

## **Working Toward Becoming Doctoral Researchers: A Collective Autoethnography of International Students in Australia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

It is well established that international education can profoundly influence a student, including identity and agency formation and the acquisition of knowledge and culture. This study applies the concept of self-formation to reconceptualize the international student experience. It captures the development, changes, and operation of identity and agency during self-formation. Utilizing collective autoethnography, the authentic experiences of three international students studying in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic were collected. These stories illustrate their transformation from international students to student researchers. Through thematic analysis, three phases have been identified in this study, which are self-exploration, self-positioning, and self-determination and shedding light on the role of agency and hybrid identity. A further scholarly investigation is advocated to enrich the discussion of self-formation and add a nuanced investigation into the variability of individual experiences.

**Keywords:** self-formation, international student experience, positioning theory, self-determination, collective autoethnography, postgraduate research.

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There are an increasing number of international students participating in postgraduate programs. Throughout countries, which are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), international students constitute 14% at the Master's or equivalent levels and 22% at the Doctoral level (OECD, 2021). Among these international students, 58% are Asian with 23% being Chinese (OECD, 2021). In line with the data, a Master's by Coursework has become the second common qualification for entry into a Doctorate degree, while the honors degree, comprising advanced subject knowledge and research skills development, remains the most popular one in Australia (Kiley & Cumming, 2015). As the Australian Qualifications Framework (2013) defines, the master's by Coursework degree can "qualify individuals to apply an advanced body of knowledge in a range of context" (p. 6), which involves the study of designed units by attending classes, completing assignments, and taking exams as required. Enrolling international students in higher degree research (HDR) programs, subsuming two-thirds of research content (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013), can strengthen global research networks and contribute to international collaboration (Lee, 2020). Thus, nurturing and supporting aspiring international students is meaningful at both individual and collective levels.

The development paths of international students are established through multiple events, subjective interpretations, and uncertainties. In following the theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), it is argued in this study that there is a need to study international students' experiences in a more holistic way by taking their situations into account during pre-enrolment, such as international learning and living and also after they have graduated. Such a proposal is driven by the acknowledgment that international students who enroll in HDR programs (international research students), regarding their professional expectations, design their career plans before and after participating in international master's programs (Li et al., 2021). Despite possible similarities among international students, awareness is vital in understanding the uniqueness of individual experiences to avoid overgeneralization. Therefore, to present distinctive and similar experiences among international research students, collective autoethnography has been selected for this study. As three Chinese students, researchers, and the participants involved in this study, collective autoethnography enables us to reflect, share, and discuss our experiences, which center on our transitions from a master's by Coursework to pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Australia.

For this study, Australia has been selected as the research context for international HDR students. Australia is listed as a country with a higher proportion of international students (>30%) in its tertiary educational institutions and caters for 8% of all international students in Master's degrees and 5% at the Doctoral level (OECD, 2016). Reportedly, Chinese students take up 30% of the international student cohort in Australia (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022). During Covid-19, Australian universities have been undergoing significant changes, which have directly influenced international education (Blackmore, 2020). Consequently, international students have been exposed to extreme social, financial, and personal hardship in Australia

(Blackmore, 2020). For example, after facing racial discrimination, international students have said that they feel unwelcome (Blackmore, 2020; Jiang, 2020). Given the gravity of the situation, it is vital that the accounts of international students are not silenced so that possible solutions can be found. As a result of this real-life issue, the guiding question for this study is as follows:

1. How do international research students transition from a Master by Coursework degree to Doctoral researchers?
2. One secondary question is proposed to explore the main research question:
3. What are strategies for international research students to achieve academic and personal development?

## **UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE THEORY**

### **Transformative Theory and International Students' Development**

According to transformative theory, learning is driven by the demand to understand the world (Dirkx, 2012; Mezirow, 2012). Throughout Covid-19, all students have experienced confusion due to changing study modes from face-to-face to virtual learning, while searching for solutions and endeavoring to normalize their situations (Eschembacher & Fleming, 2020; Lin, & Nguyen, 2021). Students are then prompted to question, critique, grow, negotiate, and adapt to a 'new normal' (Eschembacher & Fleming, 2020). These practices are defined as transformative learning (Mezirow, 2012). This study draws on transformative theory to study the development process of international students who have conducted educational research during Covid-19. The theoretical guidelines of the transformative theory are followed so as to investigate the way international students take to re-assembling and re-structuring their experiences and then transferring them into focus (Eschembacher & Fleming, 2020).

