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Introduction

Rosalind Latiner Raby

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Editor-In-Chief

Dear Readers –

I am pleased to share Volume 16, Issue 4, 2043 of the ***Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*** (JCIHE). JCIHE publishes new and emerging topics in comparative and international higher educational whose themes represent scholarship from authors from around the world. In this issue 16(4), 2024, the articles explore and/or compare international higher education in seven countries: Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Pakistan, United States, and Vietnam.

JCIHE is an open access, independent, double-blinded peer-reviewed international journal publishing original contributions to the field of comparative and international higher education. JCIHE will never implement article processing charges (APCs), fees (paid by authors, their institutions, or supporting grant agencies). The JCIHE is the official journal of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Higher Education Special Interest Group (HESIG). The mission of the journal is to serve as a place to share new thinking on analysis, theory, policy, and practice, and to encourage reflective and critical thinking on issues that influence comparative and international higher education. JCIHE showcases new and diverse international research that uses rigorous methodology that focuses on theory, policy, practice, critical analysis, and development analysis of issues that influence higher education. JCIHE has as its core principles: a) comparative research; b) engagement with theory; and c) diverse voices in terms of authorship. A key stance of this journal is to encourage the voices of those from throughout the world through the words that they use. In this regard, we encourage authors to translate their abstracts into their own languages to expand outreach and build equity in publishing.

In the 16(4) 2024 issue, two broad themes are represented in the articles and in the essays: Student Learning Strategies and Institutional Change and Reform.

Student Learning Strategies

Five articles present different contexts regarding student learning strategies. **Farzaneh Ojaghi Shirmard & Edward R. Howe** examine the development of critical thinking skills for international students in Canada. **Jade Sandbulte** examines the learning opportunities for spouses of international students studying in the United States. **Rikio Kimura** examines how teacher assistances can facilitate multicultural group work in a multicultural undergraduate classroom in Japan. **Eunjae Park & Michelle Neumann** examine the role of social robots as a learning tool for second language learners. Finally, **Latifa Sebti & Faten Baroudi** examine the sociopolitical and global contexts that shape pedagogy needed for Arab international students' social and academic engagement, identity, and wellbeing.

Institutional Changes and Reform

Five articles present information on institutional changes and reform. **Gul Muhammad Rind & Joel R. Malin** explore if a national structural reform regarding equitable access to higher education in Pakistan has been achieved. **Sanfeng Miao, Sanzhar Baizhanov, & Courtnay Barrett** explore the application of internationalization of the curriculum to the fields of school psychology, counseling psychology, counselor education, and organizational psychology. **Tongrui Liu & Yuriko Sato** compare country-specific and institutional factors that influence career choices of students who study abroad and then return to their home country. **Hossein Ghanbari** examines how assessment frameworks fail to recognize the linguistic and cultural diversity from the mainstream European point of view which leads to high-rates of drop-out and academic under-performance among minority learners. **Anh T. H. Le** examines the development of Institutional Autonomy of Vietnamese Public Universities that lets the university make decisions on primary activities.

Summary of Articles in the 16(4) 2024 Issue

Sanfeng Miao, Michigan State University, USA, **Sanzhar Baizhanov,** Michigan State University, USA, & **Courtnay A Barrett,** Michigan State University, USA. *Mapping Internationalization of Curriculum onto School Psychology and Related Fields: A Systematic Review of Literature*

This article includes a quantitative systematic review of the internationalization of curriculum literature in the fields of school psychology, counseling psychology, counselor education, and organizational psychology. The authors conclude that professional preparation programs, such as school psychology and related fields, are an excellent foundation for internationalizing the curriculum, but that Western-centric and neoliberal approach to internationalization need to be addressed.

Rikio Kimura, College of Sustainability and Tourism, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan. *Exploring Teaching Assistants' Potential to Facilitate Multicultural Group Work in a Multicultural Undergraduate Classroom in Japan*

This article describes a mixed-method study on how a course design for activating MCGW, which strategically engaged Teacher Assistants, influenced the social dynamics of MCGW and students' learning outcomes in an English-taught undergraduate course at a standalone international university in Japan. Findings show that both Japanese and international students made group work inclusive and international students demonstrated altruistic attitudes for Japanese students with foundational English skills. Students engaged, but not equally express their views or workload.

Farzaneh Ojaghi Shirmard, Thompson Rivers University, Canada & **Edward R. Howe**, Thompson Rivers University, Canada. *"What Does Critical Thinking Mean to You?" A Narrative Inquiry of Graduate Students' Perceptions*

This article uses narrative inquiry to compare Canadian and Iranian international graduate students' perceptions of critical thinking. In the conversations, deep and complex transcultural understandings of critical thinking showed that Canadian participants were articulate about critical thinking, while some Iranian participants were building their criticality. Overall, there is a need for Canadian higher education to take into consideration the development of critical thinking skills.

Hossein Ghanbari, University of Victoria, Canada. *Educational Reform Through Designing Culturally Appropriate Assessment Frameworks*

This essay examines assessment frameworks that fail to recognize the linguistic and cultural diversity from the mainstream European point of view and recognize the distinctions of diverse learners. The limitations of current assessment frameworks lead to high-rates of drop-out and academic under-performance among minority learners.

Jade Sandbulte, University of Minnesota Duluth, United States. *International Spouses' Goals and Investment in Language Learning Programs*

This article examines the experiences of international spouses who move with their partner to a foreign country. This overlooked population is often underserved by the university. This study shows that these spouses benefit from joining language programs and offers suggestions for designing and improving these learning opportunities.

Eunjae Park, School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia **& Michelle M. Neumann,** Faculty of Education, Southern Cross University, Gold Coast, Australia. *Current Insights on Using Social Robots to Support Second Language (L2) International Students in Higher Education*

This essay examines how social robots are used in education as a learning tool to support second language learning. The authors conclude that social robots for L2 students enhance motivation and engagement. Limitations are overall attitudes towards robot-assisted learning, often related to lack of knowledge of how to use this technology.

Gul Muhammad Rind, Sukkur IBA University, Pakistan **& Joel R. Malin,** Miami University, USA. *Achieving Access and Equity in Education: An Analysis of Higher Education Reforms in Pakistan.*

This article examines the structural reforms in funding, governance, and quality assurance in Pakistan higher education. A central focus of the article is to assess if equitable access to higher education has resulted from these reforms. Findings suggest that equal access to HE has mostly not been achieved.

Latifa Sebti, William Paterson University, New Jersey, United States **& Faten Baroudi,** Rowan University, New Jersey, United States. *An Exploration of Arab International Students' Campus Engagement Experiences*

This article examines the ecological factors that contribute to Arab international students' campus engagement and academic success in the United States. Findings show a significant role of global and sociopolitical context in shaping Arab international students' social and academic engagement, identity, and wellbeing. As such, there is a need to design a culturally engaging campus environment that supports engagement and identity development.

Tongrui Liu, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Japan **and Yuriko Sato,** Japan Student Services Organization, Japan. *A Comparative Study of Why Chinese Graduates From Japanese or Australian Universities Return to China and How They Contribute*

This article compares the career choices of Chinese graduates of Japanese and Australian universities who return to China, and identifies factors that influence their life planning model. Findings show that country-specific factors, such as economic relation between the study country and home country and institutional factors related to the human resource management style of the study country, were strong influences of career choices.

Anh T. H. Le, Western University, Canada. *Institutional Autonomy of Vietnamese Public Universities: An Agency Theory Perspective*

This article uses a document policy analysis to analyze policy documents released by the Vietnamese government between 1993 and 2021 to identify contexts of autonomy. Findings show that autonomy means Vietnamese public universities have authority to make decisions on primary activities; yet they must be accountable for their decision-making and responsible for funding sources.

JCIHE Support

I want to thank several individuals who volunteered their time to support JCIHE and who were instrumental in the publication of this issue. First, I want to thank the senior JICIHE Board: JCIHE *Senior Associate Editor*, Hayes Tang who has supported JICHE for the past eight years with his support, insight, and creativity. *Senior Consultant,* Bernhard Streitwieser, *Social Media Editor*, Andrea Lane, *Book Review Editor,* Shinji Katsumoto, *Communications Editor*, and Angel Oi Yee Cheng. I also want to sincerely thank our out-going *Associate and Managing Editor*, Yovana S. Veerasamy, whose leadership, insight, and support are essential to making the journal succeed. Yovana has served JCIHE for the past six years and has helped transform JCIHE with professionalism and creativity.

Second, I want to thank individuals on the JCIHE management team who are vital in the publication of this issue, *Editor for Copyediting*, Mohammad Al Dabiri, and *Copyediting Manager Assistants*, Rachael McGee, and Gina Sarabella. This team is flawlessly making sure that each article is copyedited within a timely manner. Given the volume of articles that JCIHE receives, this is a great achievement. Finally, I want to thank the Production Editor team for this issue: *Production Lead:* Adeline De Angelis who expertly led the production of this issue and *Assistant Production Editors*: Neverson-Anyjah Heatley, Pablo Lopez, and Lea Simek. The entire JCIHE managing and editorial team is critical to the quality of production of this and every issue. It is their dedication that helps keep the standards and integrity for the journal

Finally, JCIHE is dependent on the volunteer efforts of many scholars in the field of comparative and international higher education. I want to give special thanks to JCIHE *Copyeditors* for the 16 (4) Issue. Thank you for the time you give to making sure that the articles are publication ready: Dr. Barry Fass-Holmes, Sattat Hashim, Bessie Karras-Lazaris, Gina Sarabella, and Mohammad Al Dabiri.

Editor in Chief, Rosalind Latiner Raby
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Empirical Article

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Mapping Internationalization of Curriculum onto School Psychology and Related Fields: A Systematic Review of Literature

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Abstract

This article presents a systematic review of 12 empirical studies examining internationalization of curriculum (IoC) in the fields of school psychology, counseling psychology, counselor education, and organizational psychology. Situated in the historical, sociopolitical context of the disciplines, we synthesized the purposes, strategies, and challenges of internationalization of curriculum in these fields. We argue that professional preparation programs, such as school psychology and related fields, provide a promising context to understand the complex nature of IoC through a disciplinary lens. The article raises concerns over the Western-centric and neoliberal approach to internationalization and emphasizes the need to consider disciplinary characteristics in all facets of the IoC process. The article contributes to the conversations on IoC by encouraging the field to think beyond what has been done and what is possible when it comes to curriculum internationalization across disciplines.

Keywords: internationalization of curriculum, internationalization of the disciplines, school psychology and related fields, systematic literature review, critical perspectives

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Introduction

Internationalization is most often understood as the ways in which colleges and universities respond to globalization processes by engaging in binational and multinational relationships with individuals and organizations from other countries (Altbach, 2004; Knight, 2012). Internationalization had originally been conceived as a strategy driving institutions and, ostensibly, their top leadership. More recent theorization, such as the comprehensive internationalization framework, has understood internationalization as both a top-down and a bottom-up process (Hudzik, 2015; Hudzik & Stohl, 2012). International mobility, one of the most widely adopted approaches to internationalization, is criticized for being less accessible and inclusive (Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2018). Defined as "the incorporation of international, intercultural and global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a program of study" (Leask, 2015, p. 9), curriculum internationalization is core to higher education

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institutions' internationalization efforts due to its focus on both the domestic learning environment and international mobility.

There is no one size fits all approach to internationalization of curriculum across academic disciplines and programs (Leask, 2015; Green & Whitsed, 2012). Disciplinary and programmatic differences go beyond the content of the subjects, as disciplines are central to "ways of knowing, teaching, learning, and assessing to curriculum development" (Green & Whitsed, 2012, p. 156). Professional preparation programs, in particular, offer a unique opportunity to understand the interaction between the historical, sociopolitical, and structural context of a discipline, and the goals, values, and strategies of IoC. Professional preparation programs have a primary purpose of training students to gain entry into a specific occupational field (Stark, 1998). Internationalization of curriculum of these fields may be particularly important as they are training frontline professionals to work with individuals who have been directly influenced by globalization (e.g., international, immigrant, and refugee youth).

While international mobility continues to be the mainstream approach to internationalization, scholars have proposed various terms such as Comprehensive Internationalization (CI) (ACE, n.d.), campus internationalization (Paige, 2005), Internationalization at Home (IoH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Leask, 2015), and IoC to capture more inclusive and accessible means to internationalization that take people who cannot travel abroad into consideration. Among these terms, IaH and IoC are frequently used when one specifically examines the implications of disciplines because of their emphasis on the learning environments (e.g. Shahjahan et al., 2023; Kefala & Rönnberg, 2023; Zadravec & Kočar, 2023; Bulnes & Louw, 2022). While some claim that the boundaries between IaH and IoC have increasingly blurred (Jones, 2013), IoC differs from IaH, a form of internationalization of the curriculum that centers the domestic learning environment (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Leask, 2015) because it encompasses both mobility and the curriculum in the domestic learning setting.

It is important to note that curriculum is broader than the content of a course. Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) suggested that curriculum is not only the structure and content of a subject area or program of study, but also the student learning experience and dynamic, interactive process of teaching and learning. Indeed, IoC has its unique emphasis on both processes or activities and student outcomes, aims, or other indicators of quality. The process attends to both the structure and content of the subject area or program of study and pedagogy, teaching, and student learning (Brandenburg & De Wit, 2011; Green & Whitsed, 2013). What adds to the complexity is that the process of internationalization is not value-neutral and may have harmful consequences (Stein et al., 2019). For instance, internationalization often reproduces the geopolitical hegemony of the Global North (Larkin, 2015). Additionally, in their rush for revenues and other international opportunities in the global economy, higher education institutions frequently fail to create culturally responsive learning environments for international students and scholars (Yao & George Mwangi, 2022). In the case of IoC specifically, the process of internationalization may consolidate the Western-hegemony by only incorporating superficial and tokenistic components of non-Western knowledge into the existing curricular (Stein, 2017).

In this literature review, we highlighted one subset of professional preparation programs, school psychology and related disciplines such as psychology, school counseling, counselor education, and organizational psychology, to understand how IoC is conceptualized and actualized within the disciplines. These disciplines have historical, theoretical, and practical overlap. The disciplines of psychology and counseling are considered "helping professions," as their primary goal is to work with other individuals (e.g., clients, students) to support their well-being. Organizational psychology also has significant overlap with school psychology, with their common emphasis on institutional structures and systems, and the impact of those structures on individual functioning. The overlapping foci of these disciplines have resulted in some common elements in their training programs, including common theories covered (e.g., theories of mental health, theories of organizational functioning), research paradigms, and perspectives (e.g., values, worldviews). This study has conceptual significance for understanding IoC, as well as practical significance for understanding how practitioners working directly with youth affected by globalization have been trained. IoC may manifest differently across fields, as the sociopolitical and historical context of each field varies. For example, public education in the U.S. has a long history of colonialism, segregation, and inequality and school psychology, specifically, has played a critical role in the equitable access to education for students with disabilities (Fagan & Wise, 2000). These contexts may influence how IoC plays out in higher education settings. However, considerations about disciplines, particularly how the characteristics of professional preparation programs influence the process of curriculum internationalization, has been under-studied (Bulnes & de Louw, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2023).

Practically, one of the primary goals of school psychology is to more effectively prepare future school psychologists to serve students impacted by globalization (e.g., non-native English speakers, students of color) who experience disproportionately poorer academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes compared to their White counterparts

(Redding, 2019; Skiba et al., 2011). Meanwhile, disciplinary associations, accrediting bodies, and other professional organizations play an increasingly important role in defining field-specific international content and student learning outcomes (ACE, n.d.). Thus, it is important to understand how internationalization of the school psychology curriculum has manifested to prepare educators to interact with youth most affected by globalization. With that said, we reviewed and synthesized the literature to better understand the purpose, strategies, and challenges of IoC among school psychology and related fields (e.g., school counseling, counselor education, and organizational psychology), given their overlapping foci described earlier that may influence the IoC process. Thus, we aim to shed light on the characteristics of disciplines and their implications for IoC. We answered the following research questions:

1. What are the main characteristics of the internationalization of curriculum process in school psychology and related fields?
2. What are the scholarly and practical implications for IoC in school psychology and related fields?

Literature Review

Internationalization of Curriculum

Much of the internationalization literature in psychology broadly emerged from the sub-discipline of counseling psychology. Counseling psychology, as a discipline and corresponding graduate curriculum, originated in the United States (Alsoqaih et al., 2017). After World War II, as a part of the Marshall Plan in the 1950s, counseling psychology found its way to other regions of the world as a one-way exportation of psychological knowledge from the developed countries to developing countries in Asia, Africa, and South America (Coker & Majuta, 2015; Ilhan et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2013). Internationalization of school psychology, counseling psychology, and other related programs included ideologies of individualism, rationality, and empiricism that corresponded to North American values. Begeny et al. (2018), for example, reviewed literature discussing internationalization in school and educational psychology across geographical regions and found that the overall scholarship predominantly featured participants living in, and authors working in, North America or Western Europe. While there is a growing body of literature examining internationalization in school psychology and related fields, there is a lack of attention specifically paid to the development of curriculum (Bulnes & de Louw, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2023). It remains unknown how IoC is conceptualized and actualized in these fields, nor how disciplinary and programmatic considerations inform curriculum development. This gap in understanding drove our literature review.

Curriculum in School Psychology and Related Programs

Higher education professional preparation programs, such as school psychology and school counseling, seek accreditation from professional organizations to ensure their curricula are aligned with the entry-level requirements outlined by licensing bodies (Kratochwill & Shernoff, 2004). These entry-level requirements are country-specific, given that accrediting bodies exist within national regulation and legislation. In the U.S., these licensing bodies include state departments of education and state licensing bureaus that regulate the qualifications of professionals to protect the public whom they serve. These accreditation requirements might be considered institutionalized "blockers" (Leask, 2011), preventing strong IoC practices beyond individuals or specific institutions.

School psychologists and other school-based specialists are uniquely positioned to influence the lives of the many students coming from a broad range of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Professional preparation in these programs occurs at the graduate-level with several licensing bodies serving as the gatekeepers for entry into the occupation. For school psychology programs in the U.S., these accrediting bodies include the American Psychological Association and the National Association of School Psychologists. Curriculum in school psychology and other professional preparation programs must consider these requirements in order for the goals of professional preparation to be realized (Ysseldyke et al., 1997; Tilly, 2008).

Additionally, from its inception as a disciplinary field around 1900 (Fagan, 1992), school psychology and related fields (e.g., organizational psychology) have embraced an underlying positivist paradigm (Lather, 2006; Reschly & Ysseldyke, 1995) perpetuated by U.S. legislation and the sociopolitical context. A positivist paradigm is based in the assumption that a "single tangible reality exists—one that can be understood, identified, and measured" (Park et al., 2020, p. 691). For example, school psychology training and practice in the U.S. is largely influenced by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which both require that the programs, interventions, and supports that school psychologists implement are supported by empirical studies, such as randomized controlled trials. These federal laws influence all related fields that practice within the context of public education (e.g.,

school counseling, school social work, special education) and other subdisciplines within psychology have been influenced by the same sociopolitical influences of the U.S. Not only does this legislation implicitly communicate an underlying positivist assumption, but school psychology graduate programs also focus on advanced training in quantitative methods in order to access or understand the evidence upon which effective practices are identified (American Psychological Association, 2018). It is currently unclear how disciplines geared towards preparing professionals for entry into an occupation with a positivist predisposition engage with IoC which may embrace different epistemological assumptions.

Research Methodology

Search Strategy

We conducted a quantitative systematic review, because the goals of our study aligned with the goals of systematic reviews described by Munn et al. (2018). These goals include confirming current strategies and identifying new strategies related to IoC of school psychology and related fields, investigating conflicting contexts surrounding the operationalization of IoC of school psychology and related fields, and informing areas for future research. This study adheres to the guidelines described in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Page et al., 2020). Eligible studies were identified by searching ERIC and Scopus for articles Search terms included internationaliz(s)ation OR internationaliz(s)ation of the curriculum OR internationaliz(s)ation of teaching and learning AND school psychology OR school counseling OR school social work OR counseling psychology OR clinical psychology OR special education.

In order for studies to be included, they needed to be (1) published in a peer-reviewed journal, between 1990 and 2021 (2) published in English, (3) included participants or programming in school psychology training or a related field (i.e., graduate programs in school counseling, school social work, counseling psychology, clinical psychology, industrial-organizational psychology, teacher preparation, or special education or undergraduate psychology programs), (4) included discussion of the curriculum, as defined as the program of study, students' experience of learning, or the interactive process of teaching and learning, and (5) collected empirical data using a variety of methodologies to describe strategies for internationalization of the curriculum. Studies were excluded if they (1) were published in non-peer-reviewed sources, such as book chapters or trade magazines, (2) were conducted in an unrelated field (e.g., business, nursing), (3) were conceptual in nature and did not include empirical data, or (4) did not discuss the curriculum (e.g., only described the conceptual definition of or rationale for internationalization).

Our inclusion and exclusion criteria were based on our research questions, the scope of study, our definition of curriculum, our language capacities, and our access to research data base. We decided to examine only empirical research because we were mainly curious about the operationalization of IoC in the fields of interest. Initially, our literature search was not constrained to literature exclusively centered on the U.S. However, we observed that the majority of the search results were primarily oriented towards the U.S. context. We recognize that IoC is a global phenomenon. However, given our roles as scholars based in the U.S., familiarity with the U.S. laws and regulations that influence the curriculum of school psychology and related fields within the U.S., we made a deliberate decision to limit the geographical scope of our study to the U.S.

Analysis of Literature

The process of literature analysis was informed by the conceptual lens of geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo, 2005), which recognizes that the dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination is under the influence of frameworks of colonial/decoloniality and post-coloniality (Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016). We used content analysis as a method, which is a flexible approach widely used for analyzing text data (Cavanagh, 1997). We followed Hseih and Shannon's (2005) conventional content analysis approach to analyze our literature. After identifying articles that met inclusionary criteria, studies were first summarized based on their primary characteristics, including sample description and research context (e.g., study location), primary research questions, overarching research methodology, and primary results. Then, studies were qualitatively analyzed using an iterative process by all three authors. No automated tools were used (e.g., Rayyan) to ensure we had in-depth interaction with and understanding of the literature. First, each of the authors read three randomly selected articles meeting inclusionary criteria in order to identify other study characteristics of interest. We compared and identified several charcteristics of the literature including assumptions of the study, theoretical framework, purported benefit or purpose of internationalization of curriculum, rationale or the context in which internationalization of curriculum emerged, and level of internationalization. Then, the three authors evenly divided the articles and highlighted the words and

phrases from the text that appeared to capture key ideas and concepts, which derived codes (Morgan, 1993; Morse & Field, 1995). Initial codes that were taken out of the texts included global citizenship development (Bhat & McMahon, 2016), graduates' employability (Griffith et al., 2012), intercultural competencies development (Hurley et al., 2013) financial support (Ng et al., 2012), faculty engagement (Nash et al., 2011), faculty competencies (Lau & Ng, 2012), study abroad (Bikos et al., 2013), and time commitment. Then, all three authors reviewed all the initial codes and independently identified axial or superordinate codes. Finally, the three authors discussed each of the axial codes until consensus was reached on the final categories of findings emerging from the literature: purpose of internationalization of curriculum, strategies for internationalization of curriculum, and challenges of internationalization of curriculum. We purposefully chose to name our results as "categories of findings" rather than "themes" as we summed up "a collection of similar data" and placed and ordered chunks of texts proximally (Morse, 2008, p. 727).

Guided by our critical framing, which acknowledges that internationalization is not a value-neutral process, and that the characteristics and constraints of individual disciplines can complicate internationalization, we collaboratively examined the codes and resulting categories by revisiting the texts throughout all stages of data analysis. Our aim was to identify instances where the internationalization of our focused disciplines might inadvertently reinforce Western-centric knowledge paradigms.

Positionality

Our complex positionalities were influential to the approach taken to interrogate the literature. First, we are all people of color with Asian descent, with two of us being non-residents of the United States. Our nationalities, as well as racial and ethnic identities encouraged us to approach the analysis through a critical lens and interrogate the Euro-centric way of knowledge and knowing. For example, we are sensitive to how the literature positions international students and scholars in the mix of IoC and plural worldview, discussed later. We also paid attention to how internationalization was framed and whose framing was prioritized in the research. Additionally, coming from the fields of higher education administration (SM and SB) and school psychology (CB), our diverse disciplinary backgrounds were essential to our data analysis experience. We would provide feedback on each other's interpretations and engage in a collaborative analysis as we made meaning of the discourses in multiple texts. Our diverse professional training and identities allowed us to leverage unique bodies of knowledge, which offered both complementary and contradictory interpretations of the literature. For example, we had multiple discussions about whether we wanted to speak to a higher education audience or school psychology audience and how the different target audience would affect our approach to data analysis and presentation.

Limitations

There are two main limitations in this study. The first limitation comes with the conceptualization of IoC itself. We must acknowledge that curriculum internationalization is not a concept that is adopted in every piece of literature that touches on the internationalization processes of the curriculum. Other terms such as internationalization at home, inclusive internationalization, internationalization at distance might be used in some studies when discussing the international dimensions of the curriculum. Further, international schools, college or career counseling, pastoral counseling, and references to decolonizing curricula were also excluded, which may have yielded different results. Limiting the search to keywords that specifically pointed to IoC may have excluded some relevant literature. Further, this literature review included only peer-reviewed publications in the English language and prioritized Western citation databases and indexes. Hence, there might be a broader list of notions relevant to IoC written in different languages. More importantly, as we critique the Euro-centric approach to knowledge and knowing, we are aware that by conducting a literature search, writing, and publishing in English, we as well participate in a system that reproduces Euro-centric ideologies. However, focusing on studies published in English allowed us to hone in on the external regulations and legislation that are discipline and country-specific.

Findings

Search Results

The initial search of the literature yielded 102 results. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts for inclusion and exclusion criteria, 43 were retained for further discussion. Inter-observer agreement was calculated when reviewing the 43 studies for final inclusion in the study. For studies in which there was initial disagreement, all authors reviewed and discussed the study until consensus was reached on whether the study met inclusionary criteria. This resulted

Table 1

Included Studies (N=12)

Author(s)	Discipline	Country/Region of Focus
Ng et al. (2012)	Counseling Psychology	U.S.
Duan et al. (2011)	Counseling Psychology	U.S./Southeast Asia
Nash et al. (2011)	School Counseling	U.S.
Turner-Essel & Waehler (2009).	Counseling Psychology	U.S.
Bhat & McMahon (2016)	School Counseling	U.S./Australia
Wathen & Kleist (2015)	Counseling Psychology	U.S.
Hurley, Gerstein, & Ægisdóttir (2013)	Counseling Psychology	U.S.
Shannonhouse & Myers (2014)	Counselor Education	U.S.
Giordano (1996)	Counselor Education	U.S.
Griffith et al. (2012)	Organizational Psychology	U.S.
Jessop & Adams (2016)	Psychology	U.S.
Bikos et al. (2013)	Psychology	U.S.

in 12 studies included in the analyses. The PRISMA chart (see Figure 1) shows our literature search and selection process. The literature included in the analysis is shown in Table 1.

The included studies represented a variety of disciplines related to school psychology (see Table 1). Most of the studies were from counseling psychology (n = 5), followed by school counseling (n = 2), counselor education (n = 2), undergraduate psychology education (n = 2), and organizational psychology (n = 1). All of the studies were at least partially based in the U.S. The majority of studies employed qualitative methods (n = 7), followed by quantitative methods (n = 3), and mixed methods (n = 2).

Approach

The papers included for analysis in this literature review approached their studies differently. Some studies took a mapping approach, where the authors sought to understand what the existing strategies were to internationalize the curriculum in psychology education (Ng et al., 2012, Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009; Griffis, 2012; Shannonhouse & Myers, 2014). Ng et al. (2012), for example, developed a checklist for IoC in counseling psychology. Similarly, through surveying psychology programs and interviewing faculty members, Turner-Essel and Waehler (2009) compiled a list of recommendations faculty members and higher education institutions could follow to advance internationalization work. On the other hand, some studies took an evaluation and assessment approach, by examining internationalization efforts in existing courses and programs with the goal of understanding the way courses operated and identifying potential areas of improvement (Nash et al., 2011; Duan et al., 2011). Oftentimes, evaluation and assessment were conducted through the lens of both faculty and student experiences. Duan et al. (2011), for instance, offered insights into the level of internationalization in the counselor education curriculum in the United States by investigating the experiences of U.S. trained counselors working in Asia.

Additionally, the literature represented diverse respondent groups throughout the collected empirical literature. In particular, the empirical literature included professionals in the field (Ng et al., 2012), graduate students (Lau & Ng, 2012), counseling psychologists (Duan et al., 2011), faculty members (Nash et al., 2011), and undergraduate students (Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009). While this diversity of perspectives provided a broad understanding of trends and issues implicating stakeholders, it procreated limitations in developing the conceptual implications of a specific nature, rather than general ones. In some cases, the sample population was represented by a single study that provided episodic evidence subject for analysis.

Definition and Purpose

The examination of collected literature demonstrated a lack of shared understanding of what it meant to "internationalize the curriculum" or what an internationalized curriculum should be like. While it was apparent that internationalization of curriculum was important, it was also clear that this endeavor was still a work in progress. Whitsed et al. (2021) noted that definitional opaqueness was further complicated with verbs used to describe the components of

curriculum internationalization. The collected literature, in some cases, specifically used the term of internationalization of curriculum (Marsella & Pederson, 2004; Nash et al., 2011), while in other cases the authors defined internationalization of curriculum through curricular measures originated across the disciplines (Buczynski et al., 2010; Shannonhouse & Myers, 2014). Despite the differences, along with Western orientations and ethnocentricity of curriculum practice, the literature used Western-originated theoretical frameworks and approaches to define internationalization of curriculum. Knight's definition of internationalization that argues for integration of international perspectives was mentioned in the literature (Bhat & McMahon, 2016; Nash et al., 2011; Ng et al., 2012). Different from the process-focused definition, Griffith et al. (2012) used the definition of curriculum internationalization provided by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that is outcome-focused. Specifically, the internationalized curriculum is a curriculum with an international orientation in content and/or form, aimed at preparing students for performing professionally or socially in an international and multicultural context and designed for domestic and/or foreign students (OECD, 1996 as cited in Griffith et al., 2012).

In the reviewed studies, the purpose of internationalization of the curriculum was intertwined with how internationalization of the curriculum was conceptualized. Overall, most arguments for internationalizing the counseling psychology curriculum included development of competencies, international competencies checklist (Ng et al., 2012), cross-cultural skills (Lau & Ng, 2012; Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009; Wathen & Kleist, 2015), and global psychological literacy (Takooshian et al., 2016) to communicate across cultural borders and integrate multiple perspectives. Certain studies provided alternative perspectives based on the notions of social justice, indigenization, and individual transformation beyond the professional and competency dimensions. One example is Giordano (1996), who discussed the movement of the counseling curriculum from a multicultural perspective developed from U.S. social and professional realities to international human rights.

Global engagement and transferability of the curriculum are two other points of discussion in the literature when conceptualizing IoC. Conceptualization at these levels took into consideration the factor of global powers and ethnocentricity of counseling curriculum. Jessop and Adams (2016), for example, focused on higher education institutions' "open, inclusive, reciprocal, and critical engagement with the diversity of the global community, toward the transformation of knowledge and praxis in psychology" (p.42). They further recognized the concerns over the hegemonic version of psychology originated from the Euro-American global power. Meanwhile, Duan et al. (2011) highlighted the transferable nature of internationalized curriculum, stating the approaches needed to be transformed to be applicable in other contexts and cultures, which challenged the Western-centric view of psychology curriculum.

Strategies

Among many strategies the literature indicated, incorporating international perspectives into the course materials and students' classroom experience was the most prominent. Both Hurley et al. (2012) and Ng et al. (2012), for example, suggested incorporating non-U.S. focused readings in the learning materials and encouraging students to reflect on their bias and perspectives in course discussions. Ng et al. (2012) specifically addressed the need to focus on transferability of the course content to other cultures that are sensitive to international students' need to work internationally. While the literature emphasized the learning of domestic students (Lau & Ng, 2012; Lau & Ng, 2014), several scholars emphasized the role of international students who received training in the United States (Duan et al., 2011; Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009). The latter studies described assumptions in U.S. counseling psychology and weaknesses of internationalized curriculum such as the American-centric training content and process, the inattention and insensitivity of training programs to the international students' unique backgrounds and needs, and apparent inattention to internationalization in general (Lau & Ng, 2012; Ilhan et al., 2012).

Another commonly relied on approach was project-based initiatives. Giodano (1996), for example, reflected on program-level partnerships between a U.S. institution and a Greek institution, where faculty members from both countries co-taught. Studying abroad for in-training counselors, attending international conferences, and engaging in international collaborative projects were a few examples of how international learning opportunities expanded students' global horizon (Ng et al., 2012; Duan et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2011). Moreover, it was also recommended that lectures, conferences, visiting scholars, and festivals with an international focus should be integrated into the curriculum as a way to increase students' exposure to international matters (Nash et al., 2011).

Debates about new forms of internationalization in school psychology have also emerged with the development of technology. Takooshian et al. (2016) pointed to the rise of online courses and Internet-based technologies as influential to instruction and international points of view. Bhat and McMahon (2016) defined the use of information communication

technologies in counseling programs as an internationalization at home effort focused on expanding awareness beyond "ethnocentric monoculturalism". E-based learning provided the potential to have more teachers and learners in the same "classroom" and more fluidly position themselves across different settings and conditions, culturally, economically, and politically (McWha et al., 2014).

Finally, studies also underscored the importance of expanding the personal and institutional capacities in internationalization endeavors. Studies pointed out that faculty's interests, as well as their international competencies were central to IoC. Thus, faculty should be allowed to develop international relationships and contacts to encourage more meaningful personal and professional experiences. To expand institutional capacities, there was the need to recognize and use available structural incentives and supports that may assist faculty internationalization efforts (e.g., grants, policies, professional development opportunities) (Hurley et al., 2012). This viewpoint was reaffirmed by Shannonhouse and Myers (2014), who suggested that "it will be necessary for counselor education programs to provide training for both students and faculty to increase cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity" (p. 361).

Challenges

The literature addressed various challenges when internationalizing psychology curriculum. First, conceptual misunderstanding about internationalization led to confusion among faculty and students when making efforts to internationalize the curriculum. Oftentimes, internationalization and multiculturalism were understood as interchangeable concepts. Whathen and Kleist (2015)'s arguments for internationalization of counselor education, for example, were built on the importance of developing students' multicultural competence. Not having a clear distinction between international education and multicultural education is concerning. As Hurley et al. (2012) nuanced, situating internationalization in the multicultural environment might not be effective enough and thus "the relationship between counseling psychologists in the multicultural movement and international movement needs further examination" (p. 45).

The second commonly discussed challenge was the lack of commitment from a broad higher education institution community. Governmental, institutional, and professional policy regulations that did not align with internationalization initiatives hindered the process of IoC (Bikos et al., 2013). Besides, curriculum internationalization in psychology was most likely the endeavor of a few passionate faculty members and students, who felt unable to convince the entire program to prioritize such an endeavor (Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009; Jossep & Adam, 2016). A lack of interest from students was also raised by Bikos et al. (2012) as one of the barriers to internationalizing the curriculum.

Additionally, logistics such as financial constraints, technical difficulties, and assessment challenges were also common concerns presented in the literature (Griffith et al., 2012; Duan et al., 2011; Hurley et al., 2012; Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009). Students' and faculty's opportunities to participate in international activities such as attending international conferences and studying or training abroad were usually limited due to insufficient funding (Duan et al., 2011; Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009). Hurley et al. (2012) pointed to decreases in federal funding as a major barrier to internationalization efforts in counseling psychology. Scholars also suggested the need to provide technical support when using technology in virtual class settings (Bhat & McMahon, 2016). Last but not least, Nash et al. (2011)'s study unveiled the difficulties measuring intercultural competence. The authors also pointed out the mismatch between faculty's expectations and students' understandings of expected learning outcomes from internationalized curriculum.

Discussion

How the literature approached IoC in school psychology and related fields complicates the paradigm in which these fields are situated. As previously mentioned, school psychology and related fields mostly function in the positivist paradigm with the underlying assumption that "single tangible reality exists" (Park et al., 2020, p. 691). We observed tension in the literature concerning whether and how multiple perspectives and realities should be integrated into the curriculum when the fields strived to internationalize. Most of the studies recognized the ethnocentricity of Western curriculum and argued for the necessity of studying diverse ways of being and providing an epistemic standpoint from which to think more critically about natural manifestation of one's own experience (Jessop & Adams, 2016; Duan et al., 2011). Beyond the terms of "ethnocentricity of Western curriculum" (Marsela & Pedersen, 2004) other authors used the terms of "cultural encapsulation" (Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009) or "ethnocentric monoculturalism" (Bhat & McMahon, 2016) to describe challenges faced by the internationalization movement.

Further, as we mentioned earlier, many of the studies utilized frameworks originating from Western perspectives to understand internationalization of the curriculum. However, complications can occur when individuals from other

cultures did not share conceptualizations of social justice, equality, and human rights that were prevalent among U.S. counseling psychologists (Hurley et al., 2013), and the underlying assumption that the U.S. approach to counseling psychology is the norm. Therefore, future studies may consider reimagining the conceptualization of the key terms using an alternative approach to frame their research. For example, Shahjahan et al. (2023) adopted a grounded theory approach to analyze a substantial body of literature on curriculum internationalization across various geographical locations and disciplines without relying on a pre-existing internationalization framework.

However, when it comes to actualizing IoC in practice, it becomes obvious that there is a lack of further investigation concerning whether the process of internationalization can itself be Western-centric. Stein (2017) referred to IoC processes where "differential, historically accumulated institutional power of different knowledges and knowledge communities" (p. 33) are not the core of concern as "thin inclusion" (p. 33). Specifically, the "thin inclusion" of international perspectives in the curriculum focuses on inserting other perspectives and knowledge into the existing structure. Incorporating often superficial, tokenistic elements or areas of non-Western knowledge into existing curricular structures seems to be a strategic institutional means to manage difference (Nandy, 2000). Some scholars, for example, highlighted the possibility to incorporate international students' knowledge in the process of curriculum internationalization (Duan et al., 2011; Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009). Few, however, focused on developing curriculum that may help international students become successful in different cultural contexts. As Stein (2017) suggested, the ideals of using international students' perspectives, showcase how other knowledge and beings are "commodified as property belonging to the cultural archive and body of knowledge of the West" (Stein, 2017, p. 64).

Additionally, the neoliberal approach commonly taken when addressing IoC exemplifies the need for more attention paid to multiple perspectives and realities. A neoliberal approach refers to higher education as a private good provided for consumption of entrepreneurial students who seek to develop skills to be competitive in the marketplace (Jessop & Adams, 2016). The globalization of the counseling psychology profession focused on cultural competencies of graduates (Nash et al., 2011) and implementation of accreditation standards by professional associations (Wathen & Kleist, 2015), which reflect a neoliberal approach. However, there are other pressing global problems such as poverty, migration, overpopulation, international war and violence, rapid urbanization, and cultural disintegration (Marsella & Pedersen, 2004) that may be under-addressed in the curriculum internationalization discourse in the disciplines included in our study. We recognized the neoliberal ideas manifested in literature and believed that both the external accreditation process and the positivist paradigm in which these programs were situated contributed to the emphasis on neoliberal skill development trajectories.

On the other hand, we recognized the challenges for one to incorporate "thick inclusion" when internationalizing the curriculum in school psychology and related fields. As presented in the literature, challenges focused heavily on individual students and faculty without considering the disciplinary characteristics of school psychology and related fields. As previously discussed, the focus on development of student competencies aligned with the professionalization of school psychology and spread of the profession to other parts of the world (Duan et al., 2011; Takooshian et al., 2016; Wathen & Kleist, 2015). These external regulations and accreditation standards drive curricular decisions at the program level. While there are risks or limitations of not internationalizing professional programs or only incorporating "thin" internationalization, we must also recognize the risks associated with excluding or limiting existing content or competencies, such as risk of losing accreditation or harm done to future clients. That said, we are not suggesting that school psychology and other professional programs should disregard the accreditation organizations and other institutional and national regulation to avoid only "thin inclusion" of diverse perspectives. The literature we examined, however, did not delve into the tension between the urgency to internationalize the curriculum and the need to comply with the external regulations. Future scholars and practitioners should ensure they do not underestimate such tensions, nor overlook external regulations, programmatic culture, or other program-level factors.

Implications and Conclusion

Public schools are becoming increasingly diverse (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019) and students from racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally minoritized backgrounds have continually experienced disproportionately poorer outcomes compared to their White and Asian peers (Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). School psychologists and other school-based specialists have the potential to improve the outcomes of these students through assessment, intervention, and consultation practices (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010). IoCof these fields may be particularly important as they are training frontline professionals to work with individuals in public schools who have been directly influenced by globalization (e.g., international, immigrant, and refugee youth).

While internationalization approaches have primarily followed study abroad trajectories, recruitment of international students and faculty, regional area and language programs, there is a growing need for critical analysis of accumulated experience to develop a critically reflexive approach to curriculum development, curriculum conceptualization, and its implications for social justice and equity. IoC may replicate and perpetuate existing inequities, but it also has the capacity to change stakeholders' understanding of their own context, others' contexts, and the relationships implicating developed and developing countries.

The quest for integrating global and international perspectives in the current psychology curriculum signals the change in basic assumptions. However, to address the prevalence of the neoliberal perspective in the internationalization of curriculum and the tendency to operate IoC with "thin inclusion," more discussion on citizenship development and "thick inclusion" should surface as we are facing dire global problems more so now than ever before. In other words, without discrediting the importance of skill and competency development, studies about IoC in school psychology and related fields may look beyond individual gains and strive to educate students who are ready to contribute to a global common good. Meanwhile, scholars and practitioners should also recognize institutionalized "blockers" (Leask, 2011) in disciplines, such as resources and accreditation that prevent good IoC practice that occur at levels beyond individuals and higher education institutions.

Literature examined in this review provided rich scholarly discussions about what curriculum internationalization means, why it is imperative to internationalize the curriculum, ways to actualize IoC, and challenges to address in school psychology and other related fields. Conceptually, this literature review goes beyond the surface to encourage critical reflection on the potential negative consequences of curriculum internationalization when underlying power dynamics are left unaddressed. Further, this literature review outlined a broad spectrum of IoC components including diverse stakeholders, curricular and extra-curricular elements, underlying paradigmatic assumptions, and the impact of external governmental and educational institutions. This breadth of coverage can be particularly valuable for practitioners seeking to integrate international and global perspectives into the curriculum of school psychology and related fields.

While there are other countries and regions that have been active in researching IoC (i.e., U.K. and Australia), the empirical evidence of curriculum internationalization primarily represents U.S. psychology programs. Future research is needed to further diversify the sample of studies as well as the long-term and contextual features. As well, future reviews may broaden the search terms to include studies published in other types of outlets or potentially use terms other than IoC to address curricular and disciplinary issues. Future studies can also build upon this preliminary examination of research literature to provide insight into curriculum internationalization in school psychology and other professional preparation programs, while also investigating paradigmatic developments informed by different university and geographical settings. Our experience working across disciplines has been fruitful.

