

**Influencers of the International Student Experience**

The collage features a central wireframe figure with a question mark on its chest, symbolizing the uncertainty and exploration of international student life. Surrounding the figure are various items representing global influences:

- Passports:** A dark blue United States passport and a red Spanish passport.
- Currency:** Banknotes from the Cayman Islands, Indonesia (2000 Rupiah), China (100 Yuan), Canada (5 and 1000 Dollars), and South Korea (1000 Won).
- Maps:** Background maps showing international travel routes and locations like Santa Clara.
- Student Cards:** A Harvard University student card and a PhStudent card from the University of Groningen.
- Other Items:** A Delta Airlines boarding pass, a 3.5-inch floppy disk, a barcode, and a small metal figure.

# RACHAEL HELENE MEROLA





MOVERS, SHAPERS, AND EVERYTHING  
IN BETWEEN: INFLUENCERS OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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The research in this thesis was conducted at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Groningen, and at the Centre for Internationalisation of Education (CIE) at the University of Groningen, Campus Fryslan.

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# MOVERS, SHAPERS, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN: INFLUENCERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the  
University of Groningen  
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Understanding the experiences of international students is critical due to the important benefits they bring to their fellow students, the institutions in which they are enrolled, and even the nations in which they study. This research aims to identify and understand some of the factors that influence the experiences of international students. The focus is to explore the factors that shape their experiences both inside and outside the classroom, from which the research questions and resulting studies in this dissertation arise. The central research question is, "What factors influence the experiences of international students and how do they influence them"?

Research on international students requires a definition of the group to which the term refers. In this research, international students are defined as "those who left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study" (OECD, 2021). Some institutions and organizations, including the OECD and UNESCO, use the term "international student" to refer to students who cross borders for study purposes and the term "foreign student" to refer to students who are enrolled in an educational institution outside their home country but who have not necessarily crossed a border for study purposes (Clark, 2009). For example, a student with Malaysian citizenship enrolled in a university in Australia would be considered an *international student* if they came directly from Malaysia to enroll in the university, or a *foreign student* if they were already living in Australia before enrolling because their parents were employed there. However, not all institutions make this distinction when collecting data on students. There is no universal standard for what an 'international student' is or how to count them (Clark, 2009). The different definitions and methods of data collection can sometimes make measuring and comparing international student mobility difficult, inaccurate, and/or misleading.

Understanding the factors that drive international student enrollment is critical to gaining insight into their motivations, expectations, and experiences. The drivers of international mobility are often conceptualized as 'push' and 'pull' factors (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Li & Bray, 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). Push factors



include the economic and social forces that arise in the student's home country and motivate his or her decision to study abroad, while pull factors arise in the host country and influence the choice of study location. For example, a study by Wilkins and Huisman (2011), which looked at international students at Western universities and in Western countries, found that the most important push factors were "the lack of places in higher education in students' home countries, the unavailability of certain subjects, insufficient quality or recognition by employers, and the lack of post-study employment opportunities when study is done at home". Some of the pull factors were "the prospect of studying a greater range of subjects, the chance to study with other international students and with world-leading academics, the opportunity to develop English language skills and to experience living in a different culture, the possibility of gaining a qualification that will be more highly regarded by employers both in their home countries and internationally and possibly the provision of the means to aid migration from their home countries on a permanent basis" (p. 67).

A study of international degree-seeking students at public universities in Malaysia identified non-academic push factors such as the opportunity to have a study abroad experience and international social experiences, and non-academic pull factors such as expectations of comfort, lifestyle, and particular aspects of the destination country (Zulkifli et al, 2021). Beyond push and pull factors, evidence suggests that home country population, distance between home and host countries, and university enrollment have a significant impact on international students' choice of destination country (Chemsripong, 2019).

International students are an incredibly diverse group, varying widely in terms of their background and demographic characteristics, the type of education they seek, and their particular motivations for doing so. The myriad types of international students-and types of education-make it difficult to assert that, for example, the experience of an undergraduate student participating in a two-week study abroad

experience would be similar to that of a student pursuing a Ph.D. abroad; students' reasons for pursuing these educational experiences would also likely be very different. It is beyond the scope of this research to examine the experiences of all international students; therefore, we consider a specific subgroup: undergraduate students studying full-time in degree-seeking programs.

## INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In this research, internationalization of higher education (IoHE) is defined as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (de Wit, Hunter, & Coelen, 2015, p. 281). This definition reflects "a sharpening of focus from internationalization as a country's *response* to globalization to a *process* focused on the *purpose, functions, and delivery* of higher education" (Leask & de Gayardon, 2021, p. 325).