Acknowledging the challenge of reconstructing the personal knowledge system, transformative theory concerns the practices in which adult learners negotiate the taken-for-granted meaning perspectives with changing goals, values, and understandings (Eschembacher & Fleming, 2020; Mezirow, 1981). Three knowledge interests and learning types are identified, which are technical, dialectical, and emancipatory. Each of these three types refers to a unique aspect of learning, from exploration of the environment, understanding of social contexts, and cultivation of the self (Mezirow, 1981). Importantly, transformative theory emphasizes the role of education in assisting adults to communicate with their inner selves and the outer world (Marginson, 2014).

The development of international students can be seen as the practice of transformative learning (Chwialkowska, 2020; Nada, 2018). It has been found that studying overseas can promote personal growth in a way that the home country cannot offer, such as developing intercultural understanding (Lin & Zhang, 202; Jiang, 2020) and academic skills (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). These developments

have been attributed to advanced education and learning opportunities in the host country, as social and material environments have proven to promote the development of consciousness (Simon, 2014).

However, exposure to a new environment cannot equal transformative learning (Simon, 2014), which requires learners to actively negotiate with the outer world and re-examine their self-beliefs (Mezirow, 2012). For international students at master's and Doctoral levels, learning and living in a new environment can challenge and shape their existing meaning perspectives (Nada, 2018). In unfamiliar surroundings, international students are expected to study the structures and powers of the outer world (Simon, 2014). To do so, these students need to critically review their existing meaning perspectives and selectively transform learned skills (Chwialkowska, 2020), as knowledge of the environment and social contexts of home countries may not be applied as frames of reference (Nada, 2018). However, studies have found that prior meaning perspectives are still applied by international students (Lin & Nguyen, 2021; Lin & Zhang, 2021). For example, China conducts meritocratic selection by using competitive examinations and promoting a hard-working culture (Lin & Chan, 2021). These understandings constitute Chinese students' primary technical and dialectical knowledge toward learning. It has been found that Chinese students are likely to use extended time to prepare themselves for pedagogy, assignment requirements, and social and cultural norms (Lin & Nguyen, 2021; Lin & Zhang, 2021).

However, as international students, practicing transformative learning is challenging and cannot be underestimated. Research has found that a large percentage of Chinese international students are suffering psychologically from depression and anxiety (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). However, these issues are not fully understood. Moreover, it is not uncommon for Chinese international students to be considered as being uncritical, passive, and overly dependent learners with insufficient language abilities (Lee, 2020; Tran, & Vu, 2018). Thus, this results in the difficulties involved in the process of transformative learning for these international students being ignored. This situation uncovers the epistemological problem in studying overseas for international students and calls traditional qualitative methods into question (Ellis, et al., 2011). As such, knowledge is produced through God's eye view since researchers are believed to have complete knowledge of the studied issues – knowledge is “imbricated with power and subjectivity” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1661). As a result, there is a crisis of representation, as researchers cannot provide comprehensive interpretations to capture the lived experiences of their studied groups (Butz & Besio, 2009). As a response, autoethnography emerges as a novel way to use “subjectivity deliberately as an epistemological resource” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1661). Autoethnography has been accepted as a research method to demonstrate the experiences of international students to study their development in cross-cultural competence, academic writing, and identity formation (Lin & Zhang, 2021). During Covid-19, autoethnography has been used to uncover the experiences of online learning, suggesting the need to develop digital literacy among Chinese students (Lin & Nguyen, 2021).

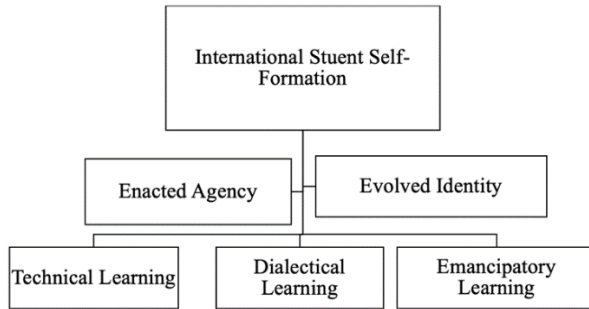
## **International Higher Degree Research Students and Self-formation**

While the transformative theory is popular in adult learning, the idea has not been fully explored in international education. Lately, the concept of self-formation has been extracted from transformative theory to describe the way learners realize, understand, and formulate the self (Dirkx, 2012). Subsequently, self-formation is introduced to refer to international students' self-directed transformative learning processes (Marginson, 2014). Such a suggestion is in line with the argument that international education is an act of self-investment (Kuron et al., 2015; Marginson, 2014), whereby international students become individual agencies to direct their development paths (Archer, 2000; Marginson, 2014).

