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Navigating New Horizons: Inaugural Words from the Editor-in-Chief
Leonardo Veliz

University of New England, Australia

It is with great enthusiasm and honor that I assume the role of Editor for our esteemed journal – The International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education. As I embark on this journey, I am filled with a profound sense of responsibility and commitment to maintaining the high standards of academic excellence that this publication has long been known for.

Embarking on a new role is akin to stepping into uncharted territory, surrounded by a realm of unknowns and uncertainties. This transition brings forth a set of challenges, ranging from mastering unfamiliar tasks and procedures to understanding the dynamics of a new team or editorial environment. However, within these challenges and uncertainties lie opportunities for personal and professional growth. I have found great inspiration and encouragement through my collegial relationships with the Advisory Board, Founding Editor and Associate Editors, all of whom have a strong commitment to fulfilling our vision of disseminating multidisciplinary knowledge in higher education.

Our journal has been a platform for groundbreaking research, diverse perspectives, and innovative ideas. I am committed to upholding these traditions while also fostering an environment that encourages fresh voices, emerging scholars, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Together, we will continue to explore the frontiers of multidisciplinary knowledge, providing our readers with insightful and thought-provoking content.

In our second issue of 2023, we are delighted to showcase eight articles that bring together diverse multidisciplinary perspectives on education. In the first article, Maunumäki Maunula and Harju-Luukkainen investigate the role of summative assessment feedback in shaping the agency of higher education students, addressing a research gap in understanding how students perceive their agency within teacher-centred feedback practices. Minna, Minna and Harju-Luukkainen, in the second article, explore the significance of online assessment from the perspective of academic adult students and examine how they interpret various assessment feedback. Looking more broadly at issues relating to curriculum, Mishra explores teachers' perceptions and conceptual understanding of the local curriculum, its importance, and the development process in the context of school education in Nepal. With a focus on international students' intercultural adjustments during the period of the pandemic, Veliz and Marandi explore the lived multilingual and multicultural experiences of two international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. The study, conducted over two years using ethnographic research methods, critically examines how the students navigated intercultural encounters and sought to enhance their intercultural awareness and competence despite the limitations imposed by lockdowns and social-distancing measures. Looking also at the centrality of individuals' lived experiences, Tallef, Espinoza and Ollive present a case study that delves into the lived experiences of three faculty members, each from different disciplines, who participated in an experiential

undergraduate nursing study abroad (SA) course. The study aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the personal and professional transformative effects of multidisciplinary faculty involvement in SA. In the article 'Emotional Difficulties: Racial Representation in Swiss International Higher Education', Hernandez showcased the influence of emotions related to racial representation, highlighting emotional challenges associated with depictions of diversity. Miller and Nadler stress on the role of student governments in shaping democratic habits among students, particularly through the act of voting. The study references a 2012 study conducted in the United States that highlighted the low voter turnout in student government elections. The last article in this issue is by Toquero whose main tenet in the study revolves around the underrepresentation and unequal treatment of women in the scientific community, attributing it to a rigid research culture and insufficient academic support.

I invite all researchers, scholars, and practitioners to contribute their valuable work to our journal. Your contributions are the lifeblood of our academic community, and I look forward to facilitating a collaborative and inclusive space where ideas flourish and research thrives.
As we embark on this new chapter together, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the editorial board, reviewers, and the broader academic community for your ongoing support. Your dedication to advancing knowledge and scholarship is the cornerstone of our success.

Editor
Associate Professor Leonardo Veliz
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education
lveliz@une.edu.au

"It gave me so much faith in myself": University Students' Experiences of Agency in Summative Teacher-centered Assessment Feedback Practices in Higher education

Minna Maunumäki

University of Jyväskylä

Minna Maunula

University of Jyväskylä

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen

University of Jyväskylä

ABSTRACT

Strengthening the agency of higher education students is one of the key objectives of higher education. Research has shown that the agency of higher education students can be significantly strengthened through different types of assessment feedback practices. However, the role of assessment feedback in strengthening the student's agency is not fully understood in practice. While formative, student-centred feedback practices are becoming more common, summative, end-of-course, teacher-centred feedback practices are still prevalent in higher education. This study seeks to address the research gap of how university students perceive their agency to be constructed in the context of teacher-centred summative written and audio feedback. From these premises, the research question was designed: what kind of agency emerges from students' experiences of summative assessment feedback? The study was conducted as a qualitative online survey for university students (N=35) in Finland. The data was analysed by means of qualitative systematic data driven content analysis. According to the results, students perceive the summative assessment feedback they receive from their teachers as a reflection of their own agency and how it is shaped. In the light of the assessment practices examined, students' agency was found to be reflexive, contradictory and incomplete. The results show that the recognition of the relationship between student agency and assessment feedback in higher education is important but still less well recognised. The results of this study are relevant for the development of assessment feedback practices that sustainably promote the construction of student agency in the context of lifelong learning and digitalisation of teaching in higher education.

Keywords: assessment feedback, agency, university student, higher education

European education policy aims to involve all individuals in lifelong learning and to provide equal access to education and training for all (European Union, 2018). At the same time, empowering individuals has been identified as a key objective of higher education policy (OECD, 2019). As a result, the importance of agency has been reinforced and given new concrete definitions as lifelong learning has become stronger and the skills needed in the world of work have also changed rapidly (Morrish, 2017; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). Today, agency is seen as a key component of professional development (Goller & Paloniemi, 2017), for example, and as a builder of meaningful careers and personal well-being (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Individuals are expected to act in ways that imply sustainable choices despite the constant and unpredictable changes in working life (Hays &Reinders, 2020). Based on the choices made and the opportunities available, individuals should build their life course in a meaningful way at the intersection of work, family life, education, and lifelong learning (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Agency has taken on different meanings. In this article, agency is considered in the context of learning and the assessment of learning, from the perspective of the student. The history of the concept of agency dates to the Enlightenment, when the role of education in supporting autonomous action began to be emphasised (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In learning theories, agency has since been considered, among other things, as an active activity of the student in the process of knowledge construction (constructivist learning theories, e.g., Driscoll, 2014), as social participation and identity construction (socio-cultural learning theories, e.g. Illeris, 2014), as experiential learning and identity development (adult learning theories; e.g. Mezirov, 1981), and as emancipatory community empowerment (critical pedagogy, e.g. Freire, 1970). In this study, we refer to agency as a theoretical concept that describes the reciprocal relationship between the student and the learning environment (e.g., Jääskelä et al., 2017). In this case, agency is seen as individual experiences of how the learning environment creates opportunities or constraints for students to actively learn and participate. As the goals of education and lifelong learning are increasingly linked to economic goals (European Union, 2018), we see the need to consider agency in a socio-cultural context (Emirbayer et al., 1998, see also Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020) and in an ecological (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2007) framework of agency that extends beyond the individual and takes into account the interconnection between agency and the learning environment. Agency is thus not only a personal characteristic or ability of the individual, but is also reflected in various structural factors, such as pedagogical solutions in education.

Research in learning pedagogy emphasizes the active role of students in learning (e.g., Boud & Molloy, 2013; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Given the strong influence of assessment on learning (e.g., Ramsden 2003; Biggs & Tang 2007), recent research (e.g., Crisp, 2012; Boud & Soler, 2016) on assessment also emphasizes pedagogical assessment and feedback practices (e.g., self- and peer-assessment) that aim to develop students' lifelong learning skills, active role in learning and self-assessment skills. However, unidirectional, declarative, and summative (end-of-course) assessment practices are still common in higher education (Van der Kleij et. al.,2019; Nieminen, 2021), although student-centred, participative, and formative (during learning) assessment practices have become more common in higher education (e.g., Winstone & Boud, 2020; Winstone, 2022). In this study, we are interested in how university students perceive their agency to be constructed in the context of teacher-centred summative assessment practices. By these assessment practices, we mean the written and audio feedback given by the teacher to the student at the end of the course. In this context, we use assessment feedback to refer to an assessment practice in which the teacher provides reasoned feedback on the assessment he or she has made. This feedback is usually either written feedback or audio feedback in the form of an audio file. Assessment feedback is therefore a more detailed part of the more general assessment concept and the broader assessment process (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Winstone & Boud, 2020). By summative assessment feedback, we mean the one-way assessment feedback given by the teacher to the student to justify the assessment (Boud, 2000; Crisp, 2012). The purpose of summative assessment feedback is to assess how well the student has achieved the objectives

(Boud, 2000; Crisp, 2012). Summative feedback is considered teacher-centred and refers to teaching and assessment based on the transfer of knowledge to the student (Ramsden, 2003; Van der Kleij et al., 2019). Summative feedback has been seen to limit students' activity and influence on their own learning (Biggs, 1998), but also to activate and strengthen students' sense of agency, even when given at the end of the course (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Although assessment and feedback practices that emphasize student agency and participation have become more common, teacher-centred assessment feedback practices are still relatively prevalent in higher education (Winstone & Boud, 2020; Winstone, 2022). Universities have been criticized for imparting theoretical and formal knowledge rather than strengthening student's agency. Research has shown that student agency can be strengthened through supportive and interactive pedagogy (Jääskelä et al., 2017) and that socio-constructivist pedagogy based on collaboration and interaction best supports skills development (Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2019). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the conditions for the development of agency in higher education students (Jääskelä et al., 2017). Assessment and feedback have been studied for decades from different perspectives, but to our knowledge, research on the relationship between agency and summative assessment feedback has been rather limited so far (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Nieminen et al., 2021).

This perspective is important because assessment and assessment feedback are related to student agency through learning. Assessment and feedback have been found to drive the learning process so strongly that learning occurs according to how students expect assessment to occur (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Therefore, this study focuses on how summative assessment feedback could support students' agency in future digital learning environments in a way that is as sustainable and as possible from a learning perspective (e.g., Hays & Reinders, 2020). This is an important question in a context where learning and teaching is fragmenting into narrow competences, micro-credentials, and digital learning platforms (Tamoliune et. al., 2023).

This study explores the agency that teacher-centred summative written and audio feedback provides in higher education. We examine assessment feedback from an agentic perspective and aim to generate further understanding of assessment practices that promote students' agency in their own learning. From these premises, we have formulated the research question for this study. The aim of the study is to investigate what kind of agency is generated by students' experiences of summative assessment feedback?

To find answers to the research question, we designed a Webropol survey for Finnish open university online students of education subjects. The Finnish open university, which is the context of the study, provides education and training that is in line with the universities' degree requirements and meets the needs of working life as part of the universities' mission of continuous learning (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). An open university can offer individual university courses, broader study modules or a pathway towards a degree (Joutsen et al., 2021). In 2022, there were around 111000 open university students (Vipunen 2023). A total of 35 open university students responded to the survey. The data was analysed using systematic content analysis. The theoretical framework used was the literature describing agency and assessment feedback and how feedback can reflect student agency.

Student agency

The focus of this research is on the agency of students and how teacher-centered written or audio feedback can reinforce that. Research on agency has for long been dominated by an individual and psychological perspective (Harris et al., 2018; Nieminen et al., 2021; Winstone, 2022). Nowadays, agency is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, which emphasizes the social and ecological dimensions of agency (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). These dimensions are related to how individuals perceive and interpret the environment as offering opportunities for active participation, influence, and choices (Jääskelä et al., 2017).

Jääskelä and colleagues (2017) define higher education student agency as the student's experience of having access to personal, relational, and participatory resources and of being empowered to act through personal, relational, and participatory resources that enable them to act and learn in learning contexts in a purposeful and meaningful way (Jääskelä et al., 2017). Accordingly, the term 'agency' is used with reference to the learner's personal ability to act, influence and make choices in specific socio-cultural and physical environments that either constrain or enable agency (see Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Agency has been conceptualized from different perspectives. Interpreted through these frameworks, different feedback practices produce different enabling and constraining factors for students. Emirbayer and colleagues (1998) have presented a socio-cultural framework of agency that includes three temporal dimensions. According to the iterative or historical dimension, agency is constructed based on an individual's previous experiences and understandings. According to Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020), iterative agency manifests itself, for example, in the student's previous assessment experiences. Emirbayer and colleagues (1998) argue further that in the projective or future-oriented dimension, the individual imagines possible paths and options and constructs agency through them.

Assessment feedback

In addition to agency, another key concept in this study is assessment feedback. Feedback has been redefined in recent years. For example, researchers have talked about an "old and new paradigm" (Winstone, 2022) and "Feedback Mark 0" versus "Feedback Mark 2" (Boud & Molloy, 2013). The former describe feedback from a conventional and cognitive perspective, where feedback is seen as a transfer of information and its role is to correct learning. The feedback process is one-way (narrative) and does not involve actual interaction. Winstone (2022) refers to such feedback as feedback information that can help students improve the quality of their work and their learning strategies. The latter newer mode, on the other hand, describes feedback from a social constructionist perspective, based on interaction and construction of shared knowledge and understanding (Sadler, 2010; Evans, 2013; Aijawi & Boud, 2017). Winstone (2022) refers to such feedback as a process that emphasizes interactive learning, for example, talking with other students.

The shift in feedback paradigms can also be described as a shift from teacher-centered (TCL) concepts of teaching, assessment and feedback based on knowledge transfer towards student-centered (SCL) concepts highlighting the student's active role (Ramsden, 2003; Van der Kleij et al., 2019). Summative one-way assessment and feedback have been seen as teacher-centered (TCL) practices.

Summative assessment has been the dominant paradigm for decades (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Boud, 2000). Its role has been to certificate evidence of learning (Boud, 2000). Summative assessment has also been criticized: For example, it has been seen as leading students to use lower cognitive processes, leaving the level of learning thin (Biggs, 1998). Students also perceive summative assessment as disconnected from the learning process (Mumm et al., 2016). Seeing assessment as separate from the teaching and learning process may also be a reason why teachers choose summative and repeated assessment methods in their teaching (Hailikari et al., 2014). Summative assessment has also been found to lead students to repeat information and seek grades rather than deeper insight or learning (Struyven et al., 2005).

Research-based evidence of the significance of versatile assessment feedback practices for student learning and agency has been limited (Ramsden, 2003). However, a link has been found between student-centered assessment practices and student activity and participation. The design of assessment and feedback should focus on how it affects learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Winstone & Boud, 2020). If students are enabled and given concrete opportunities to participate and take responsibility for their own learning, they will develop a positive sense of competence and agency. It is also about how the ownership of own learning and agency gained in university learning are transferred to other contexts, such as the world of work (Jääskelä et al., 2020).

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As Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020) suggest, students' agency can be strengthened during their university studies through various means when they feel that feedback supports their learning in the long term. The socio-cultural agency of university students is strengthened when individuals make decisions about what is appropriate in a given situation and context and act accordingly (Emirbayer et al., 1998). According to Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020), this agency dimension occurs, for example, when students describe their practical experiences in relation to feedback. Agency is constructed not only from an individual perspective but also from environmental conditions (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Agency is seen as something to be achieved rather than something to be controlled. Agency can be strengthened by actively engaging the individual with his or her environment. According to Chong (2021), the ecological perspective highlights how different elements of feedback interact with each other. For example, Han and Hyland (2019), point out that students may have difficulties to understand written feedback if their previous assessment experiences are associated with different feedback strategies.

Nieminen and Tuohilampi (2020) have outlined university students´ agency from three dimensions: Adaptive agency which occurs when students examine their own learning and gradually take more responsibility for it. Maladaptive agency is reflected, for example, in students' experiences of teacher performance. Students may also experience a lack of agency when they feel they cannot cope with assessment tasks. (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020.) In the socio-material framework, agency is seen as a multidimensional relationship or interplay between people, things, technology, and texts, and what they produce (Zukas & Malcolm, 2019; Gravett, 2020; Nieminen et al., 2021). According to Zukas and Malcolm (2019), socio-material can include physical things such as books or computers, learning spaces or environments, or more abstract concepts such as power. Charteris and Smardon (2018) point out that in future technological learning environments, student agency must be increasingly considered in relation to technology. Nieminen and colleagues (2021) argue that, for example, if the learning environment allows the student only to listen to audio feedback, without a possibility to record or transform it into a verbal form, for instance, the system limits the student's agency. Socio-material agency is also hindered in situations where, for example, students have poor Internet access or feel social pressure to provide peer feedback. In such cases, assessment feedback cannot be considered constructive, equal, or inclusive in terms of students' holistic agency. (Nieminen et al., 2021.)

Designing meaningful assessment feedback practices from an agency perspective should consider not only individuals but also how individuals interact with physical materials such as assessment matrices, notes, oral presentations, and technological devices (Nieminen et al., 2021). From a communicative point of view, agency can be regarded as a discursive construction. Feedback can be understood as a discursive practice; feedback not only reflects reality but also constructs it. A discursive perspective on feedback also enables policy analysis to unravel what is taken for granted and as if unquestioned practices (Nieminen et al., 2021).

Data and method

This study examines students' experiences of agency in summative teacher-centered assessment feedback practices in higher education. The data consists of textual data collected by means of a Webropol survey from 35 adult Open University students in spring 2021. The data was analysed using data driven content analysis.

The data was collected through a Webropol questionnaire. The students answered the questionnaire anonymously and without any identifying information. The questionnaire consisted of four quantitative background questions (age, gender, education, number of credits completed) and two additional open-ended background questions on the aim of studying and the student's life situation. Of the respondents, 97% were female and they had completed an average of 48 credits. The respondents' previous educational backgrounds varied (see table 1). In addition to the background questions, the questionnaire contained 13 open-ended

questions on assessment and feedback. The sections of the questionnaire that asked about positive and negative experiences with written and audio feedback were selected as data for this study. In total, 26 pages (A4) of analyzable data were collected. The student responses were extensive and varied in content.

Table 1

The respondent's previous educational background

	n	Percent
Primary School	0	0,0%
High school graduate	1	2,9%
Vocational education	16	45,7%
Polytechnic education	12	34,3%
University education	6	17,1%

The scientific theoretical framework of the study was based on a hermeneutic approach to analysis. Hermeneutics holds that reality is ambiguous and the meanings that construct it are individual and contextual (Patton, 2015). The aim of describing the responses and individual meanings were described and interpreted to explore the studied phenomenon of agency and assessment feedback and the relationship between them. The study was interested in the meanings that students associated with teacher-centered summative assessment feedback and agency from their own perspective. The principles of meaning inquiry with hermeneutic interpretive analysis were combined (Patton, 2015). In practice, this meant that students' feedback experiences from an agency perspective were read and interpreted. The questionnaire asked about the different experiences related to the assessment feedback. The data was rich and allowed us to explore the link between assessment feedback practices and agency experiences.

The analysis was based on systematic data driven content analysis (Patton, 2015; Grippendorf, 2018). Ethical issues were carefully considered in the handling of the data by focusing only on the part of the data relevant to the research question and by carefully pseudonymising (removing identifying information) (Roth & von Unger, 2018). As the data in this study was part of a larger study considering students' experiences and data set, the first step of the analysis was to extract the written and audio feedback sections. The material was carefully read through. The first content analysis classification was based on the types of agencies: adaptive, maladaptive and lack of agency (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020). At this stage, Nieminen and Tuohilampi's (2020) concept of maladaptive agency was supplemented and refined, according to whether the maladaptation was due to external factors or to the student him- or herself. Next, the data was classified as reflecting adaptive agency, maladaptive agency, and lack of agency. Then, the agency in the written assessment feedback data was classified as adaptive (29 mentions), maladaptive (8 mentions) and lack of agency (1). Agency of the audio assessment feedback data was divided into adaptive (5 mentions), maladaptive (11 mentions) and lack of agency (1 mention).

Next, the data, classified into three main categories, was analysed using content analysis. Mentions of the categories of adaptive, maladaptive and lack of agency were first classified into unifying subcategories. The subcategories were combined into more abstract content-describing main categories until this was no longer possible from a content-wise perspective. The content analysis resulted in the following main categories for each initial classification: adaptive, maladaptive and lack of agency.

The logic of the analysis of the data and the construction of the results are based on the following abductive process. For the written assessment feedback, two main categories were identified for adaptive agency: development as a learner and personality. Maladaptive agency was divided into the following main categories limiting student agency: content of feedback, non-interactivity, and discursiveness. In addition,

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there was one mention that was associated with lack of agency. Two main categories of adaptive agency related to audio feedback were identified as supporting student agency: content and interactivity. Three main categories of maladaptive agency were identified as limiting agency: material factors, conflict between the tone of the message and the language, and the teacher's action. In addition, one mention was identified as lack of agency. We distinguish the categories in more detail in the results chapter and discuss the results in relation to the contexts and the usefulness of the results in the discussion.

Results

The results showed the diverse meanings of assessment feedback practices for the construction of university students' agency. In the next section, first the results of the written summative assessment feedback and then the results of the audio summative assessment feedback are presented.

Students' agency in the context of summative written assessment feedback

Based on the analysis, it is interpreted that most students expressed adaptive agency in the written summative feedback. Two main categories of adaptive agency were created: the categories of development as a student and personality. In both categories, feedback was seen as reinforcing student agency in learning. Maladaptive agency was divided into the following main categories limiting student agency: content of feedback, non-interactivity, and discursiveness. Within these categories, interpreted feedback is seen as limiting student agency in their own learning. Interestingly, the maladaptive agency was not directed at the student him/herself, but at the teacher and the wider university assessment culture.

Adaptive agency -developing as a student and personality

In the category of developing as a student, assessment feedback was conceptualized in terms of facilitating learning. Students perceived that the assessment feedback enabled them to develop in their learning and as students. Assessment feedback was seen as having a long-term dimension than immediate learning and was seen as helping students perform better in subsequent tasks. However, students limited the importance of assessment feedback to the learning context (projective dimension). The importance of assessment feedback and its temporal dimension were seen as extending only to subsequent tasks and ongoing studies, and not, for example, to the working life context of non-formal learning.

> Feedback helps me become a better learner and I have changed my behavior after receiving feedback. So very useful.
> I think the written feedback has been good and clear. I like the fact that I can save the feedback for myself and reflect on it often if necessary.

Personality was another main category of adaptive agency. The adaptive agency was interpreted to occur when assessment feedback was meaningful and given in an empowering and encouraging tone. Written assessment feedback was perceived as an appreciation of the student's work. In online learning, there is often little interaction and encounters between the teacher and student. From the point of view of empowering the student, the personal nature of feedback was perceived as important.

> The feedback, which was super encouraging and appreciative of my study skills, I went to see it several times and read aloud to my husband. It gave me so much faith in myself.
> It's really nice to get written feedback and it is received more than face to face, because the courses are mostly online.
> The written feedback has been personal, just for me. I like them.

Maladaptive agency – content of the feedback, non- interactivity, and discursiveness

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In the written assessment feedback, the factors limiting agency were related to teacher performance. Assessment feedback was conceptualized as corrective feedback, which referred to the teacher's judgment between right and wrong in the student's response (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In other words, the teacher tells the student what is wrong and what is right in the answer. There are indications that assessment practices are reflected in students' conceptions of knowledge, in the maintenance of different conceptions of knowledge (see Nieminen et al., 2021). Deep learning requires the formation of one's own meanings and understandings from different perspectives. Mechanical reception of information is sufficient for superficial learning only. One-way corrective feedback on a task can maintain the learner's dualistic concept of knowledge.

> The one time I have received feedback, I was disappointed with the teacher's feedback because just being good and copying my words was not enough for me. Once I didn't get any feedback at all, so I still don't know if the assignments were done correctly or if there were mistakes. I hope I didn't learn something wrong from them.

Also, the maladaptive agency was interpreted when students perceived the assessment feedback they received from the teacher as insufficient or scarce. Some students perceived that they had invested in their studies and their own learning but were disappointed with the effort the teacher had put into their assessment feedback. This suggests a traditional teacher-centered culture of assessment and feedback, where assessment and feedback are the responsibility and the work of the teacher. There was a discrepancy between students' expectations of feedback and the reality.

> The challenge is probably due to the writer: Extensive written answers will certainly take up a huge amount of time for the teacher assessing the paper. If, on the other hand, the assessment is very short and succinct, it may not be able to accommodate much, e.g., suggestions for improvement, etc. Sometimes it seems that the feedback does not correspond to the amount of time you have spent on the task.

In addition to the content of the assessment feedback (corrective contribution and quantity), the lack of adaptation was related to the non-interactive and one-sided nature of the written assessment feedback. Some students wanted a one-to-one discussion with a teacher about their assignment. Students found summative assessment feedback as declarative and monologic in nature and retrospective. (see also Dawson et al., 2019). They recognized the possibility of self-initiated contact, but agency was not concretized in action. Students' socialization to the traditional one-way assessment culture is deep seated. A conversation with the teacher would be an opportunity to strengthen the learning and feed forwarding dimension of assessment feedback and thus promote student agency. "After the feedback, sometimes you would have wanted to justify what you had done and pose questions to the person who gave you the feedback."

The discursiveness of written feedback as a challenge to agency was interpreted. The question of power in assessment and feedback arises when asking how discursive feedback practices produce agency from a particular and limited perspective (Nieminen et al., 2021). In written feedback, the teacher can either explicitly or implicitly produce, maintain or change the student's own views. There is a lot of power associated with assessment and feedback. "The challenge is how to verbalize the feedback in a way that the reader perceives it as encouragement, not a rebuke."

Lack of agency

In the written feedback material, evidence of lack of agency in one mention only was found. Corrective feedback can be interpreted as merely pointing out errors unless it is accompanied with positive and encouraging comments on the student's work. "Feedback has also been perceived as 'oh, how many mistakes have I made, will I ever write correctly,' etc."

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Students' agency in the context of summative audio assessment feedback

Now we look in more detail at university students' experiences of their agency in the context of summative audio assessment feedback. Only a small proportion of the students in the study had experiences of summative teacher-centered audio assessment feedback. This was associated with several factors that we interpreted as supporting student agency in their own learning. In relation to audio feedback, two main categories of adaptive agency were identified and interpreted as supporting students' agency in their own learning: content and interactivity. In contrast, three main categories of maladaptive agency were interpreted as limiting student agency: material factors, conflict between the tone of the message and the language, and the teacher's action.

Adaptive agency - content and interactivity

In the data, audio feedback played a minor role in supporting content-wise learning. The learning support aspect of audio feedback was related to the content of feedback itself, more specifically the extent of the feedback. Students felt that more extensive written feedback was more relevant to their learning than less extensive audio feedback.

Recorded feedback can be given more widely

Audio feedback was seen as a channel of interaction between teacher and student. As with written feedback, the personal nature of audio feedback was seen as particularly important, as there was rarely an opportunity for face-to-face interaction during the learning process.

Audio feedback feels personal, as in distance learning you may never have met or spoken to the teacher when you receive your first audio feedback.

The audio feedback had more to say than the written feedback and I liked the audio feedback a lot.

Maladaptive agency -material factors, conflict, and teacher's action

For audio feedback, students felt that material factors were more limiting than in written feedback. The most limiting factor was the technical problem of not being able to record the audio assessment feedback for later use. In addition, audio feedback was often associated with technical problems such as audio stuttering. Another challenge was related to the flexibility of listening independent of time and place.

The challenge I found with audio feedback was that it was more difficult to record than written feedback, and it took a while to find it. (student x)

You must listen several times. Read text better so you can save it to your own file and use it for learning.

Audio assessment feedback was associated with a similar conflict between the content and tone of the teacher's speech as in the case of written feedback. From the perspective of supporting student agency, the teacher needs to be sensitive to the style and tone of audio feedback. A mismatch between the discursive and the non-discursive can leave the student in a state of confusion, which can convey a mixed message to the student. "Disadvantages - >the weight and tone of the audio can communicate something other than what the supervisor is saying."

Lack of agency

In the case of teacher-centered summative audio assessment feedback, there was only one identified mention that could indicate lack of agency.

I have not received any feedback and I do not need any.

