a few participants demonstrated integrative awareness. For instance, one participant embraced his Black identity by educating himself on contemporary African American struggles and working with African American youth in school. The rest of the literature, on the other hand, suggests several alternative outcomes (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017; Jiang, 2021; Yu, 2022, 2024).

Continued Resistance to Race in the U.S. Context

Bardhan and Zhang (2017), Feraud-King and Mwangi (2022), Jiang (2021), and Yu (2022, 2024) all suggested that students may keep resisting embracing racial identities in the U.S. context but for different reasons. Participants in Bardhan and Zhang (2017) experienced a split sense of selfhood as they navigated their "old" national and ethnic identities alongside their experiences with race in the US. To reconcile this tension, they stressed pride in their "old" identities not coded through race and resisted using U.S.-centric race labels when describing themselves. Taking a post/decolonial perspective, the authors interpreted this resistance as a "transnational interruption within the commonsense thinking about race in the U.S. national imaginary" (p. 300-301).

Some participants in Feraud-King and Mwangi (2022), Jiang (2021), and Yu (2022, 2024) continued to avoid examining their racial identities in the U.S. context even after years in the US. Their reasoning was based on the expectation of leaving the US after graduation, with many intending to return to their home countries. A few participants in Yu (2024) also considered moving to other countries for work and/or further education in the hope of escaping racism. Therefore, the belief that their lives in the US were transient rather than permanent kept them aloof from examining their racial identities in the U.S. context, let alone engaging in activist activities.

Toward Self-Reflexivity and Intercultural Empathy

Participants in Bardhan and Zhang (2017) expressed that their experiences of "becoming" racially minoritized in the US had revealed to them the arbitrary nature of racial differences. Additionally, for some of them, the accompanying loss of privilege along the race vector had evoked self-reflexivity and intercultural empathy toward marginalized and oppressed groups regardless of context, including co-nationals and other minoritized groups in the US. Bardhan and Zhang (2017) called this possibility "hopeful" as it could open the potential for creative coalitions in social justice work.

Discussion

Literature in the past decade drawing from micro-level narratives of international students of color shows that the LRUSC framework is still generally applicable to the understanding of racial learning experiences of international students of color in the US. It effectively illustrates how many students lack knowledge of race in the U.S. context and how REs can shift them to racial-ethnic identity examination. Nonetheless, the literature also reveals that the framework may overlook the multiplicity of what REs could imply and the complexities of students' reasoning and reactions when REs take place. Therefore, the framework can benefit from incorporating the following revisions:

1) Broadening the Scope of REs

Literature shows that REs encompass not only racist encounters but also various means of racial knowledge acquisition. In addition to acquiring racial knowledge in the personal sphere, such as through media, personal relationships, and formal coursework, numerous racial justice movements since 2020 have offered opportunities to learn about race in the U.S. context in the public sphere.

It is essential to acknowledge that not all forms of racial knowledge acquisition led international students of color to racial-ethnic identity examination. While many of the reviewed articles advocated for U.S. higher education institutions to formalize international students' racial learning through coursework, Ham (2023) contested whether the pedagogy of current Ethnic Studies courses supported international students' racial learning. Additionally, while experiential REs could be pivotal in prompting students toward racial-ethnic identity examination, personal interactions could also reinforce racial prejudices. Moreover, observing racial justice movements without the adequate historical context provided might leave international students bewildered, or even shocked (Ma, 2020; Yao et al., 2024). Further research can continue exploring how different REs influence students' racial learning and how educators can better equip students with resources when REs occur.

2) Emphasizing the Impacts of the Home Country Context

While the LRUSC framework focuses on how the U.S. context fosters the racial learning of international students of color, the literature suggests that equal attention should be given to their home country context rather than treating it as a mere background influence. Incorporating a transnational lens, which Bardhan and Zhang (2017), Jiang (2021), and Yu (2022, 2024) already did, into the framework would enable scholars to examine "locality of settlement as well as place of origin and the global forces shaping both locations" (Schiller & Levitt, 2016, p. 15). Hence, a revised LRUSC framework taken from a transnational lens can elucidate how the home country context and the spread of Whiteness ideology influence students' racial learning in the US.

3) Leaving the Outcomes of Racial Learning Open

Both the reviewed literature and Fries-Britt et al. (2014) indicate that most international students of color are unlikely to attain integrative awareness in their racial learning. Interestingly, participants of Feraud-King and Mwangi (2022), the only reviewed study presenting evidence of such an outcome, share similar countries of origin and racial-ethnic backgrounds as those in Fries-Britt et al. (2014). This raises questions regarding the extent to which the achievement of

racial learning outcomes depends on students' prior experiences in their home countries. It also underscores the importance of adopting a transnational lens to understand the racial learning of international students of color in the U.S. context.

Moreover, the literature illustrates how international students' intentions regarding staying versus returning influence their racial learning. Contrary to popular belief, studying in the US does not necessarily serve as a springboard to immigration, with most international students returning to their home countries after graduation (Beine et al., 2023). If their racial-ethnic identities in the U.S. are perceived as temporary, why invest energy in the examination, especially since many come to the country with academic priorities? While we, as educators, would hope international students to develop "intercultural empathy for those who are marginalized in any context" (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017, p. 302) through higher education in the US, international higher education remains largely a neoliberal project (Scott, 2016) and studying abroad a "capital work" (Wang, 2020). Therefore, instead of designating a single outcome, the LRUSC framework should leave the ultimate outcomes of racial learning open, recognizing that international students of color may achieve very different outcomes based on their prior experiences and future plans.

Conclusion

Revisiting the LRUSC framework a decade later with micro-level literature, this essay responds to Fries-Britt et al.'s (2014) call for greater theoretical work on racial-ethnic identity development for international students of color. Indeed, as Bardhan and Zhang (2017) suggested, researchers should keep theorizing race to dismantle colonial ideologies and progress toward a more transnational vision. The essay also provokes reflections on how international students, who do not take the U.S. race logic for granted and bring fresh perspectives with them, could potentially inform the learning and re-learning of race among domestic students, especially amidst the troubling racial tensions in the country.

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Conceptualizing Centrality in Micro-Level Internationalization Through a Decolonial Approach

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Abstract

Micro-level internationalization offers possibilities to explore different human experiences in international higher education. This is especially crucial given well-reported issues of racism, micro-aggression, and underrepresentation of racially minoritized international academic staff, whose voices remain mostly invisible in internationalization discourses. Previous research connects these issues to the continuing legacy of colonial logic, that privileges hegemonic Western-centric knowledge systems. In this paper, centrality is proposed as a conceptual framework that offers a direct response to the question of epistemicide which Santos (2014) explains as the exclusion of the knowledges of racially marginalized persons [in or with origins] from the Global South. It draws attention to how epistemicide and historicide (erasure of cultural history) impinge their agentic capabilities, drawing on their lived experiences and cognitive epistemological and ontological frames of knowing and being. Centrality, therefore, reiterates the need to center marginalized voices as legitimate and knowledgeable contributors to conversations and research on decolonizing internationalization, drawing on their knowledge, capabilities, and lived experience. This calls on Global North allies to not only articulate their positionality, acknowledging the inequities inherent in the hegemonic Western-centric epistemology paradigm but to contribute to dismantling persisting structural coloniality and embedded hierarchies in teaching, research, and international partnerships. Centrality thus offers a framework for: i) dismantling the persisting pernicious legacy of colonialization by working collaboratively to undo the epistemic hegemony that perpetuates the universality of Eurocentric knowledge and subalternity of the Global South, and ii) advancing access to ecologies of knowledge that affirms rather than disparages our shared humanity.

Keywords: centrality; coloniality; decoloniality; internationalization; micro-level internationalization; positionality

Introduction

At the micro-level, individuals are central to the functioning of internationalization processes and activities. Paradoxically their agentic capabilities, experiential and aspirational rationales are less central within internationalization imaginaries (Fakunle, 2021). Rather, their numeric visibility and countability in international (e.g UNESCO Institute of

Statistics) and national (Higher Education Statistics Agency, UK) datasets underpin objectification narratives (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021) through the lens of marketized discourses, that can be described as internationalization by numbers. Thus, a major criticism of internationalization relates to the pre-eminence accorded to dominant market logics and economic metrics (de Wit, 2024) that drives interest in recruiting international students, rising to 6.4 million globally mobile students in 2021 (Migration Data Portal, 2024). By contrast, there is a lack of comparable data for micro-level studies of individuals, such as international academics, faculty, practitioners, and administrators. This remains a blind spot in internationalization studies. This essay puts forward centrality as an approach that can be embedded in research and other academic practices from a decolonial lens that values the role of individuals in internationalization processes and activities.