Evolved identities and enacted agency are the foundation of international student self-formation (Marginson, 2014). The evolved identity is a result of continuous person-environment interactions (Esser, 2016). It has been found that international students' primary identities evolve in accordance with the situated environment (Esser, 2016). Hence, through self-categorization, international students can create social identities and locate an imagined community (Tarrant et al., 2009). These behaviors have been explored through positioning theory to study the perception of the self and the others (Harré & Dedaić, 2012). Importantly, the evolvment of identity is deeply rooted in social relations and is subjected to immediate situations (Berge & Ingerman, 2017; Huang & Wang, 2021). For example, it has been found that Covid-19 can alter self-positioning and form a collective identity by evoking the collective fate amongst people (Toprakkiran & Gordils, 2021).

The practice of self-formation is enabled by the enacted agency – a production of sensemaking (Berman et al., 2001). In the case of international students, they can reflect on their behaviors, assign meanings to experiences, and interpret unfamiliar materials (Berman et al., 2001). However, in the discussion concerning agency, there is a tendency to homogenize individuals. In the field, Chinese research students are generalized as Chinese international students or as under the shadow of international Doctoral students (Kiley & Cumming, 2015). Due to this perception, little is known in Western higher education research about how Chinese research students negotiate with the outer world to construct their identities, and how they enact their agency to construct pathways from master's students to entry into Doctoral studies. Building on transformative theory, this study proposes international student self-formation as the analytical framework (See Figure 1). Additionally, this study highlights the role of agency and identity in transforming technical, dialectical, and emancipatory learning into self-formation. Specifically, technical learning aims to acquire contextual knowledge, dialectical learning is conducted by communicating with others to enhance social understanding, and emancipatory learning is about self-discovery, connecting the self with the environment (Mezirow, 2012). In the recognition of three learning types, this study intends to detail the process of international student self-formation to study how evolved identity and enacted agency empower international students to cross geographical, sociocultural, and linguistic

boundaries, negotiate with social rules, engage with learning, collaborate with different social actors, and obtain personal and academic achievements.



**Figure 1: Transitional Theory and International Student Self-formation**

## **METHOD**

A social constructivist view was employed in this study. In this view, social realities are being continually constructed by social actors (Bryman, 2016). This study has attempted to make sense of the international research student experience by investigating the interactions between social actors and their environments. In the following section, the rationale is given for employing collective autoethnography, and the methods of the data collection and analysis are described.

### **Collective Autoethnography as the Research Approach**

In this study, collective autoethnography has been utilized as the research approach. Such an approach provides researchers with a retrospective vision to reflect, narrate, and analyze participants' experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Moreover, it brings researchers with similar interests together to recall their own stories from unique positions (Ellis et al., 2011). As international education continues to develop, scholars argue that more attention should be given to learning the authentic experiences of international students (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). To respond to this need, the current study unsilenced the voices of Chinese international research students by offering them a space to reflect on their experiences.

### **Participants**

As the three participants in this research, demographic information is specified in Table 1. In this study, we took on the integrated role of being both participants and researchers. As shown in Table 1, we obtained a master's by

