

Cultural Studies and Transdisciplinarity in Education 6  
Series Editors: Aaron Koh · Victoria Carrington

Ly Thi Tran  
Catherine Gomes *Editors*

# International Student Connectedness and Identity

Transnational Perspectives

 Springer

# **Cultural Studies and Transdisciplinarity in Education**

Volume 6

## **Series Editors**

Aaron Koh, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong,  
Hong Kong

Victoria Carrington, School of Education & Lifelong Learning, University of East  
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We live in a time where the complex nature and implications of social, political and cultural issues for individuals and groups is increasingly clear. While this may lead some to focus on smaller and smaller units of analysis in the hope that by understanding the parts we may begin to understand the whole, this book series is premised on the strongly held view that researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in education will increasingly need to integrate knowledge gained from a range of disciplinary and theoretical sources in order to frame and address these complex issues. A transdisciplinary approach takes account the uncertainty of knowledge and the complexity of social and cultural issues relevant to education. It acknowledges that there will be unresolved tensions and that these should be seen as productive. With this in mind, the reflexive and critical nature of cultural studies and its focus on the processes and currents that construct our daily lives has made it a central point of reference for many working in the contemporary social sciences and education.

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Editors

# International Student Connectedness and Identity

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*In memory of our colleague and friend Regis  
Machart (1968–2016)*

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Burwood, November 2016  
Melbourne, November 2016

Ly Thi Tran  
Catherine Gomes

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# Chapter 1

## Student Mobility, Connectedness and Identity

Ly Thi Tran and Catherine Gomes

**Abstract** The intersections with new sociocultural environments as a result of transnational mobility affect international students' identity and connectedness with place, people and values. Mobility provides both challenges and possibilities for international students' self-formation and connectedness with the world around them. Connectedness/disconnectedness is closely related to mobility and plays an important role in shaping international students' well-being, performance and life trajectories. This introductory chapter begins with an overview of the international student mobility and the primary factors shaping this phenomenon. It next discusses the key issues related to international students' physical and virtual connectedness with people, places, communities and organisations. It examines the conditions in which international students' connectedness and identity formation and reformation are embedded. The chapter highlights the fluidity, diversity and complexity of international student connectedness and identity development across different national, social and cultural boundaries.

**Keywords** International students • Connectedness • Identity • Well-being • Place • Mobility

### Global Student Mobility and International Education

There are over five million students moving across their national borders for tertiary education not only in English-speaking countries and Europe but also in the Asia-Pacific region (OECD, 2015). Global student mobility and international education are framed by different social, economic and political factors. These phenomena are shaped and reshaped by current changes in tertiary education policy including the

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neoliberal marketisation of education, potential fee deregulation/reregulation, migration policies and the emergence of offshore online international education. While international education has been the staple of well-known international education hubs of Australia-New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the USA, the traditional conceptualisation, nature and practices of international education in these countries are changing. In the eighteenth century, the British, French and European colonisers regarded international education and student mobility as a tool to serve the political and economic imperatives of the provider countries (Rizvi, 2009). This was followed by post-colonial decades which characterised international education as a form of aid to produce human resources for home nations while at the same time increasing their dependence on provider countries.

The past 30 years have however witnessed the shift from education as aid to education as trade. This has been accompanied by the commercialisation of education and the mass recruitment of international students to fill in revenue gaps created by decreasing government funding for tertiary education in host countries. International education, in other words, has been repositioned as a service export industry. The Australian government's new National Strategy for International Education, for example, discusses principal strategies for expanding its education export sector and sets the target of *an international enrolment of 990,000 students by 2025* (Australian Government, 2016).

International education and student mobility in countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA are also influenced by migration policies. Recent migration policies in these countries have been framed with a focus on retaining international student graduates from domestic universities rather than attracting migrants from offshore (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Hawthorne, 2014; Robertson, 2011). In Australia, the education-migration nexus has been seen as a win-win policy for host institutions and the nation. This skilled migration policy that accords advantage for international graduates from Australian universities has accelerated the lucrative education export market. This is because international education is the biggest service export industry in this country, generating around 20 billion dollars for the national economy in 2015 alone (ICEF Monitor, 2016). At the same time, the policy attracts and retains locally trained skilled human capital. However, the question of whether and to what extent this education-migration policy has effectively capitalised on the pool of domestically trained international graduates and thus addressed the current labour and skill shortages remains debatable. The sheer volume of international student mobility has had an impact, in other words, on receiver and home nations in terms of migration and employment. Receiver nations, for instance, have had to rethink their policies on skilled labour, while home nations have had to resort to creative ways in addressing the brain drain their nations face with their students remaining in the host nation or going elsewhere other than the country of birth and/or citizenship.

With the arrival of multinational and commercial companies onto the scene, no more are state institutions the only education providers. Commercial companies such as Kaplan, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Pearson PLC and others are profit-driven companies which have contributed into making international education a 'global education industry' (Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016).

Education providers are now not limited by place or by space with offshore campuses erupting globally and with online courses made available regardless of national boundaries. For example, RMIT has a campus in Vietnam, Monash University has a campus in Malaysia, James Cook and Curtin universities each have campuses in Singapore and Nottingham University has a campus in Malaysia. In addition, other countries such as those in Asia such as Singapore, Malaysia, Japan and China are now engaging in the lucrative international education market. However, these new markets have different ambitions to their established English-speaking competitors. In the early 2000s, the Singapore government, for instance, began to see itself as a global education hub host to diverse public and private institutions of higher learning from local and foreign education providers attracting international students from the region and elsewhere (Sidhu, Ho, & Yeoh, 2014; Ziguras & Gribble, 2014). Turning Singapore into a global education hub where Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans benefit from local and foreign institutions is a key strategy the government relied upon to make Singapore into a knowledge-based economy which would see the city-state strengthen its position as a regional services hub and manufacturing base for multinational companies (Sanderson, 2002). International students in Singapore in other words are a valued investment not only for the money they bring in but for some students, the future labour they provide the nation-state. However, it is worth noting that not all Singapore-trained international graduates would remain and join the labour market in Singapore. Some return to their home country, and a growing number use Singapore as a stepping stone to the USA or the UK (Yang, 2016; Koh, 2012).

The nature and practice of student mobility and international education also coincide with a rapidly changing policy environment with potential fee deregulation in countries such as Australia. Currently international students can pay an estimated 3 to 6 times more in tuition fees than their domestic counterparts (Playdon, 2015). If universities have the freedom to determine tuition fees for both domestic and international students, what will be the fee difference for these distinctive groups? In addition, would fee deregulation then prompt domestic students into pursuing their education overseas? The end result of these shifts in student mobility might well impact traditional (international) education service providers such as Australia. In England, since fee deregulation was introduced in 2012, students have had to use publicly funded loans to cover much of the cost of their university education. The situation is seen to lead to a possible decrease in public funding for teaching and research (Hackett, 2014). The fee-deregulated environment in the USA suggests that despite the high cost, it has become more competitive to get access and admission to top-tier public universities due to the pressing demand of university education (Quiggin, 2014).

This edited volume focuses on international student connectedness and identity from transnational perspectives. It addresses the core issues around international students' physical and virtual connectedness to people, places and organisations as well as the conditions that shape their transnational connectedness and identity formation. It aims to analyse the nature, diversity and complexity of international student connectedness and identity development across different national, social and cultural boundaries. This volume also acknowledges that while international

students are growing in global visibility whose mobility and presence has affected the socio-economic conditions of receiver nations and whose identities are shaped by their transnational reality, they also experience disconnectedness. Because of the transient nature of international education, international students experience disconnectedness from their home nation due to the distance and time they are away but more significantly from their host societies-sometimes despite cultural similarities and aspirations for permanent settlement. Based on empirical research, theoretical knowledge and experiences drawn from researchers from the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and America, this edited book aims to:

- Analyse the interrelationship between international students' connectedness and their identity development from transnational and transdisciplinary perspectives
- Examine the motivations, forms and manners in which international students establish and maintain connectedness to the spatial, social, cultural and intellectual environments associated with their transnational mobility
- Clarify and discuss the factors that influence their connectedness in the transnational social fields
- Examine whether and in what ways international students' connectedness to people and places have changed due to their mobility experience
- Analyse key concepts from contemporary theories about connectedness and identity in transnational social fields and advance empirical and theoretical insights needed by institutions and systems to build effective policies and practices for supporting international students' experiences and well-being.

## **Student Mobility and International Student Connectedness and Identity**

Connectedness and identity are at the heart of international students' experience in the host country. 'Delivering the best possible student experience' is considered as one of the fundamentals to the expansion and strengthening of the education export sector, together with a market development strategy (Australian Government, 2016). The process of mobility and intersections with new sociocultural environments as a result of transnational movements affect international students' identity and connectedness with space, family, friendship networks, communities as well as cultural and academic practices. Mobility therefore represents as both challenges and potential for international students' self-formation and connectedness with the world around them. Connectedness plays an important role in shaping international students' well-being, resilience and success in the host country as well as their future trajectories (Cheung & Yue, 2013; Gomes, 2015; Pham & Tran, 2015; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007; Tran, 2011; Tran & Pham, 2015; Wiers-Jenssen, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Connectedness can involve a range of social, cultural, interpersonal and intellectual engagement and learning. It is also interrelated to individual students' being and becoming. Moreover, Internet-based communication

technologies play a fundamental role in the combined notions of mobility and connectedness. In their work on transnational families and new media, Madianau and Miller (2012) coin the term 'polymedia' to explain how most people juggle a wide range of communication media. Here, they explain that individuals and groups such as mobile subjects keep connected to home-based friends and families through the use of a variety of technologies. This is because they have access to a wide range of mobile and Internet-based media, they are literate in digital media, and costs of access to Internet-based communication technologies are increasingly becoming free (e.g. free yet sometimes limited Wi-Fi access in public spaces).

The social capital deprived from connectedness with the local host community fosters international students' normative and legitimate participation in the mainstream culture (Cheung & Yue, 2013). Disconnectedness often results in a status of marginalisation that affects students' physical and mental well-being. At the same time, maintaining the ties with family and home culture helps international students sustain 'the continuity of self' (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010, p. 360). Despite various studies that indicate the interrelationship between connectedness and welfare of international students (Cheung & Yue, 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Tran, 2016; Tran & Vu, 2016), connectedness in transnational spaces remains an ill-defined concept in the literature. Notably, the relationship between connectedness, disconnectedness and self-formation is largely ignored in scholarly research.

International student identity, moreover, is often understood and theorised in the existing literature as being connected to the home nation and ethnic culture (e.g. Kashima & Loh, 2006). The existing scholarly work tends to be oriented towards 'methodological nationalism' by framing issues of identity within the boundaries of 'nation', 'culture' and 'ethnicity' as if they were an organic entity. The chapters in this book move away from this narrow and static perspective and draw on the theoretical framework, 'transnational social field' to examine how international student identity is shaped, reshaped and mediated within evolving transnational relationships. This 'transnational social field' framework will be discussed in the next section.

However, such assumptions about student identity being merely attached to 'nation' and 'ethnic culture' are unsurprising since international students are transient and thus often seen to have very less investment socially in their host country. The increasing use and connectivity provided by advancements in polymedia have meant that international students more so than ever before are connected to their homelands (Hjorth, 2011; Hjorth & Arnold, 2012). As a mobile dynamic group of sojourners, their identity is, however, complex and evolving. First of all, many international students do not consider themselves to possess a singular national home-based identity because they are influenced by the transnational circulation of people and ideas (Gomes, 2015). Locating themselves in transnational and transcultural fields has resulted in the emergence of their multiple and changing identities (Gomes & Tan, 2015). These identities are based not solely on the place of their birth but on heritage connected to the broad categories of race, ethnic culture, national culture and religion, as well as to other categories such as general interests and aspirations. Secondly, emerging studies are showing that international students redefine and create identities

for themselves which are based on their circumstance as transient and their aspirations for global mobility (Gomes, 2015; Singh, 2011). So rather than solely linking themselves to any home nation identity, many consider themselves cosmopolitan and international.

## **Transnational Social Field as a Conceptual Frame**

This book brings together key researchers from across Europe, the Asia-Pacific region and the USA to provide a comprehensive view of the forms, meanings and effects of international student connectedness and identity. We draw on the theoretical framing of transnational social fields (Fouron & Schiller, 2001; Gargano, 2009) to conceptualise international student mobility and to create an internal coherence for this volume. A transnational social field is defined as ‘an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extend across the borders of two or more nations-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations’ (Fouron & Schiller, 2001, p. 544). The conceptual notion of transnational social fields (Fouron & Schiller, 2001; Gargano, 2009) allows us to examine how the flow of ideas, practice and social networks associated with transnational student mobility is embedded within evolving relationships. In light of this conceptual frame, we analyse how international students ‘construct identities and negotiate social spaces, physical locales and the geography of the mind’ (Gargano, 2009, p. 331). Viewing international student mobility from the lens of transnational social fields not only helps us capture the lived realities of this mobile student cohort but also allows us to imagine more for student mobility.

The chapters in this book generate nuanced insights into students’ experiences and the dynamic ways in which cultural flows and processes affect students’ identity construction and reconstruction, social and transnational spaces, physical locales and online/offline networks. In particular, transnational social fields are spaces for the negotiation and evolution of relationships but also for the enactment agency for this mobile student cohort who can be conceptualised as ‘self-forming agents’ (Marginson, 2014). The advancement of polymedia and the online world significantly affects student-inhabited transnational spaces and forms of locality and belonging which transcend home/host country binaries (Martin & Rizvi, 2014). This book brings together all these emerging complex dimensions which currently reside outside the mainstream discourse of international education research to frame international students’ negotiation and formation of transnational social spaces, connectedness and identities.

Transnational social fields as a conceptual framework is useful and relevant for our collection because it locates and describes the identities and connectedness of international students as dynamic and fluid due to their mobility. Importantly, the framework of ‘transnational social fields’ avoids ‘methodological nationalism’ as noted above. Furthermore, it provides us with a conceptual lens to see how different policies including the neoliberal marketisation of education, the emergence of offshore online



international education, migration policy and changes to education policies in both host and home countries as mentioned above impact student mobility and transnational education. We thus move away from the nation-centred approach to viewing student mobility since it oversimplifies the interrelated nature of this phenomenon and ignores the ways in which student mobility intersects with multiple and transnational logics of social and economic practices. The concept of transnational social fields instead provides a broader lens for addressing how student mobility is grounded in the contexts of original and new spaces (Gargano, 2009), home and host spaces and physical and virtual spaces.

Within the context of this collection, the key terms are defined as follows:

1. Connectedness as a relational concept refers to the physical and virtual relationships international students hold with people, places, communities and organisations. International student connectedness is closely related to their sense of belonging to the home and host country. Connectedness plays an important role in shaping their identity, well-being, performance and aspirations while in transience.
2. Disconnectedness refers to the status by which international students do not or no longer feel a sense of belonging to a community, place or value. This volume also acknowledges that while international students are growing in global visibility with their mobility and presence affecting the socio-economic conditions of receiver nations, they also experience disconnectedness. International students experience disconnectedness from their home nation due to the distance and time they are away but more significantly from their host societies in many cases.
3. Transience is defined as being in a state of temporariness in countries other than where they hold citizenship or permanent residence. While research and understanding into transnational migration has often if not always focused on settler rather than temporary movements of people, transience offers us an insight into the liminal or third space within the migration and mobility paradigms. Transience becomes a useful space for us to address the changes inherent in the transnational movements of people where temporariness rather than permanence is intentional and, in increasing cases, desired.
4. Cosmopolitan identity refers to the self-perceived and aspirational worldly identity international students might process. This comes to terms with their cosmopolitan learning, which is defined by Rizvi (2015) as ‘a particular way of learning about our own social identities and cultural trajectories, but always in ways that underscore our connectivity with the rest of the world’.
5. Imagined community is the physical or virtual space or place that international students imagine they would belong to. This concept is drawn from Anderson’s (1983) well-known ‘imagined community’ theory where ideas of the nation are not limited or confined to physical boundaries and spaces but instead are borderless due to the effects of globalisation such as the movements of people and ideas.

Most scholarship in the field of international student research focuses on *onshore international students* in one particular national context (e.g. Cheung & Yue, 2013; Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2014; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Tran, 2015; Wiers-Jensen,



2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003) and concentrates exclusively on *the higher education sector*. Thus, this collection represents the first volume in the field that addresses the motivations and manners in which international students establish and maintain connectedness to the spatial, social, cultural and academic environment in *both the higher education (HE) and the vocational education and training (VET) sectors*. Also existing discussions on international student engagement focus largely on undergraduate and Masters' students. International doctoral students as well as returnees are important but often-neglected groups in current scholarly discussions and debates on connectedness and identity in international education. This edited volume will be a unique collection that addresses a range of connectedness dimensions in both the *onshore* and *offshore* modes of delivery, across different education programmes (*VET, undergraduate, postgraduate coursework and doctoral students*), both *current students* and the *returnee groups* and both *face to face* and *online environment*.

This book is a distinctive contribution to the field of international education and cultural studies. This is because it addresses current debates on enhancing the international student experience as it brings together a wide range of dimensions on the connected notions of identity and connectedness. The chapters in this book discuss international student connectedness to *peers, teachers and academic environment, the host communities, cultural practices, workplaces, religious organisations, offshore campus, homeland, virtual world, returnees' re-engagement* and issues associated with *disconnectedness*. Currently there is an absence in the literature and published work on issues related to international students from a wide range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Many chapters included in this volume address both conceptual frameworks and practical tools on cultivating international students' connectedness and well-being. This they do through a variety of approaches grounded not only in education but in sociology, anthropology, humanities, cultural studies, language studies and communication studies. Doing so, authors in this volume bring fresh insights and significant implications for education studies for international student mobility. The insights into these crucial aspects of identity and connectedness from a variety of cultural and disciplinary perspectives presented in this book will hopefully attract dialogue about the critical issues related to the burgeoning global phenomenon of young people's transnational experience in international education. The chapters in this book in other words show that international students are not passive actors but rather create effective strategies that allow them to cope with both the life as international students and the life beyond.

## Overarching Structure

The volume is organised into four main parts: Part 1 on *international student connectedness in the host country*, Part 2 on *international student and returnee connectedness in the home country*, Part 3 on *connectedness/disconnectedness and identity development* and Part 4 on *student-turned migrants and connectedness/disconnectedness*. By working with the overarching and interrelated themes of connectedness and identity, the chapters in this volume represent a cutting edge work

that maps both current and emerging trends taking place in international student mobility. Some of the authors in this collection emphasise that while aspirations for global mobility (Gomes, Chap. 6) have allowed international students to stay connected to the home nation (Wong, Chap. 7), others observe that international students struggle with notions of identity as they strive to be cosmopolitan and international (Rosenblum, Haines, & Cho, Chap. 10) and at the same time seek a transient sense of belonging (Dang & Tran, Chap. 5; Marchart, Chap. 11; Killick, Chap. 12; Yang, Chap. 13; Soong, Chap. 14; Valentin, Chap. 15). However, some of the chapters provide us with strategies international students adopt in order to create a sense of belonging whether through on-campus activities (Rosenblum, Haines, & Cho, Chap. 10) or through off-campus communities such as religious organisations (Stevenson, Chap. 4).

The quest for cosmopolitanism has led to new trends in international student post-graduation mobility with authors (Gribble, Rahimi, & Blackmore, Chap. 2; Gomes, Chap. 6; Delicado, Chap. 9; Soong, Chap. 14) pointing out that while some students return to the home nation to work, others may stay in the host country or go elsewhere. Addressing an under-researched area of international student education and mobility, these authors highlight the possibilities and challenges former international students face when fitting into their ‘new’ environment regardless of destination.

In order to unpack and analyse the umbrella themes of connectedness and identity, the authors in this collection creatively make use of conceptual frameworks and methodologies that are transdisciplinary or multidisciplinary. For example, Killick (Chap. 12) adopts a phenomenological approach when examining the lived experiences of international students, while Marchant (Chap. 11) analyses identity by using the theory of mixed intersubjectivity. Drawing on Vertovec’s (2001) idea of transnationalism and Hall’s (1996) notion of identity, Tran and Pham’s chapter (Chap. 3) found that meaningful and productive connectedness in international vocational education and training is not simply established and maintained through providing the mere condition for interaction between domestic and international peers. Instead, it depends on how to establish the real opportunities for international students to share, negotiate and contribute to building practical hands-on skills, vocational knowledge and cultural experiences on a more equal basis. As a whole, this volume is dedicated to addressing areas of international student connectedness, well-being and identity that have significant implications for stakeholders working in the global international education sector while contributing to conceptual discussions of student mobility.

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**Part I**  
**International Student Connectedness/  
Disconnectedness in the Host Country**

## Chapter 2

# International Students and Post-study Employment: The Impact of University and Host Community Engagement on the Employment Outcomes of International Students in Australia

Cate Gribble, Mark Rahimi, and Jill Blackmore

**Abstract** Post-study employment for international students in Australia has emerged as a key issue facing the international education sector. For international graduates seeking to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive labour market, foreign work experience is now seen as a necessary part of the overseas study ‘package’. However, international students seeking to augment their international qualification with host country work experience face many challenges. Lack of formal work experience programmes, difficulties identifying placement opportunities, issues surrounding English language competency and ‘soft skills’, and limited local networks are some of the barriers to labour market entry for international students. Visa policy also presents significant challenges. However, many of the barriers international students face when attempting to transition into the Australian workplace stem from international students’ broader struggle to connect with the Australian society during their study experience. Drawing on a 3-year study of international graduates transitioning into the Australian labour market, this chapter examines how international student connectedness both on campus and in the local community is closely linked to the development of key ‘employability’ skills demanded in the Australian workplace.

**Keywords** International students • Graduate employability • Community engagement • Post-study employment

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## Introduction

The number of international students studying outside of their home country has grown significantly in recent decades. In 2014, an estimated five million students studied outside their home countries, more than double the 2.1 million who did so in 2000 and more than triple the number in 1990 (OECD, 2015). The rapid growth of student mobility parallels the economic rise of Asia with 53 % of all students studying abroad coming from Asia. China, India and South Korea are the world's leading sources of international students accounting for more than a quarter of all students studying outside their home countries (OECD, 2015). International student mobility is largely a south-north phenomenon where students from emerging economies travel to study in developed nations. The USA, UK, Australia and Canada are the leading destination countries for international students, although there is also a significant growth in intra-regional mobility (Gribble, 2008; Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Robertson, 2011).

For international students, there are multiple motivations associated with their decision to study abroad. The opportunity to receive a higher quality of education in an English-speaking environment is a key driver. Better living conditions and migration pathways are other key factors. A trend for international students to seek post-study employment in the host country has emerged and is closely associated with the rise in self-funded international students (Stier, 2004; Stier & Börjesson, 2010). In the past, international students were largely sponsored by the host or home country government and often bonded to return home (Kell & Vogl, 2012). Now, most international students are self-funded and seek a return on investment in the form of graduate employment in the host country (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

Growing demand for post-study employment opportunities has emerged as a critical issue and major challenge in many host countries. The current generation of international students is looking for more than just an overseas qualification; they are also seeking relevant skills and work experience that will enhance their career, either in the host country labour market, their home country or another country. Above all, international graduates are seeking educational opportunities that provide a point of differentiation in a highly competitive global labour market (Blackmore et al., 2014; Lawson, 2012). Many international students hope that having local work experience to complement their overseas qualification will enhance their employment prospects in the host country, home country or elsewhere. For the host country, the demand for post-study employment by international students poses significant challenges. With a growing number of nations vying for the lucrative international student market, the promise of post-study employment is a major draw card. Since the early 2000s, host nations such as Australia, Canada and the UK have attempted to achieve the right balance between providing international students with the opportunity to test the labour market and ensuring the system is not negatively impacted by immigration and labour market fraudulent practices. For host countries, the goal is to encourage sustained growth in international student enrolments while at the same time providing opportunities for high-skilled graduates to



gain experience and contribute to the host country labour market in areas of skill shortage (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

While international students place a premium on host country work experience in their area of qualification, many struggle to transition into both local and home country labour markets (Blackmore et al., 2014). Changing skill and knowledge requirements are a key consequent of the growth in knowledge economies, while the massification of higher education has resulted in an expanding supply of tertiary educated graduates entering the workplace. For employers, globalisation has resulted in greater international competition, offshoring and less certainty regarding their future labour requirements (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010). For graduates, this translates into heightened competition for entry-level positions, far less certainty surrounding post-study employment prospects and the growing need to ‘stand out’ in a crowded graduate labour market. Consequently, international students face tougher competition in the post-study labour market in both the host and home countries.

Drawing on the experiences of international accounting students in Australia, this chapter examines how international student connectedness both on campus and in the local community is closely linked to the development of key ‘employability’ skills demanded in the Australian workplace. The chapter draws on the findings of a 3-year longitudinal study investigating why international graduates appear to have a low rate of employment in acknowledged skill shortage areas of health, engineering and accounting, despite having Australian-credentialed skills in these disciplines. A turbulent period in the history of international education in Australia forms the backdrop to this study, beginning in 1999 with Australia’s decision to liberalise the study-migration pathway with the aim of growing the international education sector and addressing skill shortages in key areas (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Tran, 2012). This linking of education and migration contributed to Australia’s strong appeal as a study destination but also resulted in an apparent mismatch between the skills, knowledge and attributes of graduates and the demands of the labour market as well as the growing alarm around student exploitation and so-called visa factories (Birrell & Healy, 2008; Knight, 2011; Koleth, 2010). In 2010, the government responded by introducing significant policy changes that removed any perceived link between education and migration, shifting the focus on attracting international students to Australia by offering a high-quality higher education experience rather than future employment (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012). By 2013, the government had introduced post-study work visa arrangements designed to provide international graduates from Australian universities with the opportunity to test the Australian labour market.

Despite the new post-study visa arrangements, there are indications that international graduates from Australian universities continue to struggle to transition into the Australian labour market. While the graduate labour market is tough for all graduates, international graduates must overcome additional barriers if they are to achieve postgraduate employment success. The following section considers the current debate surrounding graduate employability and examines some of the challenges



international students face as they attempt to meet employer expectations and successfully secure post-study employment in the host country.

## Research Method and Aim

The data contained in this chapter is drawn from a 3-year study of Australian international graduates and their post-study work experiences in Australia. The overall aim of the broader study was to investigate issues around the employment of international graduates from Australian universities into professions with skill shortages. While the broader study included interviews with international graduates in engineering and nursing, we chose to focus on accounting graduates for the purpose of this chapter. Between 2001 and 2012, the number of international graduates finishing undergraduate accounting degrees rose by 500 % (Evans, Burritt & Guthrie, 2014). In 2014, 45 % of international students enrolled in Australian tertiary institutions were studying business and management disciplines (IIE, 2014). Concerns surrounding the employment outcomes of international accounting graduates have emerged (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Hawthorne, 2014; Tadros & King, 2014).

The focus of this chapter is to report on the analysis of longitudinal interviews conducted with six male and seven female accounting graduates, aged between 24 and 28, between 2010 and 2013. These participants were the students that we were able to track over the 3 years as they transitioned from university to work, a complex process reliant on regular communication with willing participants. A mix of snowball and random sampling methods was used to select participants at the initial stage in three universities. International student participants were liaised with via email, and the interviews were conducted either in person or on the phone. Those who were willing to participate in further interviews were asked to provide their contact details.

All participants who agreed to be tracked were first interviewed 6 months prior to graduating. These initial structured interviews sought to understand (i) the participants' educational and employment background and educational experiences gained by studying at an Australian university; (ii) their involvement in extracurricular activities, career education, English language proficiency and discipline-specific (and other) work experience; and (iii) their plans for the future, whether they intended to seek employment in Australia after graduating, whether they intended to remain in Australia either temporarily or permanently and how Australia's migration policy had impacted on their decision-making. The second interview undertaken 6–9 months after they graduated explored what had transpired in the lives of the students since graduating and whether they had remained in Australia or returned to their home country. Those who had returned home were asked about their experiences of reintegration and how their Australian qualifications and study experience were viewed by employers in the home country and their long-term plans. Australian-based graduates were asked about their Australian job-seeking experiences, what they considered the main barriers to finding employment,

their strategies to overcome these barriers and how their chances of success in the Australian labour market could be improved.

The final series of interviews were scheduled to allow time for graduates to test the labour market. Thirteen international graduates agreed to participate in this series. The third interview, conducted 12–18 months after graduation, retrospectively tracked the experiences of those participants successfully employed and considered their experiences of the workplace relative to longer-term goals. For those still seeking employment in their field, questions were raised regarding their lack of success, how long they were prepared to look for work in their current location and the strategies they were employing to increase their opportunities in either the Australian or home country labour markets. In addition, ten in-depth interviews were carried out with employers at small, medium and large accounting firms that provided data on the expectations and recruitment approaches of employers, but not employers of these graduates. Tracking individual pathways of international graduates exiting university longitudinally, in order to recruit and retain participants, required well-established relationships of trust built on ongoing communication via email and telephone (Shirani & Weller, 2010).

In preparation for data analysis, the audio-recorded interviews were outsourced for transcription. The transcripts were imported in NVivo and coded using a number of key themes to ease the identification and selection of relevant information. The analysis phase of this study included analysing data collected from various sources including interviews in combination with related literature, reports and policy documents from relevant government departments and professional bodies. One of the main aims of reviewing a range of policy documents and related literature, and conducting interviews with key stakeholders, was to gain an in-depth understanding of the range of factors that determine the employability of international graduates as well as a variety of perspectives as to which factors were most significant according to different stakeholders – international students, government, employers or their representative bodies and academics. The different stages of the analytical process in qualitative research include ‘examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence, to address the initial proposition of the study’ (Yin, 1994, p. 99). This research takes place in a complex setting in which multiple groups of factors operate within multiple layers.

In this study, a policy analysis perspective was acknowledged to enable the examination of the roles and relations of stakeholders within their macro context and external institutional peripheries. The primary task of policy analysis is ‘to gain understanding of the issues that constitute the focus of the specific social policy which is being analysed or developed. This involves exploration of the nature, scope and distribution of these issues, and of causal theories concerning underlying dynamics’ (Gil, 1990, p. 69). The focus of policy analysis was on the visa conditions and migration policies that affect the employment of international students and graduates in Australia. A case study approach was appropriate for this research because of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions associated with the graduate outcomes for international graduates, according to their goals. Case study offers the capacity

to analyse organisational relationships and life courses, which can then provide a holistic view of ‘what is going on here’ (Creswell, 2003; Mason, 2002). In this study, the analysis of the interviews with international accounting graduates provided the key themes and overall insights into some of personal dispositions in increasing their chances of employment. Through the studied cases, the experiences of international graduates were deeply explored to take account of their key elements of their past and recent experiences in relation to the strategies for securing employment which impact on their current situation. In addition, in some methodological aspects, this study concurs with the statement of Maykut and Morehouse (1994) who describe exploratory research as the research characterised by a descriptive exploratory focus that tends to provide a deep understanding of the perceptions of the informants.

## **Key Themes in the Literature**

### ***Graduate Employability***

Debate surrounding the types of skills, knowledge and attributes required by employers and how best to prepare graduates for the contemporary workplace has intensified. The concept of ‘employability’ is both vague and contested (Andrews & Russell, 2012; Yorke, 2004). It is now widely acknowledged that graduates require skills and competencies that extend beyond discipline-specific knowledge. When recruiting graduates, employers are looking for more than just good academic results. There is increasing emphasis on non-discipline-specific capabilities or ‘generic skills’. Generic skills are also known as transferable skills, core skills, soft skills, key skills and graduate attributes. Freudenberg et al. (2009, p. 2) define generic skills as ‘as a set of skills that have potential broad application to a range of disciplines or circumstances’. In contrast to discipline-specific skills, generic skills such as teamwork, self-management, written and verbal communication, intercultural awareness and interpersonal skills can be applied in a range of professional contexts. These generic skills are treated as being culturally and gender neutral and as if disembodied.

More recently, there has been a push to move beyond inventories of skills and attributes to a broader notion of how individuals gain, sustain and progress in employment (Bridgstock, 2009). Knight and Yorke have developed an advanced knowledge of employability which they believe goes beyond the skills agenda but can be developed while at the university (Knight & Yorke, 2004). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) also argue for the debate surrounding employability to go beyond lists of skills and attributes. They identify four strands of graduate identity – values, intellect, performance and engagement – which employers are interested in and suggest graduates need to be aware of their identity across these four sets of experience (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

The realisation that a credential no longer guarantees employment in the global labour market places pressure on job-seeking graduates to demonstrate a set of personal aptitudes and capabilities, referred to as 'personal capital' (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2004). 'Personal capital' is described as the extent the self can be packaged to capitalise on those personal qualities valued by employers and is based on a combination of hard currencies such as credentials and work experience as well as soft currencies such as interpersonal skills, appearance and accent. Many of these attributes are subjective and open to cultural, gender and racial bias. The key to success in the labour market is a graduate's capacity to present their experiences, character and accomplishments in ways that conform to the competence profiles demanded by employers. Strategies implemented by various graduates in their job-seeking efforts stem from different aspects of their personal capital. The development of a 'narrative of employability' based on reflection of experience is considered key to successful graduate employment outcomes (Brown et al., 2004).

However, the emphasis on personal aptitudes and capabilities can place international students at a disadvantage. For example, if the focus in a Western workplace is on hiring graduates who exhibit leadership potential, initiative and self-confidence, international graduates who come from cultures that value quiet reserve, deference and respect for seniority in graduates are disadvantaged (Diversity Council Australia, 2014). International graduates face other barriers when seeking post-study employment compared to their local counterparts. Research suggests that lack of local networks, issues surrounding communication skills and cultural and gender differences and limited knowledge of, and exposure to, the local labour market impede international students from transitioning into the host country labour market (Gribble, 2015; Gribble, Blackmore, & Rahimi, 2015). The following section examines some of the main barriers and enablers to international graduate employment as reported in the literature.

### **'Engagement for Best Fit'**

To be recognised as members of the organisation, employees need to maintain and develop various sets of skills. Those skills, according to Drucker (1993), include: '[t]he ability to present ideas orally and in writing; the ability to work with people; the ability to shape and direct one's own work; contribution and career' (Drucker, 1993, p. 4). Clearly, these abilities are concomitant with the communication, language and cultural capitals that facilitate professionally connecting and working with the other staff (Drucker, 1993).

When recruiting, employers are looking for graduates who are going to easily integrate into their organisation. They are looking for candidates who can demonstrate values that match with those of the organisation and who can work well with both members of their immediate team and the broader organisation. That is, employers will often select people like themselves: a form of homosociability (Blackmore, Barty, & Thomson, 2006). Employers place importance on recruiting

not only graduates who have technical or professional knowledge and skills but also those who have interpersonal skills and values that match those of the organisation. Recruiting and inducting new staff involve a significant outlay, and employers report the importance of hiring graduates compatible with their organisation (Blackmore et al., 2014). Other research suggests that recruitment is often a process of cultural matching between candidates, evaluators and firms. In her study of elite professional service firms, Rivera (2012) found employers sought candidates who were not only competent but also culturally similar to themselves in terms of leisure pursuits, experiences and self-presentation styles. This raises questions about how homosocial reproduction in organisations impacts on the success of international graduates in the host country labour market (Blackmore et al., 2006).

### **Work Experience**

The growing emphasis on ‘work readiness’ is also the subject of much debate. Some believe that work and education are qualitatively different social sites. While education provides skills and knowledge useful both in the short and long term, it can only provide broad or generic training for work. Specific training for a particular job can only be undertaken after study (Hansen, 2014). However, the demand for work-ready graduates, who are familiar with organisational practices in the workplace, is increasing (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010). Employers value work experience believing that exposure to the workplace while studying provides students with the opportunity to acquire valuable insights into how the workplace operates and what is expected of them in different workplace settings (Blackmore et al., 2014). Employers report that work experience improves graduates’ soft skills, increases confidence and helps relate their studies to employment, making them more rounded and with more realistic expectations of work. The opportunity to make contacts and create networks for future employment is another advantage (McMurray & Niens, 2012). In other words, work experience improves work readiness.

In response to growing concerns around graduate employability, higher education institutions are deploying various measures to increase the employability of their students (Helyer & Lee, 2014). The link between relevant work experience and graduate employment outcomes has led to growing interest in work experience and how it may be used to enhance the employment outcomes of international students. Importantly, students are seeking a return on investment, and work experience is seen to provide critical employability knowledge and skills (Patrick et al., 2008). While work experience is a key priority for international students across a range of disciplines, many students struggle to find placements, and institutions are grappling with how to meet the growing demand for work-integrated learning. Lack of formal work experience programmes, difficulties identifying placement opportunities, issues surrounding English language competency and ‘soft skills’ and limited local networks are some of the barriers to gaining work experience (Bennet, 2011; Gribble, 2014; Gribble et al., 2015).

## Communication Skills

English language proficiency is perhaps the most fundamental employability skill, and yet the English language proficiency (ELP) of international students has been the subject of concern and debate over many decades. The English language proficiency of international students continues to pose many challenges and acts as a major barrier to employment. Employers across all discipline areas seek graduates who have both an excellent command of English and the ability to communicate in a range of settings. Employers have high expectations of graduates. They are looking for graduates who have a confident command of English and are comfortable expressing their ideas freely in a team environment. Graduates need communication skills that can span a range of workplace situations; however, employers are often dissatisfied with the written and verbal skills of many international graduates (AUIDF, 2013; Blackmore et al., 2014).

The development of English language is a form of social capital that takes on critical importance for international graduates competing with local native English-speaking graduates, with some graduates advantaged if coming from education systems which have English as the primary instructional language or families with greater English fluency (Arber & Rahimi, 2015; Hawthorne & To, 2014). However, many international students struggle to improve their English language proficiency while at the university. Previous studies have found that students arriving with weak English language skills are less likely to engage with native speakers on a daily basis, find part-time work that involves speaking English, join clubs and participate in extracurricular activities that could enhance their job opportunities through local social networks (Blackmore et al., 2014). All of these activities are likely to lead to improved English language proficiency and enhanced employability.

## Visa Status

Visa status for international students is a major deterrent to post-study employment. There is a widespread perception among employers that the process of recruiting an international graduate is expensive, lengthy and complicated (Blackmore et al., 2014). It is also considered risky, as there is no guarantee the graduate will remain in the country, and employers are reluctant to invest in students who may leave, although any new recruit potentially will leave. While post-study work rights are intended to provide employers with certainty, it is unclear whether this will be enough to encourage Australian employers to take on international graduates. International students in the UK face an even harsher post-study employment environment. Following the removal of post-study work rights in 2012, UK international students have only 4 months to secure a Tier 2 visa. According to the House of Lords International Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students – Science and Technology Committee (UK Parliament, 2014), it is extremely difficult to convince employers to sponsor international students on a Tier 2 visa due to the cost, complexity and uncertainty. In the USA, the limited

availability of H-1B visas and other work visas poses is a major barrier to international students seeking post-study employment. However, the demand for high-skilled migrants remains high, particularly in the STEM fields, and has led to calls to increase the level of both permanent and temporary work visas for high-skilled workers (TD Economics, 2014). In particular, employers are looking for middle-level employees with more than 5 years' experience, also the target of skilled migrant policy in Australia.

International students face distinct challenges when transitioning into the host country labour market. While some impediments, such as visa policy, may require the support and intervention of the government in order to create more favourable conditions, we argue that many barriers may be reduced via stronger connections between the international student and the host community. The following section examines how international students' capacity to connect with the local community both on campus and more broadly impacts the development of their 'employability'.

### **Connecting with the Host Country Community**

Our contention in this chapter is that many of the barriers international students face when attempting to transition into the host workplace stem from international students' broader struggle to connect with the host society during their study experience. We argue that promoting international students' engagement with the local community is likely to lead to improved employment outcomes of international students as well as enhance their overall experience of studying and living in Australia. Drawing on longitudinal in-depth qualitative interviews with 13 international students studying accounting at three Australian universities, we explore how students' capacity to integrate into the local community impacts on all aspects of their international student experience. Importantly, for those international students intending to transition into the local labour market, engaging with the local community is critical to their success. We argue that connecting with the host country community enables international students to improve their English language skills, develop their knowledge of Australian culture, create networks and develop a broad range of skills, interests and competencies that extend beyond disciplinary skills and knowledge. Enhanced engagement with the local community ultimately leads to enhanced employability.

Concerns surrounding international students' capacity to engage with the host society have persisted over many decades and continue to challenge the international education sector (Lewthwaite, 1996; Popov et al., 2012; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). Challenges to host society engagement span the classroom, campus, labour market and local community. Promoting engagement between local and international students is a major challenge. Studies have found that the mere presence of international and domestic students on campus does not lead to meaningful contact between the two groups with academic staff reporting significant difficulties getting international and domestic students to work collaboratively



(Arkoudis et al., 2009; Leask, 2009). Recognising the complexities of student interaction, Arkoudis et al. developed an 'Interaction for Learning Framework' to guide academics in developing and promoting peer interaction between domestic and international students. Cruickshank, Chen, and Warren's (2012) exploration of strategies to increase international and domestic student interaction in the humanities disciplines recommended the adoption of a range of interrelated strategies in order to bring about greater engagement. These included the constant mixing of groups and out-of-class mentoring. Bodycott (2009) found that personal ties with domestic and conational students, staff and community members affected international students' acculturation. Their study advocated the importance of classroom-based and fieldwork tasks to engage students and to help them develop personal, social and academic ties or networks.

Social integration into the broader host community is linked to a successful overseas sojourn for international students. However, establishing meaningful connections with local residents is challenging. Gresham & Clayton (2011) report on a programme at one regional Australian university designed to engage a broad range of volunteers from the host community to welcome, befriend and support international students. The authors advocate structured, funded programmes in order to harness the goodwill that exists in many communities as a way of facilitating meaningful interactions between international students and locals.

A US study by Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) revealed that international students experienced multiple barriers to their participation in their academic and social communities. The study identified English language proficiency as an ongoing concern and suggested that higher levels of English proficiency might lead to better adjustment. Participants in the study also found social interaction, especially with American students, lacking. Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011) explored the social connectedness of international students in Hawaii. Their findings are notable as contrary to other studies, participants had a higher ratio of host nationals in their friendship networks than conationals. Possible explanations for this finding include the high level of English language proficiency among participants as well as Hawaii's multicultural climate. The study emphasised the critical role that host national friendship plays in the cross-cultural adaptation process as well as the importance of having both strong and weak tie friendships with locals (Hendrickson et al., 2011).

### ***Friendship with Local Students***

Forming friendships with locals is considered both an influential factor in the adjustment of international students to the host country (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002) and also the one that affects international students' language fluency (Andrade, 2006; Arkoudis et al., 2009; Maynard & Peräkylä, 2006). A study by Fleischman et al. found that heightened interaction with local citizens improves the overall student experience and that international students are



'seeking opportunities that are not only advantageous to their academic agenda, but also to their social and professional development within a global context' (Fleischman, Lawley, & Raciti, 2010, p. 14). Becoming a global worker is a primary expectation for international students.

Other research finds a relationship between having more host country friends and experiencing satisfaction, contentment, decreased homesickness and social connectedness; however, international students often have more friends from their home country (Hendrickson et al., 2011). In their study Yan and Berliner (2009) found that Chinese international students in the USA experience adaptation difficulties due to their strong roots in China and experience of cultural alienation in America. They recommend Chinese international students adopt an integration strategy whereby they synthesise the best elements of both Chinese and American cultural traditions, create a bridge between the two cultures that will alleviate their acculturative stress and shorten their cross-cultural and academic adjustment time. Sawir et al.'s (2008) study of international students and loneliness found a strong correlation between the incidence of loneliness and problems with cross-cultural relationships. Students who were more successful in establishing relationships with locals were less likely to experience loneliness and social isolation than those whose friendship groups were predominantly conationals. This connectedness with conationals is exacerbated due to the concentration of international students in particular disciplines such as accounting (Blackmore et al., 2014).

### *Are International Students in 'Deficit'?*

In the media, international students are frequently portrayed as living apart from local students and the broader community. In Australia, issues surrounding student accommodation have been blamed for the trend for international students to be 'living on the edge of society' (Morton, 2007), while issues surrounding integration are attributed to their weak English language skills (Smith, 2008). One article suggested that the widening gulf between local and foreign university students was creating segregated classes, cultural cliques and religious ghettos, raising fears of a backlash on campuses (Das & Jensen, 2008). A UK report suggested international students are often highly segregated with 40 % spending most of their time with students from their own country (Sherriff, 2013), while Morgan (2010) reported that a desire to mix with people of the same nationality, shyness about speaking English to home students and fear of discrimination are driving international students into 'mono-ethnic ghettos', hindering the growth of their language skills and cultural knowledge (Morgan, 2010).

However, other research has warned against stereotyping international students, misunderstanding their social networks and portraying them as in 'deficit'. Marginson cautions against considering international students as in deficit as they adjust to host country norms and institutions and viewing their home country identity as 'a barrier to be broken down'. Instead, international students 'form their

self-trajectories somewhere between home country identity (which continues to evolve in the country of education), host country identity, and a larger set of cosmopolitan options' (Marginson, 2014, p. 6). Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, and Chang (2014) also caution against stereotyping international students under one umbrella when it comes to their social networks and capacity to integrate. Their research finds that there are increasing numbers of international students whose social networks are dominated by fellow international students who come from countries other than their own. Importantly, international students consider that establishing connections with students from a range of countries will enhance their global employment prospects. This perspective suggests that for international students intending to pursue global career opportunities, a multinational friendship network may prove advantageous.

### ***Creating a Bridge to Employment: The Importance of Connecting with the Host Country Community***

Despite the importance placed on developing an Asia-capable workforce (Asialink, 2012) and the current lack of Asia capabilities in many sectors acting as a hindrance to the success of Australian business seeking to capitalise on opportunities in the Asian region, our study found minimal interest in hiring international graduates with key language and cultural knowledge. While many employers interviewed for this study mobilised a discourse about the values of diversity, there are indications that most employers are inclined to gravitate towards the familiar (Blackmore et al., 2006). For employers, the importance of 'fit' stems from their desire for a harmonious work place. Employers are looking for graduates who will easily transition into the workplace, who will not only be hardworking and productive employees but who will also be able to maintain good relationships with staff and clients. The implication for international graduates seeking to find work in Australia is that in the current climate, those with the capacity to adapt and integrate into the Australian workplace culture are more likely to experience success.

Our final interviews with 13 international accounting students highlighted both the barriers to entry into the Australian labour market and the key strategies for success. The following two case studies serve to highlight the significant barriers that international graduates face when attempting to acquire post-study employment in Australia. We chose to profile these two students as their experiences serve to highlight how connectedness with the host country community throughout the student journey impacts on the post-study employment experiences of international graduates. Our study revealed that many international students are ill-prepared for tackling the highly competitive graduate labour market in Australia. Many have failed to both develop an understanding of job seeking in Australia and acquire key skills and experiences that enhance their employability. Critically, our interviews revealed that international students struggle to take the necessary steps to create important local

connections that provide opportunities to improve key employability skills, such as communication and cultural awareness as well as contacts that may lead to future employment. While international students are often at a disadvantage in the graduate employment market, those who are able to take steps to develop critical skills, form friendships outside their circle of home country friends and connect with broader community can successfully transition into the Australian labour market.

## **International Student Case Study 1: *Lucy***

Lucy is a female student from China who arrived in Australia in 2007 and began a Bachelor of Commerce, majoring in Accounting and Finance, at a university in New South Wales. At the time of our first interview, Lucy was 22 years old. We interviewed Lucy on three occasions over a 3-year period as she transitioned from her final semester of study into employment. Lucy stood out among our interviews with international accounting students as while the majority of students had hopes of finding graduate employment with one of the large professional services firm, commonly known as the Big Four, she was the only international graduate in the cohort who succeeded. While Lucy's achievements are exceptional, close examination of her experiences as both an international student and graduate accountant illustrates both her awareness of the rules of the game and her self-determining agency.

In both her personal and professional life, Lucy took key steps to ensure she was well placed in the graduate labour market. One of the key challenges for international students concerns English language and communication skills. Prior to arriving, Lucy felt that she had a good command of English. English has always been one of Lucy's strengths leading her to study English literature at a university in China. However, when she arrived, she described feeling 'stunned' by her inability to communicate in English:

At the beginning you can't really say things clearly, you can't really express yourself and often you felt that people consciously or unconsciously just don't want to include you as part of the group. You feel you're isolated, you feel, you know, you're sort of left alone. (1st interview, November 2010)

Literature on language learning also highlights the debilitating impact of anxiety on the oral performance of speakers of English as a second language (Woodrow, 2006). Studies report poor English language skills as a barrier to learning for international students (Cappelletto, 2010).

Despite her early difficulties, Lucy goes on to explain that her initial struggles with English are just one stage in the journey of an international student. As time went on, communication difficulties became less apparent and anxiety surrounding oral communication subsided:

But I think that was just one stage. As soon as you pass a stage, you can express yourself clearly and you start making some friends, things just go so much better. (1st interview, November 2010)

Like many international students, Lucy was initially affected by stress and anxiety as she struggled to adapt to her new surroundings, develop her language skills and adjust to Australian academic requirements. However, Lucy made a number of choices that provided her with the opportunity to strengthen critical skills and create connections that would ultimately enhance her employability and lead to career success. She joined the university choir and a women-in-business networking group which offered leadership training.

Her decision to live in homestay accommodation was the first step towards improving her English language skills, increasing her exposure to Australian culture and expanding her local networks. While it is common for international students to live with students from either their home country or with other international students, homestay arrangements or pairing students with Australian families to share meals or family outings can provide international students with the opportunity to establish a closer relationship with the host community. This social support has been shown to improve international student adjustment (O’Dea, 2016; Yu et al., 2014; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). For Lucy, her homestay experience was instrumental in developing her English language competency and confidence. When asked what had helped develop her English language skills, Lucy credits her living arrangements and relationship with her homestay mother and her calculated decision to seek out opportunities to practise her English rather than confine her interactions to Chinese speakers. Here, Lucy explains her approach to mobilising strategies that would allow her to develop her linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as build important local networks:

I think one thing is, for the whole time I was here I was living with my landlady, it’s like a homestay thing, she’s a local Australian and we talk all the time when I’m home. You know, she’s just like my mum pretty much. It gives me a really good chance to practise my speaking skills. And also at university I don’t try to stick to all Chinese community or something and try to mingle with people from everywhere – from all over the world. And you practise English that way as well. And obviously in lectures and tutorials – every single possible opportunity you have to really practise – that’s how you improve I guess. (1st interview, November 2010)

Lucy’s homestay arrangement provided her with critical opportunities to develop her English language skills from the outset as well as allowing her to gain valuable insights into Australian cultural practices. Lack of English proficiency can become a barrier for successful participation in the host community affecting students’ academic learning, participation in different events and cultural understanding (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015).

Like many international students, Lucy needed to work part-time in order to support herself while at the university. In her first year in Australia, Lucy started out like most students performing menial jobs to pay her bills. She began by selling credit cards in a shopping centre and then worked in a bakery. In her final year she secured a position as an assistant accountant in the politics department of her university via the university job service. Her decision to find a part-time job in her discipline area was another critical step towards developing the skills and expertise that would provide a point of differentiation in the job market. Work experience is not just

about extra income. Having a part-time job can also provide international students with key local experience that is highly valued by employers, as well as important opportunities for social interaction (Gribble, 2014; Lawson, 2012).

Realising the importance of getting discipline-specific work experience and unable to find a placement with an Australian company due to her visa status, she completed a 3-month internship with an international financial credit rating company in Beijing during her summer holidays. She was thus accruing new forms of social capital. She believed that the internship gave her an advantage when looking for a graduate position in Australia.

Six months prior to graduating, Lucy began actively looking for employment. Despite being on a temporary visa, she managed to secure a position as a consultant with Thomson Reuters, a multinational media and information firm. The position involved providing software demonstrations and training to clients. It offered Lucy many opportunities to visit a range of companies and expand her networks, including at Deloitte. Lucy worked very closely with the managers at Deloitte. The company quickly recognised Lucy's proactive disposition, and, after an informal interview, she was offered a position as an analyst. Lucy thus strategically bypassed the normal route from graduation, which required PR, to gain this position at Deloitte. She gained PR as an independent skilled migrant while working at Thomson Reuters and then capitalised on the opportunities available through her networks while at Thomson Reuters to position herself as offering valued capitals to the 'Big Four'. Lucy's experiences echo the findings of other studies which have identified visa status as a major barrier to employment in Australia (Ruhanen, Robinson, & Breakey, 2013).

Of the 13 international accounting graduates, Lucy was one of only two who accumulated the social and symbolic capital valued by the Big Four employers. This was achieved via her strategic approach to developing her English language skills, meeting visa requirements and accruing work experience. By drawing on her personal agency and making proactive choices, Lucy positioned herself favourably in the competitive graduate job market. While Lucy was fortunate in being able to draw on her considerable personal agency, her experiences highlight the role that institutions and university staff can play in building conscious international student agency (Marginson, 2014).

## **International Student Case Study 2: *Dian***

While Lucy stood out among the 13 international accounting graduates for her strong sense of personal agency and capacity to make decisions that enhanced her employment outcomes, Dian is perhaps more typical of Chinese international accounting students in Australia. Dian is a female international student from China who arrived in Australia in 2008 to carry out a Bachelor of Commerce at a Victorian university. She subsequently went on to complete a Master of Professional Accounting at another Australian university in December 2012. We interviewed

Dian on three occasions. She was 23 years old at the time of the first interview. In her first interview, Dian stated that her career goal was to work as a financial accountant in a large media corporation and remain in Australia permanently. However, by the third interview, Dian had returned to China. Dian had reached the conclusion that her goal of finding professional employment as an accountant in Australia was unattainable. Instead, she had decided to pursue opportunities in her hometown, a second-tier city in China. Dian's story offers a sharp contrast to Lucy's experiences as an international student in Australia. Her experiences highlight how decisions taken throughout the student journey can have a significant impact on an individual's capacity to connect with the host community, develop key capitals and secure favourable employment outcomes.

Dian lived with other Chinese international students in a shared house and described her friendship group as '60 per cent of Chinese and the other maybe some Singapore, Korea or other international students'. Dian's difficulties in making friends with local students while she was in Australia are typical of the experience of many Chinese international students who struggle to form friendships with local students (Campbell, 2012; Gu, 2011; Sawir et al., 2008). When questioned about the barriers to forming friendships with local students, she responded: 'Probably the different cultural background, because we started to chat with each other about some general topic like what's your major or something like this and after this we have no other topics to talk about'.

While studying, Dian had a casual retail job and volunteered with an organisation that assisted people with disabilities. Dian did not participate in any other extracurricular activities while at the university. Extracurricular activities offer important opportunities for interaction with the host community as well as the chance to develop employability skills (Molony, 2011; Tchiboza, 2007; Thompson, Clark, Walker, & Whyatt, 2013; Wongtrirat, Ammigan, & Pérez-Encinas, 2015).

In her second interview in May 2012, Dian was convinced that her chances of getting a graduate accounting position in Australia were minimal. She pointed to a 'lack of experience' and 'language and communication' as the two key factors that hindered her chances of securing employment in her field: 'I suppose there are plenty of accounting and finance related jobs in the work market, but it doesn't really link to support our new graduates. They choose the workers with five or three years' working experience' (2nd interview, May 2012). In addition, visa status was considered another barrier, as 'most of the ideal companies require permanent residency or citizenship when students apply for the jobs' (2nd interview, May 2012).

Dian's understanding of the labour market aligns with research carried out by the Department of Employment with successive reports highlighting the need for experienced accountants with strong interpersonal and communication skills (DEEWR, 2012a, 2012b). Applicants' level of experience, poor communication skills and lack of generic skills and corporate fit were listed as the most frequently cited reasons for the unsuitability of applicants (DEEWR, 2012a, 2012b). Notably, the most recent report stated that employers required a minimum of 1 year's work experience and 'new graduates were unlikely to be considered suitable for most of the surveyed

accounting vacancies without completion of a graduate development year' (Department of Employment, 2015).

In March 2013, a few months after completing her master degree, Dian returned to China. At the time of her third interview, Dian had recently returned home and was looking for work. In her third interview, she mentioned the significance of having Australian work experience even for those international graduates who return home: 'Some of my friends told me that if you have some working experience overseas and then you come back to China it will be a strong advantage for you. I tried to find a job in Australia, but I failed' (3rd interview, Mar. 2013). Dian was confident that she would find employment, and by June 2013, she was employed in an insurance company in China. This outcome reveals how Dian was forced to scale back her ambitions and adjust to the reality of both the Australian and Chinese labour markets. It also concurs with other research that shows that while international education remains an asset in the Chinese graduate employment market, the rapid increase in overseas-educated graduates, along with the improving quality of domestic graduates, suggests returning graduates may need to adjust their employment expectations (Hao & Welch, 2012).

## **What Does This Analysis Mean for International Students in Australia?**

Networking as means of accessing work opportunities and becoming culturally and socially engaged with the host context means acquiring additional forms of distinction that were widely used by many international graduates. Importantly, the significance of networking in finding employment in any form has been echoed in the experiences of other international graduates in the cohort. Analysis of the longitudinal data from the cohort of participant international students in the study shows that networking was used as the key means of securing employment for all international graduates who secured full-time positions in accounting. Successful international graduates engaged with the local community in order to both develop key skills and expand their local networks. For example, international graduates who succeeded in securing discipline-related graduate employment intentionally sought out opportunities to engage with local students. One international graduate took up rowing while at the university, as she knew that there would be no other Chinese students in the rowing club. Others deliberately chose to live with students who were not from their home country in either share house accommodation or homestay arrangements. Art classes, sport, church groups and volunteering were all used as a way of enhancing skills, attributes and experience, as well as a way of connecting with the local community.

While the successful students provide important insights into the types of strategies and behaviour that are more likely to lead to graduate employment, they were in the minority. The majority of international accounting graduates in our study



struggled to develop critical attributes and experience or connect with the local community. Our interviews with international accounting graduates provide important insights into some of personal dispositions such as persistence and confidence in increasing an individual's chances of achieving their professional goals by networking and accumulating social capital. For example, a comparison between Lucy and Dian reveals the distinct approaches to preparing for post-study employment. Dian did not participate in internship programmes or extracurricular activities while studying and only began looking for work in the last semester of her program. Her work experience was confined to the retail sector and not directly related to accounting. In contrast, Lucy capitalised on opportunities to build experience, create networks and develop linguist and cultural capital via various part-time jobs, an internship and a range of extracurricular activities beginning in the initial months of her time in Australia.

Dian was unsuccessful in connecting with domestic students with her friendship group confined to other Chinese international students or international students from other parts of Asia. Lucy, on the other hand, actively sought out opportunities to engage with local students with the underlying goal of improving her English and developing cultural insights. She displayed desirable dispositions and agency that are sought-after by employers. Evidenced in Lucy's journey from study to work were high levels of self-management and motivation that enabled her to participate in volunteer work, combine part-time work with study and establish local friendships. Her post-study employment success can be attributed to several key factors which include strategic networking, a variety of part-time jobs, familiarity with Australian workplace culture and strong interpersonal and communication skills.

The comparison between these two international graduates suggests that an individuals' ability to create meaningful and productive connections in the host country may have a significant impact on their post-study employment trajectory. The stories of Lucy and Dian are not unique. Within our study, there were clear links between a minority of students who were able to capitalise on opportunities to engage with the host community and further develop key competencies desired by Australian employers. For those unable to create those connections and reap the associated benefits, the challenge of securing post-study employment was much greater. This is accentuated due to a highly competitive local and international labour market in areas such as accounting.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reports on a longitudinal study of international accounting graduates from three Australian universities. A key finding of the study is that the key attributes required in order to succeed in the professional field of accounting are not necessarily developed via international students' formal training at the university. While universities are often highly successful in developing core professional knowledge requirements, interviews with Australian employers in the field of



accounting indicate accounting graduates require a range of skills and competencies, many of which extend beyond discipline-specific knowledge. The credential is considered to be the bottom line when considering employability. To succeed in highly competitive graduate labour markets, international students must build a 'portfolio' of skills, knowledge and attributes. This requires active participation in a range of activities that are predominantly external to the classroom. The longitudinal data reveals that the majority of international graduates were aware of the significance of engaging in various forms of activities and connecting with locals in order to enhance opportunities for recruitment and to develop a range of generic skills required for professional practice. However, often this awareness came towards the end of their studies rather than the beginning. Importantly, those who recognised their needs early on and who maximised opportunities to enhance their networks and develop communication and language skills were much better placed to achieve their professional goals upon graduation.

These findings have broad implications for the university sector. With international students placing increasing importance on postgraduate employment outcomes in both home and host countries, there is a need for universities to closely examine how they prepare international students for the labour market. While many universities provide a range of programmes and support services designed to develop the employability of international students, our research suggests that enhancing the connectedness of international students to the local community plays a key role in developing critical skills and attributes. The findings indicate that raising awareness regarding the types of requirements of employers should occur earlier rather than later in their degree. The study highlights the myriad of advantages associated with greater integration of international students into the host community including enhanced English language and communication skills, exposure to local cultural norms and values and local networks offering greater access to work experience and graduate employment opportunities. While a small number of students possess the personal agency to create these links themselves, many require extra support to form meaningful connections with the local community. At the same time, it indicates that employers also need to change their approaches to recruitment and how they understand what constitutes employability in a global market that is increasingly culturally diverse.

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# Chapter 3

## International Student Connectedness with Local Teachers and Peers: Insights from Teachers

Ly Thi Tran and Lien Pham

**Abstract** The mobility processes associated with the dynamic formations of locality shape and reshape international students' connectedness with teachers, peers, families, institutions and the broader community. This chapter considers the academic and social connectedness of international students in vocational education and training (VET) from teachers' perspectives. This research includes 155 interviews with international students and staff as well as fieldwork in Australian dual-sector universities and VET colleges. The chapter draws on Vertovec's idea of transnationalism and Hall's notion of identity to examine international students' connectedness with teachers and peers in international VET classrooms. The findings of the research point to the ways VET teachers view their relationships with international students and the connectedness among all students through a functional lens. Placing the functional goals of developing students' vocational and cultural skills and hands-on experiences at the centre of their pedagogy, these teachers engage in practices to foster the interaction of international and domestic students inside and outside the classroom. The research found that meaningful connectedness in international VET spaces moves beyond the mere condition for interaction between domestic and international peers to the real opportunities for international students to share, negotiate and contribute to building practical hands-on skills, vocational knowledge and cultural experiences on a more equal basis. This process enhances not only vocational capabilities but also mutual learning for all.

**Keywords** International students • Local teachers • Domestic students • Vocational education and training • Engagement • Connectedness

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## Introduction

Connectedness is at the centre of international students' educational, social and cultural experiences in the host country (Cheung & Yue, 2013; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007; Wiers-Jensen, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003). International students often maintain physical connectedness with spaces, landscapes, objects, friends and families. They can also have virtual connectedness that helps them to reinforce a sense of belonging to a particular group or place. Connectedness can involve a range of social, cultural, interpersonal and intellectual engagement and learning. However, research on international student connectedness largely concentrates on the issue of intercultural interaction and engagement (Bennett, Volet, & Fozdar, 2013; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Rienties, Heliot, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Rienties, Nanclares, Jindal-Snape, & Alcott, 2012).

In the field of international education research, intercultural connectedness is often viewed with respect to the relations between international and domestic students and among international peers (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Jon, 2013; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Rienties et al., 2013). The majority of existing literature tends to position international students as sojourners in the host community who should take the onus in building connectedness with others. Much less research closely examines the relationships between local teachers and international students and between international and domestic students from a holistic view that sees all members as equal participants in building and nurturing connectedness. In particular, little is known about how local teachers as a key stakeholder in transnational academic and social fields see their relationships with international students and the relationships between domestic and international students. Teachers' perspectives on these aspects play a key role in influencing their ways of appropriating pedagogy and curriculum for international classrooms.