The results show that teacher-centered summative assessment feedback is in many ways relevant to the construction of agency experienced by university students. The next section answers the research

question and discusses the relevance of the findings in relation to the larger context and the theoretical framework presented earlier.

Discussion and conclusion

The study was inspired by the OECD's education policy objective to strengthen higher education students' agency (OECD, 2019). Agency has been highlighted as a key factor in the new generation of assessment environments (Charteris & Smardon, 2018). Therefore, it is justified to explore agency in learning by examining the relationship between agency and assessment feedback. This study asked what kind of agency emerges from students' assessment experiences.

Both adaptive and maladaptive agencies were identified in student responses regarding written and audio feedback. Written feedback was perceived to promote learning and enable development as a student. The interpretation is that summative written assessment feedback can at best strengthen students' reflective agency and provide students with tools for reflection that help them become aware of their own learning and envision new perspectives. In this way, teaching not only reinforces students' existing views, but also generates new learning and new insights.

Although summative assessment has been criticized (Biggs, 1998; Sadler, 2010), summative written feedback on student output and the learning process can, at its best, strengthen student agency by stimulating student learning (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), quality feedback not only points to the gap between performance and goal, but also encourages the narrowing of that gap. From a socio-material perspective, written feedback was perceived to support the agency because it was easy to return to later.

In the case of written feedback, maladaptive agency is interpreted as students criticizing the teacher and his/her assessment skills. Instead of the concept of maladaptive agency, the concept of contradictory agency is used here because the results do not necessarily indicate a lack of agency. Instead, these experiences may point to a student-customer phenomenon stemming from managerialism, where students position themselves as customers who buy services (Bunce et al., 2016; Siivonen & Filander, 2020).

From the perspective of agency, it would be important to favor assessment and feedback that guides students to become aware of and actively take responsibility for their own learning process rather than evaluating the teacher's abilities and assessment skills (Boud & Molloy, 2013). On the other hand, it is also important to be critical of teachers' assessment skills, which make up a highly complex competence area as such (Xu and Brown, 2016). It is noteworthy that not all academic teachers in Finland have comprehensive pedagogical skills, which means that teachers' pedagogical and assessment skills may be narrowly defined (Juvonen & Toom, 2022). For the university's student agency to grow to its full potential and be sustainably renewed, several factors need to be taken into account in a transparent way, including the assessment feedback practices.

In addition to teachers' assessment skills, we interpreted contradictory agency where students perceived the lack of interactivity in the written feedback process as problematic. While students longed for discussion, they remained passive recipients of feedback. It should also be noted that teacher-student interaction has been found to be one of the factors constructing teacher identity (Laiho et al., 2022).

In the context of audio feedback, adaptive and reflective agency was manifested in mentions of satisfaction with the breadth of the content of feedback. On the other hand, researchers have warned against overloading feedback with too much information and detail (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Students liked the personal and interactive nature of audio feedback, which is in line with previous findings (Knauf, 2016). In the future, it is important to pay more attention to interaction, as student agency has been found to be best built through supportive and interactive pedagogy (Jääskelä et al., 2020; Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2019).

The above factors may indicate a reflective approach to studying and learning and that students see a role for themselves in providing feedback. Students also suggest that while implementing the ideal of

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lifelong learning, they need personal and individual attention and encounters to promptly update their skills and knowledge.

Evidence of maladaptive and contradictory agency was found when examining students' perceptions of feedback from a socio-material and discursive perspective. Technical problems and the discrepancy between the teacher's message and tone of voice can leave students in a state of confusion that is not conducive to agency. This finding draws attention to the role of physical factors in the construction of agency in future digital and learning environments. Digitalization may alleviate some elements of inequality, but on the other hand it also creates new ones. Audio feedback and digitalization play an important role in building inclusive higher education. In the digital learning environments of the future, more attention should be paid to the socio-material dimension of agency in assessment feedback. To fulfil the principle of accessibility, it is important to consider how individuals interact with material artifacts such as assessment matrices. Material artifacts not only construct agency through their interaction with the student but can also become agents in their own right (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020).

Written and audio feedback seemed to produce both reflective and contradictory student responses. In the analysis, the student responses indicated but little lack of agency or incomplete agency, such as fear of inability to cope with the studies or assessments. Overall, the results suggest that students have different and personal preferences for different feedback practices. This may be reflected in the student's perception of feedback and the agency that it provides to the student. Furthermore, the results suggest that written feedback has a greater future-oriented meaning for agency than audio feedback. Different frameworks of agency, such as socio-material agency, help understand how agency is enabled in specific feedback practices.

The conclusion of the study is that the pedagogical process, involving the different methods and objectives of assessment, must be understood in depth by both the teacher and the students. An active dialogue between the participants about the learning process strengthens the awareness of the learning and assessment processes and reinforces the agency of all participants. Diverse and pedagogically based assessment practices can enable and strengthen the development of university students' agency. Similarly, in addition to a wide range of assessment practices, several other factors, such as student-centered pedagogical solutions, support the development of agency. The relationship between assessment and agency is significant: sustainable and lifelong learning processes in constantly changing environments, including digital ones, require the ability of individuals to assess their own performance as responsible members of society. Given the multiple dimensions and functions of assessment, it is important to maintain the diversity of assessment practices and to make evidence-based choices about assessment in higher education.

Various limitations of the present study should be considered. First, only 35 students participated in the study. On the other hand, qualitative research aims to describe and understand the studied phenomenon in depth, which is why the size or number of data is not a direct measure of reliability (Patton, 2002). Nevertheless, a larger data set could have shed even more light on the studied phenomenon. There were hardly any cases in the category "lack of agency" in the data. This may be explained by the fact that the students who responded to the survey were basically students who had been successful in their studies. Qualitative research does not seek generalizations, and the transferability of results can also be critically assessed (Patton, 2002). The data was collected from students in education disciplines, who may therefore have more linguistic concepts and more agentic scaffolding to describe their own learning and agency. In the future, it would be important to investigate the intertwining of assessment, feedback, and agency in students from different disciplines (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020).

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Authors' Bios
Corresponding author*:
*Maunumäki Minna PhD (Education) is a university lecturer in Education, Adult Education and Early Childhood Education at the University of Jyväskylä, Open University. Her areas of interest include learning assessment, education policy and the development of web-based and multi-modal education in adult education (minna.j.maunumaki@jyu.fi)
ORCID link: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5102-0966

Maunula Minna PhD (Education) works as a university lecturer at the University of Jyväskylä, Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius. Her interests include research on the life course of adults, the relevance of education in a global era, and the development of web-based and multi-modal education in adult education (minna.r.h.maunula@jyu.fi).
ORCID-link: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7968-705X

Harju-Luukkainen, Heidi, PhD, is Professor of Education at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland and Nord University in Norway. Her research focuses on early childhood education, teacher education, equity in education and international assessments of learning outcomes (heidi.k.harju-luukkainen@jyu.fi)
ORCID-link: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4532-7133

The Relevance of Versatile Learning Online Assessment Feedback for University Student

Maunula Minna

University of Jyväskylä, Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, Finland

Maunumäki Minna
University of Jyväskylä
Harju-Luukkainen Heidi
University of Jyväskylä, Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, Finland

ABSTRACT

In the process of learning, assessment is relevant from multiple perspectives. Learning assessment guides student learning and teaching either knowingly or unconsciously. This study takes a closer look at the meanings given to online assessment by academic adult students and how they experience different assessment feedback. The study was a qualitative online survey for adult students (N=35). Adult students valued assessment feedback, and their perceptions about assessment were mainly traditional. They considered assessment feedback truthful and used self-assessment as a natural part of their learning process. They did not experience the peer-assessment of their own learning as central or reliable. Written teacher assessment feedback on whether the content to learn was understood correctly was significant from students´ point of view. New forms of assessment and assessment, such as group-peer feedback or teacher asynchronous voice feedback, were perceived as interesting novelties. According to the results of this study, the objectives of learning assessment should be clear and shared with the students. The continuous nature of the sustainable learning process emphasizes the versatility of assessment as a natural part of e-learning. Versatile online assessment practices will strengthen student agency and ownership of their learning in the future of digitally-enhanced higher education.

Keywords: Assessment feedback, University student, Learning process

Universities are undergoing major transformations internationally (OECD, 2019). In addition to traditional academic activities, universities have become a platform for new activities and expectations such as working life connections (OECD, 2020), neoliberal profit goals (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Laiho et al., 2020) and continuous learning (OECD, 2020). Education produces the skills and competitiveness needed for developing welfare states while expanding the opportunities for individuals to grow and succeed in life. The Finnish higher education system is considered one of the most competitive in the world (Isopahkala-Bouret,

2019.) Further, a key national objective of the country is to educate its citizens to an even higher level while creating more flexible learning pathways (Moitus et al., 2020). The open university concept supports this Finnish education policy goal. The aim for 2030 is that at least half of 25–34-year-old citizens will have completed a higher education degree (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). Therefore, open universities in Finland offer almost free university education available to all without admission requirements (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). Students are diverse in background and aspirations (Haltia et al., 2021). In Finland, the number of open university students has been increasing. In 2010, there were 72 000 students studying in Finland's 13 open universities, and in 2021, 153 361 students (Vipunen, 2021).

Finnish universities have autonomy in designing their curricula, and open university teaching aligns with these curricula. Teaching is research-based, focusing on both content and learning processes (Tynjälä, 2014; Tynjälä et al., 2020). While pedagogical competence is vital for teachers, its level varies. Previous studies have emphasized the significance of assessment in the learning process (e.g., Biggs & Tang, 2007; Ramsden, 2003), highlighting the importance of lifelong and sustainable evaluation that enhances students' self-assessment skills and agency (e.g., Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Boud & Soler, 2016). Assessment is considered integral to learning and closely linked to the learning process (Yan & Yang, 2022).

In the university context, learning, expertise, and self-assessment are interconnected with pedagogical and curricular solutions (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Molloy et al., 2020). Integrative pedagogy (Tynjälä et al., 2014) supports the integration of learning and assessment, fostering sustainable agency in learning (Boud & Molley, 2013; Tynjälä et al., 2020). Compared to solitary work, collaborative and varied interaction better facilitates the acquisition of general skills like decision-making, creativity, and problem-solving (Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2019). Expertise relies on deep, holistic knowledge, encouraging integrative thinking, creative solutions (Tynjälä et al., 2020), and intuitive application (Gube & Lajoie, 2020). The modern concept of expertise emphasizes ongoing self-assessment of one's competence (Charless & Boud, 2018), making it crucial to practice this skill in higher education.

In all this, assessment culture becomes crucial, and it encompasses the beliefs and values underlying assessment practices, guiding the entire assessment process (Fuller & Skidmore, 2014; Watling et al., 2020). Finnish higher education's assessment culture differs from other countries, such as England, as it emphasizes low-threshold assessment without national exams or rigid practices (Ursin et al., 2021). However, assessment for learning is rarely described in official university documents, and student activities are often framed as performance rather than learning (Nieminen, 2022). Different assessment cultures have been identified, including fear-based, accommodation-based, learning-developing, and emergent learning cultures (Skidmore et al., 2018). A culture of assessment that supports student learning focuses on integrative learning, shared responsibilities between students and tutors, diverse assessment methods, authentic contexts, and the development of learning-to-learn skills and meta-skills.

This study examines the topic of online assessment and the associated feedback practices. The participants in this research are students studying educational sciences at the Open University of the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. Due to the pandemic, these students have completed their open university studies entirely online, without in-person interactions with their teachers or fellow students. The main focus of this study is to understand the significance that students attribute to diverse forms of online assessment feedback. Specifically, the aim is to explore assessment feedback from the students' perspective and gain deeper insights into the design, implementation, and improvement of assessment feedback for learning purposes. The research question guiding this study is: "What meanings do students give to the online assessment feedback?" To address this question, an electronic Webropol survey was developed for Finnish open university students, and a total of 35 students responded to the questionnaire. The textual data collected was then analyzed using content analysis techniques. In the next section, we will describe the literature that is functioning as the framework for this study.

Literature review

Learning and Assessment in higher education

Assessment and feedback in learning are informed by various understandings of how learning occurs (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2007; Tynjälä et al., 2020). The importance of assessment within the learning process has been emphasized in research (Charless & Boud, 2018). Despite extensive study and conceptualization of learning processes, a comprehensive understanding is still lacking (Leadbeatter, 2021). In higher education, there has been a shift towards considering students as active constructors of their own knowledge and skills, leading to decreased teacher-centred communication (Henderson et al., 2019; Winstone et al.,2022). From a cognitive and constructivist perspective, individuals are viewed as active builders of knowledge who continuously assess their learning (Tynjälä et al., 2020). The learning process is social and requires guidance from teachers, including different assessment practices (Charless & Boud, 2018). Recognizing the connection between learning and context (Knowles, 1980) and the importance of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991) are essential foundations for an academic learning culture. Self-assessment of learning necessitates support and a shift towards students taking a proactive role in evaluating their learning process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2007). The reflective and cyclical nature of personal experience (Kolb, 1984), the socio-cultural aspect of learning, and the significance of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), provide theoretical frameworks for structuring learning and assessment. New constructs such as the OECD's Lifelong Learning and Active Learner as Responsible Citizen are also emerging, reflecting the need for continuous learning in response to rapid changes in the workforce, society, and economic demands (e.g., OECD, 2020). Learning has also taken on entrepreneurial and transactional aspects, with an increased presence in digital environments (Laalo et al., 2019; Bunce et al., 2017; Rossade et al., 2022).

The perceptions and practices surrounding learning and assessment are evident in the growing trend of online education in higher education. Online teaching and learning are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide. However, the shift to online learning poses opportunities and challenges for adult students, necessitating careful consideration in pedagogical planning, including assessment practices (Ibarra-Sáiz et. al., 2020; Rossade et al., 2022). The transition to online learning in higher education has opened up new possibilities for assessment feedback (e.g., Min, 2006; Nicol et al., 2014). On the other hand, there are pedagogical constraints associated with online learning (e.g., Charless & Boud, 2018), such as student disengagement (Miller, 2013; Bedenlier et al., 2020) and the risk of fragmented understanding and reduced depth of learning (Swiecki et al., 2022). Additionally, students need to properly understand why educational technology is used and how to utilize it effectively (Bedenlier et al., 2020). Providing adult students with comprehensive mentoring in academic learning and practices, including clear assessment objectives (Charless & Boud, 2018), contributes to student retention and progression (Thurmond, 2007; Rhine et al., 2000).

Feedback practices and its meanings to students

Feedback in education has evolved over time and encompasses various meanings. It refers to the practice of teachers communicating and justifying the assessment of students' work. Feedback is crucial in bridging the gap between actual and desired performance, helping students improve (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In a socio-constructive framework, feedback goes beyond one-way communication and fosters interaction and shared understanding (Boud et al., 2013; Winstone et al., 2022).

Hattie and Timperley (2007) categorize feedback based on its focus: performance, learning process, self-regulation, or student personality. Performance feedback, which corrects errors, has effectively enhanced learning (Boud et al., 2015). Additionally, feedback should address the student's learning process and strategies, facilitating self-regulation and strengthening their self-concept. The feedback that looks

forward (feedforward) has proven more effective than feedback focused on past performance (Henderson et al., 2019). Students' perceptions of feedback quality and effectiveness have also been studied (Charless & Boud, 2018).

Feedback holds individual significance for students, associated with usefulness, detail, impact, and personalization (Dawson et al., 2018). Consistency and flexibility of the feedback process also contribute to student engagement (Haughney et al., 2020). In this study, feedback refers to written, asynchronous audio, and synchronous audio feedback teachers provide to students. Summative assessment feedback assesses students' achievement of objectives (Boud, 2000; Crisp, 2012). In written feedback, students value comments on their understanding of the topic (Winstone et al., 2016). The digitalization of education has led to the use of multimodal feedback methods (Charless & Boud, 2018).

Asynchronous audio feedback, recorded by teachers, has been perceived as effective and used more than verbal feedback (Ice et al., 2007). It promotes feelings of inclusion, personalization, and comprehensibility (Middleton, 2009; Parkes & Fletcher, 2014; Woodcock, 2016). Self-assessment and peer assessment encourage student responsibility in the learning process (Seifert & Feliks, 2019). Peer feedback has shown effectiveness but poses challenges due to students' inexperience (Huisman et al., 2019; Stancic, 2021). Students associate quality peer feedback with its quantity and length (Zong, 2021). Self-assessment involves students evaluating their own achievements and learning outcomes, facilitating learning and self-awareness (Boud et al., 2015; Seifert & Felks, 2019). It is a cyclical process involving criteria definition, seeking feedback, reflection, and continuous calibration for accurate self-assessment (Yan & Brown, 2017).

Methodology

Data collection and participants

In spring 2021, data for this study were collected from 35 students studying educational sciences (educational science and adult education) at the Open University. The data was obtained through a survey using an electronic Webropol questionnaire. The survey link and information about the study's purpose and objectives were shared with the target group on the Open University's e-learning platform. Before answering the questionnaire, students were informed that their responses would be used as research data and asked for their consent. They were also assured that their personal information would be anonymized and stored securely with password protection.

The Webropol questionnaire consisted of four background questions (age, gender, education, number of credits completed) and two open-ended background questions regarding the students' learning goals and life situations. Additionally, the questionnaire included 13 open-ended questions related to assessment and feedback. The selected sections of the questionnaire focused on exploring the students' perspectives on the importance of different types of assessment feedback for their learning. Students were asked about their positive and negative experiences with written feedback, asynchronous auditory feedback, peer feedback, and self-assessment. They were also asked to identify which types of feedback they considered most important for their learning.

The survey remained open online for a period of two weeks, and a reminder was sent out after the first week to encourage participation. A total of 35 students responded to the survey, with 97% of them being female. The gender distribution of the respondents closely mirrored that of the Open University, where approximately one-third of students in 2021 were female (Vipunen, 2021). The participants had diverse educational backgrounds, with 46% coming from a vocational background, 34% from a polytechnic background, 17% from a university background, and 3% holding a previous university degree. On average, they had completed 48 credits at the Open University.

Thematic data analysis

The data analysis for this study involved several steps that will be described in more detail in the next. Firstly, relevant sections on assessment feedback were extracted from the larger dataset and compiled into separate files for each student, with pseudonyms assigned to ensure anonymity. The initial analysis focused on examining the data to identify general meanings and themes related to feedback. The next step involved identifying key and recurring themes aligned with the research question. This process entailed classifying the implications of feedback based on the students' responses, resulting in preliminary thematic clusters. As the analysis progressed, these themes were further refined into main themes and sub-themes, with their relationships becoming clearer. The main themes that emerged during the analysis were "The meaning of assessment feedback" and "Versatile assessment feedback online." The latter central theme was explored in more depth through the identification of sub-themes such as "Practices of A/synchronous Audio Feedback," "Peer Feedback," and "Self-Assessment." The questionnaire used in the study guided the students to respond to the presented themes, contributing to the preliminary data structure along these themes. The qualitative and substantive diversity of the data allowed for the identification of both anticipated and new themes. Feedback-related statements were extracted from the data and categorized based on similarities and differences.

The analysis process involved refining the main themes and sub-themes by examining their substantive meanings concerning the research question. Ultimately, structuring the data into themes enabled a precise interpretation of the meanings and a comprehensive answer to the research question. The analysis process culminated in the construction of the themes and the results of the study, shaping the structure of the presentation of the findings. The results section directly addresses the research question through the organization of these themes. It is worth noting that the research material was originally in Finnish, and the quotations included in the results were translated into English.

Limitations of this study

The small sample size (N=35) and the use of a questionnaire can both be considered as limitations of this study. While qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding and description of issues (Patton, 2002), a more comprehensive and extensive data collection method could have yielded deeper insights into the participants' responses. These could have, for instance, been in-depth interviews or focus group interviews. The meanings conveyed by the students' assessments also indicate the multi-dimensional nature of their feedback. For example, initial emotional reactions to feedback may be intense, but as they are processed, the input may acquire new meaning for the students (Parander et al., 2021). In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, detailed methodological steps have been described, and authentic quotes from the data have been included. Researcher triangulation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) has also been employed to enhance trustworthiness.

Results

The meaning of assessment feedback

According to university students, all the feedback they received from teachers on the assessment of their learning was meaningful to them. They considered the most critical feedback they received was the final assessment by the teacher of the written assignments they had completed during their studies. Students felt it was essential to obtain qualitative feedback on their learning and grades.

According to the students, feedback that was relevant to their learning was both positive and constructively critical.

> "Feedback that supports learning is positive, encouraging and constructive. It's nice to get feedback on what has worked. I also like to get feedback on how I could do things even better." Respondent 13

Students emphasized the importance of feedback for the continuity of learning in terms of content. Feedback helped to crystallize the scope of what had been discovered and to reinforce the essential points. At the same time, the feedback focused on learning broader perspectives and contexts, which the students considered necessary. From a learning perspective, quality assessment feedback provided students with new perspectives to broaden their own thinking.

Students perceived feedback as relevant to their learning when it was sufficiently explicit and justified. Well-targeted and concrete feedback was understandable and useful for future studies and learning.

"One that has highlighted a few important details of the task and provided feedback on them - either good feedback or suggestions for improvement or other observations that have helped them to improve their own performance." Respondent 22

Although the assessment feedback was mainly understood as a written summative assessment after completing the task, formative and guiding feedback during the process was also relevant. Small messages of encouragement from the teacher and quick answers to students' questions were meaningful and supported active progression. Formative and guiding feedback endorsed the student's sense of self and academic progress. Varied and timely feedback from the teacher was relevant to the continuity of the learning process. Students also stressed the importance of feedback from an academic skills perspective. Students mentioned that they had received guiding feedback on academic writing skills and concrete tips to strengthen them.

"Encouraging. Especially feedback that builds confidence in your own skills. Small private messages, responses and guidance have also been very important. Messages have been answered quickly and felt important." Respondent 4

The assessment feedback was a vital mirror of the student's own learning. The appreciative style and tone of feedback were key, according to students. Feedback was expected to be supportive and constructive, sufficiently explicit, and appreciative, thus contributing to the student's experience of feedback as a learning support element.

Students used feedback in a variety of ways in their studies, such as developing study skills and strengthening their study ability. Responses highlighted the process-oriented approach to learning and the continuously developing academic skills that feedback supported.

Perceptions of the importance of feedback highlighted its multifaceted relevance. However, students' perceptions also highlighted the partly instrumental significance of feedback. Students wanted feedback to help them perform better in future assignments, and the learning aspect was not specifically mentioned. However, the many meanings of learning and feedback were clear to university students. However, there are many different forms of feedback and their different purposes, which will be explained below.

Versatile assessment feedback online and its´ meaning to adult students
University students were provided a wide range of online feedback on their learning. Next, we look at the forms of feedback relevant to students: teacher-directed written feedback, asynchronous and synchronous audio feedback, student peer feedback and student self-assessment.

The most relevant and common form of feedback was individual summative written feedback from the teacher after the course. Students were used to this form of feedback during their previous studies. According to the students, the advantage of written feedback was that it was personalized and focused on their individual learning. The written feedback can be stored and used for future learning and learning processes. Positive and constructive learning feedback also had an emotional effect on the learning experience

"Super encouraging and appreciative of my study skills, the written feedback I went to see several times and read aloud to my husband.... Gave me so much belief in myself. I also returned constructive feedback to make corrections to my bachelor's thesis." Respondent 30

"I was very pleased with the written feedback, it was detailed and told me how I could further improve my writing. The written feedback has also informed me about the strengths and successes of the answers. The benefits are excellent, I can always go back to see what kind of feedback I have received. The written feedback has been personal, just for me. I like them." Respondent 17

The relevance of summative feedback after the completion of the course was questioned. Some of the written feedback provided by teachers was perceived to be limited in content. According to students, feedback was of the same type regardless of the teacher, which led to a loss of relevance of the feedback. Other areas for improvement of written summative feedback included a lack of guidance to study further and learning and a lack of opportunity for interaction.

"I consider the lack of support and guidance for learning to be a weakness. For example, there was a lack of guidance for additional courses. There was also a lack of interaction." Respondent 6

"I have received constructive feedback that has supported my studies. After receiving feedback, I would sometimes like to justify what I had done and ask questions to the feedback provider regarding the feedback." Respondent 28

Practices of A/synchronous Audio Feedback

Asynchronous individual audio feedback from the teacher was given to half of the students surveyed during their studies. According to them, it was a meaningful and positive new form of feedback for learning. Audio feedback enriched traditional written summative feedback and was reported by students to be rich in content and honest. Students reported listening to the recorded feedback several times and tried to internalize the content as fully as possible regarding the factors that contributed to their own learning. According to students, the most significant benefit of audio feedback was the experience of personalization. The different teacher personalities became more familiar to students through the audio feedback, which students found particularly enriching for the online and remote campus learning experience.

"Audio feedback is personal because in distance online you may never have met or spoken to the teacher when you receive your first voice feedback. A good addition to written feedback." Respondent 15

The most perceived weakness of audio feedback was related to technical limitations. It could not be recorded by the system itself, which was the main weakness compared to the recording and use of textual feedback. The students had transcribed the feedback to be able to use it in the same way as the written feedback. Sometimes there were technical problems, such as finding the feedback recording in the system and having it stutter. For audio feedback, some students expressed a need to respond but did not have the technical capacity to do so. The content of the feedback was perceived to be rich and rewarding in some respects and limited and general in others, as was the case with the written feedback.

"The challenge I find with audio feedback is that it's harder to record than written feedback, and it took me a while to find it." Respondent 9

Some of the students had received audio feedback on their learning from the teacher in face-to-face online meetings or online seminars. The feedback was perceived as meaningful and even surprisingly positive in content. In face-to-face meetings, the encouraging feedback and encounter with the teacher inspired students to continue their studies. According to the students, the online mediation did not narrow

the encounter at all, but they experienced the situation as a live situation. The relevance of direct interaction was highlighted, and common understanding could be built and completed naturally. In particular, the feedback received in the one-to-one live situation allowed students to receive accurate feedback on their learning, which was significant as a learning experience.

> "In live situations, the challenge is that something gets missed, but otherwise the feedback from the live situation has been positive, encouraging and critical in a good way. And you can ask questions straight away if something is still bothering you." Respondent 21

In seminar situations, the teacher's audio feedback was usually group-oriented, summarizing, and guiding feedback. In seminar meetings, the teacher's feedback and guidance was not directed at the individual student, which was understood from a time management perspective. In live situations, a few students discussed the tension, making some of the content of the assessment feedback challenging to assimilate. For the most part, however, students reported that the live situations were relaxed and immediate and that interaction with the teacher and other students was natural. However, some students reported that they only chose to study independently and without direct interaction with other students or the teacher. Students also emphasized the importance of this possibility.

Peer Feedback
Students also had experience of giving and receiving peer feedback on learning, both synchronously and asynchronously. It was perceived as meaningful and allowed for new perspectives on the content and social interaction. Students perceived meaningful feedback as constructive, developmental, and encouraging. Giving feedback was perceived as a problematic but valuable skill. Gaining a deeper understanding and fresh perspectives on the learning process was made possible by becoming familiar with what is being assessed, how it is assessed, and the underlying criteria. Giving feedback was a labor-intensive activity that took time and conscious study. According to the students, only a few peers were able to provide quality feedback within the time available. The relevance of peer assessment was crystallized in learning and assessment's cyclical and continuous nature.

> "Peer feedback gives you new perspectives on things and also teaches you how to give and receive feedback." Respondent 11

Peer feedback in the form of written summative feedback was reported by students as very important when studying online courses. According to students, several online courses were structured in an asynchronous but scheduled pedagogical structure. The small groups in the online course proceeded in a dialogical way, reflecting together on the content being studied. In these situations, the skills of giving and receiving feedback were emphasized and the importance of the feedback instructions given in the online course, as highlighted by the students.