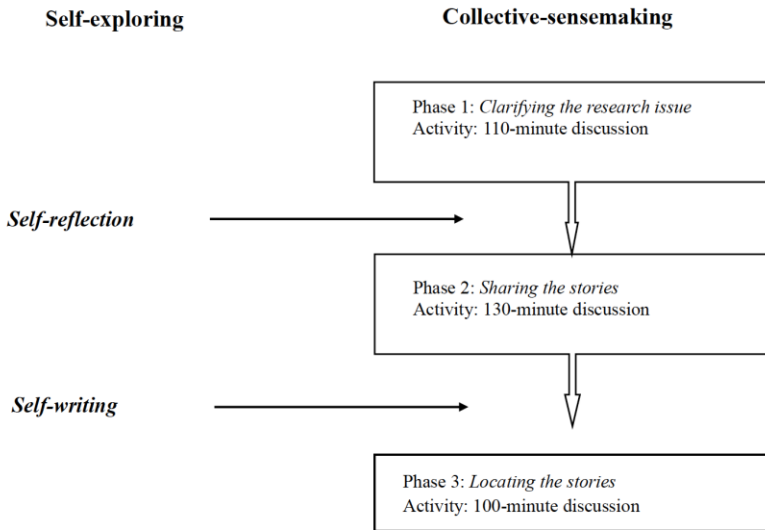
**Table 1: Participant-Researchers**

Name	Age	Highest Educational Qualification	Years of Attending Australian International Education
Author 1	25	Master of Educational Leadership and Policy	2
Author 2	27	Master of Education	2+3
Author 3	25	Master of TESOL	2

Coursework in education (containing research units) in Australia and completed research pathway units that enabled us to undertake a Doctorate. Authors 1 and 3 are prospective Doctoral students and Author 2 is a final-year doctoral student.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, data were collected through three phases (see Figure 2). In Phase 1, the three authors shared experiences of studying abroad, which were highlighted, and the research aims and questions were clarified. After discussions, as the authors, we had one week to recall our relevant memories. In Phase 2, we presented our unique experiences and after more discussions, we wrote our own stories and shared them on google drive, thereby trying to understand other stories. In Phase 3, group discussions were organized to finalize the contents of individual stories and compare differences. Through these phases, self-reflection was conducted on these international education experiences and collective sensemaking practiced.



**Figure 2: The Process of Data Collection**

### **Data Analysis**

After collecting the three stories, thematic analysis was selected to study the dataset. This was because the primary attention of this study is on “what” was told by us as the authors when responding to our research issue. In this regard, applying thematic analysis helped us search for the main themes to theorize across cases, and explain the meanings behind the created themes (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, thematically analyzing the participants’ teaching or learning experiences is widely applied in educational research (Burns & Bell, 2010; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Weurlander et al., 2018). Following Branue and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines, the following steps were taken during the process of data analysis. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading the full text and generating initial codes. Second, the generated codes were used to collate data to obtain a condensed version of the main points in the full dataset. Last, three themes were identified and termed self-exploration, self-positioning, and self-determination. Such a classification enables researchers to explore the reasoning and meanings behind their experiences.

### **Practical Considerations**

Issues about ethics, reliability, and validity were carefully considered in this research. Given the uniqueness of collective autoethnography in data collection and analysis, the ethical treatment of researchers is complex (Ellis et al., 2011). Primarily, any harm was mindfully avoided in designing the research (Bryman,



2016). As the researchers involved in this process, we had a high level of autonomy in disclosing our experiences. Meanwhile, a friendly environment was created to provide emotional support during the research. To preserve a high level of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in the narratives for individuals involved in the stories other than the authors. In this study, reliability and validity were highly regarded. To ensure the authenticity of the narratives, clues, such as time, location, and social circles, were used as reference points to ensure the truthfulness of stories.

## **FINDINGS**

Considering the word limitation, the presented narrative stories are extracted based on online discussion and self-writing on google drive.

### **Author 1: Aspiration, Confusion and Determination**

The burning need to find the inner sustenance for my academic curiosity drove me to pursue a master's degree overseas. I finished a bachelor's degree in education with a distinction in my home country and received support from my faculty Dean. In the first semester of my master's project, I was charmed by the sophistication of the human mind and the diversity of culture. I wanted to celebrate the differences and engage with other international students. However, in my second semester, I found my peers were participating in the labor market, and I panicked, as I had no idea what to do as there was no guarantee for entering a Ph.D. program. However, I was reluctant to let go of my overseas life, so I needed to prepare for work. Eventually, I decided to volunteer in a community program to provide educational support for children in a social organization, where I received a bitter lesson from society. I received no credit for my work for not being able to sign up for a one-year commitment.