This chapter responds to this gap in the literature by analysing how teachers view the nature and meaning of their relationships with international students as well as intercultural relationships in the classroom and how such understanding impacts on their pedagogical practice. The chapter is derived from a 4-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council. Data sources include 50 interviews with staff and 105 interviews with international students together with fieldwork and observation notes from VET and dual-sector institutions in the states of Australia: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and Victoria (VIC). It uses Vertovec's (2001) idea of transnationalism and Hall's (1996) notion of identity to analyse the interview data with teachers. The findings of this research suggest that VET teacher participants perceive a link between pedagogical practices and students' life experiences, which fosters their connectedness with students and the connectedness between international and domestic students. This is not often the case in higher education, where many lecturers and tutors might not see themselves as well connected with international students (Dalglish, 2006; Sawir, 2011). The focus on vocational skills development and hands-on experiences in VET links teaching and learning practices to students' practical application in their jobs. This in turn appears to be essential to building and maintaining connectedness in international classrooms.



This linkage appears to be less clear in the higher education setting. The chapter highlights how VET teachers view their roles and relationships with international students through a functional lens whereby all involved parties, teachers and international and domestic students may co-construct connectedness with each other. Their pedagogical practices thus involve developing students' intercultural relationships via connectedness with practical and cultural skills and gaining hands-on experience related to their prospect professions.

## **International Students in Australian VET**

International education is Australia's largest service export, contributing over \$18 billion to the national economy annually (Pyne, 2015). Over the past two decades, VET colleges in Australia have invested in increasing the volume of full-fee-paying international students to generate revenue in response to the decrease in public funding. The Australian VET sector currently ranks second, behind the higher education sector, in the volume of international student enrolments, with a total of almost 169,700 (AEI, 2016). International students have diverse and shifting purposes in undertaking a VET course in Australia. These include using VET as a means for skill enhancement or personal transformation, a pathway to higher education and a stepping stone for migration (Tran, 2015; Tran & Nyland, 2013; Tran & Vu, 2016). Some are motivated to study VET for dual or multiple purposes.

The considerable growth of international students in VET over the past decade has significant implications for teaching and learning in VET. Research evidence (Tran, 2013a) suggests that the diverse needs and characteristics that international students bring to Australian VET classrooms have created challenges but also possibilities for teachers to appropriate pedagogical practices. New pedagogical issues in teaching international students have arisen, and teachers are required to engage with and develop new pedagogical skills and knowledge (Nakar, 2013; Pasura, 2015; Tran 2013b; Tran & Nyland, 2011). Within this context, a more nuanced understanding of how teachers view their connectedness with international students and the implications for pedagogical practices is essential to optimise teaching and learning in cross-cultural classrooms.

## **Relationships and Pedagogies in International Classrooms**

Research on teaching international students in international classrooms appears to focus on three key themes:

1. The challenges faced by teachers in dealing with unfamiliar characteristics and diverse needs of international students (Dippold, 2013; Kingston & Fordland, 2008; Peelo & Luzon, 2007)

2. Strategies to enhance intercultural interactions between domestic and international students (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Jon, 2013; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Pham & Tran, 2015; Rienties et al., 2013; Tran & Pham, 2015)
3. Pedagogical practices to effectively engage with and use the diversity of cultures, knowledge and experiences to optimise learning for all (Leask, 2009; Ryan & Viète, 2009; Tran, 2011a, 2013a)

International classrooms provide the opportunity to enhance intercultural interactions and relationships. However, existing research evidence suggests the development of intercultural relationships and capability does not automatically happen when having students of diverse cultures in the same classroom (Croese, 2011; Pham & Tran, 2015; Ryan and Viète, 2009; Tran & Pham, 2015). Tran and Pham pointed out that without purposeful and appropriate pedagogical practices, intercultural interaction might simply occur at a surface level only, and reciprocal learning for those involved is limited. Building meaningful interactions and relationships conducive to teaching and learning in an intercultural classroom is often seen as a challenge to all involved parties and the institution. Key factors that might preclude meaningful relationships between local teachers and international students include cultural mismatch, misinterpretations in communication and different expectations (Owens, 2008). Furthermore, existing studies indicate that not all academics have the motivation or see the value in building interactions and relationships with international students, thereby seeing it unnecessary to appropriate their pedagogy in teaching international students (Dalglis, 2006; Sawir, 2011). Such attitudes preclude the development of meaningful relationships and pedagogies that can foster intercultural learning and capability for all in cross-cultural classrooms.

Ryan and Viète (2009) examined the types of academic literacy and pedagogical practices in the English-speaking academic environment in which international students' knowledge and experiences are undervalued that results in international students' disengagement. They found that such a practice is often rooted in the notion of a native-speaker norm in the English-speaking academy, which "exercises tacit power in pedagogy and assessment" (p. 303). The findings show that these pedagogical practices affect the international students' self-identity and self-esteem as they operate in unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environments in which they play a less equal role in knowledge construction as compared to their domestic peers, and reciprocal learning is not nurtured. In a similar vein, research by Collett (2007) finds that international students were often excluded in international classrooms by their lack of familiarity with the rules of engagement of the Western style. The findings also show that "the unintended use of rank to maintain a status quo prevents any consideration of the experiences of those with differing cultural understandings" (Collett, 2007, p. 21). These factors are central to the marginalisation of international students.

A significant stream of research in the field of international education is concerned with the notion of culturally responsive pedagogies and offers various suggestions to develop such pedagogical practices (Leask, 2009; Ryan & Viète, 2009; Tran, 2011a, 2013a, 2013b). Authors who advocate culturally responsive pedagogies

in international classrooms highlight the need to develop and appropriate pedagogies not only to accommodate the needs and learning characteristics of students from diverse cultural and language backgrounds but importantly to validate their diverse knowledge, cultures and experiences as a useful recourse for learning (Leask, 2009; Singh & Han, 2010; Tran, 2010, 2013a). Within this line of argument, the incorporation of cultural responsiveness and inclusivity is closely connected with active productive pedagogies (Singh & Han, 2010; Tran, 2010). Another fundamental aspect of culturally responsive pedagogies suggested in the literature is anchored in the purposeful inclusion of case studies, examples, ways of doing and professional practices from diverse cultures in teaching and learning (Leask, 2009; Tran, 2008, 2009, 2011b, 2012, 2013c).

## Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, we draw on Vertovec's (2001) idea of transnationalism and Hall's (1996) identity construct of "differences" to analyse teachers' views about intercultural relationships within classrooms as a transnational social field. According to Vertovec, the literature on transnationalism underscores the fact that there are large numbers of people now living in social worlds that are stretched between or dually located in physical places and communities in two or more nation-states. The diverse habitats and the experiences gathered in these settings comprise people's cultural repertoires, which in turn influence their construction of identity or indeed multiplicity of identities. The term "transnational social field" (Gargano, 2009) refers to a multifocal world with a set of conditions that affect the construction, negotiation and production of social identities. These identities play out and position individuals in the course of everyday life within and across each of their place of attachment or perceived belonging. This is an intimate connection between belonging, identities and social fields. According to Vertovec (1999), transnationalism and identity are concepts of juxtaposition, because transnational networks of exchange and participation are grounded upon some perception of common identity. Yet identities are constructed and negotiated within the social worlds that span more than one place and take shape by accounting for the person's present, past and future.

To deconstruct this juxtaposition, and to enable us to look into the experiences of teachers and their perception of their relationships and practices with international students, we draw on Hall's (1996) theory of identity. According to Hall, identities are constructed within, not outside discourse. In other words, people construct their identities within specific discursive formations and practices by engaging in specific strategies. Identities emerge not just from the habitats of physical space but within people's social relations and thus are product of differences. Hall's idea of identity recognises heterogeneity and diversity which is implied in transnationalism by the conception of identity as lived through rather than naturally constituted.

In a transnational social field, identities are understood through people's place in their relationships with others who come from different cultures. According to Mead (1910), people's behaviours are produced in regards to their perception of their "selves" and others' behaviours and draw on their cultural repertoires to make sense of these interpretations of behaviours. Despite the contextual differences between the present time of international education and the historical setting from which Mead's premise arose, his work is still relevant to this research as it is centred on how individuals' self-consciousness and consciousness of others influence ways of being and doing. Thus transnational identities comprise representations which provide an imaginary social identity or a convergence of "differences" to come to a common point of identity. It is through understanding how this common point of identity might arise that allows the thinking of transnationalism to go beyond the physical space to enter a kind of virtual connection through the minds of people in transnational fields, through cultural artefacts that they bring with them and through their shared imaginations. In our analysis, we draw on Vertovec (2001) to theorise a typology of transnationalism and the conditions that affect transnationalism. We look at transnationalism through the idea of connectedness as how people see themselves with others in a transnational setting and explore how social relations and practices affect their sense of connectedness. We analyse the data from the perspective of teachers: how they see their relationships with international students (social relations and identity) and how they accord their practices in line with such relationships (practices and connectedness). The focus is on the meanings held by teachers about teacher-student and student-student relationships and their practices in light of the context of their college environment.

## **The Study**

The research reported in this chapter includes 50 interviews with VET teachers and professional staff and 105 interviews with international students. In addition to interviews, fieldwork and observations took place over the 4-year period from 2009 to 2013. The directors of international programmes in different VET institutes were asked to circulate an invitation to participate in the study to staff involved in teaching and working with international students. The interviewees were from a range of fields including cookery, hairdressing, hospitality management, law, finance, accounting, building and carpentry. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were chosen as this method provides participants with space to elaborate on their responses to the questions formulated by the research as well as on issues they see important to their professional practice. The interviews focused on teachers' perspectives on how they see themselves as teachers of international students and how they have appropriated their teaching content and pedagogy to address the learning characteristics of international students. Ethics approval was sought prior to data collection from the University Human Research Ethics Committee where the

researcher is based. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms of their names and institutes are used in this chapter.

The face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The researcher read the interview transcripts several times and coded interview data using NVivo 10. The principal features of intercultural relationships perceived by the teachers were interpreted using Vertovec's (2001) idea of transnationalism and Hall's (1996) notion of identity as discussed above.

## Findings and Discussion

The teachers in this study seem to view their relationships with international students through a *functioning* emphasis. The term *functioning* is used here to include both the competency goals associated with the subjects they are teaching (*functional goals*) and the types of teaching practices (*functional practices*) that teachers engage in to achieve these goals. Along the line of Mead (1910), teachers view teacher-student and student-student relations as inherently tied to the functional goals which determine their functional practices within those relations: as people take on multiple roles depending on their positions in society, they create meanings to accord with those positions and functions.

The *functioning* relationships that these teachers position themselves within align with Hall's idea of identities as "becoming" rather than "being". It is becoming because they constantly engage in functional practices that shape how they see themselves, their being. Similarly, how teachers construct international students' identities, as cultural workers, producers or learners, and how they fit in with the college and their workplace, broader community and with other local students depend on the functional roles they attribute to the international students. Teachers' sense of fitting in with students' worlds and students fitting in with their worlds would shift depending on the specific contexts, the functioning roles and how well equipped the teachers and students are to perform that function. This means that both teachers and students (international and domestic) are participants in constructing connectedness in their relationships with each other because they try to fit in with the other person's world. Their worlds are common because of their functional roles.

Through the functioning lens, these teachers seem to recognise (1) points of divergences or differences between international students and domestic students and even themselves as learners and teachers, (2) points of convergences or similarities because of common functional goals and (3) points where divergences can be negotiated or bridged or points of a common identity. For these teachers, the functioning lens allows them to situate themselves in social relations but also to practically recognise students' divergent skills sets (competency and cultural). Closing these gaps between students is how they connect to their students. When local students and international students can share common space of vocational skills, language and

cultural understanding, they can find the connection with each other. This analysis allows us to understand in more depth the juxtaposition of transnationalism and identity that Vertovec (2001) talks about. The analysis points to the divergences and multiplicities of practical and cultural skills as resources that position international and domestic students and teachers differently in the classrooms. It also highlights how these differences may be mediated by all to achieve equality and connection with each other.

## **Functional Goal of Vocational and Cultural Skills Development**

The teacher participants in this research have two broadly functional goals: First, they need to develop students' vocational skills for the industry, for example, bakery, hairdressing or carpentry. Second, they need to foster an environment for cultural awareness to take place and particularly develop the students' cultural skills set to enable international students to adapt to Australian culture. The first goal is primary because they see their identities as the teacher/trainer of mastery of skills for vocational functions. The second goal of cultural skills development and support is secondary to and, in some cases, support vocational skills mastery. This section discusses the vocational skills and the next section discusses cultural skills.

### ***Functional Goals of Vocational Skills Mastery***

Vocational skills mastery is an important goal for these teachers in their relations with students because they see these practical functions as relevant to life experiences. This might be because VET programmes prioritise hands-on experiences in a real-world environment. As the following teacher suggests about the practical approach to everyday life experiences:

What they're learning is relative to what they want to do. They're not learning something about mechanics but they're working in a cabinet maker shop. Everything we teach is relative to what we do. (Carpentry, QLD)

In this comment, the teacher refers to students' learning being shaped by what they want to do in life. This is consistent with Hall's (1990) idea about a person's social practices in shaping a person's social identity. This teacher also sees everyday experiences as a connecting point between his teaching and students' interest in learning which is related to their future occupation. In a way, he sees students' identities as social identities where they are members of a social group, in this case a cabinetmaker shop, rather than drawing on some individual characteristics. The kind of teaching practices he then employs is based on competencies that need to be developed in order to enhance students' readiness for the workplace. He is developing a

common point with his students through the social place of cabinet making and the functional goal of developing students' skills set to be a cabinetmaker.

This teacher also extends his idea of connectedness through participation in society by suggesting a link between belonging and labour participation as a citizen's rights:

I've done it so, yeah look if people think that they can have a better future or better life or they can change the circumstance by coming to another country, whether it be Australia or any other country, I'm all for that. We're all citizens of the world. I always say that. (Carpentry, QLD)

His viewpoint about citizenship beyond the nationalist idea of legal status of citizenship justifies studying abroad to acquire better economic opportunities for oneself. While his view may stem from his own past experiences, it is insightful in the broader context of international education where there is a stereotype of international students whose motivation for studying in Australia is to acquire residency only.

### ***Functional Goal of Cultural Skills Development in Class and Out of Class***

The teacher participants seem to view cultural understanding as skills sets that can be used to support vocational and practical skills development. Therefore, they see the relationships between domestic and international students as of potential mutual benefit, where domestic students can teach international students practical skills and learn about different cultures from international students. Moreover, they seem to view culture as embedded in people's skills sets which influence how they might use these skills as resources in their everyday situations. As these teachers comment:

It's good for the local students to understand that this is not just an industry that is concentrated here in Australia. It has unlimited cultural boundaries. All cultures have some aspects of screen, screen industry, screen cultures, independent screen cultures. These things are important to understand. (Film and Media, NSW)

Tourism and hospitality, and to a large extent cookery, aim at skilling people to serve tourists, travellers, visitors, and of course, many of whom are international. There is a lot of cultural awareness built into the training packages as part of teaching: teaching people to work with different people, to work with different cultures and backgrounds, to understand that culture is not just a country or a nationality. (Hospitality Management, VIC)

The above comments suggest a direct linkage between culture and vocational jobs, which provides the logic for these teachers to incorporate differences in culture to develop students' understanding of the industries' practices. These comments also suggest teachers' recognition of multiplicity of identities that come from different places and that culture is not bound by nations or race. This is encapsulated in the idea of transnationalism (Vertovec, 1999; Gargano, 2009).



In addition, teachers view the relationships between domestic and international students as building social networks that extend beyond the borders of Australia. They see the need for domestic students to develop a cultural awareness that Australians generally lack. Thus international students can contribute positively to local students' cultural learning, and in so doing become their transnational connections. As the following teacher says:

They [international students] contribute by talking about their own experiences, who they are, and where they come from. In the second semester we started talking about working with people from different cultures and we asked the internationals in particular: "You've come here to Australia, now tell us something that you really found so strange, where you thought, "Oh, look at that! Fancy that!" And they'll talk about something and then the local students have said, really? Did you find that strange? And the local students will learn from the international students. But also the international students learn also about the variety and learn to be more accepting of different ways of doing things on both sides. (Hospitality Management, VIC)

The comment above suggests again that connectedness through understanding cultural differences or similarities also take place in the context of everyday life practical experiences. This is similar to Harris's (2009) claim that an approach of everyday encounters of culture is appropriate because it focuses on "the local, the domestic and the ordinary neighbourhood spaces, or micro-geographies of people's day-to-day lives" (Harris, 2009, p. 192). Deirdre's focus on everyday practices in the classroom also highlights the difficulties that these students might encounter in trying to understand different cultures. The absence of reciprocity by local students that are often found in literature is their fear of displaying their lack of cultural awareness (Pham & Tran, 2015; Tran & Pham, 2015). While these behaviours may be perceived as lack of empathy, they arise from fear of displaying their cultural unresponsiveness because they assume that these international students have cultural skills. As another teacher comments:

I think we are frightened of them because they just seem different and we don't really understand how to communicate with them. I've had (local) students say to me that they feel they are inadequately equipped to interact with international students. Australian students worry that they will look stupid themselves because they won't understand. My experience with Australian students is that they're very ignorant in general of other countries and other cultures. So they're frightened to get to know someone from another culture reasonably well because they will show their own ignorance. They are actually ashamed of their own inability or their own ignorance. When I talk to them that's what they really say to me. They're just frightened that their inadequacies will be exposed. (Executive Officer, VIC)

This comment reveals a dimension that is not often brought to light in literature, which largely focuses on domestic students' negative attitudes and a lack of cultural sensitivity towards international students or international students' unfamiliarity with communication norms and English language proficiency as the most significant barriers for effective intercultural interaction between domestic and international students (Wakimoto, 2007). The teacher's comment suggests that domestic students' fear of having to construct, maintain and negotiate differences and new schemas of understanding of differences is just as prominent as it is for international students. As Mead (1910) argued, the presentations of others' attitudes and our own



are reflective of the consciousness of the world that is bound up in our own self-consciousness about our place. It is always difficult to bring up that self-consciousness to display to others our attitudes and movements (Mead, 1910). Yet such self-consciousness can be the beginning of social interactions which can lead to what Hall (1990) refers to as understanding the self through recognition of differences.

Similarly, another teacher in the comment below perceives that international students can acquire cultural skills when they socialise with local students outside the classroom, for example, by attending a local football game or going to Australian friends' BBQ. He sees himself as occupying that role of developing international students' cultural learning in order to make them feel like they belong to the Australian community:

Once they [international students] are here and they get frightened or whatever it may be, they then lose their self-esteem, which in turn, demotivate them to take chances or do things. Even the simple things of going out and experience new things, going out to a local nightclub or the pictures, meet people, you know. One of the things I say to them is go and see an Australian Rules football game. Experience it, be amongst other Australian people. I've taken a group of students with me to the football and once they've been there they go wow! I've taken students out to my business or to other restaurants and we talk about designing menus to meet market needs or design or developing a coffee shop. We walk around the city. I take them to different coffee shops and show them how they're set up, how they create their own niche and things like that. Part of education must be about teaching them cultural things, allowing them to experience the city or the country, to make them be part of it. I keep on saying here that we really need to do more to get students out and see Melbourne and Victoria. (Cookery, VIC)

The above comment suggests that there is much anxiety and feeling of low confidence amongst international students. Richard perceives that his role of a teacher and of education, broadly, is to help these students to overcome their anxieties or low self-esteem by giving them opportunities to experience Australian culture. It also highlights the connection that he makes between building cultural awareness with work practices, for example, designing menus or coffee shops. Again, there is a focus on connecting work-related skills through everyday life experiences and sense of belonging to a wider Australian community.

On the other hand, cultural differences can lead to racism when there is no acceptance of differences or no way for people to tolerate different cultural behaviours. Thus, even though the majority of teacher participants seem to recognise the importance of cultural understanding and social participation, the relations between them and international students are reflective of their own dispositions to take on different cultures. For those who were diasporas or migrants in Australia, or have had overseas experiences, they seem to relate to international students more because they have the cultural skills to do so. These teachers see themselves as cultural beings, not someone who tries to enforce multiculturalism on others. They see their functional goals of cultural development as embedded within the relationships with international students they work with. As with vocational and practical skills, there seems to be a direct association between cultural skills and social practices. As the teachers reveal in the excerpts below:

As a teacher, you also need to be able to understand the cultural differences, particularly with things like special dietary needs. If you approach teaching with a closed mind and narrow thoughts of “I’m going to treat them all the same”, I don’t think you’d be able to teach. I think students [international] have to be able to understand their learning process too. Because you learn things that are particular to the ways that Australians learn things in Australia. So I need for them to be part of the Australian learning processes. I need them to be part of what’s happening in the class room because to be able to communicate, they need to have a part in the communication process. (Bakery, VIC)

I enjoy the process of learning and I enjoy adapting myself to a person’s circumstances. I enjoy learning about the person and where they’ve come from and their cultures. I’ve learnt so much since I started here and started teaching international students. I’ve learnt so much about the world around me. Learning about cultures is as important to me as myself teaching students. (Cookery, VIC)

Alongside with seeing his role in fostering cultural skills which necessitates having the right attitude and skills, the teacher in the first excerpt emphasises on the cultural skills embedded in the communication process which is essential for effective learning. He suggests that international students could engage in reciprocal actions of communicating with his and other students, which would allow them to recognise different ways of learning between Australia and their own cultures. From that, international students can take part in their own learning. Even though these two comments emphasise the importance of cultural learning for both teachers and international students, they differ in terms of teachers’ experiences and expectations of international students. However, they both agree on cultural skills as enablers of agentic practices and that both teachers and students have to develop and practise. They also highlight that without these cultural skills sets, teachers may have a monocultural view which may lead to expectation that the onus is on international students to learn about Australian culture which is linked to an assimilation approach.

Similarly, another teacher recognises differences in attitudes between local and international students towards him as teacher. As he says, it is positive for his own identity and sense of being a teacher:

It’s not only good for local students; it’s good for the teachers because you have this other attitude towards teachers and teaching that you don’t find in the local population. The local population tend to despise teachers, whereas a lot of international students actually have respect for teachers which is very refreshing. (Film and Media, NSW)

These reflections by teachers on their interactions with international students are consistent with Mead’s (1910) argument that during the whole process of interactions with others, we are analysing their oncoming acts by our instinctive responses to their changes of inclinations and other indications of intentions. These teachers’ social conducts seem to be responses to their perception of their roles and relationships with international students. They consciously develop their attitudes as they interpret others’ behaviours, which in turn shape their attitudes and further actions. Their cultural understandings are based on their interpretation of international students’ cultures. They see cultural skills to come about when they recognise their involvement in practical situations; they then see cultural skills as part of developing

practical skills to take on vocational jobs. As Vertovec (1999) says, the heightening of cultural awareness is parallel with new kinds of self-awareness. Rather than thinking about culture as a fixed state of being and differences as different states of being, cultural skills are viewed as skills that can be developed as long as social actors within relationships are willing to think relationally in terms of their own positions and dispositions to certain attitudes and behaviours of others. These teachers seem to promote an instrumental approach to culture, to rationalise cultural skills and to support the development of vocational skills in the situational contexts of the classroom and workplace. This in turn serves as commonality that can connect international students with local people.

## **Functional Practices: Pedagogy and Support**

The teacher participants seem to make choices to achieve functional goals of vocational and cultural skills through specific teaching methods and providing support to international students. It is within these functional relations that these teachers recognise differences between international and domestic students, in terms of practical skills, language capacity, attitudes and learning styles. They attribute differences in attitudes and learning styles to cultural differences and thus view supporting students to develop cultural skills as ways to develop their practical and language skills. Therefore, it seems that teachers link skills development to teacher-support activities. The latter also address other learning and social needs, particularly in cultural understanding which they see as leading to improved skills development. For some teachers, particularly those who are migrants themselves or used to working with different cultures abroad, their functional practices seem to be embedded in humanity relations that are deeper than developing skills.

### ***Teaching Practices***

Teachers' functional goals also influence their teaching methods and style and preference for classroom structure. For example, some comment upon Asian international students' rote learning style, or less English skills, which is different from local students'; therefore, they prefer segregated classes between international and domestic students to enable them to implement teaching strategies that accommodate international students' learning:

There are strategies that we use to teach international students. We give them extra exercises. We slow down. If we teach too fast the students will say, you're talking too fast for me. You've got to slow down. You have all these teaching strategies. Often you'll repeat key words. (Finance, VIC)

This comment suggests a link between functional goals and teaching practices which are shaped by their recognition of different skills levels between international students and local students. The teacher's preference for segregation seems to relate to his desire to support international students, rather than a form of discrimination. However, it is also worth noting that effective approaches to teaching international students also stand to benefit all students (Leask, 2009; Ryan & Viète, 2009).

Other teachers prefer integrating international with domestic students in classroom activities as ways to develop their adaptation skills and intercultural capability. They make a direct connection between cultural awareness and adaptation skills for work. Again this suggests a connection between work and social identities within the mindsets of these teachers:

I like to put them out of their comfort zone by putting them with students with different nationalities so they are forced to engage. This is helpful for a job in hairdressing, because you might have a client that you don't like and you don't want to cut his hair. But you don't have a choice. If the boss says you have to cut, you have to cut. So in hairdressing you are constantly put in a situation that you might not like it but you must deliver your services. In the classroom environment, it's where students begin to learn to adapt because this is where they have to adapt, and later on in their life or at work. So it's a good test or a good playground for them to sort of learn and adapt to situations. (Hairdressing, VIC)

It seems that the vocational aspects of these VET courses foster teachers' practical viewpoints about identity and participation in society and professional networks, which not only orient towards skills development but also agentic practices. This is different from a higher education environment when there is more focus on abstract learning which demands a higher level of language proficiency and less application of learning to life practical experiences. This is illustrated in the below comment:

From the learning aspect, I prefer to teach a mixed class because I think the level of exposure is better for international students if they get some pick up from the local students, particularly in subjects like law and work place analysis. It's very, very difficult to teach the work placement just to internationals because it's coming from an unexplored area in their learning so you've got to start at the bottom and build. But if they're in a class with locals, we can capitalise exponentially on the learning in both the locals with the internationals and both gain, in my experience. Also I'm very keen that people work together, that the internationals don't sit in one place and the locals sit in the other. We share, we learn, we work together. (Hospitality Management, NSW)

For supervision I think it would be better mixed because domestic students could also help them [international students] in the class room. But when it comes to the practical demonstration and skills it doesn't matter. Because I find international students to be more structured, visual learners and that way you can demonstrate and they can pick up the skills quite quickly. You know, make a coffee maker, cocktails, things like that to serve customers. But supervision where it's very theory orientated then they need a lot of assistance with the language difficulties that they have here. (Hospitality Management, Queensland)

These comments suggest that teachers engage in deliberate strategies of putting students together through their recognition of learning differences between students. Teachers have a direct involvement with their students through their teaching methods, because they can see skills and knowledge gaps and they seek to fill those gaps by using student interactions. The participant's comment below extends this idea,

highlighting that by unpacking the skills differences between students, she is able to use these differences to converge their differences towards a common functional goal, and through that, students can create transnational networks.

We also encourage the difference, within international cohorts because international students aren't just from one country either. So it's good to get the international students talking to each other. So maybe like the Swedish students talking to the Sri Lankan students and the Canadian students talking to the Chinese students. (Hospitality Management, VIC)

These teachers see themselves as skills trainers, which are embedded in their practical, cultural and teaching skills. Relationships between international and domestic students involve exchanges marked by recognition of differences and resulting interactions on an instrumental basis of achieving their functional goals of developing vocational skills. The practicalities of daily life seem to be a salient perspective of their social interactions with these students and construction of both their and their students' social identities. As Hall (1996) explains, identities are about questions of using resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming, rather than being: not who we are, but who we might become and how we might represent ourselves. For these teachers, it is not so much the history, but the present practicalities and future participation of students in their work, that invokes them to connect with each other.

### ***Providing Support (in Class and Out of Class)***

Many teachers believe it is their role to support international students and that they are the first port of call for students who may need support. Some see a mixed-class environment as places where interactions between local and international students may be useful to support international students. For these teachers, they view the relationships between domestic and international students as a platform for providing student support. As the teachers below suggest, reciprocity between students can be a mechanism for student support because international students can reciprocate by teaching domestic students about their culture and adaptation skills:

The local students learn from the internationals and they also learn tolerance and inclusiveness. The international students learn a lot more English and a lot about the Australian way of doing things. International students frequently find that the locals will be a mentor for them. (Cookery, VIC)

Because those international students have left all that's comfortable, they've left their family, their friends and all the things that they know and they've travelled thousands of miles. It's a really brave thing to do. So I think that our international students could teach our local students into action. (Hospitality Management, VIC)

The second comment implies a sense of responsibility upon local students to support international students given their lack of family and friends in a foreign country. While these benefits can come from a mixed-class environment, it is largely

dependent on the course and the teaching style. In the below comments, these teachers connect the functional goal to learning practices and classroom structure.

The idea of providing support for student well-being outside the classroom also involves improving functional outcomes of students. Most of the teachers feel that there is much support provided by TAFE (Technical and Further Education – public VET) institutes such as counselling, which is also different from higher education where the former seems to gear more towards providing well-being support for students. This is evident in some teacher participants who see a close association between functional goals and support for students' work placement. For example, the teacher from the excerpt below views helping students to obtain an apprenticeship as his responsibility:

I take responsibility for finding work place for them. I go with them. I go and knock on the doors before them and when they go, I go with them, introduce them. (Carpentry, QLD)

It must be noted that such a desire to provide work placement support seems to rely on deeper relationships between teachers and students where they see their relations as encompassing trust, care and feeling of equality. For this teacher, the relationships with his students are more than simply providing support for a particular goal. He seems to see himself as their fellow human being, not just their teacher. In the comment below, the teacher uses the term "Ubuntu" which means humanness to describe the relationship between one another as just human being:

They just come into this class and they are like friends, like a bond. And that class is almost like a family. They become buddies. I become buddies with them too, in the sense where I'll go out with them sometimes or we'll have a barbeque together. So they form like a close knit group and they help each other along the way too which is awesome. I love it as a teacher. We work really well together. I really enjoy having the boys and I have formed friendships with them that will probably stay with me, and they'll stay mates with me because I am teaching the same fields that they're going to be working in. (Carpentry, QLD)

In summary, the teachers in this study engage in practices that are shaped within the functional relations with students generally and international students specifically. They have clear functional goals towards developing students' vocational skills and thus they engage in functional practices to achieve these goals. Such practices include specific teaching strategies and providing support to students to improve their vocational skills and cultural skills. These teachers perceive a link between the teaching and learning practices within the classroom and students' life experiences, which can be co-constructed through supportive relationships. These are seen as being core to culturally responsive pedagogies (Ryan & Viète, 2009; Tran, 2013a, 2013b). Teachers also perceive the importance of self-awareness that can be learnt by all through exposure to and recognition of differences in each other's culture and skills. Through recognition of these differences to achieve vocational skills that they can apply in the broader community, international students may feel connected to their place, work, community, college, friends and teachers. Awareness of differences is an essential step towards ensuring culturally inclusive teaching and learning (Tran, 2009).

## Conclusions

The findings discussed in this chapter suggest that the teacher participants view their relationships with students and between students through a functional lens. This is largely driven by their perceived understandings of their work as VET teachers, which in turn influence their teaching and support practices. With functional goals of developing students' vocational and cultural skills, these teachers engage in practices inside and outside classrooms to connect with international students and foster the connection between international and domestic students. These findings seem different from teachers' practices in higher education, where it is more difficult to find a common point between students and teachers and between students due to the more abstract nature of knowledge that is being presented in contrast with the practical skills and knowledge that define the VET sector.

The research also indicates that the ways teachers see international students' identities and international students' connectedness with their domestic peers, college, workplace and broader community depend on the functional roles associated with the courses that they teach. Their constructs of identities are shaped by the specific contexts of the vocation, the classroom environment and how well equipped the teachers and students are to achieve their functional goals. This means that both teachers and students can be participants in the intercultural interactions and in constructing connectedness.

It must also be noted that the teacher participants in this study view functional roles of teaching and learning from their own perspectives, rather than from international students' perspectives. The risk is that teachers might engage in practices that are ethnocentric and over time may create hegemonic practices that they may not intend. These risks are not evident in these teacher participants because the nature of learning activities is practice-based (functional) which tend to be similar across cultures.

This chapter extends on Vertovec (2001) to theorise a typology of transnationalism and the conditions that affect teachers and students' participation in intercultural interactions. Theories about transnationalism tend to fragment between transnationalism as transnational networks of exchange and participation grounded upon some perceptions of common identity (Vertovec, 2001). Yet, theories of identities that position diasporas and international students in the third space and space of hybridity (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Hall, 1996; Mead, 1910) claim that identities are constructed and negotiated within the social worlds that span more than one place. The analysis in this chapter deconstructs this juxtaposition to understand how identities are shaped through functional roles of VET teachers which allow a common point of identity to be shaped. It offers ways that differences may be identified, constructed and then bridged through recognising and validating the potential and resources that teachers, international students and domestic students may employ in transnational intercultural contexts.

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# Chapter 4

## Exploring the Lifeworld of International Doctoral Students: The Place of Religion and Religious Organisations

Jacqueline Stevenson

**Abstract** There is an absence of research exploring the experiences of religious students on the UK higher education campus, despite the fact that international students, in particular, are under constant monitoring and surveillance. This is a significant omission since, without such insights, policy and practice designed help these students to develop a sense of belonging, and fitting in may be based on an inadequate understanding of their experiences. In order to help fill this gap in the literature, this chapter reports on research with international PhD students using a phenomenological approach to guide the collection of data. The findings are explored through Merleau-Ponty's lifeworld dimensions, as developed by Peter Ashworth, to help answer the question of how 'being student' is 'experienced'. The research illuminates how those experiencing a lack of belongingness may turn away from the HE institution to find a sense of belonging elsewhere, as well as the ways in which religious organisations are of importance to those struggling to fit in. The research has implications for the retention of doctoral, as well as other religious students in both the UK and globally.

**Keywords** Doctoral students • Religion • Phenomenology • Belonging

### Introduction

Data on the number of religious students studying at university in the UK is not routinely collected, unlike that relating to social and economic background, age, gender or ethnicity. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the proportion of religious students studying on the UK campus. Data is only known about for 44 % of students in English universities, and over 40 % of universities don't provide any data on their

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students' religion or belief (HEFCE, 2016). Evidence suggests, however, that, despite UK universities being framed as 'secular', students affiliating to a religion (which is, of course, not necessarily the same being 'religious') are very much evident on campus: Guest, Aune, Sharma, and Warner's (2013) survey of 4,500 undergraduate students, for example, found that 63.6 % of students declared a religion, with 51.8% identifying themselves with Christianity, 2.7 % with Islam, 2 % with Buddhism, 1.45 % with Hinduism, 0.7 % with Judaism, 0.2 % with Sikhism and the remainder with 'other' religions (such as Jainism or Wiccan). This includes international students, who are largely more religious than their UK peers (ECU, 2011).

Despite the prevalence of religious students on the higher education (HE) campus, however, there are few studies reporting on their experiences. This has resulted in religious students having been largely ignored within the access, retention, attainment and student experience literature (Stevenson, 2013). Consequently religion remains, for the most part, unrecognised within institutional policy-making. Religious students are also notably absent from discourses around both multiculturalism and internationalisation (Stevenson, 2014) despite the significant growth in international students studying in the UK. In 2011–2012, for example, the UK attracted 489,000 international students to its HE institutions (British Council, 2013). HE institutions therefore know very little about the experiences of international religious students – except when things go wrong.

Under the UK Equality Act 2010 (UK Parliament, 2010), it is unlawful for any institution providing education to discriminate against any individual, or group, because of their religion or belief. Both UK and international students are also entitled to practise their religion or express their religious views on campus. There is evidence to suggest, however, that these students are increasingly facing both discrimination and physical and verbal abuse (ECU, 2011): the number of Islamophobic attacks on students has risen sharply, and Christian, Sikh, Jewish and pagan students have also reported a rise in the number of religiously prejudiced incidents (ECU, 2011; NUS, 2011). Despite these abuses, students' religious identity remains under-acknowledged on campus despite the fact that religion is of greater importance to many students than their race or ethnicity (Stevenson, 2012). Moreover, religion is rarely valorised despite the declared 'celebration' of diversity claimed by UK universities, the valorisation of other forms of difference and the growth in intercultural understanding, multicultural pedagogic approaches and cross-cultural engagement (Stevenson, 2014).

At the same time as this growth in religiously motivated incidences, however, religion on campus has become increasingly problematised around the idea of fundamentalism, with ever-increasing guidance being provided to universities on how to tackle possible extremism and prevent people being drawn into terrorism (the Prevent duty). Prevent (Home Office, 2011) which was introduced as part of the government's post-9/11 counterterrorism strategy is based on the finding that of those convicted of Islamist terrorist-related events in the last decade 'just over one third of the British citizens and just under one third of the total...had attended university or a higher education institute' (Home Office, 2011, p. 19). To combat the apparent threat posed by the growth of fundamentalism on campus, the Prevent duty requires each HE institution to assess where and how their students might be at risk

of being drawn into terrorism and to set out the actions they will take to mitigate this risk. As part of this, religious students are now under actual or constant threat of surveillance within their own institution. Moreover, the UK government is highly alert to the risk (real or possible) that international students may pose under the Academic Technology Approval Scheme; for example, some 739 international students have now been prevented from taking certain science-based university courses over concerns that they may use this knowledge to orchestrate terrorist attacks (Mortimer, 2015). In addition, international students are also required to comply with stringent UK immigration legislation designed to monitor their attendance, progression, completion and return to their home countries post-study and are thus subject to further detailed certification, registration, monitoring and surveillance by their university.

Religious students are therefore positioned as both invisible (their religious identity frequently unknown and unacknowledged on campus) *and* highly visible (under surveillance and positioned as potential threats) and, simultaneously, regarded as both potential victims of violence *and* responsible for it. Despite these tensions and contradictions, however, research into the experiences of religious students remains sparse leaving practitioners and policy-makers ill-informed. This is slowly starting to change, and there has been more recent work in the UK, with funding coming from bodies including the UK's Arts and Humanities and Economic and Social Research Councils and the UK Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2011). The experiences of both international and postgraduate students, however, remain largely under-researched, and their experiences continue to remain hidden. This means that when policy *is* made, it is often done so against a backdrop of these students being portrayed as both victims and potential perpetrators of violence but without a detailed understanding of their actual experiences.

This research, therefore, sought to fill an existing gap in the literature by asking, and answering, the question: how is 'being student' experienced by international, religious students. In doing so the chapter draws on detailed, in-depth interviews with PhD students to help illuminate their lifeworlds, including the students' descriptions of their experiences of belonging and fitting in on campus and how they respond to any exigencies faced by being international, religious students.

The first part of the chapter draws attention to the ongoing tensions that arise from the inconsistent, contradictory and ambiguous ways in which religion and religious students are regarded on the secular UK HE campus. The second part explores, through a detailed focus on the lifeworld of four students, the difficulties experienced in developing, building and sustaining connections within the social field of the university as well as the role that religious organisations play in both reinforcing a sense of belonging and, when this is fractured, offering a sense of belonging elsewhere. The final part of the chapter concludes by reiterating the need for HE institutions to undertake further research so that policy and practice can be built on the actual, and not the supposed, experiences of 'being' a religious student.

## Methodology

The data is drawn from interviews with full-time international PhD students studying at a post-1992 higher education institution (a former polytechnic). The research site, which is not the author's institution, has a strong commitment to equity and diversity and a track record in attracting students from a wide range of backgrounds. In addition, the university's website draws attention to ways in which it aims to recognise and, in particular, 'celebrate' diversity amongst its staff and student body. In common with many other universities, however, the institution makes little recognition of the presence or needs of religious students (Stevenson, 2013, 2014). In addition, whilst the institution's equality and diversity policy acknowledges that religion and belief are protected characteristics, it makes no mention of the needs of such students. On a practical level, there are two prayer rooms and an active chaplaincy, as well as diverse student societies representing religious groups.

Following the granting of institutional ethical approval, all full-time international PhD students were contacted via email through the university's graduate school. The email outlined the rationale and focus of the research, the criteria for inclusion and how data would be used. Twelve students made contact and ten agreed to be interviewed. All interviews took place on campus at a time and place of the students' choosing. The students were interviewed once, with the interviews lasting from 55 to over 90 minutes, and were recorded and fully transcribed. The students were at differing points in their PhD journeys, from first year to fourth year (post-submission and waiting for their viva); they ranged in age from 23 to 51, were from eight different countries and held diverse religious beliefs and commitments. Their demographics are detailed in Table 4.1.

The focus of the interview was to elucidate the lifeworld, or lived experience, of being an international PhD student, that is, how do these students perceive and construct the world they experience and how is this perception embodied. The concept of the lifeworld used is as Ashworth (2006, p. 215) describes it, namely, that 'all experience whatsoever is "within a world", which is for each of us "my subjective

**Table 4.1** Student demographics

Pseudonym	Nationality	Religion	Age	Gender	Year of study
Aisha	Libyan	Muslim	31	Female	4th year
Amir	Pakistani	Muslim	28	Male	3rd year
Helen	Chinese	Anglican	26	Female	4th year
Iris	India	Catholic	32	Female	1st year
Omar	Syrian	Muslim	29	Male	2nd year
Maria	Brazilian	Catholic	24	Female	2nd year
Mohammed	Pakistani	Muslim	41	Male	1st year
Najwa	Omani	Muslim	30	Female	4th year
Nicole	Chinese	Buddhist	28	Female	4th year
Philip	Mauritian	Anglican	51	Male	3rd year

world”, nevertheless with certain ever-present characteristics. This is designated the “lifeworld”.

An important prerequisite in conceptualising a phenomenological research project is that the researcher brackets off their natural ways of viewing things. Therefore this study cannot be described as an actual phenomenology in that, in approaching the research, the assumption had already been made (based on previous research) that international students’ experiences might be phenomenologically different from those of UK PhD students and that religious students’ experiences might be phenomenologically different from non-religious students’ experiences. However the *approach* can be described as phenomenological in that the interviews were as non-directive as possible with the open question being ‘what is being a religious student like here at [research site] university?’ with the focus on ‘being student’ and ‘being religious’ and how this is ‘experienced’. Participants were therefore encouraged to give as full a description as possible with probing questions used to follow up their accounts rather than being directed from the stance or interest of the interviewer. The interview ended at a point where it was felt that each student had reached the limit of what they appeared comfortable to discuss.

Following transcription the analysis comprised detailed reading of the individual transcript as a whole. The data was organised in to ‘a first-person master narrative’ (Wertz, 2011, p. 136) with paragraphs containing ‘a meaning unit that coherently describes a moment in the participant’s life’ (ibid). These moments were then explored through Merleau-Ponty’s lifeworld dimensions as developed by Ashworth (2006, p. 265), namely, selfhood, what the situation means for the person’s social identity or sense of agency; sociality, how the situation affects relations with others; embodiment, how the situation may relate to feelings about the student’s own body; temporality, how the meaning of time, duration and biography may be intrinsic to the student’s situation; spatiality, the importance and meaning of place and space; project, how experiences relate to the student’s ability to carry out activities regarded as central to their life and the emotions engendered in the pursuance of such projects; discourse (the sorts of terms employed to describe the situation); and mood as atmosphere or ‘moodedness’ (the feeling tone that is an essential element of the student’s situation). The accounts have not been separated in to each of Ashworth’s lifeworld dimensions; rather each of the dimensions has been included in the overall descriptions. As Ashworth asserts, these ‘fragments ...together do not yet constitute a full account of the essence of the lifeworld’ (Ashworth, 2003, p. 147), but enable a ‘detailed description of a given lifeworld’ (Ashworth, 2003, p. 147).

In the following section, four of the interviews are presented in detail in order to capture the distinctiveness of individual meaning-making, by drawing on the data that glowed (MacLure, 2013) across their accounts. These accounts are reflective, to a lesser or greater degree, of the accounts of the other six students interviewed. They are not, however, representative of the broader data since each student has offered an individual description of their own lifeworld. Moreover, the particular accounts given here are amongst the more emotive of the ten students’ interviews, and it is important to note that of the other six, three described their experiences as almost



wholly positive and three as problematic and somewhat negative but not as negative as the accounts offered below. In addition, these students were all self-selecting, and it is possible that students who are having a negative experience may be more likely to come forward than those who are not.

The lifeworlds as described are those of Helen, a 26-year-old Chinese, Anglican Christian woman who is in the fourth year of her PhD; Mohammed, a 41-year-old Muslim, Pakistani man, in his first year of study; Najwa, a 30-year-old, Omani, Muslim woman in the fourth year of her PhD; and Iris, a 32-year-old, Catholic Indian who is in the first year of her PhD.

## Helen's Story

Helen is a 26-year-old Chinese, Anglican Christian woman who is in the fourth year of her PhD; Helen's account of being student is suffused with descriptions of her (failed) attempt to build connections with those around her, her anxieties, her fear of failure and her social and academic disappointments, all of which she blames on her own inadequacies. Her account is permeated with descriptions of her (mostly) problematic relationships with others which she finds difficult to understand. She describes, for example, trying to build a relationship with her doctoral supervisor and being disappointed that she is unable to do so: 'my supervisor always criticise my style, saying 'this is not professional, this is not formal'...I think this is my style, I think I can just put a 'smile face' at the end of the sentence for my supervisor, but he still thinks that is informal. So it was a little bit confusing to me. It feels like a little bit he push me away'. She interprets her social failures as resulting from her own inadequacies – primarily that she is too emotional and too needing of emotional support from others: 'my friends also told me to learn to control my emotions, solve my EQI (emotional intelligence), which is like this long...I am trying to control my emotions so most of the time is being quite calm, although I still feel I am still emotional about things happen'.

Helen's account is infused with descriptions of confusion, feelings of failure and a sense of being rejected by the university. She describes her experiences as a student as a series of feelings of high excitement followed by disappointment – both in herself and those around her: 'at first when I came here I felt very excited...I was excited because I know that this is the best place for me to learn the subject I love, so it was all very exciting. The first day I came, arrived, actually I cried. I phoned my parents, to tell them that I'd arrived safely so don't worry about that, but just two sentences, then I cried'. Being student is, thus, experienced as a series of challenges which undermine her confidence in herself: 'the course leader gave us a presentation on what is plagiarism and about the reference system and then after that I feel very, very stressed, because I have no experience of referencing things, which is a shame, very bad'.



Crying figures strongly in Helen's accounts, and she also describes hiding away from others in order to cope: 'I am very stressed and very occupied. I also tried to isolate myself for this year'. The isolation she experiences is also embodied in the way she describes wanting but not being able to touch people around her, which compounds her sense of disconnectedness from those others: 'and when I am home in China, my mother when I am sad she puts her arm on me like this [demonstrates] and I wish I could feel her, wish someone would just put their arms round me and say it will be ok'. When Helen speaks of the future, she does so in relation to her past, in terms of a desire to return to a happier time, back in China, once she has finished her PhD. The present is spoken about only as something problematic that has to be endured until she can return home.

Helen was brought up as a Christian. However she had not been an active church-goer whilst at home in China, and her religion had not been something that she had needed to draw on; she had rarely felt the need to attend church and had not been a practising Christian: 'just every now and then for festivals, weddings, such; but not regularly'. Helen describes how, at the end of her second year, however, she starts to attend a Christian-based social club and immediately finds a place in which she can feel a sense of fitting in and of being understood: 'so I thought why not. I was sad, unhappy, crying all the time and my friend said go and so I thought perhaps... and so I did and... so they were very friendly... and I felt it was very, very good. I still go for a time, chat, even though I am here for more than four years now... Somehow I think that they may know that we may have some problems settling down here and they may understand us more easily, I think'. She describes how the group sit together to pray which gives her 'a sense of peace, of just being and sitting and calmness'.

Through the society Helen starts attending church which she describes as her 'place of comfort, like of welcome. I can walk through the door, no worries, no doing wrong'. She describes the calm, the quiet and the welcome she receives and how the church is a place of comfort to her. Through the church she makes new friends, ones which she describes as *more accepting* of who she is. She also meets a practising Christian family who she lives with for part of her second year: 'they were very nice to me, they take care of me, they ask about I feel. Sometimes they cook for me and then it was really warm, it was a really warm family. When I was living there I really, really feel good, I really feel very supported, like I have a family here'.

Helen describes the church as being 'everything; saving me, supporting me, making me able to stay and give me happiness...without the church I would have been so sad, crying always'. She describes how the stresses and strains she experiences of being student on campus are removed when she attends church and that at church she is able to be the person she wants to be – open, emotional, valued and supported: for Helen, her church becomes the place where she can simply be – be student, be international and be religious: 'there I can just be me, by Helen'. Through the church, therefore, Helen finds the sense of belonging, of the social connectedness that she so desires.

## Mohammed's Story

Mohammed is a 41-year-old Muslim, Pakistani man in his first year of study. Mohammed joins a local mosque as soon as he arrives in the city, and his account of being student is thus synonymous with his account of being religious. Although he describes the problems he encounters in being a Muslim student, he also draws strength from both his faith and from the people he surrounds himself with at his mosque.

Like Helen, for Mohammed being student is experienced in complex and, frequently, problematic ways. He describes how much of the early part of being student is focussed on his attempts to be religious on campus: 'I am Muslim, I am a Muslim student. I need to be a Muslim when I am a student'. Mohammed describes how he assumed that there would be few problems in being Muslim on campus since 'England is known as a place where there is lots of openness you know, lots of freedom'. It is important to him that he prays regularly, for example, but he finds it very difficult that the prayer room is on the opposite side of the campus to where he attends his lectures: 'so there is a prayer room yes but it is on the other side of the campus and it takes ages to walk there and when I want to pray I just want to pray where I am so I started taking my mat out and just praying'. From the outset, therefore, Mohammed finds the embodiment of his religion problematic as praying instantly causes a level of disquiet amongst his fellow students: 'I felt so uncomfortable that I stopped. It was like I couldn't have done anything more foreign...in the end it was just easier to get my work done earlier and then go to the mosque'. For Mohammed being religious is embodied through the performance of the physical rituals associated with his prayers, but this embodiment appears deeply problematic for those around him.

Descriptions of being *foreign* also occur frequently across Mohammed's accounts. He describes how other students find him difficult to understand because he speaks English with an accent and how, he also suspects, they relate to him differently because he is Muslim. He recounts, for example, a group work activity where the other students end up working together because the English students don't want to work with him: 'so they just stay fixed with each other like a group tight together and even if you wanted to join them you wouldn't because how could you, when they are so tight together?'. He recognises that this is more likely to be because he is an international student than because he is Muslim, but he cannot completely put aside his feelings that other students might find his religion problematic: 'I think they just think Pakistani, Muslim, not like us. Foreign, not like us'.

Mohammed describes how he quickly starts to pray only when he is at the mosque and how he finds that the mosque offers him a place where he does not feel different and where he will feel a sense of belonging: 'that is one of the many things that is good about the mosque; everyone is welcome there and so everyone goes because it is a place where it doesn't matter what country you come from we are all Muslims there. So that means that you know you will find a sense of connection to whoever you meet, whoever is next to you when you pray will be like you'. The

mosque thus becomes a place where Mohammed can simply be himself and experience both being student and being religious unproblematically: 'I understand the practices of the mosque because although it is different to my mosque at home the prayers are the same and the rituals are the same; it is familiar and because it is familiar I feel safe there. I feel comforted'. As with Helen, for Mohammed the experience of being valued by others thus takes place outside of the university. Unlike Helen, however, Mohammed meets other students at the mosque who are studying at the same university and so the friendships he develops can be brought with him on to campus: 'at that mosque there are also lots of students and when we got talking we found out we were all at the same university and so we started to meet together between lectures so that was good because it meant that we were all able to be with people like us'.

Despite the support offered by his religion and his mosque, however, being student could still be problematic for Mohammed: he describes the ways in which he tries to build relationships with other students, in particular so that he can practise his English: 'it is important to me that I meet English people, that is why I am here, so that I can talk English and practice, practice, practice and also so that I can learn more about England'. However, he also describes several different instances where his attempts to integrate are rejected by other students. These incidences are experienced differently by Mohammed than they are by Helen: rather than resulting in a sense of sadness, they create in him a sense of irritation – at the ignorance and unthinkingness of other students. He describes how annoyed he feels when any events involving Muslims are portrayed in the media, in particular how such media accounts are not attentive to the difference between Muslims and Islamists, or between Islamists and terrorists: 'they just think Muslims are terrorists, like we are all grouped together; they don't see that we are peaceful people'. He also describes being bewildered by how little positive information there is on television either about Pakistan or about Muslims: 'why do they not see the good things about us? Why do they always just see us as a problem in the world? Other people, other religions do terrible things but these are not reported in the same way'.

Whilst being student is not as problematic for Mohammed as it is for Helen, he is able to use the mosque to help him develop a sense of belongingness both on and off campus: 'it is good that I can be at home there and then I can be at home here [on campus] because I have the same friends in both places'. For Mohammed, therefore, the mosque affords him the opportunity not just to fit in on campus but to more easily 'be student'.

## Najwa's Story

Najwa is a 30-year-old, Omani, Muslim woman in the fourth year of her PhD. Najwa's account of her experiences is described in almost wholly negative terms, as feelings of overwhelming loneliness and sadness. She struggles to develop any sense of

belonging on campus and uses her mosque for all her social relationships and, more importantly, as a place of comfort.

Like Helen, Najwa's description of being student is described as one of isolation: 'I was very lonely. I couldn't really integrate in the society here. It's different understanding, it's different way of enjoying yourself. I couldn't make friends. Let's say English friends. Or even like.. I felt so alone. I was home all the time with PhD. It's expensive for me to come to the office every day. I have to pay for a bus ticket, and if I'm home I'm sitting home, I'm not seeing, my mobile is not ringing, I'm on my own, literally. So I was... really it was awful. Even my English wasn't really improving. I was improving my writing and reading, because that's all I was doing, but not really speaking'. Also like Helen, Najwa describes crying throughout the first few years of her studies: 'so a few years I was just on my own most of the time, just mostly crying, doing nothing, without any friends... It took me two years to go from my house to this place, or to contact somebody and say 'What time is the class?' And am I really going, and every time saying 'No, no, I'm so tired'. And I'm so depressed so I can't reach that class. I'm not confident, I'm not going to be able to communicate with people, I will not be able to understand the teachers'.

Unlike Helen however Najwa has an excellent relationship with her supervisor. However, he is the only person, as she describes it, who makes her experiences on campus at all positive: 'well he's the best. Maybe he's one person who really helped me to continue, to give me the boost, let's say. All the time, he's trying to motivate 'You're good, you can do it, keep going, that's fine'. He really tried his best to help me, to encourage me, really. He's one person in the university, I really owe him too much. Sorry, I'm very emotional'. Najwa describes her other relationships with staff and students as wrought with tensions, in part because she is an international student but also because, like Mohammed, other students appear to regard her in a negative light simply because she is Muslim: 'like they look at me and I'm you know wearing a headscarf and I think they are thinking 'she is not a person who can make her own decisions'. You know that they think that because I am a Muslim woman I just do what I am told by other people. They don't see me as a former lecturer, a PhD student, an independent woman'.

Najwa describes feeling a strong and ongoing sense of isolation throughout her studies and comments that: 'it would have made change if I had friends at that time, talking to them, because talking, sharing the same experience... you improve your language talking to people, socialising with them, feeling you are a part of this society. You are not just somebody sitting in that house and nobody ask about you, nobody care about you. It would make a difference, I think'. Like the other students, Najwa struggles to develop a sense of belonging on campus, and, like Mohammed, she turns to her mosque to develop social relations and, more importantly, because it is a place where she feels she belongs. She describes the mosque as: 'a place you know where you can just go and not think, not worry, not have to be anything other than yourself, just being there is peace and calm'. She describes how she begins to spend less and less time on campus and more and more time at the mosque. She finds the campus a place where she is constantly made to feel different and excluded: 'I stand out so much in all ways, different, different, different'. She describes

worrying about how people think about her as a Muslim and as a Muslim woman in particular: 'it is how I dress, how I speak, how I think, my beliefs. It all makes me different, stand out as different, I just do not fit in. I don't belong here. I just want to finish, get my doctorate. Go home'.

Being student is therefore hugely problematic for Najwa. Unlike Mohammed, however, she does not meet other students at the mosque so is unable to integrate being student with being religious, and her lifeworld is presented as a series of tensions between these two aspects of her identity.

## **Iris's Story**

Iris is a 32-year-old, Catholic Indian who is in the first year of her PhD. Iris is a single parent who is in the UK with her 11-year-old son. Her account of being student is largely positive although she still struggles with making friends with other students and finds it difficult to fit in on campus. Just as with Helen, therefore, church becomes a place of importance to Iris, a place where she is able to meet other people and develop the sense of belonging which she struggles to do on campus.

For Iris being a student is less problematic in part because, unlike the other students, she studied for a master's degree at the same university, but also because, as a result, she speaks very good English. She recounts her overall sense of satisfaction with the university and, in particular, with her supervisor: 'I would say I'm really happy and satisfied with the work I'm doing, the relationship I have with my immediate supervisors, but apart from that it's just study but no enjoyment'. However she also describes a very positive relationship with one of the other PhD students: 'I've got a friend who has been really, really supporting, and, to be honest, from the time I started my PhD she's been so supportive with the confirmation registration, with the workshops, with everything. I think I found a friend in her that I could actually tell her how I felt. I could talk to her about the times I was scared. I'm the kind of person I get, maybe because of my background, I get a bit nervous to talk in front of people, to actually open up. I could do that with her. She was one of the nice ones, who actually listened and she helped with little suggestions as and when I... even if we didn't have to meet. So I know that she's here'. Nonetheless Iris describes how difficult it is to make friends with the other UK students: 'I don't think the home students really want to mingle that much with the international students, because they know you're international when you start speaking and the way you look and all that, so it's been...'

Like Mohammed, Iris also describes her sense of 'foreignness' and her difference to other students because she is, international, Indian: 'it's just that you are different you know. Skin, hair, clothes, accent...you speak different, say different things, talk about different things, you are just different!' Unlike Mohammed, however, she does not encounter any negativity about her religion; being Catholic is not something that is regarded with any level of concern. Iris talks openly about the importance of the Catholic church in her life and describes how she started to attend

church to develop friendships: 'I went quite regular to church and they had this lunch for those who are celebrating Easter alone. So I told my son, 'Let's just go and maybe meet people', because I thought people are more... you know, they're happy to meet you. I find it easier to mingle when we're out there, as opposed to being in the university. But the first time some of them were really nice and we had a really good time and met a few nice people'. Having been brought up a Catholic and having attended a Catholic school, Iris knows the practices of the church and so finds it easy to integrate and feel an immediate sense of belonging when she is there. Being at church makes her 'feel relaxed, calm, happy...it's just a good place to be; we go together me and my son'. However, being at church is not always unproblematic. Helen describes how: 'there was this particular person who asked me 'What are you doing?' I said 'I'm a student.' The first few minutes he spoke and then he took out his card and gave it to me and said 'You know, if you need a visa, you know, I have contacts in the Home Office if you need to stay back.' And he just gave it to me and walked off'. Even at church Iris is reminded of her differences. For Iris, therefore, being regarded as different happens as much off campus as it does on campus, and this is described as a constant source of irritation and frustration: 'we just want to be the same as the others you know; to fit in'. These feelings of difference however do not result in the same level of sadness as described by Helen: 'we just want to get on with everyone you know. I wanted to be the same as everybody else, all the other students. But it's been good. There's nothing really bad. I've not had any bad experiences. But it's been a bit lonely. It's been a bit sad'. However, these feelings of difference are all (except for the one instance recounted above) minimised when she is at church.

For Iris, being student is, therefore, described as *mostly good*, and she certainly does not experience the same level of sadness and struggle to find happiness as Helen does, nor does she experience her religion as problematic in the ways in which either Mohammed or Najwa do. However, as with Helen, Iris's church is a place of fundamental importance to her. Most importantly, at church Iris can find a sense of happiness and calm away from the stresses of being a student. Moreover everyone at her church has 'being Catholic' in common so that, unlike on campus where her differences make her stand out, at church she is simply the same as everyone else: 'we are just there to pray, to thank God, to spend time thinking about what we need to be thankful for. We are all the same when we are there, all just ordinary people doing ordinary things; just being human'. Attending church therefore offers Iris the chance to find a sense of belonging and connectedness.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The lifeworlds of all four students as described here are, to some extent, difficult. Helen, Mohammed, Najwa and Iris each describe problems with developing a sense of connectedness to those around them which, in turn, shapes how they feel they matter to the university and to others. Being student has significant implications for

each student's social identity and sense of self, and this, in turn, affects their relationship with other staff and students. For Helen this causes feelings of shame; for all three women, it causes a level of sadness, and for Mohammed, it results in a sense of irritation. These emotions affect the ways in which the students are able to simply 'be' students: Helen responds by continually thinking back to the past and Najwa by thinking forward to the future. This lack of connectedness is, of course, in part because they experience being student in the same problematic ways that many other international students do, as evidenced by the substantial body of literature evidencing their experiences at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (see, e.g. Nicolescu's (2013) literature review).

The experiences of international *religious* students remain under-researched however, and the ways in which these students seek to develop a sense of belongingness, including through places of worship, are also largely unknown. This is an important omission since, as Najwa and Mohammed's account evidence, the absence of positive discourses about religion and religious students works directly to make the campus a problem space: these students thus experience being a student more problematically simply *because* they are religious. Moreover, the problematic nature of being a student leaves all four students seeking comfort outside of the university, turning to places of worship in order to develop the friendship groups and social connections that they desire, and attending church or mosque makes it possible for each student to continue 'being student'. As these students' experiences have shown, therefore, religious places are of fundamental importance to many international students, working to develop a sense of connectedness, belonging and fitting in. However, the importance of religion to international students on the UK campus is rarely acknowledged and certainly never valorised (Stevenson, 2014).

This chapter is, of course, based on the accounts of just four students studying at just one university. Their accounts may therefore not be reflective of other religious students. However, as the earlier part of this chapter has evidenced, the UK HE campus is a problem space for many other religious students, and it would be surprising, therefore, if other students did not also find being a student equally as problematic as Helen, Mohammed, Najwa and Iris have done. Researchers also know little about how supervisors perceive religious students or how supervisors understand the tensions experienced by religious students. This is despite the fact that the relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors is recognised as of fundamental importance to their retention and success, as summarised by Jones' (2013) thematic analysis of almost a thousand papers written on issues of doctoral studies between 1971 and 2012. Further research with other students, and supervisors, on other campuses would help to further illuminate how other religious students experience being a student. This would ensure that policy and practice designed help such students to develop a sense of belonging, and fitting in could be built on their actual, and not their supposed, experiences of 'being' international, religious doctoral students on the UK secular campus.



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## Chapter 5

# From ‘Somebody’ to ‘Nobody’: International Doctoral Students’ Perspectives of Home–Host Connectedness

Xuan Thu Dang and Ly Thi Tran

**Abstract** Connectedness is an important but under-researched issue in transnational education. Using part of a project that involves interviews with 30 Vietnamese doctoral students in Australia, this chapter analyses the formation of academic connectedness of international doctoral students through the narratives of two participants. The data was interpreted via the lens of transnational social field theory and positioning theory. We argue that international doctoral students’ connectedness is constructed idiosyncratically, influenced by their positions, identities, and transnational social fields. The results of the study reveal that there is home connection in host and host connection in home. Notably, while studying in the host country, these international doctoral students feel connected but not belonged to the host institutions. They maintain a strong sense of belongingness to home, yet there emerges a sense of disconnectedness with home institutions upon their return.

**Keywords** Connectedness • International doctoral students • Vietnamese international students • Transnational social fields • Positioning theory • Study abroad • Vietnam • Australia

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, there has been a growing trend of students pursuing tertiary education overseas. The number of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions abroad increased from 4.3 million in 2011 (OECD, 2013) to 4.5 million in 2012 (OECD, 2014). There are different groups of international students studying at different levels in the higher education sector, ranging from undergraduate to doctorate (Gomes, 2014). Previous research tends to largely focus on the study experience, adaptation, identity and well-being of international students enrolled in vocational courses and undergraduate and postgraduate by coursework programmes (Cheung & Yue, 2013; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Tran, 2010, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016). Recently, there has been a growing body of literature exploring international doctoral students' experiences (Lee & Green, 2009; McAlpine, 2012; Soong, Tran, & Pham, 2015). Students' lived experiences during their study abroad are complex and diversified. However, how this group is connected with their home and host environments, which is crucial to their well-being and study, is little known. This chapter responds to this dearth in existing scholarly research by drawing on selected interview data from a research project on Vietnamese doctoral students in Australia.