> "In online courses, I have experienced both benefits and challenges of feedback from other students. I think that the guidelines for giving feedback should be improved. I have noticed that some peer feedback is superficial and assesses the look of the assignment rather than the content. Other feedback focuses on criticism and leaves out important positive feedback altogether." Respondent 17

Peer feedback situations were meaningful experiences for students, both positive and negative. Feedback and the teacher's lack of response to the situation were humiliating and traumatizing. On the other hand, successful teacher-facilitated feedback moments and processes were memorable and encouraging situations. For feedback to be meaningful, students felt that the teacher needed to instruct feedback and justify its relevance clearly. At its best, feedback was a significant part of the learning process for all

involved; at its worst a pejorative or oversimplified additional task. According to the students, the conscious practice of giving and receiving critical and constructive feedback was an essential skill for the future.

Self-Assessment

During their studies, students had come to understand the importance of varied assessment feedback, including self-assessment, as an essential part of the learning process. Students were used to self-assessment of their own learning, which was meaningful and regular. It was perceived as a meaningful reflection on one's own strengths and weaknesses, which helped to structure the learning process. Self-assessment reinforced students' agency in the learning process, where goal setting and assessment were integral to the learning process. The stage of learning was reflected in the ability to self-assess their own learning process. At the beginning of their studies, self-assessment skills required conscious research and the development of critical thinking. As investigations progressed and in other contexts, the skills practiced automated self-assessment of learning and made it more meaningful.

> "It's instructive and challenging if you haven't done it much. It's easy to fool yourself, you have to be mature enough to critically and reasonably self-assess." Respondent 10

> "Self-assessment should be done continuously to promote your own learning. This has been a new and really instructive experience. I have always used self-assessment quietly in my mind, but never in writing." Respondent 29

University students considered the self-assessment successful if it aligned with the teacher's feedback. The teacher's assessment feedback was considered more valuable than the "truth" and was not questioned by students. Students in the early stages of their studies felt written and summative assessment feedback from the teacher to be the most valuable and other forms of assessment to be subordinate to it. As the studies progressed, students highlighted the importance of self-assessment in reflecting on the learning process. They found it difficult to assess their own learning process at first, but clear self-assessment questions facilitated the process. Some students automatically associated self-assessment with their learning outcomes. Some wondered if they would only carry out a self-assessment of learning if it were compulsory. Students reflected on the interconnectedness of different assessment feedback forms and on learning from different perspectives.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the significance of various types of learning assessment feedback for open university students. The findings indicated that online pedagogical approaches were meaningful to students, aligning with the insights Sharma and Hannafin provided (2007). It was partly explained to students why different learning assessment and feedback practices were employed, emphasizing the importance highlighted by Bedenlier et al. (2020). According to the results of this study, in academic contexts, there should be greater emphasis on justifying pedagogical decisions and placing them within a broader framework, thereby empowering students and fostering their active role, as Henderson et al. (2019) emphasized. Further, according to this study, the assessment of learning with this studied cohort had evolved from a traditional one-way summative feedback approach from the teacher (as discussed by Winstone et al., 2022) to a more student-centered approach (also highlighted by Boud & Molloy, 2013; Rossade et al., 2022). Also, the development of integrative pedagogy (cf. Tynjälä, 2014) was observed, allowing students to utilize the feedback received in their learning process (also discussed by Winstone & Carless, 2020).

This study found that students were accustomed to receiving written summative feedback from the teacher after submitting their assignments (as noted by Charless & Boud, 2018; Dawson et al., 2018). Additionally, some students had experienced receiving both formative and summative audio feedback from the teacher at different stages of their studies, offering flexibility (also mentioned by Haughney et al., 2020).

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These new feedback practices were perceived as enhancing written summative feedback and grade information, as also identified by Ice et al. (2007). Peer review was generally viewed positively, mainly when clear guidance was provided (as discussed by Li et al., 2020; Sivenbring, 2017), and when its relevance was evident. However, there were instances where peer review was weak or even offensive, indicating the need for further research, as noted by Huisman et al. (2019). Students recognized the importance of self-assessment as an integral part of their own learning process. From a self-directed learning perspective, self-assessment was regarded as a fundamental element of agency: students contextualized their own learning, set goals, established a personal relationship with the subject matter, and ultimately assessed their achievement of self-imposed objectives (see also Yan & Brown, 2017).

To ensure sustainable and self-regulated expertise and learning processes within an academic context, comprehensive and deliberate monitoring of learning is necessary throughout the study phase (as highlighted by Boud & Molloy, 2013; Tynjälä et al., 2020; Ishihara et al., 2022). Learning objectives, contextualization, and continuous assessment of the learning process should be consciously practiced dimensions of academic learning. The significance of multifaceted learning assessment feedback is evident, as work environments for academic professionals demand continuous learning and creative problem-solving, where comprehensive assessment of diverse situations is an essential skill. Future research on the sustainability of academic learning and teaching should further investigate the additional abilities, beyond assessment skills, that contribute to the development of expertise. In conclusion, the findings suggest the importance of creating in higher education a supportive and dynamic learning environment that values different forms of assessment feedback, promotes student engagement and facilitates self-directed learning.

As education becomes digital, it is essential to consider the diversity of evaluation and feedback. The use of AI in learning can be seen as an opportunity if it is integrated into the learning process in pedagogical ways that support deep learning, for example, through authentic tasks and personal reflection or collaborative learning. In this case, AI is seen as an actor in the learning process and knowledge construction, not just as a mechanical answer machine. Bearman et al. (2022) have argued that, so far, digital technology has yet to be used in assessment and, even then, mainly as a tool for achieving efficiency. In addition to AI, another educational policy product of the digitalization of education is the European megatrend of micro-credentials, i.e., small units of competencies. The European Union has set a target that by 2030 every European adult should have completed at least one micro-credential (EU). Micro-credentials are an effective response to the challenges of continuous learning and to fill the competence gap. However, the aim of effectiveness should maintain the depth of learning, to which assessment is directly linked. AI can enhance and automate assessment, but to promote deep learning, its use requires pedagogically trained teachers. Research suggests that providing quality feedback to students is challenging in the current context, where universities increasingly rely on casualized and temporary academic staff to assess undergraduate work (Richards et al., 2017; Nica, 2018). Finally, we conclude that assessment has a significant power on student learning and therefore it is important to strengthen the role of pedagogically trained teachers in future digital learning environments.

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Authors' Bios
Corresponding author*:
*Maunula Minna PhD (Education) works as a university lecturer at the University of Jyväskylä, Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius. Her interests include research on the life course of adults, the relevance of education in a global era, and the development of web-based and multi-modal education in adult education.
Email: minna.r.h.maunula@jyu.fi
ORCID-link: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7968-705X

Maunumäki Minna PhD (Education) is a university lecturer in Education, Adult Education and Early Childhood Education at the University of Jyväskylä, Open University. Her areas of interest include learning assessment, education policy and the development of web-based and multi-modal education in adult education.
Email: minna.j.maunumaki@jyu.fi
ORCID link: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5102-0966

Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, PhD, is Professor of Education at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland and Nord University in Norway. Her research focuses on early childhood education, teacher education, equity in education and international assessments of learning outcomes.

Email: heidi.k.harju-luukkainen@jyu.fi

ORCID-link: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4532-7133

Teachers' Perception on Local Curriculum in Basic Education of Nepal

Nirmal Mishra

Tribhuvan University, Nepal

ABSTRACT

This research paper aims at exploring the teachers' perception and their conceptual understanding on local curriculum, importance of local curriculum and local curriculum development process in school education of Nepal. For this, the interpretive paradigm was adopted to explore the subjective realities concerned with the central phenomenon. Within this process, this qualitative phenomenological study collected intense information through in-depth interviews with the selected community schools' basic level teachers. Based on the information, three themes have been developed for presenting the results and discussion. The major finding of this study is that teachers positively perceived the local curriculum for preserving the local knowledge, cultures as well as the tourism areas of a community. The teachers also perceived that teachers, parents and community participation is essential during the local curriculum development process as well as selection of local subject matter. Apart from these shining areas, the finding shows that the curriculum development situation is in the initial phase and local governments and schools are not yet developing the local curriculum. As part of instated local curriculum development, the schools autonomously select the subjects viz. English and Computer. These English and computer subjects were implemented in the name of optional subjects in grade one to five and six to eight respectively.

Curriculum development policy has been changing due to the historical progression, national realization, and contextualization of education. In the changing times, the centralized and decentralized educational authorities are responsible for making curriculum development policy. The centralized curriculum development policy encourages the development of the national standard curriculum whereas the decentralized policy promotes the local standard curriculum (Cui et al., 2018). The centralized curriculum follows the top-down procedures and central authority makes the nationwide curriculum (Print, 1993; Onyeme & Okoli, 2018). It focuses on high academic achievement due to globalized impact on education (So & Kang, 2014). France, Russia, Australia, Japan, Korea and Singapore have applied this national standard curriculum development approach (Cui et al., 2018; Creese et al., 2016; So & Kang, 2014; Lewy,

1991). The national standard curriculum is remarkable because it prepares the nation's future economy, fixing the education system, constructing the vision of the nation, setting the rules and providing the education services to the teachers and students (Jang, 2017). Contrary to the dark side, centralized curriculum does not represent community participation and fails to incorporate the local content during the curriculum making process (Onyeme & Okoli, 2018). Similarly, it is also unable to promote the professional development of teachers and does not inspire the creativity of teachers. The teachers are far from the curriculum development related activities in the centralized curriculum. The teachers' participation in curriculum development related activities are directly and indirectly associated with their professional development (Akrom, 2015). But the centralized curriculum development approach does not provide any room to participate in curriculum development activities for teachers, parents, and community members. The limited persons especially experts/elite have got the chance to participate in the curriculum planning and development process.

Conversely, the decentralized curriculum counteracts to solve the limitations of centralized curriculum. It follows the bottom-up procedures in the curriculum developing process (Print, 1993). The teachers and local authorities are major responsible agents in curricular decisions (Print, 1993; Onyeme & Okoli, 2018). The United States, Canada, Hong Kong is practicing this form of curriculum (Cui et al., 2018; Creese et al., 2016; Lewy, 1991). The decentralized curriculum emerged to address the local people's needs, values and their voices. This decentralized curriculum enables the local people and their participation in the curriculum development process (Onyeme & Okoli, 2018). Similarly, the decentralized curriculum also focuses on the school-based curriculum development approach and follows the local standard as well as contextual standard. The schools are free to determine the curriculum independently (Cui et al., 2018). The United Kingdom, (Cui et al., 2018), Singapore (Chen et al., 2015), Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Taiwan and China (Wang & Hsieh, 2017) have adopted this approach of curriculum development. Similarly, the three national, local and school level curriculum administration practices have been adopted by the People Republic of China (Cui et al., 2018). The weightage in curriculum development of these three national, local and school level's responsibilities are 80, 15 and 5 percent respectively.

Both the centralized and decentralized curriculum development policy have been adopted in school education of Nepal. The primary education curriculum (2062 BS; 2065 BS) and basic education curriculum (2069 BS) were the first local curriculum developed and implemented at local level. Similarly, even after the country went into a federal structure, the local curriculum development policy and provision continued giving the main responsibility to the local governments. After the federalism, the national curriculum framework-2019 provided the curricular structure and curriculum development principles and approaches for school education (grade one to twelve). This framework prescribed the national standard core curriculum as well as local standard context specific curriculum (CDC, 2019a). For addressing diversified needs of local people, the basic level (grade one to eight) curriculum structure organized local curriculum or mother tongue curriculum as a separate subject at school or each local government level (CDC, 2019a; CDC, 2019b). The local curriculum development policy documents clearly stated that the local governments are to be responsible in developing the local curriculum for the individual school. But, if local governments realize that local people have common local needs, the common local curriculum could be developed for all schools within one local government territory (CDC, 2019b).

Conceptualizing the Local Curriculum

The decentralized curriculum is interrelated with local curriculum, school-based curriculum as well as place-based curriculum (Lewy, 1991; Wither, 2000; Evans & Savage, 2015). All of these allocate the curricular decision power to the local people. Local curriculum emphasizes local flexibility and teachers' autonomy in curriculum development. This form of curriculum connects the external links with parents and community members in curricular decisions (Chen et al., 2015).

The local curriculum helps to increase the students' performance and solve the diversified needs of local, ethnic and language groups of people. For this, teachers need to have the knowledge and skills on local teaching methods, techniques, cultural knowledge as well as instructional materials (Egcas et al., 2017). The teachers and parents realize that this form of curriculum preserves the regional characteristics and their cultural identity (Andria et al., 2018). This bottom-up curriculum development approach empowers the teachers in integrating learners' needs, flourishing their creativity, presenting their artistry and applying the local pedagogy (Yuen et al., 2018). If they apply the local culture and wisdom in their teaching, they feel more satisfaction. This study claims that local content helps to improve the communication between the teachers and students. Apart from this, the local curriculum helps to preserve the diversified cultures and values of people. It also promotes students' attraction toward schools (Laeen et al., 2019). In line with these findings, the local curriculum is essential to preserve the cultures and values of students. Through the curriculum localization, it creates the motivational teaching learning environment in schools (Laeen et al., 2019). This form of curriculum is appropriate to the school-based teaching. The school promotes the learners' experiences through instructional activities. By this process, learning could be meaningful as well as relevant and it connects the students with their surroundings as well (Autti & Bæck, 2019). The discussion clearly establishes that if the teacher gets an opportunity to develop the local curriculum, it will be useful for their professional development at grassroots level. It creates a discourse of how diversities are managed through curricular plan and activities in school education. It proved that teachers are not only the implementer but also the developer of curricular plans according to their local context.

Local Curriculum Development Process

The curricular decision policy is varied in a global context. The centralized and decentralized curriculum development practices have been applied in different countries in the world. The schools and teachers are responsible for developing the local curriculum in Finland. The school teachers are autonomous to handle the local curriculum. They can develop the pedagogical tools for effective implementation of national standard curriculum (Mølstad, 2015). Similarly, the local stakeholders' such as teachers, principals, parents, school management committee members and official members are involved in school-based curriculum development and implementation in Indonesia (Akrom, 2015). During the local curricular decision, they incorporated a variety of areas such as replica of village, needle work, carpet weaving, attending local rituals and ceremony, visiting remarkable places of village as well as productive centers (Laeen et al., 2019). In this process, teachers have autonomy to design, plan, implement and evaluate the school-based curriculum development in Singapore (Chen et al., 2015). This school-based bottom-up curriculum development approach empowers the teachers for developing and implementing the curriculum in Hong Kong. Through this process, teachers get the chance to demonstrate their creativity, knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy for curricular planning to implementation (Yuen et al., 2018). On the other hand, teachers perceived that the local curriculum development tasks provided an extra burden for them as it added extra responsibilities alongside their regular duties. Their personal history, residential place, career experiences and commitments to the community also affected the use of the local knowledge and values in curriculum (Autti & Bæck, 2019).

Theoretically, the national curriculum framework-2019 offers the participation of teachers in curriculum development related activities. But practically, the curriculum development process of school education is impractical and centrally dominated in Nepal. The central authority has not provided the prominent role to the teachers for developing the curriculum at local level (Bhusal, 2015). The small groups of subject experts developed the curriculum where most of the teachers were deprived from participating in curriculum development related activities. It is clear that the bureaucratic top-down process of curriculum development model is being practiced in Nepalese school education. In my experience, the chief of the education division of local governments is playing the leadership role in curricular decisions. To support my experience, Subedi (2018) claimed that the grassroots stakeholder teachers and head teachers were not

familiar with the local curriculum development policy and guideline for school education. They perceived that the curriculum development process demanded extra competencies, so these tasks can be handled by the experts efficiently.

The local curriculum development and implementation guideline of Nepal (2019) prescribed seven definite components for designing the local curriculum. The components are objective/competency, subject matter, grade wise learning achievement, teaching method and process, student evaluation, time determination/weightage and elaboration of curriculum. This guideline also suggests that the prescribed components are not mandatory for designing the local curriculum. Apart from these elements, the local curriculum development team can add or change the prescribed curricular components for designing the local curriculum. Similarly, the school or local authority can determine the components of local curriculum as per their needs and expectations. Though, both the rigid as well as flexible curriculum development approaches might be used for local curriculum development at the local level. Additionally, there are several policy paradoxes in the local curriculum from development to implementation in Nepal. The central agency such as the curriculum development center only focuses on the theoretical positions of the local curriculum development process rather than how local agencies can coordinate the local people like parents, teachers and principals. Another paradox is that the central agencies are unable to shift the local curriculum development related responsibilities to the local agencies. The people are highly concerned over the globalized subject matter rather than their context specific subject matter (Sharma et al., 2019). Similarly, Subedi (2018) also shows the gap between the policy of local curriculum development and its implementation in primary schools of Nepal. The teachers and head teachers/principals are not informed with the local curriculum development policy and guideline. They perceive that curriculum development is the duty of experts. Moreover, Sharma et al., 2019) also supported this finding and added that teachers were taking the local curriculum development as an extra task in their regular teaching schedule. But, the community people said, it is essential to incorporate the local culture and heritage within the local curriculum. The local curriculum helps to promote the feeling of ownership in people and provide opportunities to integrate the local resources, content as well as pedagogy. I got opportunities to participate in local curriculum related workshops and discussion forums. Similarly, I also got opportunities to interact with school teachers, local government officials and head teachers directly and indirectly about the local curriculum related policies and practices. Through the research evidence and my experiences, I felt that teachers have not taken interest in accountability and meaningful participation in the selection of local subjects and local curriculum development processes. The local governments leaderships or decision makers are selecting the local subject as only a subject to be taught in school. After the informal interaction with local stakeholders and review of the literature, I drew the insight that there is a problem in conceptualizing the local curriculum and local curriculum development process in school education of Nepal. Based on this research gap, this research paper has addressed the striking aspects of how community school teachers perceived the local curriculum in terms of concept, importance as well as development process in basic education of Nepal.

Research Questions

This research paper emphasizes the analysis of the teachers' perception on local curriculum and its development process. For this, I developed the following questions to know the realities of local curriculum development at basic level school education in Nepal.

1. How do teachers conceptualize the local curriculum in school education?
2. How do teachers perceive the local curriculum in terms of necessity and importance for basic level school education students?
3. How do teachers perceive the local curriculum development process in terms of participation, development process and coverage areas at school or local level?

Research Methods

Methodology refers to the perspectives and strategies for the particular research problem. It prescribes only one or various methods for inquiry (Potter, 1996). It clears the plan for how research proceeds and what researcher does in a particular research work (Leavy, 2017). There are several research approaches which emerged viz. post positivism, pragmatism, critical, constructive, or interpretive as well as transformative paradigms (Creswell, 2018). This study adopted the interpretive paradigm. This worldview emphasizes the social construction of reality through daily interactions. I assigned the meaning of curricular phenomena through the interpretive process (Leavy, 2017). Regarding this worldview, I used the qualitative approach to explore the realities about the educational phenomena such as teachers' perception on local curriculum and analyze peoples' subjective experiences (Leavy, 2017) and build in-depth understanding of the local curriculum development in basic level school education of Nepal (Best & Kahn, 2006; Leavy, 2017). It provides an in-depth description of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The nature of this qualitative design is more flexible and naturalistic (Best & Khan, 2006; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

Regarding the qualitative approach, I have chosen the phenomenological design to describe the subjective experiences of individuals (Mertens, 2010). It describes how individuals/people experience particular phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009; Leavy, 2017). Basically, two approaches to phenomenology have been highlighted in the literature viz. hermeneutic phenomenology and transcendental or empirical or psychological phenomenology. The hermeneutic interprets the lived experiences of an individual through the texts of life. Another approach transcendental phenomenology focuses on the experiences of participants as central phenomena. Among these approaches, I have chosen transcendental phenomenology for a fresh description of participants' experiences. This approach is not only applied in a descriptive process, but it is also an interpretive process. Through this process, it explores the personal experiences, feelings, perceptions and beliefs of teachers (Creswell, 2007). Based on this design, I asked community school teachers what and how they are experiencing the local curriculum and curriculum development process at local level.

In the phenomenological study, participants who are selected are those who have experienced the particular phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Before selecting the participants, I have confined the study area within the five local governments of Dhankuta, Bhojpur and Sankhuwasabha districts in the eastern part of Nepal. From these five local governments, I have purposely chosen five informants. About the participants, I believe that the community teachers have good experience on the local curriculum because the national curriculum policy has incorporated the local curriculum in the school structure of basic education in Nepal (CDC, 2019a). For selecting teachers as research participants, I informally contacted teachers at first who are accessible for me and asked if they could manage the time to interact with me or not for the topic 'local curriculum'? Those teachers who said yes, I listed their name and phone number. From this list, I selected five basic level teachers as research participants through purposive sampling. These five teachers were from each selected five local governments purposely. I decided two major selection criteria viz. those teachers who have at least ten years of teaching experience in community school and those who can interact through Microsoft teams. Considering these criteria, I have selected five teachers purposely. Similarly, I collected the information from these selected research participants. The phenomenological design stresses the in-depth interview for collecting the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2007). Due to this reason, I have taken in-depth interviews with the selected teachers for first-hand information through the interview guideline. I developed an in-depth interview guideline considering the research questions (Creswell, 2007). These questions helped to achieve the breadth and depth of information from the community school teachers (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Based on this guideline, I conducted the interviews with the teachers formally and informally. Before the interview, I informed them about my purpose for this research and ensured their privacy of information. In qualitative research, the data collection, analysis, and report writing go simultaneously and interrelated with each other (Creswell, 2007). From the beginning of the information collection process, I coded, categorized, and used theme building for analyzing and interpreting information.

I generated themes from the informants' narratives in a reductionist way (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). The information was analyzed in a thematic way supporting the informants' direct narratives. For this, I developed the textual description of teachers' experiences or how they experienced the local curriculum in their instructional journey. Similarly, I also developed the structural description of teachers' experiences on how they experienced the local curriculum in the local context (Creswell, 2007).

Results

The results have been presented in the three themes according to the research questions. These themes have been presented on the basis of participants' direct narratives with regard to conceptual understanding on local curriculum, importance of local curriculum and local curriculum development process.

Conceptual understanding on local curriculum

All the teachers were familiar with the concept of local curriculum. They perceived that the local curriculum needed to cover the local content and ensure the participation of local people in the development process. They believed that it integrates the local contents such as languages, cultures, occupation, and lifestyle of people. The P-2 teacher viewed that local curriculum or subject has separate aspects of subject matter than national core curriculum courses. Similarly, another P-1 teacher believed that it addresses the needs of a diversified community. This subject needs to prioritize the cultures, wisdom, occupation, geographical areas, agricultural activities as well as tourism areas of a local community. Likewise, the thirteen-year work experienced P-3 teacher perceived that the local curriculum covers the local content and resources. The content and resources might be about peoples' cultures, historical and religious places, occupations, and economic activities of a community. Another P-5 teacher also supported this perception and added that the local curriculum should cover the community people's expectations as well as socio-cultural and geographical context. It should emphasize the community peoples' needs and interests which is not possible to address through the centralized core curriculum courses. Abiding by these ideas, the P-4 teacher perceived in a different way that the local curriculum is an occupation and production-oriented curriculum. So, this local curriculum is only appropriate for the small geographical areas or community people. In his opinion, the centralized curriculum only covers theoretical knowledge in our school education. Due to this reason, the local curriculum needs to cover the practical as well as behavioral activities which are related with our day-to-day practices or life activities. He only put the value of production or occupation based on local subjects for sustaining their traditional occupation related knowledge and skills. He expected that this form of curriculum helps to create job opportunities in a community.

It is clear that teachers used the term local curriculum and local subject synonymously. The teachers' perception shows that they conceptualized the local curriculum in a rudimentary way where the curriculum is defined as a list of subjects or subject matter. Fundamentally, it needs to cover the local cultures, occupation, languages, geographical areas, tourism areas as well as religious places related to the subject matter. All the teachers believed that the separate local subject needs to address these areas of content available in the local community. They did not deny the integration of local content within the national core curriculum. In their experiences, they tried to illustrate the local knowledge, culture as well as knowledge construction process into their core curriculum teaching. Thus, they believed that both national and local curricular practices are essential for ensuring the quality of education. Both practices might bridge up the local knowledge into the global world and vice versa.

Necessity and importance of local curriculum in school education

Local curriculum has several benefits for the community, people and students. The teachers argued that the local curriculum needs to preserve the identity of community people in the sense of their cultural, occupational, and geographical as well as language identity. Supporting this idea, the P-1 teacher said, "through the local curriculum, the student may be able to understand the local culture as well as be aware to engage in locally adopted occupation". She added that this local curriculum helps to solve the societal problems for functioning of the social order. By supporting this viewpoint, another P-2 teacher perceived

that "the local curriculum or subject is essential because it preserves the local knowledge and occupation of community people". It also might cover the cultural diversity of people and their needs as well as interests through the process of selecting and organizing content. Through this curricular practice, it tied up the learners with different cultural practices, occupation, historical places, and tourism areas of a community. Similarly, it is necessary to promote respect culturally among the diversified people/ learners within the same society. It helps to encourage participation in other's cultural festivals as well. The P-3 teacher argued on the importance of local curriculum as following:

> Through the local curriculum, students will inform with local content, and if they inform with local historical and tourism places, they can advertise this information outside the local places like district, province and national level. The national core curriculum does not provide the knowledge and information about the local tourism areas, historical places, occupation, caste and ethnic people's culture and so on. Due to this reason, it should develop the local curriculum at school or local level.

> Similarly, the P-4 teacher viewed that students easily understand their historical traditions, religious beliefs as well as cultural practices of different ethnic group's people through this curriculum. Apart from this, students can develop positive attitudes towards the agricultural as well as indigenous occupational practices from their early age. He argued that students who have got the certificate of any degree, feel hesitant to do such types of agricultural and occupational activities. For this, the society also discourages the educated people and says, "after getting such higher education, cultivating in the field (YETRO PADHERA PANI KHETI GARNE)". This has deep rooted understanding in community people. Due to this fact, the community people were not encouraged to incorporate the local content and resources in a local subject. Supporting this perception, the P-5 teacher also focused on promoting the local agricultural activities in the local curriculum. He added:

> The theoretical knowledge could not help to sustain life and not provide job opportunities in the community or nation. Due to this reason, the locally adopted agricultural and occupational activities should be promoted through the local curriculum. If we develop these skills in students associating with modern technology, they can easily earn the money for their life sustain. For this purpose, the local government should take the initiation to develop the local curriculum from grade one to twelve.

> Based on the teachers' perception, the local curriculum is important to preserve the cultural identities of local people as well as develop the harmonious relationship among the people in society. All of the teachers agreed that this form of curriculum should be included at the secondary level too. They added, if we want to develop this local subject properly, the local government should include this subject from grade one to twelve. The P-3 teacher suggested that the basic level (grade one to five) local curriculum could cover the community level content and resources and the basic level (grade six to eight) could cover the municipality level local content and resources. Similarly, if this curriculum structure extends to the secondary level too, the district level local content and resources such as geographical structure, tourism areas, religious places, sociocultural composition of society and so on might be included. These realities expanded that the local curriculum is necessary to preserve the people's identity for assimilating each other's cultural practices. The local curriculum enables the learners to preserve the local heritage, occupation as well as economic activities.