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Exploring Teaching Assistants' Potential to Facilitate Multicultural Group Work in a Multicultural Undergraduate Classroom in Japan

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Abstract

Despite the needs for the facilitation for multicultural group work (MCGW) in classrooms in internationalized higher education, research on teaching assistants' (TAs) potential to facilitate MCGW has been lacked. This mixed-method study examined how a course design for activating MCGW, which strategically engaged TAs, influenced the social dynamics of MCGW and students' learning outcomes in an English-taught undergraduate course at a standalone international university in Japan. The results revealed that both Japanese and international students made group work inclusive and international students demonstrated altruistic attitudes for Japanese students with foundational English skills. Students expressed their views in their groups and increasingly bore responsibility for group tasks, but not to the extent that everyone in the group equally expressed their views and bore an equal share of the responsibility. Meanwhile, the percentage of students receiving lower grades decreased. Therefore, the course design positively affected the group dynamics and students' learning outcomes.

Keywords: English-medium course, group dynamics, higher education, Japan, multicultural classroom, multicultural group work, teaching assistants

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Introduction

Efforts have been made to develop and implement course designs with a range of strategies that activate multicultural group work (MCGW) in English-taught courses in higher education (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Cruickshank et al., 2012; Kitade, 2013; Miyamoto, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Shevellar, 2015; Takahashi, 2016a, 2016b; Yefanova et al.,

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2017). However, the exact makeup of these strategies remains unclear (Cruickshank et al., 2012). MCGW is defined as group work, in which students from different nationalities collaborate to tackle group assignments. The course design of this study offers another comprehensive pedagogy to facilitate MCGW, adding to the literature. The study specifically explores the role of teaching assistants (TAs) in facilitating MCGW, a crucial part of the course design. Previously, the impact of TAs on MCGW has been undocumented, except for Shin (2017). Furthermore, there is limited empirical investigation into the social dynamics of MCGW (Cotton et al., 2013; Volet & Ang, 2012) and empirical evidence of the association between pedagogical practices and MCGW (Colvin et al., 2015). Therefore, this study examines a comprehensive pedagogy that engaged TAs to facilitate MCGW in an English-medium course at a university in Japan and inquires how this pedagogy influenced the social dynamics of MCGW and learning outcomes. English-medium degree programs in countries where English is not the primary language, such as Japan, are a global trend (Dearden, 2015; Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology, 2019). Thus, this study provides useful insights for such programs.

Below, I review the literature on the social dynamics of MCGW and then narrow the scope and describe the specific context of the course in this study. Second, I will discuss the research methodology and present the course design, including the drawing on TAs. Furthermore, I present findings and discuss them. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the findings and showing the study's implications.

Literature Review

This section unpacks the literature on the social dynamics of MCGW. More specifically, it discusses incipient English abilities of students from non-English speaking countries as a serious hindrance to MCGW, the deficit perception on such students, and trust among group members as an essential factor for MCGW.

Social Dynamics of Multicultural Group Work

Although the extant literature on social dynamics in MCGW—group members' perceptions toward each other and interactions between them—is limited, some empirical studies are still available. The extant literature indicates that the nascent English abilities of some international students from non-English speaking countries are a major hindrance for MCGW (e.g., Osmond & Roed, 2010; Popov et al., 2012). Such international students in universities within Anglophone contexts, such as MCGW, tend to be quiet because they may have limited expertise in English vocabulary and speaking skills (Osmond & Roed, 2010). Additionally, multicultural groups tend to work more slowly than single-culture groups, as the former often needs to adjust to the English levels of such international students (for example, giving them additional explanations for their understanding) (Harrison & Peacok, 2010). Moreover, domestic students in the Anglophone context need to work extra to help such international students in group assignments, such as English report writing (Barron, 2006; Harrison & Peacok, 2010). According to the study conducted by Osmond and Roed (2010), although some domestic students did not mind going this extra mile, other domestic student resented it.

The emergent language abilities of some international students in English-based courses in Western universities, their cultural and educational backgrounds, and negative stereotyping by domestic students shape them as deficits and a problem (Popov et al., 2012; Safipour et al., 2017; Volet & Ang, 2012). Specifically, domestic students see them as free-riders, not communicating appropriately, and being unmotivated and incompetent (Katz et al., 2021; Popov et al., 2012; Safipour et al., 2017). Popov et al. (2012) found that students' cultural backgrounds influenced how they saw and worked in group work, while Safipour et al. (2017) found that students' educational backgrounds impacted their learning approaches. For example, if students have been exposed to a teacher-centered education, they are likely to become good listeners but can be regarded as unmotivated students by domestic students (Safipour et al., 2017). Moreover, Hennebry and Fordyce (2018) argued that silence has a communicative purpose in the Asian educational context. Meanwhile, Safipour et al. (2017) highlighted that cultural factors, such as the Confucian practices where a leader takes more responsibility in group work, led to the lack of contribution from international students to MCGW. Thus, and for example, US university students perceived that Asian students, who were likely to exhibit such attitudes, were less academically competent than European students (Katz et al., 2021).

The deficit perception also resonates with Japanese students who generally possess incipient English abilities in English-medium courses at internationalized universities in Japan, where they interact with international students (i.e., students who are foreign citizens) who have stronger English skills. Course designs intended to decrease this deficit perception and equalize the relationship between linguistic and cultural minority group members and majority group members in multicultural groups were implemented and examined by Cruickshank et al. (2012) and Shevellar (2015) in the Anglophone context and Miyamato (2012a, 2012b) and Takahashi (2016b) in the Japanese context.

Poort et al. (2022) found that trust among group members is essential for their behavioral and cognitive engagement in MCGW. Multicultural groups have a potential for deeper cognitive engagement than single-culture groups because multiple perspectives from diverse members can promote the discussion, assessment, and integration of different perspectives (Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Poort et al., 2022). Meanwhile, participation in MCGW led some students to develop altruistic attitudes towards peers of other nationalities, as those students began to appreciate the contributions from those with diverse cultural and background experience (Sweeney et al., 2008).

However, the extant literature indicates that trust-building takes more time in multicultural groups than in single-culture groups (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Poort et al., 2022). Providing opportunities for students to work in multicultural groups does not necessarily lead to trust among group members and, thus, effective MCGW (Cruickshank et al., 2012; Curşeu & Pluut, 2013). Cheng et al. (2020) found that multicultural groups obtained lower grades in capstone projects at a university in Hong Kong than single-culture groups. There is a need of sufficient icebreaking activities to strengthen social relationships among group members at the early stage of the course (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Poort et al., 2022), to leave enough time and tutorial support for group work (Hennebry & Fordyce, 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010), and to increase a sense of cohort among group members (Kimmel & Volet, 2012).

Context

English-medium degree programs in non-Anglophone countries are a worldwide phenomenon (Dearden, 2015). Japan has implemented policies that internationalize universities to increase its global competitiveness in higher education (Zhang, 2021). These include the Project to Promote Networking for the Internalization of Universities in 2008 and the Top Global University Project in 2014, requiring grant-recipient universities to construct English-medium degree programs (Horiuchi, 2018; Shimauchi, 2012). International student mobility increased within Asia, and internationalizing universities is an integral indicator for university ranking systems (Shimauchi, 2012). Thus, Japanese universities offering English-medium undergraduate degree programs and undergraduate English-medium courses increased from 20 in 2012 to 38 in 2016 and 241 in 2012 to 309 in 2016, respectively (Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology, 2019). Meanwhile, the undergraduate international students' population expanded from 67,472 in 2015 to 89,602 in 2019 until COVID-19 in 2020 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2022). However, English-medium courses in non-English speaking countries face challenges globally, including students' emergent English proficiency and instructors' lack of student-centered pedagogy (Ismailov et al., 2021).

The considered course is in the liberal arts department in a standalone private international university in Japan, established in 2000, which pioneers international universities in Japan. Private universities have led in offering English-medium degree programs in social sciences, humanities, and liberal arts (Shimauchi, 2012). Approximately half of the university students' population comprises international students, mostly from Asian countries. Most courses are offered in Japanese and English. Japanese students primarily enroll in the Japanese-medium curriculum that requires 20 credits of English-medium courses, while most English-medium curriculum students are international students. Those applying for the English-medium curriculum must demonstrate their English skills through official English proficiency tests. It is generally challenging and requires significant effort for Japanese-medium curriculum students to take English-medium courses due to their developing English abilities.

The considered course is Project Management in Development, an English-medium course that is a major subject for third- and fourth-year students, who are most likely to be 20 to 22 years old. The course examined under this study was held in 2017 and 2018. The enrollment was 35 Japanese and 90 international students in 2017 and 15 Japanese and 72 international students in 2018. I started examining the data obtained from the course from 2022 when I received research funds.

Course Design

The course utilized strategies, such as multicultural groups, group work as the primary mode of pedagogy, the strategic use of the first class, group evaluation forms, and the strategic engagement of TAs as a comprehensive pedagogy.

Multicultural Groups

The groups comprised different nationalities (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Kitade, 2013; Shevellar, 2015). Each group had six members. Students from different countries were assigned to each group. Most enrolled students' nationalities in the course were Japanese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, and Chinese, whereas there were also other nationalities with the smaller population, including Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Ethiopian, Fijian, French, German, Indian, Kenyan, Lithuanian,

Malaysian, Mongolian, Nepalese, Nigerian, Pakistani, Filipino, Samoan, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Tongan, British, American, Ukrainian and Uzbekistani. To ensure cultural diversity within each group and promote the use of English during group work, I initially assigned students from major nationalities to different groups. This approach aimed to reduce the likelihood of students speaking their native language during group work and instead encourage the use of English. Next, I assigned students from English-speaking countries and former British colonies, who use English as their first language or were trained to speak English since their childhood, to different groups whenever possible. I intended to have those fluent English speakers lead their respective groups. To prioritize cultural and linguistic diversity within groups, I did not use age, time spent in university, or gender as selection criteria for students. The same groups were maintained throughout the course to cultivate a sense of cohort among group members (Kimmel & Volet, 2012).

For the 2018 course, I implemented an additional criterion for selecting students for multicultural groups. Along with the existing criteria, I also assigned short-term exchange international students, who had been more engaged in my previous courses, to different groups to draw on their leadership potential for group work. However, as several groups persistently lacked teamwork and communication between members, I decided to reshuffle groups at the midpoint of the quarter system term. Based on their observations, I asked the TAs to nominate students who were actively engaged in group work and demonstrated a caring attitude toward their group members as each group's leader, in anticipation that they would exercise leadership. As a result, the number of such problematic groups halved.

Group Work as the Primary Mode of Pedagogy

Group work and trust-building among group members take time, especially for multicultural groups (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Poort et al., 2022). Hence, the course focused on essential contents, allowing sufficient group work time both in and outside the classroom (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Poort et al., 2022; Shevellar, 2015; Shin, 2017). Approximately 70% of the time in the weekly class, which took in form of two 95-minute consecutive sessions, was spent on group work. The first sessions were lecture-based, with around one-third of the time spent on two short group works. Then, I used the second session on group case study analyses and hands-on group workshops for project planning and design thinking, in which students needed to apply ideas and concepts learned from the first sessions. I kept this course format throughout the seven-week quarter system term. TAs observed that the relationship among group members strengthened because of sufficient time for group work (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019).

The second sessions' group work required students' *engagement*. Specifically, hands-on assignments, such as project planning and design thinking tasks, made students express themselves easily (focus group interview, 28 January, 2019) and non-verbally through writing on post-its, drawing pictures, and creating artifacts. Moreover, some group assignments could only be completed with the collaboration of group members (such as design thinking), and most of the second-session group assignments could take significantly longer to complete without collaboration (Pham, 2013; Shin, 2017; Yefanova et al., 2017). Furthermore, many group assignments (e.g., group case study analyses) were open-ended regarding answers/solutions and required higher-order thinking (Krathwohl, 2002), necessitating deep discussions to formulate them. These kinds of group work "gave all group members a chance to contribute, based on their capacity" (Pham, 2013, p. 1003) and aligned with multicultural interactions (Arkoudis et al., 2010).

Following this pedagogy, in-class group participation points accounted for 42% of the total course grade. Its breakdown was 14% (2% X 7 weeks) for participation in short group works in the first sessions and 28% (4% X 7 weeks) for participating in extended group works in the second sessions. I verified participation through the submission of group worksheets. Moreover, students had two opportunities to evaluate their group members' contributions to in-class group work in a quarter (Cotton et al., 2013; Pham, 2013), which were assessed and reflected in their participation points. This peer-evaluation process functioned as a reflection process for students (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012a) and incentivized them to actively participate in and contribute to group work. The project planning project was an outside-the-class group assignment (21% of the course grade). Students evaluated their group members' contributions to the project, which was reflected in students' scores of the project (Cotton et al., 2013; Pham, 2013). The other outside-the-class project required students' engagement in group discussions through a decision-making model (21% of the course grade). In this project, each student was tasked with evaluating and writing up the decision-making process of a decision-making situation of his/her group's choice, which was assessed as individual work. Overall, students were individually assessed by a series of group assignments instead of a single high-stakes group assignment (Cruickshank et al., 2012), and their grades largely hinged on their participation in group work. Hence, this assessment structure fostered each student's participation in group work.

Strategic Use of the First Weekly Class

Sharing Cultural Practices in Group

Arkoudis et al. (2010) and Poort et al. (2022) recommended trust-building and ice-breaking activities should be adopted at the early stages of MCGW. Such activities help students acknowledge cultural diversity in their groups, develop intercultural understanding, and formulate group-specific cross-cultural communication protocols (Hennebry & Fordyce, 2018; Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Popov et al., 2012). Therefore, I covered cross-cultural management and conducted group work related to it in the first session of the first weekly class. I employed the Think-Pair-Share process to create a safe space for students to share their ideas throughout the course (Hennebry & Fordyce, 2018; Poort et al., 2022; Shin, 2017). Students from different countries were paired in groups and went through the Think-Pair-Share process regarding their countries' specific communication/feedback styles, learning cultures, and attitudes toward cross-cultural groups and responsibility-sharing. This familiarization process to each other's cultural differences led students to think about and formulate cross-cultural communication protocols specific to their groups.

The other purpose of this Think-Pair-Share activity was to make the relationship equal between students with stronger English abilities and those with emergent English abilities (most likely, Japanese students) in the group (Cruickshank et al., 2012; Shevellar, 2015). The activity aimed to increase the confidence and capacities of those with basic English skills to share their stories in the safe space created by the Think-Share-Pair process, thereby enabling these students to enact the role of experts and bearers of resources rather than bearers of problems in MCGW (Cruickshank et al., 2012; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Shevellar, 2015). TAs observed that the Think-Pair-Share process enabled Japanese students with foundational English proficiency to express their ideas in English more comfortably (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; 28 January, 2019). Sharing their cultural practices intended to increase their confidence in expressing themselves in English (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Shevellar, 2015), thus facilitating more conversations between the partners and in the group (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; 28 January, 2019).

Facilitation Skills

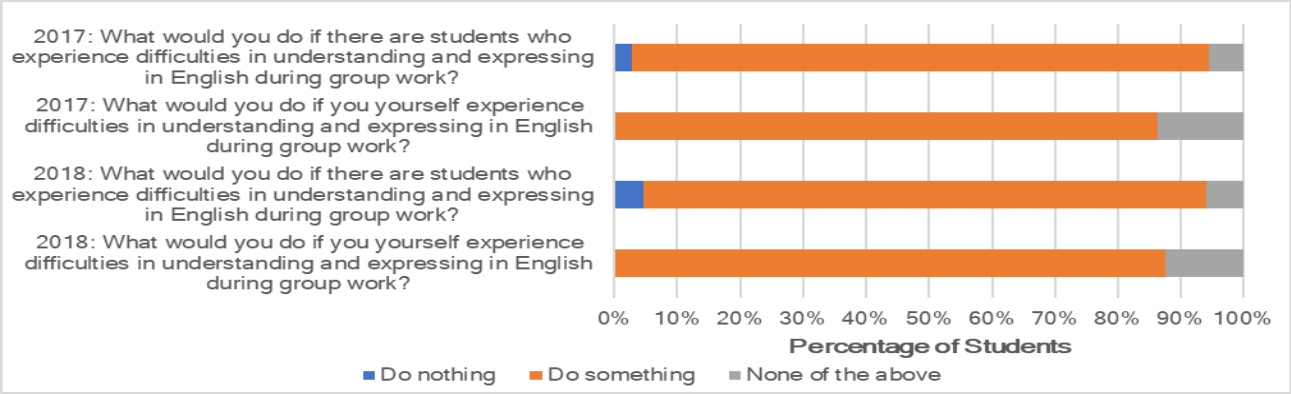
In the first session, I gave students several tips for facilitating group work as part of cross-cultural management. Arkoudis et al. (2010), Popov et al. (2012), and Yefanova et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of peer-learning workshops to learn such skills as facilitation to solicit the voices of group members with emergent English abilities in MCGW. I encouraged students to apply these facilitation skills to their group case study analysis in the second session. At the end of the second session, students completed the facilitation skills checklist to help them reflect on their facilitation (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012a) and consolidate skills.

Questionnaire on Inclusive Group Work

To heighten students' awareness of their cooperation in MCGW, they completed the questionnaire on inclusive group work in the first session. I drew this practice from Miyamoto (2012a, 2012b, 2015) and Takahashi (2016a, 2016b), who asked students, "What would you do if there are students who experience difficulties in understanding and expressing in English during group work?" I complemented her questionnaire by adding the following question: "What would you do if you experienced difficulties in understanding and expressing in English during group work?" I asked students to answer either one of these questions, depending on their English abilities. In the questionnaire, students are required to choose one of the following multiple-choice answers for the question they selected: "Do nothing," "Do something," and "None of the above." Then, they wrote their reasons and/or intentions in the open-ended section of their chosen answer. By adding this second question, I tried to increase not only the awareness of those with strong English abilities, but also the agency of those without these skills and implicitly set expectations for multicultural cooperation (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Yefanova et al., 2017).

I shared the results of the questionnaire in the second weekly class with students. Most students answered "do something" to assist or to be assisted (Figure 1). Some of those who answered "None of the above" wrote in the open-ended section that they would support those with incipient English abilities *if* they tried to participate in group discussions, ask questions about unclear things, and seek help. The result is aligned with Miyamoto (2012a, 2012b) and Takahashi (2016b).

Figure 1: ***Questionnaire Results on Inclusive Group Work***



Note. $N = 84$ in 2017; $N = 82$ in 2018.

Group Evaluation Form

Students evaluate their and their group members' performance in in-class group work using the group evaluation form (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012b). I modified the form created by Miyamoto (2012b). The form was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Questions included: To what extent did students express their views and bear a share of the responsibility? To what extent did group members express their views, bear a share of the responsibility, and help each other? How helpful was the support from TAs and the instructor? Each question was followed by an open-ended section to write reasons, examples, intentions, and/or suggestions. I administered this form at the midpoint and the end of a quarter in 2017 and 2018, which differs from the group peer evaluation reflected in students' group participation points mentioned earlier.

Using this form, I wanted students to reflect on their and their group members' performance, thereby enhancing their meta-cognition and group work (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012b). Additionally, like the questionnaire on inclusive group work done in the first weekly class, the form implicitly set expectations for multicultural cooperation (Arkoudis et al., 2010; focus group, January 28, 2019; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Yefanova et al., 2017). Moreover, through the form, I wanted TAs to know the performance of their responsible groups from the students' viewpoint, so that the TAs could improve their interventions in groups. Finally, I used the data collected from this form as survey data (mentioned in Methodology) to examine group dynamics and students' growth.

Strategic Engagement of Teaching Assistants

In 2017 and 2018, I hired two Japanese TAs who experienced long-term study abroad programs in high school in Anglophone countries and possessed relatively strong English abilities and two international students who were taking the English-medium curriculum. Cheng et al. (2020) found that the supervision arrangement with more instructors brought about more effective group projects in the capstone course. Those TAs previously took this course and were familiar with its content and process. In 2017, each TA was responsible for six groups, while in 2018, each was responsible for four groups.

I hired both Japanese and international TAs to foster mutual help between them. International TAs asked Japanese TAs to explain concepts and group assignments in Japanese to Japanese students with limited English proficiency. On the other hand, Japanese TAs asked international TAs to answer questions that were asked by international students yet difficult for Japanese TAs to answer (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; 28 January, 2019).

Pre- and Post-Class Meetings

Before each weekly class, the TAs needed to grasp the group work scheduled in the first session and read a case study for the second session and its example answers as preparation. I met with the TAs before and after classes, each of which lasted approximately 30 minutes (Shin, 2017). I used pre-class meetings to ensure that the TAs understood the group work of the day and discussed how they would intervene in groups (Shin, 2017). Post-class meetings were to help the TAs collectively reflect on how the group work unfolded, what problems they encountered, and how they addressed them (Shin, 2017). Meetings also helped build trust among the TAs, facilitating mutual help, as mentioned above (focus group interview,

19 July, 2018; Shin, 2017). Post-class meetings particularly functioned as a space for the TAs to learn from each other; for example, the international TAs learned how to assist Japanese students with nascent English skills from the Japanese TAs (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019).

Roles of Teaching Assistants

During group work, the TAs mainly facilitated cooperation between students with strong and emergent English abilities. Shevellar (2015) highlighted the importance of "repositioning the teacher role from expert or rescuer to facilitator" (p. 460) in multicultural cooperative learning classes. Cheng et al. (2020) found that the more teacher-centered the instruction was, the lower grades in capstone courses gained by the supervised students. Therefore, for this course, which placed the TAs on the frontline of interacting with multicultural groups, the TAs did not spoon-feed them but facilitated group members to think together to solve group assignments by indicating which concepts and ideas learned in the course they should employ (Shin, 2017).

To promote everyone's participation in group work, the TAs reminded groups that one or two members should summarize a case study in group case study analysis for their group members, so that all the group members would have a common understanding of it. For the same purpose, one TA encouraged the groups to ask each member for ideas (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). Moreover, to facilitate the understanding of those students with incipient English abilities, the TAs asked groups to summarize what was discussed so far.

Moreover, the TAs directly supported less engaging students and Japanese students with budding English skills. One international TAs used simple English when talking with Japanese students with emergent English abilities (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). The same TA often asked students, "Do you have any questions?" and "Do you need help?" implicitly reminding them that she was always there if they needed support (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). One Japanese TA used examples that Japanese students could easily relate to when explaining to the groups (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018).

I encouraged the TAs to figure out their facilitation styles by trial and error. They experimented with their approaches, observed the responses/reactions of students, shared those at post-class meetings, and modified their approaches. In 2017, except for a few facilitation tips, I did not give them any other instructions. Schön (1983) stated, "When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case" (p. 68). The TAs figured out their facilitation styles appropriate for their groups (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019). For 2018, facilitation tips that I gathered from the previous year's TAs were passed onto the new TA team, which formed the basis of their facilitation (focus group interview, 28 January, 2019); however, I still allowed the 2018 TAs to determine how they would facilitate groups by trial and error.

Group Evaluation Form

As mentioned, I also used the evaluation forms as a tool to improve the TAs' practice. After students completed the forms, the TAs reviewed those of their groups. The TAs said it was useful to know their groups' problems based on which they intervened (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). For example, a student who looked stout-hearted during group work actually wanted more cooperation from her group members, and hence, the TA encouraged the group members to express ideas (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). TAs also recognized the overall conditions and growth of the groups through students' responses to the 5-point Likert scale questions (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019). Through open-ended responses to the question of "support from TAs and the instructor," TAs could judge if groups wanted intervention and what kind of support was needed and/or effective (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019).

Group Monitoring Form

I created a group monitoring form to help the TAs foster interactions between students with strong and nascent English abilities. The TAs used this form to record the performance of their groups and their intervention for each weekly class. The keen observation was the most crucial task for TAs in their group interventions (focus group interview, 28 January, 2019; Shin, 2017). The form consists of questions rated on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions include to what extent did group members express views, bear a share of the responsibility, and help each other? Each question was followed by an open-ended section to write additional comments. Moreover, there were open-ended questions on groups' problems and successes, how TAs intervened, and the intervention's effectiveness. To provide sufficient data for TAs to figure out

their next interventions, I asked them to record as many details as possible, like anthropologists. In post-class meetings, the TAs shared major points from their monitoring forms.

TAs found that the form was useful for monitoring groups' growth and dynamics and functioned as a reminder for TAs to advise problematic students and groups (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019). For example, one TA reminded a student who did not read a case study to read it for the next class through Facebook (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018).

Methodology

I employed the mixed methods approach for this study. To examine the effects of the course design on the social dynamics of MCGW and learning outcomes, I triangulated the focus group data with five TAs, survey data from students, and the course's grade records.

Data Collection

I conducted focus groups with the TAs after the course ended in 2018 and 2019 and administered surveys (group evaluation forms) to the students in the classroom at the midpoint and the end of the fall quarters in 2017 and 2018. The university's ethical review committee approved this study. I received informed consent from both the TAs and students, who were informed about the voluntary nature of the study.

Data Analysis

I used the convergent parallel mixed methods (Creswell, 2014) for analysis. I analyzed qualitative and quantitative data separately and compared analyses' results to depict both general trends and specific phenomena/practices. For the qualitative analysis of the focus groups and surveys' open-ended questions, research assistants generated verbatim transcripts of those data. Then, I coded them through NVivo 12, counted frequencies of occurrences of codes (Cohen et al., 2007), categorized codes, drew diagrams based on categories (Sato, 2009), and wrote a storyline based on those diagrams (Kinoshita, 2007). For the quantitative analysis of the numerical data of the surveys, I compared the average scores between the first (N = 115) and final (N = 102) surveys in the fall quarter of 2017 and those between the first (N = 72) and final (N = 70) surveys in the same quarter of 2018. Then, I conducted a t-test to examine the statistically significant differences among the scores and determine growth in students' engagement with MCGW.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, first, I will examine hindering factors for students who were not able to express themselves and contribute to group work. Second, I will present enabling factors for Japanese students with incipient English abilities to express themselves and contribute to group work. These findings are based on the qualitative analysis of students' responses to the open-ended questions in the surveys (group evaluation forms). Third, I will offer a quantitative analysis of the surveys, which indicates the overall group dynamics and the growth of students' engagement with MCGW. Fourth, I will show how the course design changed students' course grades. Finally, I will compare the qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Qualitative Analysis

Hindering Factors

A crucial hindering factor for expressing in English was the limited English proficiency of Japanese students who enrolled in the Japanese-medium curriculum (27 occurrences). They experienced difficulties in understanding group work assignments. Students needed to read a case study written in English before each weekly class to prepare themselves for group case study analysis, and some Japanese students faced difficulty understanding it. Furthermore, being in line with the practical nature of the course, some of the tasks/questions for case study analyses, such as "Analyze…at different levels," "Establish criteria for evaluating…", and "If you were…, what would you do?", required higher order thinking to analyze a phenomenon, evaluate options, and create solutions (Krathwohl, 2002).

However, the emergent English proficiency of the Japanese students was not considered a significant hindering factor for bearing a share of responsibility for group work (4 occurrences) because there were other ways to contribute to group work than verbally expressing opinions. These ways include writing on post-its, drawing pictures, and creating artifacts in more hands-on group work. Further, although students could not express themselves eloquently, their ideas were still appreciated and valued by their group members.

Not reading a case study for group discussion was the other most responded hindering factor for students in expressing themselves in English (18 occurrences) and bearing a share of responsibility for group work (11 occurrences).

Enabling Factors

Because of the course design, students took the initiative to make group work inclusive. Four behaviors of students particularly counteracted the budding English skills of Japanese students who enrolled in the Japanese-medium curriculum. The first behavior was to help such Japanese students understand group work assignments and case studies. The coding with high frequencies of occurrences indicated that students helped each other by explaining (26 occurrences) concepts/ideas, questions, and group tasks (10 occurrences) to each other and by asking and answering each other's questions (15 occurrences), to ensure understanding (24 occurrences). Students helped the Japanese students understand group tasks and case studies by explaining in simple English words and expressions.

The second behavior was to ask the Japanese students for their ideas. The coding with high frequencies of occurrences indicated that students encouraged their group members to share their ideas (35 occurrences). Related to this was that students helped the Japanese group members express themselves. One student wrote in the survey, "With a Japanese member, we were patient to ask opened-questions to help her express ideas easier." Some groups allowed the Japanese students to express themselves in Japanese, as international students in those groups understood Japanese. The fourth behavior was carefully listening to each other's ideas (13 occurrences). These behaviors counteracted the Japanese students' incipient English abilities and included them in group work.

Thirdly, a kind and supportive group atmosphere also made group work inclusive (9 occurrences). One student wrote in the survey, "There was one Japanese student in our group. He was shy to express his opinions but we all encouraged him and gave him full support." Such an atmosphere can be created by group members trying to get to know each other. Another student stated in the survey, "In addition to discussing about case studies, we talked about something else to get to know each other more." Related to this is that students were mindful of their group members' conditions, needs, and strengths. For example, those good at writing in English edited part of their group reports written by those poor at writing (most likely, Japanese students with emerging English abilities). These altruistic attitudes of international students confirm Sweeney et al.'s (2008) finding that MCGW developed altruistic attitudes toward students of other nationalities.

As mentioned, not having read a case study for group discussion was a major hindering factor for expressing in groups. Students encouraged group members to read a case study before a class, and they started reading a case study.

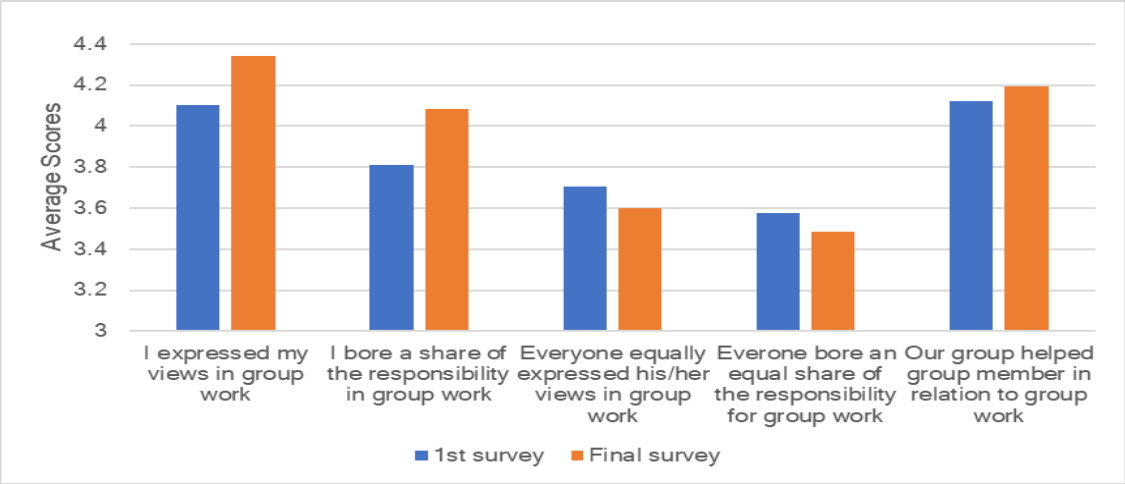
Quantitative Analysis

Students' Perceptions of Group Work

I compared the results of the surveys at the midpoint (the first) and the end (the final) of the quarters in 2017 and 2018. The analysis consistently indicated high average scores (over 3.4 on the 5-point Likert scale) for students' endeavors to express their views and bear a share of the responsibility and their group members' endeavors to do these and help each other (Figures 2 and 3). The average scores for the question: "I expressed my views in group work" were among the highest for both years. However, group members' perception of "everyone equally expressing his/her views" is consistently lower than students' perception of "expressing their views." This indicates that students expressed their views in English, but some could not do so appropriately.

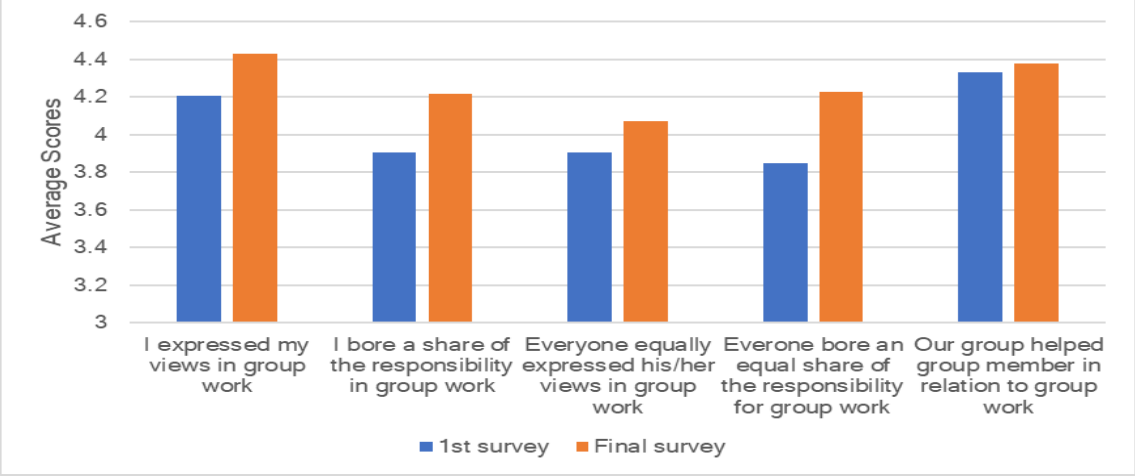
I conducted an unpaired *t*-test to see if statistically significant differences existed between the average scores of the first and final surveys for 2017 and 2018. The only question with significant differences for both 2017 (t (215) = 2.24, p = .026) and 2018 (t (140) = 2.07, p = .040) was "I bore a share of the responsibility for group work." Students increasingly bore a share of the responsibility over the quarters in their perceptions. While the scores for the "our group helping group members" question were among the highest in 2017 and 2018, the scores for the "everyone bearing an equal share of the responsibility" question were lower than the former. This suggests that students helped each other, but some did not or could not do so to the extent their group members could evaluate that everyone equally contributed to group work. Meanwhile, the questions "everyone equally expressing" and "everyone bearing an equal share of responsibility" received relatively low scores.

Figure 2: Average Scores of Students' Perceptions of Group Work in 2017



Note. $N = 115$ in the first survey; $N = 102$ in the final survey.

Figure 3: Average Scores of Students' Perceptions of Group Work in 2018

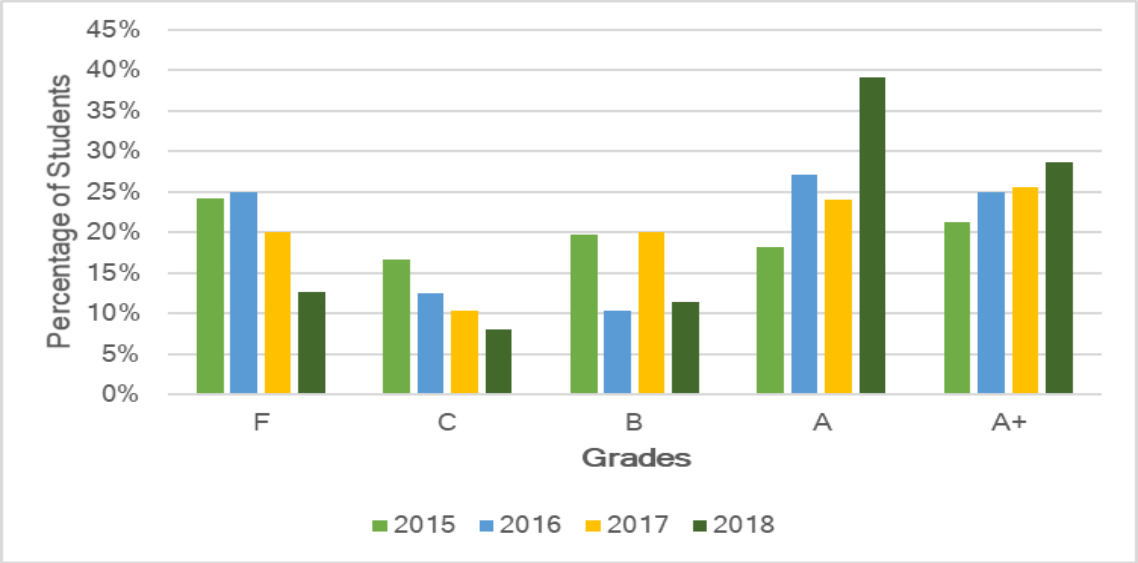


Note. $N = 72$ in the first survey; $N = 70$ in the final survey.

Course Grade Analysis

I compare the course grade distribution in 2017/2018 (when the course adopted the current course design) and that of 2015/2016 (Figure 4). The university uses the following grade scale: A+ (raw score 100-90), A (raw score 89-80), B (raw score 79-70), C (raw score 69-60), and F (raw score under 60). After I employed the course design, the ratios of C and F decreased. Most course assignments were linked to MCGW. Therefore, the course design positively impacted the percentage of students receiving lower grades.

Figure 4: Grade Distribution Comparison



Comparison between Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses

The qualitative findings show the nascent English proficiency of Japanese students who enrolled in a Japanese-medium curriculum significantly impedes their abilities to express themselves in English. Quantitively, while these students attempted to express their views in English, their incipient language skills often rendered their efforts inappropriate. This finding resonates with the current literature, which identifies the emergent English skills of some international students from non-English speaking countries in the Western context as a major barrier to their engagement in MCGW (e.g., Osmond & Roed, 2010; Popov et al., 2012).

The quantitative findings suggest that students help each other, but some did not or could not do so to the extent that their group members could assess that everyone equally contributed to group work. According to the qualitative analysis, international students helped Japanese students with budding English abilities understand group assignments and case studies, asked them for their ideas, helped them express themselves, carefully listened to them, and created a kind and supportive group atmosphere, while both international and Japanese students verbally and non-verbally contributed to group work. However, international students still bore more responsibility by doing most activities, including editing English group reports (Barron, 2006; Harrison & Peacok, 2010), as altruistic attitudes (Sweeney et al., 2008). It is also inferred that the questions "everyone equally expressing" and "everyone bearing an equal share of responsibility" received relatively low scores in the quantitative results because it ultimately depended on each student to decide how much they endeavored to express and contribute to group work (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019; Yefanova et al., 2017). This is indicated by the existence of those students who did not read a case study before a class.

The course design reduced the percentage of students receiving lower grades. As mentioned, international students assisted Japanese students with nascent English abilities in various ways in group work, fostering their inclusion into group work, understanding the subject contents, and agency toward learning. Those efforts took more time for international students but did induce better learning outcomes for the Japanese students (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Poort et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to inquire how the course design for activating MCGW, which included engaging TAs, influenced the social dynamics of MCGW and learning outcomes. Both Japanese and international students took the initiative to make group work inclusive and international students demonstrated altruistic attitudes for Japanese students with emergent English abilities. According to the quantitative analysis results, students expressed their views and bore a share of their group's responsibilities; specifically, students increasingly bore responsibility over the quarters. However, group members perceived that not everyone equally expressed their views, primarily due to the incipient English abilities of Japanese students from the Japanese-medium curriculum. Additionally, group members perceived that though they helped each other,

not everyone bore an equal share of the responsibility. Concerning learning outcomes, the percentage of students receiving lower grades decreased. Therefore, the course design positively impacted the group's dynamics and learning outcomes to a certain degree.

The course design extended the range of strategies for comprehensive pedagogy for MCGW (Cruickshank et al., 2012). Moreover, the research showed empirical evidence of a positive association between pedagogical practices and MCGW (Colvin et al., 2015). There has been little practice and research on engaging TAs to facilitate MCGW, making this one of the first in-depth studies on the topic. Furthermore, this study delved into the under-researched social dynamics of MCGW (Collett, 2010; Volet & Ang, 2012).

However, I interviewed neither international students nor Japanese students, who would have revealed thorough and nuanced group dynamics. Therefore, further studies on this topic may conduct sufficient interviews or focus groups with Japanese and international students.

Instructors are limited in their capacity to supervise and facilitate group work in large classes (Cheng et al., 2020). Therefore, internationalized universities in Japan with English-medium courses, where Japanese and international students enroll, particularly private ones with large classes, may draw on TAs to activate MCGW. Moreover, universities in other nations with large-sized English-based/medium courses comprising many international students may also experiment with and research this student-centered pedagogical approach to examine its effectiveness in their contexts.

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"What Does Critical Thinking Mean to You?" A Narrative Inquiry of Graduate Students' Perceptions

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This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Abstract

Critical thinking is an important part of higher education in Canada, and many education systems worldwide, but not all cultural contexts. Critical thinking enables students to expand their perspectives and better navigate important personal and professional decisions. This narrative inquiry compares Canadian and Iranian international graduate students' perceptions of critical thinking. Through conversations with eight participants, deep and complex transcultural understandings of critical thinking were unearthed. Findings indicate that while Canadian participants can articulate informed viewpoints about critical thinking, some Iranian participants require further knowledge to construct their critical thinking conceptualizations. Results suggest that Canadian higher education needs to consider international students' limited background knowledge of critical thinking and must provide more opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. This study offers insights for higher education policymakers, curriculum developers, and practitioners to consider international and intercultural perspectives to facilitate critical thinking in both international and domestic students.

Keywords: Canada, critical thinking, Iran, international students, narrative inquiry

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Introduction

Canada attracts more than one million international students annually for educational purposes, predominantly in higher education (Canadian Bureau of International Education [CBIE], 2024). English is the *lingua franca* of the globalized world, with one in four individuals utilizing it worldwide (Sharifian, 2013). As a predominantly English-speaking country, Canada is among the top destinations and accounts for approximately five percent of the global education market (OECD, 2022).

Critical thinking (CT) is embedded within Canadian higher education, and most programs encourage students to apply CT in their studies. CT is also an important attribute related to their suitability for many jobs because it has been

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shown to facilitate practical skills, such as reasoning, communication, and problem-solving (Zara & Othman, 2013). CT has been deemed an essential skill, as employers value workers who can adeptly solve problems as they may arise. The pivot due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a noteworthy example. Thus, CT gives students an advantage in the workplace. According to Dam et al. (2018), most international students enter Canada with the goal of citizenship. A recent survey conducted by the CBIE (2024) found that 57% of all international students intend to apply for permanent residency. Thus, obtaining a work visa upon graduation is a requirement for many international students who intend to stay.

International students are expected to meet admissions requirements to enter Canadian academic institutions. One of the mandatory obligations for non-English speaking students to enter English-speaking universities is presenting proof of language proficiency through exams such as IELTS or TOEFL. Although these tests claim to indicate students' English proficiency, they do not demonstrate students' critical academic literacy (Ojaghi Shirmard, 2023). Nevertheless, international students are expected to be able to effectively demonstrate CT despite the absence of CT in their countries' education systems (Islamiyah & Sholakhuddin Al Fajri, 2020). Specifically, for international students from non-western academic cultures, such as Iran, using CT is challenging and problematic as the concept of CT is completely foreign to them. Indeed, CT is a sensitive concept that the Iranian policymakers actively discourage. Given the foregoing, how can Western higher education institutions foster CT in international students? Moreover, do Canadian curriculum developers consider international students' limited background knowledge of CT when designing curricula for all students?

This study examines the perceptions of Iranian international students and compares their understanding of CT with Canadian students during their educational journey in Canada. This narrative inquiry seeks to answer the research question: What are Canadian and Iranian graduate students' conceptions of critical thinking?

Significance of the Study

This narrative inquiry research shares Canadian and Iranian international students' perceptions of CT during their graduate studies in Canada. This study is significant because policymakers, practitioners, and key stakeholders need to develop a better understanding of international students and their preparedness to study and succeed in Canada. As such, by understanding graduate students' perceptions of CT and their levels of awareness about CT, curriculum designers may obtain new insights. Most importantly, policymakers can become better acquainted with the challenges international students face, especially for students who arrive from non-western countries with limited knowledge of CT. Similarly, higher education institutions and instructors at colleges and universities may use the study results to design, plan, and implement CT preparedness for international students through curriculum reform. Another unique aspect of this research is adding knowledge to the body of comparative and international higher education. A meta-search of the literature indicated that no research had been done examining Canadian and Iranian conceptions of CT. Therefore, this study is unique in providing an understanding of CT among Canadian and Iranian students during their graduate studies. This study thus provides insights for comparative scholars and curriculum developers. Moreover, this research recommends that higher education institutions consider cross-national and trans-cultural perspectives in curriculum design in order to provide more equitable learning environments for domestic and international students.