At university, I was rewarded for my hard work. My opinions were valued in the classroom, and my talent was recognized by lecturers who encouraged me to work toward publishing articles. After six months of face-to-face study, all classes were delivered online due to Covid-19. My heart was broken when the Australian Prime Minister said that international students should go home if they face difficulties. While I was struggling, it was necessary to finish the assignments. Thus, I was browsing through literature and found that scholars had advocated revolutionary changes to support international students. These articles were so powerful that I felt that I had a supporting team. I deeply connected with these wonderful minds, and the idea struck me – I want to be part of them! I signed up to volunteer in the supporting group for international students and started to work on the research about international education. The desire to create a better international education system encourages me to keep going.

### **Author 2: Disappointment, Redirection and Satisfaction**

In 2015, I obtained a bachelor's degree in business management and started my internship. However, the experience disappointed me with the hidden organizational values and conflicted with my belief relating to business ethics. After discussing this with my intern mentor, I was convinced that I was very naïve to believe in doing the right thing, but I insisted on retaining my own belief. Thus, I decided to study a Master of Education to find out what education was and how it could improve social issues.

In 2016, I enrolled at an Australian university. I found that Chinese international students normally regarded a master's degree as adding value to their educational qualifications; they had high expectations of a return on investment, which I did not agree with. At the age of 21, I did not expect any return on investment and increased career status or opportunities since I had little work experience, so I held onto my inner little bit of idealism for pursuing knowledge rather than the economic returns.

A Ph.D. was actually not my initial purpose for choosing the research pathway units, as I thought conducting a research project would be interesting and would improve my skills. However, I was persuaded by my lecturer that I should have been proud of having critical eyes about educational and social issues and a spirit of caring for marginalized groups, so I decided to pursue a Doctoral degree in 2018. I enjoyed my Doctoral journey until Covid-19 changed everything. Living in a small apartment, I found myself isolated in a cage and worried about missing some opportunities. Soon after, I understood how to communicate and conduct collaborations online and realized that not having physical meetings had no negative impact on my doctoral studies.

### **Author 3: Expectations, Realities and Uncertainties**

I graduated from metal materials engineering studies, which is a male-dominated subject. This major normally leads to jobs in the machine shops where considerable physical work is required. Unsatisfied with this career perspective, I decided to study Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Through reading online comments, I thought the pressure of studying in Australia would be manageable for me to enjoy my life. Arriving in Australia, I was eager to make some friends who were learning English as a foreign language. I had an open attitude, yet I found myself making friends with similar minds only.

Eventually, I realized that my friendships were contextual, and the only reason we were together was to complete a collective task, rather than establish an enduring relationship. I never expressed my emotions freely with them because I put on a mask to suppress my negative feelings. I felt obligated to be the best of me when being with them. After six months of trying, I was tired and disappointed, and my passion for having culturally different friends was gradually slipping away. I started to doubt my choice of friends and was eager to join Chinese students. Thus, I started to actively engage with Chinese students who shared the same experiences, culture, and interests as me. I made connections with Chinese students, who were now becoming an essential part of my social life.

Six months after my course, Melbourne was in lockdown, and I lost my social life. Most of my friends returned to China. The loneliness and isolation made it difficult for me to be positive in my life. I spent most of my time staring at the laptop. My emotions fluctuated based on the outcome of my daily learning. I would be ecstatic when making progress. Most importantly, my writing was appreciated by my tutor, who told me that it was possible that my assignment could be published after revisions and that I had real potential to gain a scholarship. While doing a Ph.D. had never crossed my mind, I was deeply encouraged by my tutor, and started to exploit my academic potential. However, at other times, I was afraid of coping with learning issues online, worried, and anxious about my future.

## **DISCUSSION**

As three participants involved in international education, this study argues that we experienced self-formation through the practice of agency and the formation of identities. In addition, it is proposed in this study that self-formation in our cases was a three-phase practice, including 1) self-exploration, 2) self-positioning, and 2) self-determination.

### **Technical Learning: Becoming an International Student through Self-exploration**

Self-exploration is identified as the first phase of self-formation. In this process, as participating international students, we developed self-awareness, examined our heritage identities, and initiated agencies in the situated social system (Berman et al., 2001). The reflective journals indicated that in the phase of pre-enrolment, as international students, as shown in Figure 1, we started to select our majors and destinations through technical learning (Mezirow, 2012). As international students, our agencies were exercised to commence self-exploration by conducting self-reflection and negotiating with families, social actors, and perceived social norms within the system (Esser, 2016). In the narrative, Author 1 illustrated her aspiration to obtain a more sophisticated understanding of subject knowledge, which led to her participation in international education. This situation resulted from interacting within the Chinese education system, where she was rewarded (Esser, 2016). Her practice of self-exploration was enabled by activated agency, which emerged in social interactions (Esser, 2016).