Local curriculum development process in school and local level

The local curriculum was developed by a certain team of teachers as well as a group of experts outside the local government through the contract basis (THEKKA BASIS). Due to these circumstances, the teachers did not get any chance of participating in the local curriculum development process. A few teachers are getting the chance to develop the local curriculum at local level. The four teachers' schools have not developed the local curriculum at school level. These schools selected the English subject as a local subject for grade one to five and computer for six to eight. The P-1 teacher said, senior teachers, head teacher and school management committee head jointly decided English grammar as a local subject for grade one to

five. They believed that this subject would help to improve the language skills of the students. She also added that computers as a local subject for grade six to eight is useful for improving the technological skills of the students. The same perceptions were expressed by another P-3 teacher. He added that the English language skills and computer skills are important for today's job market. Due to this reason, the school teachers decided to implement these subjects in place of local curriculum/subjects. According to him, the curriculum was not developed in schools for teaching these subjects. The different textbooks were selected from the market by the subject teacher for teaching English language and computer subjects. The teacher believed that textbooks are the major sources for teaching these subjects. Another interesting experience being expressed was that teachers conceptualized these subjects as optional subjects rather than local subjects. The P-1 teacher did not use the textbook for English language teaching. She reflects:

> I want to say without lying, we do not use any textbooks for teaching. I have not prescribed the textbooks to the students for practice in school and home. I teach based on my experiences. I do not use materials or textbooks while teaching these subjects. This last year, we did not conduct the assessment of these subjects.

Another P-4 teacher also provided a similar view on the subject selection process of the local curriculum in school. In his school, teachers have selected the computer subject as a local subject for grade one to five since the last two years. Before this they did not select the local subjects where teachers were taught basic numerical skills and language skills in place of local curriculum in school. For supporting this argument, he shared the idea on local curriculum selection process of school in this way:

> What we have done is we searched a Nepali medium 'Practical Computer' book which was available in the market and have been teaching it from Grade 1 to five. Last year, it was not possible due to the Corona pandemic.

This statement states that they did not discuss with parents, school management committee and community leaders for selecting the local subject/curriculum. Teachers collectively decided to teach the computer subject as a local subject in grade one to five. In the discussion, teachers realized that the information communication and technology skills are inevitable for students. For this subject teaching, he added, we have only two computers to conduct the practical work for forty-one students in school. Due to the lack of computers, they only focused on theoretical knowledge of computers and elaborated subject matter with the help of textbooks.

One of the teachers (P-2) said that the rural municipality has developed the local curriculum of grade one for the academic year 2021-2022. The local government has played the leadership role in developing the local curriculum. The local government has developed the same local curriculum for all community schools within the local government territory. For this, the education committee of the municipality formed the curriculum development team including selected teachers and experts. This team discussed with the head teachers and community leaders for collecting their opinion on local people's needs. He added about the participation of teacher as:

> This team did not discuss it with me and our school's teachers. This team only called the head teacher for discussion in the municipality office. However, the head teacher has not shared the discussion matter with the school staffs till now.

According to him, the municipality has sent the developed curriculum for implementation in the academic year 2021-2022 to all the schools. This developed local curriculum has covered the content like introduction of municipality, geographical maps of municipality, culture of different ethnic people and tourism areas. After reviewing this curriculum, he felt that the curricular contents are not relevant for grade one students. He and other teachers discussed this curriculum informally and concluded that it is not suitable for grade one students. In his opinion, this developed curriculum is only appropriate for grade five or six students. He further added, "This grade one curriculum has covered the concept like square kilometer, the no of ward and names of local government representatives, features of different tourism areas and so on". The

municipality also developed the textbook for this curriculum. The textbook is also not appropriate for six-year-old children according to their developmental maturity.

The teachers believed that the schools or local government (municipality) can take leadership roles in deciding the local curriculum. For this, one teacher (P-1) argued in this way: "The school or local government can take the leadership role in developing the local curriculum. Now, the local government can take the initiation for selecting the local subjects." She further added that the rural municipality has the major responsibility in developing local curricula for all schools. The participation of teachers, parents and community leaders is needed to ensure while selecting local subjects as well as contents. It becomes clear that teachers acknowledged the local curriculum for school education. They favored the local government leading a decentralized curriculum rather than school-based curriculum. But they accepted that if the local government provides the opportunity for developing local curriculum, we can develop a local curriculum at school level. For this, the school management committee and community leaders need to get involved for effective implementation. Similarly, all the teachers agreed that if the community needs are the same for all municipality levels such as agriculture, the municipality could develop the same local curriculum for all students.

The P-4 teacher's understanding was different from the other teachers on taking responsibility for local curriculum development. He argued that teachers should take a major responsibility in making a local curriculum because they only can capture the local subject matter and resources as per the needs of community people. According to him, the centralized authority provided such an opportunity to promote the teachers' creativity in curricular activities. But we are missing this opportunity due to the lack of financial resources and parental awareness. Our laziness is also responsible for this situation.

No training programs or workshops on local curriculum development were conducted. Similarly, the district level training program only focused on the mother tongue subject related activities. The local curriculum development directive provides the same guideline to develop the local or mother tongue curriculum (MOEST, 2019b). But in his opinion, the training program was organized for those schools which are going to develop the mother tongue curriculum. Furthermore, the schools or local government also have not taken the initiative for developing curriculum locally. One teacher (P-5) argued that both schools and local governments have not prioritized this subject for basic education. He added that most of them focused on the management of the English medium teaching for quality improvement. It is clear that the local agencies are not aware of how to manage the local curriculum at local level. The rooftop mindset also influences the local subjects' selection and curriculum development at local level. The P-3 teacher said that the parents are not familiar with the local subjects or mother tongue related subjects. He said, "For this situation, teachers are more responsible where they did not make any efforts to inform the parents about the provision of local subjects. Likewise, we did not want to take on the extra burden of tasks because we will get the same incentive with or without doing the local curriculum development related activities." I think the local curriculum development process is the technical aspect where the involvement of parents are not crucial. But, for taking ownership, the parents need to be aware of why this form of local curriculum is essential for their children. Otherwise, parents are less interested in the local curriculum. However, Another P-2 teacher's perception is different and argued that the teachers take the local curriculum development process as a burden. He further added that it is not included within the regular duty of a teacher legally. Due to this reason, teachers were reluctant in taking local curriculum development responsibility at school level. But now the local government is going to take responsibility for developing the local curriculum for all schools.

Without developing the local curriculum, the schools implemented the local subject. For this, schools selected the computer and English language related textbooks from the market and taught their students. The teachers were not satisfied with this process of local subjects' selection process at school. According to them, this subject is not the priority compared to other national core subjects because they did not want to

take on extra tasks of burden with the same incentive. Similarly, they perceived that this subject is more important for preserving community identity as well as promoting the local, cultural, geographical and tourism areas. Knowing these benefits, they were reluctant to develop the local curriculum because most of the teachers have several responsibilities in society like farmers, social reformers, political members as well as businessmen. The P-4 teacher viewed that because of these several responsibilities, they were unable to provide sufficient time for their professional work. He added that teachers need to be professional at first for taking this responsibility otherwise it is not possible to manage the curricular activities at school. It is clear that professionalism is the major factor that affects the teachers' participation in curricular decisions at local or school level. The P-5 teacher looked at it differently, the reason behind why teachers are not developing the local curriculum at school level. He believes that:

> The main reason for not being able to develop the local curriculum at school is waiting for the higher body for support. Guardians are not aware of it, no one takes care of it, this is how everything is going on. Before two years, Computer subject had not been taught either. Students were taught addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Now, realizing the need of technology, we have used it. Yes, if the higher body makes it compulsory, we will develop it. Otherwise, we are fine with it.

> Another teacher (P-2) disagreed with these viewpoints and argued that the local government should take the major responsibility for local curriculum development. The school is unable to develop the local curriculum because it does not have sufficient financial resources for managing this curriculum. Due to this reason, the local government can take the leadership role in developing curriculum at school level. But presently, the local government has not informed the school staff about the discussion of local curriculum development related activities. The education committee and local government leaders only selected a few teachers as an expert and collected the opinions of head teachers only. In his experience, the parents did not get the chance to participate in this local curriculum development process. This experience showed that the roof top mindset of the central authority in decision making can also be seen in the local government too. This fact shows that the political representatives as well as bureaucratic leaders did not believe the teachers' strengths till now.

Discussion

Teachers conceptualized the local curriculum in a generic sense. In their understanding, the local curriculum is a set of local content or organized form of local knowledge within the name of a local subject. Within this organization, the local subject only covers the list of subject matters related with their culture, occupation, geographical territory, as well as tourism places. There are several functional perspectives on local curriculum in the name of intended or written form of curriculum, operational or taught curriculum, learnt curriculum, assessed curriculum and hidden curriculum (Lockley, 2018). Among these functional perspectives, teachers only conceptualized the local curriculum as a list of intended learning outcomes or content. I drew the claim that the conceptual understanding of teachers is in the initial phase. They only conceptualized the local curriculum as an organization of content that is available in the local community.

> All of the informants agreed that the local curriculum is essential to preserve the identity of people and culture of ethnic people as well as their traditional occupations. They agreed that the local curriculum preserved the people's identity, awareness building, inform the geographical and tourism areas of society, promote the religious as well as cultural values and develop the feeling of ownership among the students. This shows that students easily understand their contextual characteristics and practices through this local curriculum. The findings of Andria et al. (2018) are also similar to my results. They found that local curriculum helps to preserve the cultural identity as well as regional characteristics of people. Similarly, Laeen, Ayati et al. (2019) also proved the necessity of a local curriculum for preserving the cultures and values of students which are their way of living. These scholars' findings also supported the importance of local curriculum for school education. In my findings, the teachers positively perceive the importance of

local curriculum for protecting the contextual knowledge, values, occupation, cultures as well as geographical and tourism areas. Practically, the teachers were unable to experience the importance of the local curriculum in school because all the teachers did not get an opportunity to develop the local curriculum at school and local level. Based on the discussion, I claim that teachers are familiar with the importance of local curriculum without any practical experiences on local curriculum development practices in school or local level. Whatever benefits of the local curriculum in the community the teachers are not experiencing, it will be of importance only for the theoretical position of the local curriculum.

Theoretically, the curriculum could be developed nationally as well as locally. During the curriculum development, the process may be more rigid (Taba, 1962; Print, 1993) as well as flexible (Print, 1993). The schools did not develop the local curriculum and did not take the initiative in developing the local curriculum. Only one municipality has initiated the local curriculum development practices at local level. This local government did not ensure the participation of teachers and parents in the curriculum development process. The teachers were unfamiliar with this process of local curriculum development. It is clear that the teachers' roles in local curriculum development were not realized by the local government. However, Taba and Skilbeck approach highly focuses on the teachers' roles in curricular decision (Print, 1993). It can be said that the rooftop mindset has also been influencing the local peoples too. In Finland, teachers are autonomous to handle the local curriculum. They should develop their local curriculum according to the national steering curriculum (Mølstad, 2015). But here they are not ready to take the responsibility of local curriculum development related activities at school level or local government level. Teachers feel it as extra tasks within their regular routine. They also focus on the national standard core subjects only in the instructional activities. This finding is also similar to Autti and Bæck (2019) in which they concluded that the local curriculum development activities are the burden tasks that added the extra responsibilities for them. According to them, the teachers' commitments and career experiences affected this situation.

Conclusion

The local curriculum is inevitable for addressing the diversified needs of society. To cover this, teachers positively think about the necessity as well as importance of local standard curriculum. But there is the need to extend the teachers' conceptual understanding of the local curriculum from the list of content to the taught, learned and hidden aspects of curriculum. The local curriculum is essential for preserving the cultural and occupational identity of community people. It needs to promote the cultural, occupational, geographical and tourism areas in the local to global landscape. For this the schools need to develop or select the local curriculum or subject to teach at school level instead of English and computer subjects. The local curriculum is needed to be developed properly with the participation of teachers, local experts and parents. But English and computer subjects are popular as optional subjects instead of local subjects in community schools. The teachers and parents' involvement in curricular decisions is rare, and teachers take an extra burden in their regular duty. The gap on perceptual understanding and the lack of teachers' practical activities on local curriculum development needs to be minimized for the effective adaptation of local curriculum at schools or local level community schools of Nepal.

Implication

The findings can be used to improve the local curriculum related policies of federal to local governments of Nepal. Similarly, it might be useful for local governments to take decisions for valuing the teachers' expectations and experiences. The findings suggest that the local curriculum is important to develop the preservation and promotion of local culture, values, occupation, regional characteristics, and tourism places. For this, teachers are highly positive for local curriculum development and implementation at local level. Though, the results build on the evidence suggests that the local governments or school principals need to take the leadership role in developing local curriculum at local level. Apart from these, the findings can be

applied to make a contextual curriculum at local level by paying attention to its main principles viz. local needs, local subject matter, and local participation.

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Author's Bio

Mr. Nirmal Raj Mishra is a lecturer of curriculum and evaluation at Tribhuvan University of Nepal. He completed a master's in philosophy of education from Tribhuvan University. Now, he is a PhD student of Tribhuvan university. He has done several research projects in ICT integrated teaching, teaching practice,

classroom pedagogy, adult literacy, early grade reading, student assessment, local curriculum as well as being involved in teacher training as a master trainer. e He also published research articles and textbooks. Email: nirmaltu@gmail.com

Opportunities for developing intercultural competence during COVID-19: A case study of international students in Australia

Leonardo Veliz

University of New England, Australia

Pegah Marandi

Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a two-year ethnographic research study that critically examined the lived multilingual and multicultural experiences of two international students in search of heightened intercultural awareness and enhanced levels of intercultural competence during the pandemic. Drawing on a constructivist view of intercultural competence, this study comprehends the ways in which students use their 'action-oriented' capacity to cope successfully with new, unknown, unfamiliar, and unpredictable challenges and situations in the host culture. Informed by a narrative inquiry approach, data were gathered through participants' oral narratives at approximately eight-week intervals over the course of 2020 and 2021. Analysis of the ethnographic data revealed while students appreciated and fully exploited the limited opportunities for intercultural communication and connectedness presented to them, a higher level of self-awareness, a greater understanding of cultural distance, a desire for cultural affinity and mutuality led them to exploring alternative avenues for becoming interculturally competent citizens.

Keywords: COVID-19, intercultural awareness, intercultural competence, international students, multicultural experiences

Global mobility, cross-border migration, global shifts in geopolitics and economic power have changed the speed and scale of changes to the social, cultural and linguistic landscape of globalised societies. In Australia, the international student population has significantly grown in the last two decades from around 61,000 in 1999 to almost 500,000 in 2019. Indeed, this has made a substantial contribution to the country's revenue by bringing over $25 billion dollars to the Australian economy. Over 2020 and 2021, because of the COVID-19 pandemic through its various strains, transnational student mobility and cross-border migration came to a halt. According to Hurley (2020), during the pandemic, applications for international student visas for students in

overseas countries dropped by 90% compared to applications received in 2019. This translates to approximately 200,000 fewer international students enrolled in Australian institutions.

Besides the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector, Australia faced unprecedented levels of mental health amongst not only its local citizens but also communities of migrants, temporary residents and international students. It has been acknowledged that university students were identified as a very high risk population (Dood et al., 2021) with heightened emotional and psychological stress, financial hardships, lack of access to government welfare systems, high levels of anxiety and distress (Weng et al., 2021). The level of vulnerability of international students has been significantly exacerbated by being precluded from all federal pandemic assistance schemes such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper (Weng et al., 2021).

Added to these challenges are those that relate to social and cultural adjustments to the new environment. These include, for instance, processes of adaptation to social and cultural norms and patterns in society (Egekvist et al., 2016). International students are expected, and often required, to unidirectionally embrace the social and cultural features of the dominant group in society. Ma's (2018) 'asymmetry framework' in international education posits that international universities tend to have a natural expectation that it is the sole responsibility of the (international) student to adjust, acculturate and assimilate into mainstream society.

Based on the above complex landscape of international education and international students, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. To what extent have international students' limited instances for intercultural connections and encounters created an opportunity to enhance their intercultural competence?

2. What coping strategies and mechanisms are employed by international students to become interculturally competent during times of a global pandemic that poses limitations on social and cultural interactions?

International students in Australia: benefits and challenges

The term 'internationalization of education' lies at the center of globalized public policy discourse. Over the years, much discussion, research, and debate have taken place around the implications of globalization and the spread of information and communication technologies for (higher) education. Higher education has a long-standing tradition of internationalism (Lomer, 2017). Although cross-border flows of people have almost always existed, global mobility has significantly increased due to the global ramifications of globalization and adoption of neo-liberal policies (Peters, 2012).

International higher education providers have an enhanced capacity to attract large numbers of international students, who bring significant economic profits to local and global economies (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). In Australia, for example, international education has contributed over $25 million dollars to the Australian economy (Hurley, 2020). Besides the economic profits, international students make a substantial contribution to the social, cultural and linguistic texture of Australian society, which enhances what is already a hugely diverse nation.

As international students settle into their new environment, several challenges, barriers, and complications are presented to them. International students tend to be racialized on the basis of their language proficiency, accent, race, skin color, cultural and religious background (Veliz & Veliz-Campos, 2021; Weng et al., 2021). Much research that focuses on understanding the challenges during the transitional period of an overseas study experience has concluded that limited language proficiency has a direct and adverse influence on their social and academic life on campus (Park et al., 2021). Moreover, due to the lack of confidence in their English proficiency skills, international students are reluctant to participate in social or academic activities and are often left feeling looked down upon by others (Dooey, 2010; Park, 2016). In her study, Park (2016) reported that international students generally sense that they are judged as having low intelligence and competence

levels which leads them to taking rather passive roles in communication and interactions, most often resulting in just keeping silent.

International students' challenges go beyond linguistic barriers. A significant challenge concerns the creation and establishment of social networks in the host country. When students leave their home countries, they also leave their support networks and social connections, which have to be built up from scratch in the host country. Cena et al. (2021) point out that these social, family, and cultural disconnections "can be very stressful for international students, and to provide a healthy social environment, universities should support social connections within the university" (p. 815). Cross-cultural adjustments, including the development of friendships and social networks, are never an easy task for international students, which generally result in what Cena et al. (2021) call 'acculturative stress'. In order to mitigate such stress, international students generally opt for connections and friendships with co-nationals, which helps foster their sense of belonging (McFaul, 2016), but jeopardises their social connectedness in the host country. Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) surveyed 86 international students at a Hawaiian university who were measured on their social connectedness, homesickness, contentment, and life satisfaction. The data revealed that those students with more co-national connections scored significantly lower for social connectedness and overall satisfaction whilst pursuing their studies at university. This highlights the significance of putting support systems in place for international students to make cross-cultural connections with students from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds.

The nature of challenges that students face was exacerbated by the disruptive and catastrophic consequences of the COVID-19 global pandemic. These "disturbed established patterns of operations in the international education sector" (Qi & Ma, 2021) interfered with international students' capacity and ability to adjust to new social and cultural environments and to manage potential risks. Students, due to their status of temporary visa holders, faced enormous financial hardship, unemployment, unprecedented levels of mental health issues, homesickness, and significant barriers to connecting with the wider community. In a survey administered to over 700 students from all over the world on the impact of COVID-19, Moscaritolo et al. (2022) found that some of the significant challenges faced by international students concerned 'fear and uncertainty' and 'COVID-19 discrimination', among others. The latter was a considerable stressor given that depending on students' nationality, students felt that levels of discrimination could manifest in not only verbal and psychological abuse but physical attacks.

Intercultural competence

Before delving into the intercultural competence, it is worth noting, by way of elaborating on the arguments put forth in the previous section, that the view adopted in the present study aligns with Ma's (2018) call for a paradigm shift in international education. Ma (2018) questions and challenges dominant discourses that legitimize well-established divides such as 'local and international' which not only accentuate notions of 'otherness' and 'foreignness', but also require that 'the other', 'the foreign' or 'the international' individual is the one who must adapt, adjust, and integrate into the host environment. Sadly, this is the lens through which social and cultural adaptation processes have been looked at for many years, which is a rather simplistic, narrow, and inefficient way of developing a thorough understanding of what is needed from and expected of all parties involved in social and cultural adaptation processes.

Motivated by rapid and constant cross-border mobility, changes in the linguistic, social and cultural contours of our societies, intercultural competence has become central to our thinking and doing in an increasingly diverse world. Several frameworks, definitions and perspectives on intercultural competence have been offered with various other interrelated concepts such as intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication. A myriad of other related terms have been used to capture the general sense of being culturally competent such as global competence, global citizenship, international competence, intercultural sensitivity, amongst others (Deardorff & Ararasatnam-Smith, 2017).

A central question that arises in studies on intercultural competence is to do with the universality or culture-specificity of the term. Rathje (2008) addresses intercultural competence from both perspectives and argues that "a culture-specific understanding of intercultural competence would therefore do little to promote the validity of the concept itself" (p. 258), thus suggesting a 'generalized' understanding of intercultural competence. Drawing on the work of Wierlacher (2003), Rathje (2008) points out that a generic definition of intercultural competence should capture the development, promotion and facilitation of new systems that allow for the orientation and navigation of environments, encounters and interactions with people of different cultures.

Other definitions of intercultural competence have highlighted the need for developing personal and inter-personal skills. Some of these skills include self-awareness and awareness of others, knowledge of different conversational patterns, positive attitudes towards differences, along with personal and behavioral skills that lead to effective communication (Krajewski, 2011). Research (e.g. Byram, 1997) has also suggested the need for developing empathy, flexibility, adaptability, and stress-managing strategies. These personal and inter-personal skills become essential when navigating unknown or unfamiliar social and cultural environments and when participating in new social and cultural experiences and practices.

The communicational aspect of intercultural competence is a central feature of the construct. Krajewski (2011) argues that successful and effective cross-cultural communication and exchange is dependent on knowledge and skills that constitute an essential part of intercultural competence. When engaged in cross-cultural communication encounters, interlocutors must be aware of numerous contextual, social, cultural, conversational, and personal cues that determine the rate of success of the interaction. Drawing on Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence, one could safely assume that successful and effective communication with people from diverse backgrounds would require respect for others' cultural values and beliefs, positive attitudes towards difference, openness to listen, observe and evaluate, tolerance for ambiguity, just to name a few.

It has been argued that knowledge, motivations, and actions are the central elements that constitute the make-up of intercultural competence (Lustig & Koester, 2010). Knowledge refers to the information needed about people, the context, norms of appropriateness, social behaviors, and principles of politeness that operate in a specific culture (2010). Motivations, as they point out, include the emotional asset that individuals possess as they anticipate or participate in intercultural encounters. They explain that actions are those realized behaviors, attitudes, and performances towards people from diverse backgrounds which may be deemed appropriate or inappropriate.

One last point worth making relates to the centrality of intercultural competence as a mechanism or avenue for social justice. Although the term 'social justice' does not specifically conjure up any educationally or pedagogically sound orientations, we believe the term is appropriate when it comes to recognising the applications and usefulness of intercultural competence in all contexts and situations other than education-related ones. In education, as pointed out earlier, international students tend to be racialized, left out, discriminated and looked down upon on the basis of ethnicity, religion, language or social background (e.g. Dood et al., 2021; Dooey, 2010). One of the main goals of developing and promoting intercultural competence amongst international students, and any other individuals that partake in cross-cultural exchanges, is, we believe, to reduce and mitigate risks that may lead to social and cultural exclusion. International students generally possess feelings of exclusion not only because they are on route to developing full proficiency in the language of the host country but most importantly because the dominant community has not created sufficient opportunities for students to embrace its values, norms, principles, and practices. This links back to the asymmetry framework put forth by Ma (2018) which not only perpetuates power differences in society but continues to empower 'the host' and disadvantage 'the guest'.

The study

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This study grew out of interest in the lived experiences of international students' social and cultural adaptation process throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic in the context of a higher education institution in Australia. The first research ideas emerged amidst academic discussions and reflections with colleagues from various Australian universities in April 2020 who shared experiences and best practice as to how to navigate what could be a season of dramatic changes to teaching and learning. Special attention was turned to the challenges of social and cultural adjustment and adaptation of international students in the foreseeable circumstances. An invitation via email was sent to a small group of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students at two Australian universities, to which two students responded with a desire to participate in a two-year ethnographic study.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that draws on principles of ethnographic research. Although there are no clear-cut definitions of ethnography in education and the social sciences, there is consensus that ethnographic work is largely observation-based which seeks to construct an analytical description of practices, values, and beliefs of one or more groups (Cohen et al., 2018; Reeves et al., 2008). Ethnography has been commended for "its unique approach to social practices through continuous and immediate experience in field work, and its fragmented methodological attention to situations, interactions and experiences" (Wieser & Ortega, 2020, p. 1). Through the lenses of ethnography, the present study critically examines and unpacks the lived experiences, circumstances, and interactions of two international students in Australia who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, were precluded from social and cultural opportunities to become interculturally competent learners. Notwithstanding the limited instances for developing intercultural competence, the article also explored the compensating strategies used by the students to develop an ability to function effectively across cultures.

Participants

The participants were two international students undertaking HDR degrees at two different Australian universities. Both arrived in Australia in 2019, one in November and the other in December respectively. A total of 12 HRD students were invited to participate in this study via email. The nature, scope and duration of the study was explained in the email. After the second email reminder was sent to students, two replied with an interest to partake in the study, one male and one female. The students were then emailed the consent forms, and a preliminary zoom meeting was organised to meet with them and provide details of the study and the phases of data collection. To maintain confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms have been used, Jack and Flora. Jack's home country is China and Flora's is India. Due to studies undertaken in Japan, Jack speaks Japanese as a foreign language, Mandarin, which is his first language, and English which he began learning in high school. Flora indicated that she understands Urdu, speaks Hindi as a first language and considers English as her second language.

Data collection and analysis

The researchers met with the students over zoom at different intervals over the course of two years, 2020 and 2021. Each meeting was recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Given the number of meetings over a two-year period, and, therefore, the amount of qualitative data that would be gleaned from the interviews, preliminary analysis of the data took place as soon as each meeting was recorded. This process allowed the researchers to maintain a vivid recollection of the affective elements of the narratives told by the participants. This preliminary analysis involved coding the data and searching for emerging themes. As we approached the completion of the transcription process, the data was further analysed more rigorously through QSR NVivo. Five themes emerged from the data:

    (i)   Hopes and expectations
    (ii)   Support systems
    (iii)   Navigating the unknown

(iv)   Battling 'difference' through co-national connections
(v)   Intercultural gains

Analysis

Hopes and expectations

Global mobility creates not only opportunities for personal, social, and cultural exchanges but also expectations and aspirations about life in the host country. Nilsson (2015) highlights the importance of learning more about students' expectations as they act as windows into the real motives, drivers, and motivations behind students' mobile life. During the first encounter with Jack, he opened up about the high expectations he had prior to coming to Australia:

> "I had enormous expectations and high hopes that I would be able to mingle with the Australian community, but COVID came and I was basically deprived of opportunities for cultural connections and for immersing in the Australian culture" (Jack, June 2020)

As the conversation unfolded, Jack spent a significant amount of time reminiscing about "the dreams that had been shattered" because of the COVID-19 crisis. Jacks' expectations to build intercultural relations with the Australian community are evident in his desire to not only connect with the local culture but immerse himself in the community, which is indicative of his positive attitudes towards Australian culture.
Flora had similar hopes and expectations about having opportunities to experience "a different way of life" in the country of "her dreams":

> "We all know that PhD studies are or can be solitary activities, but I thought I would be able to meet large groups of scholarly groups in my university and have a different experience from my country, but COVID collapsed everything, which is sad" (Flora, June 2020)

Through the lenses of an 'experiential' framework, Fakunle (2020) points out that motivational drivers to undertake studies overseas are generally founded on a strong sense of expectation to experience 'something different' from the social and cultural norm in their home country. Flora's aspirations for a different scholarly experience were sadly overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, this did not preclude her from pursuing other channels or avenues to develop a broader understanding and heightened awareness of the Australian way of life.

