Study-Work-Life Balance of International Students in the Context of Temporal Boundaries

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Abstract

The goal of this qualitative study was to examine the experience of study-work-life balance among international students who were separated from their family both geographically and temporally. Using 10 semi-structured interviews with postgraduate students and thematic analysis, several themes were identified. These included boundary management shifts due to study/work demands and time zone differences. In addition, students reported social and personal challenges (in terms of family's expectations, relationships maintenance, socialization in host country). Temporal boundaries contributed to social withdrawal and isolation among students, many of which were heavily reliant on their own family network for support. The findings strengthen the argument that time difference impacts the boundary management and social experience of international students.

Keywords: boundary management, segmentation, integration, study work life balance, temporal boundaries

In today's global market, international education has become increasingly more important. The percentage increase for full-time international students enrolled in Irish universities has risen so steadily that the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has set a goal in Ireland's International Education policy to be at 15% in 2020 (HEA, 2016). In light of these developments, both academic experience as well as the student's personal experiences in higher education have become priorities for many institutions (Ong & Ramia, 2009). Accordingly, many educational institutions increasingly recognise the importance of providing welfare and counselling for these international students in order to support a healthy and successful student experience. We are not aware of any research that has examined the experience of international students in Ireland. In this context, two topics are the focus of the present work: We wish to explore how international students manage their study-work-life balance (SWLB) when they are also separated temporally from their families, friends and general support network (e.g., when there are significant time zone differences). The next section

provides an overview of relevant findings in relation to SWLB, social support, and an introduction to temporal boundaries in the form of time zone effects for students.

Study-work-life balance (SWLB)

Abbott (2013, pg. 44) describes work life balance (WLB) broadly as "a state where an individual manages real or potential conflicts between different demands on his/her time and energy in a way that satisfies his/her needs for well-being and self-fulfilment." With this definition Abbott uses the word 'demands' to refer to situations or obligations which an individual experiences in either the work or family domains. While many studies focus on WLB in organisations and the effects on employee health and well-being, there has been an increasing amount of research on the effect of WLB in the academic lifestyle of college students, including international students (Martinez, Ordu, Della Sall, & McFarlane, 2013; Ong & Ramia, 2009). In recognition of the very different experience of students juggling private lives, work obligations and the demands of their studies, the concept of 'Study-Work-Life Balance' (SWLB) has emerged in the literature on students (e.g., Lowe & Gayle, 2007; Martinez et al., 2013; Ong & Ramia, 2009; Pookaiyaudom, 2015). This concept is related to WLB but is really an expansion thereof as SWLB also considers students' academic and educational experiences. For example, SWLB captures the experience of students studying but also working part-time while trying to balance these demands in order to meet social or familial responsibilities.

A review of studies in this domain introduces the concept of SLWB further and points to some important differences between the experiences of international vs. domestic students. The first study of interest is the work by Ong and Ramia (2009) in which they researched the

experience of international students in Australia, a country with a particularly high number of international students. They found that international students reported a low degree of belongingness and were unlikely to rely on university support for academic issues. Another study by Pookaiyaudom (2015) examined the perceptions of the importance of work life balance in a sample of Thai and international students at a university in Thailand. Factors such as study workload and working hours had a significant impact on the SWLB of all students. However, although good SWLB encouraged well-being and facilitated stress control across both student groups, local (Thai) students perceived a better balance than their international counterpart. Furthermore, Thai students perceived the university as supplying the necessary facilities and activities which support WLB, a view not shared by the international students (Pookaiyaudom, 2015). Another study explored the concept of SWLB among Scottish higher education students with non-traditional entry qualifications and from less advantaged backgrounds (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Those who achieved good SWLB and who were able to manage all of the demands in the different (life, study, work) domains were receiving the most social support and declared less of a need for more support.

These findings suggest that perceptions vary among domestic and international students as to the support they receive. The perceived lack of support and belongingness among international students identified by Ong and Ramia (2009). Pookaiyaudom (2014) further suggest that international students experience issues not shared with local (domestic) students. These students feel more supported via their university, family and friends and thus seem to be able to maintain their WLB, often through making trade-offs in the form of personal time, often in conjunction with their families

(Martinez et al., 2013). Both support and good SWLB are clearly linked, as suggested by Lowe and Gayle (2007). In the absence of local networks and family, international students may find it difficult to find and access local support available to them (e.g., via their university or the local community, see also Kusek, 2015).