Literature Review

There are several well-known definitions for CT rooted in three primary academic disciplines: philosophy, psychology, and education (Lewis & Smith, 1993; Sternberg, 1986). This study focuses on educational definitions. In higher education, most experts frequently cite two main definitions of CT. The first one is articulated by Dewey (1910), who posited that CT is an "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusion to which it tends" (p. 6). The second definition is expressed by Ennis (1985), who stated, "critical thinking is reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 45). In their definitions, they underline that reflective thinking involves people having the ability to ask themselves questions about what to believe by evaluating and considering the implications of one's beliefs. In addition, Ennis (1993) stressed that CT is linked to the upper three levels of Bloom's Taxonomy for educational purposes: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Several scholars highlight that CT plays an important role in higher education; therefore, preparing students to think critically is one purpose of higher education. According to Fella and Lukianovaa (2015), CT is vital for students in all

programs as "critical thinking successful completion forms the heart and soul of every subject because its concepts and principles are presupposed in, and give rise to, the logic of every subject" (p. 3). In addition, it is noted by Egege and Kutieleh (2004) that the main distinguishing factor separating university academic standards from secondary school academic standards is CT, which generally has been viewed as a crucial attribute for students. CT benefits students in facilitating academic skills, including distinguishing issues and assumptions in a university setting, identifying relationships, making proper inferences, evaluating evidence, and reasoning conclusions (Tsui, 2003). Obtaining these abilities is a major goal of higher education, which requires higher-order thinking, such as applying critical evaluation and giving evidence for opinions (Fahim & Shakouri Masouleh, 2012). Indeed, within higher education, CT reveals itself in argumentation and empowers students to shift from passive recipients to active participants.

While generally, CT is widely considered the domain of higher education, it has become an integral part of some entire education systems from kindergarten through secondary schooling. For instance, in the province of British Columbia, the site of our study, the public education system has undergone an extensive transformation in terms of utilizing CT components in the curriculum. CT "competency encompasses a set of abilities that students use to examine their own thinking, and that of others, about information that they receive through observation, experience, and various forms of communication" (Ministry of Education in British Columbia, n.d., para. 1). This transformation emphasizes problem-solving, literacy and communication, teamwork, and information technology in order to align with the realities of the digital era and an ever-changing world (Fillion, 2020; Hymel et al., 2017). Thus, education in British Columbia seeks to foster students who can be critical thinkers and reflect on the different information, ideas, and experiences in order to set objectives, make judgments and refine their thinking in their academic and civil life.

In contrast to the Canadian context, the position of CT in the Iranian education system is quite different. It is noteworthy to consider that the Islamic revolution of the late 1970s instigated considerable changes in Iranian society, including the education system. This resulted in dramatic reforms to the content of school textbooks, based on Islamic frameworks and the rejection of other ideologies (Hashemi et al., 2010; Salehi Abari & Nikdoosti, 2021; Shahnazari, 1992). Consequently, the Iranian education system and curricula, decidedly lack any form of CT (Eghbali et al., 2021; Hashemi et al., 2010; Hajhosseini et al., 2016). Furthermore, higher education has not cultivated CT because the traditional system is focused on Islamic teachings and transferring content knowledge. Iranian students are not taught nor educated to be critical thinkers (Hajhosseini et al., 2016). This vastly different cultural context creates challenging and problematic situations for students when they aim to study in western academic institutions.

Previous Studies

As this is a cross-cultural study, focused on Eastern and Western notions of CT, it is important to identify previous research in different cultural contexts. A number of relevant studies were found, detailed here. Considering that CT is an integral part of education and a crucial attribute for students in higher education (Zhong & Cheng, 2021), it is notable to pay attention to international students' perceptions of CT in Western academic contexts as the concept of CT developed in western countries might be absent in their cultural and educational settings. A broad search of the literature indicates that a branch of investigation exists regarding international students' perceptions of CT in Western countries. For instance, Tiwari et al. (2003), through a cross-sectional design methodology, compared the CT dispositions among Asian (Hong Kong Chinese) and non-Asian (Australian) nursing students in two universities. The findings of their study showed considerable differences in CT disposition between both groups of students. While the Asian students failed to indicate a positive disposition, the Australian students expressed a positive disposition toward CT.

Another study explored the CT dispositions and differences through cross-sectional research between baccalaureate nursing students in Thailand and the United States, built on cultural values (Chaisuwan et al., 2021). Their investigation revealed no statistically significant connection between cultural values and CT dispositions. However, nursing students in the United States had a remarkably higher mean score on the entire cultural values and subscale of autonomy, secular, and emancipative values than nursing students in Thailand.

In a different study, Egege and Kutieleh (2004) explained why CT is an important element for universities as a necessity of quality academic work, academics still complain about the lack of a critical approach to learning by international students. The authors argued while there are differences in learning styles and attitudes among various cultural groups of students, it is necessary to facilitate the successful transition of international students in developing CT capacity as a vital

"distinguishing feature between western academic models of study and non-western or Confucian-based learning systems" (p. 78).

In another study, Chinese international students in Australia were concerned that their perceived inability to present western-style CT reflected poorly on their own different ways of knowing (Song, 2016). The author argued that there is an urgent need for a transcultural approach to thinking critically regarding the practice of CT in worldwide knowledge domains and knowledge production.

In the Canadian research context, several noteworthy studies were found that focused on different areas of CT. For example, Wright (2002) found teaching CT problematic due to existing definitions, practices, and obstacles; thus, the scholar defined various approaches for teaching and developing CT among students. In another study guided by McGrath (2003), the researcher attempted to discover the CT skills and CT dispositions among baccalaureate nursing students at a university in western Canada through a cross-sectional research design. The research's outcomes specified that only 38% of the study's participants had sufficient levels of CT skills, but more than 85 % had adequate levels of CT dispositions. The results of the study show that there is a need for continued development in CT areas among nursing students.

In sum, the review of the current literature has found some tangential cross-cultural CT studies, but no investigations focused on Canadian and Iranian students studying at Canadian universities and their conceptions of CT. This study fills a noticeable gap in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical or conceptual framework used in this study is based on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry, which is both a framework and a method. We also build on Dewey's (1910) notion of education as a reflection on experience. The conceptual framework is further detailed in the work of Howe (2010, 2022). While the phenomenon of internationalization of higher education has been well researched and clearly articulated, rarely are international students themselves included in the discourse or in the development of theories. A noteworthy exception is a study recently reported in this journal (Howe et al., 2023). This qualitative research puts lived experience before theory. In this study, the voices of international students are the focus. Our narrative conceptual framework also draws on Hayhoe (2000) and insider-outsider research (Etherington, 2006).

Methodology

This study employs narrative inquiry to investigate Canadian and Iranian graduate students' conceptions of CT. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is an approach to a collaborative and reflective understanding of individuals' experiences. Narrative inquiry is one of the interpretive forms of qualitative research frequently applied to discover a detailed understanding, perception, and outlook of complex phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012). The theoretical lens in narrative inquiry is a guiding perspective or ideology that brings a structure for supporting groups or individuals' experiences in the written report to imply an educational research problem (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Narrative inquiry has effectively been used to investigate the experiences of international students in Canada and was the focus of a recent JCIHE article (Howe et al., 2023).

An open-ended interview approach was used to gather data for this investigation. According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), an interview in narrative inquiry allows researchers to collect narratives from their participants regarding their experiences with a specific phenomenon in order to "externalize his or her feelings and indicate which elements of those experiences are most significant" (Elliott, 2005, p. 4). To focus on discovering a central phenomenon of a small population, a purposeful sampling strategy was used (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012), which enabled the researchers to intentionally select people and sites "to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 206).

Data Collection

Research Site. This study was conducted at a mid-sized public university in the interior of British Columbia that offers various on-campus and open learning programs in undergraduate and graduate degrees and vocational training for domestic and international students. The first author, Farzaneh, recruited eight full-time and part-time graduate students

who had successfully finished their first year of studies. The rationale for this purposeful selection was to ensure that these students had prior knowledge and experience of CT in their program.

***Participants*.** This study has eight participants: four Canadian and four Iranian, from different master's programs. Canadian students studied in education programs, and Iranian participants studied in various fields, namely education, data science, environmental science, and business administration. All students were willing to share their lived experiences voluntarily. In this study, when we speak of Canadian students, we mean students who were raised in Canada and, most importantly, who have familiarity with the kindergarten to grade 12 (k-12) curricula regardless of their race, ethnicity, and gender. In other words, these participants completed their k-12 schooling in Canada and obtained their bachelor's degrees in Canada. When we refer to Iranian students, we imply students raised in Iran, who have done their schooling in the Iranian educational system, received their bachelor's degrees in Iran and identified as international students at the university. Both groups of participants were recognized as enrolled students at the university while collecting data. Canadian students consisted of two women and two men. Iranian participants included three women and one man. Upon ethics review and approval, data collection was conducted from January to March 2022 through face-to-face and online interviews. All participants, before the interview, received an informed consent form letter which provided brief information about the study's purpose and essential factors of their participation in the research. Interviewees with a complete understanding signed the consent form and offered pseudonyms to give anonymity. Thus, all names throughout the study are pseudonyms that participants suggested on their consent forms. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants' demographic information.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Program	Education Level	Nationality
Keith	Man	Education	Master	Canada
Jenna	Woman	Education	Master	Canada
Sydney	Woman	Education	Master	Canada
Lamech	Man	Education	Master	Canada
Mona	Woman	Data Science	Master	Iran
Amir	Man	Environmental Science	Master	Iran
#4	Woman	Business Administration	Master	Iran
Mali	Woman	Education	Master	Iran

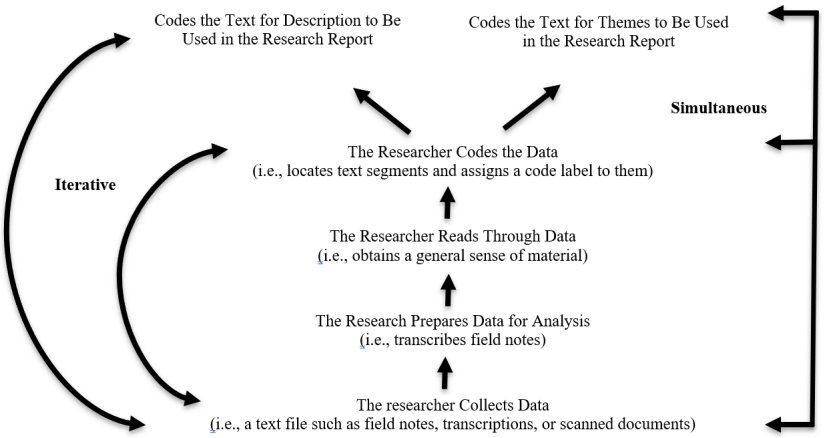
Data Analysis

This research uses thematic analysis and Bloom's Taxonomy framework for data analysis. Thematic analysis is an appropriate approach to analyze the interview transcriptions to specify whether there were any themes, differences, or relationships among the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

To do this, Creswell and Guetterman's (2019) pattern was used to analyze the data systematically. Following this pattern, the first author, Farzaneh, transcribed all the interviews after each session. Then, all the transcripts were organized into different types based on common and different opinions among participants for later reading and analysis. Next, all data was coded. The coding process aims to make sense of text information by labelling the segment with codes to narrow raw data into broad categories. This process includes five steps: "initially read through text data; divide the text into segments of information; label the segments of information with codes; reduce overlap and redundancy of codes; collapse codes into themes" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 244). Figure (1) displays the process of data analysis for this investigation.

Figure 1

Qualitative Process of Data Analysis

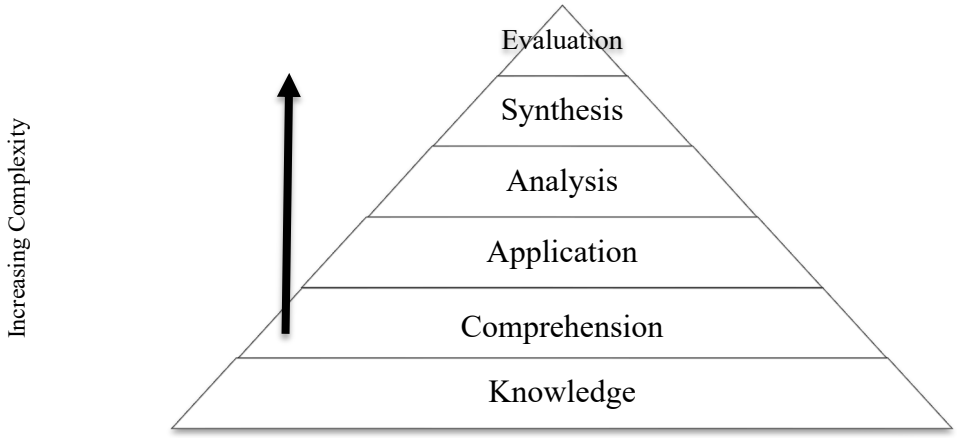


Note. Adapted from "Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research (6th ed.)", by J. W. Creswell and T. C. Guetterman, 2019, Pearson Education, p. 237.

Bloom's Taxonomy is also used as a second analytical framework to understand students' conceptions of CT better. Bloom's Taxonomy consists of six categories which create a hierarchy. The lowest three levels are knowledge, comprehension, and application, and the highest three levels include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Forehand, 2010). The scale of the CT concept among participants is based on this taxonomy, and the first author, Farzaneh, examined students' levels of understanding of the notion of CT based on this hierarchy. Figure 2 illustrates Bloom's Taxonomy hierarchy.

Figure 2

Bloom's Taxonomy Hierarchy



Note. Adapted from "Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning Objectives", by N. E. Adams, 2015, Journal of the Medical Library Association, 103(3), p. 153.

Validity and reliability have traditionally played a significant role in educational research. However, these are positivistic constructs and need to be carefully reconsidered in light of qualitative research designs such as narrative inquiry. Merriam (1995) suggested different strategies to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research, including peer

debriefing and member checks, as utilized in this study. Interviews, or what might be better called *peer-to-peer conversations*, facilitated data collection, reflexive analysis, and findings (Howe, 2010; Howe, 2022; Howe & Cope Watson, 2021). Using the member check strategy, the first author, Farzaneh, shared the interview transcripts with the participants to ensure that their words and notions were carefully and correctly understood. All participants had two weeks to review their ideas and were encouraged to comment on their transcripts for the final research text.

Results

This study addresses the research question: What are Canadian and Iranian graduate students' conceptions of CT? Thus, what follows are highlights from students' narratives of their perceptions of CT.

Canadian Students' Perceptions of Critical Thinking

The data analysis of Canadian participants demonstrated that all students had a knowledgeable understanding of CT. Sydney described a working definition of CT in seeking and understanding diverse perspectives about notions. She believed that CT means openness to alternative views. For another participant, Jenna, CT means questioning existing knowledge. In our conversation, she delivered a sense that it is significant to be an open-minded person and have a consideration about each subject from various perspectives. She stressed that CT is about questioning and re-examining assumptions about what we already know and searching for new knowledge. Other Canadian students, Keith and Lamech, expressed that CT relates to logical reasoning through analyzing and synthesizing information to evaluate and judge. Additionally, students' narratives show their familiarity with the concept of CT and their understanding of the importance of this skill, not only in academic contexts but also in other situations. Indeed, students' deep understanding of CT shows that their viewpoints are related to the three upper and advanced levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

Iranian Students' Perspectives on Critical Thinking

The Iranian participant's definitions of CT were slightly different from each other. Some individuals implied relevant principles of CT and displayed no difficulties in defining CT, whereas others reflected a lack of understanding of this concept. In response to the question about what CT means to her, Mona provided a definition that interpreted CT as a set of information-processing abilities. Mona explained that the ability to "look at all aspects" of problems or information requires CT. Another student, #4, directed her knowledge of CT as an ability to consider multiple perspectives of information and observations for making a judgment. Mona and #4 knew the significance of analyzing the information they faced in their personal and professional paths.

However, the descriptions of CT from the two other Iranian participants show a lack of understanding of this concept. Amir's definition of CT indicated that CT is finding "fault in something and criticizing someone or something". CT is about judgement, which can include finding faults and flaws but emphasizes questioning and analyzing different information and ideas. Reflecting on Mali's definition of CT, who articulated that facing the concept of CT was "challenging" to her, illustrates that her understanding of CT did not come reasonably and occurred after conducting repeated practices during her studies. She pointed out, CT is "whatever I like, whatever I do not like, and my opinion about a text or whatever I can express myself". Mali's perception of CT is synthesizing reliable sources and adequately articulating her thoughts about a subject to express herself clearly.

Critical Thinking Themes

The above findings indicated that *openness to alternative views*, *questioning existing knowledge*, *analyzing*, *synthesizing information*, and *making judgments* are sub-themes of the definition of CT among Canadian participants. The sub-themes of the meaning of CT among Iranian students' points of view consist of *information processing abilities*, *analyzing multiple perspectives*, *criticizing*, and *self-expression*. The analysis of participants' conceptions of CT resulted in six main themes: **analysis**, **open-mindedness**, **reasoning**, **questioning**, **criticism**, and **self-expression**. Table 2 compares both groups' notions about CT by presenting sub-themes and themes.

Table 2

Summary of Canadian and Iranian Students' Conceptions of CT

Students	Sub-themes	Themes
Canadian	Openness to alternative views	Open-mindedness
	Questioning existing knowledge	Questioning
	Analyzing	Analysis
	Synthesizing information and making judgments	Reasoning
Iranian	Information processing abilities	Reasoning
	Analyzing multiple perspectives	Analysis
	Criticizing	Criticism
	Self-expression	Self-expression

Discussion

The findings of this narrative inquiry clearly show that Canadian students had a reasonable awareness of CT based on Dewey's (1910) and Ennis's (1993) notions of CT as essentially reflective thinking that enables individuals to evaluate information and values to make informed judgments. The themes from Canadian perceptions of CT — *open-mindedness*, *questioning*, *analysis*, and *reasoning* — indicate their definitions of CT are also related to the upper three levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, which are predominantly identified as higher-order cognitive skills and procedures. In contrast, Iranian students' notions about the concept of CT represent various viewpoints. While two students generally understood the basic idea of CT, the other two participants had difficulties with this concept. Two key themes in this group — *analysis* and *reasoning* — are linked to higher-order thinking. However, the other primary categories — *criticism* and *self-expression* — are not active processes of effectively thinking about thoughts and actualizing subjects, according to Ennis's (1985) definition of CT.

The theme *analysis* articulated by one Canadian and one Iranian student shows that CT allowed them to analyze and synthesize information from multiple viewpoints. Based on Bloom's Taxonomy, the upper three levels indicate higher-order thinking skills that involve deeper learning and more cognitive processing among individuals. The *analysis* aims to distinguish between fact and opinion to identify the claims of an argument where the abilities are commonly thought of as CT (Adams, 2015). For Lamech and #4, the definition of CT was the capacity to break down information and explore it from various perspectives to have superior clarity about information.

The *open-mindedness* theme illustrated by one Canadian participant highlights that through being an open-minded person, students can be more sympathetic to each belief and argument regardless of considering whether they agree or disagree. As Ferkany (2019) discovered, open-mindedness includes a willingness to consider "new ideas, practices, or experiences" (p. 405) to establish whether to add or modify thoughtful or critical approaches to an individual's existing knowledge. In fact, open-minded persons can learn new things and challenge their prejudiced beliefs to make a judgment by logic, reasoning, and evidence. Being open-minded permits students to consider flexibly, determine options, and discover innovative methods to achieve a certain mission. These elements are related to the synthesis level of Bloom's Taxonomy.

The *reasoning* is a further theme in the definition of CT expressed by one Canadian and one Iranian participant. The reasoning process is a fundamental part of CT investigated by researchers such as Scriven and Paul (1987) and Zara and Othman (2013). These scholars acknowledge that individuals could evaluate statements, assumptions, and arguments about subjects in ordinary situations through the reasoning process. For Keith and Mona, CT is defined as the ability to process and assess information to make a judgment. Their conceptions of CT are linked to the analysis level of Bloom's Taxonomy. The analysis represents the ability to reflect on complicated challenges by assuming the information that individuals gathered and organized.

Questioning is another theme in the definition of CT expressed by a Canadian participant. Questioning leads students to concentrate widely on thinking about the information and current knowledge to think critically. The capability

to question can create a questioning mind in much the same way as a critical mind. In other words, questions promote debates and facilitate forward-thinking. As Fahim and Bagheri (2012) explained, Socrates believed that students could achieve a profound understanding and thinking by questioning basic beliefs and assumptions to reflect different opinions. So, the ability to question and collect various perspectives is linked to the analysis level of Bloom's Taxonomy. The analysis develops students' motivation and makes them independent thinkers to make informed decisions.

Another theme that shows the meaning of CT from an Iranian student's perspective is *self-expression*. According to Kim and Ko (2007), self-expression is "expressing one's thoughts and feelings, and these expressions can be accomplished through words, choices or actions" (p. 326). Mali's definition of CT is linked to lower-order thinking of Bloom's Taxonomy, which is the realization that a person knows what is being communicated and can utilize the material or idea without necessarily connecting it to other material or noticing its entire implications (Armstrong, 2010). Thus, Mali structures meaning through interpreting, summarizing, comparing, and explaining the content with limited or a lack of knowledge about the definition and purpose of CT.

Criticism is a narrow definition of CT from an Iranian participant's limited perspective. Even though there is a difference between having CT and being a critical person, Amir believed that thinking "against" something or someone could be counted as CT. The word criticism refers to "the act of expressing disapproval of somebody or something and opinions about their faults or bad qualities" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.). This intersects with the notion that CT is a set of skills that leads individuals to approve or disapprove of an argument through judgment, which results from analyzing, reasoning, and evaluating the observations and information. (Dewey, 1910; Ennis, 1985; Scriven & Paul, 1987; Sternberg, 1986). Amir's understanding of the concept of CT is also related to lower-order thinking of Bloom's Taxonomy, which is knowledge. The noteworthy point in Amir's view about the definition of CT relates to the cultural contexts discussed in the following section.

Critical Thinking in the Iranian Cultural Context

It is notable to reflect on and deconstruct the meaning of CT in the Persian language and Iranian culture. There is no word to define CT in Persian dictionaries (e.g., Dehkhoda Dictionary, Mo'in Farsi Dictionary, or Amid Farsi Dictionary). According to the Dehkhoda Dictionary, which is one of the most comprehensive Persian encyclopedic dictionaries, critical thinking (in Persian: **تفکرانتقادی**) consists of two words: thinking (*taffakor*/**تفکر**) and critical (*enteqād* /**انتقاد**) that have separate definitions. The word thinking (*taffakor*) has the same meaning as thinking in English, which refers to using a person's mind to consider or reason about something. However, the word critical (*enteqād*/**انتقاد**) means "correction" or "description of the advantages and disadvantages of a poem or article or book" (Dehkhoda Dictionary, n.d). So, putting these meanings together shows that Amir's definition of CT, which mainly focused on thinking against someone or something or criticizing people and subjects, is close to the meaning of CT in the existing Persian language. However, several Iranian scholars (e.g., Eghbali et al., 2021; Fahim & Bagheri, 2012; Fahim & Shakouri Masouleh, 2012; Hajhosseini et al., 2016; Hashemi et al., 2010) have provided further insights into the concept of CT based on its purpose for individuals' academic and social life. Still, there is a need to enter the sensible meaning of this concept in the Iranian language and literature to increase people's knowledge and conceptions about this notion, especially in an academic context.

The education system and cultural context are important in examining CT among Iranian students. The 1979 Revolution had a significant impact on education in Iran. This Islamic adaptation created the government's version of education, which was dramatically influenced by every Islamic law. A study by Fahim and Bagheri (2012) notes that some potential goals of nurturing CT among students are to teach them to familiarize themselves with conflicting beliefs, ask profound questions and acknowledge the fact that knowledge is always subject to change. Still, the scholars note that "it is never possible to question the beliefs and values in the name of fostering critical thinking" (p. 1125).

In such a traditional education system where students are supposed to memorize the materials and those who can remember more information obtain better academic achievement, there is no effort to consider CT. The lack of CT components in the system causes educated youth to become subservient citizens who are reluctant to question authority. Thus, there is little room in the curriculum to familiarize students with the idea of CT, and the education system cannot successfully offer an environment where learners can foster and practice this skill in an academic context. Accordingly, when Iranian students arrive at a Western university, they face challenges linked to a lack of CT and practicing it in an academic environment. Consequently, CT in higher education requires further attention, research, practice, and policy

reforms. Furthermore, universities must provide sufficient materials and resources for teachers and students about CT. Finally, curriculum designers need to develop culturally appropriate CT curricula for international students in order to succeed in higher education.

Limitations

This study aims to compare Canadian and Iranian international students' conceptions of CT during their post-graduate education in Canada. However, it is essential to point out that the study has limitations.

Firstly, in this study, Canadian students were from one program only, meaning that Canadian participants' voices do not represent all Canadian students' conceptions of CT across various programs. It is not fair to say that other students in different majors have similar conceptions and levels of understanding about CT.

Secondly, this study was conducted in a Canadian public mid-sized institution focused primarily on teaching, rather than a higher-ranked research university. In this sense, the findings might not be applied to describe Canadian and Iranian international students' perspectives in a top-tier university or community college, for example. So, future researchers can broaden the number of participants from different institutions to capture a more diverse range of experiences and points of view. This expansion can offer a broader understanding of how international students from different educational backgrounds and academic programs perceive and engage with CT.

The last limitation of this investigation is related to Iranian students' English language proficiency. As all participants were interviewed in English, it is possible that some Iranian students were unable to clearly and fully express their ideas about the topic due to a lack of language proficiency which in turn might have impacted the study's findings. According to Martirosyan et al. (2015), it usually takes longer for international students to reach academic norms in a second language (i.e., five to seven years) than to obtain the interpersonal interaction skills needed for daily communication (i.e., about two years). To address this limitation, future studies can consider incorporating language support measures to make sure that students can effectively communicate their ideas and experiences.

Implications

The results from the analysis demonstrate how the learning experience linked to CT among Iranian international students might be challenging in their western higher education. Such findings support the call for western higher education institutions to offer appropriate resources and opportunities to international students to nurture their CT. Moreover, this research results apply to wider western academic contexts such as the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK). According to Duffin (2021), 914,095 international students studied in the USA in the 2020-21 academic year. This number is a slight decrease from the previous year, when 1.07 million international students studied in the USA, and is possibly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most international students in the USA are from China and India, totaling 317,299 students and 167,582 students, respectively (Duffin, 2021). Iran is ranked number 13 with 9,614 students, so this is a relatively small number of international students. Another report by Higher Education Statistics Agency (2022) illustrates that in the 2020-21 academic year, the UK welcomed 605,130 international students for educational purposes. As with the USA, Chinese students made up the largest group of international students, with the number 143,820. These countries and other western-tradition nations are attracting growing numbers of students, mainly from non-western cultural and educational contexts where students might be unfamiliar with CT.

Western nations and higher education institutions that welcome large numbers of international students must consider providing more intercultural components in program planning and curriculum design. Furthermore, instructors at colleges and universities need to pay attention to their students' academic preparedness regarding the concept of CT and ways to practice it in an academic setting. Also, this study encourages international students who suffer from a lack of CT awareness to share their situations with their instructors or academic staff and ask them to provide sufficient materials and connections to a wide array of practical situations in order to boost their CT.

Conclusion

This research investigated Canadian and Iranian graduate students' perceptions of CT during their studies at a mid-size public university in western Canada. Through narrative inquiry, the lived experiences of four Canadian and four Iranian international students were described in detail. Findings revealed that while all Canadian participants had sufficient

knowledge of CT, some Iranian students lacked this foundational skill and had difficulties grasping the concept. Thus, more attention must be given to building international students' CT conceptualizations. Results suggested that teachers must address the lack of CT preparedness through curriculum reforms. We recommend that practitioners, through a deep and nuanced understanding of Canadian and Iranian students' perceptions of CT, create lessons with intercultural awareness of CT to better support international students. This study has meaningful implications for faculty and staff who provide a program of study for non-western international students at western universities of higher education. It is important for teachers to pay attention to students' background knowledge and the cultural context of curriculum, teaching, and learning. Moreover, this study calls for actions from policymakers and curriculum developers in Canada and other western countries, such as USA and UK, to consider international students' educational and cultural backgrounds related to CT.

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Educational Reform Through Designing Culturally Appropriate Assessment Frameworks

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Abstract

Assessments in education enables educators, curriculum designers, and program developers to evaluate the success of their programs. It also allows for assessing learners enrolled in the programs. Assessment frameworks emanate from a Western and positivistic stance and tend to disregard linguistic and cultural diversity from the mainstream European point of view. That said, failing to recognize the distinctions of diverse learners has led to inequitable learning experiences for minority learners, who have distinct ways of knowing, worldviews, and epistemologies, and have led to their high-rates of drop-out and under-performance in academe. Thus, this study reviews the literature on assessment and has found that current assessment frameworks have contributed to the high drop-out rate and academic under-performance among minority learners. This, however, could be resolved when educators indigenize and re-define assessment frameworks and assess their minority learners' academic performance using culturally appropriate frameworks that incorporate their Indigeneity and ways of knowing.

Keywords: assessment framework, indigeneity, assessment, indigenous, culture

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Introduction

The world we live in is home to diverse people who, due to various reasons, may end up living in close proximity to each other. However, this multiculturalism/multilingualism comes at a price since education is offered in the dominant language of a context and will often offer little or no appreciation of its minority peoples' languages, cultures, and ways of knowing. An example of this is the residential schools in Canada, where First Nations youth were forcibly separated from their parents to be educated in an English education system. Given such a history, it is critical to explore such contexts and their minority learners, who will encounter academic systems encoded with cultural and linguistic knowledge that will drive them to mold themselves accordingly. Such systems will eventually propel minority, Indigenous learners to undergo language shift/loss and experience academic under-performance and high drop-out rates (Redecker & Johannessen, 2013). This under-performance has been attributed to such academic systems and their assessment frameworks that encompass Western standards, depreciate non-Western/Indigenous ones (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010), and fail to consider the individual differences in them. As a consequence, minority learners will be excluded from such systems as they do not belong to the

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mainstream, fail to identify with the experience (Pearce & Williams, 2013), and are rendered unqualified for many jobs after they have graduated from school (Li & Dockery, 2015).

This has driven various scholars to investigate how academic systems instigate such challenges and attempt to supplement them with more inclusive and culturally appropriate learning environments. As an example, Mbah and Johnson (2021) have explored the role of Indigenous knowledge in postsecondary policies to implement sustainable development, and Collins and Kalehua Mueller (2016) have studied the Indigenous knowledge's decolonizing effect that will contribute to creating an epistemological diversity in the university. That is because Indigenous knowledges include the spirit and holistic implications, relationships among all entities, and embedded insights different from those of Indo-European ones (Kovach, 2015), and as such, they do not align with decontextualized education advocated in non-Indigenous/European educational systems (Munroe et al., 2013). By the same token, the assessment frameworks designed by educators in European, decontextualized educational systems fail to provide for the educational needs of minority Indigenous learners.

Additionally, because Indigenous knowledges emanate from Indigenous lands, environments, and contexts, they emphasize learners' self-confidence and spirituality. This way, they treat the effects of colonialism and imperialism and address them directly (Smith, 2012), leading to the preservation of Indigenous peoples' cultural identities and languages (Munroe et al., 2013).

At the same time, other scholars have explored the exclusion of minority learners and their knowledges from academic systems as using *other* knowledges challenge "stereotypes and assumptions" (Fonua, 2021, p. 13) towards them. This paper is in line with this mindset and argues in favor of reforms in the assessment frameworks of the academic systems in multicultural contexts in favor of more equitable, inclusive, and culturally sustainable ones akin to that of the minority learners' pedagogy in it. This will align with the right of Indigenous minority peoples to take control of their own education and design programs based on their cultures and languages. As an illustration, and in response to the 1969 White Paper that aimed to cancel Indigenous rights in Canada, First Nations of Canada developed the Red Paper in 1970 to protect their own rights and involvement in developing policies that would impact themselves (Jenkins, 2007). One of the ways this could be accomplished is by receiving flexible and cultural education based on Indigenous knowledge (Leonard, 2021), which could be actualized, for instance, in a special relationship developed between a student and their doctoral supervisor (Chew & Nicholas, 2021). That said, in the following parts of this article, I will first discuss equity in education before I review assessment from Western and non-Western perspectives. Then, I will explore several Indigenous minority assessment frameworks while I argue in favor of designing and developing culturally appropriate assessment criteria.

Literature Review

Equity in Education and Assessment

Even the most egalitarian societies are comprised of different social stratifications, where everyone belongs to a social class akin to their cultural, political, and economic background. Understandably, this diversity renders it difficult to discuss equity in academia since it has different connotations for different people. For example, equity could mean combating poverty because, based on MacDonald and Wilson (2013), half of the First Nations children in Canada live in poverty, which, as I will argue further in this paper, will negatively impact their academic performance. According to Ballantine et al. (2017), inequalities exist even in the early years of schooling and are displayed in the performance of standardized tests. They further argue that working-class learners will struggle more in school compared to middle-class ones who will demonstrate greater academic performance. They attribute it to cultural capital that promotes success in academic and workplace performance. This is further attributed to academic systems that foster the norms and expectations of the privileged social classes that working-class learners fail to relate to because their cultural capital differs from the one in the academic context in which they study. As a result, it should not be surprising that such learners demonstrate less satisfactory academic performance since they feel alienated from such norms and fail to find respect for their working-class knowledge and norms (Ballantine et al., 2017). In that sense, education systems, along with their assessment frameworks, fail to represent their minority learners (LaFrance & Nicholas, 2010), and this lack of representation has contributed to the underperformance of their minority students, who will find themselves in a context with which they may not have much in common. To give an example, Astin (2013) analyzed American higher education and argued that it has underrepresented Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, and poor students in general and in its elite institutions in particular.

That said, Ainscow (2020) argues the UN launched the "Education for All" movement in 1990 to identify educational barriers that impede access to educational opportunities and identify resources at the community and national level. Since then, scholars have offered educational reforms and changes to meet the educational needs of their society as well as those of their learners. One such change pertains to assessment frameworks, which are traditionally Western in nature and may fail to provide for the needs of minority learners (LaFrance & Nicholas, 2010), who may feel estranged when exposed to them. Additionally, the "Education for All" movement was followed by the World Conference on Special

Needs Education to advocate inclusive education through policy shifts to provide for the needs of their learners as well as those with special educational needs (Ainscow, 2020).

However, I believe before that, educators will need to define *needs* and elaborate on *how* they are evaluated for success. For instance, minority learners will receive education in the dominant language of their society which may differ from their home language and the accompanying culture. This raises the question of whether multilingual learners should receive education in their mother tongue or the dominant language of their society. Answering this will evoke varied reactions because although minority learners may wish to receive education in their language and culture, they may end up competing with other learners in the dominant language of their society. An example of this is the Sami of Sweden who will have to decide between learning the Sami Indigenous language or the Swedish language to increase their employability in the future (Nutti, 2018). Thus, even though multilingual societies may offer education in its dominant language as well as in its minority languages, one may logically doubt whether such an approach is ultimately beneficial for their minority learners. The same argument could be put forth for assessment, as well as assessment frameworks, and in what follows I will explore it from different cultural and linguistic aspects paired with examples from each philosophy.

Assessment enables educators and program developers to evaluate the success of their programs and that of those who attend them. Assessment is all the activities undertaken by educators, students, curriculum developers, and policy makers in order to obtain information they can use to change their teaching and learning experiences, or a process through which information is obtained with regard to an objective. Based on Astin (1993), assessment refers to gathering information– or measurement– and improving how higher education institutions and their individuals function–evaluation. It includes tests and standardized tests such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* that aim to test students regularly throughout the year in order to distinguish the academic performance of those learners who are developing their skills from those who have already developed them. However, as minority learners are not represented in standardized tests, they will receive lower test scores compared to other learners (Astin, 2013).

There are different types of assessments. Diagnostic assessment enables researchers and educators to closely study and classify their learners' learning difficulties to provide appropriate guidance for them (Kelly, 2004). Formative assessment helps educators make necessary changes in their teaching methodologies and contents to help their learners increase their learning experience, facilitate program improvement, and provide feedback in the teaching process (Dixson & Worrell, 2016). Summative assessment is in multiple-choice or short-answer formats and happens at the end of instruction. It enables educators to evaluate a part of the curriculum in order to distinguish learners from each other, or group them based on their performance, and determine their quality of learning or the extent they have learned in that program (Bennett, 2011).

However, there are opposing views with regard to assessment. Scholars such as McCarty and Nicholas (2014) believe assessment plays a positive role in the quality of learning because it enables educators to distinguish the performance of learners with developing skills from those who have already developed them. Additionally, Webber (2012) argues assessment improves learners' involvement and collaboration with faculty and allows educators to evaluate how much learning is taking place on the part of their learners. On the contrary, there are educators who believe assessments and tests do not yield any benefits for students but harm those who do not pass them. For instance, Pearce and Williams (2013) believe assessment diminishes education and excludes learners who do not belong to the mainstream but come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Jacob (2018) attributes the high rate of school drop-out and poor academic performance among Indigenous learners to non-Indigenous assessment, which fails to "successfully capture or build on [Indigenous] potentially important content knowledge and understanding" (Nelson-Barber & Trumbull, 2007, p. 2). This line of argument aligns with Ballantine et al.'s (2017) point of view that connects minority learners' academic under-performance to their lack of belonging and feeling alienated from norms in academic contexts even though this lack of participation has changed, and Indigenous learners are increasingly participating in higher education (Pidgeon, 2016).

As a result, and due to the growing multiculturalism in academia, scholars propose, develop, and adopt changes and appropriate approaches to address the educational needs of their diverse learners. In doing so, they have begun to re-consider the logic and philosophy behind assessment because its frameworks are designed for a monolingual population, deteriorate education, encompass Western standards, and disregard marginalized learners (LaFrance & Nicholas, 2010; Pearce & Williams, 2013). For example, Bourke and Mentis (2014) discuss how narrative assessment combines summative and formative assessment approaches to provide for the educational needs of learners with high needs. They further note, "Learning stories as a form of narrative assessment position the learner at the center of the assessment and hence are a valuable addition to the repertoire of assessment options for teachers working with learners with high needs" (p. 11).

In addition, I argue that *Indigenizing* assessment frameworks based on learners' ways of knowing will enable scholars to provide for minority learners' educational needs and assess their academic performance accordingly. These assessment frameworks help scholars to effectively explore Indigenous cultural knowledges and pedagogies, reduce bias

and inequity (Nelson-Barber & Trumbull, 2007), and reflect on the decolonizing impacts of Indigenous ways of knowing (Collins & Kalehua Mueller, 2016), which, as discussed above, differ from the decontextualized knowledge advocated in European educational systems (Munroe et al., 2013). To demonstrate this point further, in the following section I will review several assessment frameworks culturally designed based on the educational philosophies of the learners and communities involved in the program.

Designing Indigenous Assessment Frameworks in Non-Indigenous Academia

According to Pidgeon (2016), the number of Indigenous minority students in non-Indigenous academic institutions is increasing, and more non-Indigenous scholars appreciate Indigenous pedagogies and ways of knowing. That is because Indigenous knowledges are reciprocal and different from conventional knowledge (Wilson, 2008), meet the needs of Indigenous communities and peoples, and teach lifelong responsibilities to Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, Western academia is influenced by *positivistic* and compartmentalized ways of thinking and is predominated by *whiteness* and *social inequalities* (Fleet & Kitson, 2009, p. 2). This categorized approach of knowledge is also depicted in non-Indigenous assessment frameworks, which fail to consider learners' sociocultural factors (Nelson-Barber & Trumbull, 2007) and depreciate non-western values (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010). As such, it fails to provide for the educational needs of the Indigenous students and is one of the reasons that Native Hawaiian students comprise a significant percentage of Special Education (Ogata, Sheehey, & Noona, 2006). In other words, non-Indigenous assessment frameworks will fail to appropriately assess students' performance or provide reliable results on their learning. As a solution, scholars have begun to develop assessment frameworks based on their participants' cultural idiosyncrasies, or "cultural validity" (Messick, 1989), and this will help them boost their sense of belonging as well as participation in non-Indigenous academia.

Developing Indigenous assessment frameworks provides culturally appropriate tools to assess Indigenous students' language performance based on their values and ways of knowing. These criteria are based on verbal protocols (Erdősy, 2009) and role-play interviews as well as the idiosyncrasies of the Indigenous people in the research. They may encompass such cultural protocols as having an *opening prayer* and a *respectful language (*LaFrance & Nichols, 2010) or whether Indigenous learners have a clear spirit and a good heart (Smith, 2012). Such frameworks incorporate the Indigeneity of the test takers and acknowledge *the imperialist baggage* within non-Indigenous assessment criteria (Fleet & Kitson, 2009) to evaluate the performance of programs and students in a culturally responsive manner.

There is a rich literature on the important role that culture plays in academic and language learning performance which scholars can incorporate in their Indigenous assessment criteria. For instance, Oster et al. (2014) argued that Indigenous students who speak an Indigenous language live longer in residence, are less obese, suffer less from heart disease, and demonstrate reduced levels of diabetes. Based on Chandler and Lalonde (2008), First Nations in BC, Canada who have a strong Indigenous knowledge of their language demonstrate a better academic performance and a lower rate of suicide. This also holds reality about Navajo-speaking students with mastery over both English and Navajo because they will academically outperform those who receive education in English only (Lee & McLaughlin, 2001). In addition, "Navajo students whose teachers integrated local standards with state standards and aligned curriculum and assessment through a portfolio process were able to engage in high-level literacy activities and demonstrate their learning successfully" (Nelson-Barber & Trumbull, 2007, p. 7).

Therefore, it is wise to conclude that incorporating Indigenous minority learners' language, culture, and ways of knowing in academia helps scholars and minority learners to develop culturally appropriate assessment frameworks and demonstrate a more satisfactory academic performance. However, one should approach assessment with discretion because implementing *one* assessment method for all Indigenous peoples will probably fail to fulfill the needs of them all. To avoid that, scholars could *re-define,* and *tailor* assessment frameworks based on the Indigenous epistemology, pedagogy, and language of their learners involved in the program.

Indigenous Assessment Frameworks: Examples in North America

I have discussed the designing and implementing culturally appropriate assessment frameworks in the assessment of the academic performance of minority people. In this section, I will review several such frameworks and their building blocks to showcase them to scholars who may aim to develop similar frameworks or revitalize their own Indigenous ones. To begin with, LaFrance and Nichols (2010) discuss an Indigenous framework developed by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) that designs educational frameworks for Indigenous communities and evaluates their concerns based on four central values of "People of a Place," "Recognizing [Indigenous Gifts," "Centrality of Community and Family," and "Sovereignty." LaFrance and Nichols (2010) assert that the AIHEC incorporates Indigenous experiences, epistemologies, and ways of knowing with western evaluation practices in the designing, developing, and assessing

programs that meet the educational goals and needs of Indigenous peoples. They further argue that the required knowledge to develop an assessment framework is found within the Indigenous communities, stories, ceremonies, and ways of living.