The aim of this chapter is to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic connectedness and the lived experiences of international Vietnamese doctoral students in transnational education spaces in Australia. It first reviews the existing literature regarding international students' mobility and their connectedness. It then moves on to explain the theoretical frameworks used in this study, including the transnational social field theory and positioning theory. Finally, the chapter addresses nuanced connectedness of the Vietnamese international doctoral students with home and host. The interplay of the transnational education context, forms of connectedness and influencing factors is analysed and discussed through the lenses of the theoretical frameworks of transnational social fields and positioning theory.

## Vietnamese International Students and Mobility

The number of Vietnamese students engaged in overseas study has risen markedly over the last decades. This trend stems from two main factors. First, there has been a significant growth of middle class families in Vietnam who can afford the investment in study abroad for their children. Secondly, over the past two decades, the Vietnamese government has implemented strategic policies to encourage both self-funded and scholarship-funded overseas study. In particular, the Vietnamese government's Strategy for Education Development (MOET, 2008) attaches great importance to outbound mobility, seeing it as the vital opportunity for Vietnamese nationals to develop skills, knowledge and attributes at universities in advanced countries including the UK, the USA, Australia as well as in some developed Asian

countries. The promotion of student and staff mobility is regarded as a strategic vehicle to enhance human resource development, to enable Vietnam to catch up with the development levels in the Asia-Pacific region and to ease the pressure on a domestic tertiary sector with an unbalance between supply and demand (T. L. Tran et al., 2014).

According to UNESCO, the number of Vietnamese students studying abroad has grown from 23,334 in 2006 to 53,802 in 2012 (Schulmann, 2014). Approximately 90 per cent of Vietnamese international students are self-financed (Clark, 2014). Australia is the most popular international study destination for Vietnamese students followed by the USA and then China. In 2015, there were 29,575 Vietnamese students enrolled in Australian education (AEI, 2016). Vietnam is the third providing country for Australia, ranking behind China and India. Approximately 27 per cent of Vietnamese international graduate migrate to the host country or another country (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Vietnamese students are engaged in study-abroad programs across different educational levels from schooling to doctorate. In recent years, there appears to be a growth in the number of Vietnamese students undertaking a PhD overseas. According to Tran et al. (2014), the Vietnamese government's main initiative to promote staff and students' overseas study includes the project *Training scientific and technical cadres in overseas institutions with the state budget*, often referred to as *Project 322* and its recent replacement known as *Project 911*. The total funding is 14,000 billion Vietnamese dong (equivalent to about 865,500,000 Australian dollars), of which 64 per cent is for overseas study, 14 per cent for sandwich program, 20 per cent for in-country study and 2 per cent for resources (H. Nguyen, 8 February, 2012). Project 911 aims to fund 10,000 PhD candidates for their study at overseas institutions. In addition to the government and provincial scholarships, a significant number of Vietnamese PhD students enrolled in overseas institutions are funded via scholarship programs such as Fulbright, the Vietnam Education Foundation (US), AAS (Australian Award Scholarships), Endeavour (Australia), Eiffel (France), Erasmus Mundus (Europe), the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (H. Pham, 18 December, 2011).

## International Students and Connectedness

Research has provided compelling evidence about the vital role of international students' connectedness with people, places and communities in both home and host countries to their psychological well-being and success (Cheung & Yue, 2013; Marginson et al., 2010; L. Pham & Tran, 2015; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; T. L. Tran & Pham, 2015; Wiers-Jenssen, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Therefore, understanding the nature and forms of international students' connectedness is essential for host institutions to develop effective strategies to cater for international students. In addition, it is also fundamental for home countries to understand the dimensions of connectedness of their citizens studying overseas and maintain links with them to protect

their welfare and to optimise their potential contributions. Overseas students constitute an important resource which would benefit the country's development.

A plethora of the literature has investigated international students' intercultural connectedness with peers, host institutions and communities (Arkoudis, Baik, Marginson, & Cassidy, 2012; Cotton, George, & Joyner, 2013; Leask, 2009). However this stream of research concentrates mainly on undergraduate and Masters students, and there is a shortage in the scholarly literature regarding academic and social (dis)connectedness of international doctoral students. This chapter responds to this gap in the literature by providing insights into the interlocking connectedness with home and host through the lived experiences of two Vietnamese international doctoral students.

To facilitate the analysis of different forms of connectedness of doctoral students in this research, we draw on the theoretical frameworks of the transnational social fields and the positioning theory.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### *Transnational Social Fields*

In this chapter, the notion of transnational social field is employed to shed light on our understanding of the dynamic, fluid and evolving relationships and connectedness that international doctoral students establish and maintain throughout their cross-border education. This is useful for our research because it allows us to see mobility as the condition to mediate social spaces, geographical locales and personal identities. The concept of transnational social field indicates how "a constant flow of ideas and practices is embedded within relationships" (Gargano, 2009, p. 331). Such relations are neither fixed nor static but evolving and closely shaped by the condition of mobility and subjectivity of mobile individuals.

Fouron and Schiller (2001) see a transnational social field as "an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extend across the borders of two or more nation-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations" (p. 544). This concept therefore encompasses both the home and host contexts, both existing and emerging relationships and both past and new forms of connectivity that arise as a result of students' border crossings. Within the transnational social fields, international doctoral students' connectedness is maintained, established and transformed at the intersections of the external contexts, their interactions as well as various individual factors. Therefore factors such as cultural flows and processes, physical locales and individual agency play a key role in shaping international doctoral students' connectedness.

Gargano (2009) argues that by reconstructing international students as sojourners operating and negotiating the transnational social fields, interrelated factors such

as their context of origin, their current spaces in the host country and their perceived terrains of possibility are central to illuminating our understanding of their border-crossing experiences (ibid, p. 341). Therefore, within the transnational social fields, the nature and forms of international students' connectedness also reflect their past and present lived realities as well as their future aspirations and vision. Since international students operate in transnational social spaces and interact with people from a range of countries, their evolving networks and associations are likely to extend beyond the geographical terrain of their home and host countries. This research thus draws on the concept of the transnational social field to interpret the dynamic and evolving forms of Vietnamese international doctoral students' connectedness and the multiple meanings associated with their connectivity with physical locales, people and communities. The agency and identity of international students can be explained in more depth when it is combined with the major constructs of the positioning theory.

### *Positioning Theory*

Positioning theory has been used in this research to interpret the nature and manners of Vietnamese international doctoral students' connectedness with people, places and communities during their sojourn. According to Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, and Sabat (2009), positioning theory "is concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realised in the ways that people act towards others" (p. 5). Positioning theory holds that life unfolds as a narrative in which multiple interconnected episodes are embedded (Harré et al., 2009). The theory is concerned with the discursive constructions of individual storylines and concepts through which people's actions represent as social acts and can be made intelligible (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 16). Thus positioning theory provides a conceptual framework that helps to illuminate the storylines of individual PhD students with regard to their interaction with the world around them.

In line of positioning theory, there are possibilities of individual's multiple and contradictory interpretations and identities that emerge from multiple discursive practices. It is possible for the shifts in positioning to occur as the narrative unfolds and as people interact with artefacts within discursive practices (Davies & Harré, 1999). Such changes can lead to possible repositioning. Winslade (2003) argues that the possibility of contradiction in discursive positioning is necessary for individuals to exercise agency and make changes. This perspective in positioning theory is important for our research because it illuminates our interpretation of how international doctoral students may negotiate and form different types of connectivity and represent themselves differently through these emerging relationships as a result of their border crossings. How international students position themselves in relation to their context of origin, the host context and 'space of possibles' (Marginson, 2014) in the future and perceive their sense of belonging or unbelonging allows for a closer examination of their connectedness.

## The Research

The chapter reports the results of the analysis of in-depth interviews with two Vietnamese international doctoral students: Huong Quynh and Cam Tu (pseudonyms of participants). This is part of a bigger project involving 30 Vietnamese doctoral students in Australia, aiming to investigate their professional identity (re)formation in the transnational education context.

These two participants are chosen because they represent two interesting cases: one is still studying in the host country, while the other has returned to the home country; before arrival in Australia, one was a classroom teacher, whereas the other was a departmental dean. Specifically, at the time of this research, Huong Quynh was in the final stage of her PhD study at a prestigious university in Melbourne. Before arrival in Australia, she was an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teacher at a college in the central part of Vietnam. She was passionate about teaching English to Vietnamese learners. During the sojourn in Australia, she was joined by her husband and her child, leaving their extended families back in Vietnam. It is noted that her husband means a lot to his parents because he is the only son who, according to the Vietnamese culture, has the duty to take good care of his parents when they get old.

Before conducting her PhD study in Australia, Cam Tu started her teaching career as an EFL teacher in Vietnam back in 1993. Given her extensive experience and leadership capacity, Cam Tu was promoted to the position of departmental dean at an innovative university in the North of Vietnam. She had about 70 staff below her. In 2010, she decided to leave for Australia to enhance her research capacity at a well-known university in Sydney. Her son came with her and continued his secondary education there, while her husband was still living and working in Vietnam. After the completion of PhD study in 2014, she returned to Vietnam and has been working at her home university since.

In the following discussion, we will analyse the connectedness of these two Vietnamese doctoral students in light of the transnational social fields and positioning theories.

### *Arrival in Australia and Identity Change*

Transnational education involves our Vietnamese doctoral students' border crossings which often lead to a change in their professional identity. Departing their country of origin means leaving their home institutions, teaching position and even power. For Cam Tu, the home context is associated with her high position status as a departmental dean, high responsibility and being known by many others. Yet, when she first arrived in Australia, she knew no one and was known by nobody. Hence, the new geographical locale made her feel powerless and lonely at first, as described in the following excerpt:

I found it hard at the beginning. I feel like I became **Miss Nobody** in Australia while in Vietnam whenever I entered the university gate, I could hear my students saying hello and someone knows me, I see my colleagues like you who greet me and welcome me, but when I was in Australia I felt very lonely, like **nobody knows me** and **I know nobody**, and the only person who knows me is my supervisor. Even though I have to say that the Australians are very nice and friendly, but to be honest, I don't feel like I am a member there in Australia at the very beginning. (Cam Tu)

For Huong Quynh, a classroom teacher in Vietnam and holding no high position, the transition seems smoother. Transnational education means better learning opportunities for her. Having a clear purpose, right from the beginning of the doctoral study journey, she positioned herself as a higher-degree research student in Australia rather than a Vietnamese teacher going back to training in the host context. She recalled:

... very quickly when I arrived here and I went to see my supervisor and see other people at my Centre, from that very moment then I see myself as a student. (Huong Quynh)

It is noted that the initial feelings of loss and loneliness, if any, seem to fade quickly when international students are increasingly immersed into the academic spaces in the host country. The next section will provide in-depth analysis of their academic connectedness with the host and the interplay between their existing identity and new identity formation in the new physical locales.

### *Academic Connectedness with Host*

During the doctoral study sojourn at the host institutions, these two Vietnamese PhD students find themselves members of an educational community of which academic supervisors and peer research students are the key stakeholders.

#### **Connectedness with Academic Supervisors**

Our two doctoral students have been assigned two supervisors for professional guidance throughout the research journey and the interactions with supervisors can be the first form of academic connectedness. The lived experience in working with supervisors may be described as hard at the beginning, increased mutual understanding in the middle and fruitful at the end.

It may not be easy for Vietnamese doctoral students to work with supervisors initially because of possible differences in the ways of thinking and doing research. The Vietnamese student participants seem to live in two different worlds (of home and host) with different expectations. On the one hand, the Australian academic culture is perceived as giving professional advice rather than imposing ideas and promoting individual agency rather than telling students exactly what to do. Great importance is attached to critical thinking skills and individual agency which help train our students to become independent researchers.

Well, I think there's a stark difference. We are in two different worlds to be honest. The biggest difference is that the supervising method in Australia is at least I can say in my personal case, I cannot generalise other cases, that in my case the supervising method that I get exposed to is very relaxing method, like giving student a lot of freedom. I think one of the reasons why they give us a lot of freedom is because they know that we are surrounded by a lot of good materials, online materials, books, everything. So there are a lot of materials surrounding us, so they give us a lot of freedom to read and to choose what we want to choose, provided that when we make the decision we have to justify the decision. (Cam Tu)

On the other hand, these students also bring to Australia their Vietnamese academic culture in which supervisors are expected to be an expert of knowledge and are often highly respected; students get used to being told what to do rather than taking part in discussion with supervisors. Consequently, students are passive and lack critical analysis. The excerpt below is an illustration:

However in Vietnam, the supervising method is different. The students here in Vietnam were not surrounded by good environment in terms of resources. They lacked resources. And even when they have resources they didn't know how to make use of resources because they get used to the passive way of learning. They always, you know, wait for the lecturers or the supervisors to tell them what to learn, what to read, what topic to do the research. And when they come up with any idea, they don't feel confident. They always want to get the confirmation from the teachers and the students always expect the supervisors to know everything. (Cam Tu)

The juxtaposition of the home–host academic cultures can explain why Vietnamese international students find it hard to work with Australian supervisors at first. In light of the positioning theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999), we can argue that these participants positioned themselves as Vietnamese students, which shaped their behaviour: expecting their supervisors to tell them what to do, lacking agency and avoiding argument with supervisors. This is shown in Huong Quynh's narrative:

So I think that the first two years or before the data analysis, so the first two and a half or three years, then I think that I couldn't really make a strong case to argue with my supervisor. Even though I considered it later on and followed up, but not straight away. (Huong Quynh)

The Vietnamese cultural norm which is embedded in efforts to maintain harmony in communication and avoidance of disagreement or questioning in approach to knowledge (K. Nguyen, 1989; N. T. Tran, 1999) appears to hinder these students from expressing their opinions openly during discussions with supervisors. They try to be polite in the Vietnamese way by seeming to agree with supervisors, but deep inside their minds, they still keep their own views and may not necessarily follow supervisors' advice:

And I think that is part of Asian culture as well. I try to listen to them, but it does not necessarily mean that I will follow them. So whatever they say, if I cannot find a strong argument against, then I just say 'Yes'. Then later on, I can consider and I just do it my way. (Huong Quynh)



The interview excerpts also reveal that supervisors seem to position these Vietnamese doctoral students in the academic contexts of the host culture which highly appreciates individual agency, critical analysis and problem solving. They keep sending out the message that it is the students who are in charge of their study and make the final decision:

They keep telling me that **'by the end of the day, it's your thesis'** ... they just offer me advice and what they think would be best for me. Whether or not to take it is up to me. So they make it very clear. (Huong Quynh)

In the immediate physical locales, new academic context and other-positioning of supervisors, our Vietnamese students have to reposition themselves to fit in the Australian academic culture. As time goes by, they realise that to be academically successful and to gain the PhD degree, they need to change towards being more proactive and exercise more agency. Huong Quynh reveals:

I think that 'Oh, if they are willing to help me, they should have told me'. But I learned that the expectation is **'if you want me to help you, you have to ask me'**. So, that's the different way of thinking ... I think that maybe the Asian and Western way. (Huong Quynh)

It can be argued that the way of thinking of these Vietnamese international doctoral students is not fixed but has shifted in the context of educational border crossings. It is the transnational spaces that create the necessity for these PhD students to adapt their mindset; and it is the host supervisors who guide international students to integrate into the academic context in the host country. Huong Quynh further explains:

The most important thing that I learned is to be proactive in asking questions because there are kind of expectations of me that... My expectation was that 'Ok, the supervisor should show me this, should have told me this' but actually I talked to them later on and also because I interviewed academics at the university and I learned that you need to be proactive. It's part of the culture here in Australia that **you have to be a proactive. Support is there, but you need to ask for that.** (Huong Quynh)

In short, the academic connectedness with supervisors positively transforms the two Vietnamese doctoral students' way of thinking from being passive to being proactive. Moreover, the transnational spaces create the opportunity for Vietnamese doctoral students to represent and reposition their identities. Apart from supervisors, our two students are also a member of another community: peer research students.

### Connectedness with Peer Research Students

Physical locales facilitate connections of Vietnamese doctoral students with other research students studying at the same institutions in the host country. Upon arrival, these two doctoral students are put in a shared study space which is conducive for peer connections, relations and interactions. In a multicultural society such as Australia, international students often find their peers coming from all over the world, having diverse backgrounds, different expertise, and being at different stages of their PhD study:

I think first of all I have to acknowledge the great effort by the university [name of the university in Australia] in creating such a space as I mention before, accommodating as many as 100 PhD students studying at the same time, but of course different PhD students were at different stages. Some were in the first year, some in the second year, third year, fourth year. The good thing is that when I started, I saw some people going to graduate very soon in a few months. I was someone who was in the process of getting the first annual revision or in getting the proposal. I saw someone in the second year, in the middle of data collection so I think it's very good opportunity for me to network with all those people in my university. And all the 100 people are not education students. ... So it's very diversified in terms of research areas so it's really good. I can benefit from such kind of network. I can learn from other people's way of thinking. I do not feel isolated at all. (Cam Tu)

Cam Tu further reveals that the shared study space makes it easier for them to get connected with others, especially with Vietnamese and other Asian students because of numerous similarities:

Another good thing I appreciate is the way they arrange my seating in the study space because they knew that I was Vietnamese, they tried to put me next to other Vietnamese or to other Asian people so I was surrounded by the people who think like me, it's easy for me to make friends with. But for other European, African and Australian people, they just a few meters away, so if I am really keen on making friends with them, they are there for me to make friends. But if I feel more comfortable with my Asian friends, they are just in front of me. So I think the thing that impressed me the most during my PhD study is the study space. (Cam Tu)

Huong Quynh joined a Vietnam reading group where she and her peers met regularly and took part in discussions on important issues in higher education. The expertise and research skills of different group members were brought into full play. As a result, a book on higher education reform in Vietnam was published.

We got a Vietnam reading group and it went on for my first two years in Australia. We met monthly and discussed issues related to higher education in Vietnam. And our joint product was the book on reforming higher education in Vietnam. (Huong Quynh)

While supervisors and peer research students are the two main players in the academic community in the host institutions, it is possibly worth mentioning another emerging network of international researchers and research students beyond the boundary of the host institution and even the host country.

### **Connectedness with External Academic Communities**

Peer research students are important players in international students' academic community. When reviewing the PhD journey, Cam Tu realised that there is another community which has been neglected: academics, researchers and research students beyond the boundary of the host institutions. They could be based in other states in Australia or even in other countries. Some explanations could be time constraints and heavy research study load. However, their vision for the future is to make full use of this worldwide network. Below is the illustration of Cam Tu:

To be honest, most of the time I get more communication with my supervisors and other 99 PhD students surrounding me and I think it's already enough and sometimes you know I do not have time to get on with online network and probably because my thesis is too big so I have to work very hard, like everyday so I didn't have time to access all those things. But now if I had the chance to re-do my PhD, maybe that's one thing I should do because that's the gap. (Cam Tu)

The connectedness with this global community can be established through the participation in online forums and academic websites such as <http://www.researchgate.net/> and <http://www.academia.org/>. Members can do many things: creating their own profiles, uploading their scholarly papers, following each other, exchanging views, giving comments on papers and seeking advice. Moreover, some useful statistics are available regarding how many viewers read and cite their papers and which country viewers are from. Untapped potential of this academic networking should be further studied.

### Feeling Connected But Not Belonging to Host

PhD study is a transient sojourn spreading over 3 or 4 years, which is long enough for our two transnational students to feel attached to the host institutions. As Huong Quynh depicted in the following excerpt, she felt well connected to the host institution, yet at the same time she 'knew' that she did not belong here:

Most of the time I feel that I'm part of [name of the host university in Australia] and **I become increasingly attached to that but I know that I'm not part of that.** (Huong Quynh)

There seemed to be a mismatch in the perceptions of self-positioning on the part of the transnational students and other-positioning on the part of the host institutions. Huong Quynh positioned herself as a PhD student who should be treated like an early career academic/researcher. This could mean support of the host institution and supervisors to help further develop her research profile with publications and involve her in research projects. However, in her view, the host institution had other-positioning for her: just helping her to complete the PhD study and wanting her to go back to the country of origin.

Because I think that at my Centre, there's a kind of politics going on that international students are international students. And we are treated strictly as students. I would like to **emphasize** that, as students, not as like we would imagine that in a lot of systems, they could see PhD students as **early career academics** or something. So I feel that the training that I got was like Ok, to have you, of course, train you to be a researcher, an independent researcher, but with the expectation that you're going home. So, because of that feeling, **I don't feel that I'm part of the host university**, I'm just a sojourner, you know, like **I'm just there temporarily. I'm not part of them** ... Yes, they would like [us] to come here, trained to be researchers by completing us. And that's it, that's the end of training. I do not see a nurturing approach when they help us develop further. So say 'Ok, this is what we do to help you during these years', but then what's next is totally my own responsibility... So,

my expectation was, you know, to have this kind of support to help me build up my profile and everything but I think that the supervisors' interest, maybe the politics of the Centre is to complete us, to have the PhD degree rather than to help us advance in our career later on. (Huong Quynh)

This is an interesting finding. On the one hand, Vietnamese transnational students feel connected with the host campus community; thanks to the close relations and interactions with the immediate context. On the other hand, they experience the feeling of not belonging to host in a sense that they do not receive sufficient support from host institutions to advance their long-term research career. Therefore, it can be said that connectedness and unbelongingness can coexist.

While being in the host country, the two PhD students also maintain their academic connectedness with home.

## *Academic Connectedness with Home*

### **Connectedness with Colleagues**

Before arrival in the host country for doctoral study, our Vietnamese PhD students worked as English-as-foreign-language (EFL) teachers in tertiary institutions in their home country for years. As a result, they have a large network of colleagues in Vietnam, and this community does not disappear immediately because of our students' educational border crossings. The geographical locales – being in the host country – do not create the out-of-sight, out-of-mind way of thinking. Huong Quynh revealed that they could be distant in geography but still close in heart:

I never feel that the distance could be as much as it is geographically, so I think that maybe we are close in heart, so I don't see that geographical difference. (Huong Quynh)

Although our Vietnamese doctoral students and their home colleagues are not co-located, they still keep in touch. Topics of their talk surround updates at home institutions and teaching-related issues. Their common interests in academic issues bond them together:

So mostly, we would update what's happening and... just share how it is going and... I can not share a lot of details about that. If I come across some of the papers about English language teaching, then I just send them but mostly in Vietnam, especially now with the Project 2020, then I think they get even more training than us here. (Huong Quynh)

More importantly, despite being in different physical locales, our transnational students feel that they are part of the academic network in their home country. Their talks and discussions with home colleagues help reveal their root identity: they are Vietnamese EFL teachers and still belong to the academic community in the home institutions:

When I am talking to them, I'm one of their colleagues, I'm part of the College, so still know what's happening: OK, the end of semester is coming; the quality assurance, what's

happening, and these kinds of training are coming up, the end-of-year party, you know. So **I still feel I'm a part of it.** (Huong Quynh)

It is noted that the Vietnamese doctoral students in our study have multiple identities during their PhD study in Australia. When they interact with their supervisors and peer research students, they are PhD students of the host institutions. When they communicate to their colleagues in Vietnam, their identity changes to Vietnamese EFL teachers. The switch in their identity depends on who they talk to rather than the immediate context.

### **Belonging to But Somehow Disconnected with Home Institutions**

As analysed above, during the doctoral study in the host country, far away from home, our Vietnamese international students still position themselves as a member of their home institutions. They maintain a strong sense of belonging to the home campus community. This could be illustrated by their using the name of their home institution in their publications as in the case of Huong Quynh:

I still have a very close connection to the university in [name of the home city] and whatever I am doing like I am thinking about publications for example, then **I would love to use the name of my College in Vietnam as the workplace for myself.** (Huong Quynh)

Their belongingness to their home institutions has been constructed by their number of teaching years in Vietnam which tends to be much longer than the duration of their PhD study in Australia. This forms their root identity, which may not be affected by the doctoral study sojourn. Therefore, while being abroad, the geographical distance does not hinder their connectedness with home institutions, yet it increases their need to stay connected.

During the PhD sojourn in Australia, one of the common desires of transnational students is to go back to make contributions to the home institutions and to Vietnam broadly. Paradoxically, when they actually return home either for data collection or after completing their doctoral study, they wish to go back to the host country; they miss the research environment in the host context. Cam Tu shares her thoughts:

To be honest, I am not the type of person who is interested in status or position. So that's something I didn't think much. I just want to do what I want to do. I just want to do research, and **when I was a student in Australia, I wanted to come back to Vietnam,** to be back to Vietnam to reintegrate into my own university and everything. **Once I am back here, to be honest, I wanted to be back to Australia** [laugh]. (Cam Tu)

Their connection to home is not the same any more. There have been changes since they left for Australia, for instance, new staff who they do not know and who do not know them. Huong Quynh told her story:

... when I returned home for a visit after my three years here in Australia, and I visited my colleagues at my College for the end-of-year party and I can feel that **a lot of things have changed since I left.** The students that I used to teach were no longer there. And there're a lot of young lecturers who I don't know and who don't know me either. So, not until I was

physically back to Vietnam, to my home town, to my College, did I feel that ‘**Ok, I’m a bit too far away from them**’. (Huong Quynh)

Perhaps, the most important change comes from our homecoming student. Her professional identity and research interests have become different from those before the PhD study. Huong Quynh said:

**I am the one who is out of touch** because I move from language education to higher education these days. I am not strictly related to English language teaching anymore. (Huong Quynh)

Specifically, before the border crossings, our doctoral students positioned themselves as EFL teachers who transmitted knowledge to their students. Cam Tu described her identity before the PhD study below:

My roles, of course, as a teacher to transfer the knowledge to my students, they can be my Bachelor students or Master students. And at that time to be honest I was not very good at searching skill, searching tools. Most of the time I just transferred the knowledge to students rather than using the internet to help the students self study or do their own research. (Cam Tu)

Given the influence of doctoral study in Australia, our homecoming doctoral students view themselves as both EFL teachers and early career researchers who want to continue developing their research profile. When coming back home, our returnee students experience another change in their identity: turning from a PhD student (in the host country) to a teacher (in the home country). The contexts change from research to teaching. Working conditions at home institutions are characterised by heavy teaching load, lack of databases and lack of research culture. Consequently, our returnees feel lonely and lost right in the heart of their home institutions.

... to be honest, I feel like I get more and more support when I was in Australia than here. Here I feel more lonely. I lack the researchers surrounding me to encourage me to do more research. And I feel like I am discouraged to do research here because of many reasons. (Cam Tu)

## Conclusions

The study reported in this chapter makes a substantial theoretical contribution to the area of transnational education by making the first attempt, to the best of our knowledge, to combine the theories of transnational social fields and positioning in order to provide nuanced understanding of different aspects of connectedness of international doctoral students. Connectedness is the actual desire of international doctoral students in the transnational education setting. Two substantial findings have emerged from this research. First, these Vietnamese doctoral students feel academically connected with host institutions, yet the sense of belonging is still absent.

Second, they feel a sense of belonging but somehow disconnected with their home institutions upon their return from overseas study mainly due to internal changes in the mindsets of homecoming students.

The research sheds light on the interlocking home–host relations of Vietnamese international doctoral students in the interplay with the physical locales, sociocultural values and individual agency. Interestingly, Vietnamese doctoral students' connectedness with home and host is intertwined. In other words, connections with home exist during the sojourn abroad and connectedness with host still maintains upon students' returning home.

The findings from this research indicate that geographical distance does not appear to be a barrier to their connections with their home institutions. The international doctoral students participating in this research have a strong sense of connectedness and belongingness with home due to the values of their home culture attaching great importance to the context of origin.

The sojourn in the host institutions establishes international doctoral students' connectedness with the host, which evolves to a strong connection, but not belongingness, and still maintains beyond the completion of doctoral programmes. The essential link with host is through their academic supervisors and peer research students.

The research shows that Vietnamese transnational doctoral students are active in drawing on available resources to stay connected, and establish ties with people, places and communities across borders. This includes both organic and strategic connectivity with home and host. Not only their past and their present but importantly their vision about the future 'space of possibles' (Marginson, 2014) are at play in shaping the nature and forms of their connectedness.

The home belonging, their root identity, gives Vietnamese doctoral students the strength to complete the research journey in the host country, whereas the host connections create the vision of enhanced research capacity for our doctoral students. Therefore, the two students were proactively constructing their home–host connectedness in the transnational setting.

The results of the study potentially help both home and host institutions to provide better services to international doctoral students by unpacking their way of thinking, their cultural values, emotional well-being and challenges during their sojourn. Specifically, home institutions may be better aware of how to make full use of the research capacity brought back by our returnee students.

The research project involves 30 international Vietnamese doctoral students, but this chapter focuses mainly on the narratives of two students as they provide compelling accounts of the nature, manners and forms of connectedness with home and host. Even though the findings addressed in this chapter should not be generalised, the discussion provides valuable insights into the key aspects of connectedness and belongingness of international doctoral students.

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## Chapter 6

# Disconnections with the Host Nation and the Significance of International Student Communities: A Case Study of Asian International Students in Australia and Singapore

Catherine Gomes

**Abstract** In this chapter, I look at Asian international students in Australia and Singapore and their disconnectedness with local students. Here I suggest that these students create parallel societies for themselves in the host nation based on their identities as international students or as diasporic nationals. These parallel societies while impermanent exist for the benefit and support of their members throughout their transience. Through extensive interviews with 106 international students from Asia across established international education hub in Australia and emerging international student destination in Singapore, my research reveals that these students hold aspirations for cosmopolitan mobility with ambitions to live and work in the big cities of Europe, North America and Asia with a view to return to the home nation eventually or possibly in the future. Moreover my study reveals that the respondents' cosmopolitan mobility is encouraged by their lived experiences in Australia and Singapore. Here I highlight their ability to form friendship networks with fellow international students from their home nation and from elsewhere in Asia. This they do, for a range of reasons, in lieu of friendships with locals. I also refer to their capacity to find a sense of belonging to their home nation through rapid developments in communication and media technologies.

**Keywords** Parallel societies • Identities • Social/friendship networks • Belonging • Media • Communication

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## Introduction

Research in the area of international students often highlights the significance of social networks for international students. The contribution of friendship to the happiness, well-being, acculturation and social stability of international students is well acknowledged by researchers (Gomes & Alzougool, 2013; Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ying, 2002). Research has also demonstrated a relationship between well-being (e.g. decreased homesickness, social connectedness, and contentment and satisfaction with their overseas study) and having more host country friends. Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune (2011), for instance, analysed the relationships between social networks and connectedness, homesickness and satisfaction levels of international students and explored these relationships through a social network lens by examining friendship network ratios, strength and variability of the three friendship groups of 86 international students in the University of Hawaii. Their research found that international students with a higher ratio of individuals from the host country in their network claimed to be more satisfied and content and felt less homesick. Furthermore, respondents who reported more friendship variability with host country individuals described themselves as more satisfied, more content and more socially connected. This correlates with Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, and Ramia's (2008) earlier Australian study that argued for more social interactions between international students with people from outside the home nation as a more successful way of curbing loneliness. Here Sawir and her colleagues suggested that international students who formed friendships with nationals from the home nation were more lonely than those who broadened their social networks to include people from outside their homeland. Unsurprisingly these and other researchers (e.g. Arkoudis et al., 2010) advocate that one way of alleviating loneliness and for leading a more balanced life in transience is for international students to increase their interactions with local students. While the term 'transience' has often been associated with itinerant and guest workers, it is now more broadly used to refer to mobile individuals and groups such as international students and white-collar professionals who voluntarily undertake circular and/or temporary transnational migration.

Clearly social networks are significant for international students when it comes to having a healthy and positive international student experience in their host nation and for integration into the host society. However the reality is that international students in many studies inform us that international student networks are strongly made up of other international students (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kashima & Pillai, 2011). The literature – which often features Asian subjects due to the high number of students from this region studying overseas – also notes that international students form friendships with individuals from their own country, from other countries and from the host country with studies showing that international students often have more friends from their home country as compared to local friends. In other words, international students' friends are conationals studying in the same host country. Pedro and DeWind (2004), for example, found that international

students in the USA formed friendships primarily with other foreigners citing differences between American and foreign experiences as the reason for their lack of integration. The literature thus highlights two salient points: that international students form friendships with fellow international students and that these students are largely from the home nation.

It is against this background that I embarked on a study looking into the reasons why international students make friends primarily with other international students and not with domestic students. Here I chose to look at international students in Australia with each other and in Singapore primarily because Australia is a leading billion dollar international education hub while Singapore is making inroads into the lucrative international education market.<sup>1</sup>

Australia and Singapore are important nations in the Asia-Pacific region, with strong trade links and social connections. The close proximity between both countries results in Singaporeans and Australians visiting, working, studying or permanently living in either host nation. Both are international education exporters with their respective education industries attracting regional interest. Australia and Singapore have some similarities in their historical and contemporary migration trends as former British colonies and migrant nations. Both struggle to some extent to define their multicultural identities, particularly in relation to increasing migration trends from the Asian region and beyond. Yet there are significant differences. Australia has been cautious about its intake of migrants in terms of sustainability, while Singapore has been more open in its bid to increase its pool of skilled workers. Singapore's aim is to increase its population to 6.9 million people by 2030, thus making the island-state one of the most densely populated cities in the world.

While my research on the social networks of Asian international students in Australia and Singapore reveals similar trends to previous studies – that their social networks are exclusively made up of fellow international students mostly from the home nation and then followed by those from the same region and then elsewhere – I also found that there are credible and organic reasons as to why this happened. Respondents, for instance, felt that local students did not want to be friends with them for a variety of reasons such as racism (particularly in Australia). At the same time, they also felt a sense of disconnect with the host nations despite the strong Asian culture and societal presence in both countries. Instead, respondents stated that they were able to connect more with fellow international students who may not be conationals primarily because of their experience as (Asian) international

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010–2011, education services brought in AUD\$16.3 billion through full-fee-paying international students. By the end of 2013, there were 525,177 international students (including exchange students) enrolled in education institutions throughout Australia (Department of Education, Australia, 2014). In the early 2000s, the Singapore government began to imagine itself as a global education hub host to diverse public and private institutions of higher learning from local and foreign education providers attracting international students from the region and elsewhere. This was done through the Global Schoolhouse initiative which witnessed diverse institutions and programmes establishing themselves in the nation-state in 2002 followed by the launch of the Singapore Education brand in 2003 which was meant to promote Singapore as a 'premier education hub' with the aim of attracting international students (Dessoff, 2012, p. 19).

students. Moreover the experience of being an international student from Asia allowed respondents to feel a sense of belonging and community in their respective host nations while creating a network for future professional connections.

This chapter uses the concept of self-perceived identities in transience as a theoretical framework. I first developed this concept based on continuing empirical work on transient migrants (international students, exchange students, white-collar workers and working holiday makers) in Australia and Singapore (Gomes, 2016 in press). Here I suggest that transient migrants develop complex and creative strategies which are rooted in their self-perceived identities in order to navigate their temporary existence in the host country. These identities may then be categorised as existing (e.g. nationality), recent (e.g. new-found religion), temporary (e.g. international student) and developing (e.g. perception of oneself as a global citizen). Furthermore, while these self-perceived identities may be interconnected, recent identities may still be developing, while temporary identities contribute to developing ones (e.g. international student and working holiday identities are part of a developing global citizen identity). Yet whatever these self-perceived identities are, they allow transient migrants to occupy social and cultural spaces exclusively occupied by fellow transient migrants and thus steer their future endeavours. This concept of self-perceived identities in transience also leads to transient migrants forming parallel societies which allow them to create a sense of belonging *in* the host nation yet not *to* the host nation. This is due to disconnections with the local society and culture. Here transient migrants create spaces for themselves in the host nation from *their* perspective and so experience what the host nation has to offer on *their* terms.

With this concept in mind, I thus suggest that Asian international students feel a strong sense of disconnect with the host nation for reasons related to their transience (or temporary migration) despite ethnic similarities with the citizenry. They are instead drawn to fellow international students – almost always from their home nation and increasingly from the region – with whom they intrinsically form communities with as part of their strategy living in (current and future) transience.

## Methodology

Between 2013 and 2014, I interviewed 46 international students from Asia in Australia and 60 international students from Asia in Singapore on their social networks, their attitudes towards the host nation and their media and communication use as part of a broader project examining transient migration in these two countries. Respondents were recruited through advertising in international student society groups and hostels, through canvassing and through the snowball effect where respondents informed their friends of the project or brought them along for scheduled interviews with the researchers. The advertisements requested for respondents over the age of 18 and who had lived in Australia/Singapore for a minimum of 3

**Table 6.1** Demographic information on respondents

	Australia ( <i>n</i> = 46)	Singapore ( <i>n</i> = 60)
Gender	M (18)	M (31)
	F (28)	F (29)
Age range	19–24 years (27)	19–24 years (47)
	25–29 years (15)	25–29 years (10)
	30 years and more (4)	30 years and more (3)
Education pursuit	Diploma and advanced diploma (8)	
	Bachelor's degree (18)	Bachelor's degree (46)
	Master's degree and higher (20)	Master's degree and higher (14)
Home country	Bangladesh (2)	China (16)
	China (8)	India (10)
	India (6)	Indonesia (19)
	Indonesia (3)	South Korea (2)
	Japan (1)	Malaysia (8)
	South Korea (4)	Philippines (1)
	Malaysia (5)	Vietnam (4)
	Pakistan (3)	
	Singapore (8)	
Vietnam (6)		
Length of stay in host country at time of interview	3 months (3)	3 months (5)
	3.1–6 months (5)	3.1–6 months (0)
	6.1 months to 1 year (7)	6.1 months to 1 year (10)
	1 year and 1 month to 2 years (15)	1 year and 1 month to 2 years (8)
	2 years and 1 month to 3 years (7)	2 years and 1 month to 3 years (7)
	3 years and 1 month to 4 years (8)	3 years and 1 month to 4 years (5)
	4 years and 1 month and more (3)	4 years and 1 month and more (25)

months. Depending on which countries they were from, respondents were remunerated with AUD \$30 and SGD \$30 shopping gift vouchers each for their time. The respondents were interviewed in small groups and as individuals in addition to completing a short written survey which captured their background information such as age, gender, country of birth/citizenship and number of years in Singapore to date. The data in this chapter is reflective of the open-ended questions I asked pertaining to respondents' sense of belonging, impressions of their host society, social networks and media and communication use. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min, depending on the willingness of the respondents to go into more depth. Table 6.1 provides the demographic information on the respondents.

Notably Table 6.1 reveals that although most respondents fall in the 19–24-year-old age bracket, the length of stay of respondents in Singapore is longer than those in Australia. While 24 per cent of respondents in Australia have spent more than 3 years in the host nation, half of the respondents in Singapore spent more than 3 years in the city-state. Of this group in Singapore, a quarter of the respondents have spent more than 4 years there. This is because respondents in Singapore undertook their earlier education in Singapore where they completed their secondary (middle school) and junior college (high school) prior to enrolling into a university. While respondents in Australia were representative of different Asian countries, the majority of international students surveyed in Singapore were from Indonesia and China. The higher numbers from these countries could be because of Singapore's proximity to Indonesia and its active recruitment of students from China (Yang, 2014).

What I found is that the respondents in both Australia and Singapore did not have many domestic students as friends. Of note, respondents demonstrated self-awareness as to why they had no local friends which largely had to do with feelings of disconnection from their host nations' culture and society. At the same time, they also revealed why fellow international students are crucial for their everyday life in transience at the present time but also for their future. The only difference which I found between the two groups was that respondents in Singapore had social networks which were almost exclusively made up of conationals while respondents in Australia were more open with their social networks. In other words, respondents in Australia were friends with international students not only from the home nation but also from the region they came from (e.g. the Asian region for respondents from Asia) and from elsewhere.

### *Introspective About Lack of Local Friends*

When I asked respondents about their social networks, that is, who their friends are, the international students in both Australia and Singapore revealed that they did not have many friends who are domestic students. Instead, their social networks were exclusively or heavily made up of other international students almost always from the home nation. More respondents in Singapore than in Australia were friends with fellow international students who were conationals. This is despite the fact that many of the respondents in Singapore have spent 3 or more years living and studying in the city-state. Respondents in Australia revealed that while their social networks are made up of fellow international students from the home nation, they also extended their friendships to international students from the Asian region in the first instance and, then to a lesser extent, international students from elsewhere (Europe, North and South America, the Middle East and Africa).

Respondents in both countries stated that they made friends with other international students whom they met in their current and/or past courses and/or institutions;



in their accommodation complexes and neighbourhoods; at institutional organised and non-institutional social, cultural and sports groups; at the workplace, at religious gatherings (e.g. churches, Christian fellowship groups and mosques) and through other international students (friends of friends).

Respondents in Australia and Singapore were self-aware that they lacked local peers as friends. They explained that their lack of domestic students as friends was because of a variety of reasons. Respondents in Australia felt that their classmates did not want to hang out with them after class because they were Asian. Other respondents blamed themselves for their lack of English skills which likely prevented any form of friendships from germinating.

While more respondents in Singapore than in Australia admitted that they had friends who were their local peers, they revealed that they were not very close to them. Here the respondents in Singapore said that their Singaporean friends were their classmates when they were in secondary school (middle school) and in junior college (high school) whom they had lost touch because of the different paths taken. For instance, international students go straight to a university, while male Singaporeans are conscripted into military and civil defence for 2 years at the age of 18 prior to admission to varsity. Additionally, a few respondents in Singapore stated that they are still friends with conationals who they met in secondary school and junior college but who had since returned to the home nation.

Respondents in Singapore noted that while at the university, they did not have much interaction, much less social relations, with Singaporeans they met at lectures and tutorials. This was because they shared classes with different people. The Singaporeans who were in the same classes as them usually used their free time to study, while some respondents admitted they took this time to do other things such as bond with friends – usually university friends who were conationals. Respondents generally noted that when the day was over, they would go home to their families. Meanwhile, international students have no families to go back home to and end up again organically bonding with each other instead. As this female Chinese student explained:

Because [foreign students] we're all living [together].... So we can eat together.... I can go to her room, to talk to her anytime. But for Singaporean, commonly they go to school for class and go back after class. Commonly, I have no time to talk, to study with them, for a long time. We can only come out about twice a month, something like that.

The respondent here points out that because her Singaporean classmates go straight home after classes, there is little or no time to socialise or study with them. While the respondents are introspective about the reasons why they do not have many or any domestic student as friends, the next section suggests that this phenomenon takes place beyond the individual circumstance of the international student (e.g. unfriendly local students and living in the same space). Instead, I suggest that international students in both Australia and Singapore are disconnected from their host nation's society and culture. These disconnections, which the following section unpacks, also provide us an understanding as to why international students, particularly conationals, are inadvertently drawn to each other.



The attraction respondents have to other international students and adopt them into their social circles is not because of social reasons such as common meeting places but rather for more complex reasons.

## **Disconnections with the Host Nation's Society and Culture**

### ***In Transience: 'Not My Country'***

Perhaps a significant issue which needs to be brought up is that the respondents are all transient migrants. In other words, they are in Australia and in Singapore on limited visas. Hence their sense of belonging in Australia might not be very strong. As a Singaporean undergraduate in Australia noted:

this is not my country

This disconnection with the host nation is carried into any interests respondents might have with the everyday happenings of the host nation. For instance, respondents stated that they were not interested in the politics of the host nations or are influenced by the concerns of their societies. For instance when I conducted some of my interviews in 2013, Australia was experiencing a run-up to its federal elections. At the time, there was a leadership spill over dramatic changes in the then labour government which dominated the media landscape in Australia. Yet the respondents were either not interested or not aware this was going on. In their work on international students in Australia, Weiss and Ford (2011) attempt to come to terms with the lack of political activism on the part of international students, some of whom come from countries where the citizenry is politically active such as Indonesia. While Weiss and Ford explain that students from countries such as Singapore are more politically subdued because they would have gone through an education system that discouraged political activism but rather encouraged obedience to the government, another explanation could be that these students felt disconnected to Australian society and its concerns. As the Singaporean female student above admitted, Australia was not her country. Hence there is no interest in getting involved with, least of all interested in, the politics of the host nation.

This disinterest in what goes on in the host nation in part is due to respondents not keen in watching local news on television or online, least of all in newsprint. Respondents generally did not possess television sets or radios but instead downloaded or streamed their news and entertainment online from their mobile devices (e.g. smart phones, tablets and laptops) and computers. They were thus able to control what (and when) they wanted to watch and listen to instead of the broadcast material available on television and on radio, respectively. In previous studies I have done on the online information-seeking behaviour of international students in Australia which focused on international students, my colleagues and I learnt that our respondents did not visit Australian news sites (Chang, Alzougool, Berry, Gomes, & Reeders, 2012).

Instead they visited international news sites (e.g. British Broadcasting Corporation or BBC and Cable News Network or CNN). Furthermore, respondents overwhelmingly supplemented their news consumption with news posts and links made by their friends on social media. In other words, social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Tencent QQ, Sina Weibo and KakaoTalk) become outlets for the consumption and the spread (through sharing of posts and links) of current news.

Once their visas expire, respondents after all are legally obligated to leave the country. Of course they are able to apply for other visas in order to stay. These include other study visas, working visas and permanent residence visas. While almost all respondents did not discuss a desire in applying for study or work visas in either of the host countries, 33 per cent of those in Australia and 52 per cent of those in Singapore stated that they would like to apply for permanent residence. While a work visa is usually a necessary step between a student visa and a permanent residence visa, this preliminary step was not brought up in conversation with respondents. This could be because at the time of the interviews, respondents did not consider the processes and procedures involved in gaining permanent residence. However, they revealed that while they would like to do this, the majority of them also did not have the intention of staying long term in either of these countries, preferring instead to live and work elsewhere and to eventually return to the home nations. Respondents revealed that the intention for permanent residence in either of these countries meant that they would be able to have better access to practical considerations such as access to permanent employment and affordable housing. Some respondents also revealed that they would like to apply for citizenship after gaining permanent residence in the host nations in order to travel. A postgraduate student from China studying in Australia explained:

Easier ...to [go to] different other countries but for me I love travelling with like my journeys passport is very limited. Yeah more freedom so that I can go to Europe or USA or UK wherever I want to go easier that's the only ...

The student revealed that she is unable to travel to a host of different countries because of her Chinese passport. She felt that if she had citizenship, she will be able to have access to more countries if she possessed an Australian passport. At the same time, she did not see herself staying in Australia in the long term. Instead, she admitted that she would return to China to retire.

### ***Like Living in Host Nations But Feel Locals Don't Like Them***

Respondents in both countries generally were satisfied living in their host nations. They were generous about the benefits of living in Australia and Singapore, respectively. Respondents in Australia liked the pace of life in Australia which they felt was less stressful than in their home nations. Moreover a quarter of those interviewed stated that they would not mind applying for permanent residence and therefore extending their time in Australia. Many also voiced their admiration of

Australian society being open to new ideas. As a male undergraduate from Singapore explained:

Well in Singapore, everything is more closed up, whereas here, people are more open about their ideas and how they see things. I guess here ... expressive compared to in Singapore

Singapore, as this respondent notes, is a country which has restrictions on the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press (George, 2012; Gomez, 2005). There are strict laws that govern the public discussion or distribution of material that is sexually explicit and critical of religion, race or politics in Singapore. For instance, filmmaker Royston Tan's 2005 film *Singapore Rebel* about opposition politician Chee Soon Juan was banned in 2005 although reclassified in 2009 because of its political content. More recently in 2014, filmmaker Tan Pin Pin's film *To Singapore, With Love* was famously banned in Singapore and labelled by the government as 'undermin[ing] national security'. The government felt that the film which features former Singaporeans exiled for their political beliefs questioned the 'legitimate actions of the security agencies to protect the national security and stability of Singapore are presented in a distorted way as acts that victimised innocent individuals' (Media Development Authority, Singapore, 2014). In comparison, respondents in Singapore respected the orderliness and efficiency they found while living in the city-state.

However, respondents also noted that while they liked living in the host nations, they were critical of how Australians and Singaporeans treated them. One of the key issues which respondents in Australia noted was racism as the following female Singaporean undergraduate revealed:

sometimes it's very easy to feel out of place, especially when you encounter racism, like sometimes when just crossing the road with my friends, people wind down their car windows, they shout stuff at us.

Respondents in Singapore provided mixed responses about their experiences with Singaporeans. Generally respondents were reserved, positive or critical about their experiences with Singaporeans. Respondents who were reserved in their responses could well be because of politeness towards myself and my research assistants who they knew are Singaporean born. Those who were positive felt that they blended into Singaporean society such as the following male undergraduate student from Indonesia:

[Singapore society is a] completely multicultural one, so at least we are not being like really a foreigner, so if when we are foreigner we can be like yeah, we can be like, still be a local one, not be like different to the others.

This student who is ethnic Chinese points out that because Singapore supports a multicultural and therefore multiethnic population, he is able to successfully blend into it. For him being a 'foreigner' can be interpreted as looking like other Singaporeans, particularly the ethnic Chinese. Singapore's multicultural population is based on its broad Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic makeup with Chinese Singaporean making up three quarters of the citizenry (Gomes, 2015a, p. 20). While this diversity was formed during the British colonial rule (1819–1963) due to the

fast development of Singapore as an entrepot trading centre requiring labour from the region, it became a policy since the county became independent in 1965. However other students state honestly that it is only on a superficial level they are able to blend into Singaporean society because being Asian, they broadly look like one of the official ethnic groups in Singapore. They mention that once Singaporeans find out that they are foreigners, they are treated differently as the following female student from Vietnam explains:

I speak English, I can order food in Chinese. ... I can use that...[but w]hen [people] first meet me they just assume that I'm Singaporean, then when I tell them that I'm not they get really surprised.

Others however have had difficult experiences with Singaporeans because they are foreigners:

I don't have any fears about finding a job or getting a place, becoming a PR, I think like that will happen but my issue is more with the blending in with Singaporeans .... I felt a lot of hostility and that was strange because in my first year it wasn't there like I mean the job discrimination and stuff like that, it was bound to happen but sometimes it just feels really unfair.

The above female student from Indonesia explains that she not only faced hostility from Singaporeans because she is a foreigner but that this has extended to discrimination in the workplace. What this student points to are the tensions international students – and on a larger scale, foreigners working in the city-state – face from the local population. Singaporeans have been expressing their displeasure with the increasing numbers of foreigners working and studying in the country on social media and in organised protests (Gomes, 2014, 2015a). Colloquially known as 'foreign talent', Singaporeans believe that international students and foreign white-collar workers take up valuable university places and take away jobs from them while changing the Singaporean cultural landscape. This tension is even more noteworthy when the frustrations Singaporeans have with foreign talent are directed towards co-ethnics. Likewise co-ethnics is not a bridge for international students in Australia to feel a sense of belonging or connectedness with Australian society. In other words, Asian international students do not identify with Asian-born or Asian-raised Australians.

## *Inability to Connect with Co-ethnic Citizens*

### **Singapore**

Singapore is an international hub which can be conflicting for many of the international students. While the majority of international students were able to identify with Singapore because it is an Asian nation with a diverse (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others [Eurasian]) population since many of themselves were co-ethnics, this multiculturalism also presents itself as problematic and unsettling.<sup>2</sup> Those who come

<sup>2</sup> 'Others' include Eurasians who make up less than 1 per cent of the Singaporean population (Singapore Tourism Board, 2015). Eurasians have a mixed raced ancestry who developed a unique

from Asian cultures explained that while they find Singaporean culture familiar on one level, they were also unable to connect to it. They clarified that Singaporean culture is 'different' to what they are used to in the homeland. The ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia and Mainland China, for instance, both fall into this category.

A few Chinese Malaysian respondents vocalised that they were unable to identify with Chinese Singaporeans who they consider 'different' even though they were co-ethnics and thus culturally similar. This is so even though Malaysia arguably is a nation of different ethnicities similar to that of neighbouring Singapore (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Eurasian), and both nations have a shared history of British colonial rule. Meanwhile, Chinese Indonesians who made up a significant number of respondents in the Singapore leg of this study also felt disconnected from local Chinese even though both diasporic Chinese groups (Singapore and Indonesia) share similar migrant heritages as descendants of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Southern Chinese migrants (Owen, 2005).

Likewise Chinese respondents revealed that they felt that Singapore-born ethnic Chinese were both similar yet different from them. These feelings of disconnect echo earlier work by Leong and Ward (2000) who found that Mainland Chinese sojourners in Singapore found difficulties identifying and acculturating with Singaporean Chinese society and culture. In my study, the Chinese respondents admitted that they felt 'foreign' in Singapore even though the island-state is somewhat similar to China. These similarities include the strong ethnic Chinese demographic and because Mandarin is one of the four main official languages and frequently used in the media and among the Chinese Singaporeans.<sup>3</sup> As a female undergraduate from China explains:

I think Singapore is still a foreign country for me even right after I arrived here actually I miss my country..... And as I have more international [student] friends here so sometimes I practise English more with them because they don't know any Mandarin so sometimes I think this is a foreign country yeah, I don't think it is kind of home to me, yes.

While this student is from China, she finds it challenging living in Singapore because she sees more differences than similarities even though Singaporean Chinese make up the vast majority of the local population. She points out that she is friends with other international students and they communicate in English. She clearly has not found Chinese Singaporeans to be friends with or to communicate with in Mandarin.

The Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora and the Mainland Chinese are perhaps unable to totally identify with the Chinese Singaporeans as a result of globalisation and varied communal and national histories. The diasporic Chinese in Southeast Asia are largely descendants of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century migrants

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culture of their own which married both East and West traditions. This East-West hybridity stems from a European (Portuguese, Dutch and British) and Asian (Malay, Chinese and Indian) ancestry. For more information, please see the Eurasian Association website (Eurasian Association, 2015). Eurasians in Malaysia are historically and culturally similar.

<sup>3</sup>The four official languages of Singapore are English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay. However English is the language of choice for government and education.

whose societies adapted to the national cultures and histories of their homelands. Chinese Indonesians, for instance, speak Bahasa Indonesia as their first language and do not carry Chinese family names as a result of anti-Chinese legislation during Sukarno's New Order regime (1965–1998). Moreover, China is not the same ancestral place which was home to the early Chinese migrants having changed political systems from imperial to communist and experiencing a cultural rebirth as a result of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Fu, 2000, pp. 71–89).

## Australia

Approximately 12 per cent of Australia's population claims Asian heritage (West, 2015) with cities such as Melbourne supporting an active, vibrant and historical ethnic Chinese population (Fitzgerald, 2007) with a rising ethnic Indian presence (Baas, 2006; Singh, 2015). In the context of this paper, Asian-Australians refer to people of Asian heritage who were born in or spent a substantial part of their growing up in Australia. Interestingly, respondents stated that they did not have Asian-Australian friends since they perceived the latter as only wanting to be friends with white Australians and not with them. They also commented that they did not have much in common with Asian-Australians because they felt that this group was more Australian than they were Asian. They felt that Asian-Australians had more in common with Caucasian Australians than they did with Asian international students. A male PhD student from India studying in Melbourne expressed such sentiments in relation to Indian-Australians. The respondent generally felt that the Indian-Australians who had grown up in Australia were lacking in current knowledge of contemporary India and are culturally more Australian than they are Indian. He explained:

I found that people of Indian origin who have been outside India for one generation or so, have lost their touch with India to such an extent that, for me seeing from this perspective, there's not much of a difference between a person who is not a native Indian at all and a person who is settled out of India except for one generation or so. Even for example people settle in Australia for more than one generation, they can speak my language, understand me, facial expressions are similar and all, but for me they're as good as local Australians.

For this student, the Indian diaspora in Australia is too far removed for him. He finds difficulties identifying with them and does not have interpersonal relationships with any of them. So while Asian international students may be ethnically, and in some ways culturally, similar to Asian-Australians, both groups have evolved differently to each other due to varied experiences based on time and place. The disconnections that international students have with those who are ethnically similar to them but who were Australia-born or who grew up there are prevalent in a different study I conducted with colleagues on the social networks and information-seeking behaviour of international students. Here we launched an online survey across Australia which attracted 6699 respondents with 63 per cent alone coming from Asia. What we found was that no more than 1 per cent of all respondents stated that their social networks were dominated by Australians who were ethnically similar to them (Gomes et al., 2015). What we can read from this is that international students

are not able to identify with locals who are ethnically similar to them because they do not share comparable (national) experiences or concerns. Asian-Australians, for instance, would be affected by Australia-specific concerns such as dealing with issues of national belonging and citizenship. International students however have very different concerns since they are transient. Clearly there are barriers for international students in both Australia and Singapore to make friends with local students. Is the lack of local friends among international students a concern?

## **Being Friends with Other International Students**

### ***International Student Friendships Provide Support, Community and Belonging***

In an earlier reporting on Asian international students in Australia, I suggested that they formed a parallel society in the host nation (Gomes, 2015b). This parallel society which was made up of international students from the home nation, from the Asian region and, to a lesser extent, from elsewhere provided international students with an opportunity to be part of a community and feel a sense of belonging *in* Australia but not *to* Australia. From talking to respondents, I found that they make friends based on their self-perceived identities. In particular, I found that nationality is a fundamental identity marker for them while overseas. Hence the majority of their friends will come from the home nation – this happens despite their length of stay in the host country. In Singapore, for instance, international students and former international students on work visas informed me that almost all their friends there are conationals. They explain that they have very few meaningful relationships with Singaporeans despite being of Asian heritage and being in the city-state for more than 4 years.

Respondents told me that only other international students are able to understand the challenges they face while living overseas such as the emotional factors of being away from home (e.g. homesickness) and the practical issues connected with living in transience (e.g. finding suitable accommodation). Having other international students as friends allows respondents to fill the significant gap that has been left because of their separation not only from their country of birth but more significantly from family and friends. These findings sit well with existing research on the importance of friendship for foreign students (Gomes and Alzougool, 2013; Gomes et al., 2014; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kashima & Pillai, 2011; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ying, 2002). This sense of belonging is more strongly felt when the social networks are made up of international students from their respective countries of origin as expressed by a Singaporean female undergraduate in Australia:



when I'm here, I don't really feel that homesick, because .... most of my friends are Singaporean and stay with the Singaporean. So I'm mostly surrounding by .... [Singaporeans] .... and ....., so yeah, I don't feel that out of place or anything

Respondents particularly in Australia expressed that identifying as Asian and being friends with other Asian international students from regional countries other than their own provides them with a sense of belonging since they are able to understand each other in terms of some similarities in culture (e.g. Singaporeans and Malaysians are familiar with each other's cultures due to their geographical and cultural proximity and shared history as former British colonies). However respondents in both Australia and Singapore note that it is the international student friends from the homeland that provide the most comfort and support and thus allow them to feel a sense of belonging in the host nations. The following male Indonesian undergraduate in Singapore explains:

...so when I came out to Singapore .... It [was] quite difficult for me, but fortunately here [I have] an .... Indonesian community and then I feel like it's quite interesting and I feel [this is] home because some of them have similarity with me — like some [are] ... students [which is] awesome. So I feel .... it's like a home for me and .... gradually .... Singapore is my home also right now.

For this student, having an Indonesian community in Singapore has helped him feel a sense of belonging. While this community consists, he later tells me, of Indonesian workers as well, it is the fellow Indonesian students in this community which have allowed him to feel as if Singapore is home to him.

Respondents also rationalised that they were able to connect and identify more with other international students because of similar and shared experiences of being foreigners and international students. More importantly they admitted that they maintain friendships with fellow international students particularly from their homeland for practical reasons. They note that when they arrive in the host nation, they actively seek fellow international students from the homeland to help them adjust to their new surroundings. Turning to friends from the homeland for advice and help comes about because respondents believe that these friends would have gone through the same issues they face and hence able to advise accordingly. For example:

I meet the same people, with the same condition as me, I mean they're international students from Asia or from Africa, from .... I think even though I feel upset, that I don't meet any Australian, but then I become like – with the group of people, that at least we have the same experience, even though we're from different countries. But then, I come to my university at ...., that I find some of wonderful friends from Indonesia, I think they help me a lot, especially to deal with the accommodation and sort of things. Because there is some consideration for me, myself, to think, where should I live?...Because we have the same interests, that makes our bonds stronger [F/Pgrad/Indonesia].

Moreover some respondents think that locals will not be able to provide advice that is specific to international students primarily because they do not have similar experiences as foreign students as expressed below:



Yes same culture, same, because I can share some information with them, we can help each other. Because international students recognise these kind of needs, we can easily get to be friends I think rather than ... [with local] ... student [M/Associate Degree/China].

This idea that only fellow international students know better correlates with Pedro and DeWind's (2004) study of international students in the USA who felt that Americans did not understand their experiences as foreigners while they could not relate to American culture such as interests in sports. International students, as Hendrickson et al. (2011) have noted, are comfortable not only with fellow international students from their home but also with international students from their region and elsewhere. A reason for this, which the respondents articulate, is to get to know cultures and people other than their own. International students thus create a parallel existence for themselves during their stay in Australia. My research also correlates with previous studies on the importance, prominence and necessity of social networks for international students (Chang et al. 2012; Hendrickson et al., 2011).

### *Commonality with Other International Students and the Future*

Transnational mobility is a common global phenomenon. About a third of the international students I spoke to in Singapore have experienced living in other countries other than the home and host nations. For many it is because they accompanied their parents on their work placements. However, those whose only experience was living overseas because of their current study considered themselves global citizens or citizens of the world. They were proud of being international students and felt that this made them distinct from local students.

The international students I surveyed in Australia and Singapore are savvy individuals. While they may have more friends in their social circles who are conationals, they also extend their social networks to international students from elsewhere. They explain that they make friends with other international students because they are fellow global citizens who one day may prove helpful in terms of future business opportunities. Moreover the international students I spoke to have aspirations for further transnational mobility where they see themselves living and working in the big financial capitals of Euro-America. Very few of the international students I spoke to in both countries wanted to return to the home nation after they finished their studies. While more international students in Singapore wanted to gain permanent residence than those in Australia, respondents did not see themselves as settling permanently in either of those countries with transnational mobility at an early stage of their post-study adventure an aspirational priority.

If international students, who are often young and ambitious, see themselves as global citizens with a desire for future transience working outside the home and host nations, perhaps service providers can facilitate this by tapping on existing global alumnus networks during their study. Alumni here could act as mentors – even remotely through social media – with current international students. Putting

international students in touch with alumni thus allows them to develop their self-perceived identity as global citizens, possibly nurtures interpersonal relationships with individuals who are not conationals, provides possible post-study opportunities and allows alumni to be involved in some way with current students.

## Conclusion

International student service providers in Australia are often concerned that international students are not making enough or, in some cases, any friends with local students. There is a good reason for concern as studies have shown that international students with very few local friends tend to be lonely, isolated and generally unhappy (Gomes & Alzougool, 2013; Gomes et al., 2014; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Sawir et al. 2008; Ying, 2002); this impacts upon their entire overseas study experience. Often, studies tell us that international students socialise with other international students who are conationals – fellow international students from their home nations. Hence living and studying overseas do not really expand their knowledge and appreciation of what their host nation has to offer since they have no real connection to anyone there. Meanwhile, in Singapore, the government is concerned with issues of integration and assimilation between not only international students but middle class and professional foreign talent with the local population. For the Singapore government, integration and assimilation are necessary in order not only to reduce tensions between Singaporeans and foreign talent but also to nurture the foreign talent to stay and work in the city-state for indefinite periods of time

However from the findings of this study, it is clear that Asian international students in Australia and Singapore make friends with other international students more so than with their domestic peers. Respondents reveal that fellow international students particularly from the home nation and from Asia are necessary in terms of forming communities of support while in current and future transience. International student friendships also provide respondents with a sense of belonging while away from the home nation. Respondents also reveal that while both Australia and Singapore may be populated with citizens who reflect their ethnic identities, they see more difference than similarity.

As transient migrants, international students face various challenges while overseas. Almost always physically separated from their families and in countries which are, on various levels, linguistically, culturally and socially different to what they are used to, international students often resort to creative yet practical strategies in order to cope with everyday life overseas. Moreover, international students are different from permanent migrants (both permanent residents and citizens) because they are merely on sojourn in the host nation. Hence their social and cultural connections and emotional and personal investment in the host nation are remarkably different from that of permanent immigrants, as are the strategies which they are required to adopt. By looking at friendship patterns and their sense of belonging, international students demonstrate that they engage in self-determining strategies

for coping with everyday life in transience which includes self-determination. Moreover the temporary identities located in transience which are based on circumstance (e.g. being international students) contribute to their developing identity as a global citizen.