Social support may explain these differences. Research on expatriates provides more insight here. Indeed, many researchers have studied the role of social support as a primary strategy for expatriates to cope with the stress of working internationally (Fontaine, 1986; Van Bekel, Van Oudenhoven & Gerritsen, 2017). A number of studies also studied the experience of international students. Yeh and Inose (2003), for example, found that social support and social connectedness were significant factors in predicting distress for international students. Ong and Ramia (2009) also noted that international students may seek social support from family and friends from their home countries, rather than connecting with other local students and using local provisions. As a result, the need to seek social support from domestic or local institutions may actually be reduced. While this is a temporary solution, such developments may not foster interactions between international and domestic students and undermine the emergence of a sense of belongingness due to the stronger affiliation with fellow international students than their local peers, resulting in the use of alternative (expatriate or international) support systems and groups. According to Geeraert, Demoulin and Demes (2014), social support via other international students or expatriates can have positive effects in the beginning, however, if an international student stays in the expatriate bubble. Ultimately, they may not build a social network that can support them locally in their host country.

SWLB and Boundary Management

A particularly challenging situation may arise when international students are not just geographically, but also temporarily, separated from their national sources of support. Even in the presence of other international student groups, and the availability of support, the inaccessibility of immediate family members and close friends in their home countries due to significant time zone difference may create more challenges. Students whose families or close friends are in other time zones (e.g. at least 5 hours ahead or behind schedule) are likely to find that when seeking support it is disrupted or impaired by different sleeping and working schedules. While students may be able to balance the demands of study and work commitments, the different schedules of their immediate family members in their home countries may affect their ability to access support in order to achieve SWLB. However, we know very little about these effects to date.

This potential conflict brings boundary management practices into the picture. These practices capture how people manage the boundaries around the work and family domains (Derks, Bakker, Peters, & van Wingerden, 2016). According to Clark (2000) the permeability of boundaries is defined as "the degree to which elements from other domains may enter" (p.756). Boundary theory argues that some individuals prefer to segment or separate their work and family domains as possible (segmenters) whereas others prefer to integrate both their work and family domains (integrators) (Clark, 2000). According to Derks and colleagues (2016), individuals systematically differ in whether they are integrators or segmenters. Moreover, this preference for one or the other has been found to be relatively stable over time (Derks et al., 2016). Boundary management practices can come under

pressure due to changing life circumstances. In the context of work, segmenters are likely to experience role conflict when work encroaches onto one's private life (Derks et al., 2016; Clark, 2000). Integrators may be able to handle boundary violations more readily. In the context of students seeking an international education, pre-existing preferences may come under strain as the availability of sources of support shifts with the different schedule, a shift that may be more pronounced the greater the time difference between the individual students' host countries and their home countries.

SWLB and Boundary Management across Temporal Boundaries

Ideally, an individual's boundary management practices should be aligned to their preferences to separate or integrate work and life. By doing so, individuals can be supported in their endeavour to manage their SLWB. However, as we will argue, international students may find it more difficult to work to their preference or achieve SLWB in the presence of the temporal boundaries that impose restrictions on social support and limit communication. While there have been no studies examining this directly, several studies with virtual employees have already provided insights into the effects of temporal boundaries with international employees.

In a recent qualitative study, Sivunen and colleagues (2016) explored temporal boundaries in a population of virtual workers. These researchers found that both global time zone differences and the direction of the time zone (whether it was forward or backward from the individuals own time zone) affected the abilities of these workers to collaborate on projects. The findings from this research by Sivunen and colleagues (2016) showed that if the temporal difference was large

(e.g., the time difference was significant, for example, 7/8 hours), the boundaries were "visible to all" and could be managed proactively as they were easy to identify. In contrast, shorter time differences were sometimes more difficult to navigate than longer ones, especially when morning hours and lunch times would be very different (Sivunen et al., 2016). The personal effect of these differences on social support and accessing family were not explored.

Another study by Cummings, Espinosa and Pickering (2009) examined the effects of temporal and spatial boundaries on co-ordination delay in globally distributed teams. These researchers found that for pairs of members who do not have an overlap in their work hours due to significant time zone differences, the availability of communication technology does not generate any advantages. Cummings and colleagues (2009) found that temporal boundaries are more difficult to manage than spatial ones with using communication technologies such as e-mail. Being able to communicate with sources of social support is an important aspect for international students who wish to maintain a healthy SWLB. In light of the lack of research in the area of temporal boundaries and international students, this research aims to fill this gap.