A group of Native Hawaiian researchers and language experts from the Kū-A-Kanaka Indigenous Institute for Language and Culture designed the ANA'ŌLELO evaluation framework to assess Hawaiian learners' language proficiencies, prevent Hawaiian language death, and increase its use and learning. According to Kahakalau (2017), this framework is based on a Hawaiian perspective to reinforce Hawaiian native culture and assess the linguistic abilities of learners of Hawaiian as an Additional Language. She adds this framework is an innovative, culturally driven language tool that uses qualitative and quantitative data and is based on Indigenous and heuristic action research and Ma'awe Ponor, a non-linear Hawaiian methodology for data collection, analysis, and production. She furthers the ANA'ŌLELO is extremely flexible in measuring Hawaiian learners' oral language proficiency and allows them to evaluate their traditions like *protocol*, the concept of doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason. There are six levels through which one's proficiency of Hawaiian language, traditions, and values are assessed: "Level 0: HŌLONA: No Knowledge; Level 1: NŌHIE: Elementary Knowledge; Level 2: LAUA: Limited Proficiency; Level 3: MĀKAUKAU: Basic Proficiency; Level 4: PĀHE'E: Full Proficiency; Level 5: LOEA: Native Proficiency" (Kahakalau, 2017, p. 9).

When I investigated the success of one of the Indigenous Language Revitalization programs, Bachelor of Education in Indigenous Language Revitalization Program (BEDILR), offered at the University of Victoria, BC, I had the pleasure of working with the W̱SÁNEĆ Indigenous people to investigate the concept of assessment from their point of view. Based on the findings in my interviews and the qualitative analysis of the data, participants asserted that the BEDILR is a successful language revitalization program because it incorporates the W̱SÁNEĆ Indigenous pedagogy and follows an approach and assessment method based on the W̱SÁNEĆ worldviews, knowledge, epistemology, and the SENĆOŦEN language (Ghanbari, 2021).

O'Grady (2017) offers Holistic Assessment and Targeted Componential Assessment and asserts that while the former evaluates learners' overall communicative ability and focuses on pronunciation, vocabulary choice, and grammaticality, the latter focuses on individuals' specific components of language and vocabulary items. The last assessment framework is offered by Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, and Malone (2017) who state that *Cultural Advantage* is designed and developed as a significantly valuable structure to remedy social injustices that Indigenous peoples have experienced through colonization. Based on them, *Cultural Advantage* enables scholars to "re-examine the structures, paradigms, and practices of effective education" (p. 1).

Discussion

This paper discussed how educators and curriculum developers rely on assessment frameworks to evaluate the academic performance of their learners and that of their programs. In so doing, they have traditionally depended on positivistic frameworks developed based on western ways of knowing. However, and as discussed throughout this paper, these frameworks and their philosophies, among other reasons, have contributed to high drop-out rates, lack of attendance, and unsatisfactory academic performance among minority, Indigenous learners. This has been partly attributed to the differences between Indigenous knowledges and European knowledge because although the former encompasses a holistic approach, the latter is positivistic in origin (Kovach, 2015). As a result of this, minority, Indigenous, minority learners may feel alienated from such systems, and this lack of belonging to such norms may lead to their academic under-performance (Ballantine et al., 2017). By the same token, as the existing assessment frameworks in academe are majorly developed based on European knowledge, they may not provide for the educational needs of minority, Indigenous learners, who are increasingly attending non-Indigenous educational systems (Pidgeon, 2016). To address this, scholars develop new assessment frameworks to represent the cultural values, epistemologies, and ways of knowing of all leaners in education systems. In one of such frameworks, Bourke and Mentis (2014) delineate how summative and formative assessment approaches are combined in a narrative assessment to provide for the educational needs of learners with high needs. These changes will contribute to equity and decolonization of education systems in multilingual, multicultural societies.

Conclusion

This paper argued in favor of developing assessment frameworks based on the cultural values and knowledges of minority, Indigenous learners in education system. Such a development could be made through *Indigenizing* and *re-defining* assessment frameworks as well as the implementation of cultural knowledges and pedagogies in such frameworks. This, in turn, will help decolonize educational systems and preserve Indigenous and minority peoples' cultural identities, traditions, and languages (Munroe et al., 2013) in such systems. As a result, there will be an increase in the attendance and sense of *belonging* of minority learners in non-Indigenous academic contexts as they distinguish the existing "imperial baggage" from non-Indigenous assessment criteria and academic systems (Fleet & Kitson, 2009). More importantly, this

implementation of cultural knowledges and pedagogies as well as the decolonization of education systems will hopefully help reduce bias in Indigenous research, leading to a more equitable academe and education system.

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International Spouses' Goals and Investment in Language Learning Programs

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Abstract

International spouses, individuals who accompany a partner studying in a foreign country, are an important source of support for international students and scholars, yet many academic institutions overlook this population. Research indicates that many international spouses benefit from joining language programs; however, there has been no research on how to design such programs to support international spouses. By drawing on the theoretical constructs of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and capital (Bourdieu, 1986), this study investigates the goals of international spouses, the relationship between these goals and English proficiency, and how international spouses perceived the language resources available to them. Semi-structured interviews with 15 (8 female, 7 male) international spouses in the U.S. revealed that the participants viewed English as relevant to their professional, social, and cultural goals, and that various factors influenced which ESL programs they joined. This study concludes with recommendations for designing programs to support international spouses.

Keywords: capital, English as a Second Language, international spouses, investment, language learning

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Introduction

The high numbers of international students and scholars studying in the United States have been a major benefit to American universities in terms of funds, recognition, incoming knowledge and skills, and providing a more intercultural experience for domestic students (Soria & Troisi, 2014; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012; Vaughan, 2007). International students have been the focus of many research studies that help illuminate the difficulties they encounter while abroad (Johnson, 2019; Morita, 2009; Oyeniyi et al., 2021; Tubin & Lapidot, 2008; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). One finding from this body of research is that international students often benefit from the presence of family when they are studying overseas (Girmay et al., 2019; Lin, 2018; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). In particular, many married international students travel abroad with their spouses, who promote the students' wellbeing by maintaining their household, providing childcare, and offering emotional and social support. Despite their importance to international students' success, the international spouses living in university communities are often "invisible" (De Verthelyi, 1995) to academic institutions due to their lack of an official status at the university where their spouse is enrolled.

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International spouses have been traveling abroad with their partners for decades, yet only a few studies have examined this population. These prior studies have primarily focused on illuminating the difficulties that international spouses face. The most commonly-cited difficulty for international spouses is the social isolation they experience while abroad (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995; Lin, 2018; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). Another common issue is difficulty with the local language (Campbell & Prins, 2016; De Verthelyi, 1995; Grimm, Kanhai, & Landgraf, 2019; Lei et al., 2015; Lin, 2018; Martens & Grant, 2008; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). Only a few studies (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Grimm, Kanhai, & Landgraf, 2019; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012) have examined the steps international spouses take to overcome these challenges, typically through membership in informal ESL programs.

Campbell and Prins (2016) and Grimm, Kanhai, and Landgraf (2019) extended the research on international spouses by examining the community-based ESL programs in which international spouses practice language. Both studies demonstrate that joining an ESL program was beneficial in terms of improving international spouses' confidence in English and reducing feelings of isolation. However, there is still little information on how such resources can be improved to better support international spouses. In particular, although the goal of improving their proficiency in the local language has been mentioned in many of the studies on international spouses, there has been little investigation on international spouses' other goals, particularly for their future, and how learning the local language is related to these goals. By focusing solely on international spouses' desire to learn English (as opposed to discussing the unique life experiences and skillsets that international spouses can build upon by improving their English proficiency), prior studies cast upon international spouses the same deficit view that recent scholarship on international students has worked to mitigate; namely, that they are a population defined by a lack of a skill and therefore need to be fixed (Marshall, 2009; Tavares, 2021). Another shortcoming of the previous studies on international spouses is the lack of diversity, particularly in terms of gender. Of the studies cited in this study, the only ones that reported including male participants were Lei et al. (2015) (3 out of 9 participants), Grimm, Kanhai & Landgraf (1 out of 10 participants), and Campbell and Prins (2016) (2 out of 13 participants).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill this research gap by presenting data from interviews with a diverse group of international spouses in the U.S. to present a broader picture of how institutions can better support this population, especially by helping them to improve their language skills, and as a result improve the quality of life for international students and scholars. In particular, I will examine the various goals of international spouses, show the intersections between these goals and English proficiency, and analyze the factors that influence international spouses' investment in ESL programs. I will also examine several ESL programs that international spouses accessed and the perceived benefits and limitations of those various resources. Based on the experiences of the international spouses, I will conclude with recommendations for institutions that want to better serve the spouses of international students and scholars.

Theoretical Framework

In order to connect international spouses' goals with their experiences utilizing various ESL resources, this study draws upon the notion of *investment* in language learning. As opposed to the static construct of motivation, investment recognizes that a language learner's choice to engage with others in a target language is influenced by the context of the interaction (Darvin & Norton, 2021; Norton Peirce, 1995). According to Darvin and Norton (2015), an individual's investment in a language resource results from the interplay between identity, ideology, and capital. In this model, identities refer to the various ways in which one positions themselves or is positioned within an interaction, and ideologies refer to systems that, often invisibly, influence human behavior and perceptions. Identities and ideologies interact to designate certain speakers and their contributions as legitimate while excluding other speakers. The third construct, capital, is based on the work of Bourdieu (1986), who argued that there is not only economic capital (such as money) but also cultural capital (such as knowledge or familiarity with cultural artifacts) and social capital (such as network connections). Language learners are more likely to engage in interactions if the cultural capital that they bring are recognized as legitimate (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and if they view the interaction as leading them to gaining additional capital, particularly social capital (Cai, Fang, Sun, & Jiang, 2022; Moharami, Keary, & Kostogriz, 2022).

In order to design effective language resources for international spouses, ESL instructors and program administrators within the university need to be aware of what international spouses want out of such resources; in other words, what forms of capital the resource can provide to the international spouses in order to increase the international spouses' investment. This current study aimed to provide such awareness by interviewing a diverse group of international

spouses to learn more about their goals for their time abroad and the future and how they perceived the resources available to them, particularly resources connected to language learning.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study which collected data through in-person interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to answer the following three research questions:

1. What goals do international spouses have for themselves, both now and in the future?
2. How do international spouses' goals influence their investment in language learning programs?
3. What qualities of these language learning programs influence international spouses' investment in the programs?

The data for this study are taken from a larger ethnographic research project on international spouses, which involved in-person interviews, year-long case studies, and observations of ESL programs (Sandbulte, 2020). In order to answer the above questions, I will be presenting data from the interviews. Interviews are a common method of data collection for research on investment as it allows the participants to describe their lived experiences, position themselves within their own narratives, and select the details that are most significant for them (Darvin & Norton, 2021). This is in contrast to quantitative approaches, such as questionnaires, that limit participants' responses and seek to establish statistically significant patterns. Furthermore, interviewing multiple participants from diverse backgrounds allows the research to include unique perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked while also finding commonalities among different individuals. It should be noted that the aim of research on investment is not to determine a causal relationship between identity labels such as gender and the participants' experiences as language learners but rather to draw from the experiences of a more inclusive participant base (Darvin & Norton, 2021).

Research Site

This study was conducted in a small city in the mid-Atlantic United States. During the academic year, the student population of the local university exceeds that of the city; thus, most people and businesses in the city have some connection to the university.

Participants

The participants for this study are all international spouses who traveled to the city to stay with a spouse who was either an international student or international visiting scholar at the university. At the time of the interviews, none of the participants were enrolled as students at the university, although several had participated in its intensive English program. Participants were recruited through a variety of means: the university's research database, flyers in university buildings and housing, visits to ESL programs in the university and community, emails to religious organizations, and personal invitations. I had previously met some of the participants or their spouses, but I was unacquainted with most participants. It should be noted that, since most participants reached out to me based on my recruitment strategies rather than being directly asked to participate, the participants felt comfortable enough to have a conversation in English with a stranger. This may skew the results, as some international spouses lack the proficiency or the confidence to speak with a stranger in English.

Sixteen individuals agreed to participate in this study. One of the individuals was married to an American, and her interview was not included in the dataset because her experience differed significantly from the other participants (who were all married to someone of the same nationality as themselves). Therefore, this study has a total of 15 participants (eight female, seven male) from 11 countries. At the time of the interviews, the participants had spent two months to five years in the U.S. All participants had some proficiency in English, ranging from high beginner to proficient. The details for all participants are shown in Table 1 below. The participants are organized by country to highlight the diversity within the sample.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic and Background Information

Home Country	Pseudonym	Gender	Previous Job	Time spent in U.S. when interviewed
China	Aiguo	Male	NA	5 years
China	Dong	Male	Mechanical Engineer	2 years
China	Biyu	Female	Geneticist	1 year
Taiwan	Yafang	Female	Office Assistant	2 months
South Korea	Woojin	Male	Insurance agent	9 months
Japan	Jun	Female	Biochemical Engineer	7 months
Japan	Fumiko	Female	Office Assistant	2 months
Saudi Arabia	Hamid	Male	Shop owner; Islamic teacher	1 year
Israel	Etta	Female	Pharmacist	2 years
Germany	Klaus	Male	Software developer	2 years
Chile	Claudia	Female	Midwife	2 years
Brazil	Paulo	Male	Philosophy teacher	2 months
Colombia	Ivan	Male	Finance professor	1 year
Colombia	Lucia	Female	Researcher; high school teacher	2 months
Mexico	Maria	Female	Kindergarten teacher	6 months

Data Collection

I conducted the interviews in-person with one or two participants at a time. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions based on the participants' experiences in the U.S., their goals, and the people they interacted with regularly (see Appendix). The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes. Most interviews were conducted in English, with one interview including a mixture of Portuguese and English. After obtaining verbal consent from the participants, I audio-recorded the interviews and took notes. This project was determined to be exempt from a formal IRB review by the institution's Office for Research Protections.

Following the interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings. Since the goal of the study is to analyze the participants' experiences rather than their speech, the transcriptions do not include filler sounds, false starts, pauses, etc. unless necessary for understanding the content. The recordings were stored on a secure hard drive and pseudonyms were used in the transcripts. The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Polio & Friedman, 2017) with the program QDA Miner Lite. The constant comparative method mitigates researcher bias by allowing codes to emerge from the participants' responses rather than applying a priori codes to the data. I conducted an initial coding that highlighted the most salient information and actions of each participant. Then, I identified recurring codes and organized them into categories that were used for a second, focused coding on the data. The categories for the focused coding were: goals, challenges, and resources. Codes that fell within these categories were present in all of the transcripts.

Researcher Positionality

Due to the personal nature of interviews, researchers' own identities and biases shape the interactions. My experience with international spouses prior to this project came primarily from my involvement in various ESL programs, which meant that I encountered international spouses actively seeking aid with language assistance. To mitigate this bias, I asked open-ended questions that avoided language-related challenges, but I prepared follow-up questions if the participants mentioned these topics (which all of them did). In addition, since my identities as a native-born, English-speaking American could cause discomfort or intimidation among my study participants, I invited them to bring a friend or family member to the interview, but only two of the participants chose to do so.

Results

Below, I report what the dataset revealed about participants' goals and their perceptions of the ESL resources in which they participated.

Goals

Although the participants represented a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, the interviews revealed recurring patterns in their lives as international spouses, particularly in the goals that they hoped to achieve while abroad. The goals of the participants generally fell into three categories: professional, cultural, and social.

Professional Goals

All but one of the 15 participants had been working at a job prior to moving to the U.S., and 12 of the participants described professional goals that they had for their time abroad. For example, Biyu, who had been working in a genetics laboratory in China before she moved to be with her husband, describes her goals in the quotation below:

> Biyu: At the beginning we want to find another postdoc position, but it failed so maybe with another be a student. There's something more I- my PhD major is genetics. It's biology. It's quite hard to find a job, only several choice: be a postdoc, go out the academy. I would like to be go out the academy but it's quite hard to find a position, to be a faculty. So we think nowadays maybe this computer science or statistics, they are two major easy to find a job. So I choose statistics.

Biyu explains that she had wanted to find a temporary postdoc position for herself at the same university as her husband, but they were unable to do so. However, rather than simply wait for her husband's postdoc to be completed, Biyu chose to increase her cultural capital by gaining experience that would be beneficial for her career: obtain a degree in Statistics.

A characteristic of capital is that its value can change depending on the context (Darvin & Norton, 2015). For several participants, the cultural capital associated with their careers was not recognized abroad. For example, Claudia had been a midwife in Chile, and she had received authorization to work in the U.S. Unfortunately, her midwife credentials were not recognized in the local setting. According to Claudia, "If I want to do something related with midwifery here, I have to go through a nursery program. And I prefer to do a master program because it's better for my career." As a sojourner, Claudia did not see value in investing time and money for a nursing degree that she would not need when she returned home. Therefore, Claudia enrolled in a master's program, which would provide more returns for her investment when she returned to Chile.

For many of the participants, English proficiency was seen as a potential barrier that could prevent them from achieving their professional goals. For example, Dong from China stated, "At the beginning I want to apply to degree and maybe PhD, but I found my English is- I think difficult to progress." Woojin from South Korea and Ivan from Colombia also stated that they wanted to enroll in graduate studies in their disciplines but needed to improve their TOEFL scores before they could be admitted.

Apart from needing English in order to achieve specific professional goals while abroad, several participants viewed learning English itself as important for improving their career prospects. For example, Etta described why she views English as important for her career as a pharmacist in Israel.

> Ett: English is everywhere. At work in Israel and you work with medical companies almost in a regular basis. I didn't have to do it back then when we were in Israel, but now if and when we are going back I'll have to find another job and then maybe I'll have to use English more.

Etta explains that she did not need English in the past, but she saw it as being more necessary in the future. Since she, like many international spouses, left her position when she went abroad, she wants a competitive advantage when she returns to the job market in her home country, and learning English can provide her with that advantage. These findings show that improving one's proficiency in English carries professional value for many international spouses after they return home.

Social Goals

A second goal, which was mentioned by 12 of the 15 participants, was to create social connections while in the U.S., or, to put it another way, to increase their social capital. Social capital was viewed as important for international spouses because of the many benefits that it provided, as described by Ivan below:

> Int: Why is it important for you to be meeting new people here?
>
> Iva: I think that for two main reasons. The first one is that being here I need to improve my English, yes. So I need to interact with people who speaks English in order to try myself and to yes to challenge myself to speak and hear people- real people because I can listen a lot of videos from YouTube from TED but it's

different to interact with someone. So the first one is for my speaking abilities. And the second one is because I had the idea that being with people, interact with people helps you in a lot of ways. Being enclosed in my house is not- is something that I don't something that could be like nice or something that I love to do the whole- for two years. [. . .] But we have really interesting people we have met here and I think that's maybe a third reason that is that being here is also an opportunity to be like connected with with more places in the world to know more about other things in the world, so I never had spoken with someone from from the Middle East for example. But now I spoke regularly with people from Saudi Arabia. Also people from Africa. [. . .] Yes, I think that those three reasons. And also because people helps you as well. If you can be alone and try to do all by yourself but if there is someone that already knows how to do something they can help you.

Ivan identified four reasons why it was important for him to meet other people while abroad: to improve his English, to avoid social isolation, to meet people from other cultures, and to receive assistance with daily tasks. When international spouses travel abroad, they lose access to much of their social capital, or to the networks that previously provided them with information and support. Therefore, finding new connections to make their transition abroad smoother are important.

As with professional goals, one of the challenges that participants faced in accomplishing their social goals was a perceived lack in their English proficiency. For example, Woojin from South Korea described his first few months in the U.S. by saying:

Woo: Actually I felt kind of lonely whenever I was in the room with white people. I felt like for whatever reasons, for maybe language reasons or something, I couldn't feel I'm- I couldn't be included with them.

Woojin went on to describe a social event he attended with his wife, during which Americans were more likely to engage his wife in conversation because of her higher English proficiency. Similarly, Jun from China also found it difficult to engage with people because of her English:

Jun: In the first month I feel very terrible and scary because I couldn't speak English, yeah worse than now so. I feel very scary to talk with others, and when I go to the [grocery stores] and some staff talk to me but always I run away because I thought I couldn't talk anymore.

Whereas Woojin felt that Americans did not want to speak with him because of his low English proficiency, Jun describes the reverse: she avoided interacting with Americans because she was self-conscious about her poor English. Many of the participants fell into either or both situations in which their level of English was a barrier to achieving social connections. Therefore, improving their English would give them access to more social capital.

Cultural Goals

A third goal, mentioned by eight of the participants, was to gain cross-cultural experiences. Although similar to the goal of creating social connections, this goal was distinct as the participants were seeking knowledge and experiences about other cultures; thus, cultural capital rather than social capital. For example, Etta from Israel explained, "If I'm here, I want to experience something different, something new, and different perspectives and different language. There are many opportunities here it seems, so why not?" As seen in an earlier quote, Ivan also listed learning about other cultures as one of the reasons why he wanted to meet more people while in the U.S.

This goal was not limited to their time in the U.S. but also included future cross-cultural opportunities as well. Many participants expressed the hope that learning English while in the U.S. would open up opportunities to travel in the future, such as Hamid:

Int: Why do you want to improve your English?

Ham: I have some plan in future. Read different books, English books, make friend in the world because the English more popular in world, more talking- people talking English more in China, Japan, yes. And I will go and visit some country and use this English, yes.

Hamid wanted to meet with people in different countries around the world, and he believed that English would offer him the opportunity to speak with people from other countries even if they came from countries where English was not the dominant language.

From these quotes, we see that learning English is not an end to itself but rather a means for participants to achieve their professional, social, and cultural goals. Of these goals, the social goals are more temporary, as the sojourners' social connections are likely to weaken once they return to their home country. The professional and cultural goals, on the other

hand, will continue to be relevant for their futures. Therefore, programs that aim to support international spouses should consider how they can help the spouses reach their long-term goals.

Resources

Since most of the participants were invested in improving their English while living abroad, many of them had accessed ESL resources in the community. None of these resources had been specifically designed for international spouses, and the participants' satisfaction with these resources differed from each other and (for those who joined more than one) between the resources themselves. In order to demonstrate how resources can better support international spouses, the following section showcases the factors that influenced participants' investment in the various resources.

In the interviews, four ESL programs were frequently mentioned. Nine participants joined religious-affiliated conversation groups which focused either on religious topics or daily vocabulary. These groups were led by individuals associated with a church or university ministry group. Another resource, which four participants joined, was the university's intensive English program (IEP), which was taught by paid professionals either possessing or pursuing graduate degrees related to ESL education. Enrolling in the IEP did not guarantee acceptance into the university, but passing through all four proficiency levels of the program met the university's language requirement. A third resource, which seven participants joined, was a community-based literacy program called Community Literacy. The instructors at Community Literacy were all volunteers and included community members, international scholars, and master's students. Finally, eight participants attended events hosted by a non-profit organization associated with the university called World Hub. World Hub offered conversation groups, conversation partners, and classes on miscellaneous topics (such as cooking or arts and crafts), all led by volunteers

Cost and Professionalism

Two significant differences between these ESL programs are immediately apparent: the cost and the training of the instructors. The IEP courses cost approximately the same as regular college courses; Community Literacy had a modest cost to cover books and supplies; World Hub's activities were usually free unless there was travel involved; and the religious groups were all free. Five of the participants listed cost as a factor in their decision to utilize an ESL resource, including Etta, as shown below:

> Ett: I decided to check to see if [Community Literacy] is something that would work for me, because when I searched at the beginning, all I could find was courses from the university, and it was very expensive. So I just decided to not go and then when I saw that it's something that I can afford, I decided to go for it.

The courses from the university are likely the IEP classes, which several participants stated were too expensive for them. Since many international spouses are relying solely on their partner's income, they must be careful with how they use their available financial resources, and for many this means not paying a high tuition for English classes.

On the other hand, more expensive programs such as the IEP were recognized as being taught by qualified instructors. Five of the participants discussed how the quality of instruction impacted the value of an ESL resource, such as Jun:

> Jun: In IEP, this is my just opinion but teacher prepare the class. So in the Community Literacy, we can talk, only talking- there is no lesson. But in IEP, teacher prepare before the class so contents is very a lot and they useful for me.

When comparing Community Literacy and the IEP, Jun views the teacher preparedness as one of the benefits of the IEP. By being more prepared, the instructor is able to give a more organized lesson with more content. This does not mean that all of the instructors in Community Literacy were ill-prepared to teach; Lucia from Colombia described one of her instructors as well-prepared and good at managing the class. However, this instructor was later replaced with a different volunteer, whom Lucia felt had not prepared for the class and could not keep the other students focused on the material, which caused Lucia to feel that the class was a waste of her time.

Interestingly, although cost and instructor training were mentioned in a few interviews, most of the participants highlighted different aspects of the ESL resources. In particular, 8 of the participants valued resources that gave them more opportunities to speak and 13 discussed the importance of creating social connections.

Speaking Opportunities

Participants recognized the importance of frequent practice in the target language in order to improve their proficiency. The quote below shows why Woojin, as an international spouse, found World Hub to be a useful resource:

> Woo: Because that was maybe my only way to make that environment to use English. I'm, you know, I'm not a student here. Yeah, I'm just F-2 visa holder so I couldn't make any environment to use English. [. . .] It is so hard find the kind of environment but World Hub give a way to us. Give several ways to us to use English, so it was very helpful.

As an international spouse, it was difficult for Woojin to find opportunities to use English. He uses the term "environment" to describe what he wants: a context in which English is continuously spoken by him and others. Even though many of the activities in World Hub were not focused on English teaching, they provided Woojin with the environment he was searching for. Similarly, Aiguo from China described the primary benefit of attending the IEP by saying, "We have to speak English all the time." Based on the interview, Aiguo seemed to value the opportunities to practice English more than the specific language instruction that he received.

Although it would be easy to assume that all ESL resources provide participants with plenty of opportunities to practice using English, this was not always the case. For example, Jun described how her opportunities to speak differed between the IEP and Community Literacy:

> Jun: In IEP I cannot talk a lot because I am shy and yeah teenager are very powerful and I have no brave to talk in the class. […] There are different advantage and disadvantage. In Community Literacy the number of the students is very small so we can talk more easily. But in IEP there are many student in that class.

Jun points out two factors that limited her opportunities to speak in the IEP when compared with Community Literacy. First, she found it difficult to compete with the "teenager" students for speaking turns because they were more confident in their speech than she was. Second, the number of students in the IEP also limited her opportunities to speak, whereas the small class sizes of Community Literacy gave everyone more speaking turns.

Another obstacle that prevented participants from speaking was the proficiency level of the other participants. For example, Jun found it difficult to speak when she attended a World Hub activity:

> Jun: Yeah at the first time I came here, I came here in end of the March so in March and in April I went there [World Hub] because IEP begin May so before that I went there. But the program is many people can speak English very fluently so yeah I cannot continue. So yeah the good things in IEP is there is a class that people separate level so but in World Hub there is only one class so I feel that language gap between people.

The IEP has four different levels based on proficiency, so Jun could be placed with individuals who had a similar proficiency level as herself. In the World Hub group that she joined, the proficiency level was much higher, so she felt that she could not participate. Several other participants also described how difficult it was to attend an ESL program when the other speakers had a higher proficiency or that a program seemed unhelpful if the other speakers had a much lower proficiency.

Social Opportunities

Other than providing opportunities to speak in English, ESL resources provided international spouses with much-needed opportunities to socialize. For example, Jun gave this recommendation for other international spouses:

> Jun: I heard from the many Japanese women they at the first time they stayed at home for long time and they feel very sick, so I advise others to go to outside and talk to people, but for us to find the place to talk other is very difficult so yeah. So they can go IEP or Community Literacy or other community like me. Yeah it is very good way for their English skill and their feeling or mind.

Jun, as we have seen, tried three of the most common ESL resources (the IEP, Community Literacy, and World Hub). In this quote, Jun does not distinguish between the different resources but views all of them as useful for dealing with loneliness. Jun points out that these resources can help international spouses with their English, but this seems like a secondary concern. Similarly, Etta favored World Hub because she had made many friends and joined in fun activities through that organization, although she admitted, "But if you want to learn more how to speak correctly and speak English, then I guess Community Literacy is better." These examples demonstrate that ESL resources provide international spouses with highly desired social opportunities. Considering that creating social connections is one of stated goals of many of the international spouses, it is understandable how this characteristic of an ESL resource could be considered more important than the quality of the language instruction.

Relevance to Goals

A final consideration when assessing the usefulness of an ESL resource is whether or not it helps the individuals achieve their goals. When asked about why they chose a specific ESL resource, six of the participants mentioned the importance of learning English language that was relevant for their lives and goals. The quotation below shows how important Claudia's goals were to her choice to attend Community Literacy:

> Cla: Because I had the goal to learn English in order to give the TOEFL exam, so I decide to go. Like to put myself and try to do something high level. So I decide for Community Literacy at the first time because they offer a TOEFL class, and they offer like four classes with tutoring and with all like stuff. You have to pay obviously, but at least they have like a whole activity related with the thing that I wanted to do.

As mentioned earlier, Claudia's goal was to enroll in a master's program while in the U.S. to build upon her midwife credentials. In order to do so, she needed a high score on the TOEFL, which is why she enrolled in Community Literacy. Although Community Literacy costs money, Claudia deemed it to be worth the cost if it helped her meet her goal.

As a contrasting example, Jun discussed how a mismatch of goals impacted her experience using an ESL resource:

> Jun: If I don't go to the IEP I will stay home and don't talk anyone. So it is good, but IEP's goal or aim is to enroll university so the lecture is focus on the academic contents so sometimes some of them are not need for me because I finish my master's degree in Japan and I used to employee, so yeah. To be honest I don't need academic English, but I want to speak English every day so I decide to go to the IEP. So if they have more casual talk class or daily conversation it will be helpful too.

As Jun points out, the goal of the IEP is to prepare students for academic contexts. As a professional who already has a master's degree, Jun did not see much use in academic English and preferred to learn English that would be helpful in daily interactions. However, since the IEP provided her with daily interactions in English (and, as described earlier, had professional teachers), Jun chose to continue using this resource.

In summary, the participants in this study had access to several ESL resources, even though these resources were not specifically designed for them. The value that they saw in using these resources were impacted by several factors: cost, teacher preparedness, speaking opportunities, social opportunities, and relevance to their goals. Of these, the social opportunities were the most discussed benefits of joining a specific ESL resource.

Discussion

The data from this study confirms previous research on international spouses that demonstrated the importance of ESL programs for this population, particularly in terms of providing social interactions (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Grimm, Kanhai, Landgraf, 2019; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). This study connected these findings to scholarship in second language acquisition, specifically investment, in order to create a broader picture of the international spouse experience and to work against a deficit view of this population. As predicted by Darvin and Norton (2015), international spouses' choice to participate in language learning programs are strongly influenced by the perceived gains in capital. Participants showed that they joined ESL programs to provide them with future professional opportunities (economic capital), to connect with other people while abroad (social capital), and to gain experiences in both the local country and other countries in the future (cultural capital). Their investment in each individual program was influenced by the cost, teacher preparedness, opportunities for speaking, social opportunities, and relevance of the practiced language to their goals.

One interesting finding from this study is that the perceived relevance to the international spouses' goals seemed less important among the interviewed participants compared to many of the other characteristics. One possible reason for this is that, due to the isolation that international spouses often experience (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995; Lin, 2018; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012), forming strong social connections becomes a higher priority than obtaining the desired English repertoire. This in turn influences the international spouses' investment in the different programs, with programs in which they formed strong social connections becoming more important to them. Another possibility is that international spouses are operating out of a structuralist orientation toward language (Canagarajah, 2018). From this perspective, English is viewed as a single, bound system that individuals gradually gain proficiency in, and therefore learning any English vocabulary is contributing to becoming fluent. In contrast, more recent scholarship in areas such as second language acquisition, English for Specific Purposes, and translingualism would argue that a language is a collection of semiotic resources that speakers use to accomplish specific purposes (Basturkmen, 2014; Canagarajah, 2018;

The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). In other words, practicing how to discuss certain topics such as holidays or food will not meaningfully contribute to individuals' ability to converse in professional or academic settings. International spouses, as well as other English learners, can improve their strategies for developing proficiency in English if ESL program administrators and instructors communicate this important distinction in language perspectives.

Implications and Conclusion

A strength of this study is the diversity in the participant pool in terms of gender, national origin, and the duration of their stay abroad. Since research on investment seeks to gain diverse perspectives rather than identify causal relationships (Darvin & Norton, 2021), comparisons based on the participants' characteristics, such as gender or national origin, were not conducted, and such comparisons would be complicated due to the small number of participants and the many different identities that differentiated them. Future studies could examine if some of these different identities influence participants' experiences and their perceptions of language learning programs. In addition, the recruitment strategies likely attracted international spouses who were interested in conversing with a stranger in English and possessed the confidence to do so, which could skew the participant pool. Utilizing other data collection techniques, such as surveys, might result in less rich data but could reach a larger pool of international spouses compared to the 15 participants of this study. Finally, it is also my hope that future studies will expand on this study by piloting programs specifically designed for international spouses and assessing the programs' benefits.

On that note, I join with previous scholars who have examined this population in arguing that universities and surrounding communities should find more ways to support international spouses. This support will create a better environment for international students and scholars, particularly for women since they often face limitations within academia when simultaneously raising a family (Niu, Xu, Zhu, & Hunter-Johnson, 2022). In addition, international spouses bring with them resources and areas of expertise that need not lay dormant while they are abroad. Therefore, I close this study with recommendations for graduate student departments, international program administrators, ESL instructors, and other individuals in academic institutions on how to support international spouses.

Recommendation #1: Create Welcoming Environments

Although the site of this study had several resources that international spouses could access, participants expressed concerns about which places they were allowed to access. Many events in the university and community were advertised specifically to students even when other individuals were welcome to attend. Therefore, labeling programs and events as open to international spouses would alleviate this hesitation. For example, departments could create more family activities for international students and visiting scholars. Not only does this show international spouses that they are welcome in these spaces, but it allows them to socialize with others who are in a similar situation, and it allows them to bring their children along.

Recommendation #2: Provide International Spouses Opportunities to Use English

As mentioned in previous research (Grimm, Kanhai, & Landgraf, 2019), international spouses need spaces where they feel comfortable interacting in English. Part of creating a comfortable space for speaking, according to Darvin and Norton (2021), is to recognize the language learners as legitimate speakers. The data from these interviews as well as observations of the various ESL resources showed that some spaces deny language learners the position of legitimate speakers by asking them to simply read from a worksheet or answer basic questions rather than providing them the opportunity to produce spontaneous, non-scripted language. ESL programs should therefore examine their practices to ensure that they are providing opportunities for participants to express their own thoughts and ideas so that they can build confidence in using the language.

Recommendation #3: Expand Services

The data from this study showed that a wider range of targeted ESL resources would benefit international spouses. In particular, resources that are intended for different levels of English proficiency and that focus on English expressions relevant for specific contexts (such as academia, workplaces, or service encounters) would allow international spouses to choose and invest in the resource that is most relevant to them. Although this may be difficult depending on available

resources for ESL programs, some participants, such as Claudia, stated that they were more willing to pay to join programs if it had "a whole activity related with the thing that I wanted to do."

Recommendation #4: Provide Financial Assistance

As pointed out earlier, international spouses are often reliant on their partner's income, which may limit their options. Therefore, financial assistance for international spouses can provide them more opportunities to engage in local activities. For example, some university ESL programs offer reduced prices for the family members of international students, which can serve as a draw for more international students to attend the university.

Recommendation #5: Acknowledge the Capital that International Spouses Possess

Although much of this study has focused on the capital that international spouses are trying to gain, universities and surrounding communities can benefit from acknowledging the capital that the international spouses already possess. Many international spouses are highly educated and have professional experience. International spouses in this study indicated that they were interested in doing something that mattered while they were abroad and were open to volunteer opportunities. Therefore, universities should consider how they can tap into this motivated population. One suggestion would be to invite international spouses to departmental lectures, brown bags, and student clubs. In these spaces, international spouses could share their expertise while practicing their English – specifically, English that is relevant to their professions. Initiatives such as this have the potential to improve the experiences of international spouses while also benefiting the students enrolled in universities.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in the U.S.?
2. What made you decide to move to the U.S.? What are your goals while you are living in the U.S.?
3. How was your first month in the U.S.?
    a. Why do you say that? Can you provide an example?
    b. What have you done to overcome some of these challenges?
4. What resources (such as people, organizations, or places) have been helpful for you?
    a. How did you connect with that resource?
    b. How has that resource been helpful?
    c. Why did you choose to use that resource?
5. During an average week, what kinds of people do you interact with?
    a. How did you connect with those people?
    b. How have these interactions helped you?
    c. Why have you chosen to keep meeting with those people?
6. How does your life here compare with your life in your home country? What is similar or different about your activities and interactions?
7. What support would you like to receive from the university or community?
8. What suggestions do you have for other international spouses?

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Current Insights on Using Social Robots to Support Second Language (L2) International Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

New digital technologies such as social robots are embodied computers with human-like features and conversational capabilities that can socially interact with people. Social robots have been used in education as a learning tool to support second language learning. This essay discusses current research literature that has explored how social robots could be utilized to support second language (L2) international students studying at English-speaking universities. Insights into the potential application and limitations of using social robots to support L2 students outside their home countries to promote their social and academic well-being will also be discussed. Based on a synthesis of current and relevant research gathered from the literature, the affordances of using social robots for L2 students included learning L2 through human-robot interactions, enhanced motivation, and engagement in their learning environments. However, the limitations of the use of this technology included attitudes towards robot-assisted learning (e.g., unfamiliarity with learning with a social robot) and the novelty effect of social robots. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of not only the role of social robots for supporting language learning, but also how they could aid L2 students in their successful transition to a foreign university, culture, and social context.

Keywords: higher education, international students, social robots, second language learning, student support

Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education (HE) contributes significantly to both human capital and economic growth worldwide. A total of 6.1 million international students worldwide received their higher education in a country other than their country of birth (OECD, 2021). The top five most common study destinations are the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, France, and Germany (UNESCO, 2016) and new HE providers have emerged, such as China, Russia, and Malaysia (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). The majority of international students worldwide have

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culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with those from Asian countries representing the largest cohort (OECD, 2022). Traditionally, in English-speaking countries, English language entry requirements have been used to ensure second language (L2) students' language skills meet literacy standards in higher education via International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Despite the fact that insufficient language proficiency is frequently cited and often debated, these tests are not an accurate measure for predicting how students will perform in their undergraduate/postgraduate studies (Arkoudis, 2018).

Although studying overseas provides a wide range of benefits for international students such as improving second language (L2) proficiency, enhancing intercultural awareness, and personal and academic growth (Park et al., 2022) the fuller implications of these students' growth are still emerging and are much debated. During their transitional period, many L2 students are known to encounter challenges such as "psychological stress (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress, feeling of worthlessness), homesickness, loneliness, cultural differences, social isolation, academic performance stress, racial discrimination, and language barriers" (Park et al., 2022, p. 404). Regardless of how proficient they are with the language, L2 students do need time to learn the new language (e.g., different accents, colloquialisms, discipline-specific language usage, etc.) and adapt to new learning environments (e.g., academic conventions, learning styles, etc.) (Park, 2021). Hence, L2 students may develop insufficient confidence in using L2 and a fear of judgement due to stereotypes and discrimination (Kettle, 2013; Park, 2021). Universities need to go beyond simple directions about how to study in HE institutions in order to meet the diverse well-being and academic needs of students accordingly (Park, 2021).

In this 21st century, online digital technologies are integral to university teaching and learning, student support, engagement, and operation. The COVID-19 pandemic promoted HE institutions to re-envision the structure and delivery of online learning (both academic and non-academic activities) and its support services in order to improve the international student experience (Manzoor & Bart, 2021; Sumbogo et al., 2021). Social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) is also known to play a significant role in L2 students' social and academic experience; for example, maintaining social networks and making them feel less stressed and isolated (Chen et al., 2022), and finding a place in the everyday practices of university life (Chen et al., 2022; Henderson et al., 2015). Alongside recordings of lectures, many students used a video-sharing website such as YouTube to find external video content to supplement their study needs (Henderson et al., 2015; Park, 2021). To become familiar with the localized English varieties (e.g., first language (L1) accent, slang and idiomatic expressions), L2 students also used YouTube as a platform to learn the language more authentically (Park, 2021).

The present article addresses the potential of new emerging technologies such as social robots in supporting L2 international students. More recently the proliferation of social robots, which are viewed as embodied computers that can communicate with people through human-like behaviours are becoming increasingly popular in education to assist students (Randall, 2019). Social robots are distinctive compared with other forms of technology (e.g., gamification and virtual reality) due to their verbal and nonverbal interactive behaviours (Ao & Yu, 2022; Neumann, 2020). Despite various definitions of social robots in detail, Ao and Yu (2022) highlighted different characteristics of social robots such as, they may have human-like physical features (e.g., arms, legs), resemble animals (e.g., pet-like), adapt themselves to social contexts, and interact and communicate positively with humans. Social robots are deemed distinctive as tutors, peers, and teaching assistants from other technologies due to their ability to verbally and non-verbally interact with humans through speech, facial expressions and gestures (e.g., pointing) (Ao & Yu, 2022; Engwall & Lopes, 2022). These tools have the potential to reduce learning anxiety, reinforce interpersonal interactions, and improve social engagement and classroom participation supporting students and teachers in HE (e.g., Ao & Yu, 2022; Donnermann et al., 2022; Iio et al., 2019; Kanero et al., 2022; Khalifa et al., 2019).

The main objective of this essay is to gain a deeper understanding of the potential role social robots play in supporting L2 university students' language learning (including attitudes, motivation, and engagement), social well-being and academic success. This paper is structured as follows: we first discuss how social robots have been found to support L2 university students' language learning and outcomes with social robots and student attitudes towards social robots. All

references to "L2 learners" in the next section refer to research study participants of a first language (L1) who learn L2 in contexts where the target language is not the official language and thus not spoken outside classroom. We then outline the possibilities of social robots as potential learning tools for L2 international students' social well-being and academic success.

Student Language Learning and Attitudes Towards Social Robots

Social robots may be humanoid or pet-like in appearance and can communicate via speech, gestures, and facial expressions (Neumann, 2020; Zinina et al., 2023). The friendly features of social robots allow people to perceive them as helpful, trustworthy, informative, and assistive agents (Zinina et al., 2023). Social robots are also adaptive in that they can be designed to flexibly use their sensors to detect students' motivational and educational needs and change their responses accordingly (Kanero et al., 2022). Social robots, according to Engwall and Lopes (2022), can be used in three different ways; for example, (a) as a teaching assistant with a human teacher as a "motivational enhancement" by introducing this new method in traditional classroom teaching and learning (p. 1283), (b) as a tutor interacting with students without a human teacher present and practice conversation and give feedback to students (e.g., vocabulary and pronunciation), and (c) as a peer, robots can learn the language together with students and interact with them to complete a task using the target language.