Internationalization of Academic Staff

Despite the lack of visibility of the various staff cohorts captured in internationalization data, previous research has mostly focused on academic staff/faculty in internationalization. Staff cohorts include, but are not limited to academic faculty, counsellors, administrators, and leadership. Broadly speaking, the focus of research on academic staff (i.e. those who teach and/or research), in internationalization is mainly from a developmental outlook in two ways. The first is exemplified by van der Werf's (2012) proposed "International competence Matrix" as a Human Resources Management Tool to prepare staff to work in internationalised classrooms. This might be conceivably linked to Sanderson's notion of "an 'ideal' and authentic teacher to support contemplation of the development by international and intercultural perspectives in teaching" (661). This relates to the key role of those who teach in internationalising the curriculum (Leask, 2013), necessitating their professional development. The second aspect of internationalization development narratives is more specific to international academic staff. Normatively, this relates to those who teach in higher education but are not from the country in which the HEI is situated (associated normalized binary of nationality is describing international and local academic staff is problematised later in this paper). It is unnecessary to emphasize the extensive explorations of the challenges faced by international academic staff in adapting to working in culturally different higher education contexts (e.g Luxon and Peelo, 2009: Whitsed & Green, 2016). However, Minocha et al., (2018) point to the incongruity of advancing the internationalization efforts of universities with very little research into the experiences and the expectations of international academic staff. As they noted, such research can offer insights to develop frameworks for institutions to engage international academic staff in supporting internationalization and innovation in academic practice. Their research findings highlight how structural constraints limit opportunities to embed greater diversity of pedagogical practices, such as project-based learning with an international dimension. In a similar vein, in the introduction to their Special Issue: *International academic mobility and inequalities*, Bilecen, and Van Mol (2017) critique the lack of attention to the inequalities experienced by internationally mobile academic staff, and noted a limitation that, "whereas some of the [SI] papers touch upon the topics of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, these were not central" (p. 1251). Hence, while existing studies on international academic staff contribute to an under-researched area in internationalization studies, this paper further addresses the gap in this area.

Centering Racially Marginalized International Academic Staff in Internationalization

Using the example of racially marginalized international academic staff, from a decolonial lens, this paper proposes a conceptualization of centrality in micro-level internationalization. As a concept, centrality encapsulates the knowledge, competence, and lived experience embodied by an individual. The concept confronts the erasure of the non-Western knowledges and the marginalization of international academic staff in global education. This is akin to Edwards and Shahjahan's (2024) contemplation around antiblackness and centering Black Studies in global education. Similarly, Dube and Moyo's (2022) usage of critical content analysis of Zimbabwean history curriculum affirm a "centering a self-reflexivity" (Hunting 2021 cited in Dube & Moyo 2022, p. 868) to assert how curricular justice can inform pedagogy that "transcends the Western canon and reframes it as one of the frameworks of knowledge alongside indigenous knowledges" (p. 881) in a postcolonial world. They describe historicide as one of the aims of coloniality to misrepresent and obliterate the history of indigenous people. This informs their heuristic for undoing historicide as part of the epistemic decolonial turn. Additionally, Arday and colleagues (2021) assert to "the centrality of Whiteness as an instrument of power and privilege"

that limits the advancement of "a curriculum that reflects the multiple histories of Black and indigenous populations globally but particularly within the United Kingdom" and contradicts the "the lofty egalitarian ideals often espoused by universities" (p. 298).

Research spanning diverse educational contexts thus attests to the need for critical re-envisioning of normative hegemonic Western-centric epistemological "center" in postcolonial contexts. This affirms the applicability of a reimagined conceptualization of centrality in the former colonies and metropoles. The conceptualisation of centrality in this paper is different and novel on account of both its significant departure from positivist-driven foundational normative theoretical conceptualisation of centrality in different disciplines, and the epistemological decolonial approach. By drawing on literature across different disciplines and epistemological constructs, this essay puts forward the first theoretical conceptualisation of centrality in micro-level internationalization from a decolonial lens. This aligns with the growing body of scholarly discourses that stress the need for a decolonial approach to advance our understanding of how western hegemonic epistemic culture frames the underlying structures of internationalization (Andreotti, 2011; Andreotti et. al., 2015; Ezechukwu, 2022, Fakunle et. al., 2022; Heleta, 2016; Jasen, 2019; Marginson, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Extant literature and seminal work in decolonial studies will be used to support the conceptual framework of centrality put forward in this paper.

Literature Review

As a concept, centrality advocates for centering the academic subaltern, for whom their historicides seems inescapably manifest in coloniality, as experienced in professional and personal encounters. Coloniality expounded by Quijano (1997), is described as "the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system" (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 219). Maldonado-Torrres (2007) similarly depicts the difference between current state of coloniality and historical colonialism:

> Coloniality is distinguished from colonialism in that it refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that defined culture, labor, intersubjective relations, & knowledge production beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations (p. 240)

The quote above highlights how coloniality continues to impact our frames of knowing and social encounters. The opposition to colonisation as an oppressive machinery of dispossession of land, culture and freedoms, is well documented and beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is consensus that the resurgence of interest in decolonising higher education is linked to global student protests including the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Mbembe and Parker (2019) suggest that the student protests in South Africa have necessitated revisiting the difficult debates about whiteness and resultant institutionalized racial hierarchies and violence, and new questions about what counts as knowledge. Similarly, Jansen (2019, p. 2) asks questions about knowledge production: "Who produces knowledge? What knowledge is produced and what knowledge is "left out" are central questions of inquiry within the politics of knowledge". Questions on coloniality and decoloniality have been asked for decades, in different ways. Regardless of time and space, the privileging of hegemonic construction of knowledge from dominant western frames and imaginaries is an open question, that continues to attract extensive discussion across all climes, whether in former colonies or metropoles. This speaks to a wider disjunction as to the purpose of international education with Eurocentric origins (Fakunle, 2023) and underpinning colonial logic, amidst contestations against coloniality.

At this point, it is important to state that coloniality is not inevitable. A consciousness or understanding of coloniality is a key first step to examining normatively formed frames of knowing and understanding (my interpretation of so-called unconscious bias). Next is openness to questioning conceptions of incontrovertible truth premised on albeit a dominating epistemology. A possible and desired outcome of epistemological openness is a consciousness of our shared humanity and enlightenment. This counters the damaging narratives of racialization and dehumanization that are core accompaniments of the colonial undertaking. Action or inaction predicates whether coloniality is sustained or curtailed. This paper uses centrality as a concept/framework to contribute to address persisting pernicious well-reported issues around racism, micro-aggression, and underrepresentation of racially minoritized international academic staff (Arday, 2018; Miller, 2016; Minocha et. al, 2020), whose voices remain mostly invisible in internationalization discourses.

Accompanying the renewed interest in decolonising higher education, a plethora of reports consistently reveal the scale of the issues faced especially by Black academics in navigating an academic career. As an example, a recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Report "*Unblocking the pipeline: supporting the retention, progression and promotion of black early-career academics*" (Franssen et. al, 2024) highlights how some institutions in the UK do not have a single Black professor amongst hundreds of professors overall at the same institutions. The report sought to understand the prevailing issues, assess the responsiveness of universities to the issues around Black academics being the most under-represented groups in UK higher education, and the authors offer recommendations for future actions.

The HEPI report is an example of many such contributions to identifying the issues around the lack of Black representation, ethnicity awarding gap, ethnicity pay gap, and challenges with progressing through the pipeline in academia. The proposition in this conceptual paper is to build on the abundance of work that highlights the problems, to articulate a framework towards dismantling the foundational racialized causation of the barriers encountered by marginalized academics, using a decolonial lens. It is pertinent to point out the blurry line between local and international Black academic staff. A categorization of international or a migrant academic could be a time dependent journey to becoming "local", subject to a change in immigration status within the legal boundaries of the country of residence. Of course, this is a simplified version of a more complex issue of human displacement, slavery, historical injustices, and immigration. The point is important as despite differences in their nationalities, the two cohorts experience similar issues around racism and lack of representation. This is a murky area that merits future research. The concept of centrality advocated in the paper focuses on racialized marginalization that is attributable to coloniality. This transcends the social construct of nationality. There is also a distinction from normative and theoretical conceptualizations of centrality in the literature explored next.