The results by Sivunen et al. (2016) would suggest that international students from countries with significant time differences would benefit from established routines for regular contacting of friends and family back in their home countries. This may support segmentation as social support sources such as family members are only available at certain points of the day. However, students with smaller time differences may find themselves in situation where they need to attend to both work, study and family matters simultaneously. This might benefit integrators but not segmenters. In addition,

social support may be more readily available when time differences are smaller. Our research questions are therefore a result of our analysis of current trends and the identification of several knowledge gaps regarding the challenges that arise for SWLB and boundary management in the context of temporal boundaries. In order to focus our research, we explore the largely challenging effects of temporal boundaries. Our two research questions are therefore:

RQ1: To what extent do international students adopt segmentation or integration when interacting with their families back home?
RQ2: What kind of (negative) effects do temporal boundaries have on international students, both socially and personally?

Methodology

Semi-structured in-person interviews were chosen as the method of data collection for three reasons. These types of interviews enable the researcher to explore the perceptions and opinions using prompt questions which enable the interviewer to obtain more information where necessary (Whiting, 2008). More qualitative approaches such as interviews have also been implemented in recent research on the transition experience of international students (Belford, 2017) and their coping when they are separated from their family (Harvey, Robinson, & Welch, 2017). The interview guide was constructed around the four main areas. This includes the participant's background (including time difference to their home country), social support (family and friends, institutional support), and communication patterns arising from boundary theory (Derks et al., 2016). The third section focused on understanding how our sample maintained the SWLB (inspired by Lowe & Gayle, 2007; Pookaiyaudom, 2015). Following approval of the study by the local ethics committee,

participants were recruited with the help of the International Student Office and the snowball technique. Students had to be enrolled in a full-time programme to be considered, but also separated from their family, and they had to originate from a country that lay in a time zone at least five or more hours away from the host country (located in GMT – Greenwich Mean Time). Upon recruitment, each interviewee received the information sheet and completed a consent sheet. All participation in this study was voluntary and confidential. Following completion of the interviews, the interviews were transcribed.

Participants

In total, 10 Masters students were recruited to report on their experience in 2017, with another 5 in 2018 (see also Table 1). This included six females and four males between 21 and 32 years old. All of them used a variety of communication methods with their network, often using several different methods simultaneously for different purposes (e.g., texting and video calls) and networks (family and friends).
The reasons for recruiting international Masters students were the following. Many institutions limit their student activities to Bachelors students, particularly when most of the Masters students continue their education where they studied for their undergraduate degree. International Masters students usually come for a year at a time and they may not bring their partners for this time, nor are they able to build on their network from their undergraduate days. In addition, students at Bachelors level often outnumber students at Masters level, which means the number of these international students tends to be smaller. This means that for these students, the temporal boundaries were more likely to matter than for students at Bachelors level

Table 1. Participant overview and experience

No.	Home Country	Time Difference	Age	Gender	Communication Methods
1	China	8 hours	29	Female	Wechat, texting, calling
2	Mexico	6 hours	23	Male	Watsapp, Facebook
3	USA	5 hours	22	Female	Skype, Facebook, I-message, Watsapp
4	Columbia	5 hours	31	Female	Skype, Watsapp
5	China	8 hours	25	Female	Wechat (Texting and Calling) Weibo
6	USA	5 hours	32	Female	Watsapp, Facebook, Skype, Calling
7	China	8 hours	21	Male	Skype, texting
8	China	8 hours	24	Female	Wechat, Skype
9	India	5.5 hours	26	Male	Watsapp call and messenger
10	USA	6 hours	25	Male	Facebook, Google Hangout, texting

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen in order to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for a constructivist approach where no specific theory is the basis for subsequent analysis. The process of thematic analysis involves the search for themes that emerge as being crucial to the description of the phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997), such as SWLB and boundary management. Due to the theoretical freedom provided by thematic analysis it is regarded as a flexible and useful research tool that has the potential to provide a rich and detailed but also complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of carrying out thematic analysis on the data was similar to the steps out-lined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This meant repeated coding of texts until clear subthemes and themes could be identified. In the current paper, only those themes were presented which were related to the research questions and were selected by both authors as relevant (in line with interrater reliability). Previous research has shown that thematic analysis is a useful analytical approach to understanding the international student experience (e.g., Bird, 2017).