> "Because I've tried not to go out that much recently and hang out with people I know, I've been able to expand my network of acquaintances and COVID friends through social media and online platforms where we can share ideas, recipes, music, festivals in our country, and things like that, and try to know more about the Australian lifestyle" (Flora, June 2020)

It is of great interest to observe that despite the social and physical distance constraints imposed by the pandemic, Flora turned to the affordances of digital technologies to not only maintain but strengthen her social relationships and friendships during lockdown. Besides the limited opportunities for physical interaction with people in the community and the self-created avenues for pursuing a larger network of 'friends' or 'acquaintances' through social media networks, Flora and Jack express profound gratitude to their supervisors and other university departments, who, despite the restrictions in place, made regular contact with them and showed genuine care for students.

Support systems

An important element that helped Flora navigate the unknown and uncertain environment in which she, and everyone else, was living during the pandemic was the support received from her supervisors:

"My supervisors have been supportive, and they have been proactive in organising more regular zoom meetings, and group discussions with other research students about their cultures, and even student support services have organised workshops about understanding yourself, understanding others, and several others on racism and discrimination, which is the result of lack of intercultural understanding" (Flora, October 2020)

Supervisors became more intentional about creating purposeful virtual environments for interactions and collaborations with other students who were most likely representative of a wide range of cultural backgrounds. It is of great interest to observe that Flora reports on workshops that were intended to develop self-awareness, a greater understanding of others and opportunities to talk about racism and discrimination, which Flora believes to stem from a lack of intercultural understanding. She further indicated that "if we were more culturally aware, none of us would ever be discriminated", and her supervisors have ensured that students are equipped with the skills to be globally competent. "I understand that our supervisors, and all academics really want us to be competent for this global world that is very diverse, but it's difficult in an online space, not impossible though" (Flora).

Despite the genuine care and constant support provided by supervisors, which Jack sincerely appreciates, he reminisces about a sense of attachment and belonging to his social and cultural roots which he feels as he navigates the complexities of 'foreignness' in a context where he is attempting to fully integrate:

"The support that we have from our university is great, but it's not the same as being in your country, with your people, your family, your culture, traditions, food, support, while in here you're always a foreigner, and outsider, almost like an alien even when universities give you support" (Jack, October 2020)

Although a sense of alienation may be indicative of Jack's inability to develop cultural competence to succeed in intercultural encounters, it is a clear sign of the complex processes of cultural adaptation through which he navigates his ability to integrate into social and cultural practices in an academic context in Australia. He adds "sometimes, I don't know if I should laugh, giggle or stay serious when someone says a joke, or when I should speak or if I should speak at all".

Jack's high expectations prior to arriving in Australia were noted earlier. His expectations have not vanished. On the contrary, despite his sense of alienation in certain contexts such as zoom meetings, he remains hopeful about learning opportunities to develop a heightened awareness of the rituals, practices and expected behaviours in the Australian context.

"For me, I've felt more like an alien when we have zoom meetings, and there's always someone that likes the camera, and talking, and then you're Chinese, English is not your first language, your accent is not perfect, sometimes people don't understand you, so it's hard to even fit in in this online context, but I am learning the online patterns and the Aussie patterns as well because I want to fit in and meet my expectations. I am still hopeful" (Jack, January 2021)

It has been documented that adjustment challenges are particularly associated with language and cultural barriers faced by international students (Cena, et al., 2021). As observed in the above quote, Frank's cross-cultural challenges involve not only context-specific 'patterns', as he calls them, but also feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence about his English language skills.

Navigating the unknown

As time goes by, it becomes evident that both Flora and Jack have made genuine attempts to find alternative avenues to cope with the absence of social and physical opportunities to socialize and connect with other

students. Despite all restrictions in place, Flora has leveraged the affordances of technology delve into the Australian community and its social practices through online platforms and social media networks:

> "In the last few months, I have tried really hard to make connections in my community like finding Facebook community pages where I can learn about events in the community, things people sell, and even just read real English, not artificial language like in newspapers or TV" (Flora, January 2021)

The relentless efforts to connect with the community irrespective of the known limitations have led Flora to seeking opportunities that would provide her with authentic experiences with the language, thus exposing herself to what she calls 'real English'. A search for instances of authentic language use is also pursued by Jack who has also resorted to different resources to develop an enhanced awareness of some of the distinctive characteristics and practices of the Australian society:

> "It's been difficult for us Chinese because people blame us for the virus, so when I go to essential services like supermarket or the doctors, there's always one person that gives you 'that' look and makes you feel bad and ashamed, and it's a burden on you. People have said nasty things to me as well. So, it's harder for us to insert in the community in these times, but I've been reading a lot about Australian politics, the benefits they have for people in the pandemic, etc., watching AFL, and doing other things to feel more like home, a lot of Netflix and Aussie TV shows" (Jack, January 2021)

A rather confronting and disturbing observation made by Jack concerns the blame and shame he carries as a result of the racist attitudes and discriminatory remarks towards him as a Chinese student which disempowers him to take initiative when it comes to connecting with the local community and discourages active participation in cross-cultural communication as he further notes that "I feel my voice is not heard in group discussions and when there are people from other cultures, I just feel reluctant to contribute".

It would not be unusual to hear an international student express a profound desire to attain higher levels of English language proficiency or even develop a 'native-like' accent as a mechanism to feel more integrated and included in the host country. In a study that investigated Chinese international students' perceptions of their accented English, Veliz and Veliz-Campos (2021) found that students' perceived inability to acquire a native-like proficiency level or (Australian) accent hindered their capacity to not only participate in academic intercultural interactions but also fit into the wider community. Although Flora acknowledges the need to improve her English, she stresses the significance of being able to develop an awareness of the cultural norms and practices of the Australian society:

> "…I've also become very familiar with Australian TV shows and movies on Netflix – there are some really good ones! This helps me understand not just their English that I have to keep improving but their thinking, how they behave in some situations, what they do in a party, and things like that, so I ever have to be in a situation, I don't want to make a mistake because in India it's very different" (Flora, April 2021)

Battling 'difference' through co-national connections

By now, Flora and Jack have already been in Australia for over one and a half year, and yet continue to voice their concerns about how lonely and solitary life can be in Australia which precludes them from finding genuine opportunities to interact with the community and immerse themselves in the various social and cultural layers of the Australian society. It is known that intercultural encounters with people from different parts of the world present students with opportunities for the development of intercultural competence (Egekvist et al., 2016). When those opportunities do not arise, students are likely to experience what Yeh and Inose (2003) 'acculturative stress', which is exacerbated by the students' perceived cultural distance portrayed

through differences in social and cultural practices, ways of communication, daily routines and perceptions about friendship.

> "I don't have any Aussie friends, I don't even know the people next door, and this is so strange for me. In India, you know everyone, I mean not everyone, but you know your neighbourhood, the people in your community, but here it's so solitary even not in pandemic, I think, maybe because we are so different, or just have a different lifestyle. I like a lot of things about Australia and the people, they are so relaxed, respectful, treat people fairly, so it's a good mentality, and I'd like to adopt it, but it's hard through the online setting, and not having the opportunity for real interactions" (Flora, April 2021)

Despite a sense of isolation in and disconnection with the local culture, Flora has uncovered some common cultural characteristics that make up the Australian identity which are not easily identifiable in a context of limited opportunities for physical, social, and cultural connections. However, the various coping strategies she has employed to compensate for the absence of instances for socialization have led her to being more inquisitive about other aspects of the Australian way of life as she voices "I'd like to know more about where they go, typical food, comedians, sport rules, and things like that".

McFaul (2016) indicates that international students' social networks and friendships are highly dependent on and formed by interactions with co-national students with whom minimal cultural adjustments are needed, and a greater sense of identification and belonging is observed. This is observed in Jack's comment who indicates that he has taken advantage of opportunities out of lockdown to socialise with Chinese friends:

> "When we are not in lockdown, I can go to some places but with my Chinese friends, so I try to take every opportunity now, but I think you will know more about the culture if you have local friends. I think it's hard to make friends with Australians, but I have learnt many things about them and the culture, so I think I would feel ready to put myself in real cultural situations, and I am very keen to take any opportunity to mingle with locals" (Jack, June 2021)

Cognisant of the benefits of maintaining and strengthening interactions with co-nationals, Jack leverages the opportunities to meet up with them but also acknowledges the complications associated with establishing friendships with domestic students. Research has highlighted the benefits of cross-cultural interactions and engagement between international and domestic students which relate to increased participation in university events, greater retention rates and a greater sense of belonging (Trice, 2004).

Intercultural gains

After almost two years of pandemic and relentless periods of lockdown, Jack feels equipped to step into any other challenging situation as he says "I think I could go through other lockdowns and many more pandemics. It's been very difficult". However, he also feels that one of the great take-aways of the pandemic has been the 'cultural resilience' that he has developed. He reported that "I went through some culture shock at the beginning, and some discrimination, but I have learnt a lot about the Australian culture and other cultures as well that I can adapt more easily". These (inter)cultural gains have, however, been obtained mainly through face-to-face interactions as well as other virtual platforms which facilitated cross-cultural communication with different people. With restrictions being lifted in late 2021, Jack has seized social opportunities for appropriating the world rather than just Australian ways of doing and thinking.

> I am very excited because even though it's been very difficult all this time, now that we are not in lockdown, I have got into a soccer club, and there are a lot of Aussie players and other cultures so it will be a great opportunity to hopefully hang out with them, know more about the world and how different people function in this context as appearances can be deceiving" (Jack, October 2021)

For Jack, being in a soccer club constitutes a social practice that goes beyond the physical and health benefits that can be gleaned from sports, but rather it is a platform for establishing intercultural cooperation and collaboration with people from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, Jack sees this as an opportunity to see beyond himself and understand the complex and multifaceted ways in which people operate in different places and at different times. Gee (2000) states that the kind of person one is recognized as 'being' can change from moment to moment as interactions unfold, which makes features and characteristics of individuals rather unstable and dependent on the specific social and cultural practices that take place at a specific place and time.

> What I've found really good and inclusive is an opportunity to be in a church environment because it helps me connect with myself, connect with other people and share different experiences, and connect with God. People are amazing, the church is multicultural, very diverse and they all make me feel like at home. It's been great to be in person. (Flora, November 2021)

Although spirituality is not generally seen as a social need, for Flora, the opportunity to attend church physically allows her to fulfill not only a spiritual need to encounter God, but also to build personal, social and cultural connections with others, which allow her to deepen her knowledge and understanding of diverse cultural experiences.

Discussion

The discussion in this section follows the order in which the research questions were formulated earlier.

Research question 1

To what extent have international students' limited instances for intercultural connections and encounters created an opportunity to enhance their intercultural competence?

The first research question formulated in this study taps into the extent to which international students' limited instances for intercultural connections and encounters have created an opportunity for enhancing their intercultural competence. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, the data revealed that despite the challenges, barriers, physical, social, and cultural limitations imposed by COVID-19 restrictions, both Flora and Jack were able to not only find but purposely create opportunities that would allow for a deeper understanding of themselves and of the social and cultural dimensions of the host country – Australia.

Firstly, it is worth noting that Flora's and Jack's principal motivation to come to Australia was solely educational. Their aspirations to obtain a qualification in an 'international university' was something they deemed essential to increasing their employability prospects. According to Fakunle's (2020) motivational framework, one of the rationales for pursuing overseas studies is educational. Besides the add-on benefits of a study-abroad experience, the overarching goal that Flora and Frank have pursued is that of enhancing their career prospects through an overseas degree. Secondly, Flora and Jack were highly motivated by the different social and cultural experiences they would encounter upon studying at an Australian university. They expressed their willingness "to mingle with local students", "meet large groups of scholarly students and staff" and "participate in social activities" which would give them an opportunity to develop their cross-cultural understanding and intercultural awareness and competence for a smoother transition into the community. Although the realization of students' hopes, aspirations and expectations was hampered by the unprecedented impact of the global pandemic, Flora and Jack were able to successfully navigate an unknown territory which imposed personal, social and cultural restrictions on their capacity to become culturally competent learners. Despite the physical constraints on their ability to integrate into the Australian community, Flora and Jack leveraged the affordances of technology and of their social media networks to find alternative avenues that would provide them with an opportunity to connect with other people virtually and, most importantly, to develop an understanding of the Australian cultural values, beliefs and practices.

The limited instances for intercultural connections also meant that Flora's and Jack's desire to establish friendships with local students evaporated. Several studies have confirmed the significance of developing friendships with host students. Kashima and Loh (2006), for instance, argue that friendships and inter-personal relationships with host students significantly benefit international students' academic performance and cultural adaptation. Flora's and Jack's cultural adaptation process has been hurdled by not only the unfeasible reality of not being able to make connections with host students due to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic, but also by a growing a sense of alienation and a constant feeling of being looked down upon. Although these feelings and perceptions of alienation and inferiority contributed to perceived levels of racism and discrimination, Flora and Jack maintained a rather positive attitude towards the host community and wished for local friends to be made as they were cognisant of the intercultural benefits that would be gleaned from local connections.

Research question 2

What coping strategies and mechanisms are employed by international students to become interculturally competent during times of a global pandemic that poses limitations on social and cultural interactions?

Although Flora and Jack faced some significant challenges associated with the limited number of opportunities to develop their intercultural awareness and competence through direct participation in events, activities and social practices in the Australian community, they never lost hope, courage or motivation to search for alternative avenues for developing an awareness and understanding of the social and cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices of the Australian community. This demonstrated their earnest pursuit for successfully navigating different cultural backgrounds, establishing cross-cultural inter-personal relations, and most importantly, developing abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately with people from diverse backgrounds.

Technology has, by all means, been a useful mechanism through which most of our daily activities were conducted during the pandemic. People purchased their groceries online, attended teleconsultations with their GPs, participated in social activities online (e.g. online concerts), and most importantly, as far as education is concerned, conducted teaching and learning activities at all levels of our schooling system. Flora and Jack leveraged the benefits and affordances of technology as a useful and effective strategy to deepen their understanding of the social and cultural operations of Australian society. Through community Facebook pages, Australian TV shows and Australian movies on Netflix, Flora and Jack reported an enhanced knowledge and understanding of Australian language, of how people operate in different situations and of the expected behaviours in different contexts. Although this digital mechanism did not replace the knowledge, skills, experiences, and interactions that could have occurred in a face-to-face environment, Flora and Jack indicated that it still proved effective as it provided them with an opportunity to gain new learnings about what intercultural encounters would be like in a real situation. This demonstrates that despite the social and cultural constraints on students' ability to participate in intercultural exchanges, experiences, and interactions in 'real life' situations, they were capable of exercising significant levels of intercultural resilience which they fostered and nurtured indirectly through artificially crafted situations, scenarios and environments that would encounter on social media or TV.

An effective mechanism that allowed students to effectively cope with some of the complications, due to the pandemic, about not being able to have first-hand experience in intercultural environments was the support provided by their institutions. Institutional support for these students in the midst of a global pandemic was essential. Flora and Jack were very appreciative of the personal, social, cultural, and financial support they received from their universities. Their supervisors were especially proactive and intentional in creating meetings and workshops targeted at purposely developing students' cultural competence. Flora and Jack indicated that their supervisors, despite their busy schedules, were committed to assisting them in ways that they could learn more about themselves, their own cultural background, and, more specifically, about that of

others and the diversity that surrounds them. Krajewski (2011) has pointed out that central to developing intercultural competence is the development of personal and inter-personal skills, which includes, among others, self-awareness, and awareness of others. The zoom meetings and workshops organised by supervisors were greatly valued by Flora and Jack since not only would they help students enhance their intercultural competence through purposeful discussions about students' cultural diversity but also strengthen their ability to face up to potential episodes of discrimination. Despite this, it was voiced by Jack that even though supervisors and other departments in their universities such as students' services made reasonable, and rather effective, attempts to create opportunities for multicultural inclusion and intercultural encounters with other students and staff, he could not help feeling inferior, left out and excluded during online workshops and seminars. A similar sentiment was shared by Flora who indicated that feelings of foreignness, otherness and alienation also kept hold of her in these situations and reported that nothing compares to being with co-nationals or being in their home countries.

Conclusion

This study has unpacked the views and experiences of two international students regarding the multilingual and multicultural practices and strategies they employed to develop their intercultural competence and skills during their academic studies at university in an era of COVID-19. Although Flora's and Jack's high expectations about life and the social and cultural experiences they would potentially have in Australia were never fully met, they showed an incredibly profound desire to find alternative ways of knowing more about the Australian way of life that would enable them to become more interculturally prepared and competent to successfully navigate cross-cultural encounters in multicultural and multilingual environments such as Australia. It has become evident that although higher education institutions have made some reasonable attempts to care for the wellbeing of the students and create some opportunities for them to develop certain skill sets that would allow for a smoother transition into intercultural contexts, effective measures are yet to be taken to ensure that equitable spaces for international students to rid themselves of daunting feelings of inferiority, foreignness, otherness and alienation.

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Authors' bios

Associate Professor Leonardo Veliz is Associate Professor in language and literacy education at the University of New England, Australia. He is the Head of the Curriculum Department and Lead of the Language, Literacy and Pedagogy Research Strategic Group. His research centres on broad issues of languages and literacy education in Australia and overseas. He's currently editing volumes on multiculturalism, multilingualism, literacies in the Global South and language teacher agency.
Email: Leonardo.Veliz@une.edu.au

Pegah Marandi (Ph.D) is a lecturer and Researcher in the School of Education at Western Sydney University. With an interest in higher education, international students' journeys, English and Literature, she has built an academic and research portfolio in Australia and overseas. She holds a PhD in English Language and Literature.

Email: p.marandi@westernsydney.edu.au

A Case Study: Multidisciplinary Faculty Members' Study Abroad Experiences in a Nursing Course

Jennifer Talleff

Texas Woman's University, College of Nursing
Luis Espinoza
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Madison OlliveTexas
Woman's University, College of Nursing

ABSTRACT

This case study explores the lived experience of three faculty from different disciplines engaged in an experiential undergraduate nursing study abroad (SA) course, which is largely absent from the literature. This research found specific personal and professional transformative effects of multidisciplinary SA involvement of faculty. Considerations for faculty planning to engage in multidisciplinary SA will be identified, including impacts of faculty dynamics and physical and psychological demands. These findings further highlight, document, and contribute to the growing literature related to the experiential impacts of SA on faculty professional development.

Keywords: study abroad, multidisciplinary faculty, experiences, professional development, experiential learning

Higher education is increasingly seeking to be more globally minded and intentional in producing graduates who can be internationally connected, more culturally competent, well-rounded, and able to promote partnerships across borders thus creating a cohesive experiential learning experience (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017; Corbin Dwyer, 2019; Osawkwe, 2017; Walsh et al., 2020). Colleges and universities are promoting international education and study abroad (SA), as well as the inclusion of global perspectives into courses.

The Forum on Education Abroad (2018) reported that 81% of U.S. private institutions and 99% of public institutions are actively attempting to send a great number of students abroad. This commitment to engaging students in preparation to lead and serve in a connected society is often documented in universities' strategic goals and initiatives (Strange & Gibson, 2017), and in turn, the number of U.S. higher education students participating in experiential SA experiences has increased in comparison to prior years (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2020).

U.S. students continue to favor faculty-led, intensive, semester-long SA programs, which account for 95.2% (n = 260 out of 273 respondents) SA program offerings (Niehaus & Wegener, 2019; The Forum on Education Abroad, 2018; Walsh et al., 2020). The development and implementation of SA programs by faculty shed light on the ever-evolving process of faculty development, professional growth, and the benefits of mentorship and collaboration between faculty, students, and peers. Shagrir (2017) examined the outcome of teacher educators' faculty collaboration and concluded that "all participants believe that collaboration with their colleagues contributes to their professional and academic development" (p. 338).

A literature review related to faculty SA experiences and outcomes yielded findings on the following topics: potential work with other cultures, course internationalization, promoting faculty cultural competency, and faculty teaching goals (Buchanan et al., 2021; Corbin Dwyer, 2019; Gouldthorpe et al., 2021; Leigh, 2013; Niehaus & Wegener, 2019; Philips et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2013; Walters et al., 2017). Barczyk et al. (2012) explored the perceptions of faculty engaged in a research-focused short-term SA in Poland intended to "foster academic cooperation and collaboration" (p. 18). Barczyk et al. (2012), as well as Sharratt and Planche (2016), concluded that carefully planned, intentional offerings of learning have the potential to establish and strengthen relationships and create collaborations capable of producing outcomes that benefit faculty and students.

Students who SA in other countries get a great deal from the experience, particularly in terms of their academic success, personal development, and ability to function in different cultural contexts (Nguyen et al., 2018). In particular, students note a growth in positive traits such as self-confidence, independence, initiative, communication, cultural awareness, and professional achievement (Mikulec, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018). These students credit learning about a different culture and expanding their education beyond the classroom with contributing to their individual growth (Kerr, 2020). Most students return from SA courses with improved critical thinking abilities, and greater flexibility than they had before studying abroad (Nguyen et al., 2018; Schenker, 2019). Furthermore, compared to those who did not SA, those who did SA show more interest in international politics, cross-cultural concerns, cultural globalism, less prejudice, and less ethnocentrism (Medora et al., 2020; Nelson & Luetz, 2021). Increased intercultural competence is the most commonly cited advantage of SA (Hoff, 2020). The academic benefits of SA include increased interest in and dedication to the student's field and a deeper understanding of the culture and history of the host country (Medora et al., 2020; Nelson & Luetz, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2018).

Faculty that take part in SA programs see improvements in areas such as leadership, critical thinking, self-assurance, and tenacity. Not only that, but research by Ogden et al. (2020) shows that faculty's pedagogical strategies have a direct impact on students' ability to learn and take interest in class. Faculty participation in cultural mentoring was found to vary significantly by their rank, sex, race, discipline, and number of previous international travel experiences (Niehaus et al., 2018; Niehaus & Wegener, 2019). Other scholars have pointed out that faculty backgrounds, especially their foreign experience, shape both their level of intercultural competence and the methods they use to help their pupils, acquire their own (Mikulec, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Schenker, 2019). Since faculty members' disciplinary training and socialization in some professions may lead them to emphasize disciplinary material above reflection, experience, and intercultural learning, knowing the disciplinary context of short-term SA may be especially crucial (de Wit, & Altbach, 2021).

While there has been research into the methods faculty employ in delivering SA courses, far less has examined the factors that draw faculty to teach such courses. It was found in Savishinsky's (2012) research on faculty-led short-term study abroad programs that instructors "repeatedly and often passionately related the myriad personal and professional rewards" (p. 187) of teaching SA courses, such as building stronger relationships with their students and sharing SA experience. Nonetheless, faculty members are not often acknowledged for their work in internationalizing their campuses and leading short-term SA courses. In

2016, approximately 10% of schools considered international participation when making promotion and tenure choices (American Council on Education, 2017).

Course internationalization directly aligns with the goals of campus-wide internationalization, with faculty development within this component being critical to graduating students with a diversified and well-rounded worldview (Leigh, 2013; Osawkwe, 2017). Internationalization is defined as "a strategic, coordinated process that seeks to align and integrate international policies, programs, and initiatives, and positions colleges and universities as more globally oriented and internationally connected institutions" (ACE, 2017, p. 1). The ACE (2017), as well as de Wit and Altbach (2021), noted that over two-thirds of institutions are engaging in at least a moderate level of internationalization. Additionally, nearly all those institutions cited internationalization as one of their top five priorities (Niehaus & Wegener, 2019). Gouldthorpe et al. (2012) examined short-term, post-international experienced faculty reflections on "changes from initial attitudes or beliefs, perceived benefits gained from participation in the program, and anticipated impacts on academic activities" (p. 17). These findings confirm that following a SA experience, faculty aspire to integrate global-related activities into their courses and research (Gouldthorpe et al., 2012).

By participating in the SA experience, faculty highlighted their capacity to "adapt, be interested in students and treat them as individuals, embrace challenge, and be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable" (Corbin Dwyer, 2019, p. 4). It was concluded that universities should support faculty teaching abroad, as it is a productive, valid professional development endeavor (Mok et al., 2018). This aligns with the findings of Niehaus and Wegener (2019), who discovered that some of the most important aims for faculty development include cultural learning, challenging ethnocentrism, travel skills, course content, and career development. Gouldthorpe et al. (2012) examined self-identified short-term faculty outcomes following a short-term (14-day) SA experience to Ecuador and found that faculty gained insight, developed new collaborations, and recognized the potential for future interaction within their group. This exposure to various backgrounds afforded the opportunity to appreciate other fields that at-home experiences cannot offer, and further supported a change in perspective away from cultural stereotypes. A follow-up study 2 years later explored faculty outcomes related to the SA experience (Roberts et al., 2016) and identified changes related to "attitudes, aspirations, knowledge, and behaviors" (p. 30). Among the results, faculty cited the benefits of meeting new colleagues, value in learning from others, and the importance of interactions with other disciplines (Roberts et al., 2016).

Corbin Dwyer (2019) concluded that formal exposure to diverse people and their perspectives helps educators "reflect on their pedagogical assumptions and strategies" (p. 10) and further described teaching abroad as an "effective professional development approach which creates spaces that promote growth-producing experiences for faculty" (p. 10). Although it is evident that faculty involvement in SA is critical to meeting higher education institutional goals related to internationalization, supporting faculty research, and promoting professional development and growth, the literature is limited to specific experiences of multidisciplinary faculty engaged in SA courses. Leigh (2013) explored the motivations, desired outcomes, and influence on the professional practice of three faculty of different disciplines engaged in their own SA course at the same destination and concluded that leading SA courses have short and long-term effects on faculty development, specifically knowledge and eagerness toward their own discipline, internationalization, expanding their practice and role, and personal outcomes. Moseley (2009) further highlighted concepts related to transformational faculty development, role expansion, and greater appreciation for knowledge obtained outside the institution. Opportunities for enhanced research opportunities as well as greater satisfaction with scholarly efforts are explained. As such, projects related to SA efforts promote the inclusion of students (Moseley, 2009).

To the best of prior knowledge, research has been conducted on the topic of faculty members teaching SA courses from several disciplines. Therefore, this case study investigates the perspectives of three multidisciplinary faculty teaching a nursing SA course. The results of this research provide important

insights into the ways faculty members' professional and personal lives are impacted from such an experience. This study draws conclusions related to transformative effects on faculty personal and professional development. Considerations for faculty planning to engage in interdisciplinary SA will also be identified. Research is limited on the impact of SA on faculty's personal and professional development (Corbin Dwyer, 2019). This case study serves to further identify, explain, and contribute to the growing body of literature by defining SA's experiential impacts on faculty's interdisciplinary understanding and collaboration.

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Methods

Case Study

A case study is defined as "an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (i.e., a "case"), set within its real-world context - especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." (Yin, 2014, p. 18). Research in educational and health settings has frequently employed this method to analyze several persons and their behaviors in a real-world context (Merriam, 2009).

The case study approach helps to focus on a specific time and location. By doing so, the researchers can learn more about the subject and how they interact with others (Schoch, 2020). Case studies answer inquiries that begin with 'what' or 'how,' as well as those that are descriptive or exploratory in nature (Yin, 2012). According to Schoch (2020) the ideal number of cases used in a case study is three to four cases. The "case" in this study was defined as the faculty members who were required to complete a pre-and post-survey following a SA course. The unit of analysis and observation were individual faculty members (n = 3).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology was utilized as the philosophical approach to this qualitative study. Study participants' descriptions of the phenomena, as well as derived meanings, are interpreted by the researchers (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges researchers' past experiences and this knowledge may add value to the study (Neubauer et al., 2019); thus acknowledgment, rather than bracketing bias, and reflection of such was included in the data analysis process.