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**Part II**  
**International Student and Returnee**  
**Connectedness/Disconnectedness with the**  
**Home Country**

# Chapter 7

## ‘So That She Feels a Part of My Life’: How International Students Connect to Home Through Digital Media Technologies

Joshua W.E. Wong

**Abstract** What role do new digital media technologies play in facilitating international student connectedness to their home countries, families, and cultures? In this chapter, I report how digital media and connectedness to home are entangled in increasingly complex ways in the lives of international students today. Using ethnographic approaches that include picture diaries and semi-structured interviews, I collected in-depth accounts from over 20 international students about how media technologies have impacted their well-being, including their connectedness to home. Some of the themes discussed in this chapter include how they recreate and extend home environments through media technologies; how connections with family members and friends back home are maintained through digital media; how they shape identities through the narratives they tell using media; and how sometimes disconnectedness with home is an important factor for personal growth. In particular, I argue that the media ecologies of entertainment and communication technologies surrounding international students form a crucial part of their constitution of ‘home’ and familial relationships, as their sense of place becomes increasingly destabilised by their mobile contexts.

**Keywords** Media • Connectedness • Home • International students • Migration

### Introduction

This chapter explores the connectedness of international students to their home country, family, friends, and culture. These connections to their home countries and family play an important role in the lives and well-being of international students, including alleviating loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia 2008), influencing major life decisions (Geddie, 2013), and even leading to the

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development of ‘enclaves’ of specific cultural groups of students within the larger society of their host country (Turner, 2007). With the rise of globalization and digital media technologies such as social media and mobile phones, new forms of maintaining connections to home are emerging among this present generation of transnational migrants (including international students). These range from ‘mobile phone parenting’ by Filipino migrant mothers (Madianou & Miller, 2011) to migrant students from Korea and China negotiating being simultaneously ‘home and away’ through social media networks (Hjorth, 2007; Hjorth & Arnold, 2012). The properties of these new media technologies – speed, accessibility, and convergence of multiple forms of media (pictures, video, text, sound, etc.) – have fostered a situation where, if they wish to, students can recreate and stay immersed in their home environments while in a new land. It is these patterns of recreation, immersion, and connection facilitated by students’ use of media that I propose to explore in this chapter.

While early studies on digital media and migration have focused on singular aspects of the lives of migrant populations, such as the usage of specific media technologies in migrants’ lives, or an analysis of the mediascapes of migrant communities (Hjorth & Arnold, 2012; Hopkins, 2009; Komito, 2011; Madianou & Miller, 2011), recent research trends have focused on understanding the complex environments of media technologies that migrants exist in and use. These media-infused environments have been variously described as *media ecologies* (Slater & Tacchi, 2004) or as a state of *polymedia* (Madianou & Miller, 2012). In their theoretical approach to polymedia, Madianou and Miller (2012) argue that the proliferation of media platforms have become so widespread among certain communities that individuals are able to select specific communication media (or mix of media) to suit their expressive intent. (For example, choosing email over text messaging allows for longer, more deliberate responses with a slower response time expected compared to text messages.) Thus, given the range of media options, the communications channels that individuals choose to use are more reflective of the user’s choice rather than external factors such as price or accessibility. The effect of using a particular media platform on the connection to ‘home’ therefore cannot be studied in isolation, but rather must be studied within the network of relationships that exist between the different media platforms in the environment as well as the user’s own relationship with that media platform.

An analysis of a user in a state of polymedia includes their social relationships with others, the difference in affordances between media alternatives, and the cultural idioms that are linked to the communications medium they use. International students in Melbourne, I argue, are in this state of polymedia – where there is a multiplicity of channels to communicate with home – and thus their choices of *which* media technology to use, *and why*, furnish us insight into their social relationships and the cultural practices surrounding media. In this chapter therefore I examine the holistic international student experience and how their sense of place, home, and connections are destabilised and reshaped by the media platforms that they surround themselves with.

This research draws upon ethnographic work and interviews conducted among international students in the Higher Education sector in Melbourne, Australia, conducted as part of a PhD thesis supported by the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre. Twenty international students of varying levels of education (pre-university Foundation Year students to PhD candidates) were interviewed about their usage of media technologies in everyday life and how that relates to their well-being. Part of the discussions about well-being included their connections to their families and their home countries. The students were also asked to compile picture diaries of ten photos with accompanying descriptions that show how they use media in their everyday lives and how it relates to their well-being in some way. From this collection of data, several patterns and themes emerged with regard to how students engaged with home and family through media technologies. The chapter is divided into three sections: (1) recreating home environments through media, where I explain how the idea of 'home' as a construct built out of life practices can be made mobile and extended to transnational contexts through the affordances of digital media; (2) familial connections and narratives of life, where I examine how students reconfigure patterns of power and relationships within their family, as well as conduct identity work through narratives on social media; and (3) disconnectedness and new perspectives on home, where I explore why some students may seek to disconnect from their home communities to pursue growth.

## Recreating Home Environments Through Media

For many students, especially in their first year, homesickness is a common problem. And thus, to alleviate homesickness, students surround themselves with media environments that remind them of home. Upon studying the lives of transnational migrant professionals, Nowicka (2007) began to conceptualise 'home' not as a fixed place but rather as a focal point of stability through which individuals and families interact with the world – they go out to the world from 'home', and they return from the world to 'home'. When migrants speak of home, they are not necessarily referring to a physical location, although that is what 'home' is often pictured to be like in the migrant imagination. Instead, when Nowicka probed deeper, she discovered that 'home' is actually comprised of a set of practices and material objects that in the migrant's mind constitute stability, familiarity, and a reference point with which they can build a family around. What this concept of 'home' does is that it detaches the sense of 'home' from a particular physical location (which is fixed and sedentary) and instead reconfigures it as a set of familiar practices or objects which can be mobile and reconstructed in whatever place the migrant ends up in. When migrants move country, they are engaged in the process of 'home-making', or recreating the patterns of life that they are familiar with in the new space they now inhabit.

Therefore, when international students express a longing for home, or homesickness, what they are actually referring to is a desire for the familiar practices and



objects which for them constitute the sense of 'home'. In today's mediated, globalised society, we must examine not just the material practices and possessions which constitute 'home' for the individual but also the media artefacts and practices that are incorporated into the students' sense of 'home'. While they may be physically living in one country, the communications and entertainment media that they engage with allow them to reconstruct a sense of 'home' which includes not just familiar ways of using media that was learned in their origin country but also access to other material and immaterial aspects of 'home' *through* the media. This can take many forms, such as the extension of the home environment through videoconferencing, consumption of media content from their home countries, recreation of the linguistic environment of home, and being immersed in news from home. Being ambiently there and 'always on' (Baron, 2008) are key features of contemporary new media – characteristics that bring with it both positive and negative affordances. Social media like Skype provide a type of ambient hanging out that allows more different types of copresence previously afforded. As Hjorth and Arnold (2013) noted in their study of parents of university students studying away from home, media such as online games afforded a type of ambient copresence that served to ease feelings of loneliness and sadness. For some students, the copresence (electronic proximity) afforded by Skype teleconferencing allows them to alleviate their sense of homesickness during their early days in Australia, by extending their family presence into their rooms. Carol, a female undergraduate from Malaysia, describes how she left Skype on all the time in her first year, to have a sense of familial telepresence in her room:

Carol: Yeah, usually I would Skype my family – you know, like just leave it on the whole day while I do my work and they do their thing. Just like you know, the sound of home and the noises and their voices, and things like that.

Interviewer: And who was on the other side of the Skype connection that you turned on?

Carol: Anyone. Like my sister, my father, my mom... sometimes they're just busy – no one's actually sitting in front of the computer, they're just moving around, things like that, but I just leave it on.

Interviewer: Okay. What made you decide to use that way of doing things rather than just talking face-to-face on Skype?

Carol: Well we talked, but after a while obviously everyone's going to get on with their own things, so we just left it on. And like if anyone has anything to say to me, just come over and talk to me, things like that.

Interviewer: Right. How did you feel then, using that way of-?

Carol: It was a bit comforting. It was like... my sister was initially supposed to stay with me, but she missed her enrolment so she had to go back to Malaysia and do another semester there. So, like, we rented a place that was fairly big, for the two of us. So the house was just very very quiet, for just one person. So like, the noise back at home, seeing home and stuff, was just very comforting.

Interviewer: Okay. What were some of the noises that were comforting for you?

Carol: My dog. I could hear him. The computer I usually Skype them faces the dining table, so they eat and things like that. They sometimes talk to me while eating, and things like that.

Ralph and Staeheli (2011) have argued that the concept of 'home' among migrants is one that is both sedentary and mobile – both bounded by the local and

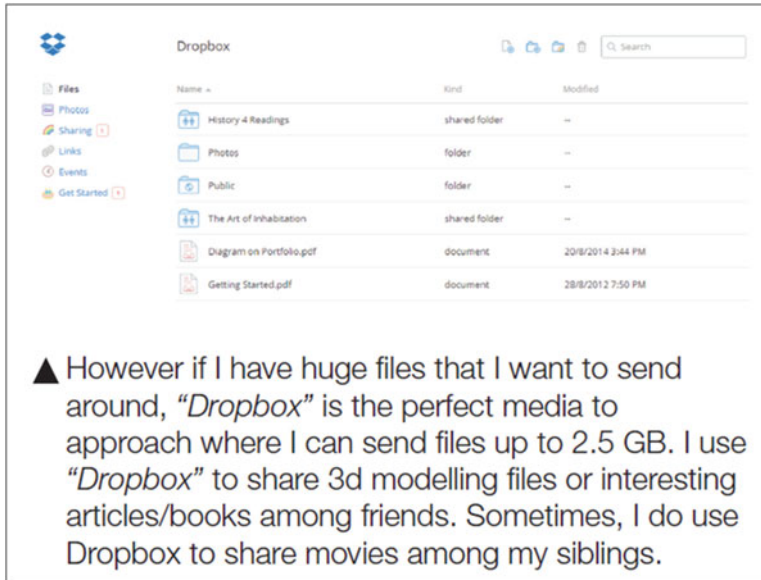


Fig. 7.1 Picture Diary, Yohann

extensible transnationally. Here, we see a depiction of that phenomenon. In Carol’s case, Skype was used primarily to bring the immediacy of the home *environment* – particularly the sounds of home like her dog’s barking – into her life to stave off loneliness. What was comforting to her and gave her a sense of familiarity and stability was the everyday noises and routines of home. While her home was still enclaved in the house in Malaysia, Skype allowed that sense of home to extend beyond national boundaries into the space she currently inhabits in Australia. She also mentions that the computer in the family home faced the dining table, so this was a way in which her family included her in their daily lives when they ate. The practice of a family dinner is one of the main ways which many households in Malaysia spent time together, and constituted a part of what Carol thought of as ‘home’. Thus, even though Carol was in another country and time zone, she still participated actively in her family’s construction of home through the stability-promoting practice of family dinners.

This idea of an extension of the home environment through media isn’t just limited to their physical environments or telepresence – it also extends to the media ecology that international students exist in. Some international students have set up technological systems that allow them to share in the same media ecology as their family members – usually siblings – back home (Fig. 7.1).

For Yohann and Kenny, who are both movie enthusiasts, they are used to media environments where they are able to download and share movies online through the Internet in their home countries (Malaysia and India, respectively). This cultural practice of freely sharing copyrighted materials online is rampant and rarely

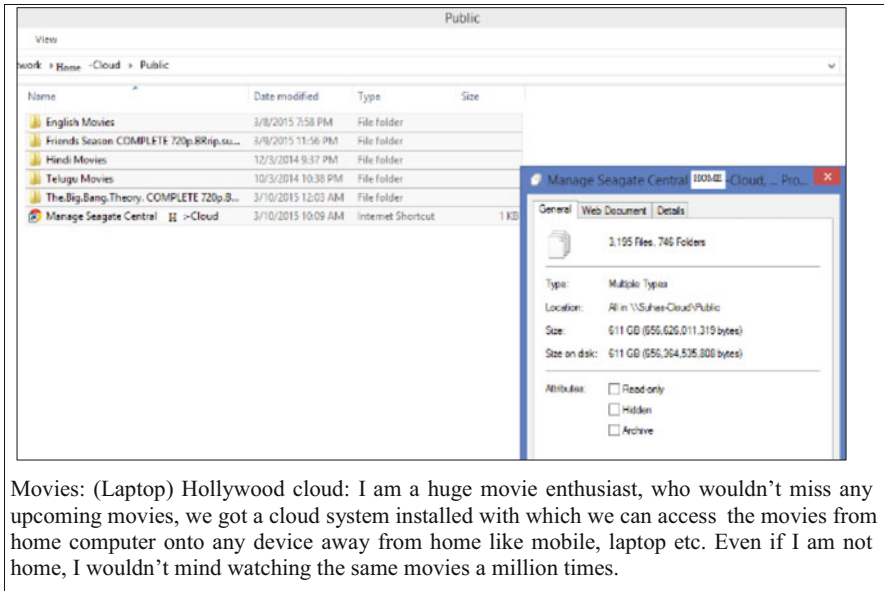


Fig. 7.2 Picture Diary, Kenny

questioned in Asian countries, for a variety of reasons including the collectivistic view that individual creators are obligated to contribute to the enjoyment of the collective whole, poor enforcement of copyright laws leading to lower moral development among youth, and lack of social pressure against digital piracy (Ang, Cheng, Lim, & Tambyah, 2001; Hill, 2007). Thus, even when coming to a country like Australia, which has stronger copyright protection laws for individual creators and a sense of justice requiring fair payment for services/goods provided, many international students still continue the practice which comes from their own home cultural values regarding media content (Fig. 7.2).

Beyond that, Yohann's and Kenny's regular sharing of media content with their siblings back home also forms a tangible connection that allows them to inhabit the same mediated environment as their siblings – liking the same movies and shows, keeping up with the same TV drama series, and hence being able to talk and discuss things even while never actually physically watching a movie or show together. In both cases, the students are repurposing the affordances of cloud computing technology to enable this practice – storing a shared database of media content online while allowing access and contributions to it from a variety of places and PC terminals. While the computing and media industries have been heading towards this direction – the merging of the media revolution with cloud computing to form the media cloud (Tan & Su, 2011), exemplified by services such as Netflix – not much has been investigated about the social impact the media cloud would have on everyday lives. These stories provide some early accounts of how users have already been creating miniature media clouds on their own initiative, outside of media industry initiatives, and their reasons for doing so. Here, videos and other media content are

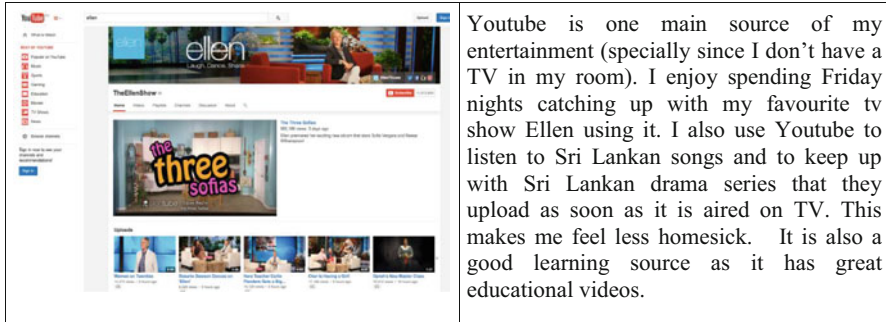


Fig. 7.3 Picture Diary, Priya

treated somewhat similar to material objects, in that they are objects used in the enactment of familiar entertainment practices that represent 'home'. Just like how a student might bring his favourite guitar or tennis racquet overseas to continue the forms of entertainment he is familiar with at 'home', these students are now bringing a media library of movies and TV shows with them, to continue their patterns of media consumption as entertainment. However, unlike a physical object which must have a fixed location, the distributed access to media content afforded by cloud computing platforms means that 'home' is much more mobile, with the materials to reconstitute 'the entertainment practices of home' existing anywhere there is access to the cloud. 'Home' therefore becomes even more distributed and less enclaved – part of it now exists in the cloud of media and can be reformed through the viewing of videos on the bus, in the library, or in the student's temporary accommodation, wherever they are.

On another note, Kenny's picture of his movies directory shows different folders for 'English movies', 'Hindi movies', and 'Telugu movies'. Hindi and Telugu are two different dialects spoken within the Indian subcontinent. The regular watching of shows from his home country and in his native tongue also produces a linguistic environment that replicates the feeling of home in his English-speaking host country. Priya, a female Sri Lankan undergraduate, echoes this sentiment in Fig. 7.3.

For Priya, YouTube is a transnational social field (Gargano, 2009), where she consumes a mix of entertainment from both her home country of Sri Lanka and new shows that she has discovered in Australia, such as the Ellen DeGeneres show – which itself is produced in the United States. She said in her interview that she watches Ellen because the show inspires her to want to help people, which is an important component of her self-identity as a medical student hoping to bring back medical knowledge to her country. The songs and drama from Sri Lanka make her feel less homesick, but also note her usage of the word 'keep up' when referring to Sri Lankan drama series. This implies a sense of not just nostalgia but *currency* – she is actively involved in the drama series 'as soon as it is aired on TV'. She also uses it for education and learning, actively preparing for a better life in the future with it.



Fig. 7.4 Picture Diary, Janet

For Kenny and Priya, surrounding themselves with media shows that are in their home language helps them maintain connections to home. Gomes and Alzougool (2013) noted that in most cases, international students consumed media content that they were used to in their home country, or media from the United States, rather than the media content produced in their new host country of Australia. This pursuit of a similar linguistic environment to combat homesickness can manifest in a variety of ways: for many students, it means spending time with other international students that are used to the same ways of communicating, creating local ‘enclaves’ (Turner, 2007) of students from the same culture. For others, it involves searching online for jokes and memes that are particular to their own cultural linguistic style (Fig. 7.4).

Janet, a Singaporean undergraduate, talks about how she looks for Singlish memes to replicate the experience of home. Singlish is a colloquial form of English spoken in Singapore that mixes together British English, the Hokkien-Chinese dialect, and occasional Malay words as well. Much of Singaporean humour is derived from Singlish – partially coming from puns and wordplay arising when transitioning from one language to another in the same sentence and partially from poking fun at people who use Singlish in everyday speech, which are often considered to be less well-educated and not as urbanely sophisticated as the academic elite. The polyglot nature of the social media platforms that these students are using allows for easy code-switching between English in Australia and the languages of their home country. Some have argued that bilingual speakers who employ code-switching from one language to another actually *produce* the context in which that language becomes meaningful and relevant (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Hall & Nilep, 2015). Thus, by deliberately seeking out and consuming media which uses language from their origin countries, the students do more than merely use them as reminders of a home that is far away – they are producing the sensation of being surrounded by home in the world they create for themselves through social and entertainment media.

While all these recreations of 'home' help international students in various ways to maintain connections with their home societies, ultimately, the main source of connection lies with their family. The next section will explore how international students maintain connections with their family members using media technologies.

## **Familial Connections and Narratives of Life**

The 'triple revolution' of the Internet, social media, and mobile phones has radically changed the way in which families communicate with each other (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of international students and how they use these new communications media to maintain connections with their families in diaspora. Gargano (2009) has argued that the concept of transnational social fields delimits the study of international students from a traditional focus on national identities at the exclusion of all other forms of identities and instead allows for a multiplicity of different sense-making and identity-formation processes to be present at the same time, in the same location, within the wider body of international students. This becomes apparent when we examine how and why international students use communications technologies to communicate with friends and family. With the increase in global mobility not just among international students but also among their family members, the concept of 'home' and 'family' may not necessarily intersect in the same physical location. Tamar, an undergraduate from Brunei who comes from a broken family that also lives in diaspora, provides a glimpse into the complexities involved in maintaining connections with family across different household and transnational boundaries (Fig. 7.5).

Tamar describes a family in diaspora and how social media keeps her connected to both of her divorced parents separately, as well as her relatives scattered across the globe. Her ideas about 'home' revolve around a network of people scattered across different locations more than a single group in a single place. Tamar reflects a more individualistic view of family, where she is a single node in the network, loosely connected to other individuals like her father or mother through peer-to-peer connections rather than being part of a tightly knit group that share the same household space. This kinship network also takes place over a range of different media platforms and services – Whatsapp, Facetime, and Facebook. The communications platform(s) used by students and their families often varies depending on what's prevalent in their home countries, the digital literacies and language literacies of both parents and their children, as well as the affordances of the communicative media itself. For some relatively less technologically savvy families, they usually stick to just one mode of communication. However, increasingly students and their families are relying on multiple modes of communication – polymedia – to maintain connections to each other, as Tamar's and Karen's photos indicates (Fig. 7.6).



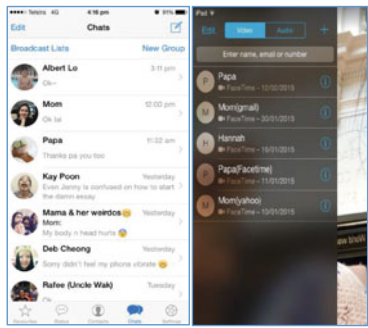

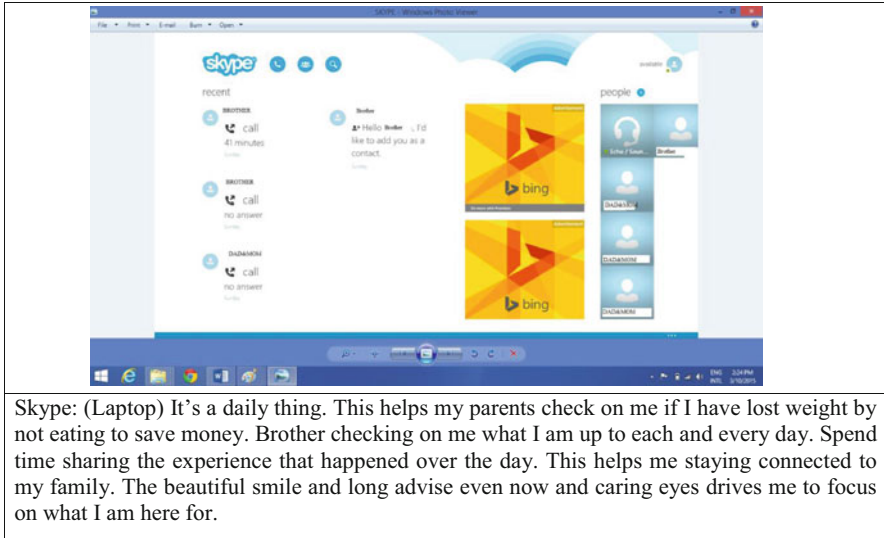
 Two screenshots from a mobile phone. The left screenshot shows a WhatsApp 'Broadcast Lists' screen with a list of contacts including Albert Lo, Mon, Papa, Kay Poon, Mama & her warden, Deb Cheong, and Rafie (Uncle Wak). The right screenshot shows a FaceTime 'Recents' list with entries for Papa, Monigmal, Hannah, Papa(Facetime), and Moniyahoo.	<p>Shown here are screenshots of my Whatsapp and FaceTime respectively. I usually text with my friends (both here and back home) and family through Whatsapp. And I FaceTime with my family back home every night for around half an hour to an hour depending on how busy I am or they are. I alternate with FaceTiming with my mom and dad since they are divorced. So if I FaceTime with my dad tonight, I will do so with my mom tomorrow night. This keeps me informed with all the things happening back home while I'm away which doesn't make me miss home as much.</p>
 A screenshot of a Facebook profile page. The profile picture is a group of people. The page shows a cover photo, a bio, and a list of posts from friends and family members.	<p>Facebook is another way I communicate with my family and friends, especially my grandparents who live in Los Angeles and my aunts and cousins from my mother's side who live in the Philippines. I have not seen my aunts and cousins for about 10 years now and only got a visit from my grandparents 2 years ago after 8 years apart. Facebook is how my mother's side of the family maintains contact since we all live in different countries.</p>

Fig. 7.5 Picture Diary, Tamar

 A collection of social media app icons arranged in a grid. The icons include Messenger, Facebook, Instagram, Weibo, WeChat, WhatsApp, Viber, LINE, and KakaoTalk. The word 'Social' is written at the top of the grid.	<p>These are the social media networks that I use everyday. I generally check my Malaysian friends' and news on facebook status updates every morning. Even though I am living in Melbourne but I am still able to read the Malaysia local news on my facebook subscriptions. How awesome is the technology! I get complaint by my friends for not updating my status or pictures on FB. But now, I upload photos or I have taken in Melbourne and current status on Facebook, still not that often though (once a month, sometimes not!)</p>
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Fig. 7.6 Picture Diary, Karen

Karen, an undergraduate from Malaysia, has a variety of communications apps on her mobile phone that allow her to participate in various activities. Note how Karen operates in a very high state of polymedia – she has many communications channels open to her, and she fluidly juggles usage of several social media networks depending on the friends she has. She uses Whatsapp, Viber, LINE, and KakaoTalk to communicate with different friendship networks in English. In particular, she



**Fig. 7.7** Picture Diary, Kenny

uses LINE and KakaoTalk to communicate with her Japanese and Korean friends, respectively, as these social media networks are dominant among those ethnic groups. Rather than settling on a media platform that she is familiar with (Whatsapp), she indicates her willingness to make friends by adapting her media usage to her friends' cultural comfort zones. Being bilingual, she also uses the Chinese-language social media apps of Weibo and WeChat to participate in communities of interest for Chinese speakers both in Australia and around the world. Finally, she checks news about her friends in Malaysia using Facebook and is pressured to update her friends on Facebook with pictures or status updates about her life in Melbourne.

The construction of these narratives of life in Melbourne forms a large part of many international students' communicative activities online. For parents who might be worried that their child may be going astray or encounter troubles, the continuous feed of news from their children overseas allows them to be actively involved in giving advice, monitoring for trouble, and generally fulfilling their parental roles while they are still in a position to influence the future events in the child's travel story. So the narratives that students construct, on the one hand, enable people from home to vicariously experience their lives in a different country. On the other hand, they also serve as a tool for parental monitoring, because of the relative immediacy of the feedback loop. This is particularly apparent in Kenny's picture diary (Fig. 7.7).

Note that for Kenny, what his parents are concerned about isn't merely a connection or hanging out together. They deliberately chose Skype over other forms of mediated communication because they wanted *visual* confirmation of his health and weight status. Kenny later confirmed this in an interview. Skyping with them allowed him to reassure them that he was not falling into bad habits of skipping

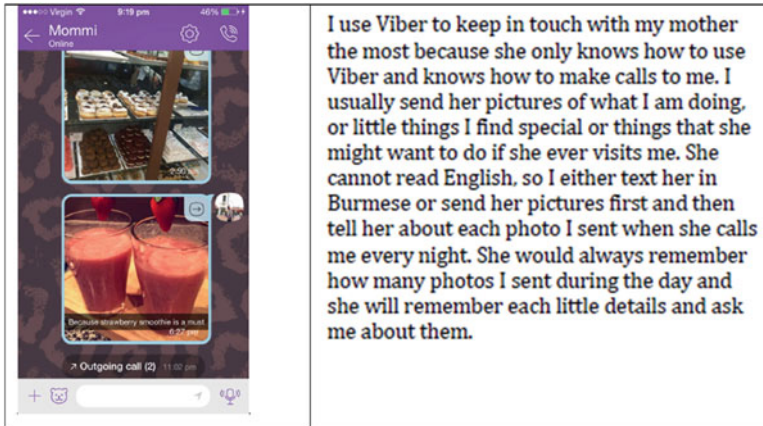


meals, and they communicated every day. This again resonates with Madianou and Miller's theory of polymedia and how individuals select media channels based on the specific affordances it has which meets their relationship needs – in this case, seeing Kenny's physical state for themselves. At the same time, Kenny shares with his family his experiences throughout the day and talks about how this time of Skyping with his family helps him reaffirm and focus on his goals. Kenny is essentially creating a narrative for his family about his progress towards a goal in life and, in the process, forming a narrative identity for himself. The construction of narrative identity allows people to create a story of their personal growth and transform the perception of negative incidences in life into stages of a journey through which some measure of personal growth can be attained (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008).

When students post narratives of their lives onto social media platforms, they are engaging in 'identity work' through the narratives they construct – they are presenting to their communities back home not just what they are doing but also *who* they are. Self-narratives – stories that people tell about themselves – can serve as a powerful bridge to help people in transition make sense of their changing lives, roles, and contexts (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). However, the affordances of social media to allow rapid feedback from multiple publics become a double-edged sword when it comes to the construction of identity. In discussions about social media and intimacy, we see how the new media remediates – that is, it revisits and amplifies existing and older practices (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). A large part of identity formation and construction has to do with the contexts that people surround themselves with. When friends and family back home ask for narratives of the students' journey in their new country, they are not merely asking for interesting stories. They are also asking for permission to continue to shape the identity of the student, through the comments they make on the student's constructed narrative. Therefore, by sharing narratives of life in Australia through social media, students are effectively giving power to the multiple instantaneous and intimate publics to reshape their migrant identities. Furthermore, because of the rapid pace of communicative activities online, the shaping of identity is much faster and more fluid and involves a variety of media.

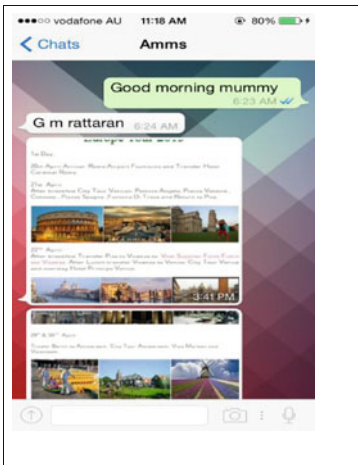
Pictures play a particularly important role in the construction of life narratives of international students, and while Karen above used Facebook to upload pictures, which allows for more careful selection and curation of the pictures to display, other students rely on more mobile messaging apps to create a sense of immediacy and constant involvement. Two students – Jane from Myanmar (Burma) and Priya from Sri Lanka – describe how they use pictures to keep their mothers involved in their lives (see Fig. 7.8).

The contrast in communication patterns is interesting. For Jane, pictures constitute a one-way sharing of narrative because of her mother's relative technological illiteracy. Nevertheless, she and her mother adapt to their mode of communication by supplementing it with text messaging and voice calls every night. Priya and her mother, however, have a more balanced two-way communication pattern with both sharing pictures of their daily lives over Whatsapp. For Jane, pictures are a way to present her life in Melbourne to her mother, with questions afterwards, whereas for



I use Viber to keep in touch with my mother the most because she only knows how to use Viber and knows how to make calls to me. I usually send her pictures of what I am doing, or little things I find special or things that she might want to do if she ever visits me. She cannot read English, so I either text her in Burmese or send her pictures first and then tell her about each photo I sent when she calls me every night. She would always remember how many photos I sent during the day and she will remember each little details and ask me about them.

Fig. 7.8 Picture Diary, Jane



Whatsapp is my main source of communication with my mother. I use it to wish her a good morning everyday! I also send her any photos and videos of things that happen to me during the day and she sends me pictures of her day in turn. This makes me feel connected to her and helps me specially when I’m having a bad day.

*[Translation note: “rattaran” in the Whatsapp conversation translates to “darling” in the Sinhalese language. “Amms” is a nickname for “Amma”, which translates to a familiar way of saying “mother”]*

Fig. 7.9 Picture Diary, Priya

Priya it’s more about maintaining that sense of connection and comfort in times of stress. This difference in power dynamic also comes out when Priya talks about why she sends pictures to her mother (Fig. 7.9):

Priya: I take photos of anything that’s interesting to send to my mother – whenever I’m in the tram, or when I’m walking, I just send her a picture to tell her I’m walking, to let her know what I’m doing. So that she feels part of my life. Because my sister is not with us anymore – like she’s not living in the same house. And my brother’s at school so my mother’s alone. I just don’t want her to feel lonely. I want somebody to be with her – that’s my way of doing this.

By sending pictures of her daily life to her mother, Priya is working to alleviate *her mother's* sense of loneliness and empty nest syndrome and to give the impression that there is still someone accompanying her mother in her family home. Here, she is constructing and exchanging narratives of daily life with her mother in order for them to both feel connected to each other and alleviate loneliness. It also represents a change in power dynamics for the family relationship – for both Jane and Priya, they change from ‘the one being cared for’ to the one providing care. In Jane’s case, she prepares for her mother’s visit by highlighting places she could visit, and in Priya’s case, she deliberately wanted to comfort her mother in her loneliness.

## Disconnectedness and New Perspectives on Home and Family

While the previous parts of this chapter have talked about how students seek connectedness to their home country, in some cases, students actively pursue disconnectedness from their home countries or communities. Being away from their home country often has led to opportunities for students to achieve personal growth, as well as gain new perspectives on the state of their homeland, and forge a new relationship to their home country or communities.

For students coming from countries which practice strict governmental controls over the media, entering Australia was a chance to gain new understandings and perspectives of their home country. In a group interview with Daniel from China and Odette from Russia, Daniel talks about how coming to Australia helped him escape from media brainwashing:

Daniel: Speaking of media and stuff, you know the Chinese government used to – I mean, they’re still doing it – to brainwash us. To make us think ‘Oh, we are the best’. But when you get outside of China, and you just realise, everything they said is crap. It’s not true. And it’s the opposite of what they told you. So I think, the travelling and media – because they control the media, they tighten up the information in China. So there’s no way you will know what is happening outside China. So you just have the one single will. And the opinion is biased, and nobody can tell you the truth. So I think media, and travelling outside, has really helped me understand what’s going on in that part of the world.

Odette: It makes sense, because the government – powerful people – they understand they can keep order on people when they restrict them. Because, especially in China, there’s a lot of people, yeah? All people are different, and maybe not all of them want to obey. Because people are born for freedom. And yeah, that’s why it’s a bit hard and limited for people. Only this way they can make them obey.

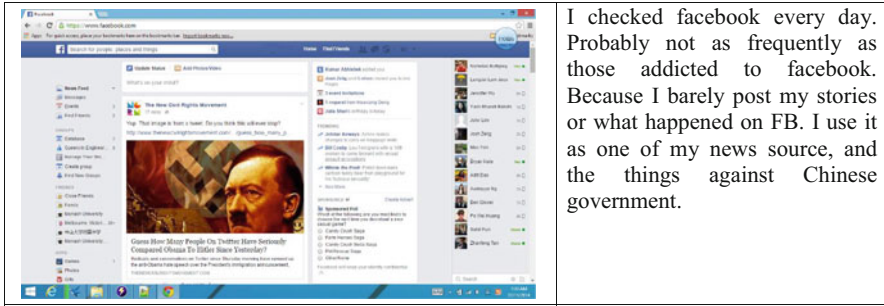
Daniel: Yeah, I mean, it’s really important to obey, to follow rules and to maintain order. Yeah but the thing is, it has to be fair. Like, you know some people can get arrest for just forwarding some post. Uh some... dissident? Is it dissident?

Interviewer: Dissident.

Daniel: Dissident. Yeah, dissident post. Yeah, you can get arrest for that. How ridiculous.

Odette: Yeah, I agree.

Daniel: Yeah, it’s just your express your thoughts, you get arrest. Or you will be sent to jail. You know, on some occasion you get beaten up. So... yeah. < sigh >.



**Fig. 7.10** Picture Diary, Daniel

For Daniel, leaving China allowed him to escape the Chinese government's censorship of the media. He describes five things about the media control in China: that it was nationalistic ('To make us think 'Oh, we are the best'), that it was insular ('no way you will know what is happening outside China'), that it was uniform ('you just have the one single will'), that it was biased ('the opinion is biased, and nobody can tell you the truth'), and that it was intolerant of dissenting opinions ('dissenting post. Yeah, you can get arrest for that'). While Odette did bring up the idea that some level of media control is needed for order among the citizens, Daniel pointed out that while maintaining order is important, the enforcement of controls over media needed to be fair. Instead, punishment was heaped upon people that voiced dissenting views from the official government stance.

In his picture diary, Daniel describes how Facebook gives him access to political news that goes against the Chinese government. Facebook is one of the websites that has been blocked by the Chinese government's censorship of the Internet since 2009, ostensibly because it allowed user-generated content to be posted and some Xinjiang province independence activists were using it to promote their cause (Riley, 2015). As such, China has developed alternative social media networks, such as Ren Ren, that replicate many of the same functions as Facebook, but comply with local Chinese media regulations. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, after leaving China, some Chinese students are now gaining access to Facebook and encountering disaffected elements online on the platform, with news and alternative media that go against the Chinese government (Fig. 7.10).

Later on, Daniel describes how leaving his country and gaining new perspectives on it has stimulated his curiosity about different ways in which his country could have developed, and he has started to read news from around the world to stimulate that interest:

Researcher: Okay. Let's talk a bit about some of the media – some of the TV shows that you watch. Daniel, you said that you looked at a lot of news... I guess mostly from the East Asian region?

Daniel: Yup.

Researcher: Okay. So, why do you do that?

Daniel: Well, um... Okay. Because I read a lot of like, racist news, in Australia. And so... Yeah, I just wonder why some Asian countries can't be as rich as European countries.

And why some – I mean like, why Hong Kong, and those under British rule can develop into international city, but we are both – I mean, we have similar culture – but why Hong Kong, why Hong Kong people manage to, like, flourish and to be rich, but why can't Chinese? And why can South Korea and Japan and Taiwan – even Taiwan! And why Taiwan can be a democracy, but not Mainland China. It really arouse my interest.

....

Researcher: Interesting. So then, all this reading of news and reading of politics is mainly for your own curiosity and satisfaction, right? Not really because you want to change anything, or gain political power?

Daniel: No. Yeah, just for fun. Just for fun and, hope for... I mean, I don't think I can make a change, but...

Odette: But here. Do you believe that here, if you participate in the future, for example, in voting, you can make a change in this country?

Daniel: You mean, Australia?

Odette: Yeah, in Australia. Because you said you don't like Australian news here, because you...

Derrick: Ah- ah- I'm not saying I don't like it, I'm just saying that, because... yeah, I'm not- I'm still a Chinese. I still care about what's happening in East Asia. But not here. Yeah because probably I'm not born in here. Probably I'm not born in Australia, that's why. Yeah, I've been here for just three years. So I can't feel a sense of belonging here.

Interestingly enough, Daniel stated that it was his reading of 'racist news' in Australia that actually led him to think seriously about this topic. Previously, he had mentioned that China's media had 'brainwashed' him into thinking that '[Chinese] are the best', and now that he encountered media that instead had diminished his race, it had prompted him to re-evaluate his worldview. On the one hand, Daniel has absorbed some elements of his host country's values. He attributes good things to a capitalistic, democratic environment – as practiced in Hong Kong and Taiwan, for example, whom he sees as flourishing and rich. At the same time, he also feels that he belongs to China and identifies himself as 'still a Chinese'. He wishes to see his home country improve, even though he has low expectations of being able to make a change. At the same time, Daniel has started to develop a transnational identity. He has begun to ponder upon ways in which China could have developed in comparison to its' neighbours. Internally, he is developing a political viewpoint and an identity that comes from his engagement with media sources outside his home country.

For other students, it is the disengagement from family that offers opportunities for growth. Jane, the female undergraduate student from Myanmar, shares how she grew up as the spoiled daughter of a rich family, but deliberately came to Australia to learn how to live independently, against her parents' wishes:

Interviewer: Given that there's a lot of pressure to stay with family – was that something you also agreed with, that you should be with family? Or why did you choose to come here and be separated?

Jane: I guess I wanted some air. Well, you could say that's one of the reasons. Because I wanted to know how my life would be to not depend on my parents all the time. Because back home I really didn't have to do anything – I've never cooked before in my life before I come here. I was never asked to even fold my laundry. I wasn't even expected to do my bed, or anything. So, I was like – what if one day my parents are gone and I'll be so lost without. And maybe like I would want to know – like I want to see how independent I am. So, like, with studying and doing my own things, I guess, that would show that I have my life together. So, I had like quite a fight with my father to leave home. It wasn't just that I

got into the uni that I wanted, it was a lot of things. Like, I had to defer one semester because my family don't agree, and all those stuff. It was just try to break out of the comfort zone.

Like, as some parents would, they don't want their kids to do all the work. You know, like, 'I got so much money for you to spend, so you don't have to worry about it.' That's what my father's mindset is. 'Why do you want to work? I'm paying you enough. And I'm working so hard so that you guys can live comfortably.' So he was like, just live comfortably. But I'm like, 'Dad, it's not that. It's not that simple. What if one day, you gone? And I will be left alone without any guidance. And I won't know anything. No matter how much money I have or how much reputation, everyone will know that I don't know shit. Everyone will bully- like, use me. And I wouldn't know it. So, I need to be able to stand on my own feet.' [...] I want a real life. He was like, I'll give you a real life back home. Back home, he will still spoil me. I don't want that. So I guess, I got sick of being spoiled.

Here, Jane narrates the argument that she and her father went through, highlighting the thought processes involved. For Jane, it was important for her to be prepared for a future where she wouldn't have her parents' guidance anymore, and so she chose to come to Australia to learn how to live independently. Later on in her interview, she gleefully described her adventures in learning how to balance her budget, clean the house, and even Skyping her mother back home to learn how to turn on the kitchen stove for the first time. She also looks up recipes from the Internet to learn how to cook. And yet, when Jane described her recent trip home to visit her family, she confessed that she relapsed into a lazy lifestyle, but rationalised it as being okay for 1 or 2 months during vacation, as long as the majority of her time spent here is useful.

A third perspective comes from disconnectedness with home communities. One thing that is mentioned quite often among female South Asian students from India and Sri Lanka is the closeness of the extended kin networks and village communities and the stress and pressure they bear as vicarious trophies for their families when their parents compete with other parents in their home country for social status. This is also congruent with earlier psychological research on South Asian parenting styles and academic anxieties. Bodas, Ollendick, and Sovani (2008) have shown that one of the main correlates of test anxiety among Indian students is the fear of social derogation if they fail to do well. Similarly, Farver, Xu, Bhadha, Narang, and Lieber (2007) pointed out that high degrees of parental authority, involvement in their children's academic and life, and the use of shaming for training purposes are common features in many Indian families' parenting styles. This leads many international students from Indian cultures to feeling under constant scrutiny by their community and enduring the gossip network, as Priya describes:

Interviewer: Was there anything in particular that stood out to you in terms of life in Sri Lanka versus life in Melbourne?

Priya: Yes. People have more freedom, I think, especially the youth. And people are not judgemental, which is very relieving. And you could go out anytime you want, and no one will judge you, you can wear anything you want.

Interviewer: Okay. Is it different in Sri Lanka?

Priya: Yes. I think people are quite nosy, they tend to mind other people's business. And they're very judgemental. Most of the people.



Interviewer: How does this judgemental attitude sort of manifest? I mean, how is it shown in everyday life? What happens?

Priya: Uh, well, I could tell you an example. So if I were to go and get my A-Level results today, my Mum's friends would call me the day before – uh, not call me, call my Mum – the day before and find out what's going on. And so my Mum would be obliged to call them and tell them what I got. And I don't think there's a need to do that. And whatever that I do, or which university I got in, they expect it to be told to them. So, yes.

Interviewer: Why does that happen?

Priya: I think it's just been like that for a long time. Their parents have been like that, so they are like that. And that's one advantage when you come to a country like this, you get to know that it doesn't have to be the case, and there are people who don't do that.

Priya describes a community where everyone knows – or wants to know – about everyone else, especially about each other's children and success. Coming to Australia was an eye-opener for her, in that it helped her to see that she could live a life free of continuous scrutiny and judgement by the extended community of her parents' peers, which was very 'relieving' for her. She later goes on to talk about how many Sri Lankan students that she meets here are hesitant to share and talk about their problems with each other, because of pride and the desire to solve their own problems, but also because they are afraid that if they share, the gossip network would spread it around to the community and their family would lose face. Furthermore, these gossip networks translate into online and virtual spaces as well, which is why Nanditha, another Sri Lankan undergraduate student, refuses to get a Facebook account:

Nanditha: But why I think I shouldn't have [an account on Facebook] is, as I said, it's more about my family. You know I see things, you know, friends' stuff. They ruining their life, just because of Facebook. And then gossips and things like that. Why? I mean, we have now more peaceful life. I don't want to ruin that peacefulness just because something else, the gossips and all those stuff. [...] So we actually [take] our time just going to somewhere and looking at something. Just our time, without all the technology, everything else. So we actually truly enjoying the life. But then it's not like that when I go [online] – like you know, I just headache, what's all the stories, what happened to all the family problems, Oh My God.

Nanditha here describes how the gossip network among the Sri Lankan community transfers to the online sphere of Facebook and how she feels pressured – not only in bearing the scrutiny of others but also being forced to listen or pay attention to family gossip. It was a cultural mode of thinking and relating to others that she was happy to escape by coming to Australia and enjoying the 'peacefulness'. Even though she still gets called up by friends and family members here in Australia, it is not as pervasive as being back home in Sri Lanka, and as long as she can stay off Facebook, she can keep most of this gossip at arm's length, distancing herself from the headaches it brings. While this is not a common pattern found in many students' use of social media, there is some evidence that there is a small but critical minority of international migrants who adopt this practice. As Lingel, Naaman, and Boyd (2014) explain, for these, the cutting of ties through social media also represents a kind of transnational identity work, in which the migrant symbolises the departure from their old life through severing social media ties. It can also help lessen the burden of keeping up with social obligations, which can prove overwhelming for

students who are already under a number of other stressors. Thus, by reducing or cutting their mediated ties to the communities in their home country, these students are in essence choosing a new identity and working towards a better life for themselves in the future.

## Conclusion

As the world becomes increasingly linked via information, communications, and entertainment technologies, the international student experience becomes one in which media technologies play a crucial role in the constitution of 'home', identity, and 'connectedness'. In an environment of polymedia, where multiple media platforms for communications and entertainment exist, the choices that international students make about which media technologies to use and how they use them grant us insights into their underlying relationships and social ties with home. These media platforms become a transnational social field where students engage in identity work, in the building and maintenance (or determined avoidance) of connections to home and family, and in the reconstitution of 'home' itself.

This chapter has provided detailed ethnographic accounts of how and why international students are using media technologies in a variety of ways to connect to home – both in terms of recreating practices that evoke the construct of 'home' and maintaining connections with family members and with their home countries. While earlier research on international students and media have focused on the impact of specific media technologies on connectedness, this chapter gives insight into how the holistic international student experience is shaped by an environment of polymedia. At the same time, it also extends the nascent research on polymedia – which has primarily been focused on transnational families communicating with migrant workers – to international students. It also incorporates a broader understanding of polymedia to include not just the purposes of communications but also entertainment and information practices that inform the emotional and cultural environment which international students exist in. The findings of this chapter help emphasise the need for future studies of international students to take into account the media environments they inhabit.

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# Chapter 8

## Visualising Returnee Re-engagement with Local Workplaces and Community: A Case Study of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Anh Pham

**Abstract** This chapter considers Vietnamese international student returnee's re-engagement in the workplace and community of their home country. It describes ways that returnee 'self-formation' is established prior to their graduation and challenges of re-entry to work and society upon their return. It reflects on the experiences of students enrolled in different disciplines at Australian higher education institutions and the perspectives of national and locally based multinational employers on the knowledge, skills and attitudes the students have developed during their sojourns overseas. Together with discussion of the value of the knowledge and the skills gained, the chapter discusses graduates' linguistic and cultural 'disconnectedness' in their adaptations back to the home country's work culture and community norms. Drawing on these experiences and perspectives, practical implications are raised, for institutions and the international education sector at large to enhance returnee re-engagement and connectedness.

**Keywords** International mobility • Culture shock • Student returnee • Re-entry • Re-engagement

### Introduction

Higher education often is seen by governments and international organisations as playing a key role in the development of the educated and trained workforce required to facilitate economic growth in developing countries in Asia and the Pacific. However, despite significant increases in participation, the domestic higher education sector in some of these countries is producing graduates who are unable to find

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appropriate employment. The Government of Vietnam has seen international cooperation as a key mechanism for strengthening the capacity of this sector and for producing job-relevant graduates, but Vietnamese graduate capabilities do not seem to have caught up with the employers' expectations. Additional to the 25,477 Vietnamese enrolments in a variety of international education programs within Vietnam (Ziguras & Pham, 2014), Vietnamese international students abroad have been growing over time. From a modest stream of mostly government-funded students sent overseas, the numbers have escalated, with up to 125,000 reported in 2013, and most of them privately funded (ICEF, 2014). As many as seven in ten failed to return home (OECD, 2013), with an estimated 37,500 students returning to seek employment opportunities. This prompts important questions: whether the engagement of international institutions and their efforts to enhance graduate employability promotes Vietnamese international students' 'connectedness' to their home country, its workplaces and community or how their employability is nurtured prior to the completion of their studies.

The chapter considers the connectedness of Vietnamese who have engaged in doing a full degree and/or a semester abroad. It discusses the ways that returnee's 'self-formation' (Marginson, 2014) is established prior to their graduation and explores various challenges of re-entry into home-country workplaces and social environments upon return. It reflects the experiences of the students enrolled in a range of disciplines across Australian higher education institutions, and it considers the perspectives of national and multinational employers on the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students develop during their overseas sojourns. The chapter also explores these graduates' linguistic and cultural 'disconnectedness' upon return to home-country work settings and the wider community. The chapter concludes with discussion of the implications for enhancing the connections between learning in international higher education and employability.

The chapter begins with the case study background and a review of the literature on student self-formation prior to return home and their re-engagement upon return. It presents key results collated under two themes: (i) returnee's knowledge, skills and working attitudes and (ii) 'reverse culture shock' in the returnees' adjustments to their home-country work culture and community. It concludes with discussion of the implications for institutions' and the international education sector's engagement in international education.

## Case Study Background

The case study presented in this chapter is part of the findings of the PhD research project conducted from 2011 to 2014 on 'The Contribution of Cross-Border Higher Education to Human Resource Development in Ho Chi Minh City' (Pham, 2014). As international mobility is believed to produce the kinds of competences that employers are seeking (CIMO, 2014, p. 5), the thesis explored the issue of connectedness of Vietnamese international students at some length, drawing out the

students' voices to make clear how their learning and acculturation in host countries support their transitions when back home, including re-engagements with their home-country work settings. The thesis also concerned employer perceptions of 'employability', especially with regard to the development of student knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Purposive sampling was employed for this study as it allows the researcher to choose a case that illustrates particular features or processes in which he/she is interested (Silverman, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 students and 12 human resource [HR] managers representing 10 employers. The interviews with HR managers occurred mostly in June and July 2012 in Ho Chi Minh City, and with Vietnamese international students from HCMC in October and November 2013 in Melbourne. As key informants can certainly influence the data quality in such a case study (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009) and beneficial learning outcomes can be achieved regardless of mobility type or duration of the experience (Mellors-Bournes, Jones, & Woodfield, 2015), the criteria of selection for each group of participants were different. The student participants were involved in various forms of international education ranging from fully onshore to transnational transfer or exchange and from key disciplinary fields such as finance, accounting, marketing, business management and media communication. These students were approached and invited to participate through the Melbourne Overseas Vietnamese Students Association. The employer participants were from established arms of multinational companies with at least 5 years of business operations in Ho Chi Minh City and with 100 or more white-collar employees; all those participants had a demonstrable need for graduates from key international education programs such as business administration, information technology, finance and banking and electronic and electrical engineering. The HR directors and managers representing the employers had at least 5-year experience in the field and, therefore, held relevant knowledge and experience in working with an array of graduates of international mobility backgrounds.

The selection process for employers was undertaken through the researcher's industry networks, utilising a snowball technique in sourcing a representative sample (Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2013; Yin, 2009). First, advice and letters of introduction were sought from within this network – for which companies to approach and whom to contact for recruiting participants. These communications focussed the selection on employers with international business experience in leading industry groups, notably electronics, information technology, human resources, coffee and cosmetics. Second, 10 potential employers in these industries were contacted and advised on the purposes of the research and the criteria of selection and asked for referrals to HR managers. Third, 15 HR managers then were invited for the interviews; 12 returned positive responses, while the rest declined invitations to participate.

Ho Chi Minh City was chosen as the case study site for two reasons. It is Vietnam's most dynamic city and accommodates one of the largest international university branch campuses in the world, with 6825 students enrolled at the RMIT University campus in Viet Nam in 2013 (OBHE, 2012; RMIT 2014). It also attracts

the highest proportion of the country's direct foreign investment in higher education and is fast becoming a hub for international education activity in Southeast Asia (Chapman & Sakamoto, 2011). Second, with 300,000 businesses, 15 industrial zones and a high-tech centre, HCMC is a leading absorber of graduates. It also has great potential for adopting international business practices and skills for building capacities for the country's economic transition from primary exports to advanced manufacturing (Bodewig, 2012), and the city recognises a major educational challenge, of training its large unskilled labour force for sustainable economic growth (East-West Center & HIDS, 2009; ManpowerGroup, 2011; Vu & Haughton, 2003). Returnee's re-engagement with the workplace and community in this city reflects how their 'connectedness' makes sense in the context of the dynamics of dynamic local corporate cultures.

## Self-Formation Prior to Return

Marginson (2014) describes international student self-formation in higher education in general and that of international education in particular during their sojourn away from home. He suggests viewing student experience as a process of self-formation rather than adjustment to learning, living and work culture in a new place, as 'all international students cross the border to become different, whether through learning, through graduating with a degree, through immersion in the linguistic setting, or simply through growing up'; most of them adjust themselves and their preferred trajectory through acquiring foreign attributes necessary to their psychological well-being and academic success (p. 7). The self-formation in this scenario is imminent and it is open to many influences since students are not experienced in the demands of the new institutional and cultural settings before the journey. Therefore, the students must respond and fashion themselves as they go (pp. 13–14). Students' experience of mobility is thus primarily seen as a self-formed process rather than one of individual adjustment activities (pp. 9–10). In support of Marginson's analysis, Tran's (2015) study of factors affecting international student mobility emphasises 'becoming' and transnational mobility as 'a resourceful vehicle to help international students become the kind of person they want to be' (p. 1). Since mobility embraces students' aspirations for educational, social, personal and professional development, it facilitates 'their pursuit of the integrated forms of social, cultural and professional capital' (p. 19).

Experiences of international student engagement in professional, cultural and social activities have been significantly described in the literature (Campbell & Li, 2008; Cho and Yu, 2015; Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014; Kashima and Loh, 2006; Marginson, 2014; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010; Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006). However, similar accounts of the acculturation experiences of Vietnamese international students are few (Le, 2011; Nguyen, 2012; Nguyen, 2013; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013; Tran, 2015). It is clear that different types of education provision provide different spaces

for student engagements and their post-study re-engagement with the home country. The chapter, therefore, concerns both Vietnamese onshore students and those engaged in a semester abroad through transfer and exchange programs at their foreign host institutions.

With respect to cultural engagements in the host country, Le (2011) points out that Vietnamese student acculturation in Australia is characterised by stresses in making connections – cultural, linguistic and political – with existent communities of Vietnamese overseas. By examining the attitudes of Australian Vietnamese refugee communities and attitudes of Anglo-Australians towards these students, this author suggests marked cultural mistrust towards others by the students and racism between Vietnamese refugee and international students, each of which influences their adaptation into the host country and their mental well-being. Compounding challenges are the challenges of gaining the required knowledge and skills to deal proficiently with new, multi-faceted interactions, with lecturers and tutors, local students and local communities, housemates, families and friends, in ways that are appropriate to their sociocultural heritage and identities as Vietnamese nationals (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013). In dealing with the pressures, students construct and reproduce their identities both as individuals and as members of an international student society. In this respect, arguably the pursuit of host-country connectedness can in some ways help to prepare them for their home-country re-engagement; in many cases, this is not a smooth a learning process, however.

## Re-engagement Upon Return

The literature on the re-entry challenges facing international students falls into two parts: most have been concerned with the experiences of those engaged with fully onshore international education contexts; there have been quite a few works that explore the experiences of those engaged in transfer and exchange, and research on cultural re-engagement with the home-country culture is well covered (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gomes et al., 2014; Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016; Le, 2014; Robertson, Hoare, & Harwood, 2011; Rohrllich & Martin, 1991; Sample, 2012). However, there is a marked gap in research focussing on the progressive character of student self-formation.

One attempt to visualise the progress of self-formation of international students beyond their sojourn is that of Bochner, Lin and McLeod (2001). In this study, 15 Asian graduate students attending the University of Hawaii were asked to anticipate three events that would make them happy and three events that would make them unhappy after their return. They confirmed, from the perspectives of returning sojourners, that the most significant aspect of re-entry was the re-engagement with three major social networks – professional, peer and family groups. More importantly, the main challenge highlighted was that of the contradictory social demands that returnees were likely to experience in each of these domains. Student experiences of connectedness to each network are critical to their journey of ‘becoming’.

Coming back for many Singaporean returnees was a positive experience, a 'true homecoming' (Robertson et al., 2011, p. 690). According to these authors, most returnees felt a strong affiliation with their country through social networks, national identity or family, but there remained a feeling of disconnectedness resulting from their lack of communication or social connection with their home context during their time abroad. One returnee in particular raised difficulties in coping with consumerism, an intrinsic part of Singaporean social life.

Hao et al. (2016) have investigated how international higher education shapes mainland Chinese students' subsequent career development. International higher education experiences positively shaped their careers and were important to their advantage in China's competitive labour market due to their adaptability, foreign language competence, capacity to learn quickly and familiarity with foreign environments. However, they also found that the process of relocation required them to effectively readjust themselves and to become comfortable again with China's distinctive forms of interpersonal relations, local cultures and working pace and styles. As a result of their mobility and 'becoming', mindsets and their sense of home-country culture were subconsciously transformed, and they needed to refresh themselves to regain in-depth understanding of Chinese culture and the domestic market and its fast-changing environment.

Regarding Vietnamese returnees, reverse culture shock upon return to Vietnam was recently captured in Le's (2014) study of students at a private university in the northwest region of the United State of America. Looking at their sojourn as a process, and from their time abroad through to their time back home after graduation, Le identifies the 'shock' as a result of significant changes in their worldviews during their time away and substantial changes in their intercultural sensitivity following exposure to American work settings and general living environment. The shock registered as losses of career opportunities, in their personal relationships and as difficulties in dealing with the home country's prejudice against their repatriates.

In a different study of Vietnamese returnees enrolled locally but engaged in exchange or transfer programs overseas as part of their transnational education program, contradictory feelings upon return were highlighted (Nguyen, 2013). This author looked at how global education market forces and their associated ideologies morph with local forces and how culture, traditions and the Vietnamese nation state may serve to foster feelings of disappointment, excitement, creativeness and fulfilment. She argued that these students, in dealing with the intersections of the economic, cultural and political dimensions of globalisation and colonialism, found that their traditional Vietnamese identities were under pressure to change, and they were obliged to take on a new set of skills, as required for their transition back to home-country workplace and community. At the same time, there was clear evidence of the high market value of the generic skills, international experience and business perspectives developed during their exchange (Nguyen, 2012; Pham, 2014).

Given that a key aim of international education is enhancing graduate employability and skills suited to work in a globalised society (Yang et al., 2006), the importance of identifying the broadest range of knowledge, skills and attitudes



needed for students to contribute to the current and future global knowledge society is clear (Leask, 2005) as these are crucial to the success of connectedness with the work culture upon their return. The adjustments and self-formations during their journey of international higher education allow them to engage with a host-country and foreign culture, which directly enhances the take-up of higher levels of knowledge and skills (Marginson, 2014). So, too, it enhances their graduate employability by providing greater levels of capability in re-engaging with their home-country work cultures.

## Knowledge, Skills and Working Attitudes

Little evidence has been published about transnational employability (Mellors-Bournes et al., 2015), and even less on how the returnees are to be trained for enhanced connectedness. Yet, the challenges for both students and employers in enhancing the students' acculturation and development of the knowledge, skills and working attitudes expected for their future career are significant.

The analysis of the interview data for HCMC reveals different emphases and values given by returning students of different disciplinary backgrounds. Most students affirm the practical gains from the knowledge that international curricula can provide, but there are important variations across their responses. Thus students taking major studies in management, marketing and banking are happy with the knowledge they acquire; for those studying media and communication, their expectations of up-to-date, international-based case studies were not all met. One student participant commented:

The case studies we discuss are mostly Australian-based and limited to the events happening within Melbourne suburbs such as Footscray and/or Maribyrnong. I don't think it addresses my expectation of updated international-based information as I believe that, to prepare students to work in fast changing world of media industry no matter where they are going to work, knowledge of media needs to be daily worldwide updated in an internationalised curriculum. (Media student, master fully onshore)

However, students who are engaged in transnational, in-country international curriculum in finance find the case studies provided for classroom discussion and assignments to be applicable to their anticipated career practices. The following comment is typical of the students' perspectives on their learning practice:

Case studies to be lectured and practiced in financial analysis of our class are mostly well-known listed companies on Vietstock, making it easy to access the latest updated and practical data for groupwork and/or assignments, and more importantly, relevant to my preferred workplace back home. (Finance student, bachelor exchange)

Consistent with key findings from prior studies of the dilemmas in formation of student identity in offshore education (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006), the offshore students "seek identity as members of the educational community through pursuing local ways of belonging" (p. 294). Thus the preferred styles of dealing with the

challenges differ in line with students' geographical location, whether they are engaged in offshore or onshore education.

However, the participants clearly share the view that both intra-curriculum and extra-curriculum activities advance their professional skills and can transform them as individuals. For some, to deal with their difficulties of living in a new country – of being disconnected from family and community, of associated loss of the solidarity and moral bonding within these relationships – they draw emphatically on prior cultural knowledge in order to make sense of their world (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013). Indeed, a strategy of engaging in networking and social clubs in responding to culture shock and feelings of isolation at the start and throughout their period abroad can transform their career prospects.

Well, my experiences....I'm terribly shocked in my first semester onshore. I even lost my interests of study. I have no friends and don't know how to make friends with the locals. In class, I just sit there...alone. Sometimes I want to cry. However, as a student of marketing, I know that networking is very important and then I start to help myself. I engage in as a university ambassador and student union member. This strategy can really help. I am now the president of Vietnamese International Association at my university....you know...my confidence and leadership are improved, my LinkedIn network as well. (Marketing student, bachelor transfer)

I felt disappointed and isolated at the very first time. It is because lectures of master programs are mostly after work schedule, and my classmates are terribly busy working the whole day and now just hurry home. I am lucky to find my current part-time job in my field and also my talent in media allows me to engage in student association leadership. I am in charge of all media jobs for the association. This is good to gain industry experience and also good engagement strategy really. (Media student, master fully onshore)

These experiences echo Campbell and Li's (2008) findings, which note the overall satisfaction of Asian students in their engagements and academic adjustments and cultural learning challenges. Specifically, Chinese returnees' ability to utilise knowledge, skills and strengths in making social contribution are reported by Lin-Stephens, Uesi and Doherty (2015, p. 123). The perspectives of Vietnamese returnees on their re-engagement are rather less clear, however. The cases discussed below focus on returnees' cultural re-engagement into local work environments.