While this updated definition suggests that universities have an obligation to provide some benefit to local and global society, earlier definitions did not necessarily include this idea. In an earlier definition, Knight (2003) explains internationalization of higher education as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 2). Knight's 2003 explanation, which de Wit and Hunter (2015) refer to as the most commonly used definition of IoHE, continues to focus on process rather than purpose, suggesting that a range of motives may underlie IoHE.

The meaning of internationalization changes over time: de Wit and Altbach (2021) note that "during the past half-century, internationalization in tertiary education has evolved from being a marginal activity to becoming a key aspect of the reform agenda. In the last decade of the last century, the increasing globalization and regionalization of economies and societies, combined with the

requirements of the knowledge economy and the end of the Cold War, created a context that enabled a more strategic approach to internationalization in higher education” (p. 28).

Governments and institutions that embraced earlier approaches did not necessarily value giving back to the societies and institutions that helped them succeed. Leask and de Gayardon (2021) argue that this sometimes led to higher education systems being “supported by the most powerful national and supranational governments (predominantly, but not only in the Global North) seeking the best outcome for their economies with little attention to the bigger picture or the possibilities of advancing the global common good through the internationalization of higher education for society” (p. 324).

To broaden the focus of IoHE and consider the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education, a better understanding of the system’s key stakeholders—particularly international students—is needed. Miliszewska and Sztendur (2012) point out that students are the “ultimate insiders and experts” on the student experience, but their voices are missing from most studies in this area (p. 12). After understanding the reasons why a university admits international students in the first place, data collected from students themselves can be an important component of effective IoHE strategies and initiatives. To describe their experiences, students need to explain not only “what” they experienced, but also “how” they experienced it. Used effectively, student data can enable universities to integrate international, intercultural, and global dimensions into education that improve the quality of education for all students and contribute positively to society.

The research in this dissertation is a milestone in this endeavor. It explores the experiences of international students and what shapes them, allowing for a deeper and more holistic understanding of how international students contribute to society and to the quality of education for students and staff. The following subsections summarize existing research on the benefits that international students bring to

their fellow students, the universities in which they are enrolled, and the societies to which they belong.

This work underscores the importance of incorporating student voices into research when it comes to influencing higher education policy and practice. Understanding students' perceptions is critical to meeting their needs because it is their subjective experiences that make up the reality of their lives. The research in this thesis uses data collected from students themselves to update and renew models for understanding the student experience. "All models are wrong, but some are useful," said statistician George Box. The most useful models provide an understanding of a phenomenon based on reality. Ultimately, this work offers an understanding of students' multiple realities based on their perceptions of their lived experiences.

### *Benefits for Students and Universities*

A campus community that includes international students is of great benefit to the entire student body. Research shows that domestic students who interacted regularly with international students had stronger networks (HEPI, 2015), more self-confidence, and better leadership skills than peers who did not have such interactions, and that these effects persisted for at least twenty years after graduation (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Another study found that exposure to international students led to less prejudice toward international students (Quinton, 2019), illustrating the link between interaction and prejudice. In addition, research suggests that contact with people from other groups leads to cognitive growth and lower levels of prejudice (Pettigrew, 2008). Taken together, these research findings suggest that higher education institutions can achieve benefits for enrolled students by fostering high-quality interactions between international and domestic students.

The benefits that international students bring to campus are important because many students do not have the resources or opportunities to study abroad. This means that many domestic students come into contact with students of other nationalities almost exclusively on their

own campuses. Statistics on student mobility show that while the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia have the most international students, their outbound mobility is low. In fact, only 0.5% of all US students enrolled in higher education are enrolled outside the United States. This compares to 0.7% in Australia and 1.5% in the United Kingdom (UNESCO, 2021).

Although there is evidence that study abroad is an influential experience, there are few empirical studies that examine the impact of study abroad (Di Pietro, 2019). A study by d'Hombres and Schnepf (2021) suggests that part of the reason for the lack of research is that it is difficult to account for differences between students who have chosen to study abroad and those who have not. Intrinsic characteristics such as motivation, skills, and expectations are rarely measured in the two groups, which in turn affects student experiences and outcomes. "The literature taking this so-called selection bias into account is still circumscribed," the authors conclude, pointing to the need for more empirical research.