Sample

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, and three female faculty members from different disciplines (i.e., nursing, biology, and health science respectively) who participated in a nursing SA course consented to take part in the study. One of the faculty members was the instructor of record for the course, the second faculty member went on the course as a chaperone, and the third faculty member went on the SA component to determine future opportunities to teach a SA course in her designated discipline.

Pre- and Post-Survey

Faculty completed pre-and post-SA anonymous surveys consisting of open-ended questions. Survey questions included: "I want to learn more about the other faculty members professionally and their role in their field; I want to explore the possibilities of engaging in scholarly activities and collaboration"; and "Do you expect your goals to be met, partially met or not met? How and/or Why?". Survey questions were developed by two primary researchers based on the literature review and were the same in both pre-and post-surveys.

Crystallization was done to analyze the surveys for the credibility of experiences by comparing peer-reviewed articles, *testimonios* (individual person experiences), and anthologies of related experiences (Ellingson, 2009). This process was done as data triangulation was not possible in this case study.

Data Analysis
The surveys were completed via Google Form. Following this, the data were imported into NVivo 12 Plus software. Data were coded by the two primary researchers and a student researcher using NVivo 12 Plus software. A researcher's bias was acknowledged as one of the researchers had also taken part in the study as a participant.

Researcher or investigator triangulation was done as three separate researchers coded the data separately. Upon coding completion, the researcher team discussed themes and findings, collectively agreeing on the results. Interrater reliability assessed with a Kappa coefficient was 0.98, indicating nearly perfect agreement between the researcher team.

The process of coding consisted of identifying a significant event and then coding it as something prior to moving on to the interpretation stage. In order to be considered 'good," a code must accurately reflect the whole qualitative range of the phenomenon being coded. Coding the data prepares it for analysis and the development of themes. To put it simply, a theme is a pattern in the data that either describes and organizes the possible observations or, more often, explains certain features of the phenomenon.

Results
Data was coded from the completed surveys into four parent nodes, or primary themes: Comparative, Experience, Learning, and Work. After reviewing the initial results, the researchers determined that it would be of the greatest benefit to focus on the data represented within the Experience parent node to examine the most impactful experiences of the faculty members that participated in the study. To that end, the Experience parent node was further separated into four child nodes or secondary themes: Interpersonal, Interprofessional, Intrapersonal, and Intraprofessional.

The child nodes begin with the prefix inter-related to data regarding how one person is related to others, while the prefix intra-related to data is representing one person's individual experience. In relation to the number of instances in which a researcher coded one of the child nodes, the Interpersonal Node was coded 22 times, the Interprofessional Node 100 times, the Intrapersonal Node 54 times, and the Intraprofessional Node 53 times. This information suggests that the largest number of conclusions, perspectives, or impacts experienced by the participants is related to Interprofessional development. The overall themes that emerged from the data illustrate the impact of studying abroad from the faculty's unique perspective and individual experiences.

Experiences Node Overview
Multiple secondary themes emerged from the Experience parent node: Value of Education Abroad, Goals, Understanding of Field Developed, Need for Societal Education, Regarding Health Educators, Understanding of Social Interactions, Critiques, and Future SA Trips (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Children Nodes/Secondary Themes of Experiences and Each of their Subcategories
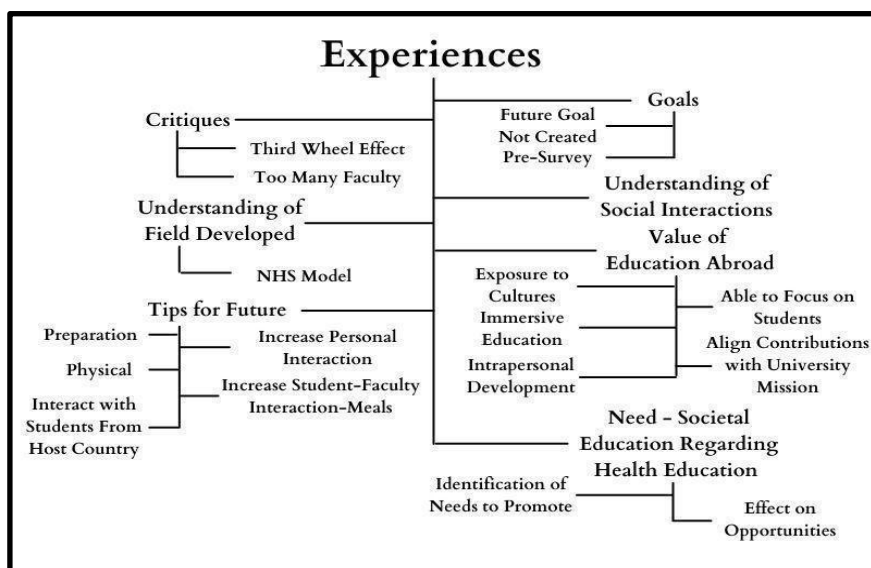
Interpersonal Node

Two tertiary themes emerged from the secondary theme Interpersonal Node: Developed Areas and Three Faculty – "Third Wheel" Effect. Developed Areas identifies numerous instances in which participants expressed a perspective or conclusion that related to this theme. These perspectives or conclusions were compiled into two main sub-themes related to personal development experience from the SA course: Bond/Relationship and Respect through Shared Experiences and Understanding that Various Perspectives/Diversity is Beneficial. A quote from one faculty member that expresses the overall conclusion of the secondary theme of Interpersonal Node is as follows:

> I was able to share my expertise that was applicable to the student content we were discussing. Most of our time was spent experiencing the course content we were being exposed to. I think the most learning from each other would have been through social interactions and not direct discussions about our professional fields.

An unexpected finding, explored in greater detail in the discussion section, is the "Third Wheel" Effect, meaning a third person who is or feels least relevant or necessary within the group (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Children nodes/Secondary Themes of Interpersonal and each of their Subcategories

Interprofessional Node

Six tertiary themes emerged from the data related to the Interprofessional Node: Faculty Feedback Helps Enhance and Encourage Course Development; Interdisciplinary Collaboration; Demand of SA on Faculty; Encouraged Development of Peer Teaching Ability; Evaluation of Field of Study and How Others Understand, Perceive, and Interact with the Field; and Developed Areas (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Children Nodes/Secondary Themes of Interprofessional Node and each of their Subcategories
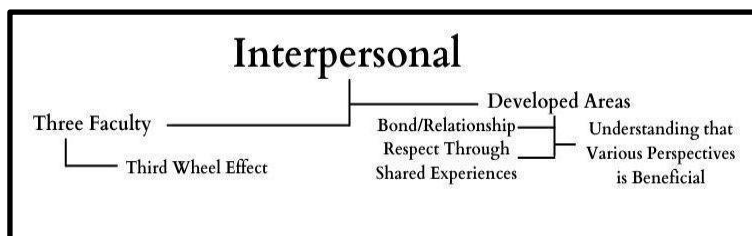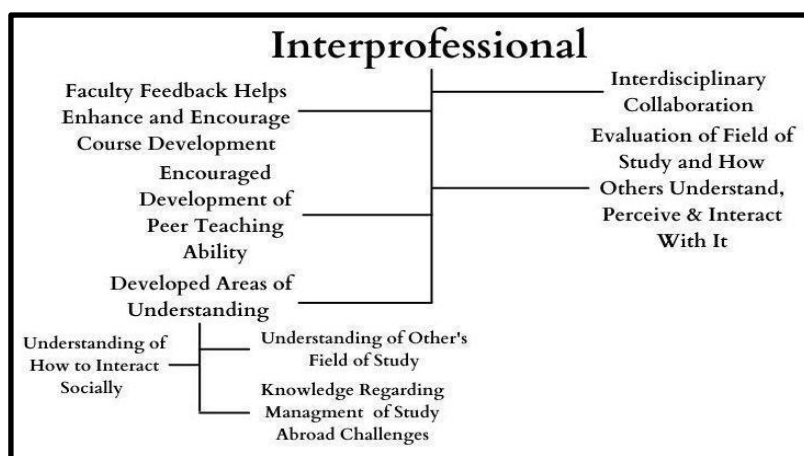

Intrapersonal Node

Seven tertiary themes emerged from Intrapersonal Node: Developed Areas, Different Perspective Overall, Value of Alone Time, Renewed Energy, Space to Challenge Original Conclusions, Physical Challenges, and Non-Physical Challenges (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Children Nodes/Secondary Themes of Intrapersonal Node and each of their Subcategories

Intraprofessional Node

Relating to the final secondary theme, Intraprofessional, five tertiary themes emerged from the data: Different Perspective Regarding Teaching/Education, Alternative Teaching Methods and Learning Methods, How to Collaborate with Others and Critically Think Together, Developed Areas, and Interaction Evaluation (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Children Nodes/Secondary Themes of Intraprofessional Node and each of their Subcategories

Intraprofessional
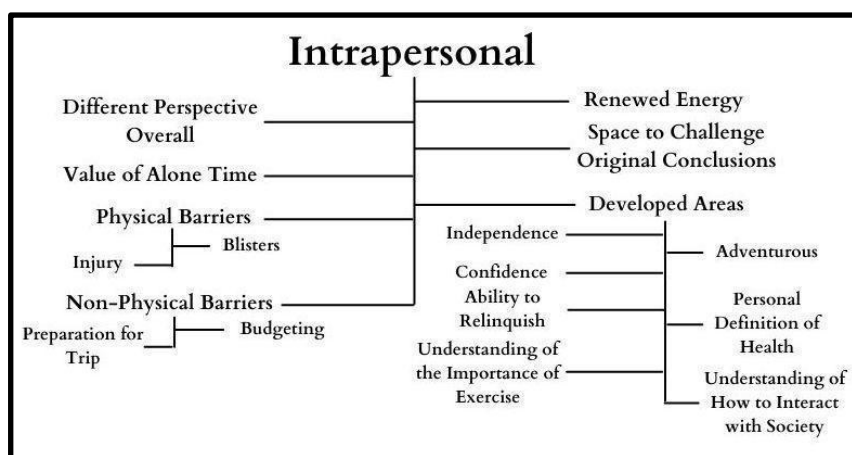
Different Perspective Regarding Teaching/Education — Alternative Teaching Methods & Learning Styles

How to Collaborate with Others — Developed

Interaction Evaluation — Understanding & Appreciation of Human Body — Peer Teaching Ability

Protective of Students — Understanding of How Prevention Influences Clinical Outcomes — Understanding of How to Interact Socially

Understanding of Education Abroad Course Development Work — Insight into Student Perspective Regarding Effective Teaching and Worthwhile Education

Insight Into Management of Study Abroad Challenges — Trip Coordination

Future Aspirations Related to Professional Development

Discussion

This case study reinforces and expands upon findings observed in the current literature (Corbin Dwyer, 2019; Osawkwe, 2017; Walsh et al., 2020). Faculty participation in an SA course and immersion within a new shared experience allows for unique and often extensive engagement with other faculty. The shared experiences and collaboration associated with SA courses provide a unique backdrop for potentially profound personal and professional benefits (Niehaus & Wegener, 2019; Walsh et al., 2020). Collaboration with faculty from other backgrounds enhances the development of new knowledge and broadened perspectives (Blau et al., 2020). In turn, this promotes the exchange of thoughts and ideas, including diversity of instructional methods and styles as well as enhancement of critical thinking skills. Opportunities are abundant for faculty development, growth, and collaboration related to SA engagement that may not be afforded by traditional on-campus work.

The "Third Wheel Effect" was among the study's unexpected findings, as well as to a significant degree by which it was reported by one faculty member. In scholarly research, the term third wheel is made about feeling like a third wheel when making health decisions or regarding being the third wheel in a relationship (Clayton, 2014; Triberti et al., 2020). In this study, the third faculty member, due to the nature of her role during the trip, felt she did not contribute much to the faculty as a team. This supports the work of Cooper et al. (2015) who found that new faculty benefit best from support from experienced teachers, only when they seek a strategy for instructional improvement or when better to deal with providing support to students. As a result, this faculty member tended to spend more time with students and less time with fellow faculty in general. While faculty enjoyed being around others, they also greatly enjoyed being alone and recounted that time alone was as beneficial as group time.

In the nursing profession, cultural competence is a universal requirement (Pacquiao, 2007). International SA programs, which are becoming increasingly popular, can deliver equal learning benefits with fewer barriers than domestic study away educational experiences. Nursing students may benefit from growth during a SA program (Lane et al., 2013; Repo et al., 2017). Students who participate in SA have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a new culture, accomplish their educational objectives, and address the cultural needs of patients in their future employment. The balance of alone and group time created a positive balance to the overall experience. The participants noted faculty demands and impacts. This aligns with the literature that transformative learning can be guided by faculty who have a role in shaping the SA experience to maximize the level of learning (Walters et al., 2017).

Prolonged time spent working with students had an emotional impact on the faculty in this study, as did the sense of feeling protective of them and needing to be always accessible. Faculty availability coupled with concern for maintaining stability and well-being of students while on the trip added an unpredictable

component, managed by assigning students to specific faculty as a primary contact person. The unique demands included course and program planning, mental and physical aspects of international travel, post-abroad debriefing, and reflection (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Phillips et al. 2017; Walters et al., 2017). Kent-Wilkinson et al. (2015) highlighted many benefits of cultural exposure for students, including developing cultural knowledge, sensitivity, competence, and safety; personal and professional growth; and global citizenship. Active learning strategies for students and staff happen within SA programs. By leaving their comfort zone, students must learn to think differently, much like they will encounter in employment following nursing school. Prior research has found that learning to think differently can improve patient care and healthcare results (Lane et al., 2013; Strange & Gibson, 2017).

This study, supports and validates Leigh's (2013) as well as Niehaus and Wegener's (2019) findings and reaffirm opportunities for faculty experiences and outcomes resulting from engaging in a SA course: 1) Reinvigorating interest in one's profession; 2) Enhancement of personal and professional growth; 3) Including internationalization; and 4) Provide opportunities for leadership and course development. The following quote from this study provides an example of this directly from a faculty member's perspective:

> As faculty, we hear about studying abroad as a programmatic option that is off in the distance. We are so consumed by the issues immediately in front of us that it can be difficult to fathom stepping away and leaving the office and the country. Take the opportunity in front of you, work hard, recruit harder, create a quality program, take advantage of the resources provided through [your university] and through your external provider, and then gain experience every minute to the fullest.

Additionally, this case study highlights practical lessons that can be discerned from the SA experiences (Stebleton et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2021).

Limitations

Study limitations include a minimal sample size of faculty participants in an undergraduate elective nursing course at a primarily female institution. Unique case study elements that may also be limiting include a participant sample of three faculty from different programs with varying roles in the course: primary faculty, secondary faculty who were not previously known by the primary faculty, and one faculty member who attended as an apprentice/mentee to learn more about faculty-led abroad courses. As Leigh (2013) and this study reveal, the person least involved in, or least directly connected to, the course tends to feel they have contributed less with regard to the overall experience, although others may not share this perception.

Future Research

Potential future research includes study replication with a larger sample size, studying intradisciplinary or interdisciplinary, with or without longitudinal exploration, of SA impact on faculty development, internationalization, and/or teaching. Exploration of physical and psychological impacts on faculty who engage in SA may be further researched as well. As additional research is generated in this area, the impacts of SA on faculty's personal and professional development may be further elucidated and documented, including interprofessional collaboration and learning.

Conclusion

When planning a SA course, faculty should identify the purpose for each faculty member's participation, such as co-faculty record, secondary faculty, observer, or mentee, and develop a plan for their role abroad. Understanding each faculty member's purpose and the role will clarify expectations, goals, and the level of engagement for all. Consider if the faculty dynamics are best suited for facilitating an SA course. To foster positive interpersonal dynamics and group cohesion, create opportunities for faculty to engage

with each other and build connections before the SA experience. Thus, faculty may wish to consider their professional goals and role as they determine whether to participate in an SA course. Faculty benefit professionally and personally from SA experiences; however, the discoveries and lessons gained, as well as the significance of such experiences are based on each faculty's personal and professional goals.

Statements and Declarations

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Authors Bios

Ms. Talleff is faculty and the Women's Health Course Manager at Texas Woman's University Dallas Campus BSN program. She is a licensed Nurse Practitioner and received a Master of Science in Nursing degree from the University of California Los Angeles. She has over 13 years of clinical teaching experience at the undergraduate pre-licensure level. Ms. Talleff is a Certified Legal Nurse Consultant and is the owner and operator of Talleff Nurse Consultants, LLC.
Email: JTalleff@twu.edu

Dr. Luis Espinoza is faculty in the Department of Sociology at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley where he teaches in the graduate Disaster Studies Program and Sociology Program. Luis holds his PhD in Sociology with expertise in Social Stratification and Health Education & Promotion from Texas Woman's University. He also holds a Master of Public Health in Epidemiology from The University of North Texas Health Science Center. Additionally, Dr. Espinoza is a master's certified health education specialist and is certified in public health. His research interests lie in sexuality and health, intimate partner violence, and emergency management outcomes.
Email: Luis.Espinoza01@utrgv.edu

Ms. Ollive is a Registered Nurse at Austin Diagnostic Clinic Circle C Family Practice. Her work focuses on coordinating care for patients, obtaining authorization from insurance companies, and applying her skills in hand-on procedures. Madison has her BS in Nursing from Texas Woman's University. Ms. Ollive enjoys exploring new places in Austin with her partner, their dog and cat.
Email: Mollive.2017@gmail.com

Pre-Survey

1) I have no goals in particular.
2) I want to learn more about the other faculty member professionally and their role in their field
3) I want to learn and share ideas about the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)
4) I want to learn more about the other faculty member's field of expertise
5) I want to learn how the other faculty member's field of expertise relates to mine
6) I want to explore the possibilities of engaging in scholarly activities and collaboration.
7) I want to stimulate my professional growth
8) I hope the other faculty member(s) enhance(s) what I am doing during the trip
9) I hope to explore a diversity of ideas
10) I want to share my talent
11) I want the other faculty member to share their talent
12) I want to help the other faculty members learn during the trip
13) I like to work with others and engage with different fields
14) Do you expect your goals to be met, partially met or not met? How and/or Why?
15) What value (personal, professional) are you expecting to derive from this experience?
16) What do you expect to learn?

Post Survey

1) I had no learning goals in particular.
2) I learned more about the other faculty member(s) professionally and their role in their field.
3) I learned about and shared ideas about the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) with the other faculty member(s).
4) I learned more about the other faculty member(s) field of expertise.
5) I learned about how the other faculty member(s) field of expertise relates to mine.
6) I explored the possibilities of engaging in scholarly activities and collaborations with other faculty member(s).
7) The other faculty members stimulated my professional growth.
8) The other faculty members enhanced my work on this trip.
9) I grew professionally and personally as a result of working with other faculty member(s) on this trip.
10) I explored a diversity of ideas with/because of the other faculty member(s).
11) I was able to share my talent with the other faculty member(s).
12) The other faculty member(s) shared their talent with me.
13) I helped other faculty members learn on this trip.
14) I like to work with/engaging with others from different fields more as a result of this trip.
15) Were your goals met, partially met, or not met? How and/or why?
16) Was there something unexpected that affected your experience?
17) Was the experience worth it? Would you do it again?
18) What value (personal, professional, etc.) did you derive from this experience?
19) What did you learn?
20) What did this education abroad experience do that will impact your role as a faculty member?
21) What advice would you give to other faculty members regarding this education abroad experience?

Emotional Difficulties: Racial Representation in Swiss International Higher Education

Gian-Louis Hernandez

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article examines the affective-discursive responses of students and administrators to representations of diversity. In total, 31 interview participants were presented with a set of nine images sourced from international study office websites. The affective-discursive analysis of their responses utilizes a synthetic framework designed to investigate reactions to representations of race. The analysis suggests the emergence of the concept of "emotional difficulties" in response to these representations of diversity. Interview respondents evaluated, positioned, and aligned themselves, resulting in three distinct types of emotional difficulty: uncritical acceptance, aggressive indifference, and wry amusement. The article argues that these emotional difficulties serve as a manifestation of students' affective-discursive reactions to inclusion and diversity in higher education and are an integral component of how students navigate the intricate complexities of diversity representation.

Keywords: race, representation, affect, stance, inclusion

International higher education is a dynamic context with challenges characterized by interactions between people of different national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, internationalization, defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 11), necessarily includes some forms of diversity as part of its premise. However, concerns about unequal flows of students in international student migration have been raised over the last decade. Studies show that structural factors impede diverse students from studying abroad in the US (Lee & Green, 2016; Murray Brux & Fry, 2010; Sweeney, 2013; Willis, 2015). Furthermore, diversity in internationalization continues to emerge as an important global trend (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; McAllister-Grande & Whatley, 2020).

The challenges faced by international students are merely one aspect of the overall education landscape. Mainstream higher education research has been concerned with equality for decades (Marginson, 2015). However, only recently have education scholars begun to focus on the challenges of inequality with

specific mentions of identity differences (Hernandez, 2021). Specifically in Switzerland, where this study takes place, scholars have attempted to understand complex power dynamics involved in international student mobility/migration (Riaño et al., 2018). This understanding especially illuminates notions of diversity in international higher education (Bell et al., 2018).

As universities compete for students under increasing marketization pressure, they must present themselves as diverse, international, and offering 'the best experience' (Askehave, 2007). Online university promotional materials mirror what universities consider inclusive and attractive. How students emotionally react to representations of diversity can tell us how discourses shape notions of diversity on university campuses. At stake here is a nuanced understanding of the emotional response to diversity representation in university settings.

This study explores racial representation on international office websites. The theoretical framework incorporates Glapka's (Glapka, 2019) synthetic approach by analyzing students' stances toward university promotion in majority-white European university settings. The concept of stance, or "the act of evaluation owned by a social actor," (Du Bois, 2007, p.141) lays bare the tensions caused by contested meanings of social values. The study further extends Glapka's (2019) synthetic framework by using Dunne et al.'s (2018) approach to analyzing teachers' "emotive language" in response to visuals in education settings. By using these two concepts, stance and emotive language, this study argues for the concept of "emotional difficulties." Emotional difficulties are an affective-discursive response to diversity. The analysis ultimately answers the question: "How do students and administrators respond to representations of diversity in Swiss international higher education?" by highlighting the undertheorized affective dimensions of inclusion/exclusion in international higher education.

The structure of the paper is as follows: it first outlines visual race as a salient factor in the analysis. It delineates the importance of (racial) inclusion and defines it vis-à-vis diversity. Then, it describes the necessary constructs of affective semiosis, or, meaning making through emotions. These three concepts, race, inclusion, and affect, form the theoretical framework for this paper. Next, the methods section provides a clear outline of the steps taken for sampling and analysis, including the justification for Switzerland as a case. The paper then presents the findings on three distinct categories of emotional difficulty: uncritical acceptance, aggressive indifference, and wry amusement. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of this study for higher education in a sociopolitical sense.

Theoretical Framework

Racial representation in international higher education

Discussions of affect and race in education contexts typically center on the inclusion and exclusion of racialized others (Ahmed, 2012). Emerging discussions on the materiality of the body acknowledge that affect as embodied meaning-making is an under-researched part of understanding internationalization (Brooks & Waters, 2017). Education scholars have also discussed how emotional investments are experienced in difficult contexts often characterized by racial and/or ethnic tensions (Yao & Viggiano, 2019; Zembylas, 2014). Race in affect literature on education is mutually constitutive with "particular emotional practices and discourses that include some students and exclude others" (Zembylas, 2015, p. 183). This affective power demonstrates the need to explore how racialized power dynamics work to establish exclusive hierarchies in global settings, even (and particularly) in European countries (Wekker, 2016).

Visual race

Public discourses in Europe tend to silence discussions of race (Cervulle, 2014; El-Tayeb, 2011; Essed, 1992). Here, race tends to be seen and not heard; research on visual racial differences focuses on discourses that 'teach' race based on sight by emphasizing the aspect of meaning-making through visual stimuli (Nayak, 2017; Yue, 2000). Discourses imbue race with meanings associated with specific phenotypes and how they are shaped by, for example, colonial history and evolving migration patterns that bring

representations and the physical presence of racially different people (Clark, 2020; Frisina & Hawthorne, 2018).

For Switzerland, the absence of explicit discussions about race help to shape racist discourses that take on regional, linguistic specificities (Boulila, 2019). The unique phenomenon of racial discussions among students in the predominant 'global hub' of education in Swiss institutions illuminates how universities represent race and attendant difficulties with inclusion.

Inclusion, not diversity

Inclusion in higher education constitutes "organizational strategies and practices that promote meaningful social and academic interactions among persons and groups who differ in their experiences, their views, and their traits" (Tienda, 2013, p. 1). Inclusion differs from diversity efforts in universities, which focus on bringing in 'diverse' bodies to a potentially hostile, homogeneous environment (Ahmed, 2012; Tate, 2014). While education studies has been primarily concerned with moving from an integration paradigm to inclusion, this concern centers on specific demographics, such as disabled students (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017).

This distinction between diversity and inclusion is key, as the presence of diverse bodies does not necessarily mean that they will be included, let alone centered, loved, or celebrated. The qualitative difference between diversity as a professed, measurable value at universities and inclusion as the promotion of meaningful interaction can be encapsulated in the concept of "diversity regimes" wherein the signifier "diversity" is employed as a vague institutional strategy that "obscures, entrenches, and even intensifies existing racial inequality by failing to make fundamental changes in how power, resources, and opportunities are distributed" (Thomas, 2018, p. 141). This regime has been found to govern university contexts regarding various forms of diversity; the affective dimensions thereof also going unnoticed and effectively silenced (Ahmed, 2021).

Affective semiosis

Affect is "embodied meaning-making" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 3) conceptualized as "influence, intensity, and impact" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4). This conceptualization deviates from earlier considerations of affect as a mostly psychological phenomenon and draws attention to the body as a site of semiosis. Within Wetherell's affective-discursive framework, influence, intensity, and impact in the form of governing structural force must be negotiated through the body and the mind. In short, embodied affect is a felt intensity interwoven with meaning (Wetherell, 2019).

Highlighting the embodied experience of affect circumvents positivist tendencies to explore the world through empirical study by addressing how emotions shape material and discursive experiences (Boler, 1999). Affect theory has the potential to defy the norms of existing academic discourses to bring emotions more clearly into focus, particularly in situations where discursive knowledge is insufficient to reconcile difficult cultural problems (Zembylas, 2014). Affective approaches to race acknowledge the tensions that mere knowledge can never fully assuage and could potentially provide alternative approaches to engaging with the complexities of inclusion and exclusion (Stein & Andreotti, 2018).

The anxieties produced by the presence of racialized others, whether physical or represented in media, have been shown to govern national and institutional contexts and interpersonal relations (Ahmed, 2013; Tolia-Kelly, 2019). An approach that centers on emotional difficulties with power dynamics can account more fully for the role of emotion in responses to specific forms of racial representation (Zembylas, 2018). Analyses of mediatized discourses have centered on the political implications of emotions (Westberg, 2021). However, approaches to interpersonal affective interactions that highlight notions of race and representation bridge larger and smaller-scale discourses (Glapka, 2019).

Methods

Switzerland emerged as a unique and feasible case for study due to its distinctive characteristics. The country's manageable size facilitated data collection; there are ten universities and two university-level federal research institutions. While there are other higher education establishments, such as vocational universities and specialized programs, this research primarily focuses on nationally-recognized universities, which also receive significant international attention.

Swiss higher education institutions boast a unique position in global academia, regularly earning placements in the prestigious "top ten" universities across various university ranking systems. Notably, they are the only universities outside of the US and the UK to achieve such recognition (QS World University Rankings 2021: Top Global Universities | Top Universities, 2021; World University Rankings, 2021). Despite the criticism regarding the fairness of university ranking systems (Shahjahan et al., 2017), Switzerland's universities' consistently high rankings make them highly sought after by international students who often refer to such rankings when making university decisions (Thakur, 2007).