Results

Descriptive results

The following paragraphs describe the general experience of our interviewees. This section will be followed by the results of thematic analysis.

Access to social support. Communication patterns were very similar across the board. All interviewees sought out their immediate family members on a daily (participants P2, P3, P4, and P9) or at least weekly basis. In 8 out of 10 cases (except for P1 and P6), mothers were the main person students interacted with. This was largely based on their greater availability compared to fathers, siblings or friends who might be working or otherwise engaged. Text messaging was preferred for non-instantaneous messaging by all interviewees (e.g., when time zones did not align), phone calls were used on a spontaneous as well as scheduled basis (when the respondents were temporarily available), and video chats were often scheduled to include several members of the family (e.g., on a weekly basis to include all parents, grandparents and siblings).

In terms of local support, we noted that none of the international students were

users of the available support services, and six indicated that they were not satisfied with the university support that was offered. In short, all support seeking activities were aimed at families and friends. Communication frequency was higher at the beginning of the degree programme, and tended to increase when interviewees faced pressure in their studies, work or personal/family affairs. More about this in the next section.

Family situation and mobility. Only two respondents out of ten had never left home and their family before (P2 and P8). Most interviewees had lived away from their families in order to pursue an undergraduate degree or a job (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9 and P10). Several interviewees had also lived abroad before (P1, P3 and P4). Most of these students did not get a chance to return home during their year abroad (except for P3 and P10) due to visa or financial constraints. This means that the majority had also experienced some independence prior to their current Masters degree.

The following section presents an overview of themes identified in our interviews and the link to main research questions.

Thematic research: Context-dependent boundary management

We first examined the themes noted in regard to the management of SWLB (specifically, the extent to which interviewees showed segmentation or integration preferences when interacting with their families back home, RQ1). Three interviewees showed very flexible contact management on a day to day basis, suggesting they were able to integrate the demands of work, study and personal life (P3, P9, and P10). The remaining seven engaged in some degree of integration as well as segmentation. This is further explained by Derks and colleagues (2016)

who noted that an individual's preference for boundary management practices can change due to work demands or responsibilities in other roles. The reasons for these shifts towards segmentation varied, from college work to temporal boundaries. We focus on boundary management shifts due to college work first.

Boundary management shifts due to study/work. Shifts to temporary segmentation occurred when interviewees had to dedicate longer periods of time to either work or family activities and interactions, such as joint skype meals, calls with family and friends around important events (e.g., holidays), or scheduled skype calls with the extended family (e.g., P2, P3, P7, P9, and P10). Several interviewees shifted from an integrative to a segmentation style when academic deadlines loomed. For example, according to P1, *"at the moment I don't contact anyone [...] because I need to save my energy on the things I need to focus. [...]once I finish I would contact everyone immediately to make it up and catch up"* (P1). In addition, P3 reported that "*I just sit down and won't get up from my computer for 12 hours if that's what it takes"*. She uses segmentation as a necessary tactic to complete assignments.