What Does Centrality Mean in Other Disciplines?

The notion of "centrality" in human communication in small groups was firstly proposed in 1948 by Bavelas who "hypothesized a relationship between structural centrality and influence in group processes" (Freeman, 1979, p. 215). The first research investigation of centrality was conducted by Bavelas and a group of researchers at M.I.T. Their conclusions that centrality was related to efficient group problem solving, view of leadership and individual satisfaction inspired many similar experiments in the 50's, 60's (Freeman, 1979). Their influential work continues to influence conceptual framing of "centrality" across different disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and computer science, and mathematics (Boldi & Vigna, 2014; Bringmann et al., 2019; Everett & Borgatti, 1999). Boldi and Vigna (2014) acknowledge that the various examinations of the question of "centrality" has given rise to a "whole plethora of centrality measures (a.k.a. centrality indices, or rankings) proposed to account for the importance of the nodes of a network" (p. 222). These conceptualizations originate from social network analysis defined by Freeman (2004), as "the structural approach that is based on the study of human social relationships (2), to understand the factors that drive patterns of behaviors, and the implications. This, in turn, underpins conceptualizations of the idea of centrality as measures of "degree", "closeness" and "betweenness" in relation to groups and individuals (Bringmann et al., 2019; Falzon et al., 2018), largely informed by Everett and Borgatti's (1999) conceptions of centrality that measures the sum of the distances of the group or individual to all vertices outside the group to indicate greater centrality (detailed theoretical analytical frameworks in: Friedkin 1991; Everett & Borgatti, 1999).

Notably, Everett and Borgatti's (1999) work on centrality focused on its applicability to groups and classes, as well as individuals. Group centrality indices measure how specific groups are central to the operation of a company, for example, they ask the hypothetical question: 'are the lawyers more central than the accountants in a given organisation's social network?' (p. 181). They also asked; 'Is one particular ethnic minority more integrated into the community than another?' (p. 181-182). They assert that a centrality measure could be used to answer these questions *to some extent* (italics mine). The paper is silent on "to what extent", and what happens with the extent that is not covered. This might be a limitation of the "standard" dataset UCINET that was used as an example of group centrality, based on a record of three months of interactions amongst a group of 20 monkeys. "Interaction were defined as joint presence at the river" (p. 184). This makes it pertinent to take account of earlier ideas of the relevance of centrality as an important 'structural attribute of social networks' in understanding human groups (Freeman, 1979, p. 217) across different disciplines. Freeman's (1979) observation as to the lack of unanimity on the meaning and conceptual foundations of the idea of centrality prompted a review of extant literature and a proposed conceptual approach towards centrality, underpinned by a formulaic dogma.

Centrality has also been adopted as a conceptual tool in Literature studies, offering less formulaic mathematical calculations that is dominant in other fields (Jones et al., 2020). For instance, Moretti (2011) measures the "degree of centrality" of characters in Hamlet determined by the flow of words between two characters. Jones et al., (2020), however, noted the limitation of this approach, citing the inadequate capturing of meaningful interactions between characters. The limitation may be connected to consistency of their approach with the normative formulaic node-level measures to ascertain centrality.

Within the last decade, some work in film studies, such as Jones et al. (2020) utilize a critical lens, whilst still normatively situated in the tradition of centrality indices. As the authors affirm, their work on gendered representation in film points to possible direction for future conceptual work. Referencing Mulvey's (1975) seminal work, Jones and colleagues (2020) describe the long-held feminist film theorization of the privilege accorded to the masculine perspective in Hollywood through the "male gaze" which renders male characters as active narrative forces and female characters as passive and defined primarily by their "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 26). Their feminism-inspired work points to future directions for utilizing centrality as a framework to critically examine other forms of marginalization. Previous studies have highlighted different forms of marginalization in internationalization (Arday et al., 2020; Bilecen, and Van Mol, 2017). Yet, there remains a gap in examining centrality in internationalization activities predicated on convergence of diverse races, ethnicities and cultures. This paper advocates centrality in the field of internationalization towards addressing this gap.

The overview of the literature over the last 70 plus years shows that theoretical and normative conceptualizations of centrality are based on relational heuristics that measures individual and group behaviors, with a focus on social network analysis. This is linked to the foundations of positivism discussed briefly to highlight its epistemological dissonance from the conceptualization of centrality put forward in this paper.

Epistemology

Differing Epistemological Approaches to Centrality

Positivism

Key tenets of positivism, such as, empiricism from direct observation of the subjects of research, methodological individualism in the treatment of social phenomena, and measurement and quantification as the basis of scientific knowledge (Little, 2019) underpin the epistemological assumptions and ensuing methodological approaches adopted in the development of ideas of centrality over the last seven decades. These methodological approaches of centrality are primarily algorithms (Everett & Borgatti, 1999, p. 182) formal algebra (Falzon et al., 2018), and experiments, process models and graph theory (Freeman, 1979). The methods are all grounded within the defining features social network analysis: structural intuition, systematic empirical data, graphic imagery and mathematical or computational models (Freeman, 2004), with hypothetical conjectures and predetermined criteria for success.

In sum, the underlying epistemology of extant notions of centrality is informed by social network analysis which Freeman (2004) attributes the implicit contribution of Auguste Comte (key contributor to the positivist paradigm). It is unnecessary to restate well-discussed criticisms of positivist approach in social research, summed up by Little (2019) as having "created blinders for social science researchers, limiting their originality in theories, concepts, and explanations of the social world and creating false assumptions about the correct methodology that social science should pursue" (p. 5). By contrast, the idea of centrality proposed in this paper is situated in a critical epistemological paradigm through a decolonial lens.

Decolonial Epistemology

This conceptual contribution put forward in this paper is not addressed by previous epistemological conceptions of centrality within a positivist paradigm, enunciated in the previous section. By contrast, the epistemological approaches situated within postcolonial, decolonial and subaltern studies are suitable to advance the conceptual theorisation of centrality. In this regard, the decolonizing approaches, as noted in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal book *Decolonizing*

Methodologies (2021) highlights "different possibilities for research [beyond] a critique of colonialism" (p. xiii). Rather, the imperative is to highlight possibilities for knowing differently and offering pathways for understanding how the "problems caused by colonialism, and the failure of power structures to address these historic conditions" (p. xiii). Smith's focus on decolonizing methodologies is rooted in indigenous Kaupapa Māori approaches underpinned by the principles of relationships, connections, reciprocity and accountability. These principles are reiterated in different forms in the scholarly writings on decolonization. For example, relationality, described as vincularidad is meant to unsettle singular authoritative assumptions of knowledge rooted in Western thought (Walsh & Mignolo, 2021).

Summing the crux of his argument on resistance against cultural imperialism, Said (1993) draws on Fanon's *the Wretched of the Earth* as the positioning of the native "tired of the logic that reduces him, the geography that segregates him, the ontology that dehumanizes him, the epistemology that strips him down to an unregenerate essence" (p. 343). This powerful elocution of dehumanization that attends the colonial enterprise is aptly captured in Memmi's 1957 book, *"The Colonizer and the Colonized", (*republished in English in 1965). Much of the earlier and more recent scholarship on decolonization encapsulate what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describes as the "epistemic line", as the major problem of the 21st century, reflecting Du Bois' (1903) 20th century proposition about "a categorization of humanity based on the "colour line". In other words, the centering of humanity within the privileges of Western-centric epistemological hegemony, are underpinned by coloniality. This informs a moral imperative for the advancement of conceptual frameworks to break down the barriers to limited, albeit dominant epistemological thought. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) provides a glossary of decolonial philosophies that (p. 49-53) to support this quest.