Participating in international education as a master's student can be seen as a transition process in professional development (Kiley & Cumming, 2015). As Author 2 and Author 3 have indicated, their enrolments in education courses were

driven by their eagerness to change their professional paths. Having experienced a disagreement about certain business values at her internship, Author 2 struggled to fit into the system (see similar experiences in Esser, 2016). This conflict was closely linked to Author 2's prior learning experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, through her undergraduate learning, Author 2 had primarily developed her professional identity, which directed her to make sense of herself and the world, and the way she wished to present herself. Thus, Author 2 resisted adapting to what she considered as "unethical". Acknowledging the flaws in real-life business, Author 2 redirected her focus to education. Consequently, Author 2's transition symbolizes the primary result of self-exploration after interacting with social actors and the business system. Given this developing self-understanding, Author 2 was empowered to exercise individual agency to make a sound career decision.

Author 3 was also encouraged by the possibility of changing her lifestyle and career perspective. On reflection, Author 3 considered different types of work, lifestyle, and family considerations. In this regard, she enjoyed a level of agency freedom (Marginson, 2014) but her decision-making was largely shaped by the perceived social norms (Kuron et al., 2015). For example, Author 3 was concerned that the gender preferences in the labor market might hinder her career development. This case coincides with Dalley's (1988) finding that some employment types are masculinized, such as engineering, while some are feminized. Accepting this social rule, Author 3 decided to take up a caring role as a teacher. (Dalley, 1988). While Author 3 felt she had a considerable degree of agency in choosing a career path, it is worth noting her unconscious thinking within the decision-making process, as rules and norms can be enacted by decision-makers (Esser, 2016).

The above accounts show clearly that as participants we acted as individual agents in our pre-enrolment time (Archer, 2000). Moreover, we re-established ourselves as self-forming human agencies who managed to select our agendas from "the menus of the possible" (Marginson, 2014, p. 11). Author 1's emerging academic identity, Author 2's crisis in professional identity, and Author 3's cultural identity took primary places in directing them towards international education (Kiley & Cumming, 2015). Admittedly, academic development is the critical goal for international students (Wu, 2020). As Author 1 indicated, she was searching for an alternative way to expand her academic potential. However, this study argues that personal development is equally valued by international students. For example, Author 2 utilized international education as a ladder to reach an ideal world and Author 3 considered international education as a life transfer station. These reflections echo the argument that international education is an act of self-investment, which is driven by enacted agency (Kuron et al., 2015; Marginson, 2014). The act of self-investment includes high hopes for academic, career, and personal development (Kuron et al., 2015).

### **Dialectical Learning: Searching for Meaning through Self-position**

Self-positioning is identified as the second phase of self-formation for participants. In this study, international, self-positioning human subjects are being positioned within the network while positioning themselves through dialectical learning (Mezirow, 2012). This study centralizes international students and specifies their three stages of self-positioning, namely pre-positioning, positioning, and performing (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

The first attempt of self-positioning – pre-positioning – can be seen as the act guided by the hope for affinity with an imagined community, which could then lead to favoring in-group behavior (Tarrant et al., 2009). In the above description, Author 1 and Author 3 located their membership within the general international students' group and positioned themselves as cultural, language learners, peers, and friends with the group members. Their pre-positioning decisions justified hybridity of identity as they embraced different cultural and relational elements to develop the self (Marginson, 2014). In contrast, Author 2 considered herself as "belonging to the Chinese students' group", reflecting her understanding within a particular cultural identity. After interaction with other students, individuals are expected to identify their distinctions from and similarities to the imagined community and enter the second stage of positioning (Berge & Ingerman, 2017). In this process, Author 2 recognized her different opinions to the group members, Author 3 experienced shock as she struggled to retain her expectations regarding her social life.