Scholars have noted that the existing literature on social robots focuses on school-age children with less work conducted with adult L2 learners (e.g., Engwall et al., 2022; Iio et al., 2019; Nomoto et al., 2022). The benefits of using social robots in educational settings have been found to vary across students from diverse backgrounds (Kanero et al., 2022). Recent studies conducted in the field of Robot-Assisted Learning (RALL) (e.g., "the use of robots to teach people language expressions or comprehension skills—such as speaking, writing, reading, or listening"; (Randall, 2019, p. 2) that have been conducted in non-English speaking universities (Ao & Yu, 2022; Banaeian & Gilanlioglu, 2021; Donnermann et al., 2022). These studies have focused on the following areas: (a) L2 acquisition focusing on speaking and vocabulary and (b) the effects of robots on L2 motivation/anxiety and affective factors such as attitudes (Ao & Yu, 2022; Banaeian & Gilanlioglu, 2021; Donnermann et al., 2022; Iio et al., 2019; Kanero et al., 2022; Yu-Li et al., 2022). These studies have shown that the use of social robots in higher education can enhance L2 language skills, learning motivation and engagement, increase enjoyment and decrease learning anxiety. The details of the research findings along with methodological approaches are discussed more thoroughly in the following paragraphs.

Practicing a second/foreign language can be stressful for L2 students as slang and cultural aspects of L2 can be challenging to understand and learn (Iio et al., 2019). This may result in L2 students reducing their contribution in classes as they may become anxious about their L2 communication skills, making mistakes, and initiating conversations or discussions in L2, which leads to a loss of speaking opportunities (Iio et al., 2019; Park, 2021). Iio et al. (2019) argued that RALL can be one of the solutions to these issues. Khalifa et al. (2019) showed how RALL could support L2 learners at a Japanese university (N = 80) to improve their grammar patterns during conversations with two robots. This experimental research proposed the joint-in-type-robot-assisted language learning (JI-RALL) using an NAO social robot (e.g., a common type of robot in L2 acquisition), in which one robot acted as a language teacher/tutor and the other robot took the role of a peer to integrate implicit learning by listening to the conversations between the two robots on several topics for four consecutive weeks. The experimental results indicated positive effects of implicit learning enhanced students' ability to construct utterances with more appropriate grammar patterns in verbal communication.

In a similar type of study conducted by Iio et al. (2019), nine Japanese L2 university learners practiced speaking with the robot for 30 minutes for seven days and their performance was measured and compared via pre- and post-tests. The effect of RALL (in this case, CommU—visually simple social robot) on various speech elements such as grammar and lexicon (e.g., vocabulary) including the number of words used per minute and aspects of pronunciation (e.g., phonemes, intonation, and rhythm). The results showed that students were able to use a larger number of words per minute and decreased grammar and lexical errors in every post-test. Further, their pronunciation became more native-like in every post-test, even though intonation and rhythm did not change. This means that some phonological variations of the learners' L1

transferred to L2, which is a natural phenomenon in L2 acquisition (Kettle, 2013), remained to some degree, whereas the accuracy of pronunciation was attainable.

A similar study conducted by Yu-Li et al. (2022) is interesting in that it provides qualitative insights into L2 learners' self-reported learning outcomes focusing on how they perceived learning with a social robot called, Robot Robert. This ten-week intervention study included several teaching cycles regarding English tour guide practice and the major concern was to evaluate teaching effectiveness using the robot. Although only two postgraduate L2 learners at a university of science and technology in Taiwan participated in verbal communication practice with the robot, they reported that learning with the robot and exchanging ideas was fun and interesting. They also felt that they were able to improve their L2 speaking fluency with a good memory of new vocabulary. These learners additionally stated that it would be useful for students who do not feel comfortable in the classroom setting and shy to verbally participate in their learning. Further, the learners expressed that RALL provides an interactive learning experience as they had to actively interact with the robot instead of listening to the instructor. Hence, Yu-Li et al. (2022) concluded that the social robot provided a positive way of increasing student motivation and willingness to use the RALL method of language learning.

Banaeian and Gilanlioglu (2021) investigated whether a NAO social robot as a teaching assistant influences first-year university L2 learners (N = 65) in North Cyprus. A quasi-experimental design using a mixed methods approach encompassed a pre- and post-test to examine the effect of the robot on the learners' vocabulary learning. These learners were undertaking an L2 vocabulary course as part of the regular program during the experiment. When comparing the control (non-RALL) and experimental groups, the control group scored slightly higher than the experimental group. Banaeian and Gilanlioglu (2021) presumed that this may be because L2 learners could be cautious about integrating such technology into their learning space compared with young children. Another factor that might explain this finding could be related to the role and function of the robot in learning environments. For example, some learners in the interviews mentioned that they had difficulties understanding the clarifications and examples provided by the robot due to its fast speech rate, which means the learners' listening skills needed to be considered to apply RALL more appropriately. Even so, L2 learners felt that the robot was helpful for them to learn new vocabulary. More than 60% of the students were satisfied with the robot's ability and believed that it was an appropriate tool in their learning space.

Another experimental research study conducted by Kanero et al. (2021) also showed a relationship between L2 learners' attitudes towards a robot and their learning outcomes. A total of 102 two native Turkish-speaking university L2 learners were taught eight English words in a one-on-one lesson either with a NAO social robot (N = 51) or with a human tutor (N = 51). The results showed that these learners in both groups learned vocabulary equally well, indicating that they benefited similarly from interactions with either the robot or human. Further, statistical analysis revealed that the learners' attitudes toward robots (e.g., impressions of the robot tutor) and anxiety about L2 learning were associated with their learning outcomes. L2 learners with negative attitudes towards robots and L2 anxiety learned fewer words in the robot tutor condition. Hence, going beyond the exploration of the influence of these affective factors on learning outcomes, Kanero et al. (2021) claimed that future research needs to pay attention to testing the unique features of robots and the nature of human-robot interactions (e.g., students' attitudes and behaviours during the lesson). In a similar study, Zinina et al. (2023) explored Latin vocabulary learning for L2 Russian university learners (N = 43) and their attitudes towards a companion social robot called F-2 Robot as a new learning tool. Using an experimental mixed methods design, they compared two groups—computer-based learning and robot-assisted learning groups. Descriptive analysis revealed that 25 learners (59.5% of the study sample) enjoyed learning with the robot, followed by 10 learners who preferred the computer (23.8%) and 7 learners who rated both methods equally (16.7%). The social robot was perceived as more "friendly, cheerful, emotional, responsive, and attractive" compared with the computer (p. 113). While learning was successful in both experimental conditions, in the post-experiment interview, students favored the robot as a means of language learning and its effectiveness (86.1%).

In summary, the benefits of social robots appear across universities in non-English speaking countries, such as Turkey, Taiwan, Russia, Japan, and North Cyprus. These studies mainly focused on speaking and vocabulary learning and perceptions of social robots as a new form of learning method in university settings. Learning with social robots has been

found to be efficient and/or equally effective as human tutors making learning more active, engaging, and personalized. However, to deepen knowledge about the effectiveness of social robots more research is needed to examine the long-term effects on language learning and experiences of RALL. Although some studies stated participating L2 learners' language proficiency (e.g., beginners/intermediate, or high proficiency) (Yu-Li et al., 2022; Zinina et al., 2023), no detailed information was provided regarding how it was measured or reported by L2 learners. This has become a particular challenge in the study of Khalifa et al. (2019) because there existed difficulties in providing feedback to each student due to their varying levels of L2 proficiency. In addition, technological difficulties were also noted by other studies (Banaeian & Gilanlioglu, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2019). Even with state-of-the-art engines, due to various levels of pronunciation, lexical, syntactical, and semantic errors made by L2 learners, recognition of L2 speech was a challenge at times (Banaeian & Gilanlioglu, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2019). Affective factors such as anxiety and some demographic characteristics such as familiarity with new technology and/or willingness to learn with digital technology should also be taken into consideration in future studies because these can influence the perceived usefulness of social robots and student learning outcomes (Banaeian & Gilanlioglu, 2021; Kanero et al., 2021).

Student Motivation and Engagement

Researchers have highlighted the use of social robots for enhancing L2 university student motivation, engagement, and willingness to learn (Banaeian & Gilanlioglu, 2021; Engwall & Lopes, 2022; Randall, 2019). A qualitative study conducted by Donnermann et al. (2022) in Germany investigated the applicability of a Pepper social robot in teaching and learning at the University of Wuerzburg. Even though this study was not specifically focused on measuring language-related learning outcomes, it is unique in the sense that it mainly addressed university students' ($N = 28$) perceptions and attitudes towards the integration of robots in their learning space by implementing a robot-supported learning environment as complementary training to a university course (e.g., digital media). This study found that students had favorable attitudes towards the robot showing a willingness to use it again for learning. Students also liked the robot's ability to provide them with feedback on their language. More importantly, the robot was perceived to enhance their motivation, attention, and concentration. While positive effects of robot-support tutoring were found, some students mentioned that the robot's explanation could be more in detail or shorter when their answer was partly incorrect. For others, the robot's arm gestures were distracting, whereas some viewed them positively. As particular features of the robot and the way they provide feedback to students seemed to affect their learning experience, Donnermann et al. (2022) argued that more flexible and personalized interactions are required with adjustments in the robot's gestures depending on the student's preference.

The findings of Kanero et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of careful consideration of other factors such as L2 learners' individual preferences and familiarity with new digital technology. Kanero et al. (2022) in the Turkish context discussed that learning with a NAO robot was not seen as the most beneficial form of decreasing learning anxiety because L2 anxiety had a negative influence when learning from a robot tutor, not a human tutor. One possible explanation according to Kanero et al. (2022) is that having a one-on-one session with the tutor robot might have felt unfamiliar and increased L2 learner anxiety. Further, learning might have been even more challenging for students in the robot tutor condition, if they had negative attitudes towards the robot (Kanero et al., 2022). While learning in both robot tutor and human tutor conditions was useful for vocabulary learning, L2 learners with more negative attitudes towards the robot had lower learning outcomes in the robot tutor condition.

Deublein et al. (2018) took a further step to investigate the effects of a social robot's (Reeti robot) motivational behaviours on L2 learners' motivation and learning outcomes using attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction (ARCS) scales. A total of 39 German university L2 learners acquiring Spanish as L2 participated in this quantitative study. The robots' motivating utterances and non-verbal behaviours were not significantly associated with ARCS. Comparing ARCS scales to their learning outcomes, the correlation between students' confidence and their language learning outcome was significant with a moderate effect size. In general, students reported a relatively high motivation level with a

comparatively high rate of interaction experience with the robot, which means that social robots in an educational setting were perceived as motivating and interesting (Deublein et al., 2018). However, despite the usefulness of social robots and their effectiveness, the novelty effect of social robots can influence student outcomes, therefore, studies of longer duration should be conducted to reduce this novelty effect.

Overall, the studies conducted at universities located in Germany and Turkey demonstrated that social robots provide a more interactive and engaging form of learning that motivates and enhances their interests within the learning environments. To boost L2 students' confidence, motivation, engagement, and learning gains in new social and academic settings, the design and application of social robots should therefore incorporate an understanding of the demographic characteristics of students (e.g., familiarity with robots and/or willingness to learn with digital technology, motivation/expectation levels). When designing the features, speech, and behaviours of robots, a specific domain (e.g., the role of robots in teaching and learning) could be considered as the effectiveness of robots acting as instructor/tutor depends on the efficacy of the information transfer (Randall, 2019). Students' learning styles and preferences could also be considered when designing materials and protocols; for example, how the robot behaviours/movement should be designed and in which role the robot can be utilized to better support these students. Before robots can be used within university settings in a meaningful way for L2 students, future research is needed to increase our understanding of the full potential of social robots as a social and academic support tool in higher education.

Potential Use of Social Robots

For L2 international students, the process of transition and social and academic integration into new university settings can be daunting and overwhelming (Moon et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022). Regardless of how proficient they are with their L2, feelings of insecurity and lack of sense of belonging are common experiences for L2 university students studying overseas (Park et al., 2022). Feeling discomfort and loss of confidence may be a natural phenomenon when moving to a new country where people speak different languages and embrace different cultures. This initial overwhelming experience can influence their transition experience, limit their classroom interactions, and socializing opportunities on campus (Moon et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022). In this respect, social robots have the potential to support aspects of these needs. Early-stage intervention for L2 students with a social robot could make a meaningful contribution to their social well-being and academic success. Among the benefits of social robots, ones that can be highlighted in higher education contexts over other technologies are: (a) personalized learning in a natural and interpersonal way through interactions, (b) an increase in motivation and engagement, and (c) L2 performance improvement. Nevertheless, findings from existing research studies are multi-layered and complex, therefore, further exploration regarding how to integrate social robots in higher education for L2 students is warranted.

Some L2 students upon arrival in a host country feel surprised and disappointed as they realize the way they sound (e.g., accent and pronunciation) is different from L1 speakers and their insufficient communication skills, leading to a loss of confidence (Park et al, 2022). Given the findings from previous literature (Iio et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2019), social robots can contribute to enhancing L2 students' communication skills including pronunciation and grammar patterns. Unfortunately, L2 students often set up language goals such as achieving a native-like accent/fluency and believe that it would be helpful for their social and academic life on campus (Dovchin, 2020; Park, 2021). Through trial and error, these students realize that such goals are hard to achieve and the way they sound is valuable as it signifies that they can speak more than one language (Park, 2021). Hence, it is important to support newly arrived L2 students to have realistic goals and feasible strategies to improve their L2. Focusing on empowering learning experiences, social robots can be programmed with knowledge of the target language and can provide more interesting and enjoyable language-learning opportunities by personalizing the activity selections and interactions (Belpaeme et al., 2018). Further, L2 students may not be concerned about misjudgment or not being heard (e.g., accent stereotyping and language discrimination) because they can practice communication skills with a non-judgmental robot in a safe environment, which can increase their L2 motivation, confidence, and willingness to learn. Although speculative, social robots in the future could be programmed to provide

practical guidance and pragmatic solutions to these students to become more confident in being themselves and retaining their personal and cultural identity.

Implications and Conclusion

In this essay, we explored current insights on social robots and L2 international students and found that it seems plausible that social robots could play a useful role in supporting L2 international students in HE settings at home and abroad. As this essay is narrative in nature, it only provides current insights into this topic, generalizations cannot be made and the points made should be cautiously interpreted. A wider search of the research literature and both short-term and long-term studies are needed that directly measure L2 learning effects and the interactions and engagement between the L2 international student and the social robot. Furthermore, before social robots are more readily adopted across a wider range of countries, designing appropriate materials and resources considering student needs and preferences (e.g., based on their L1 cultural backgrounds and language proficiency) would be necessary to maximize the students' social and academic success. Further, it is important to consider whether student attitudes towards social robots as affective factors (e.g., attitudes towards social robots and anxiety) and demographic characteristics (e.g., familiarity with social robots and/or willingness to adopt new technology) can have either a negative or positive effect on their social well-being and academic outcomes. The long-term social and educational benefits of social robots in higher education need to be evaluated through follow-up sessions and for a longer duration time to help reduce the novelty effect. Importantly, it is crucial to note that social robots are not a substitute for human interaction and support and their effectiveness must be rigorously examined.

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Achieving Access and Equity in Education: An Analysis of Higher Education Reforms in Pakistan

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This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Abstract

In the past two decades, the Government of Pakistan has significantly invested in higher education (HE) to bring structural reforms in funding, governance, and quality assurance mechanisms. Their overarching mission has been to fuel national socioeconomic development by ensuring equal access to HE. Given this, the present study aimed to address the following research question: To what extent have current HE reforms in Pakistan enabled equitable access to HE? To address this question, this study drew from a social justice-centered framework to track trends in HE access that is, broadly and based on socio-economic status, gender, urbanicity/rurality, and region/province. Using secondary data from diverse sources including the HEC, Academy of Education Planning and Management, and the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, we conducted descriptive longitudinal analyses. Findings underscore that the system has failed to provide equal access to HE in several ways and discuss some possibilities for policymakers in equalizing the opportunities.

Keywords*:* access to education, equity, higher education reforms, social justice, Pakistan

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) in Pakistan has been largely neglected by relevant authorities since the establishment of the country in 1947. At the beginning of the new millennium, just two percent of university-age students enrolled in higher education institutes (Hayward, 2009). In 2002, however, the Government of Pakistan initiated major higher education reforms by establishing a higher education commission (HEC). The HEC is the Government of Pakistan's statutory regulatory body, which has been established under the *Higher Education Commission Ordinance, 2002,* with the mission to "Facilitate Institutes of Higher Learning to serve as Engine of Socio-Economic Development of Pakistan" (HEC, Pakistan, 2017, p. 2). The higher education reform initiatives include increasing access to higher education by establishing

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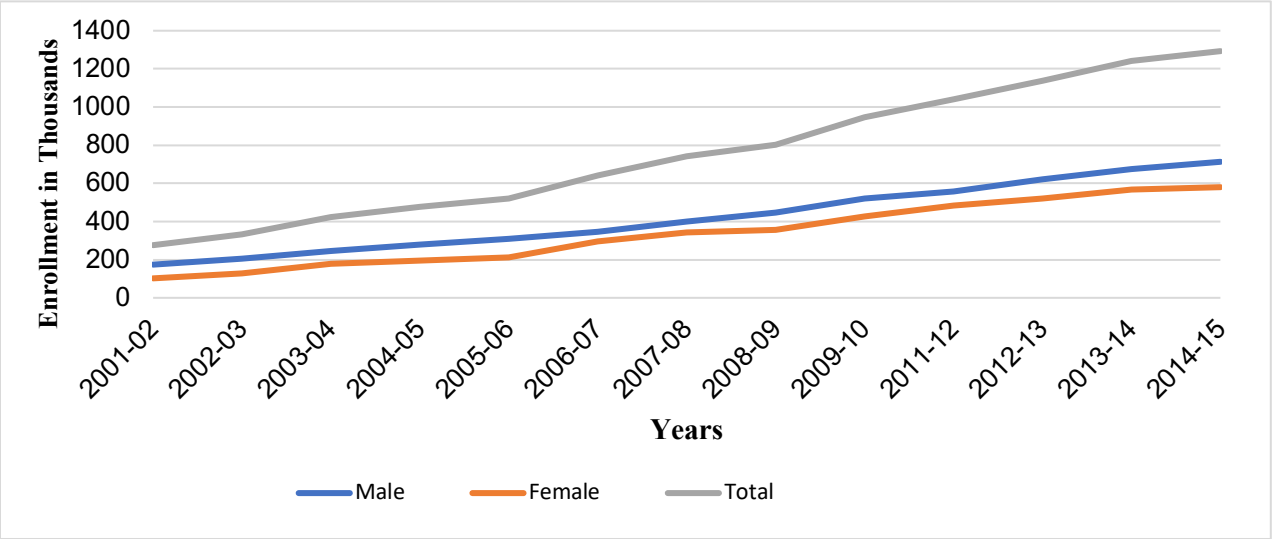
new campuses, offering targeted tuition waivers and scholarships, and improving quality education through applied research and the use of technology. These initiatives caused enrollment in higher education to leap from 2% to 12.6% from 2003 to 2021 and there were some observed enhancements in quality as well (UNESCO, 2021). Figure 1 (below) shows the growth of student enrollment (male, female, and total) in the HE institutions of Pakistan, from 2001-02 to 2014-15.

Figure 1

Higher Education Enrollment by Total and Gender



Note. Data extracted from HEC, Pakistan Universities Statistics (www.hec.gov.pk). The graphs in Figure 1 show increasing enrollment (in thousands) in HE from the year 2001 to 2015.

Despite that, we are concerned about persistent challenges in Pakistan related to access and equity. More specifically, leading into this study we have reason to expect disparities in higher education access based on demographics and geography, such as rural-urban, gender, and socio-economic factors.

Overview of the Problem

Enrollment in Higher Education (HE) in Pakistan has rapidly expanded in the last two decades. However, the expansion of higher education does not necessarily translate into expanded opportunities for the most disadvantaged populations (Buckner, 2017; McCowan, 2016). In Pakistan, a key issue appears to be geographical as universities/colleges are primarily located in big cities. In Karachi, 21% of universities, in Lahore, 17%, and in Islamabad 11%. The geographic location tends to encompass the upper- and middle-class segments of the population. The country's rural and low-income population is still lagging in its access to higher education. According to the National Education Policy 2017 (Ministry of Education [MoE], Pakistan, 2017), out of Pakistan's 120 districts, more than half (65) do not have college campuses. The enrollment rates of higher education are also increasing in big cities and urban areas because of the increase in private universities. Beyond access, there are also substantial differences in public versus private universities/institutes related to quality and access to the prestigious job market (Buckner, 2017). Within the private sector, some institutions are for-profit universities or degree-awarding institutions (DAIs), and others are philanthropic universities (Halai, 2013). For-profit private universities charge higher fees and leave their doors open for all who have sufficient financial resources. Meanwhile, philanthropic universities are located in big cities and have high standards of entrance, and accordingly, their doors for low-income people have too often been shut (Khalid, 2006). Moreover, no progress was observed even in the post-COVID-19 situation because of the digital divide, lack of institutional support, and online learning management system. This situation also exacerbated the challenges faced by low-income students. Consequently, the impact of for-profit HE institutes is still significant in intensifying the disparity (Jamil & Muschert, 2024; Iqbal et al., 2022).

Commitment from the National Government

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2009 has emphasized equitable access to higher education for sustainable development and transforming the vision of a "knowledge-based economy" into reality (MoE, Pakistan, 2009, p. 55). Currently, the youth population of Pakistan is 63% and growing, which means the nation will need to create more access to higher education for sustainable development. Pakistan has a national commitment to equal access to higher education. As cited by the NEP 2017 (MoE, Pakistan, 2017), "according to the constitution of Pakistan, Article 37 C Chapter II, Principle of Policy, the state Shall make technical and professional education generally available and higher education equally accessible to all based on merit" (p. 80).

The government of Pakistan has also developed Pakistan Vision 2025, which has six pillars. The first pillar is *Putting People First*, which envisages significant investment in human resources by offering higher education to the age of 18-23 years cohort (MoE, Pakistan, 2017). The official commitment is to increase the gross enrollment of higher education by up to 25% by 2025. Also, the government of Pakistan has an international commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where SDG 4.3. focuses on higher education as "By 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and territory education, including university." The government of Pakistan included that commitment in the national education Policy 2009 and 2017 (MoE, Pakistan, 2017).

Conceptual Framework: A Distributive Social Justice-Focused Perspective

The present study is framed by a social justice perspective and operates with practical intent, aiming to determine whether and to what extent the Pakistani government has been successful in achieving its stated goal to ensure equal access to higher education (HE). A social justice-centered perspective is fitting given its ultimate emphasis on the equal and full participation of all groups in education (Hackman, 2005; Lynch & Baker, 2005). Such a perspective accordingly also is focused on the enhancement of and support for human agency and draws attention and scrutiny toward power, structures, and privileges that can serve to create or maintain (or ameliorate) social inequalities (Hackman, 2005).

As have many others (e.g., see Dzimbiri & Malin, 2023; Fraser, 2020; Smith, 2018; Lynch & Baker, 2005), we recognize the need to center and closely examine issues of social justice in higher education. One can observe large and persistent inequalities in the field of higher education across many international contexts, and the Pakistani context is not an exception. In fact, education systems have long been criticized for their reproduction or even magnification of power and inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This is problematic, as education systems right from the early stage to higher education have a pivotal role to play in creating a modern, fair, humanizing society (Prasad, 2020). Accordingly, a nation's education system and its education policy form integral parts of its social order (Prasad, 2020).

Though social justice is a broad and contested term, scholars agree social justice requires social arrangements that enable individuals to participate fully and equally in their contexts (see Gewirtz, 1998; Tan, 2020). Achieving this goal thus entails the dismantling of "institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2007, p. 2). Generally, these obstacles are seen as taking three main forms, which most seem to agree are intertwined: issues of distribution, recognition, and representation (Francis et al., 2017; Fraser, 2003). The present study is primarily focused on distributive aspects of social justice, which are concerned with how goods are distributed within Pakistani society. For example, as applied to higher education, an emphasis on distribution at the macro level might lead one to look (as we do, in this study) at who is enrolling in what types of institutions, and examining these patterns by gender, race, social class, geography, and so on. We particularly examine, at a macro level, whether or not participatory parity (Fraser, 2003) is evident in Pakistani higher education, and we examine the nature/direction of trends in participation. In taking this focus we acknowledge we are not able to address other key aspects of social justice (see Fraser, 2020; Gewirtz, 1998 for further discussion); accordingly, we recommend that future study to complement this one—including, for example, attention toward the form of curriculum and the quality and nature of instruction at different institutions.

One of the fundamental purposes of education is to support individuals' ability to be socially mobile, and another is to support nations' sustainable development. Achieving these interrelated goals requires equitable access to high-quality education for all, which in many contexts may require elevated financial as well as specific emphasis on marginalized areas and populations (Altbach et al., 2009). Geography and unequal distribution of wealth and resources all contribute to the disadvantage of certain population groups. Providing higher education to all sectors of a nation's population means confronting social inequalities which are deeply rooted in history, culture, and economic structure that influence an

individual's ability to compete (Altbach et al., 2009). Given this perspective, it is considered fair and just to treat different people in different ways (e.g. in the admission process) based on their specific needs (McCowan, 2016).

This necessity appears to be recognized as formal policy in Pakistan; The National Education Policy Pakistan 2009, for example, has set a vision of an egalitarian approach, emphasizing equitable access to higher education for sustainable development (MoE, Pakistan, 2009).

As previously noted, we are uncertain of the extent to which such policies have indeed been fostering such change. Although access to higher education in Pakistan is increasing, our primary concern is that its growth has been uneven and, potentially, inequitable. In this paper, we will thus analyze equity to access higher education to different groups as,

> The constitution of Pakistan sets out egalitarian views of education based on the values responding to the requirements of economic growth. Article 38 (d) of the Constitution binds the government to instill moral values and offer equitable education to all citizens without discriminating between caste, gender, creed, and race. (MoE, Pakistan 2009, p.16)

Thus, based on this distributive social justice-centered perspective, our research will unpack the structural differences in the higher education system and inequality based on different available resources, varied geopolitical conditions, different socio-economic, ethnicity, gender, and cultural factors, which barricade certain segments of society to unequal conditions of access to higher education in Pakistan. Such a perspective is compatible with our use of secondary data from varied sources, as we seek to identify and analyze disparities and inequalities in HE access and participation. In what follows, we discuss the historical background of higher education in Pakistan and review literature that can partially illuminate current higher education trends and describe access patterns and issues. This review sets up the present study, which examines access to higher education for different groups of people based on the following primary research question: *To what extent have current HE reforms in Pakistan enabled equitable access to HE?* In addressing this question, we particularly attend to equity of access in relation to region, context (i.e., urban, rural), sex (male, female), and publicness (public, private). The final section of the paper discusses the findings and offers suggestions for moving forward.

Literature Review

Historical Background of Higher Education in Pakistan

Pakistan is the world's fifth-largest country, having a total estimated population of 220 million (World Bank, 2019). The country is divided into several provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and federally administered territories (Islamabad capital territories, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit Baltistan). Pakistan was established in 1947; before its establishment, the regions that comprised Pakistan were part of undivided India under British rule. The colonial period saw some progress in education, but that progress was limited to the current part of India and rarely included Pakistan. Regions which are part of current present-day Pakistan were comparatively backward in education and other social indicators (Bengali, 1999). To make matters worse, the newly established country faced insurmountable economic challenges due to a lack of financial resources—a situation that deteriorated any hope of educational progress (Khalid, 2006). Initial educational planning begins in the 1950s, was largely school-centric and its purpose was to enhance mass literacy to achieve the target of basic reading, writing, and numeracy (Bengali, 1999). During the colonial period, Pakistan did not have a system of colleges and universities, which meant any higher education was completed mainly through post-secondary colleges—also known as degree colleges (Bengali, 1999: Hayward, 2009).

Around the time of independence, there was only one university in the newly created Pakistan, the University of Punjab. Later, a few more public and private universities were added, but they retained a colonial standard. The cost of attending universities was so high that enrollment was limited to the bureaucratic and elite classes (Rahman, 2004). The first serious effort toward building a better system of Pakistani higher education was taken up in 1959. The result was a report entitled the “First Commission on Education,” which is viewed by many as a milestone for Pakistani higher education and as paving the way for the establishment of the University Grant Commission (UGC) by the federal government (Mahmood et al., 2015). At the same time, Pakistan’s economy took off and new industries were established. Consequently, the prevailing education system was unable to provide sufficient skilled labor and Pakistani leaders realized the country needed skilled human resources and worked to open agro-industrial and engineering universities (Mills, 2009).

As Pakistan's economy took off in the 1960s, it made some laudable early efforts toward strengthening higher education in Pakistan to produce skilled human resources to meet the industrial needs. Nevertheless, a political commitment to structurally reform higher education was missing (Mahmood et al., 2015). The former UGC, established in 1974, was an inherited institution of the colonial period, working to allocate funds to universities and resolve their financial challenges. It was more politically influenced and bureaucratic in nature, where universities were encountering three layers of bureaucracy including provincial bureaucracy, the federal bureaucracy, and UGC bureaucracy. The UGC observed that the standard of higher education was declining, and the rate of access to higher education was also stagnant. In order to meet the challenges of the 21st century, the country's leaders believed Pakistan needed to invest more in human resources and that it was necessary to abolish the UGC because of its ineffectiveness (Parveen et al., 2011).

In contrast to the UGC, the HEC (initiated in 2002) is more autonomous and represents a powerful national body whose chairman is required to report only to the prime minister of Pakistan. HEC's mission is to facilitate the government toward the growth of economic activity for sustainable development by adding more highly learned and skilled human capital to the system (HEC, Pakistan, 2017). In addition, the purpose of establishing the HEC was also to transform the dream of a knowledge-based economy into reality by widening access to higher education (HEC, Pakistan, 2017).

In 2000, Pakistan's higher education enrollment rate for the cohort of 17-23-year-olds was only 2.2%, which is quite low when compared to neighboring India's 7% and Malaysia's 11% (MoE, Pakistan, 2009). According to the NEP 2017 (MoE, Pakistan, 2017), the twelve-year rate of enrollment jumped to 10% by 2013, but it remains behind neighboring countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. In addition, the current growing accessibility is also skewed. This skewed growth can be a big challenge to inclusive economic growth and the sustainable development of the country (MoE, Pakistan, 2017).

Inequality in Access

Pakistan's education pyramid has been characterized by low, narrow, uneven, and weak infrastructure, which includes low access and larger disparities in access and quality based on different regions and social groups (World Bank, 2006). Within this context, higher education is unsurprisingly showing a similar pattern. Enhancing equitable access to quality higher education is the first strategic mission of the HEC, as expressed in "Vision 2025," with a target set to accelerate higher education access to 30% of the population (HEC, Pakistan, 2017). Due to a worsening political and economic crisis since 2008 and inefficient resource allocation, higher education has missed its targets and is unlikely to achieve a 30% enrollment increase by 2025 (Hayward, 2009). With the increasing demand for higher education and the government's inefficiency to meet it, on the other hand, there has been considerable growth observed in private universities (Halai, 2013). A key issue is that these universities are mainly offering services in big cities like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Meanwhile, a large portion of the Pakistani population resides in rural areas and is unable to access quality higher education. The cost of living in big cities is substantially higher than in rural areas, which barricades the rural population to settle there for HE. The urban population still has the advantages of location, and less deprivation compared to rural areas (Ejaz & Mallawaarachchi, 2023).

Growth of Private Universities

The growth of the private sector in higher education has been a remarkable development in the last four decades (Buckner, 2017). Altbach (2013) connected this rising trend in the private sector worldwide with an increasing demand for higher education and the overcrowding of public universities. These private universities typically run through business models. A chief rationale behind allowing the private sector in higher education was that some national leaders believed the Pakistani government was incompetent, whereas private industries had plenty of resources to support the development of higher education (Niazi & Mace, 2006). The NEP (MoE, Pakistan, 2009) also emphasized the role of the private sector in higher education and believed the private sector could supplement resources with the government for building future human resources. Halai (2013) noted that the government of Pakistan rethought the policy of state-run education in the 1980s because the demand for higher education in the country was high, and the state could accommodate only 2.6% of the total requirement. This situation compelled the government to allow private sector involvement in higher education. As per HEC, Pakistan (2020) data currently, private sector universities accommodate more than a quarter of overall university enrollment in Pakistan.

Skeptics of privatization raise serious concerns related to the increasing number of private universities in Pakistan. According to Khalid (2006) and Hui and Murtaza (2021), the self-financed schemes in higher education have adversely

affected students' access, which is slowly turning higher education into a class-based commodity. Most private universities operate in big cities, and tuition fees are the main source of their revenue (Khalid, 2006). The average tuition fees of these universities are 1000 USD to 2000 USD per semester, compared to 200 USD in public sector universities. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2018), the per capita income of the country is only USD 1641. The big difference between tuition fees and income narrows the opportunity for lower-middle-class and poor people to attend these universities.

Rural vs. Urban Divide

Pakistan's higher education reform agenda also includes increasing accessibility in rural areas. However, current reforms still fail to reduce the rural vs. urban gap in access to higher education. As Saeed and Fatima (2015) describe, rural areas (compared to urban areas) have limited access to educational institutions, particularly in higher educational institutes. Their study shows a huge inequality between rural and urban populations, both in terms of access to education and completion rate. The education disparity in the Sindh province of Pakistan is quite alarming, where 61% percent of the population in rural areas is illiterate compared to 29% in urban Sindh. Likewise, the graduation rate in higher education in rural Sindh is three percent, as compared to 13% in urban Sindh. HEC acknowledged this disparity and opened new universities and campuses in all regions which have to some extent increased the participation rate of students from low-income families and women in higher education (HEC, Pakistan, 2017). Despite these efforts, there remain issues of ensuring qualified faculty and better infrastructure in these regions.

Other than geography, access to education in Pakistan has enormously varied based on the different factors, which include class, gender, and other socio-economic factors, as described next.

Poverty and Income

In developing countries, children from well-off families more easily end up getting a higher education than low-income families, which translates to these students getting better jobs and higher-class positions in society (Khalid, 2006; Mishra, 2019). The analysis and findings section of the study highlights how students from high-poverty zones or regions struggle to access higher education. The current market-driven growth in the economy and lack of government social interventions create a vicious poverty cycle for the students of low-income families. The lack of resources and opportunities restricts these students from getting a better education at the school level, which leads to a barricade for them to compete for admission to the next level (i.e., in higher education institutions). Tarar (2006) argued that globalization and neoliberalism have also affected Pakistan's system of higher education. That comes with high academic standards, meritocracy, standardized admission tests, and high fees, all of which are factors that limit the opportunities for disadvantaged students to access higher education.

Gender-inequality

Overall, women's participation in higher education in Pakistan has improved. The current political environment is also favorable toward continued gains in this area, including programs providing specific financial aid and opportunities for women (Malik & Courtney, 2011). It was culturally unfavorable for women to go beyond their home city, especially to attend a college or university (Parveen et al., 2011). In 2001, 36% of those attending higher education were women, and by 2014 the percentage had increased to 47% (Pakistan Institutes of Education, 2023). Though the proportion of women has increased in teaching positions, women are still behind in administrative roles (Batool et al., 2013). A challenging aspect is that, like in other developing countries, female deprivation from higher education is mainly in rural areas and is a common occurrence. Female education in Pakistan is intricate and deeply rooted in the socio-economic and cultural background of the country; in part because of high poverty rates in rural areas, peoples' attitudes and structural constraints toward women's higher education remain unchanged, as women HE costs more and contributes less in family wealth (Ilie et al., 2021; Malik & Courtney, 2011). The requirement of per-capita investment in female education is higher in Pakistan because of cultural restrictions. In addition, there is also a gender-based division of labor (Khalid, 2006). In Pakistan, women mostly remain at home and take care of family matters after completing higher education. These practices also stunt women's ability to pursue higher education. Within women, there is another form of segregation. Most women faculty and students come from the elite class, while women from the marginalized class often fall short in the competition (Batool et al., 2013: Malik & Courtney, 2011).

There is a lack of a systematic plan and a somewhat promising but flawed approach to fixing higher education. According to Hoodbhoy (2009) and Gilani (2023), it is common flawed wisdom to fix higher education through finance

and centralized bureaucracy. Before the opening of the university, he argued that student access and faculty availability should be rationalized. Further, he argued that an enormous increase in funding marginally improved quality and access in some parts of the country, but more still needs to be done.

Methodology

As mentioned above our research method draws on and analyzes secondary data. The secondary data analysis method is an empirical exercise that uses the same principles and approach as the analysis of primary research data (Johnson, 2017). Chudgar and Lubschei (2016) elaborated that large-scale secondary data has excellent potential to enable descriptive analysis in policy research. Further, analyzing these data in relation to distributive features, using a social justice-centric perspective, enhances our understanding of HE inequality trends based on differential context, gender, and ethnicity. It also contributes to suggesting policy changes that could bring about more fairness and equity (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Making use of available existing data sets (detailed below), we generated descriptive analyses to address our research questions.

The data used in this study were extracted from four sources of documents and reports. Our secondary data sources included: (1) HEC statistics, (2) Academy of Education Planning and Management (AEPAM) Pakistan data, (3) Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) data regarding Pakistan Social Living Standard Measurement (PSLM), and (4) the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF). HEC Statistics helped us determine the number of available universities and DAIs in Pakistan and the number of enrolled students based on provinces, regions, gender, and public vs private. The data regarding student enrollment is collected by HEC approximately every year from all higher education institutions. AEPAM Pakistan data also helped in measuring higher education enrollment over the period in different regions. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) collects PSLM data which helped to measure the social living conditions of citizens. Above all, the PPAF data set helped in measuring poverty based on poverty zones.

We integrated these (HEC statistics, AEPAM reports, PSLM survey reports, and PPAF reports) multiple data sets and analyzed data using descriptive statistical methods (e.g., by calculating and reporting percentages and numbers by category and across time). Based on the analyses, we generated tables and graphs. These tables and graphs reveal several key trends in higher education in Pakistan and are interpretable from a social justice-centered perspective. Specifically, this study's results highlight which areas, sectors, and groups get more and fewer benefits from the overall higher education reforms in Pakistan. The descriptive analysis of HEC statistics and AEPAM Pakistan data yield findings related to the number of universities and students' enrollments (in percent and in numbers) in various regions in a given period, which can be found in graphs and tables below the findings section. The analysis of PSLM data sets offers results regarding higher education access to various subgroups based on provinces and regions and can be seen in Table 2. Analyses of PPAF data along with other data sources such as HEC statistics portray the relationship between poverty and higher education access (e.g., see Figures 3 and 4 and Table 1 for depictions of the relationship between poverty zone and citizens' access to HE).

Findings

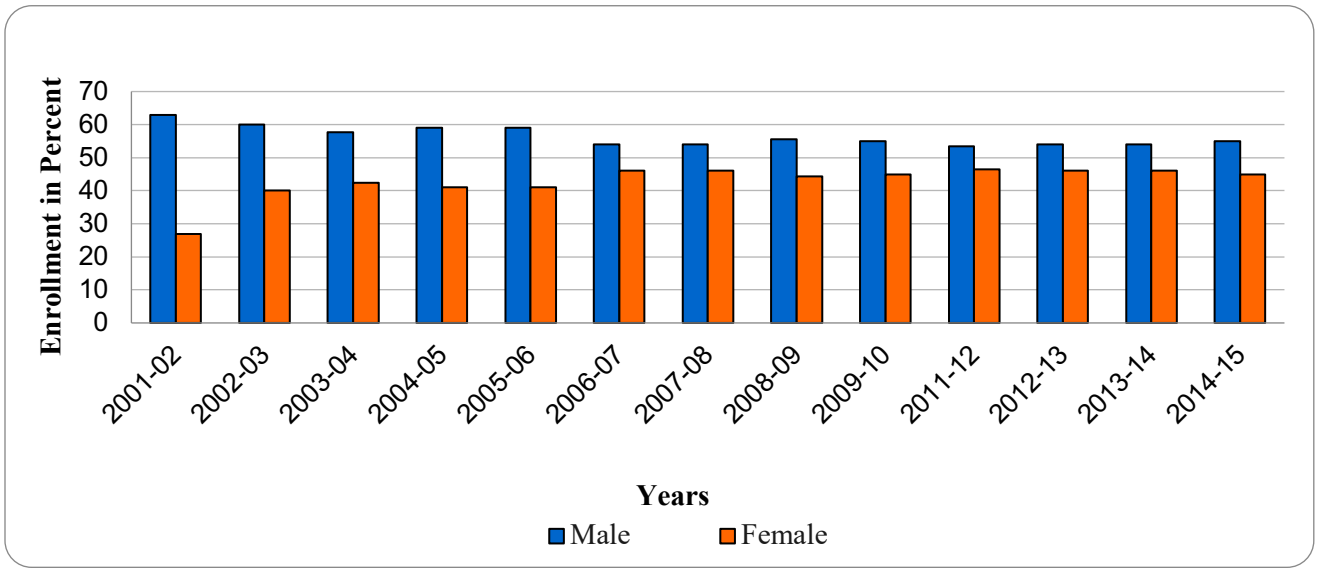
After analyzing the various sources of data mentioned above, we systematically present the results below for the discussion. In the first part, we show the growth of higher education. After that, we have shown how that growth ended up being not equal to the various groups. In this regard, we have added several graphs and tables which clearly bifurcate students' enrollments (access) to higher education institutions based on their geographic locations and demographic characteristics.

Growth in Higher Education Enrollment in Pakistan

Despite having the lowest access to higher education in South Asia, we observed substantial growth in higher education enrollment after the establishment of HEC and the tangible contribution of government funding. The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) recommended an increment of 72% in government funding (i.e., 2.9 to 5 billion) annually. The growth in HE enrollment increased by approximately 500%, from 2001-02 to 2020-21. An important point as given in Figure 2 (below) is that the gap between males and females in higher education is also narrowed. The Female enrollment in 2014-15 increased to 46% compared to 27% in 2001-02 (given in Figure 2).

Figure 2

Enrollment by Gender

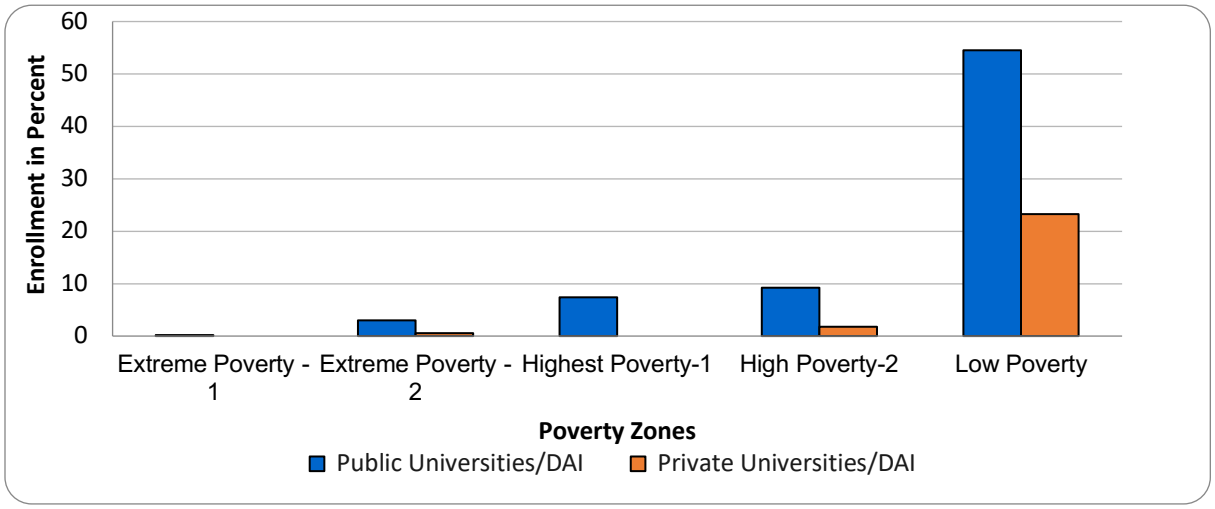


Note. Data extracted from HEC, Pakistan Universities Statistics (www.hec.gov.pk). The graphs in Figure 2 show the percent of enrollment (male vs female) in HE from the year 2001 to 2015.