## Reverse Culture Shock

As greater numbers of graduates strive to pave the way for a smooth return home (Tinmoi, 2010), they face challenges of a reverse cultural shock (Hao & Welch, 2012; Pritchard, 2011; Robertson et al., 2011). Indeed, the issue has attracted growing attention from Vietnamese national media. More widely across the region, some one third of young Chinese returnees encounter this shock when making adaptations back to their own cultural and work environment, an experience that arguably is unavoidable after extended time abroad and after becoming familiar with Western

knowledge and culture (Hao & Welch, 2012). At times, graduates with foreign higher educational backgrounds do not demonstrate clear understandings of the local social context or of networking with local business, and the shortfalls are heightened if returnees have no prior local work experience. An extended absence from local social life can in itself see returnee's out of date about local society as well as the economy and inhibit their opportunities for building up their own network with local businesses and for extending their experience with the local working styles. Such concerns and challenges are a reality among Vietnamese (Vietbroader, 2015). As two returnees described it:

Reverse culture shock is real in thinking about start-up back home with quite different market environment, networking and culture. My expectation of teamwork and support from other colleges should not be there as I have to do it all by myself. (Business management student – bachelor fully onshore)

It is kind of worry thinking about how to update knowledge of local market and network with local peers while overseas. (Marketing student – bachelor transfer)

Considering employers' demand for demonstrable communication skills, in-depth understanding of local cultures and the domestic business environment can be as critical as practical academic knowledge. As Hao and Welch (2012) point out for mainland Chinese returnees, understandings of Western cultures and international alumni networks developed via periods abroad are not sufficient to address Chinese employers' expectations. And, indeed, employer expectations can extend to the returnee's sociolinguistic credentials that the returnees' capacities for adapting to traditional cultural norms and practices of the home society have not been diminished by their student experience. For Vietnamese returnees, different employers seek different levels of language skill. For one leading business:

Graduates from international education face difficulties of finding the equivalents for the terminologies in their mother tongue. In formal writing, they struggle to write a formal business letter and to put this letter in the right format and/or standard writing mode. What they write seems "weird" to local business practices. (HR manager, US employer)

Beyond presentation skills, communication skills overall are a key concern of employers and of very great concern when the returnee's language competency in both English and Vietnamese are weak. One HR manager of a large employer in the chemical industry explains:

We highly value applicants' fluency and communicative sensitiveness in their mother tongue when recruiting for some particular positions in sales and marketing since our products are for clients with very limited literacy knowledge. The friendlier communicative skill they possess, the higher revenue they can get. (HR manager, German employer)

With or without the preferred skills for transition to work at home country, returnees to Vietnam face a competitive workplace environment with complex multicultural currents – in company ownership structures and business plans and day-to-day working styles – and effective adaptation strategies are critical to their employability and promotion.

## **‘When in Rome, Do as the Romans Do’**

Regarding the acquisition of knowledge of international work cultures, Western-dominated cultural leanings are not necessarily a key to success in Asia: Many global companies originated in the region, and sometimes the business styles they pursue are very different from the Western. In solving problems with technical procedures, for example, Asian bosses may tend to be flexible rather than strictly following the expected guidelines (Pham, 2014). Cultural adaptation to the new work environment can take time where the ‘cultural zone’ – of management styles and ways of thinking – draws on East Asian and Southeast Asian work cultures.

Many returnees have successfully negotiated the shocks in adapting to foreign country cultures; arguably their travel informs a heightened sensitivity to their own and wider Vietnamese ways of doing things and thus equips them for the challenges of re-engagement. As the often-heard Vietnamese proverb advises, ‘nhập gia tùy tục’ or ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’. This golden rule is all the more apt where employers respect Asian cultural practices. Thus the traditional rapport building among colleagues sharing dinner or singing karaoke after work hours or at weekends, for example, might be considered unimportant by some Western employers. It is, however, very popular, if not seen as essential for effective networking in the Vietnamese work environment. Returnee graduates in business management and others seeking managerial careers should certainly reflect on these issues in their career planning.

Another example, shared by an experienced HR manager, is that while it is normal for ‘all employees to stand up and deeply nod to greet the boss of the company chief executive whenever he comes and visits their work stations’, such a practice might be shocking for a returnee who has gone through internships and graduated in Western-styled work environments and seem a great challenge in their re-engagements within an Asian global work setting. Similarly, conflict can emerge from putting views forward, for example, for innovation and research, in a firm way. Again, Asian work culture can throw up a kind of cultural barrier for Western-educated graduates, as was explained by this manager: ‘It is not a big surprise if their voices of innovation and/or new ideas are not welcomed by the old and experienced managers who have been working for over 10 years’. The value of the ideas is sometimes not the problem; rather it is the direct style of voicing the issues can matter more in an Asian-based work environment.

The above findings on returnee re-engagements suggest that the students in this case study were mostly aware of challenges upon graduation and transition to work, but they were not fully prepared for it, either academically or culturally. Second, a key issue in effective re-engagement is whether or not there is shared ground in the viewpoints of employers and students regarding the challenges facing the returnee, and this, in turn, suggests the question: In what ways may graduates prepare for as well as ensure they are effectively informed on employers’ requirements relating to graduate language and intercultural competence? The interviews can only provide student and employer views on the ‘output’ of the educational process, including

graduate knowledge, skills and mindsets; their relative importance for re-engagement strategy as a whole needs to be evaluated in a context of the particular socio-economic and educational policies framing the educational provision.

## Implications

The number of Vietnamese returnees seeking to re-engage with their home-country workplace and community has grown with the significant increase in the number of Vietnamese international students abroad. This might well raise questions for international education institutions, about their appreciation of their students' self-formation beyond their graduation and curriculum, and useful innovations to pedagogy that support the returnee in becoming the kinds of citizens they want to be and the citizens they need to be to succeed in a globalised world and, indeed, how research in this area can strategically inform academic, managerial and professional staff development to enhance success in this sector.

The scope of this case study to advance a statistical representation or a particular theory is limited due to the sample size, though it does enable the explorations needed to provide insights into how international students can and do struggle in their adaptations to a host country, and in their sustaining 'connectedness' to their home-country language and other cultural credentials. The students in this study largely did, indeed, gain the knowledge, skills and mindsets needed for their transitions and, ultimately, for reconnection with the local workplace. These students are social agents striving to adapt to the cultures of others and, at the same time, embrace their own cultures and establish social networks that meet their sense of belonging (Nguyen, 2013). They do so in so far as the formal support structures around their engagements allow them to achieve the knowledge, develop the skills and acquire the attitudes required for their re-engagement. These findings underscore the need for further research, with larger populations and across other cultures.

## Conclusion

In a vacuum of research giving voice to international students and their multinational employers, the chapter provides insights into the complex social world of a group of Vietnamese students engaging in Australian higher education and the cultural richness enhancing their connectedness. The chapter has looked at student self-formation in international education as a process – from the experiences during the sojourn overseas through to their re-engagement upon return – and affirms the arrays of challenges faced by the returnee in adapting to the expectations of their employers and the wider societal context of their home society (Pritchard, 2011). It has explored how particular groups of students variously develop their employability skills needed for their re-engagement, a process that calls on them to reflect on

their own sojourn and learning experiences within international curricula. It also identifies ways that these new-found skills can satisfy the expectations of locally based multinational employers and also help prepare them for their preferred jobs and successful re-engagement with their home culture. The findings emphasise the dynamic character of the international student experience and shed light on the abiding importance of social interactions for both individual self-formation and 'connectedness'.

International education providers are invited to embrace cultural diversity by recognising the sociocultural influences and local cultural norms that stem from students' social networks as determining factors in their learning and being and more importantly making necessary adjustments to their indigenous culture in their preferred work environment. These sociocultural factors should be considered when revising aspects of curriculum and pedagogy, to provide opportunities for international students to develop employability skills prior to their return and transition to the global world of work.

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# Chapter 9

## ‘Home Is Where the Heart Is’: The Experiences of Expatriate PhD Students and Returnees

Ana Delicado

**Abstract** This chapter aims to analyse the motivations and experiences of researchers who leave their country to be trained abroad and those of returnees, in particular how they integrate into their workplace and community abroad and back at home. It is based on quantitative information built on administrative and survey data concerning mobility flows and reintegration modalities in the Portuguese scientific system, complemented with a set of interviews addressing motivations, career trajectories and reintegration experiences. Motivations to go abroad relate mainly to scientific drives such as to learn new theories and methodologies, to improve the scientific CV and to establish international networks, but non-scientific reasons such as cross-cultural experiences are also mentioned. Incentives to return home are twofold, either to resume a previously tenured position or to try to obtain one, depending on the generation to which the researcher belongs. However, non-scientific justifications such as being close to family or other country-related motivations play a very relevant role.

**Keywords** Mobility • Motivations • Experiences • Portugal • Researchers

### Introduction

International mobility has become all but mandatory in scientific careers in Europe. This is particularly true in peripheral countries, where the lack of training opportunities or the desirability of acquiring research experience in a laboratory at the core of the scientific system provides a strong incentive for researchers to go abroad. Portugal has been mainly a sending country in scientific mobility flows, but a significant proportion of expatriate researchers do return to the home country, often after obtaining their PhDs abroad. This chapter aims to analyse the motivations and

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experiences of researchers who leave their country to be trained abroad and of those who return to Portugal. It focuses on how they integrate into their workplace and community abroad and back at home.

Two types of mobile researchers are identified, corresponding to different career situations and facing different hurdles in pursuing scientific activities. An older generation of scientists left the country to pursue graduate training after obtaining relatively stable positions in academia, so their return path was nearly always ensured. Return rates in this group are high and their reintegration was fairly smooth. Younger generations went abroad without a ‘safety net’, so their paths are much more unpredictable, zigzagged and precarious, and lack of stability may drive them away from the home country again or from science altogether.

However, there are also some common traits between these two groups: a predominance of personal, rather than professional, motivations for returning home; a need for professional readjustment in the face of difficulties in continuing to do science as they had become accustomed to; and an effort to maintain connections with the host country and institution and uphold international networks.

Contextual factors also play an important role in return trends and will be examined as well in this chapter. Though policies for encouraging return are an important aspect, other conditions come into play when researchers make decisions about their careers, such as the availability of resources for science, the stability and predictability of funding and the situation in the higher education and business sectors in terms of employment, progression and remuneration.

This chapter is structured in three main sections. It begins by ‘setting the scene’: presenting the methodology of the research in which it is based, a brief overview of existing literature on the issue of international mobility and quantitative data regarding exit and return rates in Portugal. Next, it discusses the motivations of PhD students for leaving and then returning to the home country. Finally, the chapter addresses the experiences of living and working abroad and at home and how connections to the country of origin or to the former host country are maintained.

## **Methodology**

The research in which this chapter is based was carried out between 2007 and 2009, as part of a postdoctoral grant funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). The data stems from three main sources: official statistical information, a survey of Portuguese researchers abroad and semi-directive interviews with returnee researchers (who had obtained their PhD abroad).

Statistical data on exit and return flows and reintegration modalities of students and researchers were mined from public databases of Portuguese and international agencies. This data was used to gain an understanding of the mobility trends but also to gauge the size of the returnee group and trace their individual career paths.

The online survey of Portuguese PhD students and researchers abroad was carried out in 2007. After compiling a database of researchers abroad (convenience

sample) from multiple sources (associations, institutional websites), 803 invitations to fill in the online questionnaire were sent by email. Five hundred and twenty one responses were received, 321 of which from PhD students (62 % of the sample). Fifty-five percent of the PhD students who replied to the survey were women. The questionnaire was purpose built and addressed five main issues: motivations for leaving the country, professional experiences abroad and intention to return home.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2008, with 32 researchers (11 of whom women) who had obtained their PhD abroad and were currently working in Portugal in different types of institutions (universities, polytechnics, state laboratories, hospitals, business companies), from different scientific fields, and of different generations and career positions. The selection of interviewees was based on the statistical analysis performed in the first stage. The interview script addressed most of the issues included in the survey but also the motivations for returning and the constraints and opportunities faced by researchers after moving back home.

## **Brief Overview of Literature on Transnational Mobility**

The transnational mobility of PhD students is usually integrated into two different strands: one that concerns student mobility, centred, for instance, on discussions concerning the transnational market in tertiary education (Baruch, Budwahr, & Khatri 2007; Tremblay, 2002; Van Bouwel & Veugelers, 2013), and another that focus on highly skilled migration, dominated by debates on brain drain and brain gain. In the latter, doctoral students are usually considered within wider mobile groups, such as professionals (Batalova & Lowell, 2006; Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005; Connell, Wood, & Crawford, 2005; Davenport, 2004; Ferro, 2004; Rizvi, 2005) or more specifically scientific researchers (Ackers et al., 2001; Casey, Mahroum, Ducatel, & Barré, 2001; Diaz-Briquets & Cheney, 2002; Gill, 2005; Morano-Foadi, 2005; Thorn & Holm-Nielsen, 2006). Also, there are some studies that focus exclusively on the trajectories and experiences of PhD students abroad (Akulavicius & Grundey, 2011; Avveduto, 2001; Baruch et al., 2007; Lee & Kim, 2010).

Numerous studies focus on students or researchers of a specific nationality crossing borders to further their education or their careers. These studies are of course more common in sending countries, namely, in southern and eastern Europe (Akulavicius & Grundey, 2011; Avveduto, 2001; Cruz-Castro & Sanz-Menendez, 2005; Ferro, 2004; Gill, 2005; Millard, 2005) or in the global south and Asia (Buti, 2008; Kreimer, 1997; Lee & Kim, 2010). But there is also research that focuses on receiving countries and explores their appeal to international students and scientists (Alarcon, 1999; Batalova & Lowell, 2006; Diaz-Briquets & Cheney, 2002; Nerdrum & Sarpebakken, 2006; Szélenyi, 2006; Todisco, Brandi, & Tattolo 2003).

Whereas some studies pay particular attention to exit trends, highlighting motivations and international mobility experiences (Akulavicius & Grundey, 2011; Avveduto, 2001; Ferro, 2004; Ivancheva & Gourova, 2011; Jałowiecki & Gorzelak,

2004; Schiller & Diez, 2012; Thorm & Holm-Nielsen, 2006; Todisco et al. 2003), others examine return flows and the factors and policies for attracting mobile students and researchers back to the home country (Cruz-Castro & Sanz-Menendez, 2005; Gill, 2005; Lee & Kim, 2010) and others still the decision to remain abroad after completing their studies (Baruch et al., 2007).

Despite brain drain still dominating most of the discussions on PhD student mobility, based on the concern that sending countries lose their most promising young professionals after investing heavily in their education, there are also alternative interpretations that see students abroad as part of diaspora networks, maintaining a sense and practices of connectedness to home (Barré, Hernandez, Meyer, & Vinck 2003; Davenport, 2004; Khadria, 2013; Meyer & Brown, 1999; Woolley & Turpin, 2006).

This chapter aims to contribute to the literature in this area by concentrating on a sending country from Southern Europe, addressing both the exit and the return flows and the motivations and experiences of PhD students.

## **Transnational Mobility Trends of PhD Students from Portugal**

Transnational mobility trends are notoriously hard to analyse in quantitative terms, and those of PhD students are no different in this aspect. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as well as national statistical offices, have developed some efforts in this direction, by collecting information on tertiary education and doctorate holders. However, there is still no systematic or geographically comprehensive data available. Despite the limitations of the statistical data on PhD students abroad and returnee researchers in Portugal, some proxy indicators, such as fellowships for studying abroad, can be used to draw a general picture of their mobility flows.

In what regards exit trends, even though there are no Science and Technology (S&T) policy documents that address specifically the issue of mobility, in practice the Portuguese government has supported PhD training abroad since the 1980s, by awarding fellowships (which cover tuition fees and living expenses). The available data shows that over four and a half thousand students benefited from these fellowships between the mid-nineties and 2014 (Table 9.1). However, if at the beginning of this period the proportion of fellowships awarded for studying abroad was nearly the same as for studying at home, in later years the former has been much reduced. This is due to the growth of the Portuguese scientific system (including the creation of PhD programmes), but also to an implicit policy choice of favouring mixed fellowships (in which students are enrolled in institutions both at home and abroad), assumedly because they encourage the return home and reduce 'brain drain'. Until 1998, the majority of fellowships were awarded to men, but since then women outnumber men in the number of fellowships received (an indicator of the growing weight of women in the Portuguese scientific system).

**Table 9.1** PhD fellowships awarded by FCT

		1994–1998	1999–2003	2004–2008	2009–2014	Total
Fellowships abroad	N	1428	1188	1210	752	4578
	%	41.2	31.2	14.8	10.1	20.3
Mixed fellowships	N	382	808	1890	1,801	4881
	%	11.0	21.2	23.2	24.31	21.3

Source: FCT (2016) sources for funding PhD level education, such as grants from other institutions at home, in the host country or from transnational organisations such as the European Commission (for instance, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions). Students can also rely on private or family income. However, there is little to none statistical data on these sources

**Table 9.2** PhD degrees obtained abroad recognised by Portuguese universities

	1970– 1979	1980– 1989	1990– 1999	2000– 2009	2010– 2013	Total
Number of PhD	477	815	1374	1768	815	5249
Percentage in total PhD	62.0	39.5	26.4	14.8	9.7	18.5

Source: DGEEC, National Registry of PhDs, 2015

Return trends are even more difficult to assess. Although researchers with a foreign PhD degree can have it recognised by a Portuguese university and this is mandatory for obtaining a position in public institutions, many other jobs do not require such procedures. Nevertheless, available statistical data (Table 9.2) shows that in the 1970s, over 60 % of PhDs in Portugal were obtained abroad (even though this figure also includes foreign nationals), but this trend has been reversed in the following decade and much reduced in more recent years. Again, this is explained by the growth of PhD programmes in Portugal.

According to the latest available figures (for 2012), Portugal has 24,992 PhD holders. Thirty-five percent of them have spent time abroad for research, but there is no data on how many obtained their degree outside the country. In 2006, 29 % of the PhD holders working in the Portuguese scientific system had obtained their degree abroad (3200 persons).

Although there are no explicit policies to encourage the return of PhD students after their degree (see Batalova and Lowell (2006), Casey et al. (2001), Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menendez (2005), Davenport (2004), Gill (2005), Morano-Foadi (2005), Thorn and Holm-Nielsen (2006) and Rizvi (2005)), FCT has been providing some incentives, by awarding postdoctoral fellowships and fixed-term contracts to doctorate holders, though the calls are not restricted to returnee researchers. There is no information available on how many of the over 7000 postdoctoral fellowships since 1994 have been awarded to Portuguese researchers with a PhD obtained abroad. However, 12 % of all researchers hired under the Ciencia 2008 and 2009 programme (which funded close to 1200 5-year contracts) are Portuguese researchers who obtained their PhD abroad (and 41 % were foreign nationals). FCT has also taken part in the European programme Welcome II, which aimed to attract back European researchers working outside Europe, by awarding 38 5-year contracts in 2011.

An effort to trace the return patterns of around 3000 Portuguese researchers with a foreign PhD, by combining different databases (PhD degrees obtained abroad recognised by Portuguese universities, lists of higher education personnel), has shown that in 2006 the majority were working in public universities (69 %) and the remaining in private higher education (17 %), public polytechnic institutes (8 %) and state laboratories (3 %). Just 0.7 % was working in business companies, which is consonant with the very low rate of employment of PhDs in the private sector (only 4 % of the total number of researchers with a PhD – DGEEC, 2014). Around 2 % had left research altogether. The absorption capacity of public universities had been dwindling, since younger PhD holders were working more frequently in polytechnics and private institutions than previous generations. This trend must have persisted and even increased in the following years, since Portuguese universities have been facing severe restrictions in terms of new contracts even before the austerity policies started in 2011.

## Mobility Motivations

### *Motivations for Leaving the Home Country*

International mobility has become almost a given in the careers of the highly skilled or the ‘creative class’. Professional motivations are thus the main drive for leaving the home country. But what role do personal reasons play in making decisions on where to live and work?

With regard to the motivations for going abroad, most PhD students surveyed awarded greater importance to scientific drives: to learn new theories or methodologies, to improve the scientific CV and to establish international networks. However, constraints in the home country (which some authors label as ‘push factors’ – Baruch et al., 2007; Ivancheva & Gourova, 2011; Jałowicki & Gorzelak, 2004; Schiller & Diez, 2012; Thorm & Holm-Nielsen, 2006; Todisco et al. 2003) also weigh on the decision: equipment or facilities that are not available in Portugal and better quality of training abroad (see also Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2013)). Open responses to this survey question raised the issue of other material factors (less generous grants at home) and other limitations of the Portuguese scientific system: ‘the mentality of the research community abroad is less institutional and hierarchical. Merit is more important than cronyism’ (PhD student in the natural sciences in the UK, male).

As to non-scientific reasons, the experience of living abroad is highly valued, but other personal motivations, such as being close to family and friends, are seldom mentioned (but when they do it is mainly by women). Open responses to this survey also highlighted the relevance of the cross-cultural experience: For instance, a male

PhD student in engineering in the Netherlands explains: 'To have contact with other cultures, languages, ways of thinking, all this gives you a benchmark that you don't gain if you don't change places. And having a benchmark helps in developing a critical spirit, in generating a dynamic of thought that is suitable for a researcher'.

Though many other factors have a stronger influence over the choice of the host institution (such as prestige, available resources or the opportunity to work with a particular researcher or in multidisciplinary teams), for PhD students it is also relevant the characteristics of the host country (language, culture), a previous contact with researchers from there, for instance, in conferences (see also Driaz-Briquets and Chenney (2002); Millard (2005)), and the recommendation from a professor in Portugal. These two last criteria are more valued by women, evidence that senior academic networks are facilitators for student mobility (Driaz-Briquets & Chenney, 2002; Millard, 2005; Van De Sande, Ackers, & Gill, 2005) and that women rely more on mentoring in scientific careers (Long & Fox, 1995; Sabatier, Carrere, & Mangematin, 2006). Open answers to this question underlined the importance of scientific and professional motivations, but also shed light on personal reasons: geographical proximity to Portugal, quality of life in the chosen city and compatibility with a partner's career (as several authors have shown, double scientific career couples are very common and this fact has an effect over mobility choices – Ackers, et al., 2001; Casey et al., 2001; Morano-Foadi 2005; Gill, 2005).

Interviews with returnee researchers show that the motivations for going abroad have remained fairly the same in the past few decades, although older generations stressed the deficiencies of the Portuguese scientific system (lack of equipment or of experienced supervisors). A lecturer in the natural sciences at a public university, who had done her PhD in the UK in the 1980s states that 'the area in which I work needed very expensive equipment and there was none in Portugal at the time. Our machines were very limited and it was difficult to do anything innovative, so I had to leave'.

For some, a PhD abroad was seen as more favourable for pursuing a scientific career, and others (mostly women) referred that they followed the recommendations of senior colleagues. Some interviewees also mentioned the 'pull factors' of foreign scientific systems, such as this CEO of a biotech company, who earned his PhD in natural sciences in the United States in the early 2000s:

It was the greatness and the status that research has in the United States that drew me. I thought that if I was to try out the type of work I wanted to do, to have a dynamic experience, an enriching experience from the scientific point of view, I really had to leave Portugal.

None of the interviewees mentioned non-professional motivations for going abroad. But when asked about the choice of country and institutions, some referred personal reasons, such as familiarity with the language, geographical proximity or even following a partner who had decided to study abroad (counterintuitively, this was mentioned by a male researcher). However, scientific justifications, such as the reputation of the institution or specialisation in a particular field, are predominant.



## *Motivations for Returning to the Home Country*

The survey also allows a glimpse into what may drive students home once they finish their education abroad. When asked about their willingness to return home within a 5-year timeframe, 56 % of PhD students answered positively. Among these, 80 % stated family reasons for returning and 73 % the desire to contribute to the Portuguese scientific system or to the development of Portugal. Sixty-four percent were motivated by the quality of life in the country. Very few mentioned a previous contract with a Portuguese institution (13 %) or a job offer in the country (11 %). Conversely, among the 44 % of respondents that had no intention of returning to Portugal, the majority is motivated by professional reasons: lack of job opportunities at home (74 %), a wish for continuing working abroad (71 %) and difficulties in career progression in Portugal (61 %).

The interviews with returnee researchers show more clearly the generational (and motivational) divide. For researchers with a prior work contract (as seen above, mostly from an older generation), returning to Portugal was the ‘natural’ decision for furthering their career, and in some cases, it was even mandatory under legal requirements (see also Gill (2005), Kreimer (1997) and Morano-Foadi (2005)). For instance, this social sciences university professor, who obtained her PhD in the UK in the early 1990s, explains: ‘It was almost an obligation to go back to my Faculty because I had a leave of absence, staying was never an option, I never thought about it, I always thought of coming back’.

For others, the main drive was moral obligation, such as this natural sciences university professor, who gained his PhD in Sweden in the early 1990s:

I wanted to return to my Faculty. I do not know if it was for scientific reasons. I wanted to return to the Faculty, I felt I had a debt to pay, and thought that the form of paying was to go back and teach what I had learned.

But some interviewees also mentioned the lack of professional opportunities abroad, such as this female university professor, also in the natural sciences, who had obtained her PhD in Germany in the 1990s:

So I came back because I had to come back because my job was here and because no other opportunity appeared in terms of work or life. But every once in a while I think about it and at the time I used to say – and still do – that if I had found a boyfriend anywhere in the world I wouldn’t have come back here.

For students who left the country without this professional ‘safety net’, family reasons come first and foremost (see also Casey et al. (2001)), Gill (2005), Lee and Kim (2010) and Todisco et al. (2003)). A health sciences researcher at a hospital, who obtained his PhD in the UK in the late 1990s, states that he returned ‘for merely personal reasons, neither I nor my wife had any objective professional reason for returning. Family is getting old, parents, siblings, some nostalgia, some longing for some things in this country’.

But some also mention the quality of life in Portugal as a motivation for returning home (Casey et al., 2001). This engineering sciences professor who earned his PhD in Germany in the mid-2000s declares:

We should say that the quality of life here is quite reasonable, in spite of the low salaries [...] we have a lot to see in Portugal, we have fantastic weather, we have very interesting historical and cultural heritage, we have beautiful natural parks. People some time don't value this, but this type of attractions can weigh on the decision

Like the researchers with a previous contract in Portugal, some of the younger researchers also mention the moral obligation (often connected to having received a fellowship) and the wish to contribute to Portuguese science, fulfilling one of the assumed benefits of international mobility for sending countries (Fontes, 2007; Rizvi, 2005; Szelenyi, 2006). For instance, a researcher in engineering working at a state laboratory who obtained his PhD in the Netherlands in the early 1990s declares:

In fact I had the opportunity of remaining abroad, I had job offers, but – I don't how to put it – I felt I owed the country a moral obligation because all my training up to the PhD cost a lot to the Portuguese government. Despite all, the country had invested a lot in me so I thought I had the moral obligation of giving back to the country part of the effort that was spent in my education. So I rejected those offers and sought to return with all the knowledge I had and the added-value of cooperating with those foreign institutions and the colleagues with whom I had connections in order to benefit our country, our S&T system.

Less frequently stated is the lack of opportunities for working abroad as a motivation for return, but some of the returnees faced this problem. Such is the case of this natural sciences postdoctoral fellow at a university, who gained her PhD in the UK in the early 2000s.

The UK is full of postdocs in botany, with far more interesting CVs than mine, who remain as postdocs. So we have to be realistic that opportunity [staying abroad] didn't exist. I applied for many jobs in the US because they have a much more diverse and wider labour market for scientists, because they have thousands of higher education institutions, but I didn't get any of the positions.

Once examined the motivations of mobile PhD students, both for leaving and returning to the country, it is now time to devote attention to the experiences of expatriates and returnees, in particular how they maintain ties of connectedness to the home and host countries.

## Mobility Experiences

### *Connectedness and Identity While Living Abroad*

Internationally mobile PhD students usually perform a balancing act of integrating in the host country while maintaining ties to the home country.

When asked about the adaptation to living and working abroad, most PhD students surveyed reported no difficulties, particularly in professional and cultural

terms. The only problem considered relevant was the distance from family and friends (more frequently mentioned by female PhD students). A few awarded some importance to material concerns such as finding accommodation and delays in receiving the grant. Open responses to this question raised other issues such as difficulties in managing family life (in particular childcare arrangements) and bureaucratic obstacles. This is in line with results from previous studies, such as Avveduto's (2001) survey of Italian PhD students abroad.

Since science is by nature a 'transnational social field' (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 2002), it is hardly surprising that the vast majority of respondents maintained strong connections with the home S&T system. Although informal contacts with colleagues are by far the most frequent type of connection (86 % of respondents), many also maintain some sort of work relationship in the home country. The most common form of keeping professional contact is by participating in conferences in Portugal (half of the respondents). Close to a third of respondents write in co-authorship with Portuguese researchers (though not necessarily working in Portugal). A quarter collaborate in research projects with Portuguese colleagues and 21 % have a contract with a Portuguese institution. Nearly a quarter of the PhD students surveyed were enrolled in an international interuniversity programme, involving institutions and research periods both at home and abroad. These institutional arrangements are mobility facilitators, decreasing its costs, delays and bureaucratic hurdles (Avveduto, 2001; Temblay, 2002).

On the one hand, these transnational professional connections increase the opportunities for mobile students to return home (Casey et al., 2001). On the other hand, students can serve as a channel for home institutions to establish or maintain international networks (Bienkowska & Klofsten, 2012; Ferro, 2004; Gill, 2005; Rizvi, 2005; Thorn & Holm-Nielsen, 2006), which is particularly important for obtaining European Union funding (framework programmes support exclusively research in international consortiums). Students can thus be part of diaspora networks, in which expatriates contribute to the advancement of their home country (Barré et al., 2003; Davenport, 2004; Khadria, 2013; Meyer & Brown, 1999; Woolley & Turpin, 2006).

Asked about non-professional connections to the home country, the majority of PhD students claim that they regularly read Portuguese newspapers, stay in touch with family and friends in Portugal (more frequent in the responses of female students) and travel to the home country. These connections rely strongly on digital technologies (Martin & Rizvi, 2014) and low-cost flights (Dobruszkes, 2013).

Expatriate students have other ways of nurturing their national identities abroad besides maintaining connections to the home country. Membership of voluntary associations of students or researchers from the home country is one of them. In the past few decades, a significant number of these organisations have arisen, with an international, national or even international scope. Such is the case, for instance, of the International Forum of Portuguese Researchers [FIIP], the Portuguese-American Post-Graduate Society [PAPS] (which has regional chapters), the MIT Portuguese Student Association or the Portuguese Association of Students and Researchers of the UK [PARSUK]. These organisations provide support and advice to expatriate

researchers but also aim to raise the visibility of these communities and advocate for their interests in the host or in the home countries (Catanzaro, 2012). Survey results show that a third of respondents belonged to Portuguese student or researcher associations in their host university or country, but only 11% belonged to more general immigrant's associations.

## Experiences of Reintegrating in the Home Country

The two generations of scientists mentioned above also face quite different conditions when they return home. The older generation had little trouble in resuming work in their previous jobs and in most cases had a smoother career progression. In public universities, full professors are more likely to have obtained their PhD abroad (estimated at 41 % in 2006) than associate professors (28 %) and assistant professors (18 %), which is also due to the growth of home-grown PhDs in recent years. These successful trajectories can be found in the interviews. A university professor in the natural sciences who had obtained his PhD in the UK in the early 1990s explains:

When I got back to my department, I had the support of the president of the scientific council in zoology, who made available to me all that I needed to do my research. Then FCT had research programmes for young PhD graduates [...] which was very good because we didn't have to compete with more experienced researchers, so I earned my first research grant, and then my second and I had no trouble in seeing my proposals approved.

However, this is not common to all returnees, who can face career stagnation or being weighed down by teaching or bureaucratic duties. In some cases, reintegration barriers were so severe that returnees abandoned research altogether, squandering the investment done in their training abroad, leading to the so-called brain waste (Carr et al., 2005).

The younger generation faces far more uncertainty and precariousness (see also Ackers et al., 2001, Casey et al., 2001). As seen above, opportunities in tenured positions have been very scarce in the past decades so returnee researchers often have no option other than fixed-term fellowships (3–6-year engagements with limited welfare rights and lower wages) or temporary contracts (usually for 5 years). Some even experience unemployment periods. However, precariousness does not affect exclusively internationally mobile researchers. It has become rather common in contemporary scientific careers (Enders & Weert, 2004; Henkel, 2000), as well as in the labour market at large. According to a postdoctoral fellow in a university who obtained her PhD in the natural sciences in the UK in the early 2000s:

Job opportunities really don't exist (...) here we are like students, we have no workers' rights, we have no access to unemployment benefits. [...] I'm not asking for a job for life, that doesn't exist abroad, contracts last three or four years, but there are more opportunities, after you contract runs out you have other opportunities, you apply and eventually you stay on.

These circumstances may lead to another type of ‘brain waste’: researchers who leave the home country again or that abandon science altogether, searching for employment in other areas. A female postdoctoral fellow in a university who gained her PhD in the UK in the early 2000s explains:

I want to stay. No doubt about it. In science or outside science if I can't find anything in science. But to stay. I'm not saying that if in 5 or 10 years from now I would have an opportunity to spend some time abroad... [...] I enjoyed immensely living abroad and I love to travel, but for now, definitely no. [...] I like science very much but I think personal life is more important)

## **Maintaining (or Losing) Networks After the Return Home**

One of the most frequently discussed advantages of student and research mobility is the constitution of transnational networks (Ackers, 2005; Cañibano, Otamendi, & Andújar, 2008; Connell et al. 2005; Gill, 2005; Horta, 2013; Lee & Kim, 2010; Miguélez, Moreno, & Suriñach 2009; Thorn & Holm-Nielsen, 2006; Van De Sande et al., 2005). Based on personal knowledge of participants, these networks can be activated once mobile scientists return home, for different purposes, such as joint research projects, co-authorship, dissemination of information or student exchanges. In the words of a postdoctoral fellow in a university who obtained her PhD in the natural sciences in the UK in the early 2000s:

I maintain collaborations with Edinburgh. Recently I got a small funding for a collaboration project and I was there for three months. I'm also still working on old projects in the US, at Virginia Tech and Milwaukee. I don't know if this will go on, but at the moment I maintain collaborations with all the institutions where I worked.

However, not all returnee researchers keep in touch with people and institutions in the former host country. Connections can be lost over time if they are not cultivated, particularly in the case of older researchers. Also, not every connection goes beyond informal contacts, which have far less impact over science.

In short, despite the high value placed on return mobility of the highly skilled, the experiences of returnee students are seldom free from attrition and difficulties. Between career hurdles and limited resources for pursuing top-level scientific work, it is mostly family and emotional reasons that drive the wish to return and remain in the home country. The sense of connectedness gained from studying in multinational and multidisciplinary teams abroad can be maintained at home, but has to be nurtured and sustained.

## **Conclusion**

Most of the data that supports this chapter dates back to 2009 and does not account for the potential transformations these phenomena have undergone since the crisis started in Portugal. There is anecdotal evidence that many scientists are among the

thousands of professionals that are leaving the country every year. The impact of these trends over the scientific system is only just now starting to show, and it is feared that it will be felt for a long time to come.

But overall, it is fair to say that internationally mobile PhD students have changed the face of science in Portugal. In the last decades, it has been people who obtained their doctoral degrees abroad that have been heading the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the government offices in charge of S&T policies and funding and the main research centres and universities. Returnees have played a very significant role in dragging the Portuguese scientific system out of its backwardness and infusing it with internationally acquired knowledge and practices. They have been responsible for establishing ties with reputed foreign institutions, increasing publication in international outlets and promoting the transnational circulation of students.

However, in times of crisis and austerity, circulation flows of talent tend to disfavour the countries more severely affected. Reduced career and work prospects at home mean that expatriate students will think twice of returning, delaying it in the hope of better times. But as time goes by, the links to the host country, in terms of family and career, become stronger and the likelihood of return diminishes. Conversely, those who had already made it back to the home country may consider leaving again, in search of better conditions or even the opportunity to continue working in science. And they are usually in a better position to pursue this option than those who never left in the first place.

Therefore, it is crucial to continue studying mobility trends of the highly skilled, in particular in the countries most affected by the economic crisis, at risk of returning to a situation of 'brain drain' or 'brain waste'. At a time when global inequalities are growing, education and qualifications are an increasingly precious resource.

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**Part III**  
**Connectedness/Disconnectedness and**  
**Identity Development**

## Chapter 10

# Where Are We, When Are We, and Who Are We to Each Other? Connectedness and the Evolving Meanings of International Education

Karen E. Rosenblum, David W. Haines, and Hyunyoung Cho

**Abstract** Focusing on a new branch campus in South Korea of an American university, this paper examines connectedness and social identity for students who are already international by virtue of their secondary education abroad, as they return “home” for higher education. Such *already international* students are part of a relatively invisible population, excluded from aggregate calculations of “international students.” Drawing on a decade’s work on student diversity at the main US campus, a year at the Korea campus, and a range of written accounts from students in both campuses, this research considers their identity and connectedness from the perspective of a basic set of coordinates: which “where” are we, which “who” are you (or me or us), and how will that matter for our interaction?

**Keywords** Social identities • Stigma • Returnee

The idea of *social* identities – that is, of identities tied to membership in social groups and categories and at least theoretically separable from personality – now stands as a focus that spans the social sciences and educational research. From its somewhat humble origin in the social science concepts of status (a position in a social structure), role (the acting out of status), and definition of the situation (initially in Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Goffman, 1959, 1967; Mead, 1934; Simmel, 1971; Thomas, 1923), social identity now serves as a way to unpack a broad range of social phenomena, from social movements (e.g., Nicholson, 2008) to ethnic and sectarian conflict (e.g., Peacock, Thornton, & Inman, 2007) and stratification (e.g., Tilly, 2005). While social identity is understood to be complex – simultaneously fluid and stable, singular and multiple, situated and perduring, negotiated,

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manipulated, and imposed – it is arguably the preeminent consideration in contemporary studies of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and sexuality.

Framed most simply, social identities follow from the determination of a basic set of coordinates: which “where” are we, which “who” are you (or me or us), and how will that matter for our interaction? Such coordinates intrinsically affect connectedness – social identities are sites, virtually locations, from which we connect, fail to connect, or refuse to connect with one another: from birth to burial, social identities are the “stuff” of household, neighborhood, church, culture, nation, and globe. Interpersonal connection, intimacy, and the mutual presence of authentic selves often require “fighting through” the multiplicity of expectations that attend social identities.

For students, faculty, and staff engaged in international education, the relationship between connectedness, social identity, and personal identity may be especially complex, not least because the category “international” implies a significantly expanded set of “where’s” and “who’s.” We suggest this complexity is not merely specialist interest in a small subset of the world’s student population. Rather the complexities of international student identity and connection carry growing significance because international students may foreshadow the emerging characteristics of students who are global by virtue of familial migration (Suarez-Orozco & Quin-Hilliard, 2004) rather than international education.

In this paper, we focus on the new branch campus in South Korea of an American university in Virginia. The students at George Mason University Korea (GMUK), thanks to their prior experience of living abroad, arrived at the campus with individualized versions of multiple cultures. Certainly, these students do not represent mainstream students, but, as we will discuss later in the paper, their experience is likely reflected in a portion of the international student population. Thus, drawing on a decade’s work on student diversity at the main Virginia campus, a year at the Korea campus, and a range of written student accounts about connections and identities in both places, this research aims to unpack the complexities that attend understanding connectedness for international students (Haines et al. 2006; Haines, 2007; Rosenblum, Kaya, et al. 2009; Rosenblum, Zhou, et al. 2009; Haines, 2013; Cho et al. 2016).

## The Setting

Both the Virginia and Korea campuses are decidedly international by any conventional measure, including student origins, background, experiences, and personal investment in identities that are international and global. The campuses also share some of the same faculty, the same academic structures and requirements, and some of the same students. In our case, those shared students included American students (of various national origins, including Korea) from the Virginia campus studying for a semester or two at the new Korea campus and students going from the Korea campus to complete their program’s sophomore-year residence in Virginia.

The home campus (a public state university) is located in the Virginia suburbs of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area; the region is home to significant commu-

nity populations of Koreans and Korean Americans, as is the university. The branch campus in Korea, Incheon Global Campus (IGC) located in one of Korea's free economic zones, is an initiative of the Incheon provincial government, which extended invitations to American and European universities and hopes to eventually host five university programs. The campus is located on the outskirts of a new, "green" city built on reclaimed wetlands and home to the United Nations Green Climate Fund.

At the time of our participation (with the first cohort of enrollment in 2014), there were two other American universities on campus with a combined total student population of around 300. The campus, almost completely built out, was intended to house about 10,000 students on completion. Residence halls were occupied by students and locally based professionals, the latter generally returning home to Seoul over the weekend (Seoul was about 60 minutes away, by bus). While the students enrolled in our program were largely Korean nationals, the majority had extensive educational experience outside Korea, including having earned high school diplomas in the USA and other Anglophone countries. Thus, almost all of the students in the cohort were starting college in a somewhat unfamiliar "home" country and sometimes with limited Korean language abilities.

Much of the interest in international education, whether by administrators, teachers, researchers, or students, hinges on the value of going somewhere else to broaden one's personal and intellectual horizons. In the paradigmatic cases, students go from "here" to "there" for their tertiary education. They end up returning "here," staying "there," or sometimes moving on to other places. Yet this conceptualization fails to capture the complexities of a landscape in which the students who arrive at institutions of higher education may be *already* international, having experienced life and education in multiple countries as secondary school students. This *secondary* school population is marked by invisibility on the aggregate level, since national and international bodies (such as UNESCO or the OECD) limit their calculation of "international students" to those enrolled in *tertiary* institutions.<sup>1</sup> These calculations also axiomatically overlook those students who were educated abroad in secondary schools, but are returning to the country of their birth for university enrollment.

In all, despite their international experience, the Korean students in our case – returning "home" for higher education after secondary school attendance abroad – would be appropriately described as globally mobile, transnational, boundary crossers (Görüz, 2011), but they would not be formally included in measures of "international students." Our case is likely not unusual: with an annual increase of student mobility in higher education of about 5 % over the last decade and an annual increase of over 10 % in the last three decades (UNESCO, 2009, pp. 36–37),

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<sup>1</sup> The Korean government defines international students as non-Korean students attending Korean universities (Görüz, 2011, Appendix F). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics and OECD calculations define "international students" as "crossing borders for the specific purpose of studying" (Clark, 2009). *Project Atlas* defines international students as "students who undertake all or part of their higher education experience in a country other than their home country OR [sic] students who travel across a national boundary to a country other than their home country to undertake all or part of their higher education experience" (Project Atlas, 2015).

“returnee students” may be a significant part of the internationality of contemporary higher education. In their case, the issue is less international education than the education of the international since these students – *as secondary school students* – were uprooted from their home culture, assimilated to some degree into a host culture, and formed hybrid identities through the process. Now back in their home country, but living on an insulated international campus, how do they connect with each other and with the mainstream culture of their home country? In the discussion that follows, we attempt to tease out the nature and dimensions of connectedness for this student population.

### ***When and Where Are We? The Temporal and Spatial Framing of Connectedness***

At its most basic level, connectedness requires a shared understanding of where we are. Indeed, behavior grounded in status, that is, role-based behavior, may be understood not only as providing an “index” (Mehan & Wood, 1975) about where we think we are but also a mechanism by which to “encourage” others to share our definition of the situation and act “appropriately.” Insofar as identities are performed in interaction with others, our mutual, collective performance can yield a shared understanding about where and who we are.

In most settings, this process is accompanied by expectations about duration, that is, how long we expect to be “here,” including whether we expect our mutual presence to persist over time and place. For both educational and self-promotional reasons, many universities encourage students to conceive of themselves within a particular time frame. For example, new students at almost any university are encouraged to think of themselves as “establishing friendships for life.” At the Incheon Global Campus, we observed an inaugural student orientation that encouraged freshmen to see one another as postgraduate, professional collaborators (especially in innovative start-up industries). This vision had fidelity not only to the business model that prompted establishing the campus, but was consistent with the makeup of the free economic zone and the fact that the campus was conceived to house several universities offering complementary majors. In ways large and small, universities create time frames within which students may structure their action and identities: they are sophomores, alumni, club members, majors, etc. In this way social identities are built into and responsive to shared understandings about where and who we are and to expectations about the brevity or expansiveness of our relationship.

Separate from the frame an institution may attempt to instill, the actual period in which study-abroad students are “here” can vary widely. The period may begin as a semester and stretch to several years; any number of personal, familial, political, and economic factors may produce a stay longer or shorter than originally intended. In our case, the sharp contrast was between the Korea-to-Virginia and Virginia-to-

Korea students, with most of the latter fitting the conventional American model of a one-semester study abroad.

Compared to other international education frames, the one-semester study abroad is a short and fairly well-defined window. That brevity may spur connection, as seemed to be the case in the written student accounts we analyzed from Virginia-to-Korea students. These accounts suggest that when the fleeting nature of their visit is uppermost, study-abroad students attempt to move swiftly to establish connections and are likely to connect with one another *as* “international students,” that is, they frame their intentions, actions, and connections in terms of that status. For example, one of our Virginia-to-Korea students wrote:

After living alone in my dorm on the Incheon Global Campus for about a week, I went to an event where I met other foreign students from SUNY (the State University of New York). My immediate reaction was one of comfort. It was warming to speak to students who spoke English and also had some of the same interests as I do. We were from a variety of countries such as India, Iran, America, and Kyrgyzstan [these were students enrolled at other IGC universities]. I felt immediately connected with them and I thought these people could easily be my best friends.... Some people might find it hard to believe that such different people could become so close so fast – yet it happened. The first time we went to dinner together we instantly learned (and made fun of) each other’s accents and the strange, individual mannerisms we had. On that first night, we knew more about each other than even some of our best friends at home knew about us. (Heaton, 2015, pp. 12–13)

This student characterized her new friends as “foreign” rather than “international” most likely because they were neither from the USA nor Korea, and thus she flagged them as doubly out of place. Nonetheless, for those involved in international education, there is nothing especially surprising about the connections this student describes, the speed with which they emerged (the student described her orientation to these students as “pre-adaption”), or the fact that connections are more likely among international students than between them and native students. This stance is not unfamiliar: like the conversation between strangers on a bus – which may be deeply personal, impersonal, or simply absent – connectedness is affected by a mutual determination about “where” and “when” we are. In the case at hand, we are international students “here” on this campus for some limited period of time.

Other accounts from the one-semester, Virginia-to-Korea students echo the clarity of “being” an international student: “I was becoming part of an international whole as this campus changed my social life. ...I became friends with people from the other universities that shared the campus and also came from different areas of the world. Whether it was Kenya, India, Ecuador, or Japan, I met students who had lives and experiences different from mine” (Kornegay, 2015, p. 41). Thus, some students saw themselves as “international students” interacting with other “international students.” The status and role of “international student” brought coherence and clarity to “where” they were (in an international setting), “when” they were (with only a brief opportunity to make presumably lasting connections), and which “who” they were (international students). The status of “international student” could, at least in its potential, operate as an efficient, shared shorthand for a connection that allowed a panoply of other statuses to fade into the background; we are all international students here.



The students who were Korean nationals on our campus also operated within a delimited temporal frame, although it was one different from the study-abroad model. For example, a central question for them was how long they would remain in the program. Did they hope to talk their parents into letting them return to the USA for enrollment at a university there? Were they – like most other Korean students – attending one university while applying to other, better universities in the hope of moving up in educational rankings and their future employment, even though it would mean extending their time to graduation? Added to this, almost all Korean males must report for mandatory military service of 2 years. In our cohort, most of the young men had not yet completed their service; their commitment to coursework was mediated by a kind of in-progress decision about when they would leave the program and enlist.

Nonetheless, these students on the hunt for a better school or on their way to military service gave every evidence of seeking connectedness with their cohort – they appeared to share news about their changing status with their friends, had farewells when they left, informed faculty of their departure, and maintained connections at least through Facebook. Like study-abroad students, they found ways to “stretch” temporal and spatial frames. Perhaps because the cohort was small, students appeared to operate from expectations that their connections would be durable and persistent over time and place.

Yet it is good to remember what we noted about this Korean cohort at the outset: most had extensive secondary-school experience outside Korea, including having earned high school diplomas in the USA and other Anglophone countries. Thus, these Korean students were already international when they arrived on campus. Since in their experience outside Korea they would have had to build connections across space and time, they arrived at the university with that expertise and expectation. As young people of all ages, abroad with and without their families, they would have faced the task of organizing the chaos of “who,” “where,” and “for how long.” Children in other settings – for example, in the military or among migrant workers – face this task as well, with social structure providing more or less guidance. For students like ours, however, it was likely understood that the secondary-school period abroad was finite; they would at some point return to Korea. Thus, like other “already international” students, they came to the university with a relatively well-honed sense of temporality; they had already had significant experience with how the anticipated duration of an interaction may affect its substance and nature. This was not their first experience of organizing the chaos of persistently intermittent and psychologically expanded and contracted time.

### ***Which Who Are You? Culture, Stigma, and Connectedness***

Culture-specific identities were at the forefront of the landscape facing returning Korean students. The tension among students around the age hierarchies and deference systems built into the Korean language and culture is a good case in point. While these students were certainly aware of such systems, outside Korea those forms of social organization would have had comparatively limited effect on them.

Students on their own in Australia or New Zealand, staying with relatives in the USA, or even part of the large cohort of Korean students in California's secondary schools, would have had some, perhaps significant, experience building connectedness outside the framework of age grading that exists in Korea. In their return to Korea, sharing campus space with other returning Korean nationals, they confronted the irony of traditional age hierarchies imposed by members of their own cohort who were also "returnees." Older students expected younger ones to show deference, from the use of the honorific language to the daily decision-making among students.

Students' reaction to these structures was ambivalent – early in the first semester, one student flared in anger that despite her enrollment in an "American" university, she was suddenly and unhappily relegated to the position of youngest member of her class and hence of automatic subordination. She was back to a world where age was the first and most important status. Nonetheless, the construction of this age hierarchy was largely the work of the students themselves. Despite administrative pleas for speaking English on campus, outside the classroom most students chose to speak Korean, which utilizes hierarchies of age. Beyond that, however, students longed to introduce organizations that would highlight the traditional Korean junior/senior divide. Chief among these was an activity called "Membership Training," which is a Korean organization and university practice of weekend-retreat activities, including drinking, run by senior members for junior/inductee members.

Thus, despite what was for most a recent return to Korea, despite the nominally American status of the university, and despite the international dimension of the campus, most students attempted to activate connectedness through the medium of their shared Korean cultural identity. Though a truism of identity research – that identities are socially bestowed, socially sustained, and socially transformed (Berger, 1963) – the identity that was mutually and reciprocally created among these returning Korean students was notable because it was *not* one grounded in their shared status of having been educated abroad or even in their shared experience of attending an "American" university.

Culturally specific identities such as "being Korean" are a fairly easy route to connectedness; thus, they can be found on virtually all campuses that enroll even a few international students. In most cases, such identities exist as niches within a larger field; in our international university, however, they were the dominant form. Still, the cohort of students who enrolled in the second year of the campus included Korean students who had never been outside the country for study. Their enrollment could be understood both as a choice to become "international" and as an effort to distance themselves from cultural strictures. One such student described liking the experience on campus because, unlike in Korean universities, no one asked her to conform to the expectations of mainstream Korean culture. In this setting she felt she was connecting with like-minded students on her own terms. Thus, the campus and student body exist as a setting in which some students may become "more Korean" while others became "less Korean." In either case, these social identities arose from the confluence of culture and individual agency.

Under the broad umbrella of “identities,” much attention has focused on the visible and invisible stigmatized identities of race, sex, nationality, sexuality, and religion. Certainly our students possessed many invisible and stigmatizing identities. They were of the firm belief that disabilities that they or family members possessed (such as ADHD or schizophrenia) would poison friendships and reduce the chance for “normal” marriage and childbearing. Insofar as our students were gay or lesbian, that identity would also likely have been hidden (Novak, 2015).

Still, the more common stigma described by these students emerged in interaction with Koreans outside of the university who judged them inadequately Korean, that is, of being too Americanized or “foreign,” having poor manners, and speaking Korean badly. From the perspective of Koreans, these Americanized Koreans are both noticeable and disconcerting. For example, most Koreans would not ponder what to order while standing in front of the cashier at Starbucks. If the customer is obviously not Korean – is white or an Asian marked in some way as not Korean – such behavior is intelligible. If the customer seems Korean, the hesitation indicates a rude disregard for preparation<sup>2</sup>.

Such experiences, one student wrote, made life in Korea much harder for them than for non-Korean nationals.

It has been almost a year and a half since I moved to South Korea from Los Angeles, California. ... Moving to Korea was extremely difficult at first, and it still is now. There is such a difference in mentality, point of view, and even style. It all made me very uncomfortable ... [When I asked foreign Koreans about] their general response [to living in Korea, they said that] they do not like it here. Their reasoning for this is the huge gap between cultures. Though we are all Korean, growing up in different cultures inevitably causes different points of view. There are many differences between Koreans from other countries and native Koreans. When walking down the street, it is fairly easy to differentiate between foreign Koreans and native Koreans. ... There have been ... a few cases in the past year where I have been confronted by native Koreans for speaking English when I should be speaking Korean. Just because we look Korean, native Koreans expect us to behave the way they behave and live the same lifestyle. (G. Lee, 2015, p. 27)

What this student notes is not unusual; many returning Koreans (of all ages) described to us what they saw as unfriendly reactions from native Koreans, an experience that is shared by many of those in other countries who return after an extended stay elsewhere. The identity literature would characterize this reaction as showing that returnees possess a stigmatized, that is, discredited, identity; they are considered “foreign” in the pejorative sense of the word. The second year’s cohort of students at IGC includes Asian Americans and Korean American adoptees, who would also likely find themselves isolated and scorned outside the campus. As the identity literature makes clear, possession of a stigmatized identity makes connection with those who are not stigmatized especially problematic (Goffman, 1963). It also inevitably bears on connection with those who share one’s stigma; thus, the negative community reaction provided grounds for connectedness among our students. When the stigma is readily apparent (as it appeared to be for returning Koreans), a host of usually prejudicial assumptions obtrude; when the stigma is invisible, a

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<sup>2</sup>We are indebted to our Mason Korea colleague, Imseok Yang, for this observation.

wealth of potentially discrediting information must be “managed” (Goffman, 1963). Either way, their education outside Korea significantly complicated the experience of Korean returnee students as they dealt with native Koreans.

Ironically, when our students spend their year at the home campus in Virginia, they will likely be stigmatized as “too Korean” – “fresh off the boat,” meaning naïve and obviously “uneducated” – by Korean American students, despite the likelihood that these Korean students are more international than the Korean American students they will encounter in the university. In the USA, the children of immigrants are among those who express most strongly the value of a multiethnic university campus, yet those same students describe themselves as actively avoiding first-generation students, especially those from their own ancestral countries. Indeed, second-generation students are strikingly unsympathetic in their assessment of foreign-born students of their own nationality (Rosenblum, Kaya, & Robinson, 2009; Rosenblum, Zhou, & Gentemann, 2009). While this double dose of stigma – inadequately Korean in Korea and “too” Korean in America – may solidify connectedness within the cohort, such an outcome would likely not be the first preference of higher education professionals.

### ***Which Who Am I? Connection Through Invisibility***

The previous sections focused on identities that were essentially “called into being” by culture and society as “which who you are” was conveyed and conferred: weightier than individual agency, the language that attends identities can create hierarchy, and the reaction of others can confer stigma. In this section, by contrast, we turn to the domains in which agency moves to the forefront as students decide “which who I am.”

In our cohort, there were cases of students who independently (i.e., by their report at their own instigation and unaccompanied by family) uprooted themselves to enroll in secondary schools outside Korea. Their motives ranged from a desire to be as competent in English as their friends to a desire to escape the pressure of Korean education or simply to the excitement of living abroad (Park, 2015; Hong, 2015; Choi, 2015). Irrespectively, to become an “international student” they uprooted themselves from their home culture and the social categories of neighborhood, family, and nation – that is, they left much of what they were connected to. In choosing to become globally mobile, transnational, boundary crossers (Güröz, 2011), they staked a powerful claim about “which who I am” sometimes in the face of familial opposition.

How does the agentic stance involved in being such an “out-bounder” play out with the return to Korea to attend an American university? Like others’ experience of being out of the country, return for these students would involve a realignment of their routines, social networks, and ways of looking at the world, including the surprise of

discovering such changes even on returning “home” (Haines, 2013). Their sense of time would be altered “as they both move forward in time but also backwards when they return” (Haines, 2013, p. 22). They would likely find themselves fitting “less smoothly into old patterns and old relationships”; indeed, their return might involve a “mutual alienation with the home society” (Smith, 2003) along the lines of our earlier discussion of stigma. Apropos of our interest here in identity and connectedness, for returnees “the balance of their identity that is group based and individualized also shifts, with the frequent result that returnees are uncertain whether they wish to reveal themselves as the new people they have become or the people they used to be before they left” (Haines, 2013, p. 22).

These returnees may be said to occupy a highly individualized, distinct, yet relatively invisible status. Even though Korean returnees often feel themselves marked as foreign, the status/role of “returnee” is not an especially elaborated one; it is perhaps more an experience than an identity. Despite the profound transformation of perspective that often results from having been “away” and now “returned” (Haines, 2013, p. 23), there are few social routes for the experience to be anything more than private. There is no particular social role of “returnee,” no social guidance about performing such a status, and no obvious way to identify, “hail” (Althusser, 1969, p. 163), and connect with fellow returnees. The emptiness of the role “returnee” stands in sharp contrast even to its closest kin in higher education, “international student.”

While our students understood the nature and performance of the role of “international student,” which “who” were they as “returnees”? How were they to make manifest that significant experience? When abroad “which who I am” is clearer than it is on return; the agency and individuality – and in many ways bravery – that marked their experience out of the country is replaced by the appearance of “ordinariness” and the invisibility of an important life experience. “Almost all those [returnees] interviewed noted a lapse into silence as family seemed to quickly return to their own concerns, leaving the returnees with no outlets for what they wanted to discuss” (Haines, 2013, p. 29).

It is possible that an international branch campus like the one we have described functions as a magnet and safe harbor for such students, reinforcing not only their claims to individuality and internationality but also their experience as returnees. As one student framed it, after returning to Korea for high school “I did not share common cultural ground with my classmates, which gave them enough reason to trip me and make me fall over. I was expected to be a ‘Korean student,’ but I had not learned what it means to be one.” Once at the university, however, “I could finally identify myself as an international student. I believe international universities like [this university] will be the ‘comfort zone’ for people like me” (Kim, 2015, p. 37). Such campuses may offer a site in which to make manifest a status that, outside its borders, lacks clarity and visibility; offering the prospect of connectedness to similarly situated others, such campuses may also compensate for the relative lack of clarity about “which who I am *now*.”

## ***When Are We? Modern and Traditional Routes to Connectedness***

This combination of clarity and invisibility about “which who I am *now*” is, on its surface, consistent with much of the literature on modernity. While international students may be understood as on a “modern” trajectory in the sense that they are “self-fashioning,” there are also interesting ways in which they exemplify traditional forms and values.

For example, one variation among students at any university campus is between those who commute and those who live on campus. The majority of the students at our Korean campus were residential, but a significant minority were commuters. The divide also was permeable, with commuting students sometimes surreptitiously moving into the residence halls both to be better integrated socially and to avoid difficult family situations.

Commuting students who lived in the city of Songdo were still in close proximity to the university. A few had gone to high school there; others had families who happened to live there for work reasons. Some of the commuting students had very little international experience, but others had a great deal. Whether they were more or less “international” and thereby “modern” than the residential students is a question that hinges on whether one sees the university as the more international environment (e.g., because the use of English is probably higher) or whether the city itself might in some ways be more international (because it includes a number of international companies, many foreign residents, and the internationalized law of a free economic zone).

Yet the question of whether the commuters were more or less international takes a different turn if we consider the group of student *interns* at the university. The interns were extremely important cultural brokers, and they were disproportionately drawn from commuter students. This meant, one of the interns suggested, that by choosing commuting status, they had chosen to emphasize being Korean and being with their families, that is, being more “traditional.” Their continuing commitment to a Korean home environment meant that they could interact effectively with the Korean staff and faculty at the university. Yet their status as student workers also meant interaction with non-Korean faculty and with all the students regardless of background. The interns spent much of their leisure time with these other students. During the campus’s first year, in fact, all the leaders of student organizations and many of the university event organizers were exactly these student interns. From this perspective, these commuting interns lived “traditionally” at home, but worked in the “modernity” of the university.

One of the intern’s own analysis underlines the paradox that these relatively “traditional,” Korea-embedded, commuting student interns were precisely the students who glued together the framework of this international university. On the Korean side,

The fact that student interns commute ... indicates that they are more attached to their environment at home. This attachment often reflects their strong attachment to Korean culture ... [and] the Korean cultural importance of respect for superiors often orients student interns to use Korean with Korean staff because it is relatively easier in Korean to indicate degrees of respect. (J. Lee, 2015, p. 34)

On the American side, the interns:

... feel comfortable working with both American and Korean faculty and staff, acting as a buffer between American-oriented and Korean-oriented students ... A good international university must consider this special group of student workers, and the ways that they can maintain the flow of the university among faculty, staff, and different kinds of students. (J. Lee, 2015, p. 36)

This dimension of residential versus commuting students thus yields a crucial example of how commitments to being Korean, and thus seemingly “traditional,” nevertheless yield exactly the connections that can make the university’s relatively “modern,” international framework effective.

The case of intern students has a broader implication in that their experience may foreshadow the emerging characteristics of international student experience. While the modern/traditional distinction can be found in the forms of contemporary connectedness, the degree of that distinctiveness has changed in important ways over time. Twenty years ago, Korean students studying abroad could clearly distinguish two different, US and Korea, social systems. Those students had grown up in a society where life necessities and household items were bought at local mom-and-pop stores, personal automobiles were rare, and college facilities were limited to classrooms and libraries. In Korea, there were no recreation buildings, field houses, or large student centers filled with coffee shops and food marts. For those students when abroad, the difference between the host country and home country was clear. Moreover, their connection to the home country was limited to the international telephone system, which was prohibitively expensive. Thus, these students lost almost all the personal connection to the people in their home country, including most of their family members.

Thanks to the sharp distinction and the severance from their home society, these students could develop a new identity, *while also maintaining the old identity*. These two identities could coexist, but would not have been expressed at the same moment in time. Students could switch these modern and traditional identities with comparative ease since the two social systems were clearly distinguished by geography, population, and urban landscape<sup>3</sup>.

For contemporary students, like those on the South Korean campus we have described in this paper, the “where” and “when” of interaction are more fuzzy. In both countries, students may drive their own cars, exercise in college gyms, and chat with friends at the Starbucks in the student center. With the development of communication technology, they can maintain their social networks in both countries. Thus, their worlds are – at least by recent historical comparison – more similarly

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<sup>3</sup>We are indebted to our Mason Korea colleague, Imseok Yang, for these observations.



“modern.” Yet even within this context, the experience of student interns points to the coexistence of modern and traditional time frames, straddled by these students’ organizational position and individual effort.

## Conclusion

In this discussion, we have tried to sketch the complexities that attend connectedness for international students, especially for those who became “international” in their secondary education and are returning “home” to attend university. This group of students is of special interest. Even though they constitute a small subset of international students and are not included in national and professional counts of international students, we suggest such students bring into sharp focus the characteristics of international student experience. The complexities entailed in these students’ experience follow from the expanded dimensions of time, space, culture, and era inherent to international education and attest to the mastery and agency required of students and educators negotiating this landscape. Such complexities argue for increased social science attention to the fluid and situated, singular and multiple, negotiated, manipulated, and imposed social identities that comprise international education, especially because the experience of this special group of students foreshadows the emerging new characteristics of international education in an increasingly connected world.

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# Chapter 11

## International Students' Disconnecting from and Reconnecting with Diverse Communities: Fluidity of the Self in Sojourns Abroad

Regis Machart

**Abstract** If language, or more precisely discourse, is a way to preserve, cross or subvert existing boundaries (Fought C, *Language and ethnicity: key topics in sociolinguistics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006) of identity, the expressions of national, ethnic and cultural disconnecting by international students do not occur in a vacuum. These expressions must be considered as acts of reconnecting with new, imagined communities in greater or lesser ways. They often reveal how the individual navigates between two entities, i.e. the home- and the host-represented 'cultures'. The formulation of a disjuncture from a particular community by a student is often associated with existing explicit or implicit representations of the 'other' entity, as well as an urge to adjust his/her discourse to the interviewer. When, how and why this occurs is here analysed in order to gain a better understanding of the identity positioning of international students in scientific research. Using a fluid intercultural approach (Dervin F, *Impostures interculturelles*. L'Harmattan, Paris, 2012) to analyse the discourses of international students from diverse backgrounds *in* or *from* Malaysia, I highlight how disconnecting has to be systematically associated with reconnecting. Data come from focus group discussions and interviews conducted with 20 international students in Malaysia and Malaysians who studied abroad. I argue that it is important to take into consideration the context in which disconnecting was formulated, insisting on the identification of the interviewer by the participant.