A decolonial epistemological approach must first dismantle a reified conception of Western-centric form of knowledge as the standard by which all other forms of knowledge, knowing and ways of being must be measured. This offers an opportunity to embark on a life-long learning journey, and broadened worldview. At the prosaic level, it reconstructs our basis of social human interactions, and intercultural encounters. This entails removing the 18th century invention of a flawed social construct of race, a biological fiction, with no scientific basis (Witzig, 1996), yet a powerful consequential line that divides humanity. A decolonial approach is needed to upturn the concept of race at its epistemological roots. This informs a re-imagined decolonial epistemological conceptualization of centrality.

Conceptualizing Centrality in Micro-Level Internationalization Studies

Centrality, Decoloniality and Micro-Level Internationalization

The conceptualization of centrality in this paper seeks to contribute to advancing emerging discourses that connect internationalization and decolonization. This is done in two ways.

First, a conceptual framing of centrality adds a novel interpretation to the considerable body of decolonial theory summed up by Hayes et al., (2021) as involving "contesting hegemony, legacy and limitations of Eurocentric epistemologies, Northern control of knowledge production, the coloniality of the cultures, languages and disciplines of institutions of higher education and interrogating whose interests are served by this knowledge and its practices" (p. 887).

Second, centrality is described in terms of representation, which points up the importance of lived experience in academic thought. The overall aim is to put forward centrality as a practical framework that articulates how hitherto racially marginalized individuals are central to the development of decolonial work drawing on lived experience, knowledge and agentic capabilities.

As noted by Ezechukwu (2022), emerging studies on the micro-level positioning of academics within the power structures of internationalization rarely utilize a decolonial lens. This is corroborated in scholarly works that reiterate how the dominant hegemonic global imaginary and racialized hierarchies frame much of internationalization activities and discourses (Andreotti et. al., 2015; Marginson, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Broadly, there are several allusions to centrality in decolonial work. Given the conditionalities of coloniality, these works tend to reiterate the centrality of Eurocentrism, and hegemony. It is beneficial to explore existing work, to foreground a conceptual reframing of centrality.

Allusions to Centrality in Decolonial Theory

The need to de-centre the Western hegemonic portrayal of knowledge, way of being, or civilization implicitly and explicitly underpin much of scholarly decolonial work. Allusions to "centrality" permeate writings on imperialism, colonialism and decolonial approaches in two main ways. First, the prominence and predominance of "Euro centrically defined ideas" (Said, 1993, p. 400) are foundational discursive aspects in decolonial field of study or activism. Second, counter-narratives give similar attention to de-centering western dominant and hegemonic constructions of knowledge.

Said (1993) discusses centrality in the context of presence and power in American culture. He restates the configuration of power contrasted with what is not major, central, or powerful. Bhambra and Holmwood (2021) allude to the omission of multicultural others from canonical and contemporary conceptual frameworks in social theory, which they traced to a "failure to account for the centrality of colonialism and empire wire within the modern world". (p. x). This informs their focus on European social theory and colonialism in the context of Europe and the US, and relevance to the construction of the modern world. This is echoed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) who criticizes how Europe and North America are at the center of knowledge production, seen as the manifestation of 'the international', and consistent with Mignolo's (2011) advocacy for the reconstruction of the university into pluriversity through a decolonial lens.

The common thread amongst decolonial scholars is the need for a new conceptual approach towards addressing the persisting challenge of epistemicide, linguicides (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Santos, 2014), and historicides (Dube & Moyo, 2022) that underpin modern-day inequalities in positioning a hierarchy of knowledge and what it means to be human with agency and capabilities, within and outside the academe. This is taken forward in this paper that advances a conceptual articulation of centrality as a framework for knowledge production that recognizes and undertakes action to address the impact of enduring legacies of colonialization in the implicit and explicit marginalization of non-western ways of knowing and being. The need for centrality as a concept is also informed by Dube and Moyo's (2022) concern that a wave of radical educational reform even in a Global South context could be "anti-colonial without being decolonial" (p. 865). To advance this work, the concept of positionality also known as reflexivity statements (Savolainen et. al., 2023) often posed in research warrants a critical evaluation, through a decolonial lens.

Positionality

According to Savin-Baden and Major, (2013) positionality "reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (71). Zamzow (2023) further elaborates on what a researcher might chose to include in their positionality statements, "race, ethnicity, geographic location, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, and career level", noted as a common practice in social sciences that is gradually making inroads into STEM fields. However, there are debates about the practice. Savolainen et. al., (2023) question the popularity of positionality statements "without any evidence that it actually achieves what it sets out to achieve,". Whilst they agree that reflexivity and positionality are well grounded in esteemed philosophical traditions "to address genuine concerns about the limits of knowledge production" as they deem it is "impossible to construct credible positionality statements because they are constrained by the very positionality they seek to address" (p. 1331). To buttress their argument, they use the example of a positionality statement by Elliott and Reid (2019) published in the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association:

> Both authors are middle- to upper-middle class white women—one is a mother, the other is not. A commitment to antiracist, intersectional, and feminist principles guides our research efforts, and we conducted this work with an awareness of the politics, dangers, and limitations of affluent white academics writing about the lives of low-income Black Americans. (Elliott & Reid, 2019, cited in Savolainen et. al., 2023, p. 1333)

Whilst making it clear that they were not questioning the merit of Elliott and Reid's research [on the criminalization of Black Americans], Savolainen et. al., (2023) infer from their positionality statement that the authors were able to mitigate the limitations of their lived experiences by learning "critical race feminist theory", but they question how this can be verified as true, and whether "that reading critical race feminist theory" only reinforces preexisting biases inherent in the authors' sociological worldview?" (p. 1335). Additionally, questions could be asked as to what do the researchers'

"commitment to antiracist" principles and their awareness of their "limitations as affluent white academics" mean in practical terms for the affected communities?

Pointing to the majority of the literature in the UK, and majority of interviewees [in their research], Abu Moghli and Kadiwal (2021) also problematize the notion of positionality "highlighted [in] hegemonic Western epistemologies, and the lack of reflexivity on power dynamics and hierarchies where the balance is tipped to the benefit of Western academics and thought" (p. 11)

In essence, positionality statements are discretionary and explanatory normative tools that do not address contestations about the prevalence of coloniality in research (Fig 1). The extent to which emerging debates about the relevance of positionality statements can be used to dismantle persisting racialized hierarchies of power is interrogated next.

A Critical Review of a Repositioning of Representation

Representation accords with centrality as a conceptual lens, that ensures that the knowledges of the racially marginalized are duly recognized and represented in matters within the purview of their knowledge and lived experience.

Despite the critical stance on positionality adopted by Savolainen and colleagues (2023), their assertations on "representation" and "dispassionate perspectives from outsiders with no personal stakes in the matter", merit a critical examination. They also noted that "it is particularly important to include scholars with native understanding of the subject matter". However, it cannot be assumed that their reference to a scholar with native understanding necessarily represents a racially minoritized academic. This begs a revisit of the decades old question of representation in the research process conducted with racially minoritized people (Santos, 2014; Smith, 2021), who are the living embodiments of theory.

Savolainen et al.'s, (2023) point that "a truly open discourse should also include dispassionate perspectives from outsiders with no personal stakes in the matter" is further corroborated by their assertion that "increasing representation is hinged on protecting the freedom of scholarly input...[and] methodological transparency and rigor" (p. 1331). They reify a scientific dogmatic "dispassionate" approach rooted in a distanced outsider positivist paradigm. Hence, although, Savolainen and colleagues (2023) rightly point to the fallibility of the self-evaluative process of positionality, their arguments are rooted in Western-centric "scientific" value system. Their stance contradicts the tenets of a decolonial approach that critically interrogates privileged hegemonic Eurocentric postulations of epistemological value and rigour, described by Santos as "...cognitive injustice against the wisdom of the world on behalf of the monopoly of science and the technologies sanctioned by science" (p. 15).

Racially minoritized people are not a homogenous group. Whilst there is contextual difference in experiences of coloniality, Smith (2021) offers a helpful description of representation as a form of voice and expression of "Indigenous by Indigenous [that] is about countering the dominant society's image of Indigenous people...proposing solutions to the real-life dilemmas that they face and trying to capture the complexities of being indigenous" (p. 172). A reimagining of micro-level internationalization through the lens of centrality prioritizes the needs and the voices of the racially marginalized at the center of matters that concerns them, issues that impact them, and misrepresentations that may further jeopardize their precarity and disadvantage, personally and professionally. In academia, this will include learning, teaching, research and collaborative partnerships

Representation Within a Conceptualization of Centrality

Santos' (2014) assertions about representation warrant further elaboration in relation to the conceptualization of centrality through micro-level positioning of the racially marginalized.