However, the above growth and narrowing gender gap (given in Figure 2) does not yet paint a picture of broad, robust access to higher education, as the total participation rate to higher education is limited to 12% [Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), 2020]. Moreover, the larger population of the country living in rural areas and high-poverty zones is still lagging, as will be demonstrated as we proceed.

Figure 3

Enrollment Based on Poverty Zones.



Note. Data extracted from PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018); Higher Education Commission Enrollment Statistics 2017-18. The graphs show that the percentage of enrollment increases as the level of poverty decreases.

Inequality Based on Poverty

We looked at the data on higher education while connecting with poverty zones, we found that a large number of universities are located in low-poverty zones As Naveed & Ghaus (2018) divided the country regions based on poverty zones. We have depicted Extreme Poverty Zone I (very left graph in Figure 3 below) areas are the regions that ranked highest in terms of poverty and lowest in terms of social standards. In the same vein, extreme poverty zone 2 is a comparatively less poverty-stricken area than 1. Similarly, as the graph moves from left to right the level of poverty decreases. The low poverty zone (extreme right graph in Figure 3) is considered a developed and urbanized region in terms of social standards and has high scores on the human development index and relatively high literacy rates. Similarly, in Figure 3, as the graph moves from left to right the number of higher education institutes increased (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018).

The higher enrollment in low poverty zones (also sometimes referred to as advantaged regions) is attributable to several factors, including but not limited to better quality of primary and secondary schooling, which accordingly better prepares them for HE; availability of different universities and choices; enhanced career guidance; and enhanced financial support from family and other sources. The share of the extreme poverty-1 population in Pakistan is about 5.6%. In these areas, there is just a single public sector university and no private one (see Table 1), and less than half percent of that population is enrolled in higher education. By contrast, the low poverty zone comprises a population share of 40%, and more than 70% of universities are located in these areas. Similarly (as given in Table 1), as we move from high to low-poverty zones, we can see that the number of available universities increases considerably. Thus, we can estimate that there remain huge disparities in access to higher education as a function of geography and poverty, which are interlinked in Pakistan.

Table 1

The Number of Universities/ DAIs Based on Poverty Zones.

Category in Zones of Poverty	The proportion of poverty based on zones	Population share (in percent)	Number of Universities/DAIs between 2017–18		
			Public	*Private*	*Total*
Extreme Poverty-1	91.2-68.7	5.6	1	0	1
Extreme poverty- 2	68.6-49.3	11.5	11	1	12
High Poverty-1	48.4-34.6	19.3	14	0	14
High Poverty-2	33.6-19.2	23.5	20	2	22
Low poverty	19.3-3.2	40	65	73	138
Total		100	111	76	187

Note. Data extracted from PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018); Higher Education Commission Statistics 2017– 18 (HEC, Pakistan, 2020).

Rural vs. Urban Inequity

Access to higher education based on rurality vs. urbanity also reveals significant differences. First, we can see that private universities in Pakistan are largely located in urban and low-poverty zone areas. Figure 3 above shows that most

private universities that charge fees are located in low-poverty zones, and we interpret this as reflecting their client markets. As per Table 1, the low-poverty area has the highest numbers of universities or DAIs such as 65 public universities and 73 private universities. The number of universities and the percentage of enrollment in extreme poverty zones (mostly in rural areas), by contrast, are infinitesimal (having 0.2% enrollment) as it shows only a single public sector university in that region. Further, as poverty scales decrease the percentage of enrollment increases in public universities, and more so in private universities and DAIs. This situation is very likely to create more reproduction of stratification and inequality in higher education and beyond (e.g., in terms of access to certain types of employment).

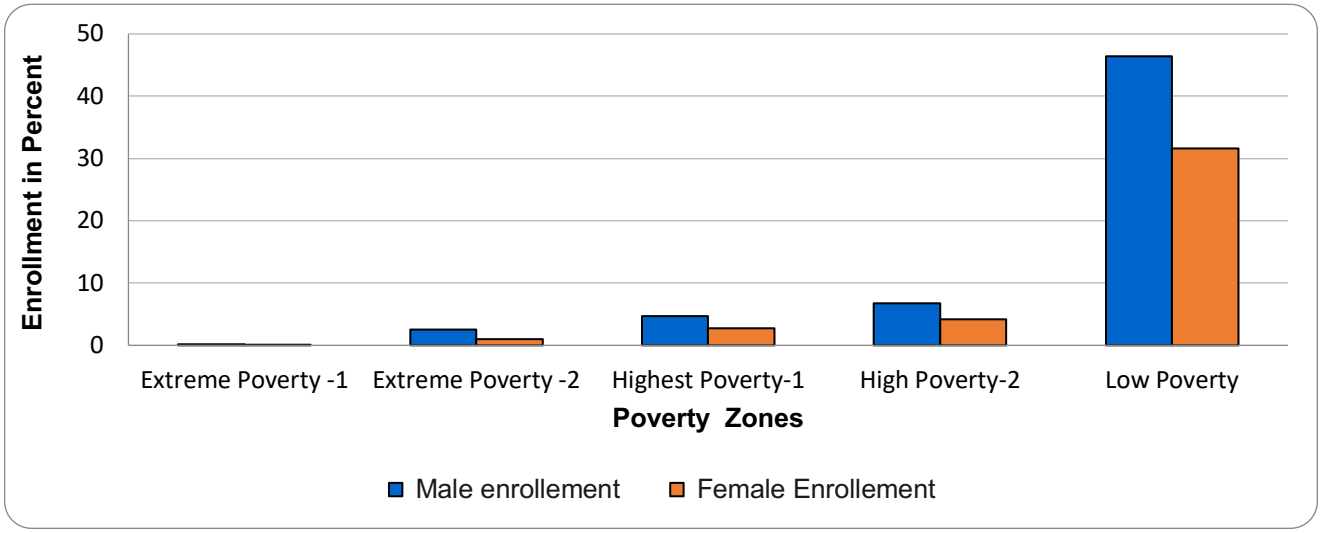
In Pakistan, rural poverty is multidimensional and about 44% of citizens live in poverty (Padda & Hameed, 2018). Citizens experiencing poverty also have low purchasing power, which means it may be difficult or impossible for them to afford HE from private university. Moreover, governments' lower spending in rural areas contributes to create more deprivation to access HE.

Gender-based Inequality

Though female enrollment increased overall after 2000, the increase has been observed only in affluent and developed areas. Figure 4 shows the female enrollment ratio is quite low (0.02% female vs 0.18% male) in extreme poverty. Meanwhile, in the low-poverty zone, female enrollment is 32% compared to 46% male. This alarming data shows the reason for the inadequate availability of facilities and support for female citizens in education poverty-stricken areas of Pakistan. Further, it also reveals that gender disparity is more tied to poverty and low socioeconomic growth.

Figure 4

Enrollment by Gender and Poverty



Note. Data extracted from PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018); Higher Education Commission Enrollment Statistics 2017–18 (HEC, Pakistan, 2020).

Based on the above result, it is evident that female enrollment in HE in Pakistan is skewed according to income and gender. This implies that household characteristics will be key factors in determining future trends toward gender in/equality in HE.

Inequality Based on Regions/Provinces.

If we look at the different regions of Pakistan compared to rural areas, urban areas have more access to higher education. For example, Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT is considered one of the developed areas and has the highest number of university and student enrollments (e.g., 14% enrollment having a population share of .97%: see table 2, below). Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Sindh Urban, and Punjab are also developed/Affluent regions (as per PSLM, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020) that have the second-highest proportion of universities and student enrollment share. Baluchistan and Sindh Rural have the lowest number of proportional enrollments and also a huge disparity among male vs female access

to higher education. Moreover, there are no or negligible private sector universities or degree awarding institutions enrollments in these areas.

Table 2

Enrollment in Universities/DAIs by Sector, Gender, and Provinces/Regions in the Years 2017–18

Provinces /Regions	Population share (in percent)	Public sector		Private sector		Total	Total enrollment (in percent)
		Male	Female	Male	Female		
Punjab	52	189,822	187,218	85779	52337	515,156	45
Sindh (Rural)	12.1	58,780	21,824	0	0	80,604	7
Sindh (Urban)	11.4	48,795	45,054	58648	30,229	182,726	16
KP	15	71,418	26,201	35574	10,082	143,275	12
Baluchistan	5.7	21,873	9,460	484	108	31,925	3
AJK	2	11,368	13,392	1021	1357	27,138	2
GB	0.83	2,160	2,184	0	0	4,344	0.3
ICT	.97	77,768	51,194	20580	13,089	162,631	14
Total	100	481,984	356,527	202086	107,202	1,147,79	100

Note. Data extracted from, Census 2017 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2018); National Educational Management Information System [NEMIS] (AEPAM reports, 2017-18); Higher education commission enrollment statistics 2017–18 (HEC, Pakistan, 2020)

The above table and previous graphs and tables showed that the increasing trend to access HE is more concentrated in urban and developed regions of Pakistan. However, rural and high-poverty areas populations are severely left behind in access. An additional, related challenge for students from low-income backgrounds and rural areas is that these students frequently are deemed as having academic deficiencies in relation to universities' standards and admissions criteria. Some universities offer foundation courses, which are also called remedial education or developmental education (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000), enabling students to overcome such academic and social gaps while living for six months one semester in the environment of the best universities. The selection of students can also be made based on students' talents and with proper consideration of their backgrounds (e.g., poverty).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study and others (e.g., Ilie et al., 2021; McCown, 2016) clearly show continued disparities in higher education access in Pakistan related to region, income, gender, and urbanicity. It is quite possible, perhaps even likely, for inequality to grow alongside HE expansion (Altbach, 2013). However, to delineate policy implications for HE reform, in this study we have tried to present facts and findings related to whether and to what extent this growth in access

to HE in Pakistan has been equitable—i.e., to what extent it has benefited all segments of society. We applied a social justice-centered perspective (see Fraser, 2020; Lynch & Baker, 2005) to examine patterns of higher education growth (i.e., participatory parity). Current data from government-published documents and independent institutes showed substantial growth in higher education access. However, we have found that this growth has not been inclusive. Moreover, this growth does not significantly benefit those segments of the population which have been historically underprivileged. Based on analysis of PSLM (PBS, 2020) and PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018) data, Pakistan showed enormous inequality in higher education access and enrollments based on class, gender, rurality/urbanity, and poverty zone. As such, its higher education reforms have thus far failed to address these structural issues. This is concerning because a narrow objective of higher education growth without attention to equity and social justice can be expected to produce and reproduce inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

There is also another over-simplified but widely held conclusion regarding the gender gap that is narrowing in access to and enrollment in higher education. On the one hand, the findings of this study showed that gender gaps are decreasing in developed and urban regions. On the other hand, gender-based gaps from the perspectives of poverty and geography (less developed regions) have persisted. It requires affirmative action from the government to reduce these disparities (Batool et al., 2013; Naz & Ashraf, 2020). Our analyses and perspectives also support the argument that rising private sector universities create more disparities in HE access due to their high tuition cost and selective approach to admission (e.g., see Khalid, 2006). Government can ensure access for all through structural reforms in higher education with most new public sector universities being opened in rural areas and high-poverty zones. These universities should also be endowed with ample human resources and financing. For private sector universities, there should be regulations from Higher Education Commission (HEC), and they should create more opportunities through scholarships, financial support, and an inclusive environment for disadvantaged regions students.

Accordingly, and based on the preceding findings, we illustrated and informed the government and policymakers to increase higher education enrollment from the current level to 15% by 2025 (as mentioned in HEC Pakistan, 2017) can only be possible through inclusiveness – all groups of the population. In order to have equitable access, special focus should be given to those who are historically underprivileged. Pakistan has launched several scholarships and a financial aid program for needy students such as HEC undergraduate scholarship programs (HEC Pakistan, 2021). These are laudable efforts, but scholarships should be more targeted (focus on low-enrolled areas) and integrated with other dimensions (e.g., poverty, gender, and academic deficiencies) which present obstacles in attaining education.

One key limitation of this study is that it has focused solely on macro-level aspects of HE access. There are several other factors at micro- or meso- levels that can also create or contribute to inequality in HE in Pakistan. For example, there are cultural barriers and expectations for women to stay at home. Also, in some cases the HE institutes' entrance policies and cultures implicitly favor some groups and exclude minorities and others, for instance based on their faith, past education, and grades. The present study also has focused on HE and not on vocational education. In contrast to schools and higher education, vocational education has not yet captured the attention of government and private providers despite of its' increasing demand in the future (Bano et al., 2022). As university-based higher education for all youth is not easily achievable in Pakistan, in this regard, the higher education vision 2025 (HEC, Pakistan, 2017) clearly demonstrates the importance of skill-based community colleges to offer post-secondary education at the doorsteps of the students. The purpose is to grow technologically competent, highly skilled workers, who meet the job requirements of the 21st century. HEC also proposed a two-year community college education to broadly focus on skill development for the youth. These colleges can be affiliated with top-ranked universities in Pakistan and operate primarily in rural and poverty-stricken areas. HEC should ensure the quality level of those colleges is on par with other higher education institutes and ensure the students at these colleges will not be discriminated against as they work to secure jobs. This initiative will reduce the obstacles to achieving higher (or post-secondary) education for students from far-flung and disadvantaged areas. We recommend additional research on these and other features related to HE and vocational education in/equity in Pakistan.

Finally, higher education is an under-researched area in Pakistan that needs more evidence-based research into whether and how it would be helpful to enhance higher education access (and subsequent success) for disadvantaged students. This study has future implications for both future researchers and policymakers to understand and explain HE access and equity in a more nuanced way and come up with equity-based reforms which can work for every segment of the population.

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An Exploration of Arab International Students' Campus Engagement Experiences

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Abstract

Arab international students are considered an integral part of American universities bringing cultural and academic perspectives that enrich campus diversity. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of development, we seek to understand the mutual interactions of ecological factors contributing to Arab international students' campus engagement and academic success in the United States. We used open-ended questionnaires with 18 Arab students to capture their overall lived experiences and conducted semi-structured interviews with five students to get rich insights into their experiences. The findings of this study have revealed the significant role of global and sociopolitical context in shaping Arab international students' social and academic engagement, identity, and wellbeing. Implications of this study drive the need for a sociopolitical turn in designing a culturally engaging campus environment and enacting critical pedagogy to support diverse students' engagement and identity development.

Keywords: Arab international students, Bronfenbrenner's theory, discrimination, engagement, identity, systems of support

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Introduction

The United States has witnessed an increasing influx of international students, with 948,518 international students accounting for five percent of higher education students in 2022 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022). International Arab students in the United States make up a large population representing 5.6 percent of enrollments at American universities during the 2021-2022 academic year based on the Open Doors report (IIE, 2022). International students are an integral part of the campus community as intellectual, cultural, and social assets bring diverse perspectives and enrich the campus sociocultural milieu. Research has indicated that Arab international students like international students in general, contribute to the economy, ethnic, cultural, and intellectual diversity, and college program sustainability (Hegarty, 2014). However, these students face many challenges regarding their cultural engagement and language communication and struggle with religious practice and social and academic integration on campus (Wu et al., 2015).

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The need for engaging and welcoming campus environments for diverse students and the dearth of research on Arab international students' experiences as an understudied, marginalized population (Aldawsari, 2020), drive this exploratory case study. We take a critical and strengths-based approach to raise Arab international students' voices by exploring their lived experiences in a Northeastern University during an unprecedented challenging time of discrimination and pandemic (COVID-19). We mean by "Arab international students" those who come to the USA with a student visa from Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia. These students' native language is mainly Arabic in different dialects, and they have diverse ethnicities and religions. The majority of Arabs are Muslims, but some identify as Christians, Jews, and followers of other religions, such as Druze and Yazidi. We use the words ecology and ecological as defined by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological theory to refer to the continuous interaction of Arab international students with their immediate and larger environment.

We seek to explore the influence of macro and micro-level ecological factors that shape Arab students' social and academic engagement and their identity development. This understanding will help design ways to provide an engaging and culturally responsive campus environment (Museus, 2014) to accommodate this student population's specific needs and strengths. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of development provides an interesting lens for our study by looking at the environmental effect and interconnectedness of historical, political, economic, and daily events and practices that shaped Arab students' academic and sociocultural engagement on campus. For this purpose, we answered the following research questions: 1) How do the ecological context and practices influence Arab international students' campus experiences and engagement?, and 2) To what extent do systems of support offered on the campus promote these students' engagement?

Literature Review

Arab international students come to the United States for a quality educational standard, in search of a better life, and to develop their academic and social engagement influenced by personal and environmental factors (Abu Rabia, 2017). This section reviews the extant literature about Arab international students' experiences at higher education institutions, including their academic and social engagement, the impact of discrimination on student engagement, and the needed systems of support.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is defined as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to [the] desired outcome of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). In this study, we refer to student engagement as their active involvement in educational practices and their commitment to educational goals and learning (Christenson et al., 2012). Student engagement includes their participation in academic activities as well as social experiences (Kuh, 2009; McCormick et al., 2013). The student's level of social engagement has been linked to their persistence in their studies (Abu Rabia, 2017; Hu, 2011), and socialization, academic performance, and academic success (Kuh, 2003). Student engagement was also connected to student development and success and to institutional culture (Becker, 1977) and categorized as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Fredericks et al., 2004). It was centered at the intersection of environmental factors and students' intentional efforts (Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Academic engagement is linked to the student's ability to cope with the new educational environment and academic demands regarding their motivation to study, purposefulness, performance, and satisfaction (Schartner & Young, 2016). Studies have indicated the influence of Arab students' English language proficiency on academic achievement, social adaptation (Alsahafi & Shin, 2019), and their willingness to contribute in class discussions and interaction with peers (Mwangi et al., 2019). Due to their unfamiliarity with the American educational system, Arab students need to master language skills and communication styles and develop critical thinking to adjust to the new learning environment. Moreover, research has revealed types of interaction that students experience in learning, including student-faculty interactions and their interactions with their peers, which show how faculty's care and responsiveness enhance students' engagement in the community and motivation that influences their drive for learning (Jean-Francois, 2019).

Studies on Arab international students focused on deficits such as language barriers and communication problems as hindering new social network development (Chen et al., 2019) and cultural backgrounds conflicting with their interactions and socialization and affecting their academic performance (Wu et al., 2015). These students confront institutional racism

that views their cultural background as a hindrance to their success while exclusionary behaviors from their peers further impede their acceptance within academic circles.

Religion plays a central role in the Arab way of life in daily practices and religious commitment. Although Islam is the primary religion of most Arab students, not all Arabs are Muslims, and each Arab country interprets and implements the Islamic rules differently (Abunab et al., 2017). There is a lack of familiarity with Arab religious practices such as praying, fasting, non-consumption of alcohol, holidays, and eating habits (Chen et al., 2019). Consequently, this lack of knowledge about students' religion leads to misunderstanding and deepens their isolation.

Additionally, social engagement has been linked to difficulties in psychological wellbeing and serious mental health problems, and a high level of anxiety resulting from cultural shock, homesickness, or perceived stereotyping (Goforth et al., 2016; Quinton, 2019). These mental issues could lead to physical health problems as well (Ogunsanya et al., 2018). Yan (2020) stated that international students tend to engage in maladaptive practices as a way to integrate in the new culture, such as drinking alcohol, even when it is prohibited in their own culture (e.g., Muslim). Also, racist behaviors toward international Muslim students have a lasting impact on their wellbeing (Brown & Jones, 2013, p. 1013). They often encounter global stigmatization as terrorists, bias, discrimination, and misunderstandings regarding their religious beliefs and practices (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). Thus, Arab international students' cultural and social engagement is threatened by attitudes and misunderstanding and by their response to the acculturative stress leading to wellbeing unbalance that affects their social and academic life.

Global & Sociopolitical Environment

Bjork and colleagues (2020) asserted that international education sociopolitical factors influence the context and life aspects of students. The sociopolitical agenda reveals racial and ethnic discrimination that can threaten students' psychological wellbeing (Krieger, 1990; Schmitt et al., 2014) and academic engagement and performance (Teney et al., 2013). Moreover, the stress and pressure that international students face, caused by stereotypes, bias, and discrimination, designates lower international students' satisfaction and hinder their communication with their peers and faculty (Wadsworth et al., 2008), leading to disconnection and isolation (Beoku-Betts, 2004).

Discrimination and academic (dis)engagement of ethnic-racial minority students are seen as a social identity threat perspective (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Arab international students may "face simultaneous discrimination for not being White and for not being American" because of their racial identities and foreign cultural perspectives and practices (Shaheen, 2019, p. 66). Although there is a tendency within higher education institutions to treat international students as economically important, higher institution systems continue to perceive them as academically deficient (Coate, 2009). These perceptions deepen the misguided discrimination and educators' attitudes towards this student population.

Discrimination against Arab students has been linked to rampant Islamophobia, and a hostile climate exacerbated by the 9/11 event (Seppy, 2018) and continued with anti-immigration sentiment from the Trump administration (Costello, 2016). In this context, Arab-Muslim students encounter negative stigma and misrepresentation due to their multifaceted identities, including their religious, ethnic, racial, and gender identities. This intersectional identity explains the discrimination based on religion and race, and ethnicity, leading to feelings of othering (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Specifically, Arab women who wear hijabs (head scarf) and other visibly Muslim students face a heightened risk of experiencing prejudice, bigotry, and racialized sexism (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). Arab students' race, religion, and gender intersectional identities add layers of complexities to their on-campus sense of belonging, feeling un-American and using coping strategies to mitigate racialization (Karaman & Christian, 2020). To overcome marginalization, international students are often expected to adapt to the host culture as quickly as possible and are considered as lacking normative skills and knowledge. Kettle (2017) recommends a shift in research from a deficit approach (focusing on their linguistic and cultural challenges in need of interventions) to a more constructive and strengths-based approach (focusing on their assets and strengths and considering the environment and structures as the source of challenges). Considering international students as assets to higher education instead of a burden is important in improving their self-confidence and sense of belonging, thus, their engagement and wellbeing. These students enrich diverse campus environments, bring multiple perspectives, and foster intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004).

Within this environment, international students encountered specific challenges due to the pandemic being stranded in the United States and facing financial insecurity with scarce job opportunities and intensified social isolation and emotional vulnerability (Daiya, 2020; Dickerson, 2020). This situation exacerbated their vulnerability to racism and discrimination (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022). The shift to virtual classes has also impacted these students' engagement

and elevated the anxiety and depression that they had already experienced before the pandemic (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Okruszek et al., 2020). Being abroad and away from home can impact the wellbeing of international students, especially during crisis situations (Aucejo et al., 2020). What worsened the situation is that the pandemic pushed international students to prioritize health security and safety when they had to decide between staying or leaving the US during the pandemic (Marginson, 2020). These students needed to find ways to return to their home country when some colleges closed their housing and dining services (IIE, 2020). They experienced additional stress related to the uncertainty around their legal status and temporary shift to online learning on top of their difficult living circumstances. In July 2020, the Department of Homeland Security announced prohibiting international students from remaining in the U.S. if their universities decided online-only instruction due to the pandemic (Whitford, 2020). In addition, multiple incidents of racial discrimination against international students were reported during the pandemic period (Berger, 2020; Horton, 2020). These students also had to bear more stress related to uncertainty and the wellbeing of their families (Kafka, 2020). These issues point to the need for supportive systems at universities and colleges.

Systems of Support

A review of the body of literature emphasizes the campus environment as crucial for educational staff to support international students through teaching and learning quality (Chen et al., 2019). One of the factors that support student' engagement is building a social network by developing additional connections to the campus and building a sense of belonging in their new community (Leong, 2015). Studies revealed that these students get support mainly from their friends in the home country as well as from local people who came from the same home country, followed by parents and faculty. Additionally, academic advisors (Zhang, 2018) and counselors (Anandavalli et al., 2020) are a major source of support for Arab international students to provide them with academic guidance, counseling, and wellbeing support.

Therefore, international students' sense of engagement in a culturally responsive campus can be enhanced through academic support programs (Abu Rabia, 2017), English language fluency development programs (Al Zubaidi, 2012), high-quality, high-diversity courses, and collaborative leadership programs (Glass et al., 2015), psychoeducational opportunities and outreach services (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015), and peer/mentor programs (Nilsson, 2019).

Extant literature on international student experiences takes a deficit-based approach portraying them in need of adaptation and adjustment, making them responsible for their own integration into the new culture (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Zhao et al., 2005). Previous literature also deals with international students as a homogenous group and fails to address the specific needs and interests of different racial and ethnic groups (Lee & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2019). Literature on international students usually takes an acculturative, reductionist approach positioning the host country's language and culture as superior and further marginalizing students' identities and cultures (Liu & Rathbone, 2021). Our study focuses on student engagement as a strengths-based approach and a way to locate the shortage in the campus environment in need of attending to diversity. Unlike other studies associating discrimination to engagement with a focus on minority groups such as African Americans and Hispanic students (e.g., Powell & Arriola, 2003), our study centers Arab international students' engagement in the COVID-19 and heightened discrimination context. Internationalization of higher education is about integrating an intercultural or global dimension into post-secondary education to enhance the quality of education and research (de Wit et al., 2015). We support strength-based approaches to international student engagement and join scholars from critical internationalization studies calling for a transformative approach to promote global engagement by challenging existing power dynamics and inequalities within the internationalization process (Stein, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model with multifaceted settings that intertwine together to promote international students' development. Bronfenbrenner argued that "development never takes place in a vacuum; it is always embedded in and expressed through behavior in a particular environment" (p. 27). The rationale behind using this theory is that individuals' development and growth do not happen in isolation but instead through interaction and interconnection with others: family, friends, peers, faculty, campus, community, and society. By placing Arab international students at the core of the ecological system, this theory frames our understanding of students' sociocultural and academic experiences, taking into consideration the following levels: 1) Microsystem, 2) Mesosystem, 3) Exosystem, 4) Macrosystem, and 5) Chronosystem. Each system level consists of different social contexts that explicitly and implicitly influence the

students' lived experiences starting from the direct effect of the microsystem to the impact of events over time in the chronosystem.

The *microsystem level* consists of the relations between international students and the immediate environment that they interact with. It includes friends, parents and family, residence, campus, and academic courses. In this study, the main microsystem areas that directly influence students were family, friends, faculty and staff, advisors, and the workplace. The interconnection between multiple microsystems forms the *mesosystem level*. It includes dynamic and reciprocal interactions and activities between peer groups, friends, family, faculty, community, workplace, university, and faith-based organizations. The main areas that cut across various elements of the microsystem in this study were cultural beliefs, language, faith, and wellness. The *exosystem* comprises indirect factors of the environment that shape students' campus experiences based on interpersonal relationships contributing to their development (Glass et al., 2015). Areas that emerged in this study were the educational system, clubs, and media. The *macrosystem* consists of historical, cultural, and societal structures. The macrosystem factors include the broader attitudes or ideologies of the culture that consists of social forces of events in the home country, the culture of higher education, student college expectations, belief systems, and cultural capital. These cultural contexts include socioeconomic status, poverty, race, and identity. Racism and discrimination made up the macrosystem in this study. Finally, the *chronosystem* encompasses the socio-historical context and environmental events and transitions in the students' lives and within which the different systems work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For this study, we focused on the impact of COVID-19 on students' campus experiences.

Additionally, we seek to understand the mutual relationships and interactions between the multiple systems, including the specific influence of contextual, global, and sociopolitical factors on student engagement and wellbeing. We advance the application of the theory by applying a critical lens and asset-based approaches from the culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) that aims to foster the sustained affirmation and valuing of diverse cultural backgrounds and identities within learning environments, and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993) that emphasizes diverse students' development of critical thinking and empowerment to challenge societal norms, inequitable conditions, and power dynamics.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model was applied both locally and globally as a guiding framework in various studies that shed light on the influence of the campus environment on students' experiences. Zhang (2018) used the ecological framework in the American context with international students' academic advising and found that environmental factors such as culture, politics, economics, and daily interpersonal interactions contributed to international students' development. Globally, Bronfenbrenner's developmental theoretical framework was also used with international students' integration in the UK (Elliot et al., 2016), Australian (Nomnian, 2018), and Canadian (Soetan, 2020) contexts.

Research Methodology

We used qualitative research methods, in particular case study (Yin, 1984). In this case study, we invited Arab international students enrolled in a United States Northeastern university we call InClude University to complete an online open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

Case Study Design

We used a case study methodology to capture a wide range of descriptions of meanings of international students' engagement experiences and give them an opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences with the goal to understand the phenomenon. The rationale behind using a case study is to uncover the "what" and "how" (Creswell & Poth, 2016) of Arab international students' experiences of engagement at InClude University as a shared phenomenon. Case study was proven effective for in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within the lived environment (Yin et al., 2018). Furthermore, a case study is situated within a "real-life context." It enables researchers to capture a thick description and examine a small unique group of participants to reveal a phenomenon (Yin, 1984). For this purpose, we used an open-ended questionnaire to seek overall lived experiences from a larger sample of Arab international students and an in-depth semi-structured interview with a few participants.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at InClude University's main campus in a Northeastern suburban area in the USA in the Spring 2021 semester. The university is a public research institution with a total of 253 full-time international students. To

align with the institution's mission, efforts are made to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion to drive university-wide culturally sustaining initiatives and equitable opportunities. Following IRB approval, we distributed a flyer with the Qualtrics link to the online open-ended questionnaire in the university's centers (e.g., the international center, the Arab Cultural Club, and the Muslim Student Association). The recruitment criteria were being a current student at InClude university over 18 years old and identifying as an Arab international student. Recruitment efforts to disseminate the questionnaire lasted for two months. As a result, 18 students identified as Arab international students completed the questionnaire. They were invited to participate in the interviews at the end of the questionnaire. Five students agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews, which were scheduled at their convenience in the following month. The recruitment, collection of the questionnaire responses, and conducting of interviews were all carried out during the university's Spring semester.

A total of 18 Arab international students have completed the questionnaire, ten males and eight females (see demographics in Table 1 below). The majority of these participants identified as Muslims, spent less than 4 years in the US, and speak more than two languages. From this sample, five Arab international students took part in the interview (see demographics in Table 2 below). They represented different genders (three men and two women), educational levels (two Ph.D., one Master's, and two undergraduates), and Arab countries' origin (two Moroccan, one Tunisian, one Jordanian, and one Saudi Arabian). All these students identified as Muslim and multilingual.

Table 1: Questionnaire Participants' Demographic Frequency Table (n = 18)

Demographics	Frequency (Percentage)
Gender	
Male	10 (55.6%)
Female	8 (44.4%)
Other	0 (0.0%)
Age	
18 to 20 years old	4 (22.2%)
21 to 25 years old	6 (33.3%)
26 to 30 years old	4 (22.2%)
Over 30 years old	4 (22.2%)
Pursued Degree	
Doctoral	6 (33.3%)
Masters	7 (38.9%)
Bachelo''s Degree	5 (27.8%)
Religion	
Muslim	14 (77.8%)
Christian	2 (11.1%)
Other	2 (11.1%)
Years Spent in the US	
1-2 years	7 (38.9%)
3-4 years	4 (22.2%)
5-6 years	2 (11.1%)
7 years and more	5 (27.8%)
Spoken Languages	
English and Arabic only	6 (33.3%)
More than the two languages	9 (10.5%)
Did not respond	3 (16.7%)

Table 2: Interviewed Participants' Demographics (n = 5)

Participant Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Education Level	Country of Origin	Spoken Languages
Mousa	Male	27	Ph.D. level	Morocco	Arabic, French, English
Nada	Female	28	Ph.D. level	Tunisia	Arabic, French, English
Amina	Female	26	Master's level	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English
Yacine	Male	20	Undergrad	Morocco	Arabic, French, English
Osama	Male	25	Undergrad	Jordan	Arabic, English

Data Collection and Analysis

We used an open-ended questionnaire in an attempt to seek overall lived experiences from a larger sample of Arab international students and a semi-structured interview to get in-depth into their experiences. Data was collected from the questionnaire from 18 participants and semi-structured interviews from five students.

First, the 15-minute open-ended questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics to capture information about the overall lived experiences of Arab international students at InClude University. The questionnaire included questions about the following sections: demographics, their experiences concerning their sociocultural and academic engagement, systems of support, and interaction with their peers or other faculty members. A sample question is: *Do you think that stereotyping and bias against Arab international students is an issue on campus? in American society?*

Students willing to participate in one-on-one interviews were asked to leave their contact information at the end of the questionnaire. Then, five diverse volunteering students were selected for 30-minute semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol comprises questions about the overall perception of campus climate, the academic and social engagement, and the systems of support for campus integration. A sample interview question is: *How is the overall campus environment supporting or hindering you to reach your goals?*

The open-ended questionnaire and interviews were scrutinized and analyzed through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). We used open coding by examining sentences from the open-ended responses and transcripts to uncover the participants' experiences. Thus, we overlaid Bronfenbrenner's ecological model on the analyzed data to create and organize the findings into themes.

Rigor

In order to follow the trustworthiness techniques set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985), data were collected over the span of a semester period and from two data sources (a questionnaire and interviews) and accounted for the credibility and dependability of the study. Participants were invited to a member check (Hatch, 2002) and had the opportunity to validate or invalidate the accuracy of the shared findings to ensure their voices had been honestly represented to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. We made significant efforts to include a diverse range of Arab students from various countries and religious backgrounds in order to mitigate any biases resulting from our positionality stated below. However,

the number and diversity of our participants were limited, and the findings rely on self-reported information provided by our sample.

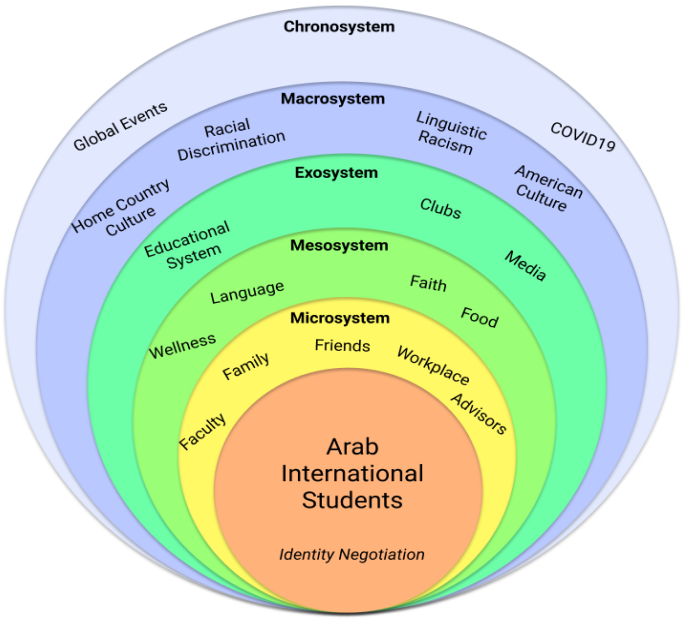
Positionality

As researchers, we state our positionality as we come to the research world with a set of beliefs and historical and cultural aspects of our intersectional identities that affect our way of thinking and interpreting the world. We identify as Muslim Arab multilingual immigrant women who grew up in a post-colonial country driven by oppressive and cultural imperialistic systems. We recognize our intersectional identities as a power in raising the missing voices in research about international students' experiences and challenges in US higher education. We pay close attention to peoples' attitudes and issues of systemic marginalization and power dynamics at the intersection of multiple identity markers that we have experienced ourselves, and we advocate for marginalized people of color. This positionality involves our connectedness and engagement with our research participants to contribute to the theory and practice in higher education to enhance diverse students' experiences and outcomes.

Results

Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, we examined the interactions of the five levels of environmental factors that impacted Arab international students' sociocultural and academic engagement. Six major themes emerged: (1) Arab international students' identity negotiation, (2) interactions and communication patterns, (3) linguistic and cultural barriers, (4) unfamiliarity with the educational system and underrepresentation, (5) perceived racism and discrimination, and (6) unprecedented socio-political context. These ecological factors are critical to the engagement of international students who face challenges from different systems and structures. The ecological analysis provides a comprehensive framework to understand the various contextual factors that influence student experiences and emphasizes the complex interactions between students and their environment, recognizing that their experiences are shaped by multiple nested systems. It is essential to consider the interplay between these ecological levels to obtain a comprehensive analysis of the data and ensure a more accurate understanding of the interconnectedness and influence of various environmental factors and the unique complexities involved in student engagement. Our findings are organized by ecological systems that relate to emerging themes depicted in Figure 1 below. We are using participants' pseudonyms throughout the paper.

Figure 1: Arab International Students' Ecological Systems



The Individual: Arab International Students' Identity Negotiation

Results have shown that Arab students negotiated their identities in order to adapt to the new campus environment. Different identity shifts have emerged, ranging from maintaining cultural assets to embracing US culture (see Figure 2 below). Some students preserved their cultural assets in engaging with the new culture. Others needed to give up some of their cultural customs and traditions to adjust to the new environment.

The Microsystem: Interactions and Communication with Friends, Family, Faculty, Advisors, and Workplace

When asked about their overall experiences in the questionnaire, the majority of students expressed their satisfaction with their engagement at the university. However, some of them did not perceive themselves as engaged, and others considered their campus experiences challenging. One of the students from the latter group shared that "Adjusting to the university is an ongoing challenge, in which it is hard to figure out where exactly I belong."

Students revealed their strong relationship with parents as significant to their engagement on campus, placing the family as an essential part of the microsystem. When asked about the engagement process challenges, Yacine shared, "It was just a different environment. I got homesick, I missed home. I missed my family, and there were just a lot of things that I had to get used to, to succeed in my classes." Participants expressed their reliance on emotional and financial support from their families as contributors to their engagement experiences.

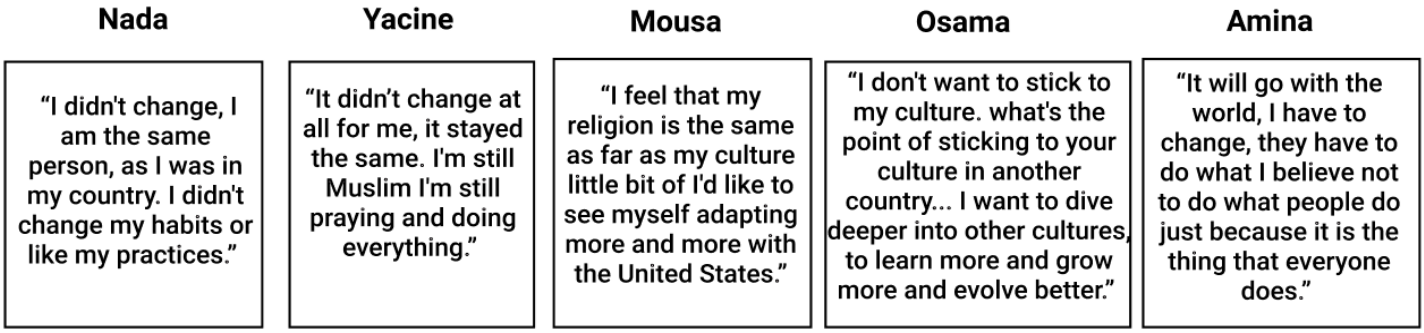
Regarding friendship building, our participants resort to the same ethnic friends to sustain their cultural aspects (language, traditions, religion, food), but they also tend to make local friends to learn the local language and culture to ease their adjustment. However, Nada reported her social experience with American peers. She stated, "I share my culture with my Arab classmates like few Americans are really interested in my culture. And they are really distant; they don't really interact with us too much." These perceived relationships with friends and peers could influence these students' engagement in the campus community.

Additionally, building relationships with faculty and staff was considered an integral part of the student's academic and social engagement (faculty and staff microsystems). Some participants' supervisors and faculty cared about the student's performance and wellbeing. However, one participant reported "that professor only cared about his work. They do not care about students."

Overall, students believed that close relationships and interactions with faculty helped them reach their expectations. For example, Yacine's close interaction with one of his professors outside the classroom supported him with career development. Furthermore, respondents valorized the vital role that advisors play in their psychological and social development, helping them adjust, engage, and feel secure. Nada stated that "whenever I feel down or have a challenge, I contact my advisor to solve the situation."

In terms of the workplace environment, students shared employment stories and emphasized their experiences of hard work and perseverance to prove themselves in the workplace. Nada shared her story about some previous lab work she did with one of her professors that affected her engagement and motivation. She revealed:

Figure 2: Participants Cultural Identity Negotiation



> The work environment was very toxic...the relationship with postdoc was not good, and they were very demanding, and they really exploit students to work for them, and whenever the work is okay, they presented as if they did it. Whenever the work is not done, there is a challenge… the bad experience I had before affected me, now it is affecting me. I'm still recovering from it.

The Mesosystem: Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

The interaction between the various microsystems presented above adds more influence on these students' experiences through the mesosystem. The mesosystem components that came out in our study include language, food, faith, and wellness which are detailed in the following sections.

One of the main challenges that the majority of participants shared was the lack of language proficiency. Participants as multilingual students came to the US with particular linguistic assets. They speak, code-switch, decode, and translate texts from and into Arabic as a Semitic language with its dialects and varieties. They found oral fluency and academic writing challenging. Nada stated that "Language barrier is an issue...in a sense, it relies too much on communication, reading skills, and academic writing."

Some Muslim students talked about their difficulties in finding Halal food (Kosher). Mousa expressed his diet concern when ordering food at restaurants saying," I don't eat pork, but sometimes they give it completely different names that you never know until you get the food." Another questionnaire respondent recommended that "the university needs to work on its food culture by offering more varieties with consideration of its diverse population."

The majority of "the students who took the questionnaire identified as Muslim who raised the difficulty of practicing their religion (prayers) on campus daily. One student said, "the lack of praying rooms made it hard to practice on time." Students' commitment to religion was influenced by their interactions with their family and friends. Mousa stated his attachment to religion as a part of his identity, stating, "Some of my friends would push me to practice my beliefs. So honestly, I'm very happy with the full situation. So, my religion is always the same. It did not change."

About a third of the questionnaire respondents had reached out to the wellness center to overcome their academic and social stress and anxiety. They expressed their confidence in seeking help when needed. One participant expressed his satisfaction with the mental health service provided on campus. While two participants were discontent with the limited length of the program and the counselors' lack of experience with the Arab international student" culture, Amina stated, "15 sessions only! This is not making sense because when we go to the counselor, we need something for the long term... The person that I met is not experienced with international students."

The Exosystem: Unfamiliarity with the Educational System and Underrepresentation

The exosystem components that emerged from our study include the educational system, clubs, and media, as detailed below.

More than a third of the questionnaire respondents elaborated on their difficulties in engaging with the new educational system. Despite the students' unfamiliarity with the interactive classroom, participants showed their admiration and engagement. Nada said that "most of the classes are discussion and reading based, which is something I've never done before... I think that the classes here are more engaging." However, Osama explained, "It took me a year to understand the system of education and how they teach you." Students highlighted that such a system invokes their academic motivation. Mousa emphasized that "work hard, play hard always remind you that you have to give all your effort to succeed." Nada shared her additional pressure and said, "I want to get my Ph.D., and I don't have any other choice. I think there is no time to go back. So that's what keeps me motivated."

Arab students elaborated on the importance of their membership in the university's clubs and organizations. They also raised a concern related to Arab people's representation on campus. One respondent proposed that "The university should work to provide course material that focuses on and acknowledges Arab students as a marginalized group and incorporate them into the inclusivity campaigns."