Temporal boundary management shifts. Nearly all interviewees (except for P1 and P10) were managing the time difference either by establishing routines or increasing the effort they made in order to communicate with their social support networks in their home countries. The availability of family during the day (particularly mothers or grandparents for 8
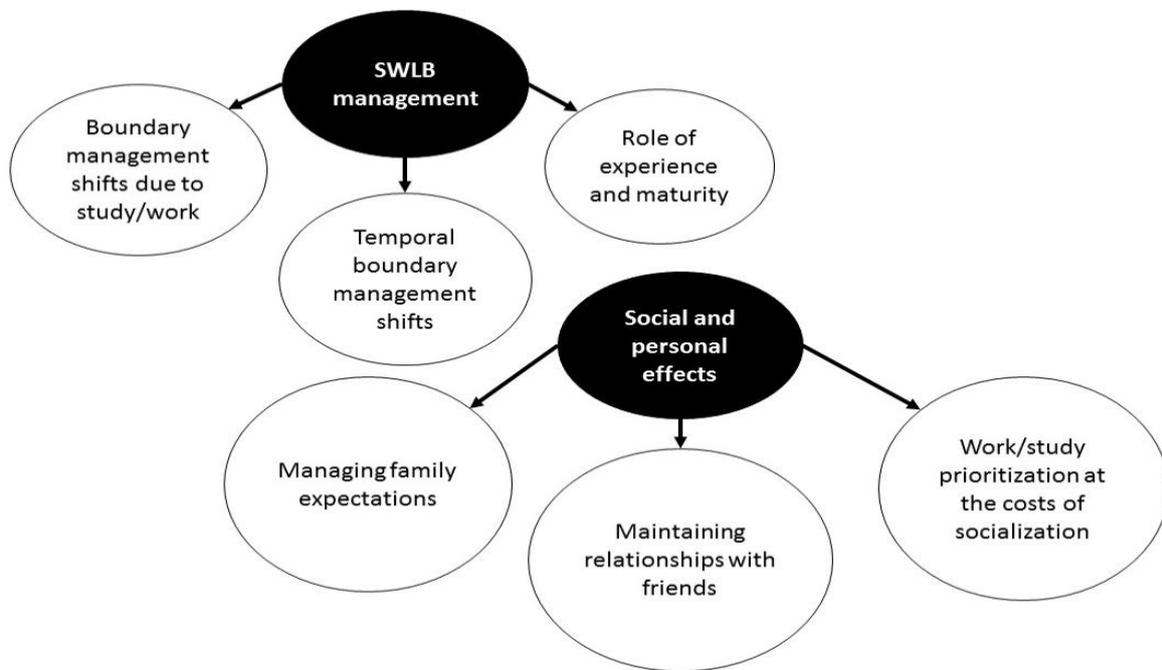
Figure 1. Overview of themes

interviewees) often facilitated interactions and reduced temporal scheduling issues (e.g., P2). However, not all friends and families were as accessible throughout the day.

A number of individuals (P10) rearranged their schedule to fit those of their friends and family in their home country. P8 noted that "*we contact each other on Saturday am so here the local time here is 12 o' clock but in China is maybe 8 o' clock in the evening. [...]so that we don't have to stay up late for each other.*" Several interviewees moved their contact hours into the late evening: "*I don't wallow that much because even if I can't contact them I can stay up late till 11 and call them up*" (P10). Nevertheless, "*the time difference makes it a bit challenging*" (P9) to connect with friends and families, particularly when several time zones are involved.

Role of experience. Eight out of ten appeared to manage their study/work demands well (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P8, P9, P10). This may be due to their prior work experience where they had to handle more demanding schedules. In addition, as noted by P9: "*I've too much free time, which is something I'm not used to so it's hard to manage. I think it's more of a question of not having enough to balance as opposed to balancing if that makes sense.*" P10 noted similarly: "*it's not difficult or harder than I expected [...] it's like just forward of what I'm doing, what I was doing previously*". Previous experience may also have played a role as several individuals made a conscious effort to manage their SWLB (e.g., P6, P8 and P9). In addition, P6 reports that "*I'm trying to be proactive in that way so that way I won't be completely immersed in only work, my thesis and miserable. That I'll still be taking care of that part for the WLB and not stressed.*" Nonetheless, not everybody coped well: "*I always was kind of able to maintain a good balance and*

now I just notice myself fluctuating up and down" (P3).

Thematic research: (Negative) personal and social effects of temporal boundaries

However, despite these efforts and experience, several interviewees reported issues related to their ability to manage their personal and social life effectively (RQ2). While we cannot be certain that these difficulties are solely due to the influence of temporal boundaries alone, many of these issues are the results of demands that are likely to be exacerbated by time zone differences between the host and home country.

Managing family expectations. A few examples demonstrate how familial expectations influenced contact seeking and most appeared to be triggered by concern for the interviewees (e.g. P1, P2 and P5). Staying in touch was also pivotal in order to reduce worries: "*If I don't get back to my mom within 24 hours she will text me again and be like "You alright over there?" you know like "Is everything going ok?"*" (P3). P5 similar noted: "*I need to contact them every day to make them feel its fine.*" Finally, keeping "*emotional bond with my family*" also (P1). The temporal boundaries again complicated matters as reported: "*the time difference makes it a bit challenging because when it's morning here, it's dead of night there right so you just have to be mindful of that*" (P9). Learning to be separated required some adjustment among interviewees such P2 who had never lived abroad or away from her family: "*We were so close from one moment to another not having contact with them would be quite strange so for me it's like I really need to be in contact with them*".