While in positioning theory, it is predicted that individuals will readjust their social strategies and find a community that fits into their new social imaginations in the stage of positioning (Huang & Wang, 2021), Author 1 felt lost in the transition and was "surprised" because as she said, "most of my peers seek immigration chances". It could be seen that Author 1 struggled to distinguish herself from accepted social rules, including her life decision to become either a research student or employee, so her decision-making was considerably influenced by other social actors in her pre-positioned group. As Sen (2000) suggests, this type of struggle can be attributed to one's weak sense of self. In other words, Author 1 could benefit from developing a solid identity within herself to negotiate her hybrid identity (Marginson, 2014).

In the third performing stage, Author 1's perceived "rules and regulations ... work as agents" (Esser, 2016, p. 15), thus directing her behavior. In the performing stage, Author 1's initial decision was compromised, thereby exploiting her academic potential in international education, and then following other international students to prepare for non-academic work. Consequently, Author 1 practiced self-critique to deal with the conflicts between the different contexts, including belonging to the social group, the labor market, and fulfilling her need for academic development (Whyte, 2002). Such a situation could have adversely affected subjective experiences of living overseas. While Author 3 was "frustrated" about being unable to make the expected connections with international students, she had a relatively short and smooth transition from positioning to performing.

Conversely, Author 2 possessed a stronger identity in relation to the I – a centering self to navigate in cultural plurality (Marginson, 2014). As such, she

was able to address the conflict between her roles; international students, a Chinese person, and make decisions about changing her direction (Marginson, 2014). After Author 2 recognized her differences from group members in terms of the value of international education, she “did not expect any return on investment and increased career status or opportunities” It can be seen that there is a consistency between Author 2’s transition from self-exploration to self-positioning (Dedaić & Dale, 2012). Following the view of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), Author 2’s prior experience of negotiating with the business system – self-exploration – may have enabled her to have a clear expectation of an international master’s degree. As indicated above and in Author 2’s earlier excerpt, her expectations of the degree were about the construction of a utopia where unethical behaviors will be prevented through education. Such consistency aligns with Harré and Dedaić’s (2012) finding that individuals will perform in their position based on their expectations for themselves and the wider world.

The above accounts offer insights into international students’ behaviors and inner activities during the second phase of self-formation, when they conduct pre-positioning, positioning, and performing (Huang & Wang, 2021). In this process, some identities are prioritized, such as Author 1’s collective identity. Despite the shared patterns, individual experiences are unique. This study suggests that self-positioning is not limited to a single dimension of international student experiences. Rather, it is a unit constituted by a particular physical time and personal lifetime, space, social, and education system, and mindsets of international students (Simon, 2014). In this unit, transformational learning is conducted to help individuals realize and develop the self while interacting with the world (Dirkx, 2012). To develop the relational approaches in agency studies, this study highlights individuals’ abilities to self-reference. Specifically, this study proposes the concept of self-reference to describe international students’ capacities to relate to prior social interactions in present decision-making processes. This ability is well-presented in Author 2’s differentiation of herself from the other social actors and illustrated in Author 1’s and Author 3’s redirection of their social and academic lives.

### **Emancipatory Learning: Becoming a Researcher through Self-determination**

Self-determination is identified as the third phase of self-formation. As Deci and Ryan (2000) point out, competence, relatedness, and autonomy are the three basic psychological needs for human beings. In the process of emancipatory learning, people are evolving, negotiating with the system, and interacting with others (Gagné & Deci, 2005). These developments were captured within the narratives when as the three participants, we described our plans to become researchers after graduation. Although we all experienced a similar course of events, our motivations varied, and our experiences were similar yet unique. When reflecting on the events that led Author 1 and Author 3 to pursue an academic career, they were encouraged by being potentially rewarded from publishing articles, suggesting that their motivation is driven by the need to

receive approval from others (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Hence, they felt worthy as their ideas were appreciated by lecturers, and capable when knowing it was possible to publish their work (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As such, these feelings satisfied needs for competency and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Author 2's story further enhances the value of positive interactions, and as she said "I was persuaded by my lecturer" to pursue a doctoral degree.