We do not want to be spoken about we want to speak for ourselves. We do not want to be seen on the other side of the line. We want to eliminate the line. (p. 6)

In the book, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*, De Sousa Santos (2014) describes the limitations of western knowledge that sees itself as "a vanguard theory that excels in knowing about, explaining, and guiding rather than knowing with, understanding, facilitating, sharing, and walking alongside" (p. ix). This aligns with the underpinning principles informing the conceptualization of centrality as a theoretical framework that puts forward the need

for the advancement of the knowledges of racially marginalized persons in or with origins from the Global South, who historically and presently endure the ignominies of racism, erasures, misrepresentation, and marginalization.

Centrality draws extant literature from researchers, scholar and activist to highlight how epistemicide and historicide (erasure of cultural history) impinge the agentic capabilities of racialized academic staff, and structural constraints that delegitimize the value of their contributions to advancing research based on their lived experiences and cognitive epistemological and ontological frames of knowing and being. Centrality, therefore, reiterates the need to center marginalized voices as legitimate and knowledgeable contributors to conversations and research on decolonizing internationalization, drawing on their knowledge, capabilities, and lived experience.

De Sousa Santos' proposition of "a teoria poverra, described as a rearguard theory based on the experiences of large, marginalides … with the purpose of strengthening their resistance" (p. ix) is rooted in the principles of critical resistance, from a self-described intellectual activist. The distinction between the underpinning rearguard theory proposed by Santos and the notion of "centrality" are, while the former is rooted in the emancipation of the marginalized minorities, centrality is about bringing the subaltern to the forefront any work with them and about them, and a legitimate and practical aspect of designing and developing academic thought in different educational activities. This speaks to questions about the practicalities that meaningfully take forward the proliferation of debates and intellectual postulations of decolonization (Morreira et al, 2020).

Santos (2014) makes an important point about allyship, asking the question: On which kinds of allies can we count? Allies are described as those who are "solidary with us and have a voice because they are not on our side of the line" (p. 14). In this sense, the notion of white allyship confers a sense of responsibility and understanding that there is a line and their voice on the other side of the line is crucial to removing the line. An imaginary spatial configuration of a space without lines ensures that representation of the marginalized is crucial for them to speak for themselves from a position of centrality underpinned by an ethos of equity and equality. This can be adopted in internationalization studies to address research findings showing that micro-level individual experiential and aspirational rationales are not at the center of dominant economic driven discourses, and institutional policy (Fakunle, 2021). To conclude, the importance of representation within micro-level internationalization is reimagined and presented below as the enactment of centrality in practice

Conclusion

Four themes are central in the discussion of centrality in micro-level internationalization through a decolonial approach: epistemological lens that is underpinned by a shared acceptance of the legitimacy of diverse knowledges, culturally inclusivity, representation of racially marginalized people in decolonial work in teaching, research and other academic undertakings, and targeted allyship, that is aware and responsive to undo the harms of coloniality.

Conceptualizing Centrality Through Decolonial Lens: Implications for Research, Teaching, International Partnerships.

Coloniality in a postcolonial world remains unabated, despite decades of research and theoretical postulations. Centrality affords a conceptual framework that moves beyond expressing a position about the research subject but actively asking questions regarding how to undo the harmful legacy of coloniality in all aspects of educational undertaking in a globalized world. This essay puts forward centrality as an approach that can be embedded in research and other academic practices from a decolonial lens. Centrality is explained in two ways. First, decolonial work in any ramification needs to involve those whose lived experience is inescapably central to the intent of decolonial work to eradicate oppressive legacies of colonialism. This accords with notions of moving from "universal" epistemology to pluriverse approach (Mignolo, 2011), enabling a fundamental paradigm shift from normative hierarchical posturing of Western-centric as valid, while delegitimizing other knowledges.

Second, the concept of centrality supports well-intentioned aims to involve everyone in decolonial work, including allies. It should however be pointed out that positionality, whilst laudable, does not address the causes of inequities reflected in hierarchical positionings of the "knower" and the "subjects" of research. Positionality is an important conceptual lens premised on reflexivity in decolonial work (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021) and generally. Both "reflexivity" and

"positionality" can be described as important explanatory frameworks (see Fig 1). However, they provide little evidence of actively contributing to addressing enduring epistemic injustices that perpetuates inequalities and marginalization or address epistemic violence and the impact on racially marginalized researchers or subjects of research.

By contrast, as a conceptual framework, centrality explicitly recognizes the lived experience of those positioned at the receiving end of social and epistemic injustice. This goes beyond an acknowledgement of the problem in the form of a positionality statement. Practically, centrality requires a clear articulation of the implications of our work in terms of who is involved and what knowledge matters in learning and teaching, research and other forms of work entailed in knowledge production in international education. This approach can highlight structural and systemic affordances that constrain or enable the embeddedness of cultural inclusivity in internationalized institutions, and forges a way to addressing challenges, redressing inherent inequities, and sharing good practices. So how might this work in micro-level internationalization? Suggestions are offered in the next section.

Centrality: Practical applicability of an ARC model: Active involvement - Recognition – Contribution

A centrality lens requires an explicit consideration of how knowledge, lived experience and agency are represented in designing teaching, research and international projects. Practical considerations can be taken forward using an ARC model: Active involvement – Recognition – Contribution (Fig 1).

As depicted in Figure 1, an ARC model of centrality distinguishes itself from discretionary and explanatory concepts, where the credibility of positionality is questioned in recent debates and discourses. The ARC centrality model foregrounds representation, from humanising and cultural inclusivity principles as follows:

- **Active involvement**: who is involved; for example, are racially minoritized academics actively involved in research or knowledge sharing activities for which they have relevant lived experience?
- **Recognition**: what is the nature of their involvement in the work; for example, are they working on the peripherals, or are they recognized as bringing valuable input that adds value to the research project? Are they recognized as bringing enrichment elements in curriculum design.
- **Contribution**: how are their contributions attributed and rewarded, as may be warranted? How are their well discussed labor, especially Black women (Arday, 2018) rewarded in promotion cycles? Are their contributions reflected in project outputs? Are the project outputs meaningful for advancement from the perspective of the beneficiaries of the research?

Figure 1

An ARC (Active involvement -Recognition -Contribution) model of Centrality in internationalization
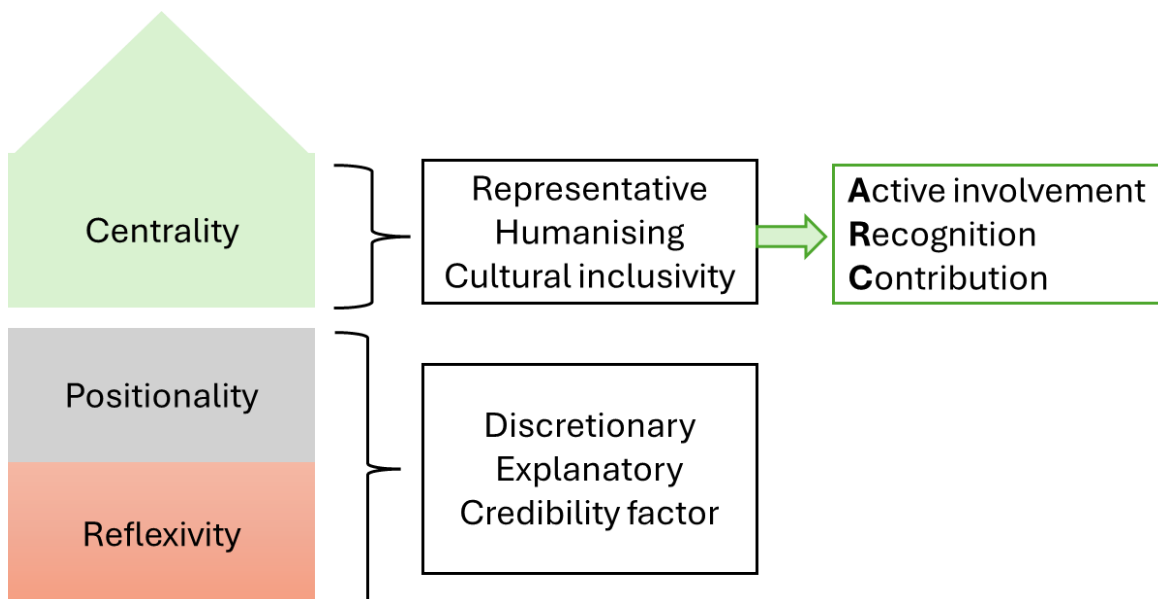
Internationalized classrooms offer opportunities for learning for everyone. International academic staff and students offer institutions with opportunities to draw on their experiences to embed cultural inclusivity in the curriculum (Fakunle et al, 2022; Minocha, et al, 2018). From a centrality lens, institutions could examine the recruitment pipeline of racially minoritized staff and outline transparent plans for retention for sustained representation.