**Keywords** Disconnecting • International students • Fluid interculturality • Identification • Social interactions

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R. Machart (deceased)

Can you imagine? The representative of the university told me “As soon as you arrive, don’t forget to join the Malaysian Association of the University. They will help you for whatever you may need.” But I don’t care. I just want to go to UK to further my study and to be with my [British] partner! I was not going to tell her that! (Informal discussion with Zul,<sup>1</sup> Malaysian citizen, international student, 30 years old)

## Introduction

At first glance, Zul’s narrative indicates that he will be disconnected from the Malaysian community because he does not intend to be affiliated to a Malaysian network. Rather, Zul intends to immerse himself within the local environment by living with his partner. Some would even consider him as a ‘lost-for-the-group’ individual who would disappear from research on ethnic groups (Wimmer, 2013, p. 42). I believe, however, that talking about the *disconnectedness of an international student* (here, Zul) appears at least as thrice problematic.

The first issue is semantic. The presence of the prefix *dis-* is associated with a *contrast with* or the *noncompletion of* something which appears as desirable and whose ‘absence’ is worth being noted. The online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary<sup>2</sup> defines *dis-* as: ‘1 *a*: do the opposite of; *b*: deprive of (a specified quality, rank, or object); *c*: exclude or expel from; 2: opposite or absence of; 3: not’. Disconnectedness is thus negatively connoted and implies a lack of relationship with a community with which an individual is expected (or supposed?) to be connected.

The second potential pitfall lies in the notion of a *community*. In a reflection on the construction of nationalism in Europe, Anderson (1983, pp. 6–7) defines nations as ‘imagined communities’ because ‘even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’. It is indisputable that (European) national identities are constructs which have sometimes been created on forged testimonies (Thiesse, 1999), but they also appear along a long list of identity facets which are similarly superficially and stereotypically homogenised: race (Prum, 2012), ethnicity (Zotzman, 2015), culture (Dervin, 2012), language (Bourdieu, 1982), gender (Goh, 2014), occupation (Danaher, 2015), social background and so on. These facets constantly intersect and their meanings are permanently being renegotiated (Machart, 2013); communities are thus not univocal given but consist of converging, ever-changing individuals who are making sense of their experience at a particular time.

The third risk would be to consider the community of *international students* as a whole, or a series of national (Chinese, Malaysian, French or any other nationality)

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<sup>1</sup>In order to respect the anonymity of participants and informants, all names mentioned are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dis->

wholes, from which 'disconnecting individuals' would distance themselves. A variety of motivations and experiences among international students (e.g. Ballatore, 2015; Van Mol, 2015) and the permanent, contextualised renegotiation of the *self* (Dervin, 2012; Holliday, 2010) lead us to address the expression of disconnectedness not as a static feature of these students' experiences but rather as transient, punctual perceptions. Hottola (2004) demonstrated the instability of the attitudes towards the *other* and local culture in the case of the international experiences of tourists. These representations may also greatly differ among international students, whose sojourn abroad lasts for a much longer time than tourists'.

Nevertheless, all of them would be members of the greater and diverse student community for the time of their study. This community is composed of members of different age groups, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, gender identifications, geographical origins (urban/rural; from the neighbourhood/regional/national/international), academic levels or economic status. This student community is also going to be part of a greater social environment which is similarly diverse, and international students are going to distance from or connect with these groups on their own terms.

In other words, international students are not and cannot *always* be disconnected, except if they eventually opt for dropping out of their studies and live a secluded life. Their sense of belonging to a given community—which needs to be identified—may change over time—e.g. identification as a student may not be valid in all circumstances. Moreover, the instances when students express any form of disconnectedness need to be analysed by taking into consideration the context in which this distancing takes place. Hence, I argue that disconnecting moments, as the suffix *-ing* embeds an ongoing process, rather than a permanent, perceived static disconnectedness.<sup>3</sup> To better understand why and when this disconnecting occurs, I will draw from the narratives of international students in or from Malaysia as related by them during interviews which I have conducted. After questioning what lies behind the very idea of disconnecting, I will adopt a fluid (Bauman, 2001) approach to highlight the complexity of this ambiguous concept.

## Presupposing a Sense of Belonging

Finding a large number of participants from the same country is obviously easier when a large target community is present in the country. Studies on Chinese students who currently represent the largest international student population in the world (Edwards, 2008; UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2012) originate from almost everywhere on the globe: Europe (Gu & Maley, 2008; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), Australia and New Zealand (Holmes, 2004; Wong, 2004), the USA (Lee, 2010) and more recently Southeast Asia (Yang, 2016) and East Asia (Lai, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, identification (as a process) needs to be situated in opposition to identity (as a product) (Machart & Lim, 2013).

Similarly, Arab (Garneau & Bouchard, 2013; Lemaître, Gardelle, & Gill, 2015), Indian (Wadhwa, 2016) or Nigerian (Cabaces, Blanco, & Cabañas, 2014) overseas students attract researchers' interest.

Very often, the overt/covert reference to a racial affiliation and 'belonging' is present in these studies. The following example is an illustration thereof:

In this study we have documented, once again, evidence for resegregation, but also made significant advances in understanding 'why' all the White (and Asian) kids sit together in the cafeteria. (Ramiah, Schmid, Hewstone, & Floe, 2015)

It is quite amazing that in this recent contribution, the reason advanced for students sitting together is a lack of interest in the racial *other*. Researchers could have opted for other motivations such as (1) different linguistic practices—we could imagine that these students connect because of linguistic affinities due to the presence of a large numbers of students sharing the same language (Lim, Machart, & Yamato, 2010); (2) a shared accommodation which leads to the emergence of 'cocoon communities' who tend to live a life parallel to the 'locals' (Dervin & Korpela, 2013); (3) a shared hobby or activity (Machart & Lim, 2014); or (4) the same schedules, among many other reasons. Yet the explanation given is an eminently racial categorisation that poses an opposition between Whites and Asians, as if '*all* the White' [my emphasis] or all the 'Asian' would stick together because of their phenotype, i.e. their physical appearance.

In their contribution, Ramiah and colleagues (2015) express the perception of ethnic (in fact racial) discrimination. Another study on international students in Australia grouped students from different Asian countries (China, Taiwan, Vietnam and Malaysia) under the same paradigm because of their Asian origins (Wong, 2004), thus neglecting, for example, the ethnic diversity within any of these countries. For other researchers, boundaries seem to be national because even if they speak the same language, Chinese Malaysians, Singaporeans and Hong Kongers undergo different experiences (Smith, 2001). In these studies, the concepts of race, ethnicity, culture or nationality are used ambiguously but lead to a similar impression: there exists a static category called 'Asian' which can eventually be split into subcomponents following national boundaries. When the categorisation is not based on physical characteristics (an Asian phenotype), it often relies on stereotyping and decried cultural attributes (i.e. Trice, 2007), usually opposing a collectivist East to a more individualistic—here meaning more advanced—East (Holliday, 2010).

The boundaries between race and ethnicity are tenuous, and both terms have become quasi synonyms, though race is supposed to include a biological component and genetic transmission while ethnicity is more based on cultural practices (Machart & Lim, 2013). The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1982) claimed even that ethnicity is merely a euphemism for race (p. 135). Further studies highlighted the porosity between race, ethnicity and culture (Dervin, 2012), and most researchers now agree that the notions do not rely on scientific basis (Prum, 2012) but need to be addressed as social constructs. It would thus be more relevant to talk about racial/ethnic relationships in lieu of race and/or ethnicity, of (socio-constructed) interculturality rather than (determining) culture (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006; Dervin, 2013; Holliday, 2010).



However, the reference to the 'typical X-ethnicity students' is convenient: they can be blamed collectively for their failures (see a critic of the discourse on Chinese students in Dervin (2011) and Henze and Zhu (2012)) or praised for their achievements (e.g. Yeow, 2016). In his book *Ethnic Boundary Making*, Andreas Wimmer (2013) warns us against a problematic tendency in research on ethnic groups to provide an ethnicity-based explanation for phenomena which should be associated with 'lower (or higher) levels of social categorisation' (p. 42). Similarly, Hannerz (1999) labelled 'culturespeak' as a systematic reference to culture to explain almost any kind of behaviour: culture 'and other concepts deriving from it, seem to be just about everywhere' (p. 393).

Large student communities from the same perceived origin offer an ideal ground to perpetuate 'culturespeak' (Hannerz, 1999), but quite often participants in these studies could be contacted because they were part of a racial/ethnic/linguistic network. Thus, we can witness an overrepresentation in scientific literature on international students of individuals who are connecting to 'their peers' from the same race/ethnicity/culture/country at the time of the study. In contrast, contributions on student experiences from countries less represented in the field of student mobility are scarce, as if their narratives were worth less in being analysed, or less symbolic.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, the experiences of lost for the group (Wimmer, 2013) individuals (LFTGIs) or temporary disconnecting students (TDSs) may enlighten us on integration processes which are often deemed as in fact successful (Machart, forthcoming).

LFTGIs embody the desired expectations from institutions which expect them to interact with the 'locals' (Dervin & Layne, 2013; Machart, forthcoming), or from students themselves who intend to 'meet the locals' (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Machart, Lim, Yeow, & Chin, 2014; Trice, 2007). LFTGIs are certainly more difficult to contact than international students who tend to stick together: they 'disappear' within the host society, they become less visible<sup>5</sup> and their journeys divaricate from one another. Sometimes, their intention is to improve their language skills (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), especially when they study in a country which language is valued at home (i.e. English or French) or when they are language specialists. Addressing LFTGIs' and TDSs' experiences implies moving away from perceiving individuals as representatives of a nation, i.e. from 'methodological nationalism' which assumes that 'the nation/state/society is the natural and political form of the modern world' (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, as cited in Dervin, 2013, p. 8). It also encourages us to stop perceiving individuals (LFTGIs, TDSs as well as other students) as mere representatives of any particular group such as race, ethnicity or culture, i.e. to move away from any form of culturalism and essentialism. These concepts are linked with stereotypical, ready-to-use expectations of individual's behaviours based on these artificial characteristics, and researchers definitely need

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<sup>4</sup>Processes and markers which are used to define racial and ethnic identifications often resort to symbolic attachments which may be manipulated (Fought, 2006; Machart & Lim, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>For a critic of 'visible diversity' in opposition to *diversities*, see Dervin, Machart and Clark (2016).

to avoid this kind of cultural essentialism (Dervin & Machart, 2015). This is especially necessary in the case of studies on academic (student, lecturer) mobility, a phenomenon which concern individuals from a minority<sup>6</sup> whose trajectory is often less ‘conventional’ (Machart, 2016a).

## Contextual Disconnecting and Reconnecting

While looking at individual experiences, one should look more in detail into different layers of identity such as linguistic backgrounds, social class, gender, age and so on (Dervin, Machart, & Clark, 2013) which are constantly intersecting (Ferrarese, Goh, Lee, & Lim, 2015; Machart, 2013) and being reconstructed (Zimmerman, 1998). In the same vein, Wimmer (2013) further advises us to:

Pay careful attention to individuals who are ‘lost for the group’: those who do not maintain ties with co-ethnics, do not belong to ethnic clubs and associations, do not consider their country-of-origin background meaningful, do not frequent ethnic cafes and shops, do not marry a co-ethnic, do not work in jobs that have an ethnic connotation, and do not live in ethnic neighborhoods. (p. 42)

Zul, in the epigraph above, would match this description of an LFTGI in the eyes of many, at least for the duration of his study in UK: he does not intend to join the Malaysian Association of the university—although being strongly advised to do so wants to live in an area which is not predominantly Asian or Muslim and wants to co-habit with a Caucasian British person, and his occupation would be similar to many British citizens’ and residents’, as well as other foreign migrants’, i.e. he will become a student at a local university.

Zul’s LFTGI status or rather identification<sup>7</sup> may not be permanent because as a ‘transient migrant’ (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014), his identification processes may change over the different periods of his life. Zul may consider himself as a ‘liquid’ or a ‘solid stranger’ (Dervin, 2007), depending on how he perceives his future in the country, seeing himself as a transient or a permanent resident of the UK respectively. It may well change during the time of his sojourn abroad in relation to his interactions with locals/local groups, the evolution of his relationship or prospective job opportunities (Deleva, 2015). Thus, the perception of his LFTGI ‘status’ needs to be considered as a time-delineated construct.

Zul’s case is not unique. Yet, those international students who ‘immerse’ in their host country in a way or another often disappear from the radar of research, although they are often being reminded of their origin by the authorities of their home country

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<sup>6</sup>For example, less than 5 % of all European students participate in the Erasmus programme in Europe (Ballatore, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>Here, I oppose the concepts of a fixed *identity* associated with solid (Bauman, 2001) characteristics and *identification* processes (Machart & Lim, 2013), as these processes are fluid (Bauman, 2001) and context dependant (see Holliday, 2010). Identifications are multifaceted (Fought, 2006) and their markers, such as ethnicity, may be consciously endorsed or manipulated (Dervin, 2013).

or by their (future) lecturers (Zul's case). At times, their foreignness is being regularly highlighted by the host institutions (Machart, *forthcoming*). In fact, many studies on international students—sometimes without being conscious of it—prefer to focus on stereotyped representatives of a particular ethnic group who can easily be 'spotted' and contacted through an association, a club, an ethnically connoted occupation or activity or a snow-ball sampling. Consequently, these students are 'forc[ed] into boxes' (Dervin & Gao, 2012), and their supposed belonging to a given national or cultural group may frame them into a particular set of representations (e.g. Chalmers & Volet, 1997). They are assigned ethnic or cultural characteristics, and their assumed culture of origin, or a (unique) national affiliation, is going to serve as a grid to analyse their behaviour (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009; Dervin, 2013).

The absence of connections with 'similar' individuals may be due to a lack of opportunities which forces these individuals to a shift of attitudes. For instance, a study on the perception on learning Malay in a Malaysian public university (Lim et al., 2010) has demonstrated that speakers of lesser used languages such as Tagalog and Amharic were more inclined to learn the local language to interact with the local population, in contrast with Arabic and Farsi speakers who would rather interact with other speakers of the same language. The latter were more reluctant to learn the official language of the host country. On the other hand, language appears as a facilitator to interact with fellow nationals, or other international students or local individuals speaking the same language (Machart & Dervin, 2014; Machart et al., 2014). The linguistic abilities of international students are essential to reconnect with any community, and they condition an individual's possibilities of adjustment to the local environment: students coming from mix parentage who study in the country from which one of their parents originally come (Van Mol, 2015) as well as lecturers who speak more languages than just their mother tongue (Machart, 2016a) tend to be more international than monolinguals. Individuals' marital status or personal agencies may as well impact their need or desire to connect with their community of origin, and the relations between the individual and the community need to be seriously reconceptualised.

In the case of international students, the disconnecting is rarely complete: they may be on scholarship which reinforces a permanent relation with home authorities (e.g. Machart & Dervin, 2014); they sometimes take language courses which put students from the same language background or country in contact with each other (Qian & Zheng, 2015); they register through the international offices which are keen on insisting on the students' origin; they are hosted in international colleges which facilitate the emergence of 'cocoon communities' (Dervin & Korpela, 2013) by putting conationals and other international students under the same roof. Disconnecting from the 'home community' or rather from conationals may thus be only occasional, and it often implies a geographical relocation from accommodation provided by the local institution; this reappropriation of the space, perceived as an appropriation of a new, non-ethnically connoted territory, appears as a necessary condition to adjust to the local environment (Calinon, 2013), as a key to integration.

This review of the literature interrogates us on the ways that we, as researchers, perceive connectedness: is it racial, ethnic or linguistic or does it embrace a national paradigm? We need to be very careful in the ways in which we approach categories which may imply a form of fixity and solidity (Bauman, 2001). Dervin (2013) encourages us to move away from ‘methodological nationalism’ and not to see our participant as the ‘national’ because these static approaches are not relevant to our postmodern times. Moreover, research on tourists’ experiences has demonstrated the instability of perceptions while being overseas, rapidly alternating between indulgence, positive feelings and deceptions which Hottola (2004) labels as ‘culture confusions’. In opposition, the widespread, still very present reference to the ‘culture shock’ approach (Oberg, 1960) which frames individuals into categories in conflict needs to be criticised, at least in the field of academic mobility (Machart & Lim, 2013). Having elucidated how problematic the term *disconnecting* can be from a theoretical perspective, we now move on to the disconnecting processes of international students in or from Malaysia may undergo.

## Personal Positioning and Data Collection

As an international lecturer of French origin working in a Malaysian university, I have always been interested in the cultural adjustment of academic international individuals. Thus, although providing an academic analysis of such phenomenon, I do not consider myself as an outsider, as my personal journey is informing my scholarship in this domain (e.g. Machart, 2016a). The necessary reflexivity when dealing with intercultural studies (Dervin & Clark, 2014) forces me to take into consideration my own experience. I am situating myself in the domain of postmodern interculturality (Abdallah-Preteceille, 2006; Dervin, 2012; Holliday, 2010) which means that I do not consider ‘culture’ as a given but as a construct. Similar to ethnicity (e.g. Fought, 2006), culture may be manipulated, adhered to, distanced from, subverted and so on, and the concepts need to be contextualised.

In the last 5 years, I have conducted numerous interviews in Malaysia with international students for different research projects. I am aware that the interactions we had were influenced by my own identity. Examples thereof are provided in Machart and Lim (2013) where participants were intending to get closer to the interviewer, or where interviewees were using a ‘liberating speech’ which led them to express a point of view they did not wish for me to use in publications because they did not want these data to eventually be used against them. For ethical reasons, the latter type of confidences has been deleted from all transcripts and will not be part of any contribution. They reveal the role played by an international interviewer who may sometimes be perceived as ‘an understanding ear’ rather than a mere outsider. The deleted sections mainly concerned behaviours which are considered taboos in the home society of the participant or ultimately even illegal. Though being informed that pseudonyms would be used in any circumstances, participants expressed their fear of being exposed.

The data used for this chapter come from three major data sets collected over the last 5 years. The first one dealt with the experience of Malaysians who studied in France. Six participants were interviewed after their return to Malaysia. They were graduating in language studies in order to become French teachers in local schools. These participants were either Chinese or Malay Malaysians, and the age difference at the time of the interview was quite large (24–60 years old). The second project involved eight Chinese undergraduate students in Malaysia, aged 19–23. They were degree students, i.e. students who were going to receive a degree from a Malaysian institution, as opposed to credit or short-term mobility students who only spend one semester or two in the host institution. The third project included 12 Middle Eastern Arabic- or Farsi-speaking students in Malaysia. They were either undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate students. Students from the Middle East represent a large number of international students in a country which declares a particular connection with the Muslim world (Machart & Dervin, 2014; Welch, 2012).

In all studies, data were collected through semi-guided interviews. The questions were focusing on the preparation of the students for their sojourn abroad which resulted in an article (Machart, 2016b), their lives in the country and their expectations for the future (for Chinese and Middle Eastern participants), or their re-entry experiences (for Malaysians). For this chapter, excerpts where participants were expressing some form of disconnection have been selected. I will now analyse how these international students reflect on their disconnection within their narratives: When and why do they distance themselves from their home communities? What does this experience mean for them? How is the role of the interviewer significant in this identification process?

## **(Voluntarily?) Disconnecting from National Communities**

For the remainder of this chapter, the *de facto* isolation which concerns students for whom a community of fellow national students does not exist in the host country (e.g. the case of the previously mentioned Amharic speakers) is opposed to a voluntary distancing from a larger community of conationals. For example, in 2010 there was only one Malaysian student in Hungary in comparison to more than 20,000 of them in Australia (Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia, n.d.). This offers international students more possibilities to physically (in opposition to virtually) connect with fellow nationals in the latter case.

Even when the community is comparatively limited in the host country, students may be geographically regrouped. For example, most Malaysian language learners can be found in Besançon in eastern France (Riget, 2014), while ‘pockets’ of science students are sent to a few universities over the country. Ihsan, a Malaysian male student in a French university, feels the urge to distance himself from this group of fellow nationals in order to mingle with students of other nationalities: ‘[in France] I stick with French people and foreigners [to have different activities], whereas Malaysian students normally remain among themselves’. Ihsan believes

that disconnecting from the Malaysian community is not a goal in itself, but rather a necessary option to be involved in activities other Malaysian would not be interested in: when asked to evaluate how much time he spends with each community, Ihsan declares that 40 % of his time involves fellow nationals. Interestingly, Ihsan echoes a widespread representation of Asian students to justify his moving away from the community: they would stick together and not mix with locals (e.g. Machart, Lim, Chin & Yeow, 2014). However, all Malaysian interviewees will declare to have moved away to a certain extent from the Malaysian community, which will most of the time be depicted as a national whole in their discourse.

Malaysian interviewees had been chosen randomly, and the informal discussion with Zul (from the epigraph) was fortuitous. Not all of them can be considered LFTCIs, but all of them experienced disconnecting experiences. However, trying to interpret this distancing as a planned move may reveal to be far-fetched: Zul did not primarily intend to become a LFTGI in the UK but became one of them as a collateral consequence. Neither did Mohd who studied in France for 3 years and stated that he ‘was not imagining that [he] would move away from the college and share a flat with a French person’. Disconnecting appears in Zul’s and Mohd’s discourses as coincidental, whereas it was more intentional in Ihsan’s case. These individual moves could however occur because they were in line, or at least not conflicting, with the students’ aspirations: it was a convenient way to gain contact with the locals. Mohd later insisted on the fact that this experience enabled him to better integrate the local society:

Interviewer: What does integration mean to you?

Mohd: It means to do like they do, to talk like them, and get used to do like them, forget *for a while* where we come from, who we are, and so on

[...]

Mohd: We have to make a difference between younger and older ones.

Interviewer: Do you feel closer to younger or older ones?

Mohd: I would say both, depending on activities.<sup>8</sup>

Mohd’s discourse alternates between solid representations, generalisations and stereotyping (‘like they do’, ‘do like them’) and more fluid ‘fine-tuning’ where he opposes French people from different ages with whom he interacted.<sup>9</sup> Mohd’s discourse is thus here typically ‘Janusian’ (Dervin, 2012). Yet, Mohd’s distancing needs to be contextualised. He is clearly situating it within a time-space framework (time, ‘for a while’; space, ‘where we come from’). This instance is transient even if its time limits are not specified here (e.g. for one hour, for some moments during the sojourn abroad and for the complete duration of this sojourn which is experienced as a parenthesis), and it represents only a part of Mohd’s experience in France. While narrating his life abroad, Mohd may wish to highlight, to underestimate or to silence these instances when he is escaping the (national) group, depending on his interlocutor. In this case, the formulation of this disconnecting is a snapshot of

<sup>8</sup>The instrumental role played by activities (and possibilities) to reconnect will be discussed later.

<sup>9</sup>This ambiguous type of discourse is quite common in education, including among French language lecturers in Malaysia.

Mohd's experience which he decided to include in his narratives in order to make sense of his story for his interlocutor. Mohd clearly selected the picture he wanted to represent to the interviewer. By doing so, Mohd behaves the same way his father did when he presented his former experience overseas with the help of the family photo album (Machart, 2016b).

## Reconnecting with a Local Environment

This coincidental distancing from home communities appears sometimes as a constraint, in particular in the case of students who relocate with their families. Lee, a Malaysian female who studied in France, was accommodated in a different residence from her fellow nationals because she relocated with her husband and child. The family constructed their own life which revolved around the child's experience such as schooling, activities, socialising, etc.:

Interviewer: With whom do you spend the most time?

Lee: With my family.

Interviewer: Then?

Lee: With my daughter's friends.

Interviewer: Are they Malaysian?

Lee: No, they are friends from the school. My daughter went to a French school.

Finding more spacious accommodation, while concomitantly seeking a school for the children, may condition students' relationship with the home community which is mainly constituted of single students. Iman, who is originally from Jordan, relocated to Malaysia with her husband and daughter. They were living in the USA before deciding to pursue their studies in Asia because it appeared to be more affordable than Australia (Machart & Dervin, 2014). However, when they looked for an accommodation, Iman insisted that they look for a place which was convenient for her daughter to be schooled, and she ended up in a large condominium which offered this possibility. Although there is a large Arabic-speaking community around her campus (Iman insisted that her child spoke both American English and Arabic), she opted for a place where her child would be immersed in a local society:

Iman: Okay. I don't know why but this school is only for... it's not only for, but all the students are all Chinese, all the teachers all the staffs and even the students. But it's not only for Chinese. Yeah, she went there, but not the first day we went there, it's like my second semester.

The medium of instruction of the school is English, but what is not clear here is whether Iman is referring to Chinese nationals or Chinese Malaysians who represent 24.6 % of the Malaysian population (Department of Statistics of Malaysia, 2011). Iman's choice was neither dictated by her mother tongue (Arabic) nor her religion (she declared to be Muslim but chose a school where most students were Chinese, i.e. non-Muslims). Iman's child is bilingual (English/Arabic), although she recognises her child's deficiencies in Arabic. In comparison with Lee, whose child



was schooled in a mainstream French-speaking institution, Iman opted for minority environment involving mainly Chinese families who could speak English. This would however represent a form of local experience in line with Iman's child's linguistic repertoire.

Both Lee (who was in her 40s at the time of her expatriation) and Iman (in her late 20s) were mothers who moved with their family through which they would reconnect with the local environment. Lee's and Iman's experiences are conditioned by their family status. As married women, they moved with their respective husband. As mothers, they connected with other parents through the schools their children were attending. Both exited from their home country community to identify as parents rather than as Malaysian or Jordanian. Moving beyond a national paradigm, they highlighted another facet of their identity which was more significant for them.

The following excerpt shows another type of identification based on the academic level of the interlocutors. Dalia is Omani and received a scholarship from her government. Before joining university, she had to take English proficiency courses in order to meet the criteria of her institution:

Dalia: My class where I have students from Iran, from Iraq, Indonesia, Libya, I think these only. And me and one of my friends.

Interviewer: So many Middle Eastern?

Dalia: Ah, and China.

Interviewer: And China? There are some Chinese?

Dalila: Some Chinese, yeah.

Interviewer: And are you still in contact with them?

Dalia: No, not really, only like one of them, two of them, and they both doing master. Like when I get to class, me and my friend [from Oman] we are the only... like bachelor, and another one guy is from Palestine, I forget. And two other guys they are also like bachelor, and rest of them PhD and master.

The class which Dalia joined only enrolled non-Malaysians, and the class intake represented the main origins and nationalities of international students present in Malaysia: Middle Easterners, Indonesians and Chinese. At first, Dalia identified fellow students according to national boundaries. When she switches to her interactions, the students' level of study appeared however as more significant. Dalia was only 19, whereas most other students were Master and PhD candidates and thus older than her. Dalia almost did not keep in touch with them after she left the English class and joined her BA programme, even if many of them were Arabic speakers (Iraq and Libya are mentioned) or Muslims (e.g. Iraqi, Libyan, Indonesian or Iranians). The linguistic and religious potential affinities did not counterbalance the age gap. In fact, Dalia befriended a Somalian female student from her BA class, who was also Arabic speaker and studied for a while in Oman, but more importantly, they 'directly connected' because they were of a similar age. They also shared the same gender, although she insisted on language affinities: 'So she also speaks Arabic, so we speak the same language, we have the same culture and everything, so actually since the first day I saw her, it was like we know each other for so many years'.

Dalia expressed her need to build new relationships: '... we are international here, we are not with the family, so I mean like any close relationship with them, I mean friendship, more than just study, you know, going out together maybe, or

something like this...'. Reconnecting appears to her as a need for social interactions, not necessarily as a plunge into a 'culturally different' world. Dalia regrets that local students are not so easily available because they have their own life in Malaysia. She thus reconnects with another female international Arabic-speaking individual of approximately the same age, which once again appears coincidental. A similar experience occurred to Liz, a Malaysian female in her 40s, who became friends with a French family during her sojourn in France:

Interviewer: How did you become friends [with this French family]?

Liz: They invited me to their home. Why this family in particular? I don't quite know... maybe they were more comfortable with me than with other Malaysians, or vice versa.

One would argue that Dalia connected with a non-local individual, but Liz befriended locals. Both experiences have to be considered similar though as they were happening out of a desire to connect with individuals, in a colour-blind approach. Neither Dalia nor Liz chose to befriend their new acquaintance because of the category they 'belong to'. Both were open to any relationships, regardless of the origin of their interlocutor. Seeing Dalia's relationship as confined to one linguistic or cultural community or Liz's interactions with locals as more desirable is mere extrapolation. Both are conjectural, and blaming Dalia would be a sign of discrimination: Why would she not feel closer and befriend someone who is speaking the same language? She finally did not pick *any* Arabic speaker as a friend, and assuming that she would have to connect with locals instead of people from a similar community (but once again who is similar?) could be considered as a discriminatory perception. For institutions, as a foreigner, you *have to* (be willing to) interact with locals (Machart, [forthcoming](#)), and if you connect with more with people from the same ethnic/linguistic/cultural, you are deemed suspicious because you appear to reject local integration. For international students who feel alone, any form of connection is welcome.

The picture would be incomplete if I did not mention the reconnections enabled by new technologies. From all the interviews, only one participant referred to virtual relationships with her family in her home country. Ling is a PRC Chinese student who keeps in touch with her parents through the Internet. Her constant disconnecting and reconnecting with local and international students from different origins includes a weekly virtual discussion, which is a part of the global picture:

Ling: My father... I prefer to chatting online, maybe once a week, or twice a week. and I'm not that much missing my family... and I still feel, I stay with them together, I don't know why but I just feel, the distance is nothing [...]

## **Making Sense of the (International?) Experience: A Gap Between Perceived Desirability and Reality**

Earlier in this chapter, I showcased how Mohd purposefully disconnected himself from the Malaysian community in order to engage in activities that he thought he could only have with non-Malaysians. Dalia mentioned that she needed friendships

which she could only have, thanks to her Somalian friend. Even Liz's reconnection happened through a common event, i.e. an invitation to the home of a local family. Associating with someone appears easier when individuals share common interests (activities, free time, get together), independent of the origin of interlocutors. In the following excerpt, Tan confirms that a common activity facilitates relationship-making:

Tan: I have some friends from another country, other students here. Before we go to our major, we need to study in English, ELS, so make some friend from other countries, Iran , Iraq... so sometimes we hang out together, and because I join... I training my dance in [Name of the University] group... a dance group, so I know some local friends, Malays... Chinese. So sometimes we also hang out together and my Chinese friends.

Besides language courses that most international students have to go through, sharing a common interest appears as the best way to connect with a group of people. Tan is practicing dancing which enables her to connect with local students. When local and international students do not have the same interests, interactions are rendered more difficult, even non-existent. Yang (2016) has shown the difficult interactions between PRC Chinese international students and local Chinese Singaporeans, even though they share similar languages (Chinese and English) and are mainly ethnically Chinese.

In the next excerpt, Pang relates her socialising experience:

Interviewer: So, you were mainly with Malaysians?

Pang: Me? Yes. Sometimes with classmates: Taiwanese, Japanese, and French but not so many. I was staying home watching TV, was shopping alone... Once or twice a year, I was going for holiday through the CROUS [a student organisation in France], touring around France...

Pang reconnected with people from different nationalities, but her main socialising experience was going for holidays with the CROUS. The CROUS in French universities organises discovery trips for which they target international students. Consequently, Pang mingled with foreigners of other nationalities. In her narrative, Pang mentioned that she had fewer interactions with French nationals, as if she regretted it. Pang's social life is quite rich and diversified which would be a sign of local integration. However, 'meeting the French' seemed to be at the top of her desired outcomes, and expressing some form of connection with the local society was a must for her. Mohd's discourse in this regard is also significant:

Mohd: I did not want to stay with the Malaysian gang. Not that I did not like them... but I told myself, learning another language means practising it. I had to go towards the other ones, in that case French people.

Interviewer: Other ones, it could also mean students from other countries who do not speak the same language as you.

Mohd: I wanted so much integrate the French society and feel one of them.

Mohd expressed the desire to become 'one of them'. This is quite emblematic of student mobility where individuals are encouraged to get closer to the locals (Dervin & Layne, 2013; Machart, *forthcoming*). This is also problematic because the local becomes reified, otherised, idealised (e.g. Dervin & Machart, 2015) and finally out of reach. But ultimately, we have to recontextualise the discourse in which this

disconnecting from home communities and reconnecting with local or international entities occur.

All interviews were conducted by the author of this chapter, a Caucasian lecturer in a university. Härkönen and Dervin (2015) have highlighted the fact that students who apply for academic mobility try to adjust to what they perceive as the expectations from 'the institution' (university, international office, lecturers, officers) in order to be selected. These imagined expectations include displaying some affinities and mixing with the locals of the target country. We cannot exclude the possibility that participants wanted to present a positive, successful story of their sojourn abroad. In their story, they highlighted their interactions with local participants. Ihsan mentioned that these moments represented 40 % of his time—which is not a negligible amount of time by any estimates—and Pang regretted not having more interactions with locals when a deeper analysis of her narrative shows frequent contacts. Both students and many others (e.g. Machart et al., 2014) were evaluating their interactions in relation to what they thought the interviewer would have liked: a 'success story of mobility' emphasising on local networking.

We need to situate the participants' discourses because:

[...] identities are discursively constructed according to audience, setting, topic and substantive content [...] In this way, the concept of identity [...] never signifies anything static, unchanging, or substantial, but rather an element situated in the flow of time, ever changing, something involved in a process. (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2003, p. 11)

The interviewer was here perceived as a researcher ('we have to tell him what he expects us to do in mobility'), as a foreigner ('he is one of us, we can tell him what we experienced') and, in the case of Malaysians who studies in France, as a Frenchman (Machart & Lim, 2014). Participants may have faced 'cultural confusion' (Hottola, 2004), but they adjusted their discourses in relation to their interlocutor to produce a successful story which underestimated their relation with conationals in order to highlight interactions with locals, or the lack thereof. This is contradictory to the way I personally perceive intercultural interactions (Machart, 2016a), but is in reality a part of the participants' identification of how I appear to them.

## Conclusion

Research on international students' networking often takes on a culturalist turn (Dervin, 2012). Students' interactions are analysed through ethnic or cultural lenses whereby the peer is a cultural or national self. However, a closer analysis of students' discourses shows that categories of belonging may differ from the researcher's point of view: linguistic backgrounds, levels of study or marital status appear to be more significant in participants' discourses than cultural, religious or national affiliations.

Moreover, the overwhelming attention given to interactions with locals in research or on the institutions' websites encourages students to present a desirable

story, whereby they underestimate their interactions with their peers or with other international students. These however also represent intercultural interactions beyond cultural essentialism (Dervin & Machart, 2015) or categorical stereotyping. Students' dis- and reconnecting processes are constantly reassessed and readjusted in order to make sense of the moment and to inscribe it in their narratives.

Reading international students' experience as un/successful in terms of local adjustments reveals to be power related because (1) only interactions with locals are deemed valuable; (2) this national-oriented emphasis enforces a stereotyped representation of home and host communities; and (3) it underestimates international students' personal agencies and finally individualities. Hermeneutical descriptors such as Oberg's (1960) 'cultural shock', or rather the way it has been interpreted, do not necessarily reflect the taking into consideration of individual experiences, adjustments, renegotiations and agencies.

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# Chapter 12

## Self-in-the-World Identities: Transformations for the Sojourning Student

David Killick

**Abstract** This chapter illustrates how UK undergraduate students on a semester study abroad programme in Australia experienced space and location as a driver and an inhibitor to their identity development. As students whose first language and previous experience of higher education and of international travel arguably offered stronger preparedness and familiarity with their new study homes, their lived experience offers a different lens through which to view the international student experience. This chapter makes extensive use of the participant's voice to show how the serendipitous spaces they each inhabit impacts upon how they experience and identify themselves in the world. The importance of spaces and the people who inhabit them, as shown in the participant narratives, suggests a need for greater attention to framing university spaces which will better facilitate the development of the intercultural self.

**Keywords** Internationalisation • Identity • Global selfhood • Study abroad • Transformative learning

### Introduction

As noted in the introductory chapter, international student mobility has been a feature of higher education since its inception but grew significantly through the second half of the twentieth century. The current millennium has seen a substantial acceleration in this growth and a notable widening in terms of both sender and destination countries, significantly extending the range of players in the transnational social field. The economic drivers and impacts of this growth are variously estimated and have highly differential significance to the diverse participating nations and individuals. In broad terms, however, international student mobility

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represents a considerable flow of monetary and intellectual capital from poorer to richer nations, not all of which is returned. Equally significant, international student mobility demands considerable *personal* investment. Such investment comes in terms of irreplaceable years of young lives and associated exposure to learning risk, the potential consequences of connectedness/disconnectedness on future identity and agency development as well as the economic input which may well have been drawn from extended family resources.

These social and individual impacts create a pressing ethical need for the institutions involved to examine what value derives from international student mobility for the principal stakeholder – the student. Exactly who constitutes the ‘international’ student, who identifies themselves as such and who is identified by others as such are also becoming more complex questions with the development of transnational delivery, online delivery across continents and the emergence of different combinations of study in home and host institutions.

This chapter explores, specifically, the lived experience of transnational connectedness for individual students, as revealed in the role played by ‘space’ for six second year UK undergraduate students on a one-semester study abroad (SA) programme in Australia. ‘Space’ is explored through participants’ lifeworld representations of the physical places of their new worlds and the incidental, serendipitous people who inhabited them. The focus here complements other publications concerning the role played by ‘significant others’ in shaping their experiences and development (Killick, 2012a), structural descriptions revealing key dimensions of their lived experience (Killick, 2013b), the relationship between their lived experience and learning theory (Killick, 2013a) and the implications which each of these might hold for structuring the transnational social fields of home campuses and curricula. A full exploration and analysis can be found in the PhD thesis from which these are educed (Killick, 2012b).

The literature on SA students, researched almost entirely from the perspective of sending nations, is rarely referenced in the work concerning the experience of ‘international students’; it is similarly researched almost entirely from the perspective of the same nations, this time as hosts. For this reason, it is hoped that this chapter will provide an interesting perspective in the broader context of this volume. Where much literature relating to the international student experience tends to problematise the student, perhaps through a focus on one or other dimensions of a ‘deficit model’ of their capabilities or on dimensions within the learning experience/environment, SA literature, by contrast, largely reports on the gains brought through the experience. This dichotomy within research foci may tell its own story of how these students are, respectively, identified within the HE community.

While the students, environments and situational factors, such as motivation, duration, investment and so forth, undoubtedly make for significant differences within the experience of these two student groups, some of which are highlighted below, there are also meaningful similarities, most notably, of course, that in each case students experience a temporary transient (dis)location and an associated (dis)connectedness. Notwithstanding the differences between SA and other international students, the lived experience explored in this chapter suggests that the challenges, variously present for international students of being ‘continually forced to restate

and renegotiate their identity' (Montgomery, 2008, p. 23) in their new educational context, are also, variously, present for SA students.

Within both groups of students, individuals encounter and experience novel ways of interpreting and of being in the world. While these may remain at the periphery much of the time in their home-worlds, particularly where they are members of a majority sociocultural group, they assume a larger, closer, more pervasive presence in their new locations. This, in turn, challenges established world views and self-views, perhaps initiating changes in self-perception and the sense of what is or is not 'normal', 'acceptable' or 'good', including within aspects of an individual's self-identity. When we look at learning theory, such fundamental change processes are most visible in theories of transformative (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000) or significant learning (Rogers, 1969, 1983). The associated perceptual shifts are, on the one hand, argued to be necessarily engendered *within* such dilemmas and disjunctions (Jarvis, 2006) if transformative learning is to occur while, on the other hand, they are bounded within the vulnerabilities of identity threat (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and so at risk of inhibiting development:

Asking critical questions about our previously accepted values, ideas, and behaviors is anxiety-producing... resistance, resentment, and confusion are evident.... (Brookfield, 1987, p. 7)

In our focus on the transnational social field, transformative learning is also seen to be predominantly driven within the social milieu; and where new social groupings are required, further 'mobilization of risk and vulnerability' are required (Barnett, 2011, p. 677).

Arguably, SA literature has focussed predominantly on the transformative learning, while international student literature has focussed predominantly on the learning inhibitors.

I refer to the transformative learning around the students' sense of 'who I am in relation to the global other' as *self-in-the-world*. This is a construct I have developed from Amartya Sen's work in development economics on *capabilities* (Sen, 1993, 1999, 2003). Sen's framing of capability offers a powerful construct through which we might model the student/graduate as a global self and their transformational transnational development as:

*Moves towards enhanced capability to 'lead lives they have reason to value' in a multicultural and globalising world*

Where Sen speaks of the 'freedoms' accorded by socio-economic and geopolitical contexts, I characterise these contributing factors to an individual's overall positioning in the world as comprising *objective* and *subjective* capabilities – though the interplay between these is as complex as any other interplay between self and world. Among objective capabilities I list, for example, an individual's access to education, clean drinking water, health care, or a life free from political persecution, war or domestic violence, etc., we might reasonably hope that global higher education will enhance some of these for many peoples over time; some of us might even wish this were its driving force. However, its more immediate remit in current times lies in the

development of the subjective capabilities of its students. These, too, may be characterised into two interwoven types:

- *Act-in-the-world* capabilities – an individual’s knowledge and skills for interacting in/with the world, for example, being able to read and write, to speak in a public forum, to access and evaluate information, to cook nutritious food, to see an issue from other perspectives, etc.
- *Self-in-the-world* capabilities – an individual’s view of themselves and their place in the world; that is, how s/he envisions herself/himself in relation to ‘others’, for example, ‘I am someone – who treads lightly in the lives of others; who is curious among other people/in other places; who has communicated successfully across cultures’; etc.

In this chapter, I am specifically interested in how the experience of space during a period of transience in an international educational context impacted the *self-in-the world* capabilities of the SA students whose lived experience we glimpse below, and how these impacts were framed by factors within the transnational social field of their transient SA experience.

This chapter begins with overviews of my interpretive positioning in the work, and a brief description of the participants, before presenting an exploration of their lived experience of connectedness and disconnectedness within different aspects of their relationships with the spaces of their SA world, followed by illustrations of how these challenged and changed individual *self-in-the-world* identities.

## Interpretive Positioning

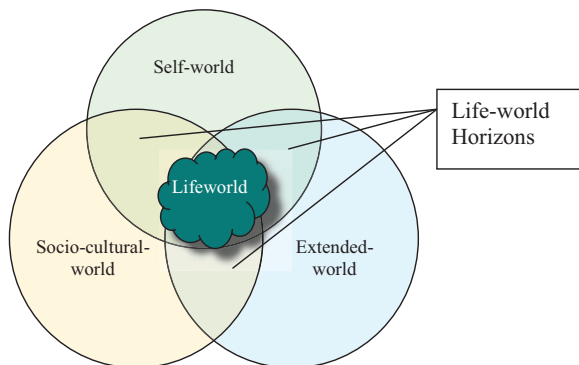
This chapter assumes a phenomenological stance towards participants’ lived experience. That is, the transient world of their SA experience is as perceived, modelled and incorporated into each participant’s lifeworld; all its representations are ‘true’ to the participant. In subsequent sections, extensive use is made of participants’ own words, with minimal interpretation wherever possible.

It has proved helpful, though, to differentiate the horizons on which experience and development take place, categorising elements of lived experience into three dimensions while always recognising their fusion in each participant’s lifeworld, as represented in Fig. 12.1.

- ‘Self-world’: their personal identity (how they construct and constitute themselves)
- ‘Sociocultural world’: the world of friends, family and familiarity
- ‘Extended world’: the wider, less-hued world – particularly that surrounding their study abroad context but in some cases extending to more distant horizons

Reference is made to each of these lifeworld dimensions in the discussion of the students’ lived experience later in this chapter. As each undergoes change, we

**Fig. 12.1** Representation of the life-world and its horizons with the self-world, the socio-cultural-world and the extended-world



glimpse how, framed by factors within the transnational social field of their transient SA experience, the participants' *self-in-the-world* identities take on new characteristics.

## Participants

The participants were part of a wider study involving UK students engaged in a range of international mobility experiences, including volunteering, long and short work placements (internships) and study exchange. They are selected for this chapter because their experience took place in a university environment in which a large number of full-time international students were studying, with a predominantly White domestic student population and English-speaking instruction and community context. All of which mirrored the participants' home campus and their own demographic. In other words, some of the significant variables which may impact upon many other international students were significantly ameliorated; though this is not to say that nuances of language and differences in academic and social cultures might not have an impact. The research adopted a broadly phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) to data collection and exploration, seeking to derive rich evocations of each participant's experience and the signification they attached to it.

Four participants were females and two males; for anonymity, all are reported here as female. All were attending one of the two large Australian city universities for a single semester in their second year of a 3-year UK undergraduate degree programme. All gained credit for their studies and undertook an agreed selection of modules which complimented their home degree. Like all students, including all international students, these participants were individuals in all respects. Aspects of their individuality in terms of *intercultural* capital can be glimpsed in these mini biographies:

**Christine** spoke another language reasonably well and had had extensive travel experience, including residence in a non-English-speaking country, prior to her exchange. She was ambitious for future travels and attracted to the prospect of living overseas. She saw herself as interculturally experienced and adept.

**Tiff** spoke no foreign languages, but had had extensive prior travel experience, including quite extensive periods in both English- and non-English-speaking countries. She had very ambitious future travel aspirations and was interculturally experienced and adept.

**Clare** had a basic grasp of three foreign languages but quite limited previous travel experiences and quite limited intercultural experience. She had very ambitious future travel aspirations.

**Gill** spoke one foreign language weakly and had had quite extensive travel experience prior to her exchange, including quite a lengthy stay in another English-speaking country. Her future travel aspirations were very ambitious, and she was highly interculturally experienced.

**Lisa** had some knowledge of two foreign languages and had had extensive travel experience prior to her exchange. She saw herself interculturally quite adept and experienced and had ambitious plans for herself as a traveller, including hopes to live and work overseas.

**Betty** had limited foreign language skills, though her previous travel experience was quite extensive. Although she had only limited intercultural experience or ambitions, she did have very ambitious travel aspirations, including possibly living and working overseas. Determination to move on from a previous unhappy extended work placement (internship) in another city in the UK was a significant driver for taking on this ‘challenge’.

Individual differences notwithstanding, all participants except Clare had previous travel experience, in some cases involving quite extensive periods in other countries. This might set them aside from many full-time international students and might also be expected to reduce the impacts of their transient extended world experiences. To the extent that that anticipation is true, it is likely that the challenges, responses and development within their SA experience may be less than those experienced by full-time international students. I am not proposing that this is the case, but it is more likely than its opposite and may be added to the other potentially ameliorating effects of shared cultural heritage and first language noted earlier.

A significant social field in the transient world of any student is the place they select to live and the people they share that space with. In many countries, it is common for a majority of domestic students to continue to live at home with parents during their undergraduate studies. This was the case for the Australian universities in this study, but not for the participants, who had followed the ‘typical’ British model of moving to their university town for their studies. They had spent their first year in university halls of residence (usually arranged as individual rooms with shared or en suite bathrooms) and the first semester of their second year in shared private rental houses, which they had found themselves with members of their extended university friendship group. These had both in themselves offered further



existential and developmental challenges and enhanced experience of independence and living with others, as noted explicitly by one participant, Betty, during her time in Australia:

I think it's ... the fact that I'd already moved away from home has made me not miss home as much [...] I think if I'd been living at home and come away, I would... I would probably be missing home, [...] a lot more than I am doing.

A significant variable in their transnational social space was their choice of accommodation in Australia:

- **Christine** and **Tiff** lived, independently, in international student residences provided by the university (the 'Village').
- **Clare** found her own accommodation after arrival in an apartment in the city, shared with two recent immigrants.
- **Gill** lived with an Australian family whose daughter she had met previously.
- **Lisa** and **Betty** shared a student house together, along with two other UK students who were not part of the study.

As will be explored, these choices were, differently, significant in terms of each participant's experience of (dis)connectedness in transition and to the development of their *self-in-the-world* identities.

## Exploration: Lived Experience of (Dis)connectedness

The exploration of participants' lived experience and development in this section are drawn from the themes of the original analysis and illustrated by the direct use of the participant voice. The picture presented here is not intended to tell the whole story, but represents a portion of their truths as interpreted in the wider study. In the selections revisited here, I am interested more in the individual experience than in any collective 'themes' but have presented them under the loose thematic headings of:

*Space envisioned as 'absence from'* – in which we see how aspects of the sociocultural worlds left behind carry impact in how participants envision the extended worlds of SA

*Spaces of their temporary homes* – evidencing how participants' varied choices and chances concerning their accommodation arrangements on SA have significant influence on their experiences and their self-in-the-world development

*Inhabiting spaces* – where participants reveal the different ways in which they came to belong within their SA location, transforming the extended world into a new sociocultural world

*Peopled spaces* – in which we see examples of how some of the people who came to be re-envisioned in each participant's lifeworld were themselves linked to specific spaces

## Space Envisioned as ‘Absence From’

As young international students, the participants were variously engaged in and influenced by the broader extended world contexts of their transient lives. Much of their construction of this space was as ‘not home’ and ‘far from home’ rather than of any characteristics it might hold. In other words, connectedness to home remained highly salient but also the distance of Australia from home imbued it with a specific characteristic and an attendant heuristic for being there.

**Christine** felt herself ‘so far away from home’, characterising ‘far away’ as ‘a million miles away from home’, ‘on completely the other side of the world to where I come from, the time zone is completely different’.

**Betty** was excited by ‘[j]ust being at the other side of the world, and ... just being somewhere completely different to where you’re used to...’.

**Lisa** saw it as, ‘exciting – being somewhere new, being far away’ because for her, ‘I mean, the size of the UK, it’s ... nothing compared to the size of Australia and how far away that is’, and she envisioned herself as someone who could be independent ‘but be at the other side of the world’.

**Clare** found distance in some ways limiting: ‘cause of being so far away from home, you think, you’re a bit, like... you’re a bit in your shell’. However, her life was changing ‘because I’m living on the other side of the world’, noting a significant impact of this distance:

...it’s so far away from home isn’t it. It’s ... it’s like ... for example, if I’d have gone to Holland I would have been more of a ... what’s the word? More ... it’s... like during the time I was away I’d have been inspired more to want to come home.

While actual physical distance from home will be less for most international students than it was for these SA students, the feasibility of going home during a single semester is likely to be extremely low for all of them. Casting a transient home in terms of what it is not (i.e. ‘real’ home) is likely to have significant impact upon motivation to engage and to find value in the development opportunities it might offer.

Within the envisions of physical distance were strong feelings of absence from loved ones. **Lisa**, for example, despite the support of her UK housemates related:

That’s hard because you are away from your actual friends who you do... you know, who you can confide in more. And your family, again, if you do get upset you just think, ‘Oh I just wish I could go..., you know, for a hug and that. I’d say that’s the hardest thing really.

And **Betty**, one of her housemates:

I’m looking forward to my mum coming out, just ... so that I can ... just got that little bit of home.

And

The difficulty – well one of the biggest things for me – was that my nan fell ill while I was over there. So that was quite hard, it made me sort of realise how far away from home I was.

While **Tiff**, living in the international student residence, observed:

I do miss my friends and stuff. Not all the time, but on certain occasions you'll be on like Facebook and you'll see pictures and you'll be, like, 'Oh, yes, I would have been there', kind of thing.

And **Christine**, also in the Village noted that,

...you don't have... anybody to sort of back you up – so you're sort of here on your own... no parents, family and friends, that kind of thing, who are travelling with you.

While the absence of loved ones was a source of some discomfort, connectedness to them even at a distance home provided some security:

**Betty**, again:

...that was why I didn't feel homesick, because I knew I had them as a kind of stable network, back, back home, where they were always going to be.

And for some the fact that someone close had experienced Australia in itself added a degree of connection and attendant security:

**Gill**:

Cause my auntie has been here before, and she's seen like the proper Aboriginal culture first hand. And I really want to see that because she's got so many stories about it, and she can explain all the pictures.

And **Christine**, whose brother had spent some time in the same city previously:

So, it gives me a sense of ... sort of some security because I know that one of my family members has been here and has lived this lifestyle. So it sort of makes it, sort of more comfortable.

Additionally, Christine's early use of 'homely', 'cosy' convenience food and Skype and Facebook communication technologies ('you kind of feel like you're taking the journey with you'), in diminishing the presence of the new extended world in her lifeworld, offered a level of personal comfort which gave her a will to engage with her local environment.

Some, though in line with learning theory noted earlier, simultaneously recognised the discomforts and difficulties brought by their absence from friends and family as contributing to their development:

**Betty** recognised that being away from her family 'definitely, definitely, without a doubt made me more independent'. **Lisa** extended her relationships with others, whereas she would have 'stuck with my normal groups of friends' if she had stayed at home. **Christine** saw removal from both parents and friends as removal from possible inhibitors to personal development:

...probably 'cause I can't ring up my parents and have a thirty minute conversation with them about something, I'm having to be more ... yes, I'm having to think for myself slightly more.

And

I think back home ... your personality sort of stays the same because all your friendship groups are exactly the same.

And **Gill** experienced a sort of liberation in being free from anyone who knew her back home:

I think because when I was there, no one knew who I was except one person. ... so in that situation, I could be whatever I wanted. And I did... I was, I was who I wanted to be... I went out and I tried new things, I met... talked to people. I wasn't bothered about who I had to talk to – I just talked to anyone.

Before even beginning to review features of the transient spaces in which these students were physically located, then, we see *absence from* home, established friends and family being experienced as salient both to the challenges and to any personal development which might ensue. Perhaps, in its focus on cultural and linguistic differences, much research into the international student experience may take insufficient account of the variable impacts of this more fundamentally human dimension to dislocation.

## Spaces of Their Temporary Homes

In embarking on this SA experience, only Gill had made a firm accommodation choice with any degree of insight into how it might be, and even she had not anticipated the challenges and the personal development which living with her particular host family would bring. Those in the international student village had, separately, opted to live there because it was easy to arrange; they had not realised their peers would be almost exclusively 'internationals' and had certainly not cast themselves as international students prior to arrival. The students who shared a house had not planned to do so, but were shocked into doing so by the practical difficulties involved in finding anywhere to live as students on a short-term rental contract (having anticipated everything would be the same as their house-hunting experience at home had been). Clare, while knowing she would look for an apartment in the city centre, did not plan or foresee having immigrant flatmates. Nonetheless, these accidental housings impacted upon each participant's experience and learning in different ways. These differences in their engagement with and identity within this dimension of their extended world and how they each accommodated it into their sociocultural world point us to the importance of acknowledging the *individual* when we seek to interpret the international student experience. These individuals emerge again through the subsequent sections. Equally, they show how the space they happen to be in, these largely serendipitous temporary homes, simultaneously gives and denies experience and engagement.

**Lisa and Betty** shared a house but took different approaches to connections with the network of conationals this provided:

Lisa:

...we really had to stand together the three of us who were there and support each other, and... and get through, through the challenge of it.

Betty:

I lived with some girls from over here, but that didn't really stop me. I wasn't in any more ... I made ..., I put myself out of my... way to... sort of, get in my... get in my own classes and be on my own, so I could be more independent while I was there.

On reflection, **Lisa** saw her choice as having limited her connectedness within the experience:

Had I not lived with them, I'd have had to put myself out even more at making new friends that what I had to do by already knowing ... the girls. And it's something, that I probably would... if I did it again, I wouldn't ... live ... I don't because I probably would live with one of them... so it's, it's difficult, but they definitely hindered how many people... yes, how much I put myself out.

In her international residence, **Christine** found its impact on her connectedness ambiguous:

...it does give you that opportunity to just socialise with people who go to your university, outside of the university itself, [but at the same time] I think the first kind of couple of months you kind of get trapped into this bubble, ... of being a Village... a Villager, which is what they all referred to us as.

**Tiff** also noted its restricting impact:

'...people [who live in the Village] don't go out so much – because it's... it's... there's not a lot in the area to go out. Whereas if I was in the CBD I would probably have gone out a lot more', but also reflected that 'Geographically, where I was based was a very ... very high migrant population, ... so that was different to anything I've ever had before ... there was a lot of cultural stuff going on.'

We see in the lived experience of accommodation surfaced here that initial choices, made mostly with limited forethought, choice or knowledge, had various impacts on the ways in which the participants were enabled to make connections within their new extended worlds. However, it is also notable that where accommodation choices were the same, the ways in which individual participants *chose* to inhabit those spaces influenced the connectedness achieved.

## Inhabited Spaces

Perhaps surprisingly, *none* of the participants brought the physical, people or practice dimensions of their academic spaces into significant focus in their narratives. Even when specifically questioned on these, answers were short and rather superficial. This contrasts with most research with international students, where academic spaces are often the main focus of the study. The nature of the short SA experiences and other factors already noted with regard to the characteristics of the participants vis-à-vis their SA location might account for this. However, all participants did speak of spaces which were challenging and spaces from which they derived self-in-the-world development. I refer to these here as 'inhabited spaces', and suggest

they indicate for other international students the import of finding (dis)connectedness and lifeworld change through their new physical location.

In Australia, **Lisa** extended her sense of herself as connecting with/belonging to her transient home through '[f]inding somewhere new. Exploring...exploring the area you live in. Exploring the city'. Although she did travel more broadly in Australia, she characterised this as 'a big adventure'; something superficial compared to her aim of *experiencing*:

I wanted to get to know Melbourne, and I wanted to meet people in Melbourne and have a life in Melbourne. Rather than just flying around and... and seeing... 'cause I'd rather... it's all about the experiences I've had, rather than tick off, 'Oh, I've seen this place. I've seen that place'.

Also locally, from **Clare's** first day, Melbourne acquired a multicultural hue as she realised it was home to 'over a hundred different cultures'; she found 'walking up the street where you go up to the main campus' 'a cultural experience'. Not because this was the Australia she had anticipated or the one she experienced among the strong Australian sporting community which she joined (predominantly White, monocultural and outside the university), but because it was an area of diverse immigrant shops and food outlets. **Tiff** characterised the same area: 'it's not... there's not really Austra ... Australians. It's a much more like Middle Eastern, Indian, Asian population [...] and like Italians, and stuff'.

**Gill** found herself approaching opportunities differently precisely *because* she was in a different place:

I think, I feel like I have to experience it, so I'm going to ... I'm getting out there and doing more because I'm in another country ... going to music festivals... going on all these trips with uni. I don't even know if uni do trips back at home, I don't even think I'd go on them back at home...

So she found herself:

...always out every week, finding new places, new restaurants, new little cafes, ... going to Tourist Information, seeing what's on, going on the free tram ... all that kind of stuff, that wouldn't stop.

This experience of location itself as a driver, perhaps, went even further for **Christine**, for whom:

Because at the end of the day, you're in Australia, the sun's shining – Australia is such a massive country, would you rather be stuck in your room doing a piece of work for ... three hours that you would probably do in England, or would you prefer to do it in fifteen minutes knowing, 'Yes, fair enough, I'm not going to get the best marks, but I'm going to go to Carnes this week end'.

As with accommodation, we see participants in the same place at the same time finding their connectedness to it coming in markedly different ways. I would propose that their connectedness became a significant feature in how they identified themselves within this space – along the lines of 'I am someone who [explores the city] [seeks exciting experience in the city] [finds cultural richness all around me] [travels widely] to get the most from this place'. All are similar, though, in seeking

to find their own way of being in/connecting with *their* place, transforming the initially alien extended world into a sociocultural place of their own.

## Peopled Spaces

As noted earlier, I have described elsewhere (Killick, 2012a) the high importance of *significant others* (e.g. a pole dance teacher, a Down's Syndrome child, an Aboriginal friend) and *communities of social practice* (e.g. the 'internationals', the local sporting community) to these participants. In all cases, these were individuals and groups whose lifeworld presence impacted most profoundly on the connectedness and the personal development of each participant, yet all were outside the formally arranged SA programme and outside any anticipated experience.

For most it was disappointing, and a challenge to their own self-identities, not to have met many 'ordinary' Australians. Equally surprising and a source of significant development were the encounters which were enabled by the spaces they were co-inhabiting.

**Christine:** 'I think you don't really come over here to meet international students [...] you come over here to meet Australians because it is their country'.

**Lisa** met more 'kind of other exchange students', and found some Australians she did meet not to conform to her expectations:

I must admit, I've met some Australians here, they're nice. But some are quite hostile. They just ... well don't go particularly out of their way to kind of ... get to know you. Which, I didn't think it was going to be like that.

Her more positive experiences of connectedness with Australians came from those peers she encountered whose families were relatively newly settled in Australia:

I met quite a lot of Maltese and Croatians. So I kind of knew from them learned and seeing their families – who still hold their traditions quite strongly... I learned more about that ... those other cultures.

As did **Christine's**:

We were sat there as well... I think there were some people from some areas in Africa, and the Maldives, Mauritius... you know. And you sort of sit there and you think ... you know, you just talk through their experiences, and I think it just changes your opinions. You know, and meeting people from different cultures...

**Betty** emphasised the learning she derived from her encounters with people from other cultures:

...just the fact that I did meet so many people, and see so many parts of the world ... I'd never even thought about some of the places that I visited. I didn't even know they existed.

**Gill** felt it was diverse people as individuals she was experiencing:

I suppose, really, I've been ... getting on with these people from other countries more like friends rather than ... getting to know another culture, just because it's .... It's just ... finding friends in other cultures ...



These experiences of disconnectedness from ‘mainstream’ Australians, however, were not echoed by Tiff and Clare. The import of their highly meaningful encounters with established Australian communities and newly arrived Australian immigrants is clear in their narratives, and we again see how it is the places they are in which are peopled by these important others.

**Tiff** was ‘able to socialise with different people—so I didn’t just socialise with people from university, I socialised with locals’ spending ‘I’d say, at least ninety per cent of my time with Australians, I was able to nip and tuck between the international students’.

**Clare’s** principal encounters with Australians were within the local Australian sporting population, beyond the university, in which she proactively immersed herself. Their inclusive response to her had a significant impact:

Cause you’re putting yourself in environments with... with people who are... who are willing to... If you’re willing to embrace the way they live their life, then you’re welcome... you’re welcome in no matter where you’re from.

And

The people that I met, and being able to get to know these people, ‘cause they... they essentially didn’t have to make me so welcome. They were not obliged to in any way, but I got to know them, and they made me feel so utterly welcome.

But she also found her identification of others changing significantly through her experience of her immigrant flatmates:

I am getting a greater appreciation for like, the different ways that they do things... They ... my attitudes towards things are a lot different to theirs [her flatmates]. They [PAUSE] I’m struggling with how to put it into words ... Well it’s just ... they ... they’re coming here with ... everybody speaks the language that I speak, they’re coming here and having to integrate ... they say how much they like to integrate but are having to learn the language at the same time, whereas, it’s kind of like ... it’s more on a... it’s more easy for me to get into this, but as I’m speaking to them I can appreciate how it can be ... how it cannot be as easy for them with the language barrier. It’s amazing...

And

... it was like an eye-opener for other people – that they’d left their home country and they’d come there... that was... they were making their life there now in order to try and find success, and like... in terms of like studying to get a good job and so on – but they, I’d met a group of people who’d, like, they’d left their families behind in order to go ... to go achieve their goals, and that... I’d only commend their attitudes.

## **Development: Windows into a Wider Sense of *Self-in-the-World***

The vignettes above have sought to capture a small part of the canvass on which the participants in this study painted their SA experience and have illustrated how aspects of the physical spaces they each inhabited brought or excluded them from

their new sociocultural world and the developments it might offer. In this section, I surface just three aspects of identity development which they reported to have been influenced by those dimensions:

*Etic view* – where participants reveal examples of a developing awareness of how they and/or their own cultures may be perceived by others with whom they interact, seeing themselves as others might see them

*Sense of intercultural/global connectedness* – in which we see participants sense of location-in-the-world being extended beyond the narrower frontiers held prior to their time in Australia

*Re- and de-connectedness and lifelong identity* – where participants see changes within themselves which are about who they are and how they stand in relation to others who have not shared their SA sojourn; differences which some sense as lifelong and life changing.

## Etic View

Participants began to see how they, themselves, and their own practices might stand in the eyes of cultural others. Through opening to the perspectives of the others they encountered, they began to develop the etic view of an outside observer and to seek to take this into account in their own actions.

**Clare:** ‘I come across in a different way than I do at home. It’s just – how the whole thing’s rubbing off on me’.

And

... there may be certain things that I do that people think are strange and other people do things that I think are so different. So, in order to just ... in order to fit in, kind of, you need to just ... just go about things a bit differently.