This study employed photo-elicitation techniques to facilitate semi-structured interviews and elicit affective stances towards racial representation (Harper, 2002). Nine photos representing visually diverse subjects participating in university life were selected from a larger dataset of images from the twelve Swiss universities' international office websites. The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. The interviewer conducted, recorded, and transcribed the interviews in German, Italian, or English. The photos were presented to elicit emotional reactions and prompt responses to the visual diversity on campus. The interview questions did not explicitly invite participants to discuss race to avoid prompting, but race emerged spontaneously (Griffin, 2007).

This analysis focuses on transcripts from thirty-one interviews with four administrators, six bachelor's students, fifteen master's students, and seven doctoral students; nineteen were female, and twelve were male. They were thirteen domestic students and fourteen international students, and four administrators. Two participants were Asian, one was Black, one was Middle-Eastern, two were White Latinas, and the remaining twenty-six were White (For a summary of demographic characteristics, see Table 1). Participants were recruited via advertisements in various social media groups and direct emailing and snowball sampling through the interviewer's networks.

Selection criteria for inclusion in the sample were that participants had to be attending or working for one of the ten Swiss universities or two federal research institutions. These criteria were selected to create a multifaceted picture; solely including, for example, international students would not capture the emotive responses of domestic students. Administrators were included due to their overarching view and ability to provide context; in contrast to professors, they are intimately familiar with the ins and outs of internationalization. The driving force behind the study was to understand how students and administrators who interact with them understand, navigate, and respond to diversity.

Table 1

Demographic information for Interview Participants

Name*	Gender	Age	*Status*	*Race*
Andrea	Female	Early 40s	Admin	White
Andreas	Male	Mid 20s	BA student	White
Andy	Male	Late 20s	MA student	White
Blue	Female	Mid 20s	MA student	White
David	Male	Early 20s	BA student	White
David	Male	Late 20s	Ph.D. student	White
Elena	Female	Early 30s	Ph.D. student	Latina

Esme	Female	Late 30s	Admin	White
Giacomo	Male	Mid 20s	MA student	White
Giovanni	Male	Mid 20s	Admin	White
Hakeema	Female	Late 30s	MA student	White
Indiana	Female	Early 20s	MA student	Black
Jo	Female	Early 20s	Admin	White
Joachim	Male	Early 30s	Ph.D. student	White
Laura	Female	Early 40s	Admin	White
Laura	Female	Late 30s	Admin/PhD	White
Leia	Female	Mid 20s	MA student	Asian
Ludovico	Male	Early 20s	BA student	White
Luna	Female	Early 20s	BA student	White
Maria	Female	Early 20s	MA student	White
Meagan	Female	Early 20s	MA student	White
Mercedes	Female	Mid 30s	MA student	White
Para	Female	Early 20s	BA student	White
Paula	Female	Mid 20s	MA student	Middle Eastern
Phoebe	Female	Mid 20s	Ph.D. student	White
Rainer	Male	Late 30s	BA student	White
Stefan	Male	Early 20s	MA student	White
Sara	Female	Late 20s	Ph.D. student	White
Sara	Female	Late 20s	MA student	White
Vasco	Male	Mid 20s	MA student	Asian
Kirby	Male	Mid 20s	Ph.D. student	White

Note. All names are pseudonyms selected by interview participants

The author, a Queer, Black, Latinx, US-born man, conducted the interviews; his positionality influenced how the interviews took place (Brown, 2016). For example, the interviewer's status as a non-White, non-Swiss person impacted the interviews as the use of English and references to the United States were quite common, even in interviews not conducted in English Additionally, some participants who guessed that the interviewer could also speak Spanish used Spanish terminology.

The photographs were selected from a larger data set that was part of the author's ongoing research (see author, forthcoming). They were selected due to the wide range of activities shown (for a brief description of the selected images, see Table 2). Ultimately, the nine images represented several kinds of images within the dataset. Images were chosen from each region in Switzerland, assuring that there would be at least a partial representation of similar kinds of universities. A wide array of visually diverse students were also represented; these images were chosen to represent visual diversity and elicit participants' responses to this concept.

Table 2

Photograph descriptions

Photograph	Description

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1 – Trio of students	Three students walk across a grassy campus on a sunny day. One presents as White and male, one presents as White and female, the last presents as a darker-skinned South Asian female.
2 – Students on stairs	Several students working on their laptops on the stairs in front of a university building. Most of the students are White and female, and one is darker complected.
3 – Seven student faces	Seven students of varying complexions are depicted. The image is cropped so that all one can see are the students' heads. They are all gazing in different directions
4 - Working with headsets	Two White students are depicted working at computer screens with headsets on while a White blond woman stands above them looking at their screens.
5 - Another trio of students	Three students engaged in conversation. One presents as White and male, and one presents as East-Asian and female, the last is darker complected and male
6 – Woman pointing at a screen	A White woman points at a screen with a remote in her hand while a Black man and Black woman look on.
7 – Students pointing at a map	A White man points at a map while two White women on either side look on.
8 – Several students smiling	Several students of varying complexions smile at the camera.
9 – Class in a lecture hall	A typical lecture hall with tiered seating is depicted. The student in the center is a White male. In the row behind him sit two female students who present as East- and South Asian, respectively.

The analysis relied on a theoretical framework that synthesizes the approach used by Glapka (2019) based on the larger affective-discursive framework (Wetherell, 2012) and combined with concepts of emotional manifestations and thematization (Fiehler, 2002) and stance theory (Du Bois, 2007). In her study, Glapka relied on photo-elicitation to guide semi-structured interviews. She used images of women racialized as Black found in popular beauty magazines to stimulate responses from her interview participants, in a similar fashion to the current study. The analysis here extends this synthetic framework by incorporating Dunne et al.'s approach to emotional analysis to expand Glapka's affective-discursive theorization toward inclusion/exclusion in education. Dunne et al. (2018) analyzed "emotive language" evoked by photographs taken by students and shown to teachers to understand the children's standpoint and emotional experiences, which resonates with Fiehler's concept of "emotional manifestations" (p. 3). These emotional responses showed how individuals position themselves regarding inclusion, invoking socio-cultural values (Du Bois, 2007).

The analysis proceeded through the following steps: transcripts were analyzed for manifestations of emotions in several categories, including vocal, non-vocal, verbal, and nonverbal expressions (Fiehler, 2002). Additional notes on paralinguistic cues were collected via field notes to enrich the data. The analysis was reviewed by a second researcher to bolster validity and underwent several revisions before arriving at the final categories. This approach allowed for an inductive development of a new theoretical construct, namely emotional difficulties. The study identifies the forms of emotional difficulty by marking the evaluation, positioning, and alignment of stance taking.

Findings

Stances
Stances are characterized by affective-discursive relationships amongst subjects, between subjects and objects, and within specific socio-cultural environments. Three types of affective stances were identified within the data: uncritical acceptance, aggressive indifferences, and wry amusement. These stances indicated the respondents' emotional difficulties with questions of representation and highlighted tensions between diversity representation and inclusive environments.

Uncritical acceptance
Uncritical acceptance is an affective-discursive gesture toward accepting diversity without reflecting on its complex meanings. This affective stance is often manifested through avoidance of specific linguistic markers of diversity, i.e., specific mentions of race, ethnicity, and other forms of difference and the power imbalances and inequalities these differences might entail (George Mwangi et al., 2018). Respondents evaluated diversity as a benefit for the social context of the university (Maher & Tetreault, 2013). However, these responses did not show concrete understandings of diversity. For example, when asked if the nine images were representative of the diversity on campus, one White, male, international student demonstrated his uncertainty.

> Kirby: yeah, I think so. Yeah? I would say. I think the, the population here is quite large and rather diverse
> Interviewer: You sounded a little hesitant. And you said, yeah? tone goes up? What does that, what is what's going on there?
> Kirby: Yeah like, maybe the population isn't quite quite as diverse, but you know, these are all sort of images that the environment would be similar here. You know, like I'm not seeing like a recreational soccer team or something that I would say was missing from. From the environment here. Um, you know, these are all groups of three walking or, you know, slightly larger groups potentially studying together. I think that is something that I see quite regularly in the, in the day to day I've been to on campus.

This admission that the population isn't "quite as diverse" and his tone of voice showed his disbelief in the statement that the university is diverse and thus a negative evaluation of the promotional material. Nevertheless, he took a stance of unreflectively accepting the idea of diversity as he pointedly avoided saying more about it, shifting instead to discussions of space, with vocal fillers and stuttering indicating hesitation. The linguistic and non-linguistic emotional manifestations demonstrated a lack of consideration of what diversity means and discomfort with his statement describing the university as diverse. His affective-discursive acts demonstrated an embodied conflict between the desire to profess inclusivity and the material reality of a lack of diversity on campus, made visible through this stance of uncritical acceptance.

Another kind of uncritical acceptance emerged in the interviews that showed the complete removal of dynamics of difference from an embodied frame of reference. One White male Swiss student studying outside of his home region struggled to define diversity but seemed to have strong opinions.

Giacomo: For me diversity […] For me, it has nothing to do with ethnicities, with skin color. For me diversity is / In the sense, when I thought for myself what diversity was or how to conceptualize it with my companions, I would have told him even just / I don't know, I really like architecture, for me like diversity is seeing the wall in sight like this and then a whole beautiful piece in glass. Something that contrasts, but not related to people. Actually, diversity / It's true that before I asked the question to others I had to think for myself what it was. For me, especially, diversity is in well supported opinions, ones that aren't too extreme. However, I don't know how I would define diversity to you. We were born in this era where everything is so globalized that I have not / I have always had so many friends, acquaintances, contacts all over the world, that I have never really asked any questions. Even many girls. In fact, I've never had one who spoke Italian. They were all Slovenians, Estonia and South America, always a meat market at home, and I never actually felt Swiss either.

On the one hand, Giacomo defined diversity as "nothing to do with ethnicities, with skin color" and "in well-supported opinions, ones that aren't too extreme." On the other, he went on to say that he could not define diversity. His response resonates with the previous example by demonstrating a similar reluctance to name specific, critical characteristics. His statement that diversity is "something that contrasts, but not related to people" distances him from acknowledging race as an embodied characteristic, thus implying a purportedly accepting but uncritical stance. While he acknowledges the "meat market" of women of different origins in his past, their flesh is distinctly female and not racialized. The problematic nature of his response to diverse visuals gestures towards an underpinning emotional difficulty; he professes acceptance of one-dimensional diversity (in this case, gender diversity) yet is averse to mentions of race. His statements also give a distinct evaluative character to his emotional difficulty with diversity representation; his stance comprises assigning diversity a specific disembodied quality and invoking the misogynistic socio-cultural values that categorize women as gendered bodies. This contrast between gender as embodied and race as disembodied demonstrates a problematic relationship with various forms of diversity; Giacomo's emotional manifestations reject complex engagement with critical notions of diversity, instead describing his own limited engagement with diverse embodied subjects.

For Giacomo, Kirby, and others, acceptance seemed motivated by an embodied desire to acknowledge the benefits of diversity and perform inclusivity. Yet, their responses to diverse representation showed a limited engagement with diversely embodied students. This stance reveals an amicable but lacking engagement with acceptance and highlights an emotional manifestation of difficulty with diversity on campus.

Aggressive indifference

The theme of "not caring" is an aggressive form of being "passionately unmoved" (Wetherell, 2015). Several students passionately claimed that they "do not care" and then illustrated that they care enough to adopt a negative stance toward representations of diversity. The specific manifestations were linguistic (i.e., explicitly saying I don't care) and paralinguistic (i.e., interrupting). These affective manifestations thematized the topic of diversity and specifically indicated a negative evaluative stance towards representation inclusive of visually diverse subjects.

Each respondent who exhibited this form of emotional difficulty vehemently claimed not to care about racial differences but explicitly derided the images. For example, one White international

doctoral student gave cues throughout her interview that diversity is a laughable topic. Describing the Black and White subjects in image six, she said:

> Lynne: In terms of nationalities, etc, like the diversity. I think some of them are…alright. Sometimes, I must admit that I'm a little, it really brings my attention when there are pictures in which there is like, they almost feel like they are designed to condition you "hey look, we are so International." So they put someone (laughing) black and (laughing) someone white. And they're like "okay, I mean, I got it, international" but it's just like it almost makes me feel like they are like focusing so much on the skin color and I don't care, you know?. It's like, so maybe something that's much more subtle. […] I'm sure it's good to include different diversity as well but in some way that is not like (exhales, gestures with hands) yeah, but if it's all like white, extremely white people and dominant men and so, then again, that was also not what you want. So yeah, certain subtleties

The emotional difficulty with racial representation is marked by her statement of 'I don't care." The participant indicates that the socio-cultural value of internationality represented through different skin colors is overvalued through the emphasis on the word "so" in "so much focusing on skin color" and the mocking, exasperated tone of the phrase "okay, I mean, I got it, international." Her conflation of race and internationality, common among all participants, further reinforces the notion that diversity does not mean inclusion by affectively marking differences without accepting them. Her tone does not signal inclusivity; on the contrary, it suggests that she is positioning herself in opposition to marking diversity. Lynne's emotional manifestations position her in a stance critical of 'focusing so much on color' in favor of something that would be 'more subtle.' Her critical stance towards these representations leads her to suggest a more 'subtle' representation that indicates the images are not subtle and, therefore, less acceptable despite initial claims of not caring.

In addition to "not caring," interruptions were a common occurrence in several interviews. For instance, one White domestic student who was born outside of Switzerland expressed aggressive indifference in the following excerpt:

> Interviewer: Sure. You mentioned something about these could potentially be marketing images for brochures targeting people that are represented in these…
> Stefan: (Interrupting) So if we could be done by 16:00 that would be great.

The interruption of the penultimate question included an explicit epistemic statement, "If we could be finished by 16:00, that would be great," in an annoyed tone of voice. To contextualize, the interview had seemingly gone well up until this point. Additionally, the interview had only lasted about 30 of the approximately 60-minute range listed on the informed consent form that Stefan signed. This participant made clear that he was not aligned with the researcher's critical inquiring stance through his divestment of the time he was willing to spend being interviewed. Through the content of his utterance, his tone also calibrated the relationship between interlocutors by disrupting the affective encounter through his clear expression of disinterest in the interview process. Stefan's stance of aggressive indifference demonstrates his overall positioning towards diverse racial representations; engaging with them is not worth his time. His difficulty with these representations elicited a stance that impacted the interview, creating a rushed intensity felt in extra-discursive ways.

These examples demonstrate a departure from the statement that these participants "don't care." The contrast between statements that they don't care about diversity and the length and quality of their responses show disapproving stances towards diverse representation, revealing a tension between inclusion and racial

diversity. A stance of aggressive indifference toward diverse racial representation highlights emotional difficulties toward inclusion through visual means.

Wry Amusement

Wry amusement, a sense of being amused in a cynical or detached way, emerged in the data as emotional expressions that thematize a difficulty with how the visuals were constructed. This difficulty indicates an underlying problem with the representation of diversity on campus. One of the triggers for wry amusement was a perceived "lack of authenticity," which was a source of dissatisfaction with representation. Overall, respondents expressed mocking, incredulity, and disdain indicative of a negative stance that is most frequently manifested as a problem with specific aspects of representation.

Emotional difficulties were rarely explicitly named but demonstrated through emotional manifestations. Wry amusement occasionally manifested in a sardonic expression of explicit critique regarding the racial demographic makeup of the images. These manifestations indicate a negative evaluative stance toward how various racial groups are represented. For instance, one White female international student described image two as follows:

> Azula: I would say: students… as usual a chunk of non-Caucasian people (laughs) and that's it.
> Interviewer: Do you think they're representative of the university here?
> Azula: (more quietly) Yes...they could be
> Interviewer: Ok.
> Azula: Definitely, at the level of spaces, in the sense of public spaces where you can meet, computer rooms, then multimedia tools available, parks, campuses with facilities, etc.
> Interviewer: And the other levels?
> Azula: I told you, I'm thinking about multiculturalism. yes, I know that at the university I was doing last year, I think the share of Africans I think was 10 percent of the school, so the fact that there's only one black person (laughs) in these images…
> Interviewer: Ah, ok. Is there 10% of people of African roots there? And this guy in the image
> Azula: Here, for example. Yes, on all images / He seems more Indian to me. This is dictated/ but maybe he's Moroccan (laughs) This is dictated, obviously, only by visual prejudice, then maybe he's from LA (laughs) so I don't know**.**

Azula's wry, critical interpretation of how students are portrayed indicates her stance toward the visual representation of demographic differences. Several epistemic markers, including metaphorical language, describe large groups of non-White people as a 'chunk' and laughter, marking her negative stance verbally and non-verbally. When asked if this chunk was representative of the university, she paused slightly and responded in a quieter voice that seemed unsure to the interviewer that they 'could be' before hurriedly describing the non-human aspects of the visuals. Thus, the topic shifts abruptly from embodied differences to abstract levels of representativity, avoiding embodied visual differences. When the interview is brought back to how people are represented, Azula pauses to think and highlights the disconnect between the presence of those with African origins at her institute in contrast with the university at large. This disconnect signals a tension between the representation of non-White bodies and their inclusion on campus.

She also laughs mockingly that there is 'only one black person.' The qualifier 'only' is another short comparative marker that indicates more Black people to reflect the number at the institute would be more appropriate. Compared to the word "chunk" to describe large groups of non-White people, one can infer from the affective-discursive acts within that specific sentence in the excerpt that she holds a critical stance and, thus, has a problem with how the subjects of the images are represented in the visuals. Rather than

simply explicitly describing an emotional difficulty, she first linguistically marked the problems, then subtly demonstrated her stance of wry amusement toward the issue.

A final example demonstrating a slightly different version of wry amusement came from Vasco, a self-identified Asian student born in Switzerland. His interview was rife with mocking jokes at representations juxtaposing White and non-White students. Additionally, he highlighted his difficulties with the representation of non-White embodied subjects and linked this to his own experiences by negatively evaluating this representation.

Vasco's difficulty with this representation reflects his stance toward racial diversity in the Swiss University context. When asked about images of differently racialized students all sitting together, he described differences between "Western" and "Asian" girls:

> Vasco: Image 8, it seems to me so much like a language school because there is always a Latin and there is always an Asian. For example, in Australia I saw so many Latinos and so many Asians going there to study, and there are always them, plus five girls. (...) Latino is very swaggering, as I said, Asian is a bit stiff, (in English) nerdy, typical guy with glasses, (in English) nerd, skinny; instead, Latin is very over-the-top, Casanova. Instead, Image 9 is inside a university: I see two Asians and an Indian woman who are in the same row, same desk, and then the other white people among them. This is strange to me, because I am the opposite: I would sit here with two other Western girls / I don't come to go to an Asian, that is, no, I would sit where there is room, but from an Asian I cannot, because maybe I have the image of seeing my mother controlling me (laughs) (in English) the Tiger mom.

Vasco uses "descriptions of circumstances relevant to an experience" (Fiehler, 2002, p. 92) to relate to the images. For instance, his "Tiger Mom" joke hints at his history with the racialization of East-Asian mothers. His usage of the phrase in English indicates an awareness of globalized notions of race and an attempt to align with the non-Swiss interviewer. Rather than seriously accepting constructions of Asian Otherness, Vasco playfully acknowledges them while demonstrating the impact internalization of otherness has had on his sense of humor and partially aligning himself with globalized racial ideals. Furthermore, he positions himself within socio-cultural race norms in the Swiss context against his reading of the example, taking a stance that illuminates the limits of diversity representation for inclusion. His wry amusement is a manifestation of the tension between inclusive embodied difference and lacking attempts to represent diversity.

Many students expressed a wryness related to their representations of their own type of racialized embodiment; Vasco's emotional difficulty is an emic critique of the representation of non-White bodies in Swiss higher education. Vasco's responses demonstrate how his emotional difficulties with racial representation have manifested inclusion/exclusion in his experiences at university. Overall, wry amusement highlights diversity representation as the subject of ridicule and critique, emphasizing students' difficulties with the representation of diverse bodies.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This study demonstrated the impact of emotions around racial representation by identifying emotional difficulties with representations of diversity. The analysis outlined embodied senses of acceptance, indifference, and amusement. Manifestations of emotion indicate evaluations of representations of race in line with socio-cultural values, rendering it unspeakable (Hernandez, 2021). The notion of emotional difficulties allows researchers and practitioners to highlight the emotional aspects of navigating diversity.

The responses of Kirby, Giacomo, Lynne, Stefan, Azula, and others show that reactions to diversity are often beyond mere words, and some are more pleasant than others. As is often the case in Western Europe and elsewhere, the problematics of race "blindness" and "muteness" are to be seen, heard, and felt in subtler, more insidious ways.

This study has shown institutional discourses of diversity are not reflected in the affective environment; perspectives on inclusion remain uncritical, aggressive, and wry. Additionally, this analysis exposes mundane occurrences of forceful emotional intensity by analyzing commonplace emotional expressions rather than the "particularly emotional" (Fiehler 2002, p. 96). It provides a framework for situations where racialized exclusions play a powerful yet inconspicuous role. Specifically, in an age where internationalization is playing an ever-increasingly important role in migration, and migration is being leveraged by stakeholders as an important political issue, this study addresses affect as an unspoken, yet clearly impactful force on reactions to international students. Future studies on this topic could build off of this framework, for example, by incorporating affective-discursive reactions in their analyses of internationalization within and beyond the classroom. For Swiss higher education, this study has demonstrated that internationalization is not simply a question of logistically accommodating newcomers from the surrounding countries.

Discursive analyses of affective interaction are increasingly important in a world characterized by power relations driven by emotion in media, politics, and culture. Identifying emotional difficulties as a stance towards various kinds of representation further highlights the material reality of diversity on campus. The theoretical framework expanded upon in this study illuminates the warp and weft of interwoven aspects of discourse and affect. The benefit of acknowledging emotional difficulties entails not achieving the goal of doing diversity the "right way," but a step in a more generative direction.

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Author's Bio

GIAN-LOUIS HERNANDEZ, Postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication Science from the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI). His research centers around diversity discourse, communication, and internationalization. He has published in the Journal of International Students, Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education, and Journal of Contemporary European Studies, among others. Email: g.hernandez@uva.nl

How Many Turned Out? College Student Voting in Student Government Elections Reconsidered

Michael Miller

University of Arkansas
Daniel Nadler
University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

Student governments can play an important part in the habit development of participating in democracy. A study in 2012 in the United States however, illustrated just how few students actually voted in their own student government elections. With a changing world of national politics, there is a need to understand student voting as a possible reflection of voter participation after college. This study compared student voting in their own government elections between 2012 and 2020, finding several, yet no significant, differences in voter turnout. The study used a sample of doctoral and comprehensive institutions, finding under one-in-five students voted in their own government elections.

A decade ago, a study reported on the participation of college students in their own student government elections (Miles, Miller, & Nadler, 2012) which was seen and reported as a possible indicator of both student participation in public elections and investment in the governance of their own institutions. The results in that study were not entirely optimistic: less than one in five college students voted in a student government election at doctoral universities and only about one in ten voted in comprehensive university student government elections.

Nationally, much has changed over the past decade in politics. There has been a growing divide among political parties and the collaboration of legislators and politicians seems to have diminished (Pew Research Center, 2022). One result has been the polarization of politics, and also record numbers of Americans voting. Nearly 67% of all eligible voters turned out to cast their ballots in the 2020 presidential election. These changes and this surge in voting suggest that the 2012 Miles et al study needs to be updated to either confirm the general disinterest of students in voting in their own elections or to identify a new trend of increased voting on campus.

Student governments have a long history on college campuses, often using the student unrest of the 1960s and 1970s as a departure point for the current structure and set of responsibilities for these governing bodies. Students in this era of higher education were able to articulate specific changes to the academy that they believed were necessary to maintain the relevance and integrity of higher education, and the resulting structures have often included students serving on governing boards and having access to institutional leadership on a personal level. Additionally, student governments have created roles for themselves in the collection of student fee monies and subsequently used their scripted power to distribute these funds to student organizations and initiatives that they deem essential for their campuses.

There are a variety of student government models that colleges and universities make use of, with the most common being one that generally resembles the US federal government system of an executive, legislative, and judicial branch of government (Nadler & Miller, 2022). The study assumes that the primary voting activity that would generate student interest and involvement by voting would be the election for the student government presidential position, an election that often also includes voting for senator positions. Using this presidential and senatorial election as the main voting instance, the purpose of conducting the study was to identify the number of students who voted in their 2020 as compared to their 2011 student government election. The study attempted to identify differences in voter turnout and to more accurately identify some base level of student participation in these elections.

Background of the Study
The activities, roles, and significance of college student governments have been well documented. Their evolution from loosely defined collectives that emerged into formal bodies with defined power has been debated and described (Miller & Nadler, 2006; McGrath, 1970), and their role in student development has similarly been critically examined (Bray, 2006; Kuh, 1994). Research on student governments, however, has not been structured in any particular manner or in any sort of linear progression. There continue to be news reports on who college student government presidents and leaders are (Miles, 2011), the issues these governing bodies face (DiLoreto-Hill, 2022), and a wide assortment of independent topics (Ramsdell, 2015).

Student governments on college campuses can serve any number of functions and be held in varying degrees of value, depending upon their agenda, and commitment to communication with their constituents (DiLoretto-Hill, 2022). LaForge (2020) noted a somewhat limited role for student governments.

> Most universities embrace methods to involve students formally in issue discussion, information dissemination, and, to some extent, decision-making regarding policies that affect students and their academic extracurricular activities (p. 128).

When student governments are actively engaging with the larger student body, they presumably have the ability to garner stronger interest and attention, resulting in greater interactions and value placed in their work. This increased value would, then, potentially result in a higher level of voter turnout. This conceptualization of government responsiveness is aligned with the public policy theory of agenda setting. In agenda setting, public officials develop their agendas in response to articulated concerns by constituents (Kingdon, 2010). Sharp's (1984) identification of citizen demand-making as an illustration of constituent involvement in agenda-setting and larger participation in government serves as an example of how to issue popularity can result in higher levels of constituent engagement.

Student governments on college campuses range from small groups with little influence to large organizations that engage thousands of students. Some campaigns for student government are little more than social media or email messages, and at other institutions, large-scale campaign staffs raise funds to orchestrate month-long, multi-faceted campaigns. As Miles et al. (2012) found, large, research universities often have more students participating in elections than their comprehensive university peers, and this is true for the percentage of those voting as well as the actual number of voters.

At the time of her study, Miles et al (2012) identified over 14,000 undergraduates who voted in the University of Alabama's student government election (53% of the student body) and over 15,000 students who voted in the Texas A&M student government election (31% of the student body). Those were the largest in terms of the number of voters, but she did find that at institutions such as Clemson, Louisiana State, and Rice, over 30% of the student body voted. These doctoral, research universities averaged 17% of the student body voting with a range of just 3% participation to 53% participation. These institutions averaged 4,380 votes with an average institutional undergraduate enrolment of 25,559.

In comparison, Miles et al identified a range of turnouts for the comprehensive universities, including under 3% of the students voting at the University of Michigan-Flint to nearly 52% of the students voting at Trinity College in Connecticut. The average for this group of institutions was 13%, with an average of 1,355 students voting and an average enrolment for these institutions of 11,940.

Little is known about why students vote or do not vote in student government elections. The literature on voter participation in public elections, however, has received considerable attention. Blais (2006), for example, reviewed previous research on the topic and identified elements such as the competitive nature of an election, strong political parties, the association of organizations to election issues (such as churches and labor unions), and reviewed literature that identified variables such as socioeconomic standing. Blais did note, however, that the higher voter turnout is linked to compulsory voting (sometimes seen in other countries), although no link between the consequences of non-participation and participation was identified. Other studies have stressed socioeconomic status, particularly as it is linked to other variables such as education level, as being critical in predicting who participates in voting (Horn, 2011). Some of the variables identified in this literature base may similarly relate to college students deciding to vote in their own self-governance elections, including issues such as the relationship between voting and institutions (Greek life chapters, for example) and the competitive nature of an election. The first step in identifying voter motivation to participate, and then linking that participation to civic engagement post-college, is to understand voter turnout in self-governance elections over time.