Hence, as participants, we have revealed that we were driven by extrinsic motivation and attempted to claim self-worth in academia. In this phase, our identities were mainly exercised in a social form (Esser, 2016), meaning that we obtained our sense of self from teacher-student relations, as our fragile egos were protected and cultivated, which meanwhile formed our prospective identities. For example, Author 2 expected to become a scholar who could speak for the "marginalized group". However, her extrinsic motivation lies in the urge to get the prizes and lacks intrinsic power to perform well in trying times (Deci & Ryan, 2000). During Covid-19, Author 1 and Author 3 were suffering from disappointing social lives. The struggles with social lives were reflected in Author1 and Author3's perceptions of their international experiences. Losing the support from the community they belonged to, Author 1 felt abandoned, and Author 3 was lonely. Nevertheless, Author 1 highlighted her emerging collective agency and identity, which were closely attached to the international students' group. As the narrative shows, Author 1 enacted a collective agency to improve international students' living and education situations in Covid -19 by participating in a supporting group (Ibrahim, 2006).

At university, which is an institution for learning, as researchers, we connected with academia through the Internet during Covid-19. Such an attitude to connect required us to work in a new normal, where physical education practices shifted into virtual ones (Moyo, 2020). As international students, this study has found that we were able to retrieve our autonomy after readjusting to the situation. However, this process cannot be simplified, as both non-human and human actors were involved (Bickerdike et al., 2016). In the process of adjustment, Author 1 conducted a new round of self-positioning academically. This change in behavior was only attainable after she recognized her interconnectedness with the general international students' group. Following Deci and Ryan's (2000) finding, Author 1 strengthened her relatedness with the international students' group, which led her to make an indirect connection to scholars in the field. Through interaction with scholarly work, she considered her competence as the potential for contributing to the field. In this process, goals were established, a central value was formed, and she prepared herself to pursue a higher research degree.

Author 2 was in her third-year Doctoral studies, where she found it vital to stay involved with academia. As shown in the story, she adapted to the new normal in Covid-19. Hence, she managed to negotiate successfully with the online system and showed high adaptability during the process. Such behavior reflected her existing relatedness with academia, in which a membership had been forged during her Doctoral journey. Her quick transition to working online rewarded her with positive feelings, as she was able to conduct online communication

effectively (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As such, Author 2 was more autonomous in terms of behavior and subsequently in achieving self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In the stage of self-determination, as participants, we clarified our goals, further developed our motivation, and established a stronger connection with the social group. For example, Author 1 and Author 3 decided to pursue a higher research degree after graduation, and Author 2 stayed focused on her academic goal. Such achievements lie in prior efforts regarding self-exploration and self-positioning. Moreover, this study highlights that becoming a researcher is not the end of international experiences. Rather, it is an ongoing emancipatory learning practice that enables international students to sharpen their focus and improve their performance (see Figure 2). Meanwhile, as Author 1 has demonstrated, the transition between stages is a linear process as she was re-positioning herself socially before determining her professional focus. Hence, identifying the complexity within the transition process requires equal attention to the individual stages.

It could be seen that the pathway for an international master's student to a Doctoral researcher entails constant negotiation between the self and the outer world. In this process, as participants in this study, we practice self-exploration, self-positioning, and self-determination. Our international journeys have been enabled by the enacted agency to create plans; followed by the development of identity through social interactions and led by self-determination, which has been achieved by locating self-value, strong agency, and clear identity. Pathways to becoming doctoral researchers are fueled with enduring self-motivation, support by significant others, and meaningful interaction with social members.

## **CONCLUSION**

For the first time, this study explores Chinese students' development pathways in Australia. Drawing on transitional theory in relation to international education, this study enriches the discussion of international student experiences by studying the development paths of master's students to doctoral researchers. It argues that international research students' experiences are created by interactions with non-human and human actors within a *unit*. The study reconceptualizes the international student experience by proposing a three-phase self-formation framework, including self-exploration, self-positioning, and self-determination. These phases cover the process of pre-enrolment, overseas learning and living, and postgraduation. Moreover, this study explores how agency and identity evolve and change in self-formation and confirms the ways in which hybrid identity may form. With these insights, it advocates the creation of supporting groups, additional help from universities to nurture the development of international research students. Although the findings from this study provide insights into the international research student experience, structured data collection can be inadequate for gaining a holistic view. It suggests future research to consider factors, such as social status, gender, and to explore and test the given framework of this study. Moreover, more comprehensive studies that focus on



career and professional pathways in this area are much needed to better support and cultivate aspirational international researchers. This study hopes to feed forward ongoing scholarly interest and research concerning experiences of international students and the complexity of international student agency and identity.

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