**Lisa:** ‘Because you’re very aware of like different cultures and different backgrounds here. So it makes you more sort of conscious of... who you are...’

**Christine:**

... you sat around a table and there’s like five, six different types of nationality around. And I think, personality-wise, sometimes somebody could say something and another nationality could take that, you know, the wrong way – so I think it’s all about sort of sitting back, sort of watching people, and learning, you know, how they interact within their own culture, and then how to sort of adapt your way in your culture to sort of fit in with another one. So you don’t sort of offend people by accident.

**Betty:**

Sort of you meet – like I met a lot of sort of international students and other people, and they’re interested in where you’re from, and our world so it makes you ... It made me talk about it a bit more... and obviously taking about things makes you realise the situation that you’re in that you never, well, that I’d never thought about, I guess.

## Sense of Intercultural/Global Connectedness

Participant's self-in-the-world views of their own place as part of a connected cross-cultural/world community, wider than Australia, expanded through their SA experience. Despite her connectedness to Melbourne, it was travels beyond Australia, with peers from Fiji, which seemed to have brought **Lisa** to a greater connectedness with culturally different others (emphasis added):

...towards the end of my trip we went to Fiji. And I sort of never had even thought about their culture or their way of life. I mean, we went round the islands and it was just amazing, the way that they live and what they go through... it was just amazing, *it was life changing – like, I'll never forget meeting those people.*

This extended travelling brought her to identify herself as someone now more connected to the wider world, it 'really sort of really opening my eyes to ... to other places – other cities and cultures'.

Actual travel was not needed for **Christine**, again, just being among a range of nationalities opened her sense of herself in the world and of how she should connect with others:

I don't know – when you talk to them, you sort of hear their stories. You kind of ... you can kind of visualise how they would be in a country that you couldn't sort of visualise. You'd never been to, so you couldn't ... you can't sort of visualise being there. So when someone talks and kind of ... they kind of just open a window onto their way of living, in say... you know, Mauritius or wherever. You know, ... it just educates you better, so then you've got more of an understanding of that culture, so then you can kind of talk to them and kind of, learn from each other, really. Learn different experiences.

...you become more tolerant when you meet different people, other cultures. You take that on board and you do become more tolerant and have more respect for them.

**Tiff** had a similar story:

... I became much more culturally aware of other cultures, especially because I was an international student, like – with all the Mauritians, and ... the ... Americans, and the Italians... Like all the different type of people that I met...

And:

I became a lot more accepting of – not accepting but more... knowledgeable ... and appreciative of their cultures.

While **Lisa** was less committing, she also recognised the role these other cultures played in her intercultural development:

I was mixing ... having to mix with cultures that I wouldn't have mixed with before ... yes, so I just had to.... I did meet different cultures... I did meet many different people from many different cultures, which I do think helped me.

**Betty** thought the whole experience:

... made me more determined to see the world a bit more. It's opened my eyes to different ... different sorts of people, and different cultures, and that sort of thing.

She had become more confident and 'at home' in this newly envisioned world but also saw herself as of less significance:

... it's definitely opened my eyes, and ... it's sort of made me realise how small everything is, and how small and insignificant I am - in comparison with the rest of the world...

## Re- and De-connectedness and Lifelong Identity

How participants came to identify themselves in relation to their previous selves within their original sociocultural world changed through their SA experience. A number of them came to re-envision themselves as 'more than I was', in some cases with lifelong implications.

**Lisa** came to see herself as someone who could make her life beyond her previous sociocultural world:

I know it's probably a bit ignorant and naïve to say this, but I suppose my life was there [Leeds], my friends were there, that was my world. Whereas, going away and seeing else, I know that that's not my world now. And I know I could make – if I had the opportunity – a life anywhere. Well not anywhere, but there are a lot of places in the world, and there are experiences and things going on outside of here – in fact a lot more exciting.

Similarly, **Christine** saw the world offering more for herself and also for her own children:

You can sort of map my family out, where they've lived their entire life, going back generations, to very small areas in England. And for me, I don't want to live my life, you know, like that. I want to ... have children who are ... international children. Who will have an experience of a lifetime.

**Clare** saw herself transformed in terms of self-perception and confidence in social situations:

I've had a low perception of myself and what I'd have to give in a certain situation. But, like, kind of ... it's made me feel like I'm as good as any... I'm as good as anybody else now – there's no, like, inferiority complex about because I might not have done as much as other people. I feel like ... just in order to... I've got more to give now, like – just like in anything.

And:

It's like, I've been away – that far away, and made my way with so many new people who you wouldn't meet in any normal times. I think, when I come into a situation here, it's like why... why would there be anything to fear when you've put yourself into that situation, which is kind of extreme?

**Gill's** self-perception of intense personal growth through being absent from Leeds was anything but diminished when she had returned to Leeds and reported on a conversation with a close friend:

'Oh, you've changed so much, I love it'. And I said, 'Can you imagine if I'd have stayed in Leeds'. She was like, 'Yes I know. You wouldn't be like this at all'. And I wouldn't. 'Cause

it... the situation would have stayed the same. I wouldn't have had to push myself out of my comfort zone. I wouldn't have wanted to go out and search for things, and make the most of my time – which is what I did there.

**Gill** previously 'always just afraid of what other people would think about what I do... said or did', came back feeling:

... a completely different person. Or... that's not quite right... I'm still, still me, but ... I'm just so much more outgoing, so much more confident, so much happier being myself. It's... it's amazing the difference.

It was life changing [LAUGHS]. Because it has ... it's changed me completely. Well, no, it hasn't changed me – it's brought me out – it's made me who I am. And if I hadn't have done that. If I'd have stayed here, I wouldn't... I wouldn't be half the person. I feel as if I was ... a fraction of who I am now. And... the ... I can really feel the change. I feel so much happier here in Leeds, because I don't care what other people think. ... Australia has just... somehow made that happen. It definitely changed my life, definitely. I love it.

## Conclusion

In presenting the selections from these participants' SA journeys, I have sought to illustrate how aspects of their lived experience of the spaces they encountered as international students stimulated and inhibited their sense of connectedness and their *self-in-the-world* identities. I have not paid great attention to the impact of significant others here because those who were of so much importance to these participants were serendipitous, and not something all international students might be lucky enough to encounter. I have also limited the discussion on impact to factors clearly related to identity development, in line with the focus of this book. The development of capabilities associated with *act-in-the-world* development was, however, also revealed in their lived experience.

The picture I have provided is *not* entirely coherent, and I know it is far from complete. All the chapters in this book deal with human complexity, diverse experiencing and differential learning. However, I do hope to have illustrated that the spaces experienced and explored are salient to the lived experience and lifeworld changes of any international student. In which case, I conclude by suggesting that higher education has a responsibility to seek to give shape to those spaces.

While global higher education may be experiencing (and actively contributing to) a shift in the ways in which its function is envisioned and performed in many national and transnational contexts (massification, marketisation, performativity, employability, student-as-consumer, etc.), the fact remains that the principal stakeholders continue to be the young people who trust their future to our expertise – undergraduates, in the case of this study, whose self-identification is at a highly formative stage (Magolda, 2001). Embarking upon their university journeys is a high-risk venture, arguably demanding from all students a re-envisioning of the self amidst a new cultural milieu but with the cultural field made more challenging for those who venture into strange and distant transnational social fields for all or part

of their journey. The lived experience uncovered here shows complex manoeuvrings, incomplete and tentative learning as well as potentially transformative development in the form of emerging transnationality, coexisting alongside residual ethnocentrism, new self-confidence vying with continuing vulnerabilities. The globalising world, in its propensity to push alterity onto the borders of all our lifeworld horizons, opens to our students, and to ourselves, the prospect of a wider form of human being. I suggest that, *regardless of* the broader movements in global and national HE agendas, those of us concerned with the *education* and transformative learning of our students must continue to grapple with the challenge of enabling each of them to emerge from the experience with their sense of self as well developed as it can be to plot their course through the liquidities (Bauman, 2000, 2008) of a multicultural and globalising world.

This is not to suggest that faculty should not be active in institutional and national HE Policy formulation, for we most certainly should be. It is to say, though, that we must also be active in examining and advancing our own learning and teaching practice to ensure we provide the equitable and appropriately challenging educational spaces and experiences which will enable all our students – international, domestic, majority and minority – to find the connectedness necessary to develop their capabilities, including those framed here as their sense of *self-in-the-world*, to lead lives they have reason to value in a globalising world.

Crucial in achieving transformative learning are not only the ways in which the students engage but also the ways in which universities (administrators, services colleagues and academics) and the community and society in which they are located construct their own characterisations of their students – international, domestic, majority and minority. To the extent that we provide inclusive learning spaces, where all students – perhaps particularly those mainstream domestic students whose presence in the narratives of these participants was so limited – are encouraged to engage with the dilemmas which the world views and practices of others may present and simultaneously scaffold them through the vulnerabilities of transformative learning, we may succeed.

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**Part IV**  
**Student-Turned Migrants and**  
**Connectedness/Disconnectedness**

# Chapter 13

## Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants? Chinese Student-Turned-Migrants in Singapore and Their Discourse on Mobility, Flexibility, and Identity

Peidong Yang

**Abstract** This chapter offers some considerations of the notion of *(dis-)connectedness*, drawing on a qualitative study of a group of Chinese student-turned-migrants in their mid- to late-20s in the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore. In contrast to analytical perspectives rooted in counseling and psychology, this chapter approaches (dis-)connectedness from a *sociocultural* perspective that is more conversant with discussions about migrants in sociology, sociocultural anthropology, and cultural studies. Specifically, it examines the student-turned-migrants' discourse about mobility, "flexible citizenship," and identity in relation to "culture," society, and the nation-state. Among other things, it is found that young Chinese student-turned-migrants in Singapore working in skilled professional jobs have a positive attitude toward mobility and flexibility, which implies a readiness to disconnect with places and to be on the move. Furthermore, it is argued that information technology such as social media enables them to adopt a dialecticism between being connected and being disconnected, whereby alleged connection might in fact be manifestations of disconnect. It is cautioned toward the end of the chapter, however, that these findings about the subjective experiences of (dis-)connectedness must be viewed against contextual specificities such as the age group and career stage of the informants.

**Keywords** "Flexible citizenship" • Foreign talent • Student-migrants • Singapore • China

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## Introduction

*The pasture is always greener on the other side. (English saying)*

*The moon is brighter back home. [yue shi guxiang ming] (Chinese saying)*

Juxtaposing these two sayings above brings out the tension between an arguably innate human psychological propensity to imagine and desire a better place “beyond” on the one hand and an equally instinctual craving for connections with the familiar, with the past, and with one’s “roots,” on the other. As border-crossing mobility becomes a key feature to the lives of ever greater numbers of people today, such tension-ridden subjective experiences also become increasingly commonplace and characteristic, not least for the rapidly rising numbers of international students worldwide (OECD 2013). Among the many issues arising from these students’ experiences potentially of social scientific interest, this chapter offers some considerations of the notion of *connectedness/disconnectedness*, drawing on an ethnographic study of a group of Chinese student-turned-migrants in the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore (Yang 2014b).

There is by now a substantial body of literature on international students, concentrated in fields such as educational studies (both policy and pedagogy focused), intercultural communication, psychology, and counseling. In the subset of this extensive literature that specifically deals with the student-sojourners’ sociocultural experiences of adjustment, *connectedness* has often been either explicitly (e.g., Cheung & Yue 2013; Doku & Meekums, 2014; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003) or implicitly recognized as an important factor contributing to international students’ well-being and successful academic and social outcomes. For instance, Brown’s (2009) research shows the significance of friendship, which is a crucial type of connection for international students. As Townsend and McWhirter (2005) quote in their comprehensive review article on the concept of connectedness, to be *connected* is “when a person is actively involved with another person, object, group, or environment, and that involvement promotes a sense of comfort, well-being, and anxiety-reduction” (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, & Bouwsema, 1993, p. 293).

This particular approach to connectedness, situated in the educationalist and/or counseling paradigms and underpinned by the disciplinary perspective of inter-/cross-cultural psychology, has evidently been productive and has indeed informed some of my own previous writings (Yang, 2014c, 2014d). However, there are alternative approaches that can arguably complement and enrich our existing understandings of what it means to be (dis-)connected for international students as migrant subjects in the making.

Echoing Gomes (2015) in her recent study of international students in Australia, this chapter moves away from the prevalent paradigms toward one involving analytical perspectives and frameworks that are influenced by sociology, sociocultural anthropology, and cultural studies. Thus, instead of the psychologist’s emphasis on interpersonal or individual-group connectedness as a determinant of well-being, this chapter proposes a *sociocultural* understanding of (dis-)connectedness emerging

from student-turned-migrants' discourses revolving around issues such as "culture," society, and the nation-state. In other words, this chapter represents an effort to draw out the contours of a sociologically and cultural studies inflected understanding of (dis-)connectedness through a grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) of discourse.

Admittedly, such an open and emergent conception of (dis-)connectedness can be elusive. Thus, before examining the case of the Chinese student-turned-migrants in Singapore and parsing their discourse, I first provide some necessary conceptual reference points by briefly reviewing Aihwa Ong's well-known theorizing of "flexible citizenship" and Vanessa Fong's ethnographic research on Chinese international students studying in the developed world, with a view to foregrounding the theme of (dis-)connectedness that is implicit in their respective work.

### **(Dis-)Connectedness in "Flexible Citizenship" and Chinese Student-Migrants' "Filial Nationalism": Ways of Being and Ways of Belonging**

Based on her observation of the significant number of well-off Chinese (ethnically speaking) migrants from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia who shuttled the Pacific Ocean between Asia and North America in 1990s, Aihwa Ong (1999) coined the term "flexible citizenship" to theorize the ways in which these well-heeled migrant subjects treated citizenship instrumentally as a strategic asset in their flexible accumulation and conversion of economic, social, and cultural capitals across national borders. Such a practice was in part a response to the political circumstances at that time, especially the return of Hong Kong sovereignty to the PRC in 1997, but it also harbingered a more general pattern of increasingly footloose human and capital flows that other scholars had also begun to observe (e.g., Mitchell, 1995; Skeldon, 1995). Ong's thesis originally stemmed from a rather select group of socioeconomically privileged people, and it has also been subsequently criticized for overemphasizing flight/mobility and not paying sufficient attention to the processes of localization and forms of fixity in the transnational projects (e.g., Kalir, 2012; Waters, 2009). This notwithstanding, "flexible citizenship" has become a landmark conceptual idiom in research on contemporary human experiences of migration.

Although seldom framed as such explicitly, the discussions and debates around "flexible citizenship" can in fact be seen as centered on the idea of *(dis-)connectedness*. Under the "flexible citizenship" paradigm, there is presumably a disconnect between the migrant's sociocultural and economic practices on one hand and their formal political identity on the other: while the flexible citizen acquires the passport of a certain country (i.e., a political regime), they may be largely *disconnected* from or indifferent toward this adoptive context but remain strongly *connected* in cultural and other ways to their original home country, or even to a network of places. What matters to flexible citizens is that the pattern of (dis-)connection is conducive to the flexible accumulation of economic and other forms of capital.

Meanwhile, Vanessa Fong's (2011) more recent ethnographic work shows that the logic of "flexible citizenship" is not necessarily the preserve of elite transmigrants but has become a powerful *imaginary* motivating the practice of ordinary young Chinese people venturing into the developed world in pursuit of education, cosmopolitan experience, and possibly residence/citizenship rights. China is currently the largest sender of overseas students in the world; in 2014, some 460,000 Chinese citizens went abroad for study (Caixin News, 2015). Source suggests that, as of 2006, only about a quarter of all Chinese students overseas had returned to China on a long-term basis (Welch & Zhen, 2008, p. 520), which gives an indication as to the size of the Chinese student-turned-migrants remaining abroad.

For these young Chinese subjects, increasingly originating from non-elite backgrounds, "flexible citizenship" often sets the horizon of their aspiration. Coining the notion of "filial nationalism" (Fong, 2004), Fong further notes that even as they desire and pursue citizenship in the developed world, these Chinese student-migrants nevertheless retain a nationalistic attachment to their home country in a way akin to filial piety. Thus, physical *disconnect* from the homeland or even the renunciation of birth citizenship on one hand and emotional/cultural/ideological *connectedness* on the other are found to be juxtaposed but not necessarily contradictory. This shows that the issue of (dis-)connectedness can be nuanced, even ambivalent, when considered in relation to sociological themes such as citizenship, nation-state, and/or cultural belonging.

In their seminal essay, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) argue that for migrant subjects inhabiting the *transnational social field*, defined as "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed [across national borders]" (p. 1009), a distinction must be made between their "ways of being" and "ways of belonging." While the *ways of being* refers to "the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated with their actions" (p.1010), *ways of belonging* refers to "practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group" (p.1010). Importantly, these two domains need not overlap, in the sense that transmigrants can be immersed in transnational social relations (i.e., "being") without necessarily having the associated sense of cultural identifications (i.e., "belonging"). In other words, the two kinds of ways may be disconnected. Ong's and Fong's works usefully illustrate such disconnectedness in transnational subjecthood, with Ong's work focusing on the "ways of being" and Fong's study of "filial nationalism" emphasizing the "ways of belonging."

Another important point Fong makes in her book, which is captured in its title *Paradise Redefined*, is that *imagination* plays a key role in shaping the contours of the Chinese study-abroad students' desires and aspirations. An idealized imagination of the developed world as a paradise is subject to disillusionment or redefinition when the developed world is encountered in the real. Notwithstanding this, imagination remains extremely powerful as the initial motivator for their overseas adventures and as the ongoing impetus for their subsequent sojourning trajectories. What Appadurai (1991, p. 198) said more than two decades ago, "More persons in

more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before,” is today even more true as information and communication technologies (ICT) rapidly develop and widely spread. In this chapter, I also highlight the constitutive role of the imagination in shaping the “flexible citizenship” discourses of the Chinese student-turned-migrants in Singapore. Indeed, I shall suggest that my research participants’ “flexible citizenship” discourse sometimes rings hollow, for much of it seems to hinge on (ICT-)mediated imagining.

Furthermore, I shall argue that imagination mediates a *dialectical* relationship between connectedness and disconnectedness for the Chinese student-turned-migrants I studied. This is so in the sense that when they claim to be connected to a certain place, notably the homeland (i.e., China) they left behind, they do so often primarily through ICT-facilitated imagination. Not only might this kind of qualified connectedness be itself understood as a form of disconnectedness, it arguably also has the effect of reducing the need or incentive for these migrant subjects to desire more than the minimal level of connection with their immediate host context, i.e., Singapore—resulting in another kind of disconnect, namely, local disconnect. They become disconnected on both ends, in short.

It is such nuanced and sometimes contradictory dimensions to the notion of (dis-)connectedness that this chapter aims to explore. Before advancing these arguments with empirical data, some basic information about the research and its context is in order.

## **The Case and the Research: Singapore’s PRC “Foreign Talent” Students**

Facing declining population fertility and pressures to upgrade the skill levels of the workforce in order to remain competitive in a globalizing knowledge economy, the government of the Southeast Asian city-state Singapore has since the 1990s proactively sought to attract “foreign talent” to its shores. While broadly speaking “foreign talent” refers to a wide range of highly “value-adding” personnel such as professionals, businesspeople, scientists, artists, and so on, a major channel through which “foreign talent” is recruited and nurtured is education, especially tertiary education.

In early 2000s, the government of Singapore launched a “Global Schoolhouse” project, with the ambitious target of increasing the total number of foreign students in Singapore to 150,000 in a decade, hoping to make the city-state a regional center for education and knowledge creation (Ng & Tan, 2010). By the end of 2010, the total number of international students in Singapore approached 100,000 (Davie, 2010), though this number suffered some declines in the subsequent years. Behind this drive to recruit foreign students is the implicit expectation that many will seek work in Singapore after completing studies, thereby augmenting the city-state’s population and workforce. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that young foreign

students who enroll in Singaporean primary and secondary schools typically receive invitation from the government of Singapore to become permanent residents (PR).

Various kinds of government-sponsored scholarship schemes were also put in place since the 1990s to secure high-caliber students from the Asian region, particularly the People's Republic of China (Yang, 2016). In 2012, the Singaporean Ministry of Education (MOE) admitted that annually some 2000 full scholarships were awarded to foreign students at tertiary and pre-tertiary levels (Seah, 2012). Most of the tertiary scholarships carry legal “bonds” requiring the recipients to work in Singapore for a number of years as a contribution back to the benefactor city-state, thus officially sanctioning the student-turned-migrant route. Until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it was also a common practice for scholars to receive PR invitations upon completing their undergraduate studies.

Although due to the sensitiveness of the “foreign talent” issue (Yang, 2014a) it is not openly known exactly what percentages of student-turned-migrants in Singapore are of PRC background, it can be surmised with confidence that PRC Chinese make up a substantial group, if not the largest. This is because, on the one hand, the Singapore state seeks to replenish the Chinese population—being persistently the local ethnic group with the lowest fertility—in order to maintain the percentage of ethnic Chinese (historically about 75 %) in the national population composition (Yeoh & Lin, 2013, p. 35; Yim, 2011, p. 65); on the other hand, being a country where Mandarin is widely spoken, Singapore is not an unattractive destination for many Chinese students and migrants.

My broader research project was an ethnographic study of the Chinese “foreign talent” scholarship recipients in Singapore (see Yang, 2014d, for an overview), involving a 16-month double-sited fieldwork comprising discourse analysis, participant observation, semi-structured, as well as informal ethnographic interviews. My research participants included both “PRC scholars” who were still undergraduate students and those who had already turned into migrant working professionals. For this chapter, I focus only on the latter category, under which I carried out in-depth interviews in Mandarin with twenty informants. Being former scholarship recipients, almost all these interviewees studied engineering or science disciplines at university and had 6-year bonds with Singapore. At the time of my fieldwork (2011–2012), they were aged in their mid- to late 20s and had been 2 or 3 years into professional life (15/20) or postgraduate research training (5/20).

## **Imagination and “Flexible Citizenship” Discourse: Readiness to Disconnect**

Imagination and comparison often go hand in hand. An *imaginary* is often constructed vis-à-vis a *reality* that is found to be undesirable or inadequate. Thus, an us-vs-them “comparative methodology” can be said to be characteristic of transnational imaginations and discourses. For the Chinese international students Vanessa



Fong studied, the us-them dichotomy is one between a wanting China and an idealized developed world:

Backwardness, poverty, corruption, jealousy, and dependence on instrumental social networks (*guanxi*) topped the list of “Chinese characteristics” these teenagers found most deplorable in comparison with what they perceived as the wealthier, more meritocratic, more modern, less treacherous, more independent, and less socially exhausting life available in wealthier societies. (Fong, 2004, p. 638)

In this section, I look at the discourses of imagination and comparison voiced by the PRC “foreign talent” student-turned-migrants in Singapore. As it turns out, in contrast to the China-West dichotomy Fong articulated, for my research participants, narratives of imagination and comparison involved not two but *three* places, or imaginary constructs. As these “foreign talent” subjects have already lived in *Singapore* for a number of years, this developed city-state has become for them less a site of imagination but more a place of concrete experience. In contrast, their homeland *China*, now seen and experienced only from some distance, increasingly takes the place of a site of fascination and imagination. On top of these two places that are alternately them/us and home/abroad, then there remains a third place: the “real” (read *white*) developed West that constitutes the boundary marking, ultimate “other” in their imaginations.

In their imaginary “shopping” between these three imaginary spaces, various parameters or criteria are applied. Prominent among these are social welfare provisions such as education, healthcare, and retirement systems, life-work balances, and the presence of sociocultural discrimination and exclusion. For instance, education in China is believed to be strong and rigorous at the foundational level but inferior at higher levels to the Westernized Singaporean system and ultimately to the world-leading educational systems of North America. My interlocutors not only comparatively spoke about these different educational systems from their own experiences and perspectives but also thought about their future children’s education.

With regard to healthcare, the general perception is that the European welfare states operate “cradle-to-grave” care systems and are therefore the most desirable. The USA is much less desirable, because it does not provide universal healthcare but relies heavily on private insurance. (Interestingly, many informants cited what they had been reading on the Internet about President Obama’s efforts at reforming the American healthcare system, which happened to be going on during the time of my fieldwork.) Singapore, for many informants, was not very desirable when it comes to social welfare either, as provisions are considered not extensive, although many acknowledged that the quality of medical care is high, and the system is transparent and reliable. China’s healthcare system, in contrast, is regarded as extortionately expensive and often corrupt, though not necessarily inferior in technical terms.

On work-life balances or lifestyle in general, a common perception is that Western/European countries are the most relaxed but do not provide opportunities for big-time success. Singapore, on the other hand, with its highly regulated and relatively mature economy, is considered to offer reasonable spaces to develop one’s

career steadily but not the kind of seemingly endless exciting opportunities that China as a fast-developing dynamic economy offers. Most informants also mentioned explicit or implicit racial discrimination as a factor that undermines the desirability of the West—a problem much less relevant in the Singapore context.

The list of comparative criteria goes on, but the above should be illustrative. As different national-cultural “systems” can be more or less desirable depending on which criterion is applied, choosing among these systems involves maximizing the advantages through practicing mobility and flexibility in citizenship and being ready to disconnect with places without so much as the baggage of attachment. During the interviews, I was often struck by the remarkable tone of confidence and optimism in which this “flexible citizenship” discourse was voiced. Having by now accumulated a fair amount of useful capitals (a widely recognized education; bilingualism in arguably the two most important languages in today’s world, i.e., English and Chinese; cross-cultural experiences, and working experiences in Singapore-based international corporations, among others), these Chinese student-turned-migrants spoke of transnational mobility in what seemed to be a taken-for-granted manner. They were born and raised in China, received a Singaporean higher education, and have seen the developed West through exchange programs or overseas internships, and thus the world is not such a strange place for them anymore. Even if not immediately in a position to move frictionlessly and choose a most desirable country to live and work in, it is not beyond imagination for certain opportunities in the near future to allow them to do so.

Kexin<sup>1</sup> (26, F, shipping executive) had at the time of interview never traveled to any Western country yet, but she nonetheless spoke as follows in response to my question probing where she’d like to live in the future:

Well, I don’t know yet. Let’s see. Now I am already a Singaporean citizen, so it’s relatively easy for me to travel. Hopefully in the coming year I will have an opportunity to travel on business to Australia. If not I will just go there for holiday. And I can take a look (*kan yi kan*). Maybe further down the road I will also get to travel to Europe and the US, and then with some first-hand experiences, I can compare for myself, to see which is the most suitable environment for development (*fazhan*) and living (*shenghuo*).

Or take the example of Aijia (26, F) who was at the time of the interview about to complete her PhD in Civil Engineering from a Singaporean university. Aijia had been in a relationship with her Chinese banker boyfriend for over 2 years. Her boyfriend was then based in Shanghai, and the two of them had met when he was previously posted to Singapore for a half-a-year period. Now maintaining a relationship straddling Singapore and Shanghai, the two of them traveled back and forth to visit each other several times a year. When I asked Aijia what their plans were regarding the future, her reply was illustrative of the “flexible citizenship” strategy that many others of my research subjects also adopted or did not mind adopting. Aijia suggested that as long as the arrangement is pursuant to the interest of their careers and their quality of life, they are happy to straddle across Singapore and China. After her PhD graduation, she might seek work in Singapore, and eventually obtain Singaporean citizenship. In the future, when Aijia and her boyfriend get married and raise children, their children would have the option of receiving education in either China or Singapore, depending on which would then seem to be the better

choice. Her future husband, on the other hand, would probably retain his Chinese citizenship so she could easily go back to China for visits, and vice versa. With each of them holding a different passport, they will be able to flexibly and simultaneously enjoy the best of the two countries.

In such manners, personal career development (*shiyegeren fazhan*) and quality of living (*shenghuo zhiliang*) feature as two key pursuits toward which the flexible “shopping of countries” is geared. It is typical to hear my interviewees say something along the line of “As long as it’s good for career development and family life, anywhere in the world is okay.” In other words, in their imagination and discourse, these Chinese student-turned-migrants displayed a positive and easy attitude toward flexibility and mobility. Importantly, this also means that *connectedness* to a certain place or environment, be it physical or social, in the sense of long-term stable residence or immersion, matters relatively little to them. Instead, for what they truly desire, they seem more than ready to be on the move, to disconnect from the old and to connect with the new.

## Disconnected or Connected...through “Culture”

Alongside this imagination-driven “flexible citizenship” discourse which betrays the Chinese student-turned-migrants’ fairly easy attitude toward disconnection or a readiness to disconnect, they sometimes also talk about (dis-)connectedness in a more grounded and experiential way. When they did so, the notion of “culture” was often brought up, thus illuminating another important way, i.e., the “cultural,” in which they understood the meaning of (dis-)connectedness.

During interviews, several of my informants mentioned that in Singapore, human connections were “thin” (*renqing danbo*) compared with that in China, and they saw this as an unsatisfying aspect of the Singaporean “culture.” Some say that the human connections in Singapore are mainly business and transactional relations, invested with too much interest and utilitarianism, but not enough genuine emotion and solicitude. Zi Guang (26, M), who worked in a local Singaporean civil engineering company, observed as follows:

In Singapore I think the human connections are thin (*renqing danbo*). Everybody *dabao* [takeaway] food<sup>2</sup>, even the core family *dabao* food and eat on their own. There is not enough connection. [...] Everybody is like an isolated entity standing alone (*meigeren xiang dandu de yigen ci*).

The implication of what my informants considered to be “thin” human connections in Singapore is that there lacks “warmth” in daily life, resulting in social and emotional life characterized by loneliness and isolation, in other words, little connectedness. However, it must be pointed out that such an observation from my informants was mainly an evaluation of the Singapore society they made from the positionality as outsiders and probably reflected more accurately their own disconnect with the local Singaporean society than the state of general human connectedness in the Singaporean “culture.” Thus, when I probed my informant by asking

whether their perception of “thin” human connections in Singapore might not have been due to the fact that they were not yet an integral part of the local people’s social life, some readily conceded so. The majority of informants agreed that whereas they had many local colleagues and friends, their best friends often remained other Mainland Chinese in Singapore. In other words, not being connected with the Singapore society and culture makes some Chinese student-migrants perceive that society and culture in Singapore are characterized by thin human connectedness.

If Zi Guang’s above comment represented an affective and nonutilitarian understanding of connectedness, then the following anecdote told by Peng (27, M), an entrepreneurially spirited self-employed informant, hinted at a more instrumental or utilitarian conception of connectedness, which he found also lacking in Singapore:

I know one of the secretaries working in the Chinese Embassy here. The other day, a friend of mine was in urgency to go abroad on a Sunday; however, her passport was being renewed at the Embassy, and the Embassy is closed on Sunday. So she phoned me up to see if I could help. I phoned up the secretary friend in the Embassy, explained the matter to him, and he helped to retrieve the new passport immediately, and asked my friend to go and collect it. You see, this is the flexibility you have with Chinese people. In a Singaporean context, this would never have happened.

It seems that what Peng was putting his finger on here is another type of “flexibility,” one afforded by the type of connection/connectedness that has been commonly referred to in Chinese as *guanxi*. Literally meaning “relationships,” cultural anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (1997) explains that *guanxi* unifies material exchanges and obligations with *ganqing*—the Chinese term for emotion or affection. Through examining the ways in which the affective and the instrumental cannot be clearly compartmentalized in Chinese sociality, Kipnis highlights the specificity of the tendency in Western modernity to separate the instrumental/transactional relations from the affective/emotional domain.

Peng’s anecdote was rather unique, but the gist of his comment, namely, that in Singapore the kind of flexibility stemming from personal connection/connectedness is lacking when compared with the case of China, was echoed by some of my other informants. Some used the Chinese terms *ziru du* or *shufu du*, roughly translated as the “level of agility” or “cultural comfort.” Reflecting on their experiences of working in Singapore, several informants pointed out that here, rules were a bit “rigid” (*siban*), without room for maneuver (*huixuan de yudi*).

It must be stressed that the Chinese *guanxi* social philosophy is emphatically not one about merely instrumental and utilitarian exchange and transactions. As both Kipnis (1997) and Osburg (2013) show, for the Chinese, *guanxi* is about affective and emotional connectedness, and the material and transactional aspect is just a manifestation of this nonmaterial connectedness. What appears to be instrumental materiality in fact serves to cement or materialize the nonmaterial connection. Because for some of the Chinese student-turned-migrants I interviewed in Singapore, the “rigid” local rules obstructed certain material exchanges and transactions, this was interpreted as a sign that nonmaterial connectedness is lacking. Again, it must be added here that the discourse of my informants reflected their own conception

and perception of connectedness in Singapore, which is more likely a function of their own degree of (dis-)connectedness to the local society, people, and workplace and not necessarily an accurate or objective characterization of the latter.

## **Patriotic yet Disconnected: Discourse on Citizenship and National Identity**

Although virtually all of my informants have taken up the permanent residence (PR) status offered by the government of Singapore upon their university graduation<sup>3</sup>, few had made the move yet to acquire full citizenship at the time of my research fieldwork. Partly this was because many informants still considered it early times to make such a decision and would rather “take one step at a time” or “keep watching” (*guanwang*). For those who clearly saw themselves settling down in Singapore in the future, the application is made sooner rather than later. For example, Kexin, who works in the shipping industry, believed that because of her professional field, it was definitely more advantageous for her to be based in Singapore. Thus, she applied for and was granted citizenship just over 3 years after university graduation. Although Zhi Cong, a 26-year-old male informant who originally came from rural Hubei in China, hadn’t made the application yet, he hinted that he would probably do so soon as well—“It would only be good for me, you see, in China, I have a rural *hukou* (household registration)<sup>4</sup>; by becoming a Singaporean, next time I’d be an “overseas Chinese” (*huaqiao*) when I visit China. I don’t have much to lose by taking up the Singapore citizenship.”

The instrumental and calculative way in which my informants look at citizenship status is clearly demonstrated in their often-made comment or, *complaint* rather, about China’s nonacceptance of dual citizenship. In fact, were China (and Singapore too, of course, which does not accept dual citizenship) to accept dual citizenship, my informants, as well as most other Chinese migrants would not think another second about acquiring an additional passport. In other words, a great many Chinese “foreign talents” and Chinese transmigrants in general currently hesitate to take up foreign citizenships primarily due to the exclusive citizenship regime of China, the desirability of which is arguably on the rise. Were there to be no such exclusivity, citizenship would indeed be an asset to be “accumulated” by these flexible subjects to maximize their advantage. Thus, when it comes to the formal/legal membership in a specific regime, cool-headed calculation is the dominant logic.

Neither the student-turned-migrants that I interviewed nor the general Chinese immigrants in Singapore that I knew of made the link between citizenship status to the issue of loyalty or patriotism. “(Legal) citizenship doesn’t necessarily have to do with your sense of belonging,” I was told quite a few times by different informants. One’s connection with China as the motherland—to the extent such an attachment exists—will not change with the change of passport. For most part, national identity or matters like loyalty or patriotism or nationalist sentiment seemed to matter very

little for my informants. Only after being pressed would they try to offer some thoughts on this issue, usually to the effect of saying that their emotional attachment and connection remain stronger with China rather than their adoptive home Singapore. For example, one informant Min Jian (M, 25, PhD student) put it, “my heart will always be inclined towards the side of China (*wode xin yongyuan hui xiangzhe zhongguo*).”

That these student-turned-migrants claim they retain an emotional connection to their homeland China is, in itself, not a refreshing finding. However, if one were to subject the concrete expressions of their “patriotic” sentimentality to ethnographic examination, it seems a pinch of salt is in order, for much of the connections that supposedly sustain such attachment seem to be again highly mediated, driven by imagination. For the most part, connections with China consisted of the daily browsing of China-related news and China-based “infotainment” on the Internet or TV. “How do you mean when you say you are more emotionally connected to China?”—I would probe my informants along such a line, and their replies would typically run something like “Well, you just care about it; reading the news about China; browsing some blogs to see the big social events and scandals...” In other words, for transmigrants such as these student-turned-migrants living outside China, China is largely experienced as an abstraction, comprising mostly information and signs. Their patriotic attachment to or connectedness with China tends also to be expressed through symbolic acts such as leaving a comment on a China-related news article or “liking” a post on Facebook that says China will soon take over the USA in GDP.

One of my informants, Ouyang (27, M, civil engineering consultant), remarked revealingly in an interview, “Close your door, and turn on the computer, you feel just as if in China.” Among all my interlocutors, Ouyang was among those who stayed most closely connected with China, in the sense that he kept highly up-to-date about China-related current affairs and demonstrated notable pride and defensiveness when our topics turned to Chinese politics, culture, and society. Compared with others, Ouyang also stood out in how much he remained loyal to Mainland China-based media and the infotainment it offers. He would be close to the type of person one has in mind when words such as “nationalism” and “patriotism” are invoked. But even for him, China is in most part an abstract domain of symbols and imagination that one switches on when one switches on the laptop or social media. One’s emotional attachment and patriotic sentiments can be kindled and rehearsed in this domain, but as we can imagine for Ouyang, when he switches off his computer and opens his door to go to his Singapore-based workplace, he is immediately presented with the mundanity of white-collar professional life in a highly cosmopolitan global city which has little use for his emotive attachment to China.

In the mundane spheres of daily work and living, pragmatism and flexibility are still the principles that govern my informants’ thinking and behavior, while high sentiments such as patriotism and national loyalty are relegated to a symbolic compartment suffused with signs, imagination, fantasization, but little more. Precisely because information and communication technology has now allowed people to

participate in symbolic self-expressions of identity and belonging independent of their physical locations, pragmatism and flexibility can be adopted even more fully in their mundane and extra-symbolic life domains. Here we glimpse the dialectical relationship between connectedness and disconnectedness, mediated by ICT-enabled imagination.

Here lies my trouble with Fong's "filial nationalism" thesis as well as Hail's (2015) more recent argument about Chinese students being "patriotic abroad"—not that their observations of Chinese students' nationalistic or patriotic sentiments and discourses are not valid, but, instead, ultimately how much such sentiments and discourses really amount to? Many sojourning Chinese claim to be strongly attached to China and to be "patriotic," even as they prefer not to physically live there. Having a secure "base" abroad (in the form of permanent residency or citizenship) means they can "dip in and out" of China at ease. This flexibility allows the sojourners the privilege to criticize and bemoan what is amiss with China while singing the sentimental songs of patriotism. The limitation of such kind of connectedness should be clearly recognized.

Furthermore, the by-and-large middle-class background of my "foreign talent" research participants means that their families and friends in China are usually not the immediate victims of China's myriad social problems. This tinges their solicitous attachment to China with a certain character of "watching the fire from the opposite side of the river" as the Chinese idiom goes (*ge'an guanhuo*)—what I venture to call a "patriotism at a safe distance." This somewhat hollowed-out connectedness, sustained through, yet suspended in, ICT-enabled imaginations/imaginaries, seems to be one important feature to note when the question of connection and disconnection is considered with regard to migrant subjects such as international students.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, through examining the discourse of a group of Chinese "foreign talent" scholars in Singapore, I have tried to offer a grounded understanding of what it means to be connected or disconnected for international student-turned-migrants. As opposed to the dominant approach of studying (dis-)connectedness which is underpinned by a psychologist paradigm, this chapter has employed an approach that emphasizes sociocultural themes, with an ethnographic sensibility. The outcome is an explorative account that unpacks the notion of (dis-)connectedness, foregrounding the social actors' own terms—an emic view.

To some extent resonating with previous research such as Aihwa Ong's work on "flexible citizenship" and Vanessa Fong's observation of "filial nationalism" among Chinese students abroad, my research in the context of Singapore also found the discourse of flexibility and mobility to be rather prevalent and characteristic and that



student-migrants claimed certain affective or emotional connectedness to their homeland. However, I argue rather than “flexible citizens,” perhaps the term *disconnected trans-/migrants* might be more appropriate for these subjects because, given that their discourse of flexibility is mostly sustained by the practice of imagination, such a discourse reflects more accurately their disconnectedness and readiness to disconnect and not so much their objective capacity for mobility and flexibility.

Furthermore, through highlighting the role of the ICT in enabling imaginations and discourses, I caution against idealizing or essentializing the political subjectivities of Chinese student-migrant subjects abroad. Their purported connectedness with the homeland (or even nationalistic or patriotic sentiments) should be taken with a pinch of salt, or even dialectically regarded as precisely a form of disconnectedness, for sometimes there is little more that sustains such connection than the Wi-Fi connection.

Before ending, however, one qualification to the research findings must be registered. As noted earlier, in this research, my interviewees aged mostly in their mid- or late 20s. It is possible, indeed likely, that their discourse about flexibility and mobility and their disconnectedness or even readiness to disconnect reflected their relatively young age and their early career stage. Thus, the findings reported here should be read strictly against the age range of my informants and may not be assumed to be applicable to different age groups, or migrant subjects of other demographic characteristics.

To end, I argue in agreement with Gomes (2015) that the default binary categorization “home-host” used in studying international student-migrants is increasingly simplistic and obsolete. Like my research participants who were recruited and nurtured by Singapore as “foreign talent,” increasingly student-migrants are in various ways “in betweeners,” for whom what truly constituted the “home” or the “host” becomes ambiguous, unstable, and problematic. In this context, investigating connectedness and disconnectedness represents an exciting and challenging endeavor, toward which this chapter is a small effort.

## Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Singapore specialist Lai Ah-Eng (1995, p. 49) indeed noted that in Singapore there was a “high frequency of eating out.”
3. The practice of offering PR invitations to “foreign talent” scholars stopped after 2008 when popular discontent rose.
4. The household registration system in China categorizes the population broadly under rural and urban and allocates resources and welfare accordingly (Solinger, 1999). Although the system’s influence has significantly diminished as reform deepened in China, *hukou* still affects a citizen’s life chance and symbolic status in China.

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# Chapter 14

## Transnational Student-Migrants and the Negotiation of Connectedness and Self-Identity in Australia: The Pains and Gains

Hannah Soong

**Abstract** As globalisation deepens, student mobility through international education-migration nexus is becoming a prominent feature of today's global education landscape. Over the last decades, international students have become more visible in most universities, especially in developed countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Europe, North America and even some parts of the Asia-Pacific region. Yet, beneath these visibilities of international students, very few scholarly projects have looked into the desire for overseas education as part of an *imagined mobility* for transnational flows to adequately deal with the heterogeneity and complexities of education-migration interactions. Drawing on an ethnographic study of seven international student-migrants undertaking Australian Teacher Education, I investigate how students' imagination for mobility can be a more useful way of understanding the reality of their sense of connectedness and self-identity. By using the work of *imagined mobility* as a lens for analysis (Soong, 2016), the chapter illustrates how the forms and workings of transnational connectedness are being shaped, rendering the transnational student-migrant a subject of 'being in flux' between the pains and gains.

**Keywords** Transnational connectedness • Being in flux • Imagination • Education-migration interactions

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## Introduction

According to Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data, there were more than four million individuals studying for a tertiary qualification outside their home country in 2015 (OECD, 2015). Furthermore, since international student mobility has increased at the same time, the share of international student becoming migrants has also been given as much attention. Like many other immigrant-receiving countries, Australia seems to act like a magnet attracting those living outside its borders by offering favourable conditions for linking study, work and migration. However, much is still unknown about the relation between identity and connectedness when a student is acquiring and using education qualifications for migration trajectory.

Drawing on critical policy, socio-anthropology, cultural studies, discourse and intercultural studies or work on socio-psychology and identity theories, several authors (e.g. Brown & Holloway, 2008; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Sidhu, 2003; Tran, 2007; Rizvi, 2011) have discussed how international migration through education should be framed. One common assumption of critical sociology, for example, is displaying how the Australian international education-migration pathway, brought about by globalisation of education and labour, is intricately interwoven by modes of neoliberalism (e.g. Robertson, 2013). Yet, the real challenge to deal with the heterogeneity and complexities of education-migration interactions requires a theoretical stance that must be systematically related to specific context (Soong, 2016). This is because while the students are visibly culturally other within 'Western' universities and their legal status in the host country defines them as 'temporary outsiders', they are not homogeneously defined cultural subjects. Understanding what the education-migration nexus means for them as they confront their dilemmas and expectations, as they negotiate the myriad complexities between the constraints and possibilities and as they make sense of their shifting multiple identities is key to interpreting the connectedness of a transnational student-migrant subject. In this chapter, taken from an ethnographic study of a group of seven international students who remain uncertain about their migration trajectories, I present the significance of multiple and conflicting logics of the pains and gains of connectedness to a world that is increasingly impacted by transnational flows.

Current literature (e.g. Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010) documents the unique challenges international students face in adjusting to Australian higher education. Specifically, they have to negotiate different academic systems, communication differences, racial and ethnic distinctions and a lack of social interactions with members within the host society (Leask, 2010; Soong, 2013). Since mid-2000, much research on the complicated nexus between education and migration have attempted to address policy and labour market integration issues and how the shifting discourses outside the boundaries of the education-migration sector are impacting on international students. Crucial to these discussions is how mobility is highly valued in the eyes of international

students aspiring to be ‘designer migrants’ (Ziguras & Law, 2006). For instance, some studies have shown how highly skilled international students have become exploited labour migrants (Nielson, 2009; Robertson, 2011). Other studies (e.g. Baas, 2006; Hawthorne, 2010) have observed how becoming ‘Australian permanent residents’ is not necessary about remaining in the host country, but rather it is about making future plans for more border-crossing mobility (Birrell, Healy, Edwards, & Dobson, 2008). Yet, for student-migrants in this chapter, despite being framed by their deficits in becoming ‘backdoor migrants’ (Colebatch, 2010), the desire to migrate through education remains strong.

Such desirability for mobility through education, I contend, requires them a capacity to imagine what their lives will be like in the future while they make sense of their subjective experience of connectedness to the host society: its people, ideas and culture. Appadurai (1996) has observed that because the concept of collective sense—made possible by mass media—is creating a ‘community of sentiment’, it is the social force of imagination that is now operating frequently beyond the boundaries of the nation. Building on this and paraphrasing Gilroy (1992), for Ang (1994), the experiences of migration for a migrant are no longer ‘where you’re from’, but ‘where you are at’ which forms the point of anchorage (p. 10). In reading this way, such a tenet sheds light on how one’s social imagination can play a significant role in imagining one’s social existence in a liminal space of border crossing. Also, it is important to note the increased barriers to such movement. One such barrier that Robertson (2013) recognises is the kinds of ‘policy experimentation’ (Hawthorne, 2010) brought about by the power assemblages of state’s policy frameworks which exposed the students to an extensive battery of tests and control measures. This adds further complexity and a different take on how globalisation is being mobilised by the postmodernity of global flows, travelling cultures, flexible citizenships and transnational circulations of human movement (Ong, 1999).

In other words, the virtual-free movement of capital, media and technology in the contemporary era has not been paralleled by the equally free mobility of people (Appadurai, 1996). Rather, as Massey (1993) claims, it has been accompanied by tightening controls and greater selective migration. For instance, for many Asian international students undertaking teaching degree who wish to remain as migrants upon graduation, they have to pass with distinctions in their English testing and undergo further screening in the local State Government Education Department, before they can apply for work relevant to their teaching degree (Soong, 2016). While many international students from non-English speaking backgrounds in Australian universities are visibly culturally other and their legal status in the host country defines them as ‘temporary outsiders’, they are not homogeneously defined cultural subjects (Waters & Brooks, 2011). In this sense, connectedness for such student-migrants is claimed as a primary resource for enacting one’s identity and creating a meaningful membership of belonging to a social group while in transience.

Of particular interest here is the concept of *imagined* mobility as a lens of analysis (Soong, 2016) to understand the workings of connectedness which, in the education-migration context, takes two forms: the unfixed spatial and temporal

connectedness of the student-migrants in the host society and the everyday negotiation of the student-migrant actors straddling between the freedom of space on the one hand and the controlling of one's 'right to one's own place' on the other by the already powerful (Massey, 2005, p. 86). While abdicating the broader agenda of internationalising higher education and its nexus with migration as a neoliberal project (Marginson, 2007; Ong, 2006), the individual student-migrant is still being insinuated to be market actors in representing economic benefit for the institutions, state and labour market (Masanauskas & Harvey, 2011). In many ways, such conditions require them to develop the capacity to make strategic calculations for taking advantage of the increased global interconnectivity to reshape their lives and future trajectories. Yet, worries about some 'unintended consequences' on student-migrant mobility are starting to be heard internationally. These consequences include rising anti-immigration policies, a shift from quantity to quality top research universities and a lack of control amongst private providers (de Wit, Ferencz, & Rumbley, 2012), as well as the increased awareness that international students are a vulnerable community in 'Western' countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (Forbes-Mewett, McCulloch, & Nyland, 2015; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). For student-migrants, such consequential issues are vital to the everyday project of establishing an identity which is tied with access to social and cultural connectedness in both home and host societies (Rizvi, 2011). For those who belong to the ethnic minority, particularly those from non-English-speaking background students, they must achieve self-representing agency if they are to participate in mainstream social and academic contexts, renegotiate their identities in new places and accrue the necessary symbolic capital to create a meaningful existence within the institution and the wider society (Marginson, 2014).

Before turning to the effects of one's *imagined mobility* on transnational connectedness and identity, the next section outlines the myths and realities in Australian international education-migration nexus, the means by which the transnational education mobility has been secured in the form of linking certain skilled migration policies, chiefly specified by the immigration department, which govern the insertion of 'student migration' into the international education industry. I then discuss the nuanced engagement of connectedness by examining particular incidents in the community experiences and professional practice, experienced by a group of student-migrants. In so doing, I address how their experiences of pain and gain are key to understanding their sense of connectedness as transnational student-migrant subjects living in a world that is increasingly impacted by the work of imagined mobility.

## **Transnational Students at the Nexus of International Education and Migration**

Australia, for a number of reasons, provides a particular significant case study of education-migration nexus (Robertson, 2013). Ranked the third highest in the country's export industries (Australia Bureau Statistics (ABS), 2011), Australia's



international education is believed to be one of the first countries to create an education market in higher education by recruiting full-fee paying students from fast-developing countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong (Rizvi, 2011). According to Rizvi, not only has Australian higher education seen a remarkable increase of international students, such enormous success was largely due to the manner in which Australian higher education has managed to capture the changing cultural and political dynamics of globalisation through their 'policy experimentation' (Hawthorne, 2010), especially with the education-migration nexus. A closer look at UNESCO's (2014) data shows that long-distance migration through international education, across most OECD countries, confirms that Australia is continuing showing an upward trend with the recent record rise of 216,815 international students enrolled in higher education studies (Knott, 2015). Such increase in enrolment is largely steered by an active participation and leadership by the Australian government in casting higher education for trade in educational services (Pyne, 2015).

When Australian government began merging the higher education and migration policies at the end of 1990s, it was then that the phenomenon of 'student-migrant' was created (Robertson, 2013). Through its 'points' system, Australia's immigration policy permitted potential students in certain fields of study a simpler path to permanent residence. Rather than choosing to directly apply for independent skilled migration prior to the entry of Australia, for these students seeking to become potential migrants, they have chosen to study in a course that would provide them a pathway to migrate and then work in the host country for a number of years to obtain permanent residency. For instance, recent data from Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) indicate a 480 % increase of international student graduates lodging the post-study visa scheme between 2014 and 2015 (DIBP, 2015).

Even though de Haas (2010) refers such education-migration nexus as a 'rise of new economics and livelihood perspectives' (p. 246), such policy has not been as effective. In a research conducted by demographers based at Monash University, a widening gulf between matching employer demand and domestic and international graduate supply has been reported (Birrell, Healy, Edwards, & Dobson, 2008). It was reported that many of the international students (aged between 20 and 29) who came from a non-English-speaking country (NESC) background who had degrees in information technology, engineering, business and accounting were found to be working in administration or sales. Part of this mismatch was because many Australian employers were concerned about the lack of English communication skills, particularly in mainly Asian or non-English speaking country (NESC) international student graduates, needed in the professional work such as accountants and engineers. This concern has consequently led to the modifications of current General Skilled Migration (GSM) programme in 2010 and the revision of granting international graduates temporary working visas (Baird, 2010). As Robertson's (2013) study has shown, such staggered process of obtaining residency and constant modification of policies is found to negatively impact on those transnational student-migrants who lack the social, cultural or linguistic capacities to enable them to overcome the structural barriers (Robertson, 2013; Soong, 2016). For instance,

Soong's (2016) recent study on student-migrants has shown how the changes in education-migration policies have a great effect in shifting students' motivations, identities, knowledge, skills and dispositions. Worries of how education-migration might subsequently impact the social, political, cultural and spatial domains over the next decade remain to be explored (Castles & Miller, 2009; Marginson, 2012; Raghuram, 2013).

This relates to a myth produced by media and policymakers that 'student-migrants' are a homogeneous group with a fixed transnational identity and trajectory (Birrell, Healy, Edwards, & Dobson, 2008). More often than not, the Australian context has tended to focus on the students desiring and transitioning to become migrants because of the lure of residency pathway (Baas, 2013). Yet, like some of the student-migrants in Robertson's (2013) study, some have found their motivations shifted over the course of their sojourn in Australia. When viewed in totality, migration policies do not just impact education-migration nexus in enabling or constraining international student graduates from applying to become migrants. Their success or failure to obtain migrant status in Australia will also have implications for their immediate families back in the home countries (Baas, 2013). For instance, Bass (2015) has shown how some Indian student-migrants in his study continued to meet the ongoing obligations and ties back home and argued that, in some ways, their aspiration for upward social and transnational mobility had indirectly perpetuated the experience of 'containing' or 'holding' the lives of their family members of whom they left behind. Massey (1993) refers to this distinction as forms of 'differentiated mobility' which explains how various flows and movements are simultaneously related to the uneven and unequal positioning of different groups and persons. For instance, for some of student-migrants in this chapter, who come from working class background, they possess little resources that they can depend on, and yet, they have been encouraged by their parents to achieve residency through overseas studies, as part of a broader strategy for upward mobility. This is unlike Ong's (1999) upwardly mobile families who will arrange immigration for their entire household in order to cross border for their children to access Western education. Despite the differences, most research on cross-border families carried out by human geographers have found that immigration for education is becoming more common amongst families from Asia (Waters, 2010). It involves splitting families, resulting in individual, social and political effects (Elliott & Urry, 2010).

While transnationalism is not new and has emerged as long as nation states have existed, it has never been that swift, easy and affordable in current times (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). Transnational student-migrants are rapidly becoming a growing sector of migrant and student population in developed countries, playing a key role in building and maintaining the global neoliberal imaginary (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). An imaginary has not only helped Australia attract international students as prime destination for study, it has also developed significant reliance on international students as long-term consumers of education-migration export industry. What is central to this chapter is engaging in the question of how one's imagination for a transnational life through overseas education can shed light on one's sense of connectedness and identity in both home and host societies as they negotiate

between their 'roots' and 'routes'. Although education-migration nexus has reconstituted and multiplied the 'lines of flight' open to student-migrants, it is also important to note the increased challenges to such movement. Like Pine's (2014) work, at the backdrop of these visibilities of international students pursuing higher degree and status, is how migration through education forms a symbolic capital in the enactment of imagining of a different future from the present. In many ways, despite the obstacles they encounter in the host country, the visibility of international students in most universities reveals that the international mobility for education has become a marker of success and social status for some students (Harman & Nolan, 2002), and for others, it can result in greater isolation and loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). This, as Ong predicted, is the potential that transnationalism today has offered to 'induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political and economic conditions' (Ong, 1999, p. 6). This, I add, is also part of the work of an *imagined mobility*.

### **The Work of *Imagined Mobility*: Effects on Transnational Student-Migrants' Connectedness and Identity**

In his aim to situate human global mobility as marked by a 'new role for imagination in social life' (1986, p. 11), Appadurai has argued that the capacities to aspire, imagine and anticipate are not an individual property, but a cultural and relational one. Such capacities, as value-creating praxis, involve two kinds of ethos: one is how the diversity of collective goods is imagined and another refers to the logic of managing risks (Appadurai, 2013, p. 188). Appadurai further argues that the speed of global cultural flows have broken down national boundaries in exceptional ways, causing people to 'no longer see their lives as mere outcomes of the givenness of things, but often as the ironic compromise between what they could imagine and what social life will permit' (1996, p. 54). Based on Benedict Anderson's view that nationalism emerged once people were able to see themselves as part of an 'imagined community', Appadurai (1996) contends that it is such force of imagery that alters how people construct their lives, make their choices, communicate with others and think about their future (p. 4) as part of an imagined world. In reading this way, like Ong (1999), Appadurai is offering an alternative way of thinking and analysing the scope and impact of 'globalisation from below' with rich descriptions of 'a world that has become deterritorialised, diasporic and transnational' (*ibid*, p. 188).

Additionally, embedded within such imagined mobility is what constitutes 'an experiential engagement with modernity' (Appadurai, 1996, p. 10). In stressing how 'different flows along which cultural material may be seen to be moving across national boundary' (p. 46), Appadurai (1996) reveals five key cultural dimensions of living in an 'imagined world'. Out of the five, the dimension of 'ethnoscape' is highly relevant to this chapter. This dimension reveals how a particular landscape of persons—such as tourists or migrants or refugees—constitutes an essential feature

of the shifting world in which we live in, do still impact on politics of nations. Hence, one key aspect of understanding the dynamics of transnational student mobility is knowing why and how their imagination of the 'West' is an important dimension of transnationalism. This is often discussed in their stories which uncover the discursive relationships between the imagined 'West' and 'East', as they play out in the stories of the student-migrants' processes of transition. While I acknowledge that the classification of an 'East-West' mechanism may sound simplistic, particularly when the global mobility of students is increasingly more multidirectional (Kell & Vogl, 2010), I have used the term 'West' not to refer to any specific geographic region or ethnicity or nation state but rather to an imagined world where it is a source of 'supposed objective knowledge' (Conceison, 2004, p. 57) or a range of adoption of Western capitalism in cultural attitudes and values regarding personal liberty, gender and technological rationality (Tomlinson, 1996). This is where I use a range of insights from postcolonial theories to provide an analysis of the processes of personal identity change to reveal that a result of physical departure from a home to their individual experience of 'where they are at' is one definitive form of social imaginary in process. A central aspect of this chapter has been the pervasive hermeneutic aspect, in attempting to make sense of the phenomena of an imagined mobility by describing the key experiences and to focus on what makes those experiences self-transforming.

While the work of imagination is being cast as a significant role in how human movement is conducted and by whom, as features of transnationalism, my current focus is to steer the analytical lens towards the immediate interface between the student-migrant subjects and members of the host society in order to unravel the finely variegated spatial and temporal forms of transnational connectedness, and how student-migrant subjects reconstruct and enact identities as a fluid process. Hall and du Gay (1996) proposed that identities are about the process of 'becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves' (p.4).

This is where Giddens' (1991) account of reflexivity adds to Hall and du Gay's (1996) concept of identity formation process. Like Hall, Giddens notes that the process of self-defining or redefining is not confined to an internal sphere; it is also socially produced: one that is constitutive of the psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life. As Giddens writes '[t]he reflexivity of modern social life consists of the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information of the very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (1991, p. 38). Crucial to Giddens' theory in this chapter is to understand how self-reflexivity for the transnational student-migrants is deeply rooted in institutional and not just bounded by the cultural and subjective. For Giddens (1991), as a consequence of increasing interconnections between personal lives and globalising social influences, the self is actively engaging with constructive renewal opportunities and risks which involve constant negotiation and

change, a process that this chapter will describe as a subject of 'being in flux'. Although the relation between identity and society on individual strivings, motivations and reflexivity has been central to Giddens' work, to this point the focus has been on the emergence of identity conditioning of individual self to society, particularly in a society that is increasingly becoming postmodern and uncertain. It is therefore important to recognise how the identity conditioning of transnational individual is motivated by a desire to connect between self and others in a shifting social world.

In the following sections, I will illuminate insights pertaining to the struggles that the student-migrant participants encounter: why some have more struggles than the others, and what possible theoretical perspectives their voices can add to the body of literature. I present and discuss the theoretical underpinnings of works done by Giddens (1991) and Hall and du Gay (1996), as a basis to understand their lived realities of connectedness cross-culturally as spaces for the negotiation of relationship and enactment of self-agency which transcend home and host binaries. Although the student-migrants portrayed in this chapter are not representatives of all international students who are on the verge of migration, their process of identification with and differentiation from others, as framed by their individual social contexts, memberships and interactions, seems inescapable in understanding how their identities and sense of connectedness are shaped through and by complexities in negotiating family relationships and gender identities, as well as the 'in-between' space of 'roots' and 'routes'.

## The Study

This chapter is derived from a two-and-a-half-year ethnographic study which tracked seven student-migrants (two males and five females) from their first semester through to their graduation and then to their mainstream integration as a migrant to be. The research aims to examine the experiences of international students studying in Australia and their motivations for mobility through education-migration nexus. It also examines their views and cross-cultural adaptations in the host community. Upon receiving ethical approval from the host university, I have recruited seven student participants who have volunteered to be interviewed throughout their studies. The group was heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, language background, age, gender and undergraduate degrees (see Table 14.1 for further details). The student-migrant participants were recruited from one particular master's course in Teacher Education. The interview transcripts were subjected to NVivo software analysis to code the interview data. In addition, I have also included notes from researcher observations, student diaries and blogs to add to the richness of the interview data. In this chapter, due to the limited length, profiled commentaries were selected from five of the seven student-migrant participants.

**Table 14.1** Profile of participants

Name	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Bachelor degrees	Previous professional career	Years in career
Haggai	Israel	35	Male	Law and Finance	Lawyer	5
Asuntha	Sri Lanka	27	Female	English and History	English and History tutor in Sri Lankan University	3
Mei	China	35	Female	English and Translation	English language teacher in prestigious private school	10
Chong	China	26	Male	Languages	Tour guide for Swedish tourists in China	3
Ping	China	28	Female	Finance	Project officer in a Chinese warehouse company	5
Sunita	India	25	Female	English Studies	Manager and trainer in a call centre in New Delhi	5

Adapted from Soong (2016)

## Connectedness of Pains and Gains: Complexities in Negotiating Family Relationships and Gender Identities

Within the globally interconnected relationships between home and host societies, gender, ethnicity and culture can each be used to modify the lens through which obligations and expectations embodied in the nature of gender as well as gender-related relationships are conceived, enacted and valorised. Throughout my observation and interviews, I was mostly confronted with the growing struggles the three female student-migrant participants encountered playing the role of a mother, daughter and woman and the ways they negotiated their experiences in order to make sense of their shifting family affiliations and sense of connectedness in a transnational space. For instance, Ping, aged 28, from Shanghai, was a mother of a young toddler son. She left him under the care of her husband and mother-in-law. Before she left for Australia, she worked in a large Chinese warehouse company dealing with export and import products. However, she struggled with being a working mother, and as a result, her marriage was estranged. To her, the education-migration nexus was an attempt to manage its fuzziness and precariousness of her marriage and domestic role as a mother and daughter-in-law as she searched for her self-identity in Australia:

Back in Shanghai, he [Ping's husband] was yelling at me and now I am in Australia, I don't have to hear him yell. When I went back home a few months ago, he changed a lot. I don't know whether a person can completely change but I am over that stage now. If he is good to me, that's good. Mentally and physically it is a form of relief and it has also saved my marriage [pause]... Definitely I have changed in some ways but not much because I know

what type of person I am many years ago. It is just like I know I am an apple tree. Before I was a small apple tree and now I am a big apple tree. And I am still the apple tree.

Unlike the glitter of some rich transnational businessmen and students who are able to make trips back home or send remittances back to families (Ong, 1999), Ping had to straddle her transnational space by being virtually connected with her faraway son while being visibly connected with real people around her. The following narrative captured one such dualistic moment in Ping's struggles within the transnational space. As Ping recalled:

I didn't talk to him [her son] a lot in these two weeks because lately, he was a little bit angry with me. That day, I was very busy so I told him I have to go. He just cried after that and he told me if I really miss him, I better get back and not stop. I told him, the ticket was quite expensive. ... and he went crazy. He knew that that was an excuse, for a mother.

Well, I should not have said stuff like that to him. So lately, I bought him toys and books through internet; prepared him stories and sometimes I read stories for him. I also sent books to his father to read to him. Anyway, even though he is not living with me, I still need to spend time with him.