Given the benefits that international students bring to the universities where they study and to the fellow students with whom they interact, those involved have much reason to continually improve their experiences abroad. Understanding the experiences of international students allows universities to think about how to focus their efforts on high-impact areas, such as establishing programs to facilitate informal exchanges between international and domestic students, cultivating a student body of diverse backgrounds and nationalities, or promoting mobility programs. Using data on the student experience to make informed decisions can pay huge dividends in terms of domestic and international student satisfaction.

### ***National and Societal Benefits***

International students not only promote cultural exchange and international competencies in their academic communities, but also bring economic benefits. According to a study based on data from UNESCO (Choudaha, 2019), international students contributed over



\$300 billion to the global economy in 2017. The data show that there were more than 5.3 million international students in 2018—an average increase of 4.8% per year since 1998 (OECD, 2020a).

Overall, international students account for 5.6% of total tertiary enrollment (UNESCO, 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have interrupted international student mobility in 2020 and 2021, the upward trend is expected to resume: OECD data predict that eight million students will study abroad by 2025. Students from Asian countries make up the largest share of international students enrolled in tertiary education—they collectively account for 57% of all mobile students in OECD countries (OECD, 2020a). In 2019, more than 993,000 Chinese and 375,000 Indian students were enrolled abroad, accounting for more than 30% of international students. The other major supplier countries—Vietnam, South Korea, Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Japan—jointly contribute more than 260,000 international students (UNESCO, 2021). The economic and social weight of international students underscores the importance of understanding their experiences.

The leading countries that host international students are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD, being the resulting acronym). According to the OECD, the United States accounts for 18% share of the global education market, followed by the United Kingdom (8%), Australia (8%), and Germany (6%). International students enrolled in non-OECD countries accounted for about 30% of the global pool of internationally mobile students in 2018, with the fastest growth in enrollment coming from non-OECD countries (OECD, 2020a). The countries with the highest share of international students are Luxembourg (48%) and Qatar (34%), followed by Australia (27%) (Hilger & Downing, 2021). The relative impact of international students in these countries may be even greater than in countries where they make up a small proportion.

The significant benefits that international students bring have led governments and higher education institutions to seek ways to support

the internationalization of higher education. Finland, for example, considers student mobility in addition to quality and impact measures when deciding on higher education funding (OECD, 2020b). Norway and Estonia take into account the proportion of international students at a university when deciding on its funding levels (OECD, 2019). Many countries, including the United Kingdom, allow international students to stay for a period of time after graduation to seek employment or start a business, which can bring valuable skills and economic contributions to the country. These students make up a large part of international labor migration flows in many countries and contribute significantly to the economy (OECD, 2020c).

Overall, the research described in this section paints a picture of growing international student mobility and the benefits of study abroad, highlighting the uniqueness and complexity of the international student experience. Understanding the factors that impact the experience of international students provides the foundation for the research in this thesis. The next section focuses on the international student experience.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

Student experience is defined as “how students perceive interactions with [their] institution” (Tribal, 2021). One of the first empirical studies to address the concept of ‘student experience’ suggested that it encompasses many different aspects of higher education, noting that “what happens during face-to-face contact between student and lecturer is only part of the story” (Harvey, Burrows & Green, 1992). Other aspects such as the institutional context in which the student learns, including campus culture, resources, and support services, must also be considered as part of the experience.

Benckendorff, Ruhanen & Scott (2009) believe that “contemporary notions of the student experience extend well beyond the traditional focus on curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy to include the extracurricular activities of students and how universities respond to help students manage their external commitments” (p. 84). Research

shows that student experience is influenced by factors such as perceptions of, and attitudes toward, teaching and learning (Bean & Eaton, 2000), perceived quality of learning (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003), and participation, communication, and membership in academic communities (Metzner & Bean, 1987).

In particular, the experience of international students deserves its own study. Evidence suggests that international students have different challenges than domestic students in adjusting to college life (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Aubrey, 1991). Research on the adjustment of visiting students spans decades and has led to numerous theories and explanations, including the concept of “culture shock” described by Oberg in 1954. “Culture shock” was the term Oberg introduced to describe the four phases of adjustment he identified. These include the honeymoon phase, in which novelty makes the experience abroad seem exciting and displaces the negative aspects; the crisis phase, characterized by a sense of being overwhelmed and a lack of belonging; the recovery phase, in which a routine and sense of normalcy develop; and the adjustment phase, in which an understanding and acceptance of cultural differences are reached (Oberg, 1954).