Additionally, based on data and research, the extent to which racially marginalized staff are underrepresented in leadership requires urgent attention. Although there has been progress in recent years, this reiterates that representation matters. Representation is not only for academic staff advancement, but for students who can see a reflection of their aspirations in the staff who look like them.

The ARC principles can be adopted to advance centrality in international partnerships. This implores partners in Global North to reflect on the enduring coloniality that underpins the framing of designing international partnership agreements and collaborations. Based on their research that used data from 7,571 approved projects between 1990 and 2020, Heinzel et al, (2023) criticize the operationalization of earmarked funding [for specific purposes] in international development organizations. This suggests a potential applicability of centrality, inferred in Heinzel et al's (2023) allusion to "normative emphasis on ownership and the principle that people affected by decisions should have a say in these decisions" (p. 491). This is an extensive area that cannot be covered in this paper. It, however, shows the potential relevance of micro-level input in macro-level international development projects.

Targeted Allyship

Allyship is important to remove the structural and systemic barriers that have maintained the "line" (Santos, 2014) for those who have been systematically excluded from building cultural capital to grow in academia. Anecdotally, mentorship is mostly seen as an end to itself. Having targeted measurable outcomes for a mentoring program can focus the mentor and the mentee. The operationalization of effective mentorships can be taken forward in future research.

Where hitherto the focus and onus has been to pen a statement on positionality, a centrality statement can highlight how dismantling hierarchies of oppression of colonialization must start from those who seek to undo it, including allies. An intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) can be explored in future research to take forward possible ways for centrality to be used as a framework to address different kinds of marginalization.

Limitations and Future Research

The suggestions in this paper are not prescriptive. Given the topic discussed, a key limitation of this paper lies in the fact that the cited texts are in English language, reiterating an inherent hegemonic language privilege (Wa Thiong'o, 1998). Nevertheless, this also reiterates the need to critically interrogate how we engage with the bequests of colonialization.

In sum, centrality is a beneficial framework to re-envision the actualization of the transformative potential for internationalization, for its intendent recipients at the micro-level. Benefits include expanding worldviews, knowing that the particularity of hegemonic epistemology limits the opportunity for a well-rounded international and intercultural education for all.

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Book Review

Richard Joslyn and Bruce Stronach. *The History of Temple University Japan: An Experiment in International Education*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023. 292 pp. $30 (paperback). ISBN 9781439919507.

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Purpose and Central Argument

Japanese universities have consistently and extensively documented their histories; however, *The History of Temple University Japan: An Experiment in International Education* stands out as a first account of a foreign university's branch campus in Japan. In this work, former Temple University, Japan Campus (TUJ) deans Richard Joslyn and Bruce Stronach explore why TUJ was founded and how it has survived and thrived. Prior to accepting the dean's role at TUJ in 1996, Joslyn had been involved at Temple University (Temple) in the U.S. since 1986, serving as a political science professor and later as a vice provost for academic administration and planning. Stronach had a background as a scholar of international relations; before joining TUJ as the dean in 2008, he served as president of Yokohama City University, Japan, from 2005 to 2008. Given their backgrounds in higher education administration, the authors bring a wealth of experience to their exploration. In analyzing the history of TUJ, they contextualize the institution within the broader U.S.–Japan relationship and the realms of cultural and economic globalization. The authors posit that the key to TUJ's success lies in the unwavering commitment of individuals at Temple and in Japan to international higher education. They view the symbiotic relationship between TUJ and its Japanese stakeholders as a microcosm of the U.S.–Japan relationship and propose that TUJ could serve as a prototype for institutions in Japan and worldwide, exemplifying successful cross-cultural collaboration.

Overview of the Book

The first eight chapters detail the establishment of TUJ from 1980 to the mid-1990s and provide insights into intricate partnerships with Japanese businessmen and politicians involved in the early years. In Chapter 1, the authors delve into TUJ's financial difficulties and their efforts to protect faculty positions. The authors describe the university's reputation for teaching English and President Wachman's keen interest in international education. This convergence of interests, combined with the Japanese businessman Hiroyasu Yamamoto's desire to establish an English language program in Japan, laid the foundation for TUJ. In Chapter 2, the book delves into TUJ's first financial crisis triggered by Yamamoto's

"problematic behavior" (p. 19). The authors employ a wealth of primary sources, including letters and memoranda, to narrate conflicts and provide nuanced insights from both Temple and TUJ personnel.

The next three chapters describe the development and disintegration of the relationship between Chikara Higashi, a politician, and Temple. Chapter 3 navigates TUJ's evolving partnership with Higashi, characterizing the period 1984–1986 as one of stability and growth. The authors discern a shift away from the initial assumption that students would enroll in an intensive English language program at TUJ and transfer to a U.S. university. Instead, TUJ began offering curricula that led to associate and baccalaureate degrees. Challenges in managing TUJ culminated in conflicting views between Temple and Higashi regarding growth and academic quality at TUJ. Chapter 4 outlines the negotiations as the contract between Temple and the Higashi side approached expiration in April 1989. Chapter 5 details the irreversible breakdown of their relationship. The authors illuminate the cultural differences between U.S. and Japanese universities accompanying globalization, leading to divergent expectations, notably Higashi's desire for more control over TUJ's academic program than is typical in American universities.

Chapter 6 expands the lens to the broader context surrounding American branch campuses in Japan from the early to the mid-1990s. The Japanese news media's critical stance toward U.S. programs affected TUJ's relationship with the Japanese Ministry of Education. The authors commend Temple's successful efforts despite this criticism, supported by the U.S. Embassy and Congress, in transforming the treatment of U.S. academic programs in Japan and securing enhanced cultural activity visas. They evaluate this visa as "a qualitative improvement over tourist visas," which were valid for only 90 days (p. 89), although TUJ's struggles for legitimacy in Japan continued.

Subsequent chapters detail TUJ's transformation into a subsidiary of Temple. Chapter 7 exposes the heightened tensions between Temple and Yasuyuki Nambu, a Japanese businessman and TUJ's third partner, mirroring past issues with Higashi. TUJ was facing operational losses and accumulating debt during Japan's economic downturn in the early 1990s. While Temple and the Nambu side were both working to ensure TUJ's survival, they were approaching it from different management perspectives. Chapter 8 marks a pivotal decision point at Temple in which the university's stakeholders overcome significant caution and opt for TUJ to operate independently. Joslyn and Stronach consider this decision in 1995 as "the single most important event in TUJ's history" (p. 236).