Ping's pressure of trying to be 'there' virtually for her son was one example of what Elliott and Urry (2010) have observed in the use of 'miniaturized mobilities'—another term for the latest digital technologies—as part of 'holding or containment of anxiety'. On the one hand, this could 'facilitate thinking in relation to mobile lives'. Yet, on the other hand, it could turn its back upon the 'self in various pathologies of mobile lives' (p. 43). In fact, Urry (2003) has argued that virtual contact with families and friends cannot replace a physical contact with loved ones. This problematises the notion of 'astronaut families' (Ong, 1999). According to Ong (1999), 'astronaut families' is an emerging construct belonging to the many transnational Hong Kong businessmen living in several different countries as they pursue commercial purposes and educational opportunities for their children.

Ping's situation did have some resonance with this transnational 'astronaut' construct. Like many of the Hong Kong businessmen, she wanted to remain in Australia because she aspired to create a better future for both herself and her son. In this sense, although not all transnational families share equal economic, social and cultural linkages between home and host societies within the transnational space, Ping's account of her 'virtual' parenting for emerging transnational student-migrants like herself in how they strive to understand their role as a daughter-in-law and mother within the transnational space, however, is not usually enacted in isolation. How one imagines one's cultural connectedness and identity can also penetrate into the fog of one's transnational obligations to families back home. It raised another important aspect about one's sense of connectedness: which cultural aspects to let go and which to hang onto.

To understand this further, I asked one newly married female participant, Asuntha, about her future plans to raise her children and family in Australia. Asuntha, aged 27, from Sri Lanka came to Australia with her newly-wed husband. Upon graduation, she worked as an English language and History tutor in one of the biggest Sri Lankan universities. It was her parents-in-law who provided the initial



funds she needed to study in Australia. Her husband, an ex-engineer in capital Colombo, found a job in the abattoir factory, which could provide some relief from the financial strain Asuntha's study had on their families back home. The following excerpt revealed how she attempted to navigate her cultural identity:

... [I want my children] to speak Sinhalese at home ... For us it is ok to speak English, but still I want them to know our language because it is our roots. I believe that as long as we have roots we can survive. I don't want them to be totally Australian but Sri Lankan-Australians. If you know the language and you know the cultural background. ... There are good things and bad things about my culture. I want them to grab the good things like respecting and caring for each other. I have seen how some Sri Lankan children who have grown up in Australia don't seem to respect their parents at times.

Asuntha's strong feelings of connection to her culture, however, imagined, are anything but artificial. This is why Vertovec (2004) calls for concepts of transnationalism and identity to be juxtaposed and contends the need to approach the concept of transnational space and fluid identity with caution. Perhaps that could be one reason that motivated another female student-migrant participant: Sunita. Sunita, from India, aged 24, came to Australia with her newly-wed husband, started work at the age of 18 in New Delhi during her undergraduate studies. Upon graduation with Bachelor in Languages and History, Sunita got promoted to work as a manager in a call centre and later found another job working for a British-based private corporation and was given 3-month training in London. That is where she met her husband and decided to migrate to Australia through further studies.

Sunita created her personal blog which provided her the emotional space to express her thoughts about effects of gender, identity, career and migration on her identity as a transnational Indian female in making sense of connectedness to both home and host societies. An example is in the following excerpt she wrote at the start of her sojourn:

A part of me has died. It remains indiscernible if it happened for good or bad. All I am is a changed person who hates changes. I have a creative block that chokes me. I try to compensate for it by reading. I read a lot lately. Trying to find my voice through others' words.

When I asked her to elaborate on how she was finding her voice through others, she elaborated:

... by being bilingual, I think it is a great thing. I get to read Hindi literature and they are fantastic. I can appreciate literature in both languages.

What some of the female student-migrant participants have showed was their varying level of self-reflexivity in their attempt to understand and imagine how their future and gendered roles are impacted by their transnational lived experience of connectedness. In fact, according to Elliott and Urry (2010) who cited Giddens (1990), this is a part of 'reflexivity of modern social life' (p. 38). In his work on *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens (1990) develops a powerful argument pointing to the increasing self-actualising character of identity in contemporary societies which 'consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed

in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus altering their character' (p. 38).

Sunita did this by interweaving her life experiences in the world of duality through Indian and Western literature. She would then resort to deploying communication technologies—as a form of 'reflexive modernization' (Giddens, 1990, p. 38)—to generate a new form of experience that not only engaged her in 'creative dreaming or reverie' but it also provided her a way to facilitate the 'affective complexity of the self' (Elliott & Urry, 2010, p. 42).

To a certain extent, the three female student-migrant participants portrayed here were straddling within an emotional dilemma of pains and gains. While the analysis evidenced is peculiar to the individuals presented here, they have each revealed a sense of insecurity of losing their multiple cultural identities to a total conversion into a singular 'Westernised' identity. Such insecurity could possibly be induced internally by their families and friends back home and then externalised when they arrived in Australia. Each of the three participants has in some ways demonstrated that knowing both their mother tongue and English languages was a tool on which they could process their thoughts about their transnational identities.

For instance, against the backdrop of new opportunities and huge risks of being in Australia, Ping began to reflexively analyse her Chinese Confucianistic 'tradition' and philosophy. Her pre-study/migration move to Australia, as part of her 'fantasy' to live freely from the constraints of her cultural roots and estranged marriage, had also opened her mind to interrogate her identity and gender. Such issues, in Giddens' (1991) view, are core concerns of self which he considers to be influential in reshaping people's understandings and sense of reflexive consciousness, a kind of consciousness which, in Giddens' eyes, has transformed Ping's thoughts about 'marriage till death do us part' to 'marriage until further notice' (1991, cited in Elliott & Urry, 2010, p. 93).

## **Connectedness: The In-Between Space of 'Roots' and 'Routes' as Pains and Gains**

The insertion of 'roots' into the education-migration nexus involves an inevitable imagining of searching for new 'routes' as a transnational individual. Such a process has been observed in the recent book (Soong, 2016), and in this section, I will only focus on the experiences of three student-migrant participants who best illustrated how their 'roots' played a substantial role in shaping connectedness and sense of becoming a transnational migrant: Haggai, Chong and Asuntha.

Haggai, from Israel, aged 31, was single and worked as a lawyer for 3 years before deciding to study and migrate to Australia. During his time as a lawyer, he was posted to London and worked for about a year. Having encountered a near-death incident while he was doing his national service in the army force, he felt the urge to change his environment and moved to Australia to a more peaceful place to live.

Haggai saw the process of himself 'starting a new life' in Australia as part of a symbolic growth as a person. He imagined himself to be:

... a small plant growing in Israel, suddenly being transferred to another soil and trying to get start[ed] with your roots and everything ...

In order to find his roots in 'another soil' and integrate into the host culture and educational practice successfully, he was aware that he had to begin by '... knowing the community well ... to be inside ... and to grow and influence others'. However, this does not mean that Haggai had to alienate his cultural identity as a Jew. In fact, amongst the student-migrants concerned, despite looking like a typical white Australian male who could speak English eloquently, Haggai is connected very strongly with his Jewish national identity and ethnicity. As Haggai explained:

... who I am is also an outcome of where I come from [pause]... but I have never looked [at] it separately and ask how much of this has changed the way I have been doing and what I am doing now [pause]... but definitely this is a part of the culture of who I am, how you perceive things and treat people. It comes with all sorts of experiences, you can't analyse it [pause]... It is like asking yourself what parts of the roots give this apple so red?

In the final interview with him, Haggai continued to talk about how he was locating himself in-between the transnational space of his 'roots' and 'routes'—by keeping close contact with the Jewish-migrant communities living in Australia and others who were his local Australian friends. Clifford (1997) would see Haggai's view as the desire to connect with others as a process of becoming more aware of his multilocality. Still, like the rest of the student-migrants, Haggai was also concerned about being perceived as 'the other' by the host society. As a result, Haggai too had to make certain adjustments, in varying degrees, to various aspects of his life.

To a certain degree, all the student-migrants concerned have adopted a dual and at times paradoxical perspective of their evolving identities as they each adjusted to both their home and host societies. Such a perspective, I contend, is also evident in Said's (1983) sense of worldliness when he inscribed himself in his text of identity. However, how one begins to imagine the adoption of a 'Western' life is highly contextualised and individualised.

For instance, Chong, from Beijing, aged 26, was single and the only son and child. His mother, a homemaker, who had sisters who have migrated to Australia and Spain, was very supportive of his choice to study in Australia. Being fluent in Swedish and having graduated with Bachelor in Languages, he worked as a tour guide for Swedish tourists touring in China. Like his aunts who were living overseas, he too yearned to live in a Western country where he could experience freedom of movement without visa restriction from the Chinese government authorities. In Chong's case, being more proficient in both Swedish and Chinese than English has posed greater complexities as he attempted to negotiate his double consciousness of a 'Chinese-Swedish Chong', as he explained:

In fact, what made me unique is that I may be seen as half Chinese and half Swedish. I don't want to give up that part that probably made me unique and that helped me to find a job or something. Like in the first few months, I still listened to Swedish radio as I did when I was in China to keep up with my language.

But now I have to stop thinking like that. I have an invisible bubble around me. I thought that is quite silly. I thought if I go back to China and speak Swedish, many cannot understand and that made me look cool. Because if I speak English in China, people can understand what I am saying, this does not make me distinct enough.

Such thinking made it difficult for me to learn English. So, now, I feel I am more into Australian side. I feel my English improved the most once I choose to give up some of my own identity, both Chinese and Swedish.

From here we see that Chong was fluctuating between his multiple identities as a Swedish-educated [in China], Chinese-born and Asian-Australian student becoming a migrant in Australia. Vertovec (2004) has observed that for many globally mobile people, they experience the increasing need to retain their national connections so that they can enjoy opportunities that stem from such ambiguity. Undoubtedly, being fluent in a plurality of languages does ensure Chong greater flexibility to move between national and transnational spaces. Yet Vertovec (2004) has not touched on the importance of sense of self-agency, inscribed as a mode of consciousness, revealed in Chong's case here.

Asuntha (as mentioned before) also discovered the benefits and freedom she received by living within the transnational space of 'in-between'. For instance, at our final fifth interview, not only was Asuntha happy to work as a hotel cleaner, it had also provided her the opportunity to play a role as a good daughter to her parents—by sending remittances and saving some money to fly back home—a form of symbolic capital in her home country, because she could now prove to her friends and family back home that she was able to study, live and work in Australia.

Yet, her identity as hyphenated Sri Lankan-Australian 'hotel cleaner' could be problematic. While being a hotel cleaner provided her with consistent income and a sense of stability, it has denied her the possible social and cultural capital that she could have as a qualified local school teacher upon graduation with a teaching degree in Australia. Asuntha's dilemmas and problems of professional identity were consistent with Rizvi's analysis (2011) on the ways international doctorate students are positioned in Australia and the United States. Rizvi (2011) argues that the formation of the identities of international doctoral students involves 'calculative logics' (p. 167) to help them interpret the transnational space they might occupy after their studies. This concept of 'calculative logics' is clearly seen in Asuntha's case even though she was not doing doctoral studies. However, according to Rizvi, because of the global communications and media possibilities, international students today are now able to 'imagine' a wider set of professional trajectories.

In fact, it can also be argued that the transnationality of experiences is increasingly affected by the changing transnational pressures, activities and aspirations that Vertovec (2009) has explained which are evident in the experiences of international students and student-migrants today. Indeed, the experiences of Chong, Haggai and Asuntha showed us that the formation of professional identity can be best understood as 'a dialectic of embedding and disembedding which, over time, involves an

unavoidable encumbering, dis-encumbering, and re-encumbering of situated self' as aspects of transnationalism from below (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998, p. 21).

But, equally important for Chong and Haggai was how they made use of their multiple identities to create a meaningful existence for themselves, while in transience in Australia, and accept their emergent transnational self. This may explain why Chong continued to keep in touch with the Swedish diaspora community living in Australia by teaching Swedish children Swedish language during school holidays. Such interactions created several hybrid identities, and Chong was often seen to switch positions between the hyphenated identities (Asian-Australian, Swedish-speaking Asian-Australian) in accordance with the demands of the context. Burnapp (2006) in his work with foreign students in the United Kingdom echoes how transnationality changes people: '... for each international student, hybridity rather than complete acculturation is going to result, and further than this is not fixed but is itself in constant change' (p. 91).

While students' sense of connectedness involves an inevitable interactions between alienation and intimacy of a certain kind to accommodate the search of one's 'routes', questions of how much one can claim to one's cultural identity as 'roots' within a foreign milieu remain. In this sense, there is no complete substitution of one's culture with another; rather it is a combination of two or more cultures, which are 'being-in-flux' (Soong, 2016). So, each of them—Haggai, Chong and Asuntha—has their myriad complexities in negotiating their multiple selves and their sense of nostalgia in one's 'roots' because of the Australian way of life they are obliged now to live, illustrating the various forms of connectedness between pains and gains. In so many ways, each one of them provides a microscopic view of Appadurai's concept when he described that the 'image, the imagined, the imaginary- these all terms that direct us to something critical and new to global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice' (1996, p. 31).

## Conclusion

It is time that international education and student mobility research go beyond a focus on the metanarratives of the 'student-migrant experience' to look at the dimensions of connectedness and process of becoming and understand the transnational perspectives that shape the forms and manners of mobility experiences. Although individual differences exist amongst student-migrants that affect their connectedness or identity work, by following Appadurai (1996), this chapter has also attempted to uncover the complex processual interplay of transnational space of gendered roles, identities and sense of belonging to both 'root's and 'routes', as dimensions of cultural logics of one's *imagined mobility* to building a sense of connectedness in becoming a transnational migrant.

As such, I have alluded at various places in this chapter that the student-migrants' narratives do not only portray their desires for flexibility in citizenship (Ong, 1999)

and future possibility of employment outcomes (Hawthorne, 2010); their portrayals are also shaped by their imaginations of accessing to social, cultural and symbolic security and freedom of living in the 'West'. Inspired by Said (2001), the notion of the 'West' is not only viewed as a historical space (Venn, 2000) for understanding how 'all human activity that takes place in history, of history'; it is also a conceptual space to understanding how to 'connect things with each other – different cultures, different peoples, different historical periods' (Said, 2001, p. 143). In this sense, connectedness for these student-migrants is a difficult process because for these student-migrant participants, they relied heavily on the material and virtual reality of lived transnational space. Ping, Sunita and Asuntha have all shown how gender plays a part in romanticising which parts of their culture they can hang onto and which parts are they prepared to let go. For Haggai and Chong, their sense of connectedness and identity work is linked to how mobility can be negotiated in the affective domain of living 'in-between' transnational space of 'roots' and 'routes'.

Given the nature of the hermeneutic study, the qualitative study of these individual experiences uncovers some insights to questions of what could potentially be shared by other transnational student-migrants. They include the following: How do student-migrants who are on the verge of migration negotiate the myriad identities within the transnational space of connectedness in becoming who they are today? How have their lives across two or more countries, languages and cultures shaped their sense of identity and connectedness within a world of transnationalism? Understanding the complexities of these processes will provide further insights on how those cross-border acts through education-migration gateway can shape not only who they are but how connectedness is being conceived as transnational migrant in Australia.

More recent work on 'student-migration' research (e.g. Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014) has highlighted the need to understand how student-migrants have navigated the labour market and reframed their precarious lives of living constantly in limbo. While it may not be immediately apparent, the need to unpack the new contours of their *imagined mobility* within the precincts of social, cultural and institutional practices in host communities is crucial to an understanding of core issues surrounding their physical and virtual connectedness to changing gendered roles and identities as living within the 'in-between' space of 'roots' and 'routes'. While the findings in this chapter cannot lend themselves to be generalisable, it has shown how individual student-migrant can find ways to respond positively to the contested site of intercultural engagement that their international education in Australia demand. Furthermore, the study of the identity change and sense of connectedness has offered a context to explore how the process of self-redefinition of student-migrants can be individualising and reflexive that Giddens (1991) refers to. Their experiences of connectedness and identity formation, within the framework of imagination, can provide some insight into how generative and transformative the education-migration site can be for student-migrants in negotiating their transnational lifeworlds.

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# Chapter 15

## Transnational Belonging and Relational Practices: Nepali Student Migration to Denmark

Karen Valentin

**Abstract** International student mobility from the global South to the global North is often portrayed as an avenue for unskilled labour migration in the blurred zones between legality and illegality. Less attention has been paid to the multiple motivations that underlie this and the efforts that many young people from the South put into pursuing an education abroad, securing a livelihood, and establishing new social relations, while actively maintaining transnational links. Drawing on an analytical perspective that recognizes shared human experience as fundamental to social life and the everyday agency of migrants, the aim of this chapter is to address the subtle, everyday processes of ongoing emplacement in multiple locations that develop over time. This chapter explores the simultaneous processes of transnational engagement, diasporic identification, and integration into Danish society, based on ethnographic fieldwork among current and former Nepali students in Denmark.

**Keywords** Student migration • Mobility • Transnational belonging • Integration • Nepal

### Introduction

In the media and in the scholarly literature, international student migration from the global South to the global North is often portrayed as an avenue for the migration of low-skilled labour migration in the blurred zones between legality and illegality (Baas, 2007; Neilson, 2009; Pan, 2011). A preoccupation with students who have overstayed their student residence permits, or who have worked more than they are allowed according to the regulations, has led to a disproportionate emphasis on the

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industrial and exploitative character of such student migration. Less attention has been paid to the multiple motivations that underlie it and the efforts that many young people from the South put into pursuing an education abroad, securing a livelihood, and establishing new social relations, while actively maintaining transnational links.

Student migration from Nepal to Denmark is a relatively new phenomenon, dating back to the first decade of the twentieth century, when Danish higher education institutions entered the global educational market, in order to attract young, talented students and, in a longer perspective, to secure a highly qualified workforce (Valentin, 2012). By 2007, the Nepali constituted the third largest group of students in Denmark from countries outside the EU, exceeded only by Americans and Chinese. To maintain a living and pay the high study fees, the Nepali students also filled a niche at the labour market through unskilled part-time jobs, mainly in the service sector. The media soon cast the Nepali students as a prime example of a new category of young people from the South, who allegedly used student residence permits to enter the Danish, if not the European labour market, and questioned the intentions behind their choosing an educational programme in Denmark. Under headlines such as ‘School recruits poor students from Nepal’,<sup>1</sup> and ‘Empty student seats filled with dubious Nepali’,<sup>2</sup> the media debate was dominated by accusations against both the Nepali students and the recruiting institutions for more or less deliberately bypassing existing study permit regulations. Firstly, the debate failed to recognize the ideological and political underpinnings of the expanding commercialized educational market, driven by strong neo-liberal market mechanisms. Secondly, in their reporting, the media ignored the complex agendas informing young people’s decisions to pursue an education abroad, the ambiguous identities that make up a student-cum-migrant selfhood, and not least the endless efforts that the young people themselves put into establishing a stable everyday life in a new place, often in temporary and uncertain situations. Having worked on questions of education and its role in interrelated processes of social and geographical mobility in the context of Nepal since the late 1990s, I have found the media’s representations of the Nepali students very simplistic. The debate, thus, is a starting point for me to explore international student migration as one out of several mobility strategies employed by contemporary Nepali youth.

From a comparative perspective, Nepali student migration to Denmark is interesting, firstly, because there were no historically established pathways for migration between these two countries prior to the expansion of the commercialized international education market of the 2000s. Secondly, as a new form of transnational student migration from the South to Denmark, it has shed light on the ambiguous position that Nepali students, a supposedly transient category of people, occupy in an otherwise highly regulated welfare society characterized by strong assimilationist approaches to immigrant integration (Olwig & Pærregaard, 2007). This chapter will show how, over time, Nepali students have become increasingly connected to

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<sup>1</sup> My translation, ‘Skole hverver fattige studerende fra Nepal’ (<http://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/artikel/294393:DanmarkDOUBLEHYPHENSkole-hverver-fattige-studerende-fra-Nepal>)

<sup>2</sup> My translation, ‘Tomme studiepladser fyldes med tvivlsomme nepalesere’ (<http://www.information.dk/163654>)

Danish society, though still strongly anchored in diasporic networks and imaginaries of a common belonging (cf. Levitt, 2001; Lukose, 2007; Vertovec, 2009), and without necessarily considering Denmark as their final destination. Without overlooking the fundamentally uneven structures that govern contemporary forms of international student mobility (Brooks & Waters, 2011), the aim of this chapter is to turn the focus from the suspicion that surrounds contemporary practices of student migration and the preoccupation with questions of legality-illegality to the subtle and discrete everyday processes of ongoing emplacement in multiple locations that develop over time. More specifically, it explores the simultaneous processes of transnational belonging and integration into new environments and addresses both the constraints and opportunities that the students encounter.

### **Conceptualizing the Relationship Between Mobility, Education, and Forms of Belonging**

The question of student migration connects debates from the field of migration studies to studies of higher education and student mobility, foregrounding the role of education in the interrelated processes of geographical and social mobility. Feeding into wider discussions of mobility, internationalization, and marketization (Brooks & Waters, 2011) and interrelated issues of employability, transitions to both low-skilled and highly skilled labour markets, and immigration (Balch et al., 2012; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Liu-Farrer, 2009; Mosneaga & Agergaard, 2012), studies of higher education have privileged a focus on the structural conditions of student mobility and paid less attention to the subjective and lived experiences of students as mobile subjects. On the other hand, much migration research, especially within anthropology, sociology, and human geography, has attempted to analyse specific migration trajectories as aspects of wider livelihood strategies, not only in economic and material terms but also in terms of social and cultural resources needed to sustain a living (Olwig & Sørensen, 2002). This scholarship focuses on networks (social, economic, political) and social relations that connect migrants across multiple locations. It recognizes the fluid social spaces within and across the borders of the nation state that shape migrant routes and identities and identifies the complex and often overlapping motivations that foster geographical mobility (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). However, migration scholarship in general, preoccupied with labour migration and forced migration from the South to the North, or within the South, has been less concerned with education as a driving force in such processes (Olwig & Valentin, 2015).

In the wake of decolonization during the second half of the twentieth century, student migration from the South to the North was addressed through the lens of a development-migration nexus and related to the concepts of 'brain drain'/'brain gain' (e.g., Rizvi, 2005). Underpinned by a developmentalist ideology, these concepts reflect a recurrent concern about potential losses, set against the potential

benefits of student and other forms of skilled migration. From a national point of view, 'brain drain' refers to a fear of losing highly qualified manpower from the South to the North. On the other hand, 'brain gain' indicates the possible positive outcomes for the national development of a highly educated diaspora that can send home money for investment (Baas, 2015a; Freitas, Levatino & Pécoud, 2012). However, as pointed out by Fazal Rizvi (2005), this conceptualization relies on economic rationales and does not take into consideration the more complex socio-cultural and political dynamics within which processes of transnational mobility are embedded. In recent years, the commercialization of international higher education and the intensified flow of self-financed students from the South to the North have drawn attention to the importance of migration for education among the expanding, yet economically and socially vulnerable, middle classes of the South. This is reflected in an increased scholarly recognition of the role that international education plays in families' accumulation of cultural and social capital (Biao & Shen, 2009; Valentin, 2015; Waters, 2005) and, more generally, in the maintenance of transnational livelihoods, by providing access to longer-term residency and citizenship (Baas, 2015b; Fong, 2011; Kringelbach, 2015). A few scholars have elaborated on the issue of student migration as an entrance point for low-skilled wage labour in the context of migration from countries in the South to countries in the North and how this is embedded in global, structural inequalities (Baas, 2007; Neilson, 2009; Pan, 2011). Drawing attention to a blurred field of legality and illegality and to the mismatch between education, labour, and migration policies (Singh & Cabraal, 2010), these studies have provided important insights into contemporary 'regimes of mobility', that is, ways in which nation states and changing international regulatory and surveillance mechanisms influence individual mobility and immobility (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). At the same time, these studies have contributed to supporting and reproducing the image of the migrant student from the South as a dubious figure who does not come with a genuine intent to study. This focus has overshadowed other significant aspects of the young migrants' lives, including interrelated short- and long-term strategies for migrating for an education, the multiple social identities – as students, low-skilled workers, middle-class youth, friends, parents, and so on – on which people draw and have to juggle in the processes of geographical mobility and, not least, the social and emotional effort put into managing everyday life in new locations and emerging diasporic communities.

This chapter aims to expand the focus from that of the 'exploiting/exploited student migrant' to one of the (student) 'migrant as a human' (Grønseth, 2013), without denying the structural conditions that contribute to the production of such regimes of mobility. This is grounded in a perspective that recognizes shared human experience as fundamental to social life and an approach to migration that addresses everyday agency based on the human capacity to expand and transform experiences through mundane, day-to-day negotiations (ibid: 3). Glick Schiller, Darieva, and Gruner-Domic (2011) similarly propose the concept of a 'cosmopolitan sociability' to refer to forms of relational practices and domains in everyday interaction where people encounter each other through points of shared interests and through an openness that is experienced despite differences. 'Cosmopolitan sociability',

defined as ‘forms of competence and communication skills that are based on a human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world’ (Glick Schiller, Darieva, & Gruner-Domic, 2011, p. 402), can engender an exploration of the everyday activities and social relations through which mobile people connect to other human beings and specific places within the context of fundamentally uneven global and local power relations. In other words, this sheds light on experiences that are closely related to the specific circumstances of geographical mobility that shape certain people’s lives and identities and those pertaining to the common human abilities to create and engage with new social and cultural contexts (Grønseth, 2013).

Analysing student migration from the South to the North shifts the focus from one of suspicion and victimization to one of agency and potentiality. This perspective is important for understanding the case of Nepali students in Denmark, who occupy several positions – as international students, low-skilled workers, and middle-class youth. As I discuss later, they are actively trying to connect to Danish society through various personal and institutional involvements that develop in everyday life and, at the same time, are deeply involved in transnational livelihoods. The latter is reflected in their social and emotional bonds, political networks, and civic engagements across national boundaries, among other things. The agency and resourcefulness of the Nepali students are revealed in these simultaneous processes of transnational engagement, diasporic identification, and their integration into Danish society.

## **Studying Nepali Student Migration in Denmark: Methodological Reflections**

The chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Nepali student migrants in Greater Copenhagen between 2010 and 2013.<sup>3</sup> Methodologically, the fieldwork is anchored in participant observation of college classes, recurrent social and political events organized by Nepali migrant organizations, and home visits and in cafés, trains, and other public spaces. This brought me in contact with more than 200 students, their spouses, and jobseekers, with whom I had informal conversations, in many cases recurrently over a couple of years. I conducted and recorded semi-structured, in-depth interviews with thirty of these 200 students. Additionally, I interviewed coordinators of international education programmes at five colleges, two immigration lawyers, one official from the Ministry of Employment,<sup>4</sup> and representatives of the police, one from the national police and two from a local police

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<sup>3</sup>The project was part of a collaborative project, ‘Education, Mobility and Citizenship: An Anthropological Study of Educational Migration to Denmark’ (2010–2014), funded by The Danish Council for Independent Research, Humanities.

<sup>4</sup>At the time the fieldwork was carried out, the Danish Agency for Labour Retention and International Recruitment (*Styrelsen for Fastholdelse og Rekruttering*), under the Ministry of Employment, was the body responsible for issuing student residence permits.



force. The transnational approach informing this study is reflected in a multisited research methodology (Marcus, 1995), which enables the ethnographer to identify geographical routes, social networks, and mobility practices that frame migrant lives (Paerregaard, 2008). Therefore, the study also consists of data gathered through recurrent visits to Nepal and two short visits to Barcelona, Spain, a popular destination for the Nepali students in Denmark for both short-term visits and long-term settlement. This yielded in-depth interviews with an additional 15 returnee students in Nepal and numerous conversations with relevant representatives of political and civic organizations engaged in the mobilization of Nepali abroad. Finally, Facebook emerged as a significant site for gaining access to, and informally communicating with, informants. Moreover, it served as a window through which to learn about specific concerns occupying the minds of young Nepali in Denmark and to identify the transnational networks of which they are part.

Following Nepali students in a range of different social contexts and everyday situations, within and beyond formal institutions, revealed a perspective on the subjective and multi-faceted experiences of migrant life, including the often contradictory rationales and emotions which are at stake among people on the move. In the context of the present study, this particular approach allowed me to understand how contemporary forms of Nepali student migration are closely related to the consolidation of the middle class in Nepal and how, partly through transnational engagements, Nepali students in Denmark are actively working to reclaim the middle-class status to which they feel entitled (Valentin, 2015). This may provide a critical corrective to the frequent, stereotypical images of victimized student migrants from the South as young people derived of agency.

## **Nepali Students: A New Category in the Immigration History of Denmark**

Nepali migration to Denmark is historically closely related to the neo-liberal marketization of education that characterizes the 2000s (Brooks & Waters, 2011) and the implied opportunities of this for (upper) middle-class youth whose families had the financial means to support them, at least at the beginning of their stay (Valentin, 2015). Up until 2000 there were few Nepali in Denmark, but in about 2003, Nepali started to enrol as students in short-cycle, higher education programmes. Initially, higher education for foreigners was free in Denmark, but in 2006 fees were introduced for students coming from outside the European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA), making most of these students dependent on labour during their studies. Foreign students from outside the EU were allowed to work 15 h per week from September to May and full time in June, July, and August.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>This was raised to 20 hours per week as of January 1, 2015.

In 2005, 59 Nepali were granted student residence permits in Denmark (Udlændingetjenesten, 2007, p. 15). This number peaked at 710 in 2008 (Udlændingetjenesten, 2009, p. 23) and then to 577 in 2014 (Udlændingestyrelsen, 2015, p. 45). Some students came via Danish folk high schools, 'some of which have international programmes of three or four months' duration'.<sup>6</sup> The folk high schools brand themselves with reference to the ideas of democracy, active citizenship, and lifelong learning and function as a channel for young foreigners to study formally in Denmark. From 2006 to 2007, Danish educational institutions, especially business colleges, started to actively recruit Nepali students in collaboration with Nepali educational consultancies. The vast majority of these students enrolled in either 2-year Academy Profession Programmes at business colleges or three-and-a-half-year Professional Bachelor's Programmes at so-called university colleges. These students studied fields such as multimedia design, management, business administration, and nutrition.

In numerical terms, Nepali students constitute a very small group that may sound insignificant when compared to the circumstances in most other student-receiving countries. Despite this, they deserve attention for several reasons. Firstly, the speed with which the Nepali population in Denmark has increased over the last decade, spurred by student migration, is significant.<sup>7</sup> There is still an influx of new students, and many former students have extended their stays through a Green Card, a scheme that allows highly skilled foreigners to stay in Denmark for 3 years while seeking a job, or through permanent residence. Some of the students, mostly men, married in Nepal, brought their wives to Denmark and had children. As the spouses of international students, they are eligible to stay and work full time throughout the year. Others have come directly from Nepal on a Green Card to search for job. Thus, from only a handful of individuals and a few families, a consolidated migrant community has developed, organized around a number of politically affiliated, philanthropic, and cultural migrant associations. These associations have been instrumental in nurturing a strong, collective orientation towards, and identification with, Nepal as a homeland. Understood as a 'fiction of congregation' (Levitt, 2001, p. 15) or an imagined connection between a post-migration population and a place of origin, composed of sentiments, narratives, and memories of a common homeland (Vertovec, 2009, pp. 136–137), one might even claim that a diaspora, as a collective, has taken shape. Secondly, student migration from economically less privileged countries in the South represents a new form of migration to Denmark. From this perspective, it is noteworthy that, for several years, Nepali students have retained their position as the third largest group of foreign students in Denmark from all

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<sup>6</sup>The folk high school movement refers to a tradition of adult education that arose in the mid-nineteenth century in Denmark under strong influence of the theologian and philosopher N.F.S. Grundtvig, as a means of educating the uneducated peasantry. The folk high schools have persisted since then and offer nonformal education to both young people and adults, mostly through short-term courses.

<sup>7</sup>According to Statistics Denmark, the total number of Nepali citizens in Denmark was 3,067 in fourth quarter of 2015 (<http://www.statistikbanken.dk/FOLK1>).

countries outside the EU/EEA. Thirdly, as is the case for all international students, the legal basis of their stay is by definition temporary, because residence permits are predicated on a time-limited educational programme. Although many of the Nepali students eventually remain on other residence permits, the inherently transient character of the international student figure has implications, both for the way in which they are seen by others, including the authorities, and for the connections they establish within Danish society. The increasingly diverse, temporary, international student population poses a particular challenge for Denmark, which, unlike other Scandinavian countries, has historically rejected multiculturalism as a political ideology (Olwig, 2011). The ambivalence towards multiculturalism is also reflected in the educational sector, where international programmes often run parallel to the Danish programmes, with little interaction between them.

The relatively sudden influx of Nepali students to Denmark has to be seen in the context of the recent migration history of Denmark and the dominant narrative of cultural homogeneity and equality as a basis for a properly functioning welfare state. As the key provider of social services, the welfare state plays a crucial role in the integration of immigrants (Olwig, 2011). The Nordic welfare state is based on the principle of equality, the premise of general and comparatively high taxation, and the strong expectation that all citizens will contribute to the common good. Inherent to this is also the idea of sameness as a precondition for equality, which, in the case of immigrants, means that they must become 'Danish' by assimilation. Within this narrative of cultural homogeneity, 'integration' has become a powerful emic term that signifies the ability and willingness of newcomers to conform to social norms and cultural values deemed fundamental to proper citizenship and to be legitimate members of the Danish welfare state (*ibid.*).

Although the migrant population in Denmark is highly diverse in terms of both nationalities and types, migrants are generally associated with descendants of guest workers who came from the Balkans, Pakistan, and the Middle East during the 1960s and the Sri Lankan, Bosnian, Iraqi, and Somali refugees in the 1980s and 1990s. These groups have been subject to much political debate, media coverage, and research focused on their marginalized position and the cultural barriers to successful integration that they encounter. The debate is characterized by a strong assimilationist outlook, which assumes that migrants will and should gradually replace their connections to their home countries with ties to Danish society and that this is best achieved through the educational system and state-run integration programmes (Whyte, 2015).

Highly skilled migrants, including students, are generally not expected to become integrated in the same way as labour migrants (Schrooten, Salazar & Dias, 2015). As a category, the Nepali students conflict with the stereotypical images of the problematic immigrant in need of integration. As students, as Nepali, as middle class, and as non-Muslims, they do not represent an 'unacceptable otherness' in Denmark (see Olwig & Pærregaard, 2007) that make them a threat in the public gaze. Yet there is an underlying concern that they have come for the purpose of working rather than studying and that their temporariness may turn into permanence. Irrespective of their underlying intentions, many of the Nepali students have indeed

stayed on, as explained above. In many cases, what was initially thought of as a stay of 2 or 3 years' duration has turned into 6, 7, or 8 years, or even longer. This ambiguous relationship between temporariness and permanence and between different migrant categories – student, Green Card, and permanent residency (PR) – contributes to a continuous blurring of the positions assigned to the Nepali students.

## Among Other 'Immigrants'

While the Nepali students frequently echo public discourses on 'problematic immigrants', they have to establish their position within the immigrant landscape, nonetheless. On the one hand, there is a recognition of an identity shared with other South Asians, expressed, for example, '[they are] Pakistani.... so we can understand each other', or 'they [the Pakistani] suddenly start to speak the same language', referring to a common cultural and linguistic heritage.<sup>8</sup> However, this sense of a shared identity seems to be overshadowed by experiences of exploitation by more established migrant groups, and, for reasons explained below, by the concern related to the potentially negative implications of living in neighbourhoods with a large number of Muslims, particularly for the Nepali children growing up there.

Pakistanis form a relatively consolidated group of immigrants in Denmark and have a strong foothold in the housing and labour markets, from which they have been able to profit at the expense of recent newcomers, including the Nepali, for example, by subletting rooms and flats and acting as contractors. Upon arriving in Denmark, a self-financed student's immediate concerns are to find a place to live and a job to secure a livelihood. Except for in a few locations considered unattractive because of occasional gang violence, housing companies' waiting lists for rental accommodation are exceedingly long, and therefore many Nepali students have depended on private sublets, especially in the early stages of their stay. There are numerous stories among the Nepali students about Pakistanis who rented out accommodations without contracts, with excessively high rents, and with various additional charges. This issue emerged early in my fieldwork in 2010, when I noticed a post on Facebook written by a Nepali student, Suman, who warned other students not to rent rooms from Pakistanis, without entering a contract. He later explained to me that this warning had been prompted by an incident where some of his friends, a married couple with two children, had been evicted of a flat without any notice and subsequently came to stay with him. Another young man, Surendra, told me that at one point he was living in a house owned by Pakistanis. He and seven other Nepali were living in a basement without any windows and infested with mice, while other immigrants inhabited the ground floor. Or take Hari, who was among the first Nepali students to come to Denmark in 2003 and who, in an interview in 2010, stated:

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<sup>8</sup> Nepali, Urdu, and Hindi are distinct languages with common roots in Sanskrit and therefore have overlapping vocabularies. Most Nepali understand and speak Hindi.

It is too much... it is too much. They [Pakistanis] have a house and Nepali students, they need to stay somewhere. It is really hard to find a place to live and they make [us] crazy. Last time I heard, one month or two months ago, one Nepali couple went to Germany by car with a Pakistani and they had to stay in a hotel and left all their things in the car. And when they came back from the hotel, the car was not there. All the things were missing and the Pakistani, we don't know where he is.

Hari had also rented from Pakistanis, but he and his wife managed to find a flat through a private, non-profit housing association, in an area of Copenhagen inhabited by many immigrants, mostly Muslims and Danes with low incomes or receiving social benefits. Relieved that he was no longer dependent on a private sublet, he was concerned about the social environment, embodied by a group of noisy young people who hung out on their mopeds further down the road, and the bad influence it might have on his then newborn son, if he were to grow up there. Hari assured me that they would not be living in this neighbourhood in another 3 or 4 years. Three years later he and his wife had bought a small apartment in a corporate housing company in a middle-class area in the suburbs north of Copenhagen.

According to the immigration lawyers I interviewed, many students reported having been exploited in the labour market, working for very low wages, or not being paid their wages for months. This was especially the case among those employed through contractors or by small private enterprises such as gambling kiosks, typically run by Pakistanis known to employ people for a meagre amount of DKK 25 per hour.<sup>9</sup> The purpose is not to contribute to the equally generalized stereotypes of Pakistanis as 'problematic immigrants' but to shed light on the vulnerable position in which Nepali students find themselves, especially in the early years of their stay, and the role that they ascribe to another immigrant group. The experience of exploitation certainly figures as an important theme in immigrant narratives, but, as already indicated, there is a temporal dimension to it. Over time, many Nepali successfully found more secure options on both the job and the housing markets, as they encountered larger and usually more organized workplaces and housing companies. Seen in this light, it is interesting to explore how the students, many of whom have legally extended their stays well beyond the initially intended couple of years, have developed a sense of belonging and actively worked to solidify their position within an ethnically diverse Danish society.

## Relational Practices and Transnational Belonging

In order to provide a counter-narrative to the stereotypical images of exploited, submissive, student migrants from the South striving for a better life in the North at all costs, in this section I focus on the more 'ordinary' aspects of Nepali student life in Denmark and the efforts that many actually put into establishing relationships and

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<sup>9</sup> DKK 25 is equivalent to approximately USD 3.80 and about a quarter of the average minimum wage.

involving themselves in Danish society. There are important strategic reasons for this, in terms of paving the way for a potential future in Denmark, but I contend that it is also an outcome of the ability and willingness to form and maintain social relationships and to engage with points of shared interest that are not necessarily utilitarian or purposeful (Glick Schiller et al., 2011, p. 402). In many respects, the Nepali students' lives resemble those of most Danish students: they go to college, work part-time, establish families, and enjoy a student social life, and it is around these shared interests that they also establish relations. In other words, although subject to specific conditions related to legal structures, socioeconomic positions, and transnational connections, they act as much as 'humans' as they act as 'migrants' (Grønseth, 2013, p. 9). This provides a useful lens through which to examine the way in which the Nepali students encounter new sociocultural environments and actively work on sustaining connections to a wider transnational field, through diasporic networks.

As mentioned above, the Nepali population in Denmark has expanded significantly over the past decade, and many Nepali students have extended their stays in Denmark beyond their studies. The first wave of Nepali students, who came to Denmark around 2005–2007, was mainly young men. Some had already married before leaving Nepal, whereas others married Nepali women in Nepal and later brought them to Denmark. As accompanying spouses, wives are allowed to work full time and become the primary earners, at least for some years. However, it is not unusual for married couples, over time, to shift between the status as a student and that of a dependent, so that wives begin their studies once their husbands' studies have been completed', and the husbands then take over as primary earners. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the increase in the number of married couples has resulted in a new generation of Nepali children born and growing up in Denmark. The demographic shift from predominantly single male student migrants to families has important implications for the contacts Nepali students make in a wide range of social domains, such as the health system, day care institutions, schools, trade unions, and civic organizations. The personal and institutional involvements entailed in these encounters help to connect the students more strongly to Danish society than the relatively isolated international student environment enables them to do. However, the increasing engagement with different domains of Danish society in no way conflicts with a continuous orientation towards the broader horizons reflected in a distinctly transnational livelihood. This is manifested in recurrent trips to and family visits from Nepal, in political networks and civic engagements across national boundaries, and in various cultural and social initiatives, such as festivals, art and music performances, Nepali language education, and dance classes for children.

I will present three cases that in various ways situate the Nepali student experience in a broader context and illuminate both the students' agency and, relatedly, the multiple links that the students establish. The first case underscores both some of the vulnerabilities of student migrants and the importance of personal relationships as points of contact with Danish society, whereas the other two exemplify how students actively engage with domains outside their educational institutions. At the

same time, the cases show how the Nepali students are deeply involved in various transnational practices.

The first case concerns Surendra, who, with the assistance of an educational consultant, came to Denmark with a friend in 2007 to attend a 3- to 4-month course at a folk high school in the Danish countryside. Each had paid DKK 32,000 (equivalent to USD 4848), excluding travel, to cover board and lodging, but when they arrived they realized that the school had just been closed down. The school authorities maintained that they had informed the agent, but Surendra and his friend had not received this information. An elderly Danish woman, Kirsten, a retired teacher with strong links to the folk high school community, somehow came to know of this incident. Surendra and his wife, Kalpana, whom he married in 2009, introduced me to Kirsten as their Danish *amaa* ('mother'). In January 2012 she invited me to her home, along with Surendra and Kalpana, gave me the entire file of Surendra's case for me to look at, and told me about Surendra's struggles. The case had made her furious, and she offered her help to Surendra and his friend, who were stranded in Copenhagen in a state of despair, with hardly any money left. The case was controversial for the folk high schools in general. However, through her networks Kirsten managed to get them into another school, free of charge. Both she and Surendra were appalled by the standard of the education offered. Only two weekly lessons in Danish and four lessons in cultural studies were offered, there were only Nepali and Chinese students, with hardly any Danes in the class, and one teacher for 50 students. Kirsten made an official complaint to the central committee of the folk high schools. Later, the second folk high school also closed down, 'because of us two', she said, and nodded to Surendra, referring to their common complaint. When I went through the files, I came across 2 or 3 years of correspondence between Kirsten and Surendra, the folk high schools' committee, banks, immigration authorities, the Minister of Education in person, information about Nepal, educational institutions in Denmark, stipend programmes, and handwritten notes with budgets and lists of things to take care of: 'clothes, a Copenhagen map, money, dinner tonight, a car drive in town, Samsøgade [referring to her daughter's address], 100 kr. to both, inexpensive flight tickets to Kathmandu'.

Surendra's friend had lost all hope and disappeared, but a strong, lasting friendship developed between Kirsten, Surendra, and, later, Kalpana. Surendra continued his studies, first in an AP programme and then in a bachelor's programme, and, in the summer of 2013, he completed his master's degree. Although he did well academically, Surendra faced a lot of challenges, but Kirsten stepped in whenever there was a problem, for example, when his application for a student residence permit for further studies was rejected. Kalpana, a highly educated woman, first worked at a gambling kiosk, and later as a cleaning assistant in the early mornings, and did not conceal her frustration. Again, Kirsten activated her network and helped to organize 12 h of private housekeeping to supplement the other job and encouraged her to learn Danish. Kirsten was much more than just an advocate for Surendra and Kalpana; she was indeed their 'Danish mother', who attended Surendra's graduation ceremony, joined them for a stroll in the amusement park, brought them to family gatherings, and became the grandmother of their son, who was born in March



2013. Sadly, Kirsten was suffering from cancer and lived just long enough to see their baby daughter, born in the summer of 2015, before dying only a few weeks later.

Kirsten was indignant and exceptionally insistent, but there were several other cases of students who related how they had established similar kinds of caring relationships with Danes, typically elderly people, some of whom or whose children had been to Nepal. It is impossible to say what would have happened if Surendra had not met Kirsten, but there is no doubt that she played an instrumental role in connecting Surendra and Kalpana to Denmark, not only helping them to sort out legal and practical problems but also providing emotional support, by taking on a parental role.

For the following two cases of two Nepali couples, I had the opportunity to meet their families in Nepal, in the last case during the couple's own visit to Nepal. These visits provided insight into ways in which transnational relations are maintained and helped to contextualize both the media representations and the students' articulation of their background and situation in Denmark.

Ram and Kopila are an example of a married couple that has worked actively to establish relations with Danish society, while still being closely connected to Nepal, both socially and economically. Strongly motivated by his father, a wealthy business man, Ram came to Denmark in 2007 to study, 6 months after his and Kopila's marriage. One year later, having obtained a master's degree in social sciences in Nepal, Kopila arrived as a 'dependant', the term used by the Nepali themselves to describe the legal status of spouses of students with temporary residence permits. Like many other Nepali women in her situation, she started working as a maid in a hotel but, as an upper middle-class woman, felt uncomfortable with this kind of work. Therefore she looked for another job, and, after circulating her CV, she succeeded in securing a sales position in a department store. She was promoted, she learned to speak Danish, and, by the time of my interview with her and Ram in the spring of 2013, she told me that she was now eligible to apply for 'PR' (permanent residency). They were, they asserted, the first of their kind – the spouse of a student who obtained permanent residency – but were still uncertain what the implications of this would be for Ram's legal status. Kopila liked staying in Denmark and had no strong desire to return to Nepal so she was pleased when she obtained her 'PR' 6 months later, only a month and a half after applying. While Kopila had a stable job with regular working hours, for a number of years Ram was engaged in many different social and economic activities, which brought him in contact with many people. When I met him in Copenhagen in the autumn of 2013, after my visit to his family home in Nepal, he listed all his engagements: he was doing a 'pre-master' course at a business college and had been asked by the international coordinator to act as a tutor, took Danish classes three times a week, worked as a cleaning assistant for 3 h, 5 days a week, and on most days picked up their son from the kindergarten, because of Kopila's work hours. Additionally, he was engaged both in a business and in social work. Together with a Danish friend, Ram started a small IT outsourcing company. This company enabled him to apply for PR and also facilitated travel between Denmark and Nepal for up to 6 months per year. He was also a founding

member of a philanthropic organization that, through donation campaigns, supported the education of poor children in Nepal. Commenting on the background of the organization, he said:

It was just an idea that came by sitting with some friends. Let's do something. We are in this world, we have everything. Why don't we help some people if we can. If we cannot, then who will do it for them. Then we just created an idea and then till now it is going really well.

What is particularly striking in this quote is the way in which Ram defines himself as a privileged person who has 'everything', something that was certainly supported by what I observed in his family home and by the conversations I had with his parents and brother, when I met them in Nepal. According to his brother, a successful business man, who had paid a large share of Ram's education, they had an informal division of work in the family: the brother did business in Nepal and had the economic responsibilities, whereas Ram secured an educated status for the family through his studies abroad. However, it was obvious that Ram also used the business as a platform for expanding his networks, improving his skills, and gaining a foothold in the Danish labour market. This certainly paid off: in early 2015 he sent me a message saying that he wanted to share the good news that he had got a permanent position in a Danish IT company.

Another example of a couple that has put much effort into making a life in Denmark is that of Milan and Renu. I ran into Milan on a train in the autumn of 2012, when he was about to complete his bachelor's degree. He acknowledged that he was among the fortunate few who had received a scholarship from the Danish Ministry of Education. Several times he repeated that he was a 'very happy man', because he, unlike other students, did not have to pay fees. He asked for my phone number, as his wife, Renu, wanted to practice her Danish language skills. A few months later, I visited their home to interview Renu, who turned out to be so fluent that I conducted the interview in Danish. Renu came as a dependant in 2008, 1 year after Milan. She was around 20 years old and had just completed her nursing education in Nepal. Realizing that she needed Danish language skills, she started Danish courses 4 months after her arrival. After a few years, she reached the highest level in the officially approved language class programme. However, her nursing qualification did not allow her to qualify for a nursing job in Denmark, so she had to start all over and first study to become a health aide, then a health assistant, and finally, a nurse. She clearly felt overqualified, but she realized that it would help her to improve her language skills, especially because of the internship, which she did at an old-age home. Many of the old people did not understand her:

Yes, because of my accent. You know, it is two of the permanent residents. And one of them says, 'you are saying the wrong word'.... For example, if have to lower the bed I say 'I take down the bed'. Then he says, 'this is wrong, you have to say, "I lower the bed"'. .

In addition to her internship, she worked 2 h a day as a cleaning assistant. Milan was about to obtain his bachelor's degree and planned to explore the possibility of going on to a master's programme. According to Renu, whether or not they could stay depended on the immigration rules. Similarly to Ram, she noted that a permanent residency would give them the freedom to travel to Nepal now and then.

In 2013 I met the couple in Renu's maternal home on the outskirts of Kathmandu. One of the reasons for their visit to Nepal was to fulfil their marital vows with a Hindu wedding. They had had a civil ceremony in Nepal just before Milan left for Denmark in 2007, but, according to their parents, this did not suffice. As we were all chatting and seeing photos from the wedding ceremony, I noticed that Milan was occupied on the computer, apparently checking out New-in-Denmark, the official web portal for foreigners,<sup>10</sup> to confirm that he had obtained his new visa. According to his flatmate in Denmark, this had already come by standard post, and he had sent Milan a photo of it. He showed it to me on his mobile phone, a student residence permit with a limited work permit, valid until April 2014. He had been accepted by a master's programme but so far had a visa for only the next 10 months.

The foregoing examples illustrate the more successful aspects of students' lives, the different forms of progress they experience, and the multiple social relations in which they engage and are by no means unexceptional. However, this does not necessarily mean that the students do not experience any of the exploitation discussed in the previous section but rather that the individual trajectories and circumstances are more complex than often described, and, as indicated earlier, that these paths tend to change over time. The examples also show the ways in which many students gradually pave the way for extending their stays depending on what is legally and economically possible at different points in time. While this requires a continuous nurturing of social relations, both transnationally and in relation to Danish society, such relations are often more than purely utilitarian but become valuable in themselves.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the concurrent integration into Danish society and forms of transnational belonging from the perspective of Nepali students, with a focus on a relatively new category of international student in Denmark. By focusing on the ways in which international students maintain, shape, and reshape affiliations to several places and people in a wider transnational space over time, this chapter sheds light on the complex dynamics between 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging', respectively referring to the actual social relations and practices in which migrants engage and the identities they develop (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1010). Partly owing to the temporary nature of the student residence permit that provides the legal basis of their stay, many students maintain an orientation towards broader horizons of future geographical mobility that reach far beyond Denmark. However, this in no way prevents them from engaging in both short- and long-term

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<sup>10</sup>The official web portal for foreigners presents the regulations for entering and residing in Denmark. It is maintained jointly by the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration.

personal and institutional commitments within Danish society and, in several cases, has also contributed to establish new future opportunities.

This chapter combines an approach to student mobility that recognizes its structural conditions and its inherent, fundamentally uneven premises (Brooks & Waters, 2011), with an approach that explores everyday forms of engagement and agency in mobile livelihoods (Glick Schiller et al., 2011; Grønseth, 2013; Olwig & Sørensen, 2002). In a Danish context, the Nepali students occupy an ambiguous position between immigrants in low-income jobs and international students from middle-class backgrounds who are engaged in a range of intersecting relational practices, which in various ways link them to, and become instrumental to their integration into Danish society, more specifically, into ethnically differentiated education, labour, and housing markets. Contributing to reinforcing situations of exploitation and uncertainty, some of these relations are experienced as disconnecting, whereas others instigate a sense of potential and agency, which makes the students feel connected to wider transnational spaces. This underscores the importance of analysing contemporary forms of student mobility within the framework of transnational social fields, leaving both the subjective experiences of the students and the structural conditions that direct and restrict their mobility open to analysis.

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# **Part V**

## **Conclusion**



# Chapter 16

## International Student (Dis)Connectedness and Identities: Why These Matter and the Way Forward

Catherine Gomes and Ly Thi Tran

**Abstract** This chapter draws together the main themes of the book. One of the key themes highlighted in several chapters is the dynamics and fluidity embedded in the ways in which international students experience or create connections and disconnections with family, friends, communities, institutions and places in their host and home nations. Another important theme emphasized in this book is the challenge of maintaining and or creating a sense of belonging while being in nationally, socially and culturally unfamiliar surroundings. Through examining international students' connectedness and disconnectedness, this book also notes the challenges international students face and the strategies they use in order to construct a meaningful lived experience in the transnationally mobile space. In this transnational context, media and communication technologies play an important role in international students' social life. In many cases, these students draw on media and communication platforms to design translocal spaces for themselves and to continuously recreate the familial home environment in their domestic spaces. It is therefore important for education providers in the host countries and related stakeholders to develop strategies that support international students not only to make use of media and communication platforms productively and to reinforce existing relationships but also to find new points of connectivity during and after their study. These forms of connectedness and networks are essential for international students to navigate everyday life in transience; but also to provide a foundation for their future aspirations and future trajectories.

**Keywords** International students • Connectedness • Identity

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## Introduction

In May 2015, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) *Four Corners* programme aired an investigative piece about international students in Australia called 'Degrees of Deception' (Besser, 2015). The episode, in no uncertain terms, alluded that international students in Australia were unprepared for study in tertiary institutions due to their lack of English-language speaking and writing skills. As a result, students resorted to cheating in assignments by presenting work that wasn't their own through plagiarism or by submitting work written by external parties with whom they had financial arrangements. Moreover, *Four Corners* also revealed that international students, even though on temporary visas in Australia, had the long-term intention of staying by becoming permanent residents thus giving the impression that they were only studying in order to secure residency.

After the programme was aired, the *Four Corners* Facebook page was inundated with negative comments by the Australian public who generally felt that international students were not only abusing the Australian education system but also using it to become 'backdoor migrants' while denying deserving Australian citizens' tertiary places. People who commented on the episode further implied that international students brought education standards down because of their difficulties with the English language and course content in addition to creating social ghettos in tertiary institutions by not integrating with domestic students. International students are seen to have the sole onus of establishing interactions and fostering engagement with domestic students.

Responding to the *Four Corners* episode and to the ensuing social media reactions, we wrote an opinion piece on *University World News* debunking the comments by strongly arguing that stereotyping international students is not only unhelpful but also wrong (Tran & Gomes, 2015). Referring to our own separate research into the experiences of international students (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Gomes, 2015; Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014; Tran, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016; Tran & Vu, 2016), we argued that many students who come to Australia not only value their education and have a strong desire to learn but also felt hurt by the kinds of stereotypes echoed by the *Four Corners* episode.

International students in other words are much more complex, dynamic and aspirational than what the *Four Corners* episode presented and what the Australian public understand them to be. Moreover, understanding the patterns of the contemporary experiences of international students is vital since established international education hubs such as Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA and up-and-coming international student destinations such as China, Malaysia, Korea and others desire to expand their international education sector and increase their international student numbers. Australia, for instance, aims to double its international student intake from approximately half a million to 990,000 by 2025 (Australian Government, 2016), while China (Zhang & Tobias, 2015) and Malaysia (Hughes, 2015) aim to see themselves supporting half a million and 200,000 international students, respectively, by 2020.

## Themes

Although the authors in this book specifically look at the ways in which international students experience or create connections and disconnections with family, friends, communities and institutions in their host and home nations, they also reveal starkly the challenges international students face and the strategies they use in order to construct a meaningful lived experience while being in nationally, socially and culturally unfamiliar surroundings. Moreover these challenges and strategies are not country specific nor confined to particular study streams, in other words regardless of whether they are in undergraduate, (post)graduate, study abroad (exchange), vocational education and primary and secondary schooling streams. Additionally some of the chapters feature the experiences of former international students as they navigate work life in their home nations or in the countries they completed their studies. The international students featured in this collection are from various countries and studying in different nations across the Asia-Pacific and Euro-America. Since many of the them come from the Asian region, it is important for readers to understand that Asian students are not homogenous since they come from countries which are nationally, culturally and socially different from one another. A Chinese student, in other words, is different from a Taiwanese student who is different from a Hong Kong student despite ethnic and cultural similarities. In addition, international students' experiences are shaped and reshaped by various individual factors including learning characteristics, capabilities, aspirations and personalities as well as by differing conditions of mobility to which they have been exposed. It is also important to avoid essentialising international students from the same national and ethnic background as individuals personalise and mediate cultural patterns in their own ways.

Through empirical research, the authors in this book present contemporary profiles of international students. International students in other words are very different to what was portrayed by the *Four Corners* episode and the related comments from the public thereafter. Instead, the authors of this book show us that *international students are clearly not one-dimensional but complex individuals who see themselves as their own agents of change*. A fundamental challenge the authors in this collection highlight is the challenge of feeling a sense of belonging while in the transnationally mobile space. For many students, going overseas to study may well be the first time in which they are away from their families. Fundamental to them is refashioning a home away from home in order to help them navigate everyday life in the transnational space that they currently occupy. This is where rapid improvements in media and communication technologies have helped international students connect with their families and friends still in the home nation. However, these students do not merely use media and communication platforms to simply talk or write to their loved ones but rather use them to continuously recreate the familial home environment in their domestic spaces (e.g. livestreaming the interior of their parents' house through Skype). In other words, they make use of media and communication platforms to design translocal spaces for themselves.

Though some international students struggle to feel a sense of belonging in the host nation due to identity differences with their host nation's society, they see the value of forming connections to local communities, organisations and institutions in the host nation reflective of these identities. Here they reveal that it is still important for them to maintain their social, cultural and religious identities. They feel this way because they are of the opinion that these identities are at most times not in harmony with the cultural norms of their host society.

The significance of making connections with people, organisations and institutions in the host country however also extends beyond social, cultural, religious or other kinds of identifiers. International students see building connections with locals such as fellow students sometimes as more important than maintaining social networks that they established in the home nation. This is due to reasons connected with constructing a sense of belonging through integration with the local community and the future intentions of the international students. Here many international students featured throughout the chapters in this book express that returning home straight after their studies is not a primary concern. Instead, they see themselves as either staying in the host nation or aspiring for further transnational mobility. They see establishing connections with local communities, organisations and institutions which are either reflective of their identities or of their host nation as beneficial for future employability, and they also desire future mobility. In other words, they do not see themselves tied to the home-study nation nexus. So whereas many do not mind gaining permanent residence or citizenship in the nation in which they studied, they do not see themselves settling there for the rest of their lives.

Despite the fact that there are connections to be made and/or maintained, there are also disconnections – whether incidental or purposeful – that occur. Even though international students see the value of making connections within the host nation, they also, as we alluded to above, experience disconnections as well as see the benefits of disconnections. Though international students may put effort into maintaining connections with individuals in the home nation such as family and friends, they also see that disconnecting themselves in favour of making local connections is useful for local integration. In other words, they see connecting to social networks in the home nation as preventing new connections in the host nation to be formed. Another issue of connectivity and disconnectivity appears in the work of Martin and Rizvi (2014) when they studied Chinese international students in Melbourne. Here they infer that international students continued to maintain high contact with friends back in China through media and communication technologies and with Chinese (student) communities in Melbourne because the Chinese social media apps have localizing functions. So the Chinese students were connecting to the host nation transnationally through their Chinese friends but not integrating into Melbourne city itself. However, some international students are strategic and capable to both maintain connections and create networks within home-host countries and transnationally. These students draw on these connections and networks for a sense of belonging or 'the continuity of self' (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010, p. 360) but also for their exploration of the 'possibles' in terms of their future trajectories and employability. Having meaningful encounters particularly with local students and citizens, as some of the authors in this collection point out, is not only necessary for understanding the host nation's society and culture but

also for self-reflection of their own intercultural competencies. Such self-reflections are essential particularly since the international students of many of the studies presented in this collection have expressed desire for further transnational mobility. Here creating disconnections, as other authors in this collection have pointed out, with the host nation's society despite gaining permanent residence and citizenship is thus not unexpected.

More than five million students enrolled in tertiary education outside their countries of origin or citizenship (OECD, 2015). These numbers are projected to increase due to the expansion of traditional international education hubs (Australia, North America, the UK and New Zealand) and the entry of new and dynamic players (China, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia) into the global education industry (UNESCO, 2016). While nations go full steam ahead to increase their international student intake, providing a profile of the contemporary international students in terms of the significance of their individual identities and the strategies they use to make connections with people and places in the home and host nations is useful in enhancing our understanding of the increasing diversity host nations face and will possibly encounter in the coming years. Importantly, insights into the complexities, dynamics and fluidity of international students' connectedness and identities are essential to the development of strategies to support and enhance their well-being and experiences in the host countries and beyond. Ensuring international students' well-being is the responsibility of all stakeholders involved in the education of international students, among whom host countries and host nations play a key role.

## Recommendations

The chapters in this book impress upon us the significance of identity and how this helps international students connect as well as disconnect with people in both the home and host nations. We see how these connections (and disconnections) are necessary and practical strategies for international students to navigate everyday life in transience but also to provide a foundation for their future aspirations. International student service providers thus could take the opportunity to develop programmes that facilitate the connections that students create while in transience while also working on strategies that pay attention to points of disconnection that occur within the host nation. In other words, it is important to create strategies that support international students to find new points of connectivity during and after their study. For instance, institutions can initiate on-campus activities and social groups for students from different cultures to integrate with one another. In a similar vein, classroom activities should be designed to facilitate such intercultural engagement. Service providers could perhaps tap on alumni networks where former international students act as mentors – even remotely through social media – with current international students. Putting international students in touch with alumni thus allows them

to make useful connections and possibly nurture interpersonal relationships with individuals who are not co-nationals, provide possible post-study opportunities and allow alumni to be involved in some way with current students. Current international students then do the same when they become alumni.

Fostering the meaningful and productive conditions for the interaction between international and domestic students is beneficial for all students. Such conditions are crucial for the enhancement of social networks that stand the benefits for all students' employability and for the development of intercultural skills and knowledge much needed for the current context of the contemporary globalised and interconnected world. Such conditions cannot be established and sustained without a coherent whole-institution approach which is supported by institution's core goal of enhancing graduate employability and performance (Tran & Pham, 2015). It is important for the institution to develop strategies to raise the awareness of teachers and domestic students about the enormous benefits and values of interacting and engaging with international students whose diverse knowledge and cultural background have the potential to enrich learning for all. Without such mutual understanding and awareness, it would be quite difficult to build and maintain productive connectedness. In addition, building intercultural competence and interaction among students from diverse backgrounds should be prioritised at both the programme and course development levels and make them explicit in course objectives (Tran & Pham, 2015).

This book addresses the motivations and manners in which international students establish and maintain connection with the online and physical spaces. It discusses the key emerging issues around establishing and sustaining a sense of connectedness as well as the conditions that shape and reshape their transnational connectedness and identity formation. The book touches on range of connectedness dimensions in both the *onshore* and *offshore* mode of delivery and across different education programmes. Based on the findings and suggestions addressed in the chapters of this volume, the following aspects of international students' connectedness and identity are worth being further researched:

1. International students' connectedness with peers and engagement in learning in the online classroom
2. The interrelation between connectedness and identity formation/ reformation
3. Nature and forms of connectedness of international doctoral students
4. The role of domestic students in fostering the connectedness between international and domestic students
5. The effects of gender and social classes on international students' connectedness with peers and the local community
6. Practices in enhancing the engagement between international students and local community in the host nation
7. Impact of connectedness on students' learning experiences and outcomes

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