This adaptation theory follows a “U-curve” first conceptualized by Lysgaard in 1955, in which satisfaction is initially high, then plummets, and later recovers. Other theories of adjustment propose different models. For example, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) assume a “W-curve” in which the individual’s initial culture shock is followed by a reverse culture shock upon return to the home country. More recent studies question the applicability of these curves (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Berardo, 2006) and propose other models of adjustment. In particular, Astin’s (1999) Student Involvement Theory, Tinto’s (1975) Student Integration Model, and Searle and Ward’s (1990) Intercultural Adaptation Theory offer ways to understand and explain what influences students’ experiences and are discussed in later sections.

### ***Factors Impacting Student Experience***

Understanding the student experience and how it is influenced by various factors is critical to providing appropriate support services, fostering a sense of community, and cultivating a diverse student population (Altbach & Knight, 2007). A positive student experience is associated with higher student retention (Schreiner, 2009), stronger student loyalty (Thomas, 2011), and higher word of mouth (Garrett & Merola, 2018), among myriad other benefits. Student satisfaction is tracked as part of the student experience and there is evidence that it is influenced by many things, including background and demographic characteristics (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012; Arambewela & Hall, 2007), social and psychological characteristics (Baber, 2020; Basuony et al, 2021; Merola, Coelen, & Hofman, 2019; Athiyaman, 2001; Korobova, 2012; Perrucci & Hu, 1995; and college characteristics (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Nurunnabi & Abdelhadi, 2018; Ahmad, 2015; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013; Athiyaman, 1997; Merola et al., 2021).

Integration is an important component of the international student experience. Academic integration is defined as “the extent to which students adapt to the academic way of life” (Tinto, 1975), and social integration as “the extent to which students adapt to the social way of life at university” (Rienties et al., 2012). Previous research suggests that there are differences in satisfaction across nationalities. For example, European and Indian students studying in the United States are the most satisfied overall with their student experience, while students from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Latin America and the Caribbean have the lowest satisfaction (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016).

Some studies suggest that the level of social and academic integration of international students influences their satisfaction (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; God & Zhang, 2019) and indicate a negative relationship between social support and psychological distress, including academic stress and depression (Han et al., 2013; Sümer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008). In addition, the way a student relates to peers influences their integration, including sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a; 1994; Furnham &

Alibhai, 1985; Mannan, 2007). There is a negative relationship between the extent of interaction with natives and academic problems (Pruitt, 1978) and social difficulties (Ward & Kennedy, 1993b).

Academic integration also merits special study. Previous research has shown that the learning experience has a greater impact on international student satisfaction than the arrival, living, or support experiences (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Academic integration is complicated by differences in teaching styles and academic expectations between home and host countries (Aubrey, 1991; Roberts, Dunworth, & Boldy, 2017), as well as inadequate English proficiency and cultural knowledge (Andrade, 2006; Poyrazli et al., 2002; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Within international education, transnational education plays an important role. Forms of TNE include distance and online learning, partnerships and joint programs, and international branch campuses (IBCs). Research by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education found that IBCs enroll more than 100,000 students (Garrett et al., 2016). Studies have found evidence both for and against the equivalence of the academic experience<sup>1</sup> at IBCs (Healey, 2018; Shams & Huisman, 2016; Ahmad, 2015; Altbach, 2010; Wilkins, 2020). For example, one study found that, while students are generally satisfied with the academic experience at IBCs, satisfaction would be improved if course content were geared toward the students' context and environment (Ahmad, 2015). Other research indicates that students may have difficulty adapting to the teaching methods at the IBC, which are intended to be similar to those of the home university (Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012; Bhuian, 2016; Heffernan et al., 2010; Lee, 2017; Marginson, 2011).

Existing research on the experiences of international students, a relatively new area of research, points to the importance of developing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding. While research on

<sup>1</sup> "Academic experience" is defined as in a 2014 report from the Higher Education Academy (HEA): "students' interactions with the institution associated with their studies" (Temple et al., 2014).

international higher education is increasing—in 2012, there were 472 publications by 3,362 researchers from 1,164 different institutions—only 11% of publications were authored by researchers from two or more countries (Kuzhabekova et al., 2015). This paper is the result of an international research collaboration involving several countries and institutions. It is composed of four empirical studies that examine different facets of the international student experience. The following section explains the theoretical foundations on which these studies are based. Then, the research questions are explained. The four studies are then presented and discussed. The final chapter summarizes the findings of the studies and addresses the implications, limitations, and future research potential.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

There are three core theories and paradigms that have guided this research. First, Student Involvement Theory, originally developed by Alexander Astin in 1984 and updated in 1999, provides a framework for examining how international student satisfaction is influenced by external factors. Second, the Student Integration Model, developed by Vincent Tinto in 1975, assumes that students who exhibit higher levels of social integration in the campus environment are more likely to feel attached to the institution, which in turn increases the likelihood of graduation. Finally, the Global Integration-Local Responsiveness (I-R) paradigm developed by C.K. Prahalad and Yves Doz in 1987 sees a core challenge for multinational corporations (MNCs) as managing the pressure to standardize their services across markets while adapting to local markets.