When interviewees were unable to get or keep in touch, they experienced guilt and anxiety (e.g., P3, P4, P8 and P9). This

is also reflected by the following quote: "*sometimes I worry too much like when people don't answer their phone and normally they do so it's like oh something happened*" (P9). And similarly, "*it's very important for me to check on family to see how are they doing or is there any tragedy*" (P3). This suggests that the inaccessibility of family can cause anxiety, especially in the context of adverse events. However, interviewees also realised that "*when there is such a time difference you don't really have a choice like you can't be there for everything*" (P3). Being away during the holidays, missing out on important life and social events also increased the contact frequency for most interviewees (P1, P2, P7, P9, and P10).

Maintaining relationships with friends. Many of our interviewees used text messaging and social media posting throughout the day to communicate with friends, without expecting immediate answers. For example, "*for friends I can just kind of fire out text messages*" (P3). Despite the flexibility shown by our interviewees to compensate for temporal boundaries, they still reported several access issue or temporal barriers (P2, P3, P5, P6, and P9). Getting back to friends in a timely fashion was sometimes difficult, when the interviewees were unable to return calls until after their studies (e.g., P5), at which point their friends would go to bed. Even simple tasks such as trying to arrange meetings with friends or even trying to book a joint holiday (e.g, P9) became new scheduling challenges. Furthermore, scheduling flexibility was often limited for friends rather than family due to new job demands among graduated friends (e.g., P9 and P3). For example, "*most of my friends who have graduated from their undergraduate degrees have just gotten these big jobs where they can't really talk as much during the day*" (P3). The challenge to maintain relationships was worse for those interviewees who had people in several different time zones and whose contacts were not available until after working hours (e.g., P6 and P9). These patterns demonstrated the degree to which temporal boundaries led interviewees to be increasingly disconnected from friends. Most interviewees ended up staying more in touch with family rather than friends as a result: "*It's hard for me to find some time to contact [friends]; to be honest it's far most easy to call my family instead of my friends*" (P2). The importance of maintaining friendships was not lost on interviewees, even if they contacted mostly their family: "*I worry this year is going to change our friendship [...] because we're being driven further apart*" (P9).

Work/study prioritisation at the cost of socialization. Another theme that emerged in relation to managing both work and study demands, a theme that has very strong personal connotation, was the cost of setting priorities. For example, study was a priority for 4 out of ten interviewees and influenced the degree to which they organised their work/study and contact time with family to fit into their work and study schedule (P5, P6, P7, P8 and P10). P5 commented on this: "*study is... goes first because it's important that I can finish it*". Guilt played a role in this prioritisation as well as noted by P5: "*I don't need to spend enough time for the study then I can feel it's fine to go out or I'll feel guilty.*" This prioritisation is linked with guilt but also potentially encourages withdrawal from social activities locally: "*I don't take the ... socialise on my break I can have a, you know, I can have a relief going to the gym. That's I think is enough for me*" (P7). The lack of social participation also meant some interviewees did not connect with other international students: "*I didn't find a way to really reach out the International crowd*" (P6).

Many found it difficult to express and share their emotional experience with others in their host country (P1, P3, P4,

P6, and P9). Many reported that it was difficult to access help due to cultural differences (P1, P6 and P9). These circumstances further increased their withdrawal tendencies: "*you cannot express what you're feeling*" (P4). This is echoed by P1 who notes that "*with your own culture circle you're also feel free but you still yourself but there is very relaxed way you don't have to be you know, so different*" (P1). Cultural differences and norms also matter in terms of whether or not interviewees succeeded in building relationships with potential friends: "*in general culturally I find like as a person I'm more willing to talk about things […] maybe it takes longer to get to know someone or to open up.* […] *So I probably haven't probably asked for as much support as I could have*" (P6). The personal learning journey required is clear: "*there's a lot of cultural norms that aren't apparent at first glance, that you have to learn*" (P9).

The isolation resulted in two different outcomes for interviewees. On the one hand, we saw evidence of increased self-reliance: "*I'm definitely just relying on myself more and more at the moment*" (P6). On the other hand, several interviewees experienced various forms of social loneliness: "*I spend a lot of time alone so it's nice to have someone to talk to, you know?*" (P9). Loneliness also led interviewees to experience a sense of personal exclusion: "*I would feel like I'm leftover somehow yeah I feel isolated and feel forgotten*" (P1). The perceived gulf between cultures also stood in the way: "*People they live their own customs, their own culture circle they don't understand the sense of loneliness I'm talking about*" (P1).