The Macrosystem: Perceived Racism and Discrimination

Participants revealed degrees of systemic perceived discrimination and prejudice primarily based on the media portrayal of Arabs (macrosystem) they face in their daily campus lives. More than a third of the questionnaire respondents claimed that they had confronted situations of discrimination on campus and outside it. When asked about discriminatory situations, one respondent stated that "Since 9/11 every Arab has been viewed by others as a terrorist who is seeking to harm non-Arabs in the name of Allah (God). This stereotyping has affected many innocent Arab lives." Another one confirmed, "I did get discriminated against at work; they gave someone else a promotion that I deserved." This perceived stereotyping of Muslims pushed Amina to change her religious dress code to look similar to Americans: "This is not hurting my religion as well for the dress. I still cover my body with a different style to be engaged and assimilated to the new culture, but with a balance."

Osama shared a story about a verbal microaggression in one of his English classes portraying the Middle East as a place for war and terrorism, which made one American student in the class express his hatred towards the Arab region. This event pushed Osama to defend his people and engage in conversations with his classmates: "Is he racist?... Everybody thinks the way they do for a reason, what they've been exposed to. I believe I'm not gonna judge the kid...he doesn't know." The same student was confronted with another situation where he experienced discrimination as a worker in a restaurant. He stated,

> So, it was the time of the year where they choose who the certified trainers are for a promotion, and they take the people I trained over me… That just hurt, honestly, because I gave them everything. I would do work that is not in my job description. And I would just go above and beyond because I felt like I had to prove myself as an outsider.

Regarding systemic linguistic racism, one participant perceived that "the Arabic language itself would be enough to cause alarm or spark a confrontation at the university, and I believe this is true of the wider US population." In terms of Arabs' representation on campus, one respondent shared that "Arab students are one of the least represented at the university. As a result, those employed by the university are provided minimal or no guidance on dealing with the particular struggles that Arab students face."

The Chronosystem: Unprecedented Global and Socio-political Context

Past and current socio-political events, including the pandemic, have threatened international students' safety and wellbeing. This pandemic period was accompanied by anti-immigration policies and global anti-racial events that put pressure on these students. Participants in the questionnaire have linked the current situation to their engagement experiences stating that "the pandemic period affected too much everyone's life and experience on campus. I think if COVID-19 didn't happen, the experience at the university would have been better." Another student said that "If it wasn't for COVID-19, my adjustment at the University as an Arab international student would've been at ease." From interviews, Mousa pointed to the challenge related to online learning during the pandemic stating, "He [the advisor] knows that I was having problems understanding the lecture with this pandemic and all. He advised me to go see a counselor." Nada shared the negative impact of the pandemic on her interactions with people, "with COVID, things became worse so that there is no opportunity to interact with the American people or even Arabs."

The application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system has revealed a strong connection between student subsystems. So, when one system is interrupted, the student's other system may be affected too. The main interaction that emerged from the findings is the impact of stereotyping and discrimination (Macrosystem) on mental health (Mesosystem) and identity negotiation (Individual) which will be further discussed in the next section. All of these systems have contributed to the overall student engagement on the campus.

Discussion

Arab international students' engagement experiences are deeply impacted by the mutual and meaningful interactions between various systems. Although participants described the campus as a friendly environment, some of them have revealed several incidents of discrimination, feeling discomfort in practicing their religion, and displaying their

identities. This finding is in line with Shammas's (2015) and Kishawi's (2012) studies, where Muslim students face an unfriendly campus climate that negatively impacts their academic and social engagement. Similarly, students' identities and engagement experiences are influenced by discriminatory acts (macrosystem), socio-political climate, and anti-immigration policies (chronosystem). Discrimination against Arab students is considered as a threat to social identity development, compromising social identity needs, including a sense of belonging, self, esteem, and sense of control (Verkuyten, 2019). In response to the environmental factors, students made decisions to adapt or assimilate into the host culture leading to identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This is what happened to Amina, who resorted to shifting her cultural identity under pressure to assimilate and comply with the new culture as protection from potential discriminatory behaviors and acts.

Studies on discrimination have revealed its negative effects not only on student identity development but also on psychological wellbeing (Schmitt, et al., 2014). An example from our study is Nada's story of disengagement and alienation when she felt excluded by her supervisor and advisor. It is clear that advisor's care and empathy towards Arab students make them more engaged in their academic performance. Similarly, other studies indicate that students benefit from diverse mentors who have similar experiences and are highly informed about these students' integration process (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Therefore, we recommend a representation of a diverse student population in universities' advising and mentoring bodies.

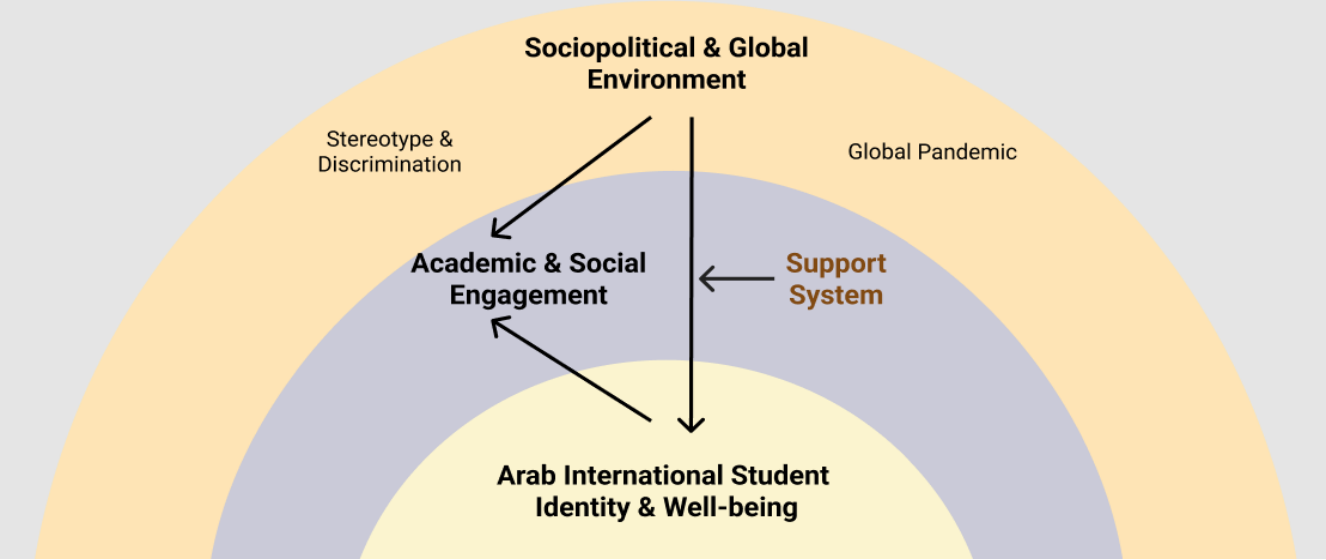
Student negative experiences of discrimination affect their mental health, especially since they come to the US with a strong commitment to get their academic degrees seeking a better life than the one they had in their home country. Many participating students resorted to the wellness center, but they were confronted with counselors' lack of cross-cultural understanding resulting in perceived ineffective consultation. The mental health assistance is not always meeting her Arab identity and cultural expectations. This idea is reinforced in Arthur's (2017) and Abu Rabia's (2017) studies. Yet, international students are less likely to access mental health services due to stigmas and cultural concerns, lack of awareness of mental health services, and increased difficulty in accessing those services (Hwang et al., 2014). Thus, counselors' intercultural competence is needed to increase the efficiency of these students' counseling services.

These discrimination experiences were exacerbated by the effect of COVID-19 as expressed by many students in our study, limiting their access to social interactions and academic support and worsening their situation. During the pandemic era, international students were perceived as threats and had a greater risk for microaggressions and discrimination. This situation heightened their mental health effects due to increased isolation, reduced access to resources, and continued neglect by their host countries and universities (Han & Richardson, 2015; Chen et al., 2020). Offering culturally responsive and accessible services and critically engaging these students in discussing issues of discrimination and social justice would help develop awareness and reflection about discriminatory attitudes and practices.

In response to this pressure, students turn to social relationship support as a buffer to counteract the negative effect of discrimination. Our findings highlight the importance of students' relationships with family, friends, faculty, and staff as microsystems whose interconnection forms their mesosystem. Participants elaborated on their strong collectivistic culture characterized by strong family ties (in Arabic الروابط الأسرية) as the family is foundational in Arab'' cultural identities (Hamdan, 2009). Arab students relied on their family bonds for emotional and social support, which shaped their individual development and influenced their sense of engagement. Additionally, this population was inclined to make close friendships with students from the same ethnic group, which helped minimize their isolation and the degree of culture shock. This result is similar to Brown's (2009) study, where international students felt more secure when they made multinational friends, sharing an "identity of strangers in a foreign country" (p. 246). Thus, universities should offer these students opportunities to socialize with their multinational peers in a safe and welcoming environment.

Our study highlights the effect of discrimination and mental health on Arab students' engagement in the COVID-19 context. It shows the major influence of global and sociopolitical context (macro and chronosystems) on Arab students' identity and wellbeing (individual characteristics) and, consequently, on their academic and social engagement at the university level (micro and mesosystems). This study emphasizes individual student characteristics and contextual factors that moderate these interactions. The systems of support from university staff, families, and friends act as a buffer against

Figure 3: Ecological System of Campus Engagement Framework



the negative effects of exclusionary context, policies, and practices (Benner, 2017). These ecological factors of engagement are represented in Figure 3.

Implications and Conclusion

Even though our study was conducted in one university, our findings connect to literature and have valuable implications based on the unique students' lived experiences. Campus stakeholders are encouraged to deeply understand the unique experiences of Arab students to tailor outreach programs and a culturally responsive campus environment to cater to their needs and interests. We should view these students as organized within sociopolitical and historical context, social structures, and everyday practices that are rooted in discriminatory, deficit-based assumptions. This sociopolitical turn could not be achieved without a radical shift to democratic and critical educational policies and practices and cultivating intercultural competence.

Critical Pedagogy

Promoting a radical educational view is a premise for developing Arab students' cultural identity (Chen, 2005). A critical education is based on critical pedagogy that promotes equity, empowerment, problem positing, and dialogic learning allowing students to develop their critical thinking through discussions, arguments, and explanations (Freire, 1993) and enables students to reflect, critique, and make a transformative change (Darder, 2012). This perspective allows for a shift from a deficit-based and assimilative context to a critical, pedagogical approach where diverse students are valued and actively participate in the construction of knowledge. Thus, it is crucial to understand that some Arab international students are discriminated against because of the national order that places power over their so-called "ex"colonized countries (Lee & Castiello, 2019). To counteract this colonial thinking, educators should enact critical teaching, advocate for oppressed countries, and promote emancipatory acts. This should be understood as a common shared responsibility for every human being not only to remove injustice but also to decolonialize the minds (Fanon, 1963).

To do so, scholars recommended adopting critical education that focuses on analyzing authority and power, where students' sociopolitical macrosystems are the actual problem, not the people (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Giroux (2010) defined critical pedagogy as, "the educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (p. 73). In such classrooms, teachers design a curriculum that meets diverse students' needs, encourage problem solving tasks, and discuss controversial issues in the US and globally. In other words, when Arab international students engage in a

critical pedagogy, they are critical thinkers, bring their international perspectives and experiences in their Arab countries, and become aware of social justice issues that give power and privileges to some people but not others (e.g., colonial history, the Arab revolution). Thus, these analytical skills teach students how to reflect on the acquired knowledge (Giroux, 2010) and enable them to engage in learning and become agents of change toward social justice and equity.

Intercultural Competence

Arab students' perceived identities and cultural negotiation coupled with their friendship behavior invoked the need for embracing linguistic and cultural diversity. Discrimination and stereotyping should be counterbalanced with a supportive campus environment promoting access, success and equity for students in the margins through a culturally engaging campus environment (Museus, 2014). Campuses should promote the intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004) of faculty, staff, and students through not only organizing events where American, Arab students, and other ethnic groups work together and learn about each other's cultures but also ensure accessible resources for these students on campus (e.g., prayer rooms, Halal food, clubs, and organization). In addition, the implementation of cultural pedagogies such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) and tapping into students' funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2006). These campus practices boost international students' social skills and motivation to explore the new culture and make friends from similar and dissimilar cultures (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Moreover, counseling ought to be tailored to support Arab international students (Zhang, 2018), considering their specific faith-related beliefs about mental health and their collectivistic culture. This cultural sensitivity would prevent the risk that counselors apply western liberal advice that may oppose Arab family and community culture and values (Alajlan, 2016). In the same vein, cross-cultural supervision and advising are essential to understand the needs of international students who may not be informed of how to utilize campus resources (Reid & Dixon, 2012). Accordingly, counselors need to be aware of the Arab student ecological systems' change over time, stay tuned about current events, and utilize professional advocacy efforts to support these students (Anandavalli et al., 2020). This advocacy position cannot be achieved without setting pre- and in-service programs for faculty, staff, and counselors that focus on intercultural competence and enable not only changing teachers' attitudes but also promoting experiential and reflective activities that promote diverse perspectives and cultural understanding.

Contribution to Research

The current study contributes to the field of diversity in higher education and to critical internationalization studies (Stein, 2019) in various ways. First, it raises the voices of marginalized students, offers insights into their unique ecological systems that affect their engagement, and emphasizes the historical and sociopolitical forms of marginalization that shape student experiences. Second, we further develop the ecological theory toward a critical framework tracing the connection between discrimination, identity development, and engagement with the systems of support acting as a protective factor. Third, we advocate for new ways to provide a welcoming and supportive campus environment taking a sociopolitical and critical approach toward these marginalized students. Further research can dig deeper into the process of identity shift taking an intersectional lens based on racial, ethnic, and religious constructs and their implications on student cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Researchers and practitioners should collaborate to bridge theory to practice with the goal to build and sustain diversity and inclusion in American higher education using critical and strengths-based approaches.

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A Comparative Study of Why Chinese Graduates From Japanese or Australian Universities Return to China and How They Contribute

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This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies

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Abstract

This study compared the career choices, contributions, and challenges of Chinese graduates of Japanese and Australian universities who returned to China, and it explored the factors that influenced them based on the life planning model. The mixed-method approach was adopted by combining the results of 208 questionnaire responses and 13 semi-structured interviews of the returnees working for a company in China. As a new finding, study country-specific factors, such as economic relation between the study country and home country and institutional factors related to the human resource management style of the study country, were identified to have influenced the returnees' career choices, satisfaction, and contributions. This study also highlighted the importance of career development and utilization of specialty/expertise in graduates' decision-making and the issue of overtime work, which was raised as a common challenge by the two groups.

Keywords: Australia, career development, Chinese international students, Japan, life planning model, returnees

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Introduction

Chinese students studying overseas have dramatically increased in the last two decades, standing at 39,000 in 2000 to reach 703,500 in 2019 (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). China's rapid economic development, spurred by its participation in WTO and funding from the IMF, was a driving force for this expansion. It has also drawn these students back to their home country: the number of returnees from overseas study increased from 130,000 in 2000 to 4.2 million in 2019 (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). Wang et al. (2021) state that these returnees have contributed to the localization of multi-national enterprises and the internationalization of traditional industries in China.

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In international higher education, studying overseas has been seen as a pathway to better career outcomes (Waibel et al., 2017), including for Chinese students (Tsang, 2013). Pan (2011) pointed out that Chinese students who returned to China after studying overseas have contributed to the development of their home country by utilizing their enhanced human capital. Traditionally, the most popular study destinations for Chinese students have been the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and Japan (Gong & Huybers, 2015). However, few studies have compared the career choices and contributions of Chinese students who returned from these destinations.

According to the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), the number of Chinese international students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Japan was 95,003, accounting for 43.4% of the total international students in Japan's HEIs in 2020 (JASSO, 2021). In 2017, among 79,502 Chinese students in Japan's HEIs, 32.6% were enrolled in graduate schools while 46.2% were in undergraduate programs; 58.4% majored in humanities and social sciences (H & S) while 17.7% majored in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (JASSO, 2018).

In Australia, the number of Chinese international students enrolled in HEIs was 129,464 as of May 2020, accounting for 35.7% of the total international students in HEIs. In December 2020, 40% of Chinese students were enrolled in undergraduate programs while 45% were in Master's programs; 44.3% majored in management and commerce, followed by 11.1% majoring in information technology (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021).

There are some similarities between Chinese international students in Japan and Australia. First, Japan and Australia are located in the Asia-Pacific region, with less geographical distance and time zone difference from China, compared to other major study destinations in North America and Europe. They are the groups who did not choose to study in the most popular destinations, the US and the UK, due to their concern about expensive tuition fees and/or insufficient academic ability to obtain a scholarship in these countries.

Considering these similarities, this study compares the career choices and contributions of Chinese graduates of Japanese and Australian universities who returned to China. A comparative approach reveals the similarities and differences among the target groups (Kosmützky, 2016). This approach proves particularly valuable in the field of higher education, where studying international trends and reform requires an examination of diverse contexts and practices (Teichler, 1996). However, there is a lack of cross-country studies on student trajectories through higher education (Haas & Hadjar, 2020). Considering this situation, this study aims to compare the career choices, contributions, and challenges of Chinese returnees who graduated from Japanese universities (hereafter referred to as "Japan returnees") and those who graduated from Australian universities (hereafter referred to as "Australia returnees") and explore the factors (contexts) that influenced them.

The following research questions were posed to compare the results between the two groups:

(1) What factors have motivated them to return to China?

(2) What factors did they consider in choosing a workplace in China?

(3) What are their major contributions and challenges in their workplace?

Literature Review

Pioneering work on international students who returned to their home countries was carried out by Saxenian (2005). She described the contribution of Chinese and Indian engineers who received degrees in the US and started information technology (IT) businesses in their home countries by utilizing their skills and networks obtained overseas. The phenomenon was named "brain circulation," and numerous studies have been conducted since then. Here, we mainly focus on the studies of Chinese graduates who returned from overseas study and extract the major findings related to our research questions: reasons for their return and choice of a workplace, their contributions and challenges, and the characteristics of returnees from Japan or Australia.

Reasons for Return and Choice of Workplace

Dustmann and Weiss (2007) found that the main reasons for international students in the UK to return to their home country were lower living costs and higher return on their educational investment than the host country. Kenney et al. (2013) pointed out that political support and encouragement attracted scholars back to their home countries.

Hao et al. (2017) reviewed 143 empirical studies on Chinese returnees published between 2005 and 2015 and concluded that family ties, career opportunities, and economic growth had motivated them to return to China. Tharenou and Seet (2014) found that Chinese returnees were pushed away from their study countries by social and psychological concerns, such as dissatisfaction with career and economic opportunities and lack of cultural assimilation. Xiong and Mok (2020)

added the growing wave of nationalism and protectionism as a push factor from some host countries. Jiang (2016) asserted that the policies and projects to offer preferential treatment had attracted overseas Chinese students and scholars back to China.

Regarding the choice of workplace, the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) survey of 1,625 returned graduates of overseas HEIs revealed that 56% hoped to work in first-tier cities, and 35% listed career development, 27% listed salary and social welfare, and 26.7% listed workplace location as an essential factor in choosing their workplace (CSCSE, 2019).

Returnees' Contribution and Challenges

Wahba (2014) explored the returnees' contribution to the economic development of their home country by bringing back both financial and human capital through savings, skills, and knowledge. Wang (2015) surveyed 4,183 former J1 visa holders in the US who returned to their countries and found that returnees' knowledge transfer success depended on their embeddedness in their home and host country workplaces.

Dai and Liu (2009) found that the high-tech companies created by Chinese returnees showed better performance than those owned by local entrepreneurs due to their technological and commercial knowledge as well as their international orientation. Ma and Pan (2015) indicated that homecoming Chinese talent has contributed to China's scientific research, technological economy, and academic leadership through quantitative and qualitative brain gain.

Despite these expectations and preferential treatment provided to them, the returned graduates have faced challenges in their home country. Increasing numbers of Chinese returnees from overseas study have faced growing competition in the home labor market (ICEF Monitor, 2018). Tran and Bui (2019) asserted that losing home connections and networks due to their overseas stay could result in lower social capital when returnees compete with the local graduates in their home labor market. Xiong and Mok (2020) concluded that the return on educational investment of UK-educated Chinese returnees had declined because of the increased difficulty in finding jobs and dwindling career prospects. Chen (2023), based on a large-scale quantitative survey, disclosed that US-educated applicants had fewer callbacks from companies in China than applicants educated in China, especially from Chinese-owned firms that had concerns about retaining the former.

Bai et al. (2016) pointed out that some returnees faced challenges in knowledge transfer due to the different characteristics of domestic and foreign markets. Gill (2010) analyzed that the unfamiliarity with the communication skills used in the workplace bothered the Chinese returnees. Cheung and Xu (2014) indicated that Chinese society's complicated social resources and networks (*guanxi* in Mandarin) had puzzled the returnees from Western countries.

Hao and Welch (2012) pointed out the gap between the recognition of returnees' self-ability and their evaluation in China's labor market. Dal Maso (2020) listed the mismatch between returnees' expertise acquired in the study country and the demand from China's labor market.

Studies on Returnees From Japan or Australia

The studies on Chinese returnees from Japan or Australia are much fewer than those on Chinese returnees from the US or the UK. Here we list several studies on returnees from Japan or Australia.

Okunishi and Tanaka (2020), based on the interview with five Chinese returnees from Japan, indicated that they maintained some aspects of Japanese culture, such as emphasis on the observation of public rules, respecting other people's intentions in communication, and orientation toward co-existence with others, which have indirectly impacted their life and work. Sato (2019) compared the questionnaire responses of Asian graduates of Japanese universities working for Japanese companies in Japan and those working for Japan-affiliated companies in their home countries (including 43 Chinese returnees) and pointed out that although the graduates working for Japan-affiliated companies in their home countries showed higher satisfaction than those working for Japanese companies in Japan, it is necessary to reform the Japanese traditional human resource (HR) management such as seniority system to prevent their job-hopping to other multi-national companies and local companies.

Hao et al. (2016), based on the online questionnaire and interviews of Chinese master's degree holders of top Australian universities, pointed out that holding an overseas qualification no longer guaranteed success in China's labor market because of the intensified competition with other overseas returnees and graduates of Chinese elite universities. Singh (2020) conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with Chinese returnees who graduated from Australian universities and depicted the significant barriers to finding employment in China, including limited prior work experience, a difference between graduation time and employment period in China, and a lack of *guanxi*. Tran et al. (2021), based on interviews with Chinese returnees who majored in accounting in Australia, their (potential) employers, and other stakeholders in China,

pointed out that their overseas accountancy credentials were assumed to represent a form of cultural capital that could be converted to permanent residency capital in Chinese global cities (through the provision of household registration) and that some employers raised concerns about returnees' lack of localized knowledge and long-term commitment to local small or medium-sized companies which had been treated as stepping stones in their career development. Pham and Saito (2020) categorized Vietnamese returnees from Australia into three types according to their strategies in the home country's labor market: navigators (who utilize soft skills to navigate barriers), rebels (who change jobs or start a business), and retreatants (who compromise with the rules in the home country's labor market).

Research Gap

Although extensive research has been conducted to analyze the Chinese students' decision to return and their experiences in China, few studies have compared the returnees from different countries and elucidated the study country-specific factors that influence their decisions, contributions, and challenges, especially those on returnees from Japan or Australia based on quantitative survey data. While there exist common factors that influence returnees' decisions and experiences, some aspects of their choices, contributions, and challenges should be understood in the light of study country-specific factors, such as the advantage of their studies and the relation between their study country and China, which would be clarified by adopting a comparative approach.

Theoretical Framework

To fill the research gap stated in the previous section, we adopted the life planning model of Sato (2016, 2021) in our research design to explore the factors that influenced the returnees' decisions and their contributions and challenges in their workplaces in China. The life planning model offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the factors that influence international students' decision-makings in choosing a study destination, workplace, and place of settlement, both in their home country and the study country. It assumes that international students make rational decisions by considering restricting factors (such as cost, language, the intention of family, and visa) and their benefits (such as capacity development/utilization, better employment, and social environment). It also assumes that their decisions are influenced by policies and institutional, economic, and cultural factors of their study country and home country (and the relations between them) (Sato, 2021).

Since we aimed to explore the study country-specific factors that influenced the returnees' career choices and their consequences (contributions and challenges in their workplace), the life planning model that considers the policies and institutional, economic, and cultural factors of their study country and its relation to the home country was regarded to be a good fit for this analysis.

Methodology

We adopted a mixed-method approach by combining questionnaires and interviews. Explanatory sequential design was employed considering its advantage in using the quantitative data to provide a general understanding of the research topic, and the qualitative data to explore participants' opinions in more depth (Ivankova et al., 2006). In this study, we used the questionnaire data to see the tendency of returnees from Japan or Australia in choosing their workplaces, and how they perceive their contributions and challenges in their workplaces. Then, we interviewed the returnees to understand the factors that have affected their decisions and perceptions.

The questionnaires were designed based on the life planning model by asking about their decisions, satisfaction, contribution, and challenges in chronological order. The 5-point Likert scale was used in the questions related to the reasons for return, choice of workplace, and satisfaction with the working environment to examine the statistical differences between the responses of Japan returnees and Australia returnees. We also asked open-ended questions to investigate the background of their choices and the details of their contributions and challenges in the workplace.

The pilot survey of Chinese graduates of Japanese universities was conducted in 2015. After confirming its result, the questionnaire was distributed to Japanese university graduates via the Chinese students' alumni associations of several Japanese universities, the International Foreign Student Association (IFSA) mailing list, and the authors' social networks. The questionnaire of Chinese graduates of Australian universities was conducted from October 2019 to December 2020 to compare the results with those of Japanese university graduates. It was distributed via the Chinese students' alumni associations of several Australian universities, the Network for Research into Chinese Education Mobilities (NRCEM), and the authors' social networks. In 2021, an additional questionnaire of Japanese university graduates was conducted via the

authors' social networks to increase the comparability of the respondents between Japan and Australia. We collected 471 valid responses from Japanese university graduates and 190 valid responses from Australian university graduates.

Since we focus on the Chinese graduates who returned to China, we screened the respondents by setting the following criteria: those who (a) completed a degree course in the host country's university, and (b) worked for a company in China. As a result, 129 Japan returnees and 79 Australia returnees were selected as the target of this study. Those working for a company were selected to decrease the professional difference between the two groups. They constituted the largest group of both Japan returnees and Australia returnees.

Table 1

Major Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants

Variable		Japan returnees N=129		Australia returness N=79	
Gender	Male	69	53.5%	44	55.7%
	Female	59	45.7%	35	44.3%
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.8%	0	0.0%
Age	20-29	46	35.7%	56	70.9%
	30-39	73	56.6%	18	22.8%
	40-49	9	7.0%	3	3.8%
	⩾50	1	0.8%	1	1.3%
	Prefer not to answer	0	0.0%	1	1.3%
Study period in the host contry (years)		4.2		3.7	
Highest degree obtained in host country	Bachelor	52	40.3%	34	43.0%
	Master	68	52.7%	41	51.9%
	Doctor/Ph.D	9	7.0%	4	5.1%
Major	STEM	86	66.7%	19	24.1%
	H & S	32	24.8%	15	19.0%
	Business	6	4.7%	36	45.6%
	Others	5	3.9%	9	11.4%
Company type	Host country's company	59	45.7%	8	10.1%
	Chinese company	62	48.1%	61	77.2%
	Third country's company	8	6.2%	10	12.7%
Industry	Manufacturing	35 Machinery (20) Electeric appliance (10)	27.1%	13 Electeric appliance (7) Food (4)	16.5%
	Services (non-manufacturing)	50 IT (17) Finance & insurance (11)	38.8%	45 Education (14) Finance & insurance (8)	57.0%
	No response	44	34.1%	21	26.6%

We conducted semi-structured interviews (around 60 minutes for each participant) with seven Japan returnees and six Australia returnees from November 2021 to March 2022. They were selected from the questionnaire respondents by purposive sampling, considering the demographic characteristics of each group and the comparability of the two groups. The interviewees were asked about the background of their decision-makings and their actual contributions and challenges in their workplaces.

The t-test compared means of the two groups' responses concerning the reasons for returning to China, choosing a workplace, and their satisfaction with the working environment. A content analysis of the open-ended answers about their contributions and challenges in their workplaces classified the responses into categories identified through the analysis, and the frequencies were calculated. The study employed a thematic analysis approach to analyze the interview data. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative data, this study aimed to enhance the validity and depth of the analysis and to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Table 2

Major Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants

	Identifi-cation	Gender	Age	Degree	Major	Industry	Company	Position	Location
Japan returnees	JR1	Female	31-35	Master	H & S	Machinery	Chinese company	Assistant manager	Beijing
	JR2	Female	26-30	Master	Business	Finance	Japanese company	No title	Beijing
	JR3	Male	31-35	Doctorate	STEM	Chemistry	Chinese company	No title	Shenzhen
	JR4	Male	46-50	Bachelor	STEM	Electerial machinery	Japanese company	Director	Suzhou
	JR5	Female	26-30	Master	H & S	Internet	Chinese company	No title	Beijing
	JR6	Female	26-30	Master	H & S	Consulting	American company	No title	Dalian
	JR7	Male	26-30	Master	H & S	Data development	American company	Team leader	Shanghai
Australia returnees	AR1	Male	20-25	Bachelor	H & S	Education	Australian company	No title	Shanghai
	AR2	Female	26-30	Master	STEM	Data development	Chinese company	Team leader	Shenzhen
	AR3	Female	26-30	Bachelor	Business	Aviation service	Chinese company	No title	Shanghai
	AR4	Male	36-40	Master	Business	Consulting	Chinese company	Director	Shanghai
	AR5	Female	26-30	Master	Business	Education	Chinese company	Team leader	Hangzhou
	AR6	Male	31-35	Master	STEM	Data development	Chinese company	No title	Tianjin

Participants

Table 1 shows the major demographic characteristics of questionnaire participants. Among 129 Japan returnees, 40.3% got a bachelor's degree, 52.7% obtained a master's degree, and 7% obtained a doctoral degree in Japan; 66.7% majored in STEM, 24.8% in H & S, and 4.7% in business. 45.7% worked for a Japanese company, 48.1% for a Chinese company, and 6.2% for a third-country company in China. Among valid responses, 41.2% worked in the manufacturing industry and 58.8% in the service industry. Among 35 participants in the manufacturing industry, 20 worked for machinery companies and 10 for electric appliance companies; among 50 participants in the service industry, 17 were in IT, and 11 were in finance and insurance. The percentage of those majoring in STEM is higher among the survey participants than the Chinese international students average in Japan, which seems to be caused by sampling bias in the survey.

Among 79 Australia returnees, 43% got a bachelor's degree, 51.9% obtained a master's degree, and 5.1% obtained a doctoral degree in Australia; 24.1% majored in STEM, 19% in H & S, and 45.6% in business. 10.1% worked for an Australian company, 77.2% for a Chinese company, and 12.7% for a third-country company in China. Among valid responses, 22.4% worked in manufacturing and 77.6% in the service industry: among 45 in the service industry, 14 were in educational services, and 8 were in finance and insurance.

Although the two groups show similar ratios in gender and master's degree holders, there are differences in age, major, type of company, and industry. These differences will be considered in the analysis of the survey results. Table 2 presents the major demographic characteristics of seven Japan returnees and six Australia returnees who participated in the interview.

Results

This section presents the questionnaires and interview results of Japan returnees and Australia returnees who worked for a company in China.

Reasons to Return to China

Table 3 shows the answers to the question, "To what extent do the following statements apply as the reasons why you returned to China?"

Japan returnees' top reason for returning to China is "better career prospect in China," followed by "promotion is limited in host country," and "my specialty is in higher demand in China." The top reason for Australia returnees to return to China is "better career prospect in China," followed by "my specialty is in higher demand in China," and "because promotion was limited in the host country." These results show that both Japan and Australia returnees chose to return to China expecting better careers, promotion, and utilization of their specialty obtained overseas.

Table 3:

Reasons to Return to China

No.	Reasons	Japan returnees N=77		Australia returnees N=48		p
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
1	I need to take care of my parents	3.23	0.94	3.57	1.16	
2	My spouse and/or children live in China	2.64	1.30	2.94	1.51	
3	I would like to educate my children in China	2.54	1.38	2.90	1.46	
4	Because of better career prospect in China	3.78	0.97	3.91	1.10	
5	Because my specialty is in higher demand in China	3.35	1.04	3.75	0.93	*
6	Because I don't like the foreign working environment	3.07	1.14	3.29	1.24	
7	Because I had stress in host country's society	2.77	1.15	3.33	1.36	*
8	Because promotion was limited in host country	3.72	1.05	3.73	0.92	

Note. S.D. = Standard Deviation, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01; Likert scale (1=does not apply at all, 2=does not apply so much, 3=neither way, 4=applies to some extent, 5=applies very much) was used in the answer option

As the result of t-tests comparing the means of the responses of the two groups, significant differences at the 5% level were found in "my specialty is in higher demand China" and "I had stress in host country's society." This indicates that Australia returnees had higher stress in Australian society and higher expectations for utilizing their specialty in China.

In our interview asking about the reason for returning to China, an Australia returnee (AR6) elaborated on the stress in Australia as follows:

> the most important reason [why I felt stressed] is the impossibility of getting the immigration opportunity as before because there were too many applications [for the limited quotas] in the general skilled migration program. I had to live with anxiety every day because I can't get the PR (permanent residency).

A Japan returnee (JR4) who had worked for a Japanese electrical appliance company testified about the limited promotion opportunity in Japan as follows: "I was well aware that if I were working in Japan, I couldn't have a higher position [than a

Table 4

Reasons for Choice of Workplace and Satisfaction with Working Environment

(a) reasons for the choice of workplace (a company in China)

No	Reasons	Japan returnees N=129		Australia returnees N=79		p
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
1	Good salary	3.43	1.11	3.34	1.13	
2	Good living environment	3.53	1.16	3.89	1.01	*
3	Prospect of career/capacity building	4.19	0.94	3.92	1.05	
4	Prospect of promotion	3.08	1.07	3.78	1.16	**
5	Utilization of capacity/specialty at work	3.73	1.11	4.00	1.04	
6	Convenience of spouse	2.25	1.30	3.27	1.39	**
7	Convenience of parents	2.30	1.36	3.42	1.37	**
8	Convenience of children	1.82	1.04	2.87	1.51	**
	(b) satisfaction with the working environment (a company in China)					
1	Match between expectation and reality of work	3.69	0.87	3.85	1.08	
2	Utilization of my expertise/specialty	3.52	1.02	3.91	1.03	**
3	Salary	3.23	0.85	3.75	1.03	**
4	Relationship with colleagues	3.80	0.74	4.09	0.95	*
5	Guidance of superiors	3.70	0.88	3.90	0.97	
6	Promotion or prospect of promotion	3.18	0.97	3.73	1.07	**
7	Working hours	3.24	1.10	3.61	1.18	*
8	How to proceed work/efficiency	3.35	0.97	3.96	0.97	**
9	Clarity of duty sharing	3.43	0.98	3.87	1.07	**
10	Personnel evaluation system	3.35	0.93	3.94	1.02	**
11	Realization of own ideas in the workplace	3.29	0.89	3.89	1.04	**
12	Social insurance and other fringe benefits	3.85	0.82	3.91	1.00	
	Overall satisfaction	3.69	0.87	3.96	0.90	*

Note. S.D. = Standard Deviation, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; Likert scale from 1=does not apply at all to 5=applies very much was used for Table 3 (a), and Likert scale from 1=very dissatisfied to 5=very satisfied was used for Table 3 (b)

manager], because they [company leaders] always gave the opportunity to Japanese staff." An Australia returnee (AR1) working for an educational agency for study in Australia commented on his competence in China's labor market:

> after studying in Australia, I became familiar with the procedures to apply for Australian universities, so I can use my specialty [overseas studying experience] in China [by helping others contact and apply for Australian universities]."

Finally, a Japan returnee (JR2) working for a Japanese finance company in China stated her advantages as follows:

> one is my familiarity with Japanese culture, language, and etiquette because I studied in Japan; another advantage is one of my lab mates is working for this company, and it was his social network [that recommended me to this company].

Reason for Choice of Workplace and Satisfaction with Working Environment

Table 4 shows the questionnaire participants' answers to the question "To what extent do the following statements apply as the reason you chose the current company/organization in China?" and "How do you describe the level of your satisfaction with the following elements of your working environment?"

As shown in Table 4(a), the top reason for Japan returnees to choose a company in China is "prospect of career/capacity building," followed by "utilization of capacity/specialty" and "good living environment." The top reason for Australia returnees to choose a company in China is "utilization of capacity/specialty," followed by "prospect of career/capacity building," and "good living environment." These results show that both Japan and Australia returnees chose a workplace considering their career/capacity building, utilization of capacity/specialty obtained overseas, and living environment. As the result of t-tests comparing the means of the two groups, significant differences at the 1% level were found regarding "prospect of promotion" and "convenience of spouse/parents/children," and a significant difference at the 5% level was detected in "good living environment" between the two groups.

In our interview asking the reason for the lower prospect of promotion among Japan returnees compared to Australian returnees, a Japan returnee (JR5) working for a Chinese internet company explained as follows:

> Although I could utilize my Japanese language ability in my workplace, promotion opportunity was limited because I am responsible only for the Japanese market and could not do any other job [like other overseas marketing] in my department.

Another female Japan returnee (JR1) working for a Chinese machinery company also stated her concern: "… considering my age [31–35 years old] and plan of pregnancy, I don't think there will be many promotion opportunities for me." All the interviewed Australia returnees mentioned that they chose the current job because of the workplace location, namely, the first-tier city or special municipality directly under the central Government of China. This preference may be related to the convenience of their spouses/parents/children, as seen in the testimony of an Australia returnee (AR2): "I came to work here because my fiancé is a Shenzhen city resident, and this city can provide a good education for our children." A Japan returnee (JR1) also chose the workplace to get a household registration (*hukou*) in the capital city:

> even though the salary [of this company] was not that much, I'm happy because I could have a Beijing *hukou*. My children and my future social welfare will be benefited from it."

On the other hand, a Japan returnee (JR6) working for a consulting firm in Dalian expressed a different perspective about location: "I am happy because my living cost is much lower here. I can make some savings."

Regarding the satisfaction with the working environment shown in Table 3(b), the item with the highest satisfaction for Japan returnees is "social insurance and other fringe benefits," followed by "relationship with colleagues" and "guidance of superiors." The item with the highest satisfaction for Australia returnees is "relationship with colleagues," followed by "how to proceed work (efficiency)," and "personnel evaluation system." As the result of t-tests comparing the means of the two groups, there are significant differences at the 1% level in "utilization of my expertise/specialty," "salary," "promotion or prospect of promotion," "how to proceed work," "clarity of duty sharing," "personnel evaluation system," and "realization of own ideas in the workplace," and significant differences at the 5% level in "relationship with colleagues" and "working hours" between the two groups. The overall satisfaction with the working environment is also higher among Australia returnees than Japan returnees with a significant difference at the 5% level.

In our interview exploring the reason for satisfaction/dissatisfaction, JR3, who took a doctorate degree in engineering in Japan and worked for a Chinese chemistry company, confessed as follows:

> although I can conduct my research [in this company], many people are bossing me around. I had to listen to them because this company is very hierarchical. My salary is not proportional to what I spent for study abroad for many years.

AR4, an Australia returnee working for a Chinese consulting firm, illustrated the reason for his satisfaction as follows:

> with many small and medium-sized startups, this industry [consulting] has huge potential in China. My overseas working experience can be an advantage here. I am also satisfied with the salary level, though it is much lower than what I received in Australia. Since Shanghai is my hometown, I can save on my housing expenses.

JR5, a Japan returnee working for a Chinese internet company whose business mainly targets the Japanese market, shared her positive feelings about her relationship with her colleagues and superiors: "… most of us [in my department] have similar experience [study in Japan], so it is easy to communicate and work with them."

Some Australia returnees expressed their intention to improve their working environment, as seen in the talk of AR5 who worked for a Chinese agency for study abroad as a team leader:

> I care more about the working style in the company, such as productivity and whether the organizational arrangement is reasonable. I don't want to spend too much time at work because I need my own life after work. My colleagues who studied in Western countries have a similar view to me.

Returnees' Contributions and Challenges in the Workplace

Table 5 shows the answers to the open-ended question in the questionnaire: "Please state your major contribution(s) and challenge(s) in the workplace."

Among 76 responses from Japan returnees related to their major contribution, 63.2% listed "bridging China's market with Japan's market," which included "expanded business for a Japanese company in China," "promoted cooperation with a Japanese company," and "introduced some products to the Japanese company." 11.8% raised "improvement of product competitiveness," such as "optimized the product" and "improved the product's quality." 10.5% wrote that they contributed by transferring technology/management systems from Japan to China, such as "using what I had learned in Japan in this company." 9.2% replied that they started or carried out a project related to Japan, and 5.3% said that they helped with language and cultural problems in the company.

Among 53 responses from Australia returnees regarding their major contribution, 58.5% listed "helping with language and cultural problems at the workplace," such as translation and communication with foreign customers. 22.7% raised utilization of their experience/specialty acquired in Australia; 9.4% reported transferring Australia's management

Table 5

Major Contributions and Challenges in the Workplace

(a) Major contribution

Japan returnees N=76	%	Australia returnees N=53	%
Bridging China's market with Japan's market	63.2%	Helping with language and cultural issues	58.5%
Improvement of product competitiveness	11.8%	Utilizing experience/specialty acquired from Australia	22.7%
Transferring technology/management system from Japan to China	10.5%	Transferring technology/management system from Australia to China	9.4%
Started or carried out a project	9.2%	Started or carried out a project	5.7%
Helping with language and cultural issues	5.3%	Bridging China's market with Australia's market	3.8%

(b) Major challenge

Japan returnees N=42		Australia returnees N=34	
Working overtime	54.8%	Working overtime	55.9%
Dissatisfied with salary level	16.7%	Dissatisfied with salary level	23.5%
Competition in the company	9.5%	Limited promotion opportunity	14.7%
Limited promotion opportunity	7.1%	A mismatch between work and what you hope to do	5.9%
Personnel evaluation system	7.1%		
Cannot utilize the Japanese language in the company	4.8%		

systems to China. 5.7% replied that they started or carried out a project related to Australia, and 3.8% listed "bridging China's market with Australia's market."

Regarding challenges, among 42 responses from Japan returnees, 54.8% reported "working overtime," such as working during the weekends and getting off work late. 16.7% were dissatisfied with their salary. 9.5% faced too much competition in the company. 7.1% had challenges in the limited promotion opportunity. 7.1% held a negative opinion about the personnel evaluation system, such as "wasting young employees' ability," and 4.8% felt frustration for not being able to utilize the Japanese language ability in the workplace.

Among 34 responses from Australia returnees about challenges, 55.9% listed working overtime, 23.5% were dissatisfied with their salary, 14.7% worried about their promotion for their limited social connection or working performance, and 5.9% were bothered by the mismatch between work and what they hope to do.

In our interview asking about their contributions and challenges in their workplaces, we found similar testimonies. Six interviewees from Japan (JR1, JR2, JR3, JR4, JR5, and JR7) and four interviewees from Australia (AR2, AR3, AR4, and AR6) complained about working overtime. AR2, a team leader in a Chinese data development company, reported her situation as follows: "If I'm lucky, I can get off work before 10 p.m., and I only have one day off a week."