### ***Theories of Student Involvement and Integration***

Student Involvement Theory postulates that students are shaped by their engagement with their higher education institution and that the extent and nature of engagement is related to student outcomes. It takes into account student demographic variables such as nationality and cultural environment. Alexander Astin, who originally developed the theory in 1984 and updated it in 1999, conceptualizes a student's level of involvement as a function of how much physical and mental

energy he or she devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1999). The theory is based on five postulates:

1. "Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects". The object may be generalized, such as the student experience, or specific, such as studying for a final exam.
2. "Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times". In this way, a student's involvement may change over the course of their time in the program.
3. "Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams)".
4. "The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. The energy invested into an activity or task will produce proportioned results".
5. "The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (Astin, 1984; 1999, as cited in Streeter, 2011, p. 22).

All of these postulates contain assumptions that support the studies in this dissertation, which uses a student-centered lens to explore and understand student satisfaction. Particularly relevant to the research in this dissertation is Postulate 2, which states that student engagement occurs on a continuum that can change over the course

of the experience and is different for everyone. The studies in this dissertation take into account the student's stage of study and recognize that this can affect the student's experience.

Since its inception, Student Involvement Theory has been used to create an effective academic environment where students are the focus. Research suggests that university administrators and staff should align the academic experience with the needs of students to allow them to engage with new ideas, people, and routines (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Grier-Reid et al., 2008; Flowers, 2002). Although it is one of the central theories of the student experience, some research has pointed out weaknesses in this theory. For example, Streeter (2011) states that the theory "does not consider that students may have been negatively impacted by the dominant culture prior to their campus enrollment" (p. 26). Lundberg (2007) theorized that students of color in the US may feel intimidated and overwhelmed by their involvement in the college experience at predominantly white institutions. Other critics argue that the theory focuses on 'traditional' students and is not representative of students who may differ in age, mode of study, and background (Morgan, 2001).

A second framework fundamental to this research is the Student Integration Model by Vincent Tinto, who proposed in 1975 that students who exhibit higher levels of integration into the university environment are more likely to have higher levels of commitment to the institution, which in turn increases the likelihood of graduation. The model considers academic and social integration as two separate dimensions, but they interact and reinforce each other. Moreover, a student's level of integration in each dimension is not necessarily the same.

Tinto's framework has been applied in many studies of university students, often using persistence or degree as the dependent variable. Critics of the model point out that additional factors such as self-efficacy, goal setting, and self-concept play a role in study outcomes (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011), and suggest that a student's



academic and social activities are difficult to separate-study groups, for example, are both academic and social (Deil-Amen, 2005; Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010). In addition, studies suggest that minority students are disadvantaged in higher education, making it more difficult for them to graduate (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Carter, 1999; Streeter, 2011). Nonetheless, Tinto provides a useful framework for the studies in this thesis, highlighting the importance of students’ sense of belonging to their success.

### *Global Integration–Local Responsiveness (I–R) Paradigm*

The research in this thesis, which focuses on transnational education, draws on the paradigm of global integration and local responsiveness (I–R) developed by Prahalad and Doz in 1987. This paradigm describes the tension that multinational corporations (MNCs) face in balancing standardization across markets and adapting a service-such as higher education-to a local market. The I–R paradigm has been used to illustrate this tension (Shams & Huisman, 2012; Farrugia & Lane, 2012; Wildavsky, 2012; Silver, 2015) and to show that IBCs “must be concurrently homogeneous with the home country institution and host country expectations” (Silver, 2015, p. 2).

One factor that influences the I–R paradigm is the institutional and cultural distance between the countries involved (Hofstede, 1984; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1999; Brock & Siscovick, 2007; Kostova & Roth, 2002). Hofstede’s seminal research on cultural distance defines national culture as “the learned values, beliefs, and assumptions that distinguish societal groups” (Hofstede, 1991). Originally, he listed four dimensions that can be used to measure cultural distance, including Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, and Uncertainty Avoidance, later adding Long vs. Short-Term Orientation and Indulgence vs. Restraint (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Some research suggests that the extent of cultural distance between two nations corresponds with the extent of organizational differences between the countries (Kogut & Singh, 1988) and that greater cultural distance correlates with a greater need for local adaptation (Kostova & Roth, 2002). While cultural distance is

one way to look at international higher education, it is not the core of this research.