Methods

Consistent with the 2012 study, data for the current analysis were retrieved from online student newspapers and student government websites. The first step in the examination was to look up each 2012 institution's student government websites to see if the number and percentage of votes were recorded and identified. If so, the number of actual voters in the election was noted to compare between 2020 and 2012. If not, the institution's student newspaper or official university news website was consulted in an effort to identify how many students voted in the election. These numbers were recorded in a spreadsheet next to the voting numbers from the 2012 study.

Only one institution reported student voting data on their student government website and the remaining identifications were all made through the student operated newspaper. The reliance on student newspaper reporting proved to be problematic for the follow-up comparison, as 11 of the doctoral universities and 28 of the comprehensive university newspapers did not report the number of students voting that they had reported in 2012. This means that the overall sample size was reduced by over a third (39%) in the comparison.

As in the original study, doctoral research universities and comprehensive universities were included in the data collection and analysis. Doctoral research universities were selected in the first study from a national listing of these institutions maintained by the Carnegie Classification. These institutions had a similarity of mission and focus, with that being the emphasis on graduate education, external research funding, and they tended to be large universities that enrolled students from a wide range of areas around their host states and other states as well. The doctoral research universities were intended to be a contrast to the comprehensive universities included in the study. These institutions were selected from a listing

maintained by the Carnegie Classification as well, but they tend to focus on undergraduate education and professional programs through the master's degree. Although some comprehensive universities do offer doctoral-level work, their primary focus is on teaching and the transfer of knowledge through the classroom rather than the development of new knowledge. Additionally, comprehensive institutions tend to recruit and enroll students from a closer proximity to their campus locations.

Table 1
Number of Institutions Included in Comparison Groups

Institution Type	2012	2020	Difference
Doctoral	50	39	-11
Comprehensive	50	22	-28

Data on undergraduate enrollment were retrieved from the 2020 IPEDS report. The IPEDS report is the official federal government reporting mechanism for higher education institutions in the United States and is coordinated through the US Department of Education. The Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) includes a range of institutionally reported and certified data, including official enrollment counts. The study made and accepted the assumption, similar to the 2012 study, that only undergraduate students voted in undergraduate student elections, so this undergraduate student enrollment number was subsequently used for data analysis.

As a primarily descriptive study, the data were reported in terms of a percentage of possible students voting in each election, and ultimately, using a t-test, these percentages were compared for statistically significant differences. The t-test is a commonly used statistical comparison of the means of two groups of data, in this case, the comparison was made between the data from year 1 (2012) and year 2 (2020).

Findings
Doctoral institutions
Overall, 21 of the 39 doctoral institutions which reported student voting experienced a decrease in student voter turnout; however, as a group, the doctoral institutions experienced a slight increase in the percentage of students who voted. In the 2011 election, 17.9% of the undergraduates, on average, voted, and this increased to 18.42% in the 2020 elections. Despite this increase, the actual average number of students voting decreased from 4,567 in 2011 to 3,878 in 2020 (see Table 2).

Table 2
Doctoral Institutions Voter Turnout Comparison

Institution	2011 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	2020 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	Difference in %
Alabama	14380	53.77%	8476	25.85	-27.92
Arkansas	3445	17.90	5773	25.07	+7.17
Arizona	4752	13.29	3.032	8.47	-4.82
Arizona State	3619	7.39	6924	10.97	+3.58
Boston College	3967	28.53	809	8.63	-19.9

California-Los Angeles	9715	25.24	9482	30.06	+4.82
California-Riverside	3163	17.49	2606	11.82	-5.67
Chicago	2139	14.40	1458	21.98	+7.58
Clemson	6056	34.43	5004	24.78	-9.65
Connecticut	3892	13.24	2384	12.65	-.59
Duke	2700	20.06	1872	28.15	+8.09
Florida	9847	19.15	9907	30.57	+11.42
Florida State	5947	16.53	5118	15.38	-1.15
George Washington	3964	19.81	4967	39.79	+19.98
Georgia	7306	21.37	11258	37.72	+16.35
Indiana	7742	19.18	5371	16.13	-3.05
Iowa State	2188	8.14	4534	16.02	+7.88
Kansas	5650	19.24	2235	11.36	-7.88
Kent State	1387	5.87	2417	10.86	+4.99
Louisiana State	7771	30.00	3646	14.12	-15.88
Massachusetts (Amherst)	2425	10.42	2419	9.99	-.43
Miami	593	3.86	3324	29.40	+25.54
Nebraska	3615	16.68	3308	16.15	-.53
Nevada Reno	1554	12.77	2581	15.79	+3.02
New Hampshire	1958	13.78	36.48	29.90	+16.12
New Mexico State	2183	14.22	1492	12.78	-1.44
North Carolina State	6366	19.41	4020	15.48	-3.93
Ohio State	6216	11.57	3098	6.62	-4.95
Oklahoma	3447	14.96	1126	5.17	-9.79
Oregon State	2095	10.31	1871	7.13	-3.18
Pittsburgh	3876	12.58	3394	17.68	+5.1
Rice	1610	30.15	1133	28.40	-1.75
Tennessee	6112	22.03	5818	24.98	+2.95
Texas	10000	20.00	9191	22.90	+2.90
Utah	3652	15.58	2532	10.34	-5.24
Vanderbilt	2425	20.05	2113	30.69	+10.64
Washington	3156	7.49	4718	14.72	+7.23
West Virginia	5400	18.44	2671	12.63	-5.81
Wyoming	1807	19.97	736	7.50	-12.47
AVERAGE	4567	17.9%	3878	18.42%	+.52

The range of participation in the 2011 study included a high of 53.77% of all undergraduates voting at Alabama to a low of 3.86% of the undergraduates voting at Miami University (Florida). These two institutions also represented the high and low of actual number of voters and not just the percentage of participation, with Alabama having had 14,380 students vote in 2011 and Miami had 593 students vote. In 2020, George Washington University had the highest percentage of students voting (39.79%) and the University of Oklahoma had the lowest percentage of students voting (5.17%). In terms of the actual number of voters, the University of Georgia had the highest number of student votes (11,258) and the University of Wyoming had the fewest (736).

Several of the doctoral institutions experienced dramatic shifts in voter participation. Institutions such as Alabama (-27.92%), Boston College (-19.9%), and Louisiana State (-15.88) had large decreases in the percentage of students voting in their elections. In comparison, several institutions also experienced large percentage increases in voters, including Miami University (FL) (+25.54%), George Washington (+19.98%), and Georgia (+16.35%).

The number of voters and the percentage of those students voting were then compared using an independent t-test. No significant differences at the .05 level were identified between either the number of students voting ($p=.38460$) or the percentage of students voting (p=.80986).

Comprehensive institutions
For the comprehensive universities included in the original study, 28 did not report voting numbers in their respective student newspapers, through university relations, or on their student government websites. This meant that only 22 of the original institutions were considered in the current data analysis. Of these institutions, 13 experienced a decrease and 9 increased the percentage of students voting in the 2020 election. Overall, the percentage average of students voting at these institutions fell from 10.65% to 10.03% (1,336 students voting in 2011, compared to 1,226 in the 2020 election; see Table 3).

Table 3
Comprehensive University Voter Turnout Comparison

Institution	2011 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	2020 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	Difference in %
Austin Peay State	999	13.32%	348	3.49	-9.83
East Tennessee	1713	15.40	977	9.13	-6.27
Eastern Illinois	733	6.88	234	3.76	-3.12
Emporia State	905	14.13	552	16.21	+1.99
Marquette	2515	21.63	2218	26.05	+4.42
Minnesota State Mankato	1790	13.52	1546	12.42	-1.1

Nebraska-Omaha	751	4.99	697	5.69	+.70
North Carolina-Wilmington	1606	13.16	1876	12.69	-.47
NE Illinois	612	5.13	220	3.86	-1.27
Point Park	368	9.57	246	7.94	-1.63
San Jose State	1800	5.49	1562	5.60	+.11
San Francisco State	1614	6.64	1211	5.04	-1.60
Sonoma State	794	9.05	459	6.33	-2.72
Southern Utah	1337	17.78	984	9.58	-8.82
Southern Maine	403	4.63	409	6.13	+1.50
Texas-Dallas	787	5.26	5120	24.39	+19.13
Texas-San Antonio	1505	5.25	598	2.11	-3.14
Utah Valley	2191	10.22	409	.99	-9.23
Weber State	961	4.49	2178	7.93	+3.44
Western Washington	2184	15.85	1081	7.09	-8.76
Wisconsin-Eau Claire	1445	14.71	2517	25.71	+11.0
Wright State	2381	17.41	1541	18.56	+1.15
AVERAGE	1336	10.65%	1226	10.03%	-.62

Institutions not included from previous study: Abilene Christian, Cal State-San Bernadino, Central Michigan, CUNY-Queens, Drake, Drew, Fordham, Fort Hayes State, Georgia College and State, Jacksonville State, Louisiana Tech, Michigan-Flint, Missouri State, Northeastern State, Pittsburg State, Rowan, Santa Clara, Southeast Missouri, SUNY-Geneseo, Tennessee-Chattanooga, Trinity, Towson, West Georgia, West Texas, Western Kentucky, Wisconsin-Whitewater.

For the institutions that reported data for both the 2011 and 2020 elections, the institution with the highest percentage of students voting in 2011 was Marquette University (21.63%) and the institution with the lowest percentage of turnout was Weber State University (4.49%). The highest number of voters in 2011 was 2,191 at Utah Valley University and the lowest was 368 students voting at Point Park University. In

2020, Marquette again had the highest percentage of the study body voting (26.05%) and Utah Valley had the lowest (.99%), and the highest voter turnout was at the University of Texas-Dallas with 5,120 students voting and the lowest was Northeastern Illinois University with 220 students voting.

Although most institutions varied only slightly in their percentage of voters, several did experience large increases and decreases. Institutions with large increases included the University of Texas-Dallas (+19.93%), University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (+11%), and Marquette University (+4.42). Those with the largest decreases included Austin Peay (-9.83), Utah Valley (-9.23), Western Washington (-8.76), and Southern Utah (-8.82).

The number of voters and the percentage of those students voting at comprehensive institutions were then compared using an independent t-test. No significant differences at the .05 level were identified between either the number of students voting (p=.693095) or the percentage of students voting (*p*=.750733).

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of the study need to be contextualized within not only the world of politics but also the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all of the elections from the 2019-2020 academic year were either in process or completed by the time of most campus closures for health-related reasons. Even though these campuses might have been open, voting might have been impacted by growing fears about the pandemic. This means that additional analysis, perhaps 15, 20, or even 25 years of comparisons of voting numbers and percentages would be helpful to best understand student government voting.

A second consideration in understanding these findings is that the public reporting of election and self-government behaviors is less than complete. The role of student newspapers is disappointing, especially among comprehensive universities, as neither group of institutions reported in thorough manner election results. If students are learning in college to not rely on formal news outlets such as newspapers to inform their decision-making, then once they are out of college, they most likely will be unfamiliar with relying on newspapers to be informed. They are learning not only to vote and participate in civic dialogue, but they are also learning how to do this. Subsequently, if society wants, or needs, an informed, unbiased mechanism for understanding their world, then they need to invest in college in mechanisms such as investigative journalism and reporting in and by college newspapers.

Third, a critical analysis of issues addressed by student governments needs to be considered, something similar in many ways to DiLoreto-Hill's effort to understand student government agenda-setting. Linking agenda interest, then, to participation levels of student voting might reinforce voter behavior theory, or conversely, lead to new, ground-theory approaches to understanding college student behaviors.

Findings from the study highlighted that there appeared to be two domains of student governments determined by both the size of the electorate and the percentage of students who went to the polls to vote. The first group, represented by institutions such as Alabama, Arkansas, UCLA, Georgia, and Marquette had over 25% of their students voting in their student government election. The second group had low percentages of student voter turnout and was characterized by institutions such as Austin Peay State, Eastern Illinois, Texas-San Antonio, and the University of Oklahoma and had voter turnouts of 5% of the eligible student body or less.

Thirty years ago, Weiss (1992) wrote about the machinations of Alabama's student government and the Miles et al study seemed to reinforce the power of student government as demonstrated by a massive voter turnout. However, these findings, as well as those of a decade ago clearly show that the majority of student governments are engaging a small segment of the undergraduate student body. If college and university leaders truly want to help encourage future participation in a democratic society with participants well informed about issue complexity, then they must use information such as these study findings to begin finding new ways to not only engage students but help them find value in realizing and implementing the power of a vote.

Findings such as these also should begin a larger conversation among student affairs professionals about how to engage more students in not only elections, but the governance process. Focusing on creating an agenda that might have broader appeal to more students, creating election procedures that have broad interest to all types of students, and teaching students about the importance of involvement early in their academic careers might be good starting points in this discussion. Additionally, institutions that find success in engaging high percentages of students would do well to share their stories of success and offer case studies about how they worked to grow involvement. Ultimately, the process of demonstrating value in voting participation will require buy-in and role modeling by other governing bodies, including faculty and staff senates. If colleges and universities truly see their role as enhancing the practice of a democratic society, they must provide meaningful attention to the content and methods of this practice, notably, taking the time and investing the energy in participating in governance.

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Authors Bios

Michael T. Miller is a Professor of Higher Education who also teaches in the Adult and Lifelong Learning, Community College Leadership, and Public Policy graduate programs at the University of Arkansas. He has served as a department chair and associate dean at two different institutions as well having served as the Dean of the College of Education and Health Professions at UA.
Email: mtmille@uark.edu

Daniel P. Nadler is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of Arkansas and is currently serving as the Interim Vice President for Student Affairs at Georgia College and State University. He previously served as the Vice President for Student Affairs at Northern Kentucky University and Eastern Illinois University, as well as the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Tulane University.
Email: nadlerdan22@gmail.com

Revolutionizing Education for Women Empowerment during Pandemic and Beyond Pandemic Times

Cathy Mae Dabi Toquero

College of Education, Mindanao State University-General Santos City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Women are underrepresented and denied equal opportunities in the scientific community as a result of a rigid research culture and a lack of genuine academic support. Higher Education should go beyond the superficial treatment of women empowerment. This article reflects on the heightened gender-based inequality during pandemic and calls for the academic community to take social action and contribute to women empowerment. It also advocates re-creating and revolutionizing the educational system to promote women's rights and success stories in pedagogical instruction, as well as forming alliances with more men as one of the potential solutions to strengthen women's empowerment. Higher Education should create and encourage inclusive research cultures, implement mentorship programs, integrate gender equity in institutional metrics, and amplify policy spaces for women beyond COVID-19. Academia should therefore adopt a feminist praxis as an integral part of its structure to enact social change, because women empowerment is beyond mediocrity.

Keywords: COVID-19, women empowerment, higher education, gender inequality, feminism

Higher education can play a pivotal role in disseminating a significant contribution in women's career trajectories in the research world amid the pandemic and beyond pandemic. Despite how COVID-19 accentuates the disparities in the plight of women (Chen & Bougie, 2020), women prevail no matter the disparities and gender inequalities. However, as generations pass by, women are still subjected to stigma for being sensitive, dramatic, and indecisive (Eklund, Barry & Grunberg, 2017). These gender-based stereotypes and gender-based violence are some of the primary reasons why I view feminist praxis as valuable for contributing to social justice. During this global health crisis, I delved into an interpretivist paradigm that focused on women's roles in the academe to fight against COVID-19.

Because stereotypical socio-cultural practices persist, being Asian and living in a developing country may indicate deprivation. Women's traditional roles in parts of Asia are strict, patriarchal practices predominate, and gender inequalities persist (Strachan, et.al, 2015). Nonetheless, I am privileged to be in academia, where my influence as a catalyst for change to a generation of learners is recognized. As an educator and researcher, I have had the privilege of contributing to the empowerment of marginalized people. Similarly, my thoughts and experiences during COVID-19 fueled my desire to advocate for revolutionizing the educational system through a disability and feminist lens as critical to the social outcome of the post-corona

society. I would like to emphasize how academia and science can strengthen feminism practices, liberate women from gender oppression in the face of COVID-19, and engage men to social action for women's empowerment. As a result, I focus my commitment to social justice on the possibility of COVID-19 disproportionately affecting women's career and educational paths (Gabster et al., 2020).

Reflecting on the gender and development programs of some universities is a call for action, so I ponder and dissuade the lack of profundity of the programs with a nexus grounded on the materialism aspect. Such derivative superficiality is earmarked on aesthetic embellishments with an insufficient depth of critical gender lens for socio-cultural transformation. The issues dealing with women empowerment are beyond the well-orchestrated concept of a spectacular Broadway show. The literary context of superficiality for charismatic influence to evoke emotions resulting in frenzied applause is a satirical illusion of theorizing change in the deep-rooted stereotypes of gender discrimination prevalent in society.

Women empowerment is beyond physical beauty, absurdity, and distorted sense of reality. Persuading people in the academe to partake in the women's month and dreaming that shared efforts are accomplished in making the lives of women better— is incomprehensible and unsubstantiated. It is not simply about the embellished banners marked with 'celebrating women's month' in every corner of the university in March every year. Though these are good signs that organizations try to uphold women empowerment in academia, is this good enough to address long-standing issues of women. Following that, people look forward to another year of embroidering pink and violet symbols on the university hallway. To what extent do these aesthetic illusions address the universality of gender discrimination? The answer— it is a metaphorical representation that women do exist.

In my university, a few women have functions and responsibilities in high positions. Male dominance exists in these positions with a ratio of 8 out of 10. In scholarship, we try to incorporate a gender-inclusive approach, but not much of programs and policies cater to address the need for more scholarship among women. Moreover, one of the challenges that women encountered relative to scholarship is the lack of mentoring in navigating the publishing environment. Lack of mentorship would mean slow career progression in academia since publishing can be an uncharted territory. I, for one, had difficulty with publishing when I started out since I received minimal guidance, if any, on how to do things. I studied alone since I had no research mentor and superior to guide me. I unleashed the power of technology and stood on the shoulders of giants, relying on platforms such as Google Scholar to look for answers to my questions about research. In the Philippines, our primary responsibility is focused on teaching rather than publishing. But a rather lackluster network makes publishing ever more challenging, especially since promotion and contribution are also anchored to producing research. Then, women are rated with the same standards as men without looking at the multiple roles played by women at home (motherhood, wife duties, household chores, etc. refer to Whiley et al., 2021) that may hinder such similar career trajectories.

Moreover, I rarely encounter books that depict representation of successful women researchers and prospects of science and political-related careers for women. Scholarships leading to college also do not target those girls in marginalized areas. The incorporation of feminism concepts is also not taught in most courses in the curriculum. If any, there is minimal or limited representation of feminism lens in praxis and pedagogy in the educational system. Hence, peer mentorship, meaningful and relevant empowerment programs, calling men to support feminism, and curriculum feminism praxis are possible entry points to expanding the authenticity of women empowerment.

Beyond Superficial: Spectrum of Fragilities due to Pandemic

The advent of the pandemic has resurfaced dimensions of fragility in systems and institutions that heighten the hallmark of deprivation, unequal treatment, and discrimination on a global scale. Everybody is vulnerable to COVID-19, and so are women. The quarantine posits gendered implications to women (Wenham, Smith & Morgan, 2020). For example, the authors from Pakistan reported that women's vulnerability "get heightened

in situations like COVID-19 mainly due to the religiously inspired dominant patriarchal social behaviors and the state's inability to practically empower its women during normal conditions" (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020, p. 10).

The pandemic has exposed the vast disarray concerning gender inequality in society, and the academe is no exemption. Before the pandemic, masculinity tends to dominate higher positions and ranks (Eagly, Karau & Makhijani, 1995; Ryan & Branscombe, 2013; Eklund et al., 2017) in the socio-political ecosystem, and COVID-19 exacerbates this deprivation for women leadership.

During the surge of the pandemic, I spearheaded and organized international conferences despite the little logistics and limited human resources. Spearheading the events as conference chair, I navigated a whirlwind that included heavy academic workload, household duties, benign physical illness, online learning adjustments, student org advising, three sections of online thesis consultations, publishing numerous papers, networking with foreign practitioners, and coping with psychological exhaustion due to the pandemic. Amid these multiplex and concurrent happenings, a few of my male counterparts labeled me as incapable of managing the stress associated with the international conference without knowing the real context of my motives and reasons behind my supervisory actions- especially when I make sudden decisions that call for desperate measures to mobilize people to action to achieve the goal for the conferences during an extreme period in our lives. Such stereotyping and 'dramatic' labeling is uncalled for.Empowering women necessitates more than just physical aesthetics. Advocating for feminism lens is beyond the superficial display of women empowerment. Women have been fighting for generations to liberate against gender-based societal stereotypes that sprang from patriarchal societal domination imposed through religious, familial, superstitious, cultural, and political standards (Ahmed & Noushad, 2017; Ajala, 2016; Muasya, 2016). All these factors of deeply-entrenched dogmatic norms and values cannot be solved through mediocrity of environmental embellishments. Advocating for women empowerment requires targeting norms and values and sustainable development (Bayeh, 2016) to break the chain of gender discrimination and gender-based violence. I purport that the academe has the most crucial role to play in shaping societal values. Empowering women is a shared vision for human rights and social justice (UN Women, 2015). This empowerment empirically means significantly contributing to the decrease of multidimensional poverty and socio-economic related issues in society, aside from its great influence to education and well-being (Wei et al., 2021).

Amplifying Policy Spaces and Enjoining Men for Social Action

To improve the plight of women, unity is essential to dismantle patriarchal dominion. We must not allow the pandemic to exacerbate existing disparities in women empowerment so that those feminism movements that existed prior to the pandemic are not in vain. However, men's involvement to alleviate gender stigmatization is also important for women's empowerment (Toquero & Ulanday, 2023). They are part of the cause of the problem, so they can also partake in the solution (Flood, 2015). When more men join in advocating for women's rights, despite the inherent complexities of this involvement, there is a better chance that laws and policies formulated by men in positions of power will favor women. We can strengthen women empowerment when we enjoin men as our allies in social action and call out justice for women. One of the challenges is how to engage more men to advocate for women's welfare. These are desperate times, and we need all the help in amplifying policy spaces for women empowerment. COVID-19 exposed the spectrum of fragilities and mounting complexities in academia (Stack, 2021), but this pandemic era is a time for an educational and societal revolution.

Since men tend to dominate many of the higher positions in some universities in the Philippines, including positions in research, then cooperation of men and women is crucial to raise academic voices for social action. One instance after the pandemic lockdowns, in meeting with other researchers during conferences, I encountered that there were only very few women who participated in a Philosophy forum. This event suggests that men have the platform to call for more women participation in the field of Philosophy.

Integrating gender equity in university metrics will challenge institutions for accountability towards systemic change. Equal representation will afford both men and women opportunities for professional growth in academia encompassing leadership, resources, and dignity. Practicing an inclusive scientific culture in an institution is crucial for balancing funding distributions, implementing flexible work arrangements, and improving programs and interventions.

Despite the adverse effects of the pandemic to some people in the world today, particularly women, this pandemic presents opportunities for women empowerment. This is not the time to be afraid of initiating change, even if society resents it, because times have changed and many people are either suffering or reflecting on inner changes. Thus, today is a hallmark for a dynamic revolution to make women's lives better and liberate women from brusque treatment and undesirable typecasts. There is a need to capture the opportunities (Yan, 2020) and make use of this hiatus to effect change for women. The lingering question is not why, it is how? There is a need to focus on where feminism can advance its movement and proliferate where it can serve best—academia.

Expanding Scientific Opportunities for Women

In the research spheres of the university and the transnational scientific community, research opportunities should be equally granted to women. There are only very few existing publishing houses that cater to women studies. But every university needs to create more scientific outlets for both men and women with the groundwork on women empowerment and intersectionality. There is also a significant gap in the scientific studies, such as in the Philippines, that delve into feminism studies. I have only read a few of that in-depth research that tackle real issues confronting women. Although there are funding grants that are provisioned for incorporating feminism, very few researchers opt to do research on critical issues surrounding women, which may be due to multifaceted factors. Women should be encouraged and supported to propose and publish more research for the transnational scientific community during pandemic and beyond the pandemic.

Research journals also need to cater to the feminist movements to support more women to publish scientific research. "Scientific expertise and knowledge from all genders are essential to build diverse, inclusive research organizations and improve the rigour of medical research to tackle COVID-19" (Gabster et al., 2020, p. 1969). Hence, the research culture should be kinder for both men and women throughout the pandemic and beyond pandemic to generate more shreds of evidence focused on women studies and advance women empowerment. We are in times of gender dynamics, but it takes academia and the research culture to change stereotypes against women. Taking structural action to address the challenges of women commits to honoring the Sustainable Development Goals (Burzynska & Contreras, 2020). This endeavor is more than merely cosmetic.

Curricular Response through Feminism Praxis

The academe needs to proliferate knowledge by making the curriculum more responsive for inclusivity and create more research opportunities with a focus on advancing women empowerment in the society. The educational system needs to incorporate relevance and responsiveness to meet the needs of the changing times. Courses could be created in the country with the nucleus on women empowerment so that the younger generations can provide knowledge generation for the society. Such curricular responses may engender legitimate strategies to advance the welfare of women as aligned to the sustainable development goals.

With reference to equality, we hope to see more women leaders in academia and the country's political ecosystem in the future. Character education should incorporate the values of feminism and lessons of women's achievements that changed the course of history. Books should be rewritten to highlight the role of women from earlier times leading to the pandemic in which women are the first line of military defense against the spread of the novel coronavirus. By doing so, the younger generations of student citizenry, both boys and girls will be taught that both men and women have equal rights and equal opportunities in society. Let us

imagine a future in which more men advocate for women's rights. Changing norms and values clearly necessitates the participation of the entire academe and society. "Social awareness and civic conscience are now needed more than ever. Feminist thinking and community work are key to the development of empathy and actions that foster togetherness rather than otherness" (Boncori, 2020, p. 3). This is more than superficial.

Rebirth for Academia during Extraordinary Times

The pandemic sparks the beginning for uncertainty, and we never know where the university efforts will lead its influence, but this pandemic represents a rebirth for academia. Uprooting gender inequalities is the first step toward reimagining how society should live, treat, and respect women's rights. Women should not be relegated to the shadows, waiting to be discriminated against and abused by patriarchal society. This systemic role has to change, this is more than superficial. In these dark times, academia can serve as a torch to educate society on how women should be granted equal rights, research opportunities, and social protection. We do not want a business-as-usual market in which women remain in the dark ages and only exist during women's month in the post-pandemic world. There is more work to be done. The Great Wall of China was not built overnight, but the painstaking efforts of people propelled it to the ranks of the world's seven great wonders. Hence, academia must seize this opportunity to initiate change for women beyond superficial panacea. Women create success. Lest we are not going to assert the feminism movement during these extraordinary times and effect change for women empowerment in society, a woman will always be behind every man's success.

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Author's Bio

CATHY MAE D. TOQUERO is an Associate Professor V of the College of Education, Mindanao State University, General Santos City, Philippines. She is currently an Associate Editor in the Journal of University Teaching Learning and Practice in Australia and a Regular Member of the Department of Science and Technology-National Research Council of the Philippines (DOST-NRCP). She finds keen interest in disability topics and advocates for feminism and disability lens in higher education governance and educational policies. Email: cathymaetoquero@gmail.com