Discussion

In the global education market, positive overseas education is viewed as a competitive advantage. In light of this,

there is a need to pay more attention to alternative approaches to enhancing the student experience. In this work, two research questions guided our analysis. First, to what extent do international students adopt segmentation or integration when interacting with their families back home? (RQ2). And second, what kind of effects do temporal boundaries have on international students, both socially and personally? (RQ2).

The themes that emerged in relation to RQ1 suggest that students varied their boundary management practices. This is similar to the findings found by Martinez and colleagues (2013) where they found PhD students established priorities on a daily basis. Derks and colleagues (2016) also reported that individual's preferences for boundary management do not always align with what they practice. We found a similar trend in our sample. While most tried to integrate the different demands, some shifts to different practices were reported by all respondents. On the one hand, workload determined a shift in practices, with segmentation being more likely when work/study demands increased. This means our participants did not display consistent segmentation or integration preferences. Instead, they responded to the situational demands. On the other hand, temporal boundaries also led to shifts. Students would change their schedules to enable them to create some common contact time with family. Scheduling became more important for them.

As a result, we found that students would engage in flexible integration and segmentation practices. Rather than working to their own preferences, they adjusted their hours. Similar findings of time management were also found in the SWLB studies (Martinez et al., 2013; Pookaiyaudom, 2015). However, this did not seem to result in conflict as reported for regular employees (Derks et al., 2016), possibly because the interviewees were not

embedded in a regular family life and most did not work in addition to their studies. Boundary violations were therefore not reported. Experience and maturity played an important role here as well, as eight out of 10 interviewees had previously lived away from family and/or managed heavy schedules due to past work experience. Many had also lived abroad, potentially enabling them to build on this prior experience of working with, rather than against, temporal boundaries.

Several other themes were uncovered when we examined the social and personal effects that temporal boundaries had on our student sample (RQ2). Our sample reported a sense of perceived family obligation, desire to stay close and expectations which increased their desire to stay connected to them. Concerns and anxiety, as well as inaccessibility, were a common trigger for contact-seeking from the students and their families. As a result, guilt appeared the outcome for many students who felt they were not able to support family when necessary. In addition to family obligations, many students struggled to maintain existing relationships with friends. Incompatible schedules and different priorities (as many friends worked rather than studied, reducing their flexibility) were frequently reported. This led to a decline in correspondence with friends as calls were becoming more difficult to schedule, resulting in the use of chat or text messaging alone to stay in touch. This raised concerns among interviewees who feared that their friendships may be affected by the lack of contact and communication. While communication with friends declined, communication with families increased, suggesting a heavy reliance on family support.

The efforts invested by most of the interviewees in staying close to family and friends were far greater when offset against efforts to make new friends. This is also similar to the findings of Ong and Ramia (2009) who suggested that international students may seek support from those they know in their home countries, rather than connecting with other domestic or international students in their host country. While this may not be a conscious choice, many interviewees indicated that they prioritised their studies over their social life in their host country, a trend that has also been observed among senior expatriate managers (see also Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005) Although temporal boundaries did not stand in the way of making friends locally, the prioritisation of studies by our interviewees certainly did. As a result, our interviewees were not able to benefit, to any significant degree, from social companionship or emotional support (van Bakel et al, 2016). Given the efforts required to overcome temporal boundaries that affected their contact with friends and family, many interviewees may have decided to accept that their life abroad would require more self-reliance.

However, it was also clear that many found even subtle cultural differences and norms more challenging (e.g., in terms of how much information can be readily shared). When compared to the ease with which they connected to family, and the extent to which they felt understood and supported, many appeared to have struggled to make similarly intimate and supportive connections due to different norms. Cultural distance is a term that describes the degree of perceived or actual difference between cultures (see also Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). The term recognises that some countries may be harder to adjust to than others. While Ireland shares many characteristics with our respondents' countries in terms of language, religion and history (e.g., those in more Catholic countries and those with a history of immigration), broad cultural differences nevertheless emerged for our interviewees. This included the accessibility of social groups, discerning social norms and

language barriers due to dialects. Such cultural challenges have also been linked to expatriates isolating themselves, thus reducing the chances of their integration (e.g., Feldman & Thomas, 1992).