The following chapters detail TUJ's development under the new management structure and depict how the university has achieved stability in cooperation with various stakeholders. Chapters 9 and 10 cover the period of 1996–2007, emphasizing program development, student recruitment, and TUJ's official recognition as a "Foreign University, Japan Campus" by the government of Japan in 2005. The authors note that, although achieving the status of a "Foreign University, Japan Campus" secured enhanced cultural activity visas and enabled TUJ to attract more non-Japanese students from abroad. However, this designation did not solve the university's tax issue; TUJ remained a for-profit institution under Japanese law, resulting in tuition being subject to consumption tax. Chapter 11 details Stronach's efforts to identify a new location for TUJ. Although attempts to secure a new campus in Minato-ku Ward failed owing to the lack of support from the Minato-ku bureaucracy, TUJ eventually established a permanent home at Showa Women's University (SWU) in Setagaya-ku Ward, Tokyo. Chapter 12 highlights the development of TUJ's academic quality during the 2000s and the 2010s. This chapter vividly illustrates that TUJ has moved away from modeling itself on Temple and has taken new strides in creating degree programs unique to TUJ. Chapter 13 scrutinizes TUJ's response to crises, specifically the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 and the COVID-19 pandemic. TUJ and Temple maintained close coordination and communication during these crises despite the time difference, which, according to the authors, shows Temple's dedication to TUJ. Chapter 14 is significant in that it explains how TUJ dealt with cultural differences in collaborating with other educational institutions in Japan, drawing parallels to the U.S.–Japan relationship. In discussing the cultural and educational collaboration between TUJ and SWU in the 2010s, the authors provide examples of tattoos and public displays of affection. TUJ taught its students that these are taken for granted in the U.S. but may be inappropriate at other universities in Japan, including SWU. The TUJ–SWU relationship is based on bidirectional efforts in maintaining their base cultures while learning from the other, and the authors believe it could become a model for cross-cultural collaboration. Chapter 15 analyzes the evolving relationship between TUJ and Temple in recent years, emphasizing TUJ's increasing autonomy,

particularly academically. The authors conclude with a strong expectation that TUJ will continue to lead the internationalization of higher education in Japan and worldwide.

Strengths, Weaknesses and Contributions

Studies investigating the survival of TUJ, in contrast to the closures of other U.S. university branch campuses in Japan, such as the work of educational sociologist Yasuteru Torii (2003, 2006), offer a valuable context for the reader. Torii (2003) categorized the reasons for the closure of other branch campuses into seven areas, encompassing factors such as a decline in student numbers, high tuition fees, poor reputation, English proficiency issues, legal status problems, differences in attitudes toward universities in Japan and the U.S., and main campus contract terminations. Notably, TUJ's distinctive features, including diverse program offerings and substantial enrollment of non-Japanese students, have emerged as significant factors contributing to its sustained existence (Torii, 2003). He underscores that, while TUJ's designation as a "Foreign University, Japan Campus" in 2005 addressed longstanding concerns, financial stability hinges on devising a new framework to tackle taxation challenges arising from its for-profit status, distinct from Japanese universities (Torii, 2006).

The History of Temple University Japan enhances our understanding of TUJ's success by incorporating voices from its founding and operational phases and tapping into rich archival sources in English. The authors emphasize a pivotal decision in 1995 when the university assumed direct control of TUJ, deeming it as the most crucial event shaping TUJ's stability and integration within the Temple. This book reveals that the relationships between Temple and its Japanese partners were marred in similar ways. That is, the goals of the Japanese partners and Temple gradually became less aligned; Temple eventually decided to make TUJ a wholly owned subsidiary. This decision, fostering increased trust from Temple, enabled TUJ's greater academic autonomy, facilitating the establishment of distinct programs aligned with student needs and contributing to its resilience against closure, as outlined by Torii (2003). Joslyn and Stronach show that TUJ has become financially stable without legal recognition as a Japanese educational institution, in contrast to Torii's (2006) assertion. These findings may also have implications for other branch campuses.

Although the book excels at elucidating the administrative aspects of TUJ's history, it is important for readers to acknowledge its limitations. Notably, it does not offer a comprehensive exploration of TUJ history, with aspects such as student life beyond its scope. The first half of the book, centered on TUJ's period with Japanese partners, seemingly reflects the perspective of the U.S. campus more than that of TUJ. A more inclusive approach involving insights from former Japanese partners such as Hiroyasu Yamamoto, Chikara Higashi, Yasuyuki Nambu, and other locally hired staff members during that period could have enriched the narrative, providing a more multidimensional perspective. Furthermore, reliance primarily on English language sources, while valuable, creates potential limitations by neglecting the perspectives of Japanese stakeholders, potentially limiting the depth of the narrative. In future work, a more inclusive approach that considers diverse perspectives and utilizes sources in both English and Japanese could offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of TUJ's history.

While *The History of Temple University Japan* focuses on a branch campus of an American university in Japan, the perspectives it offers are rich with universal implications. First, this book can provide practical insights as higher education institutions have become more aware of the risks of creating a campus abroad in response to the closing of branch campuses (Becker, 2010). Second, understanding of the motivation for establishing and sustaining branch campuses is still limited (Altbach, 2013; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), and this book can contribute to the literature in this area. By integrating voices from various stakeholders, including the authors, the book unveils many administrative aspects of TUJ that facilitated its survival in Japan, a context in which numerous U.S. branch campuses have opted to exit. This comprehensive narrative, fortified by rich primary sources, is a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners interested in the internationalization of higher education.

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Book Review

Lorena Basso, Magdalena Cardoner, Paula De Bonis, Mariana Ferrarelli, Stefanía Martínez León and Pedro Ravela. *Aprender en Comunidad: Prácticas Colaborativas para Transformar la Evaluación* (*Learning in Community: Collaborative Practices to transform Assessment*), Montevideo: Grupo Magro Editores, 2023. 191 pp $U1,080.
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Aprender en Comunidad: Prácticas Colaborativas para Transformar la Evaluación (Learning in Community: Collaborative Practices to transform Assessment) is the joint creation of Argentinian and Uruguayan practitioners. As much of the current discourse in comparative and international higher education is on the Global North, this book expands the discussion to territories historically excluded from the conversation. The book has a prologue by a university lecturer and researcher and is structured in seven chapters, which go from telling about the constitution of the work team, through the statement of their common goal: the design of improved course planning with authentic assessment tasks, to the reflection on the implementation of such proposals, as well as on the experiential knowledge gained from the collaborative work within the community of learning. The book's purpose is then to describe and reflect upon those proposals with the intention of inspiring similar collaborative assessment practices. While the book is written in Spanish, the intended audience is any teacher, teacher trainer/trainee, college/university educator or tertiary level student who wants to read about varied innovative assessment experiences, carried out mainly at higher education (HE) institutions, and the synergy that learning from and with other colleagues harnesses.

In Chapter One (pp. 13-25), *Comunidad de Aprendizaje: Relato de nuestra experiencia de trabajo* (Community of Learning: Account of our work experience), the authors tell the readership how the community of learning gathered. Most of the authors of the book had participated in a previous collective project that had sprung from an instance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on Authentic Assessment, led by two members of the current team, Ravela and Cardoner. Others soon followed. They also discuss the way in which they supported each other and kept the teamwork going by means of respecting a self-directed agenda that organized their synchronous meetings and asynchronous activities, such as writing or reading and giving feedback to their colleagues' written pieces. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) refer to this form of *Collaborative Professionalism* as one of the most successful ones because of its methodical and continuous quality -instead of having sporadic meetings- and its basis on positive bonds of trust (p. xv). The educators that make up this learning community elaborated different authentic assessment proposals, meaning those which comply with the following features enumerated by Wiggins (1989): show the students' progress, need collaboration with others,

involve situated intellectual challenges, resemble real life problems, require an audience, encompass both assessing and self-assessing several variables not just giving/getting a single grade, and are enabling, transdisciplinary, fairer, equitable and more humane than traditional tests (pp. 711-712). These proposals were thought for and enacted in diverse educational contexts, four for higher education and one for secondary school, and were developed in depth in each chapter.

In Chapter Two (pp. 27-57), *La evaluación (al cubo): Sobre la coherencia entre lo que decimos de la evaluación y cómo evaluamos, en un espacio curricular denominado "evaluación"* (The cube of Assessment: On the coherence between what we say about assessment and how we assess, in a subject called "Assessment"), Magdalena Cardoner describes the planning and implementation of her assessment practices in the subject *Evaluación II* (Assessment II) at the teachers' training college for kindergarten and Primary School from Universidad Católica Argentina (UCA), which is inscribed in an approach named *Aprendizaje Inclusivo y Efectivo* (Inclusive and Effective Learning). She meant assessment to be coherent and organic by having her teacher-trainees go deeper into the knowledge and competences on assessment built in *Evaluación I* (Assessment I) and integrating *what* they discuss about assessment theory, for example, differences between formative and summative assessment, into *how* students are actually assessed. This was done going through assessment tasks that are hand in hand with the class bibliography seen, and both peer and self-assessment situations where the theory sheds light on their own assessment histories prior to this course and instances exposed to within it. The course ended with an authentic assessment activity, an *Encuentro de Mejora Institucional* (EMI), simulating an in-service CPD institutional meeting.