An Australia returnee (AR3) working for a Chinese aviation company briefed her major contribution and challenge as follows:

> when someone encounters language [English] difficulties, they always call me for help. However, I am worried about my career development. I only obtained a bachelor's degree, and it's not enough to achieve a higher position. And I've found that leaders always favor people who are close to them or give them gifts. I've never done this before.

A Japan returnee (JR7) stated his hope to contribute to his workplace by utilizing his advantage (Japanese language): "I do jobs related to programming now. I hope to move to a position to utilize my advantage [Japanese language ability] because I feel my language ability is not as good as before."

Discussion

The above results revealed the commonalities and differences between Japan returnees and Australia returnees in their decisions, satisfaction, contributions, and challenges. In this section, we discuss the influencing factors behind them based on the life planning model and compare our findings with those of the previous studies.

Firstly, regarding their decision to return to China, better career prospects, higher demand for their specialty in China, and limited promotion in their study countries were listed as common reasons for return by the two groups. China's economic development is regarded to be the leading cause of such views. According to the World Bank (2022), China's gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate was 6.7% in 2018, much higher than that of Japan and Australia. Returnees must have seen it as a signal of opportunities for better careers, promotion, and utilization of their expertise. The results confirm the assumption of the life planning model that capacity development and better employment will impact international students' decision-making.

Previous literature on returned graduates listed family ties, career opportunities, higher return on educational investment, favorable political support, economic growth in the home country, and social and psychological concerns/stress in the study country as key drivers for their return (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Jiang, 2016; Hao et al., 2017). Our study shows that prospects for career development, utilization of specialty, and limited promotion in the study country were more important reasons for their return than consideration for their families for both Japan and Australia returnees.

Australia returnees listed "stress in the host society" more often than Japan returnees as a reason for returning to China. This finding might be partly explained by the study of Blackmore et al. (2015) on Chinese accounting graduates who faced difficulties in finding employment in Australia because of the oversupply of graduates, tightening immigration policy, and lack of English proficiency and social resources compared to local students in Australia. It also might be explained by the wider cultural distance between China and Australia than between China and Japan based on the life planning model.

Secondly, in choosing a workplace in China, both groups listed "prospect of career/capacity building," "utilization of capacity/specialty," and "good living environment" rather than the salary level. This result mostly coincides with the result of the CSCSE survey. It is noteworthy that career development and utilization of specialty were again identified as the top reasons for their choice of a workplace by both Japan and Australia returnees.

Our interview results indicate that "good living environment" includes household registration (*hukou*) in big cities. As the Chinese household registration impacted China's labor mobility (Colas & Ge, 2019), providing *hukou* to returnees from overseas study seems to have played a significant role in attracting them to big cities. This analysis endorsed the assertion of Tran et al. (2021). However, this phenomenon could lead to a brain drain from other cities within China.

Australia returnees tended to consider "convenience of spouse/parents/children" more than Japan returnees in choosing a workplace. All the interviewees from Australia chose the current workplace because of the location (the first-tier city or special municipality), implying that many of them were from such cities/municipalities or had a stronger desire to let their families live in such places.

Thirdly, concerning satisfaction with the working environment, Australia returnees reported higher satisfaction than Japan returnees in expertise utilization, salary, promotion, work efficiency, clarity of duty sharing, personnel evaluation, realization of their ideas, relationship with colleagues, and working hours. These disparities in satisfaction levels can potentially be attributed to differences in the types of companies and industries that they work for. A larger proportion of Japan returnees were employed by the host country's companies in the manufacturing industry while over three-quarters of Australian returnees were employed in the service industry, particularly in the educational sector.

Traditional Japanese companies' HR management is based on seniority system and lifelong employment, which are reported to be less attractive to international employees (Huang et al., 2020). Conrad and Meyer-Ohle (2017) contended that Japanese companies expected international employees to comply with conventional HR management rather than reformed it. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) pointed out that Japanese manufacturing companies adopted more tacit knowledge and middle-up-down management (characterized by hierarchy and task force) than Western companies, which may be perceived to be less transparent and efficient by the local staff, including Japan returnees. This analysis aligns with the finding of Sato (2019) that illustrated the unpopularity of traditional Japanese HR management among the returned graduates working for Japan-affiliated companies. Based on the life planning model, the results show that institutional factor has affected the satisfaction of returnees.

According to the Ministry of Commerce of China (2021), Japan's investment in China was US$ 33.7 billion in 2020, while that of Australia was US$ 3.4 billion, about one-tenth of Japan; the major field for Japan's investment was manufacturing, while Australia mainly invested in services and information technology. According to the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2016), China is Australia's largest market for education-related travel services. These economic relations appear to have influenced the career choices of the returnees.

As shown in the aforementioned analysis, returnees had a strong orientation for career development and utilization of specialty, which must have led them to choose an industry where the economic activities between their study country and China would be most active: the manufacturing industry for Japan returnees and the educational service industry for Australia returnees. In such industries, they expect to utilize their specialty/expertise (such as knowledge of their study country's language and business manner) most effectively and develop their career further. This is the most notable finding of this study related to the study country-specific factor that has influenced the graduates' career choices. This verifies the assumption of the life planning model that international graduates' choices would be affected by the relationship between the home country and the study country.

Fourthly, regarding contribution in their workplaces, more than 60% of Japan returnees reported that they have contributed by bridging the home and study countries' markets. This will be related to Japan's closer economic relationship with China than Australia. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 2021, China's merchandise export to Japan amounted to US$ 166 billion, while that to Australia was US$ 66 billion. Facilitating business connections between China and Japan is assumed to have given them opportunities to utilize their expertise acquired in Japan and develop their career.

Australia returnees listed their major contributions in helping language and cultural issues, followed by utilization of their experience/specialty acquired in Australia, such as English proficiency and familiarity with Western business culture. This is in line with the analysis of Pham and Saito (2020) that some returnees from Australia utilized their soft skills (working style, professionalism, and communication ability) to navigate their home country's labor market.

Lastly, as challenges, the prevalence of overtime work was listed as a common issue by both Japan returnees and Australia returnees. Wang (2020) described how certain Chinese employers adhered to the 996 regime, which requires employees to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, to maximize profit. Our survey illustrates that it has posed significant challenges to the well-being and work-life balance of returnees as well. This is a new finding that was not listed in the previous studies that mainly discussed the challenges, such as the mismatch between returnees' expertise and the demand of the local labor market.

Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

Through conducting a focused comparison between Chinese returnees from Japan and Australia, this empirical study has provided new insights into the factors that influenced the returnees' career choices and trajectories. By employing the life planning model, study country-specific factors (such as economic relation between the study country and home country and an institutional factor related to HR management style) were identified to have influenced the returnees' decision-makings, satisfaction, and contributions. This study also highlighted the importance of career development and utilization of specialty/expertise in their decision-makings and the issue of overtime work commonly listed by the returnees from the two countries.

This study presents precious implications for policymakers and educational institutions of study countries, especially Japan and Australia, regarding the career development of their graduates in their home countries. Since international students tend to find employment in the sector where the transactions between their study county and home country are most active, HEIs need to design their education and offer career advice to enhance students' employability considering the needs in these sectors.

Our study also provides valuable implications to employers to utilize and retain the returned overseas graduates. It is essential to place them in a position where they can utilize their specialty/expertise obtained overseas and control their working hours to create a healthy working environment.

This study has a few limitations. Questionnaire participants may not represent the population (Japan returnees and Australia returnees) properly because of the insufficient number of responses and sampling bias. The percentage of survey participants (Japan returnees) majoring in STEM was higher than the Chinese international students average in Japan. Thus, the results have reflected a stronger tendency of Japan returnees in the STEM field.

Another limitation is insufficient comparability between Japan returnees and Australia returnees who participated in the questionnaire. The differences in age, major, and type of company may have affected the survey results. To overcome this limitation, we hope to conduct a broader survey of Chinese returnees from Japan and Australia by improving the sampling method. Also, we would like to compare the working situation of returnees by industry and company type to see the influence of institutional factors on their satisfaction, contributions, and challenges. By doing so, we seek a deeper insight into the career development of Chinese returnees who studied in these countries.

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Institutional Autonomy of Vietnamese Public Universities: An Agency Theory Perspective

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Abstract

In 2012, the Vietnamese government enacted the institutional autonomy policy to support the reform process of the higher education system. The autonomy policy signifies the transfer of decision-making authority from ministries to public universities to increase university performance and competitiveness in the globalized knowledge economy. This paper examines the nature of autonomy as a new form of governance in Vietnamese higher education through the lens of agency theory. I used thematic analysis to analyze policy documents released by the Vietnamese government between 1993 and 2021. The findings indicate autonomy means Vietnamese public universities have authority to make decisions on primary activities; yet they must be accountable for their decision-making and responsible for funding sources. The study contributes to the literature on comparative and international higher education by providing a better understanding of autonomy in a post-Soviet context and informing a transformative approach to policy practices for the higher education reform.

Keywords: agency theory, institutional autonomy, post-Soviet context, university governance, Vietnamese public universities

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Introduction

In 2012, the Vietnamese government enacted the institutional autonomy policy to support the reform process of higher education system towards internationalization agendas. The institutional autonomy policy signifies the transfer of decision-making authority from government ministries to public universities to increase university performance and competitiveness in the globalized knowledge economy and the neoliberal context; accordingly, university leaders will have power to decide on issues of teaching, research, finance, and personnel (Higher Education Law, 2012). Through the policy, the Vietnamese government aims to address the lack of effectiveness of the existing centralized governance model that they adopted from the Soviet era (Central Government, 2015). The centralized Soviet system through which the ministries controlled all institutional decision-making processes within public universities was criticized for hampering the flexibility, efficiency, and innovation of Vietnamese public universities (Dao & Hayden, 2010). The reform policy also originated in new expectations the government and society were developing concerning the role of universities in the globalized knowledge economy (Madden, 2014). The expectation was that granting autonomy would help to optimize university

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performance which would in turn contribute to Vietnam's economic competitiveness. A particularly important aspect of the Vietnamese government's objective in implementing the reform policy is the reduction of financial burdens on the national budget, which had been overwhelmed by an increase in the number of universities and in student enrolments since the transition from elite to mass higher education (World Bank, 2019). Under the old, centralized governance model adopted from the Soviet Union, the Vietnamese government subsidized all financial aspects of public universities and was responsible for financial losses (Tran, 2014). The system had become too large, however, and required excessive expenditure from the national budget.

The reform of Vietnam's higher education system is shaped by the ideology of neoliberalism, New Public Management, and the globalized knowledge economy in which agency theory is located. Agency theory is a neoliberal theory which has provided the rationale for sweeping reforms in the governance of higher education. As a neoliberal theory, agency theory helps define and put parameters in the policy context that has led to the implementation of autonomy policy in Vietnam. In specific, agency theory signifies the delegation of decision-making authority from the government to the public university while at the same time applying accountability measures to monitor university performance (Enders et al., 2013). The underlying rationale for delegating decision-making authority is that handing over responsibility for performance and finance to public universities will provide incentives for universities to work better (Yokoyama, 2008). This argument is based on the assumptions of neoliberal theory that human well-being is best ensured by encouraging individual responsibility in a competitive market (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Accordingly, the primary role of the neoliberal state is to foster conditions that will make public institutions more effective and economically efficient—that is, public universities should become autonomous, self-responsible, and strategic actors to actively pursue new revenue streams in the competitive market. At the same time, they are subject to strong accountability measures in the form of audits, reporting requirements, and performance-based funding. Such neoliberal ideas have profoundly shaped higher education policymaking in governance worldwide and agency theory has been increasingly used as a theoretical framework for analyzing the implementation of neoliberal policies such as institutional autonomy (Kivistö, 2005, 2007, 2008; Enders et al., 2013). Given the Vietnamese government's goal of university reform in the global knowledge economy, agency theory is useful for revealing insights on institutional autonomy as a new governance model.

In this paper, I explore the nature of institutional autonomy as a new form of governance in Vietnam's higher education system. I used a theoretical framework drawing on agency theory and a qualitative methodology, with data collected from policy documents released by the Vietnamese government between 1993 and 2021 and documents internal to Vietnamese public universities that concern the implementation of autonomy policy. The findings will contribute to the literature on comparative and international higher education by providing a better understanding of institutional autonomy in a post-Soviet context when the centralized legacy is still strong and informing a more transformative approach to policy practices to achieve the goals of reforming higher education systems.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework grounded on agency theory was initially developed to measure the organizational autonomy of public sector organizations (Verhoest et al., 2004) and has been applied to the world of higher education in investigations of the autonomy of European public universities (de Boer et al., 2010; Enders et al., 2013; Kohtamäki & Balbachevsky, 2019). Typically, Enders et al. (2013) used the framework to investigate governance reform in the Netherlands in response to the changing global economy. Indeed, as Dutch universities have become autonomous, self-responsible, strategic actors in the competitive market, with capacity for managerial discretion, they have been strengthened. However, the government is still very present in defining the rules of the game through monitoring mechanisms. The working mechanism of autonomy drawing on agency theory centers on three concepts of decision-making authority, accountability, and responsibility. This governance mechanism is situated in a vast body of literature examining institutional autonomy as a new form of governance in neoliberal contexts that emphasizes a mutually dependent relationship between autonomy and accountability, with universities being situated as autonomous and self-responsible subjects within the market-driven dynamic (Yokoyama, 2007, 2008, 2011; Maassen et al., 2017; Ørberg & Wright, 2019; Enders et al., 2013; Kickert, 1995).

Decision-Making Authority

Agency theory conceptualizes institutional autonomy as a form of governance in which a principal actor delegates decision-making authority to an agent to carry out tasks set by the principal actor (Kivistö, 2008; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). In a higher education setting, the principal is usually the government, and the agent is the higher education institution (Dougherty & Natow, 2019b). The decision-making authority handed over from the government is the institutional autonomy a university may acquire, in which a university can make its own decisions about admission processes,

enrollments, teaching programs, curriculum frameworks, research programs, financial matters, and human resources management (Enders et al., 2013). Agency theory is based on assumptions of bounded rationality and information asymmetry which justify the delegation of decision-making authority (Austin & Jones, 2016; Hanushek et al., 2013). Bounded rationality implies that the principal has limited information; therefore, the principal's response will not be a near perfect rational choice but will be limited in its capacity to deal with complex realities (March & Simon, 1958, as cited in Enders et al., 2013). Information asymmetry means that the agent knows more about the activities being undertaken than does the principal (Kivistö, 2008; Dougherty & Natow, 2019b). Therefore, in a principal-agent relationship, the principal needs an agent to perform tasks because the agent has more information and knowledge about the tasks than the principal and the outcome will likely be more successful.

Accountability

Agency theory assumes that a university, given decision-making authority, might prioritize its own interests rather than the interests of others. Control mechanisms, therefore, should be implemented to limit a university's opportunistic behavior and ensure it is working towards the government's expected goals (Enders et al., 2013; Verhoest et al., 2004). As Dougherty and Natow (2019a) suggest:

> Because neoliberal theory conceptualizes government agencies as fundamentally self-interested, with their interests often running counter to those of the elected official principals they serve, it argues that monetary incentives, accountability, and monitoring are needed to get the interests of agencies aligned with those of principals and to address the information asymmetry in which agents usually know more about their activities than the principals (p. 3).

Dougherty and Natow (2019a) indicate that a government may develop concern about a university's self-interested behavior after transferring decision-making authority. Because the principal and the agent diverge in their interests, the agent either wishes to pursue goals different from the principal's or puts in less effort than the principal desires. A state's budget, for example, is intended to improve teaching and learning activities but may be diverted by the university to research and build the institution's reputation (Austin & Jones, 2016). A typical control mechanism might be an audit implemented by the state to evaluate how the funding has been spent.

Accountability measures might take the form of a compliance-based or performance-based system. Under a compliance-based accountability system, the university is granted substantive autonomy to determine its own goals and programs, yet the government continues to employ monitoring mechanisms to observe the university's behavior (Berdahl, 1990; Austin & Jones, 2016). One example of this type of accountability occurs when the government sets regulations with which a university must comply in implementing its activities (Verhoet et al., 2004). Under a performance-based accountability system, the university has strong procedural autonomy (Berdahl, 1990) and the authority to decide the techniques and means it will use to accomplish goals set by the government (Austin & Jones, 2016; Capano, 2011). One typical performance-based accountability measure that has been adopted in higher education policies is performance-based funding. In this public funding mechanism, the state allocates funding to public universities based on their performance which is measured by key performance indicators (KPI) or outcome indicators such as student enrollments, graduation rates, graduate employment rates, or the number of publications (Pruvot et al., 2015; de Boer et al., 2015; Jongbloed, 2010). The purpose of this funding approach is to improve institutional performance as well as the social relevance of public universities (Jongbloed, 2020). For example, the performance-based funding mechanism was widely applied in most funding allocations for higher education in Korea from 2003 to 2017 and in Taiwan from 2004 to 2015 (Shin et al., 2023). Control measures, either compliance-based or performance-based, are believed to limit the gaming practices a university might attempt given the decision-making authority it is delegated.

Responsibility

In essence, agency theory stems from an economic view of risk transfer in which the principal hands over certain responsibilities to an agent (Bendickson et al., 2016; Eisenhardt, 1989). Agency theory highlights the benefits of delegating decision-making power, but such benefits accrue only if enough incentives for the agent to perform well are present. One incentive is risk-transfer, that is, the transfer of responsibility for financial loss to the agent (Verhoest et al., 2004). In the governance model of institutional autonomy, a government hands over responsibility and risk management to a university to put it under pressure to work better (Yokoyama, 2008). Ultimately, the university, as a neoliberal agent, is maximally responsible for its own future.

In summary, the theoretical framework systematically highlights the nature of institutional autonomy in a neoliberal context which includes decision-making authority, accountability, and responsibility. Through a principal-agent relationship, agency theory reflects a changing governance dynamic in which the government steps back from its traditional role in centralized control to make public universities autonomous and self-responsible in performing their tasks. This governance model takes advantage of the university's strengths, makes use of control mechanisms, and hands over responsibility to push the university to work better in the market-driven mechanism.

Methodology

In this study, I used a qualitative methodology and thematic analysis with the support of Nvivo to analyze data which include the Vietnamese government's policy documents and Vietnamese public universities' internal documents on the autonomy policy.

Qualitative Methodology

To explore the nature of institutional autonomy as a new form of governance in Vietnam's higher education system, I employed a qualitative design. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative research uses words as data collected and analyzed in all sorts of ways. Data for this study include words collected from two sources of documents: policy documents on institutional autonomy and accountability released by the Vietnamese government between 1993 and 2021 and documents internal to Vietnamese public universities that concern the implementation of autonomy policy.

The initial source of data comprises official documents concerning the autonomy policy. My first step was to conduct a systematic search for documents relevant to this topic of inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), documents that might be important in constructing the object of my analysis and the focus of my study, the institutional autonomy of Vietnamese public universities. I employed a purposeful method of text selection to capture the most important documents containing information relevant to the research question. My inclusion criteria were designed to select official policy documents on autonomy and accountability released by the Vietnamese government. I assessed the authenticity of the documents by verifying the author, place, and date of release (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After my preliminary review of documents, I created a more selected list of policy texts for closer analysis. This refining process helped me to select policies closely connected to the focus of my study and which contains local knowledge.

One group of documents analyzed in the study includes official policy documents on institutional autonomy and accountability of Vietnamese higher education institutions. These documents were released by government agencies between 1993, when the Vietnamese government first began to delegate autonomy to public universities, and 2021. These documents provide primary data and comprise most of the documents I collected for this study. They were produced by government agencies such as the Central Government, the National Assembly, the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Finance, the MOET, and the Central Committee of Vietnam's Communist Party, and are available on the Vietnamese government's official website. The three most important policies in this group of government documents are the Higher Education Reform Agenda (Central Government, 2005), the Revised Higher Education Law (2018), and Resolution 77 (Prime Minister, 2014b). In reporting my findings, I analyze and cite extensively the content of these crucial documents. This group of government documents also includes secondary sources of data such as the MOET's Evaluation Report on the implementation of autonomy policy in Vietnam (MOET, 2017) and the World Bank's Report on governance reform in Vietnam's higher education sector (World Bank, 2015). Some media coverage of the autonomy policy is included but, to ensure it is reliable, only that which is available on the government's website or in national newspapers is covered.

A second group of documents analyzed in the study comprises documents internal to Vietnamese public universities that concern the implementation of autonomy policy. These are institutional documents, issued either by government agencies or from within the university itself. This group of documents includes documents that were exchanged between Vietnamese public universities and the ministries during the policy negotiation and implementation process. I also include secondary sources of data such as Technical Reports of Universities and media coverage of Vietnamese public universities from the university's website and prestigious national newspapers. To protect the confidentiality of Vietnamese public universities, I do not provide a list of their internal documents.

Thematic Analysis

I used thematic analysis to identify the meaning of institutional autonomy. I followed the process of thematic coding recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). This process includes open coding–assigning codes to pieces of data—and axial coding–grouping open codes into categories or themes, a process I repeated until I had derived a set of findings. I applied six steps for creating the codes: (1) familiarizing myself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report as suggested by Braun and Clarke

(2006). I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to facilitate my data management and data analysis because, as Creswell & Poth (2018) indicate, qualitative data analysis is a complex and time-consuming process. Three main themes emerged about the meaning of autonomy: (1) institutional autonomy is the right of a public university to make its own decisions; (2) institutional autonomy means a university is accountable for its decision-making; (3) institutional autonomy means a university is responsible for its decisions and finances.

Results

Three themes emerged concerning the nature of autonomy: (a) autonomy is the right of public universities to make decisions on teaching, research, personnel, and finance; (b) autonomy means the university is accountable for its decision-making; and (c) autonomy means the university is responsible for financial resources and consequences of its decisions. Three concepts—decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility—are interconnected to define the meaning of autonomy. Findings confirm the literature on autonomy as a new model for university governance in neoliberal contexts that emphasizes a mutually dependent relationship between autonomy and accountability, with universities being situated as autonomous and self-responsible subjects within the market-driven dynamic (Yokoyama, 2007, 2008, 2011; Maassen et al., 2017).

Autonomy as the University's Right to Make Decisions

As stated in the laws, autonomy is, first and foremost, the right of a Vietnamese public university to make its own decisions. The autonomous right of Vietnamese public universities was written into law for the first time in the Education Law (2005) and amended in the Higher Education Law (2012) and the Revised Higher Education Law (2018). Autonomy is officially defined in Article 4 of the Revised Higher Education Law (2018) as follows:

> Institutional autonomy is the right of a higher education institution to determine its own objectives and to select the way to implement its objectives, *to make its own decisions on* [emphasis added] and to be held accountable for its teaching, research, organization, personnel, finance, assets, and other activities on the basis of the law and its capacity (p. 2).

In this definition, the word *right* is used to emphasize autonomy as the power or authority of a public university to make its own decisions. The concepts of *authority* and *power* are repeatedly used in the laws and other policy documents concerning university autonomy. For example, Article 13 of Decree 99 (Central Government, 2019) states that "public universities have the *authority* [emphasis added] to design and implement internal regulations on admission, teaching, science, technology, and collaboration within the legal framework" (p. 17). This means that Vietnamese public universities do not need to seek approval from state governing bodies for any of these activities. Furthermore, strong words such as *have the right to implement, be proactive to regulate,* and *be autonomous in* are frequently used in policy texts to describe, emphasize, and clarify the rights of a public university. And this right is the authority of the university to *make its own decisions*—to decide what to do on its own and at its own discretion. Article 1 of Resolution 77 (Prime Minister, 2014a), for example, states that "public universities *make their own decisions* [emphasis added] on teaching activities such as training programs, teaching methods, examination and assessment of learning outcomes, textbooks, learning materials, and managing degrees" (p. 2). This means Vietnamese public universities, not the MOET, make decisions about teaching activities. Throughout the documents, the words *making decisions* are repeatedly used—ten times in Resolution 77, for example, and four times in the Higher Education Law (2012)—to signal the public university's decision-making authority.

Policy documents also provide details on the decision-making authority that a Vietnamese public university has in the areas of finance, teaching, research, organization, and personnel. Amongst these areas, Vietnamese public universities have gained their strongest decision-making authority on financial issues, especially concerning the determination of tuition levels. The university has also been delegated considerable autonomy on teaching activities and research. The findings also indicate that Vietnamese public universities, with the establishment of a University Council and the right to appoint the Rector, have acquired significant authority over their organizational structure and personnel.

In brief, autonomy is about the right of a public university to make decisions; words such as *right, power, and authority,* accompanied by strong action verbs help to articulate the primary meaning of autonomy as *decision-making* authority. This meaning is significant because it marks a change in the state-university relationship—a new relationship in which the Vietnamese public university is empowered as an autonomous entity to decide matters on its own, actively and independently, instead of being subject to state approval as in the former governance system. A University Council replaces government ministries for the performance of such functions as approving expenditures or appointing a Rector. The Vietnamese public university has gained more authority to act on its own in its relationship with the ministries.

As the literature suggests, formal decision-making authority is of utmost importance in a governance structure, because it defines the role and function of a university in its relationship with the state (Donina & Paleari, 2019). In addition, the term *right* defines autonomy as a legal status enhanced to a high level which, once granted, is not easy to take back. Legally autonomous status also implies that the state's direct control in setting traditional a priori regulations and forcing universities to comply with them must be changed so as not to violate the university's new autonomy. Basically, the meaning of autonomy as decision-making authority is consistent with the literature–autonomy is first about the university's authority to make its own decisions (Verhoest et al., 2004).

Autonomy as the University's Accountability for its Activities

Institutional autonomy means not only that decision-making authority has been granted to the Vietnamese public university, but it also means the university is accountable for its activities and decisions, as provided by the Revised Higher Education Law (2018):

> Institutional autonomy is the right of a higher education institution to determine its own objectives and to select the way to implement its objectives, to make decisions on and *to be held accountable for* [emphasis added] its teaching, research, organization, personnel, finance, assets, and other activities based on the law and its capacity (p. 2).

The Revised Higher Education Law (2018) also provides an official definition: "Accountability is the responsibility of a higher education institution to report and make transparent information to students, society, authorized management agencies, owners, and other stakeholders about its compliance with regulations, laws, and commitments" (p. 2). This definition specifies that accountability is the obligation of an institution to provide information on and justification for its activities to stakeholders. It also emphasizes transparency concerning compliance with laws, indicating the existence of a compliance-oriented accountability system in Vietnam's public sector. Obviously, a Vietnamese public university is accountable for all the activities for which it has been delegated decision-making authority— including finance, teaching, research, organization, and personnel. As indicated in policy texts, however, every authority the Vietnamese public university has been granted is accompanied by control measures set by the state. Indeed, authority is always accompanied by regulations, conditions, or restrictions which precede in policy texts in any statement of authority. For example, authority on tuition fees is stated in the Revised Higher Education Law (2018) as follows: "Higher education institutions *meeting conditions regulated at Article 32, Clause 2 of this law and self-financing for all operating expenses* [emphasis added] are autonomous in determining tuition fees" (p. 27). Conditions are stated first, for emphasis.

Accountability as a concept is closely related to steering and control, and accountability measures are used to monitor and evaluate a university's activities. My document analysis shows that Vietnamese public universities are subject to many accountability measures implemented by the state, including regulations, reporting requirements, and ministerial approvals as well as quality assurances, state audits, and performance indicators. Every decision-making authority that has been granted to a Vietnamese public university is subject to regulations and reporting requirements set by the ministries— to ensure the university follows the legal framework in its operation. Indeed, despite the autonomy they have been granted, Vietnamese public universities continue in some ways to operate under the MOET's direct control, with most of their decisions still subject to ministerial approval.

The MOET implements quality assurance to monitor Vietnamese public universities education quality and determine accreditation status. According to Article 17 of the Education Law (2005), quality assurance is the key mechanism for assessing education quality provided by Vietnam's higher education institutions. Quality assurance emphasizes the university's compliance with regulations articulated in the laws governing accreditation procedures (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018). Quality assurance is implemented periodically, and its results are publicized. The results are used to determine accreditation and the level of autonomy to be granted to an institution, as stated in the Higher Education Law (2012): "Higher education institutions have higher levels of autonomy appropriate with their capacity, ranking results, and accreditation results" (p. 16). Together with the university's capacity on infrastructure, human, and financial resources, accreditation results serve as a condition for the granting of autonomy.

In terms of financial matters, Vietnamese public universities are subject to state audit of their financial statements, annual reports, tax, investments, and procurement of assets. This control measure ensures that the university is complying with laws and regulations that govern accounting and financial practices. The state also uses performance-based accountability measures to monitor performance in terms of indicators such as number of lecturers, enrollment in majors, and admissions and graduations, all of which must be annually disclosed on the university's website (MOET, 2016).

Overall, autonomy means Vietnamese public universities are held accountable for their decisions. Different areas of university performance are subject to various kinds of control measures, which mainly emphasize compliance with

regulations. Amongst the aforementioned accountability measures, quality assurance and performance indicators have been recently added to existing regulations, reporting requirements, and state audit, reflecting changes in steering technologies under an autonomy regime. The change means there are more control instruments over public universities in the new governance mechanism than in the old model. Regulations and ministerial approvals in particular show up as the most common control measures that were well-established in the former system. Furthermore, a mixture of old (regulations, reporting requirements, and state audit) and new steering instruments (quality assurance and performance indicators) raises questions about how they are articulated to steer a public university so as not to violate university autonomy.

Autonomy as the University's Responsibility for its Decisions and Finance

To be autonomous a Vietnamese public university must be self-responsible for its decisions and expenses. Article 3 of Decree 43 states that "The public university's autonomy must be accompanied by self-responsibility for its own decisions to the state management agencies and the law" (Central Government, 2006, p. 1). This means the university rather than the government is responsible for any consequence of its decisions—for inefficient performance or financial loss, for example. In this sense, self-responsibility emphasizes who is responsible for consequences of decisions made by the university. Article 16 of Decree 16 provides a clear example for the concept of self-responsibility. Given the university's autonomy in making decisions to borrow capital for investment, the university must itself be responsible for payment of loans and interest. If the university cannot pay a loan it has acquired, it must itself bear legal responsibility. In addition, the university is responsible for efficiency in its borrowing decisions, such as the performance of investing activities, and for handling any risk or consequence (Central Government, 2015). Ultimately, autonomy incorporates risk management into the decision-making process on the university's side, which creates pressure for and requires precautions from decision-makers as they exert their autonomy.

Importantly, autonomy means the university is responsible for covering its own expenses, as Resolution 77 clearly states: "Public universities committing to self-finance all operating and investing expenses are comprehensively autonomous" (Prime Minister, 2014b, p. 1). In this sense, the university is financially independent from the government. Given that one of the overarching goals of the Vietnamese government in implementing autonomy policy is to reduce the financial burden on the state's budget (Prime Minister, 2014a), the inclusion of financial obligations in the meaning of autonomy is not surprising. Autonomy imposes financial responsibility on the university and gradually reduces the financial burden on the national budget.

The Evolution of three Aspects of Institutional Autonomy: Decision-Making Authority, Accountability, and Self-Responsibility from 1993 to 2021

Since 1993, the Vietnamese government has released many policy documents focused on giving autonomy to public universities. The specific concept of "institutional autonomy" of Vietnamese public universities was used for the first time in Resolution 04-NQ/HNTW dated January 14th, 1993. This was an important legal document ratified by the Communist Party of Vietnam that mentioned the need to "increase institutional autonomy of higher education institutions" (Central Committee of Vietnam's Communist Party, 1993, p. 5). However, no further detail was provided about the meaning of autonomy or the kind or degree of autonomy that a public university was to be given. Also, in 1993, the Prime Minister released Decree 90 to clearly signal that Vietnam's higher education system would significantly depart from the centralized model (Le et al., 2019).

The most significant effort to decentralize the whole higher education system and delegate decision-making power to public universities was made in 2005 with the promulgation by the Central Government of the Education Law and the Higher Education Reform Agenda. Article 14 of Education Law (2005) provided that "the state will decentralize the educational management system, [and] strengthen autonomy and self-responsibility of educational institutions" (p. 5). With this statement, the state indicated its strong support for the autonomy of public universities. However, the statement was ambiguous and conflicting with another statement in the Education Law (2005) which said that "the state centrally manages the national education system in terms of objectives, programs, curriculums, education plans, teachers' standards, examination regulations, degrees, certificates, and the educational quality" (p. 5). The Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) (Central Government, 2005) was adopted as a fundamental and comprehensive renovation of Vietnam's higher education system during the 2006–2020 period. The provisions provided in HERA, if fully implemented, would have resulted in a significant transfer of authority from the state to public universities. In particular, the government declared that one of its most important tasks was "abolishing the mechanism of line-ministry control over public universities" (Central Government, 2005, p. 6). The elimination such control was a bold idea, one which meant public universities would no longer be under the control of ministries, yet no specific timeline was given for the process. Most importantly, for the first time, HERA proposed the development of a higher education law to legalize the autonomous status of higher education

institutions. With these provisions, HERA was evaluated as the most innovative legal document for Vietnam's higher education reform (Dao & Hayden, 2019; Le et al., 2019) with its emphasis on transferring decision-making authority from the ministries to universities.

The next critical juncture in the autonomy policy occurred on June 18th, 2012, when the Higher Education Law was officially passed by the National Assembly after six years of drafting and revising (Dang, 2013). This Law became the most imperative legal document to recognize the autonomy of higher education institutions, clearly stated in Article 32 as follows: "Higher education institutions are institutionally autonomous in their primary activities in areas of organization and human resource management, finance and assets, training, research, and technology, international cooperation, and quality assurance" (Higher Education Law, 2012, p. 16). For the first time, the concept of "institutional autonomy" was emphasized in the law as the right of public universities and was used 16 times (Le, 2019). Chapters and articles of the Law provided details on decision-making authority of higher education institutions. Notably, the term "institutional autonomy" was usually juxtaposed with the term "self-responsibility," which was used eight times in the Higher Education Law (2012) (Le, 2019). The Higher Education Law consolidated in one single document a vast number of regulations on the autonomy of public universities that had been incrementally approved since 1993 (Le et al., 2019; Dao & Hayden, 2019). The Law was criticized, however, for its lack of an official definition for autonomy and its lack of details on how to achieve stipulated goals (Marklein, 2019).

In 2014, the Central Government released Resolution 77 to advance the progress of autonomy policy by providing greater detail about decision-making authority of public universities on teaching and research activities, organization and human resource management, finance, and investment and procurement (Prime Minister, 2014b). The years 2018 and 2019 marked other milestones in the evolution of autonomy policy in Vietnam with the release of the Revised Higher Education Law, Resolution 99, and Decree 99. All three of these crucial documents were revised and updated based on the results of the implementation of Resolution 77. For the first time, a definition of autonomy was provided in Article 4, Clause 11 (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018). Importantly, the concept of accountability was officially used in the Revised Higher Education Law (2018), with an official definition for accountability. Also, Decree 60/2021/NĐ-CP was released in 2021 to provide specific regulations on financial autonomy of public universities.

In summary, between 1993 and 2021, there was an incremental change in the contents of autonomy policy of Vietnamese public universities, as indicated in the government's legislative and regulatory frameworks. Three aspects of institutional autonomy: decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility have evolved over time, which officially authorize the institutional autonomy of public universities in Vietnam.

Discussion

As the findings indicate, three aspects of autonomy—decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility—are bound together to form the meaning of autonomy. Vietnamese public universities have authority to make decisions but, at the same time, they must be held accountable for their decisions and must be responsible for financial resources and any consequences of their decisions. This meaning is discursively constructed against the background in which autonomy policy is implemented in Vietnam– the lack of effectiveness of the existing centralized governance model and budget constraints. These conditions put the state under pressure to decentralize the administrative system. As a result, a contingent relationship between autonomy and financial responsibility has been constructed in which Vietnamese public universities must bear financial responsibility to be granted autonomy. The transfer of autonomy can both enhance the university's performance and reduce financial burdens for the government. However, the state must take precautions in handing over power because doing so is in stark contrast to the legacy of Vietnam's centralized governance system that the government adopted from old Soviet countries. Given this concern, accountability becomes the state's primary focus in implementing autonomy policy in the post-Soviet context–a focus which creates tensions with the policy itself and significantly limits the autonomy level of Vietnamese public universities. In this sense, the findings of my study are consistent with the results reported by Shin et al. (2022) that Vietnam, together with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, has the lowest degree of university autonomy in comparison with other Asian countries such as China, Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, Taiwan, India, and Nepal. As Tran (2014) indicated, one of the biggest challenges in implementing the autonomy policy in Vietnam was the presence of centralized governance legacies. During the reform process of higher education systems, most countries in post-Soviet contexts abolished the line-ministry control over public universities that was a typical feature of the Soviet centralized model. Hungary abolished it in 1993, and China made the same choice in 1998. Line-ministry control is criticized for being redundant and obstructing the efficiency of the decision-making process in higher education institutions (Hayden & Lam, 2007). Yet, line-ministry control still exists in Vietnam, controlling public universities and creating much tension in the implementation of the autonomy policy.

The theoretical framework grounded on agency theory grasps contradictory movements in the Vietnamese higher education context—the institutional self-governance of public universities, the legacy of state centralism, and the growing market force. With a strong emphasis on control mechanisms, agency theory helps to explain the existence of accountability in the new form of governance, given the legacies of a heavily centralized governance system. As Olssen et al. (2004) point out, "Neoliberal governments have built stronger state structures and introduced more robust modes of centralized control and regulation" (p. 172). Control and regulation cover a wide range of reporting requirements, evaluation, and audit processes which will inevitably be inherited in a newly decentralized Vietnamese system. As suggested by agency theory, the Vietnamese government can choose either a compliance-based or performance-based accountability system to govern public universities more effectively. The challenge for the government is to determine which accountability system is optimal—which will achieve the best outcomes at the lowest governing costs. The findings of my study indicated that in addition to compliance-based accountability measures (regulations, reporting requirements, and state audit), performance-based accountability measures (quality assurance and key performance indicators) have been used by the Vietnamese government since 2018. In this aspect, my study in Vietnam's context reflects the application of performance-based funding in higher education policies to improve university performance which has been widely reported in other countries such as Korea, Taiwan, Finland, the UK, and the United States (Shin et al., 2023; Pruvot et al., 2015; de Boer et al., 2015; Jongbloed, 2020; Sorlin, 2007).

The Vietnamese government's rationale for institutional autonomy is revealed through what exactly the government has handed over to public universities. Responsibility for performance and finance happened because of the financial burden the subsidization of 419 public universities and colleges placed on the national budget. Handing over financial responsibility to public universities has, therefore, been strongly emphasized in most of the policy documents on institutional autonomy. Under the pressure of financial responsibilities, public universities, as autonomous and self-responsible actors in the competitive market, are expected to work with efficiency and effectiveness (Kivistö, 2008). Agency theory emphasizes the benefits of autonomy in producing self-managing universities that are innovative, efficient, and effective, consistent with the goals envisioned in the Vietnamese government's institutional autonomy policy. Agency theory, therefore, is not only a tool to strengthen the government's governing capacities; it also reinforces the university's role and position in the market—if it can take advantage of its autonomy and meet accountability requirements. In other words, to boost their performance, Vietnamese universities should take into their own hands the autonomy granted to them while also demonstrating their accountability to stakeholders. The key challenge seems to be how to balance autonomy with accountability.

Given assumptions of bounded rationality and information asymmetry, agency theory emphasizes that the university should have autonomy because it produces knowledge which, in the knowledge-based economy, is capital. Enders et al. (2013) argue that the modern conception of the university embraces the idea of the university as a distinctive social institution, and that it deserves a special status in terms of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. In addition, the university creates knowledge, which forms the capital and competitive advantage of the nation's economic development in the contemporary global economy (Olssen & Peter, 2005; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The creation of knowledge requires innovation, creativity, and flexibility; therefore, a university needs autonomy to function optimally (Enders et al., 2013). In its relationship with the state, the university brings superior knowledge and expertise on teaching, learning, and academic work to the performance of tasks on behalf of the government (Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015). Superior is a particular term that assigns value to knowledge and expertise, which emphasizes that the public university should have autonomy to fulfill its mission in the knowledge-based economy. Without its superior knowledge, the public university might not have autonomy. Agency theory contributes to promoting the role of universities as knowledge producers and key drivers in the knowledge economy; they should have autonomy. The paper, therefore, contributes to the field of comparative and international higher education and previous published articles by reinforcing the need for institutional autonomy of public universities to compete globally (Wilson, 2021; Altbach, 2016). The study also joins with Aboye (2021) about the influence of the state's political ideology on autonomy of public universities, in which the centralized legacy still exists through the monitoring mechanism of ministerial approvals. However, the study advances the conversation by theorizing the institutional changes in higher education (Jafarova, 2022; Le, 2022) through the perspective of agency theory.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, through the lens of agency theory, institutional autonomy of Vietnamese public universities is conceptualized as a new form of governance in which the government (the principal) delegates decision-making authority and responsibility to the university (the agent) and applies control mechanisms to ensure the university is working towards the government's expected goals. Institutional autonomy of a Vietnamese public university, therefore, includes not only the university's right to make its own decisions but also accountability for its decisions and self-responsibility for financial

resources. By providing a better understanding of autonomy as a new form of governance in Vietnam's context, the study has contributed to the literature on university governance and higher education policy. Especially, by providing insights into the complexities of autonomy in Vietnam's higher education system and shedding light on tensions between autonomy and control that emerge together in the policy, the study helps to inform a more transformative approach to policy practices to achieve the goals of reforming higher education systems. Policymakers might have to take into consideration the government-university relationship as a principal-agent relationship, with the government needing a university to perform tasks because the latter has more information and knowledge about the tasks than the government and the outcome will likely be more successful. In this case, a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches during the policy implementation process is necessary to include the voices and roles of all policy-relevant actors. As a result, policy-relevant actors may acquire a more informed understanding of the policy and develop a response that better aligns with the state's aims in enacting the policy.

However, examining the nature of institutional autonomy through the perspective of agency theory is not without limitations. The consequence of thinking of the state and the university as principal and agent is that a business relationship is emphasized in which the state and the university are engaged in a contract (Austin & Jones, 2016). The use of business language in higher education settings identifies a degree as a commodity and the university as a corporation with students as customers (Shore, 2010; Thornton, 2004). These business terms are contested because they highlight the commercialization and marketization of higher education. Particularly in a contractual relationship with the state, the university is assumed to be fundamentally self-interested and inclined to opportunistic behavior. This assumption has led to agency theory being criticized as trivial and dehumanizing (Kivistö, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989) because it presents a short-sighted perspective on human motivation with an unnecessary negative and skeptical evaluation of people's ethics. If a university is viewed only as a collective of self-interested shirkers, a broader range of human motives such as humanity, trust, and respect are ignored. However, the assumption of opportunistic behavior is aligned with recent arguments on the rise of the audit culture, which indicates mistrust in management (Blackmore, 2010; Welch, 2016), even though mistrust is not named explicitly. Control mechanisms are always implemented because governments do not trust universities. Also, the assumption of opportunistic behavior reflects the pessimistic perspective of scholars such as Yang et al. (2007) and Lane and Kivistö (2008) on the use of accountability measures to limit gaming practices rather than to support the university's performance. The application of agency theory in higher education policy, therefore, expects to be further explored in future studies to examine how the governance mechanism plays out in different contexts.

Another limitation of the paper is reliance solely on government documents as a data source for the analysis, which might lead to an incomplete understanding of the reality. The future study should consider the perspectives of universities and professors on the practical implications of the institutional autonomy policy. Also, future studies should question whether the discourse in government documents truly represents the government's actual views and practices by including the perspectives of policymakers on the rationales, ideas, and theories behind the design of the institutional autonomy policy.

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