As a result, reaching out to familiar others (predominantly family) can be readily explained. As mentioned by Yeh and Inose (2003), social support for expatriates helps to reaffirm their sense of self and reduce distress. Nevertheless, family support did not necessarily help them overcome the sense of loneliness that they felt from withdrawing from local social activities. Our results therefore reflect the experience of cultural, personal and social loneliness that has also been reported among international students in Australia (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia, 2008). Considering the short nature of their degree (one year), many may have felt that the social isolation was an acceptable cost if they finished their degree on time and as expected. Given that general adjustment has been shown to correlate positively with the length of time expatriates spend abroad (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005), the shorter stay may not have been as conducive to adjustment as, say, a three or four year stay (in line with an undergraduate degree). However, these results suggest that there is a need to improve the experience of international postgraduate students to support their connection to both local expatriates and domestic students through more integrative activities (which may be associated with their studies). These reflections have also resulted in several recommendations, which are discussed next.

Practical Implications

This study is the first one to examine the SWLB of international postgraduate students in Ireland. It is also the first study to examine the impact of temporal

boundaries (via time zones) on a student's ability to seek social support. While the research results are of importance to many educational institutions, we briefly reflect on the recommendations shared by our interviewees to improve their student experience (and which we shared with our International Office). Many of these may also echo the perspectives of other researchers. Indeed, a number of studies have already available been published, some of them based on expatriate research (such as Salgado and Bastida, 2017; van Bekel et al., 2016), on how to improve the experience of international students by changing or expanding university and community services for students (see also Bai, 2016; Briggs and Ammigan, 2017; Harvey, Robinson, & Welch, 2017; Kusek, 2015; Sawir et al., 2008).

In our case, the suggestions from our interviewees focused on increasing the number of social events for international postgraduates (rather than undergraduates), improving expectation setting and management (to clarify what hours are required, the support that is needed and available). It is well documented that an international student's access to social support while studying abroad is important to their well-being and success on foreign assignments (Lowe & Gayle, 2007; Van Bekel et al., 2017). Informing the students about what to expect when communicating with their social support abroad can only improve the international student experience and in turn benefit the university. A final recommendation is to increase the visibility and accessibility of student support mechanisms (as many were uncertain about what resources they had access to; see also Pookaiyaudom, 2015) via international student ambassadors and peer mentoring. These provisions may also provide informational and instrumental support in addition to social companionship to help international

students cope with the challenges (see also work by van Bekel et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

At this stage, it is wise to reflect on the study and its limitations. We include methodological and contextual factors. The first limitation in this study was the small sample size and the different nationalities represented in our sample. The number of interviews used in this research was ten whereas Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) recommend a minimum of twelve interviews for qualitative research. In addition, in the absence of very similar research, the authors used a variety of instruments which were not well-established during the data collection. The absence of triangulation points are also a limitation of this study, and a concern future research should address.

At a contextual level, cultural differences may play an important role to and may have influenced student expectations of support and their proactive vs. passive use of support functions. This raises questions as to the trustworthiness of these findings for the international student population as a whole, but our findings may serve other researchers as a useful starting point. Similarly, both authors worked with international students at the institutions where this study took place. As a result, the interpretation of the results may also be a reflection of their experiences at work (which may have had both positive and negative effects on the interpretation of the interviews by understanding their local context, but also possibly encouraging confirmation bias).

A number of question remain for future research in this domain. As we have seen, temporal boundaries affect students' ability to access social support, yet physical distance tends to lead to more selective information sharing in order to reduce the concerns of their family abroad. The behavioural patterns of these students

need further investigation, as do potential mechanisms that could support students in university settings. The degree to which forward or backward time zone differences affect social networking and boundary management would also be worth investigating. Our results suggest that the boundary management may depend on family availability during the day, cultural differences and student flexibility to schedule contact times. However, the impact of temporal boundaries and the influence contact difficulties have yet to be established.

Conclusions

The findings from this study highlight that there are several variables which affect how well international students manage their SWLB and how their overseas study may shape different personal and social outcomes. It would appear that many students experience a mix of anxiety and guilt when they are unable to support their family, a circumstance which inherently leads to more social withdrawal. The decline in communication and difficulty experienced in maintaining existing friendships further increase the reliance on the existing family network. These results suggest that temporal boundaries can have, in addition to study prioritisation, several negative effects on the experience of international students whose contact with family and friends is affected by a time difference of at least 5 hours. The extent to which this experience can be improved or ameliorated by computer mediated means and local provisions has yet to be seen.

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