In Chapter Three (pp. 59-89), *¿Cómo evaluar en la virtualidad? Relato de una experiencia en el ámbito Universitario* (How to assess in a distance education scenario? An account of an experience in the university context), Paula De Bonis reports on her assessment practices at faculty of Economics from UCA in the years 2020 and 2021 in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic. She intended to maintain the same precision and academic level as those held in face-to-face education before the emergency lockdown. The students in *Administración Avanzada* (Advanced Administration) were asked to carry out some fieldwork, i.e., to interview managers and other workers from an existing company of their choice virtually, so as to have contact with corporate reality. The information collected in their interviews had to be transcribed in critical reports that were finally shared in an event in which the students roleplayed being company consultants who provided, not only a description of the companies but also an informed kind of feedback with improvement suggestions based on the analysis of the situation and the theoretical baggage acquired along the learning process. Among the assessment tools De Bonis employed we can highlight: the use of analytic rubrics, shared from the beginning of the course for students to resort to as a guide preliminary to their fieldwork, and after the completion of the written reports and oral presentations as opportunities for self-assessment on individual and group work, paying attention to aspects such as organization, commitment, participation, creativity and performance.

In Chapter Four (pp. 91-106), *Repensando la clase: Propuestas auténticas en el nivel superior* (Rethinking the lesson: Authentic proposals in higher education), Lorena Basso and Mariana Ferrarelli delve into their assessment venture within the subject *Psicología del Aprendizaje II* (Learning Psychology II), corresponding to the third year of *Tecnicatura Superior en Psicopedagogía* (Psychopedagogy College) at a higher education center in the province of Buenos Aires. The educators specified two purposes behind their renewed assessment practices: making lessons more meaningful and building a bridge between the theoretical knowledge developed by the students and their future professional job. Basso and Ferrarelli subverted a previous limited assessment view that involved the reading and discussion of texts on theory and then the search for examples from reality, by beginning with real problematic situations whose complexity requires resorting to bibliography to be solved. The tertiary-level students were to write an article that would be published in the institution's mural. The article had to address a school problem seen in the light of the authors that the educators contemplated in the course syllabus and others that they themselves included to enrich the analysis and the possible solution. Apart from publishing the articles in the institutional context, the students were asked to share them orally in a formal conversation with students from second year through the teleconference platform *Meet*. The future psychopedagogists self-assessed their knowledge construction process as well as their performance in the technologically-mediated panel, which was deeply valued by them.

In Chapter Five (pp. 107-144), *Investigación educativa aplicada a la gestión de instituciones educativas* (Educational research applied to the management of educational institutions), Pedro Ravela explains the assessment

changes he implemented in a six-month subject from the first half of the second year in a postgraduate course for in-service school headmasters and headmistresses in Uruguay. His authentic assessment task consisted of having the heads develop a concrete improvement plan for each institution, involving the recognition of a current problem, the elaboration of questions to be answered via gathering and analyzing empirical evidence. He reflects that, even though the changes introduced contributed to the subject significantly, the activity continues being too "ambitious" as the course participants do not begin from the same starting line. Consequently, different finishing points should be acknowledged.

In Chapter Six (pp. 145-176), *De los boletines a los informes: Una mirada institucional a los procesos de evaluación en el nivel medio* (From grading to writing personalized feedback: Institutional assessment processes in secondary education), Stefanía Martínez León, a pedagogical advisor, expounds the modifications made in the tool used for communicating parents the assessment results their children obtained along the year in a secondary school in the city of Buenos Aires. She tells how the tool evolved from being a report card with grades from one (the lowest grade) to ten (the highest one) to being a rubric with thorough descriptors and room for personalized feedback. The focus was placed on trying to strike a balance between objectivity and subjectivity in the assessment carried out and valuing both final results and effort involved in the learning process, making it all a more humanizing practice. According to Martínez, future improvements to be taken into consideration entail adaptations for the different subjects and student rubric ownership for increased learner autonomy.

In Chapter Seven (pp. 177-191), *Lo que aprendimos en esta experiencia: De cuando el todo es más que la suma de las partes* (What we learned in this experience: On when the whole is much more than the sum of its parts), the authors provide their personal insight on the takeaways both from the community exchanges and the actual implementation of their varied projects. Cardoner makes emphasis on the need for coherence between discourse and action. De Bonis underlines the richness of the external view of the learning community in the interpretation of the variety of educational scenarios and assessment challenges. Basso foregrounds the potential of conversation as a joint action in meaning making, therefore, in learning and teaching. Ferrarelli remarks on the collaboration, support, empathy, warmth and respectful feedback shared within the community of learning. Ravela puts the stress on the horizontal relationships established among his colleagues, as they all made conscientious suggestions and reading recommendations. Martínez León agreed with Ferrarelli in the fact that the community of learning was a safe space to share doubts and ignorance on certain matters since the colleagues weaved a supportive net that helped each and every one grow at a professional and personal level.

The book is solid and inviting. Diversity is its strength; diversity in the voices gathered, in the contextual scenarios and in the teaching and assessment modalities. The polyphony reached through the knitting of the authors' thoughts and those of their students, providing insight on the assessment proposals, enrich the analysis of such practices and the design of future ones. The variety of geographical and institutional settings adds substance to the written production, given the facts that the professionals involved in this transnational project were from Argentina and Uruguay and the proposals were materialized at secondary school, at a teachers' training college, at a psychopedagogy college and in two university courses: Economy and Administration of educational institutions. The different modalities depicted, wholly virtual, hybrid and face-to-face, make it possible for other colleagues to take or adapt what they might find useful for their own didactic spheres. With respect to difficulties found in the process, authors, proving their criticality, humbly recognized weak points to improve in forthcoming courses. One of these challenges was providing a sufficient but not exceeding quantity of materials or activities; Ravela pointed out offering a large amount of bibliography for students (in his case, heads) to handle and Cardoner referred to students feeling overwhelmed by the number of asynchronous tasks. Another challenge was making students aware of the importance of peer feedback, as in traditional practices the authorized voice is simply that of the teacher and student agency requires developing; De Bonis noted that some oral peer-feedback comments tended to be repetitive, only to comply with what was asked, or superficial, to avoid "hurting" their mates' feelings if anything negative was said. The last, but overarching, challenge was making the assessment proposal or communication tool open and flexible enough for other agents involved to own them; Basso and Ferrarelli detected this tension between planning as preestablished linear actions which are fixed and those which are open for students to be able to make choices and Martínez León identified the needs to adequate the assessment communication tool to the specificity of each subject and to make students acquainted with it so that it is useful for them. It would be interesting to have the chance of reading about how these challenges are tackled with upcoming groups in a future volume.

This book contributes to the scholarly conversations within this journal in two ways. It opens up another discussion subtopic with respect to assessment because it deals with collaboration in the planning of authentic assessment instances, while other articles on assessment deal with intercultural competence, such as that of Rokos et al. (2023) or with the impact of race in academic performance, such as that of Zewolde (2022). It also extends the international discussion, as mentioned above, because it shows what is happening in the matter in two countries of the Global South, which could be compared and contrasted with other assessment practices held in both near and far away regions, allowing for fertile dialogue.

To conclude, *Aprender en Comunidad* is worthwhile reading for a wide Spanish-speaking audience range. In-service and pre-service teachers and educators can profit from it as they will be able to rethink their own present or future assessment experiences, either those they go through as students or the ones they pose as educational workers. The collection of the students' voices assessing the assessment procedures and the educators' ongoing reflection to enhance learning through their teaching are proof of this mutual benefit. As the assessment activities emulated real ones, other graduate or undergraduate professionals might gain insight too, since any project undergone should be assessed to give the expected result. On top of that, all readers will see the relevance of collaborating with others to grow better professionally and personally. The clarity in the description of not only the processes involved in assessing the different groups but also the theory that gives such undertakings a proper framework can help those who read it reproduce their endeavor, adapting the assessment tasks to new contexts, applying some of the practical strategies used or following the dynamics of the learning community though in the pursuit of different goals. The authors' freshness in style and humble but informed viewpoints invite us to both read the book and innovate in our assessment practices.

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