The above theories and frameworks highlight the importance of understanding what influences international students' experiences and the transnational education experience. Understanding students' own perceptions is an effective way to explore students' experiences, even in studies that focus on TNE experiences (Chapman & Pyvis, 2007, Bhuian, 2016; Humfrey, 2009; Lee, 2017; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012). The research questions based on these theories are listed below.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Main Research Question: *What factors influence the experiences of international students and how do they influence them?*
- Sub-Question 1: *How do students from different nationalities vary in their levels of satisfaction and integration?*
- Sub-Question 2: *What is the effect of an international student's level of academic and social integration on their satisfaction?*
- Sub-Question 3: *Does integration mediate the relationship between nationality and satisfaction?*
- Sub-Question 4: *Which aspects of the student experience predict the satisfaction of undergraduate international students<sup>2</sup>?*
- Sub-Question 5: *Do home and IBC-enrolled international undergraduate students differ in their satisfaction with the academic experience?*
- Sub-Question 6: *How did the COVID-19 pandemic change the academic experience at IBCs?*
- Sub-Question 7: *How did the COVID-19 pandemic change the relationship between the IBC and the home campus?*

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2 Aspects include university reputation, undergraduate enrolment, the proportion of international students, and the local population, as well as student gender and stage of study.

To the author's knowledge, no large-scale studies have explored research questions 1-5. Likewise, no published studies have focused on questions 6-7.

## METHODS

This section provides a summary of the samples, procedures, research instruments, and statistical analyzes used in four studies. Chapters 2-5 present the studies and describe the methodology of each study in more detail.

This thesis uses a mixed methods approach to examine the research questions. The studies use subjective measurement tools such as self-report surveys and semi-structured interviews to examine subjects' perceptions. This approach is well suited for examining psychometric variables that may be conceptualized differently by individuals (Elasz & Gaddy, 1998), such as academic experience, satisfaction with support services, and the impact of the pandemic on academic experience.

### *Survey Instruments*

The first three studies (presented in Chapters 2, 3, and 4) use self-reported satisfaction of international students to examine their different experiences. These studies use the International Student Barometer (ISB) to measure satisfaction with various aspects of the student experience. The ISB includes a series of quantitative questions about teaching and learning, life, and support services at the university. Students are asked to indicate their opinions on a 4- or 5-point scale. The ISB also used to obtain students' written feedback on the topics covered in the survey.

The fourth study (presented in Chapter 5) uses a semi-structured interview instrument to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic experience at international branch campuses and the relationship between IBCs and home campuses. The interview instrument includes questions about *IBC Context and Operations*, the *Academic Experience at the IBC*, and the *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Data were coded and analyzed for themes that provided insight into the research questions.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This thesis is composed of four empirical studies that examine the factors that influence the international student experience. Together, they paint a picture of the unique ways in which student experiences are influenced by individual, environmental, and institutional elements.

The following chapter of this thesis—chapter two—explores the role of integration in understanding satisfaction. Statistical analyses are used to examine the relationship between integration, nationality, and self-reported satisfaction among Chinese, Indian, and South Korean undergraduate international students pursuing full-time studies at universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Chapter three continues this research by examining the factors that influence international student satisfaction. Using multilevel linear regression, it identifies how satisfaction is influenced by certain aspects of the student experience, including college reputation, size and proportion of international students, and student gender and stage of study.

Chapter four presents research on whether international students differ in their satisfaction with the academic experience at IBCs and home campuses. Results from a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) test the hypothesis that international students studying at IBCs are less satisfied with their academic experience than international students studying at their associated home campuses.

Chapter five delves deeper into the nature of the academic experience at IBCs. It examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the academic experience at IBCs and how it has changed the relationship between the IBC and the home campus. The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews with leaders, academic staff, and students at seven IBCs in Malaysia, which were then coded and analyzed.

Finally, chapter six brings together the findings of these studies and discusses their implications for HEIs. Both theoretical and practical implications are considered. The limitations of the research as well as opportunities for future research are discussed.

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## Introduction

There is no question that the number of international students worldwide is increasing: there are now 4.6 million globally mobile students (OECD, 2017), more than double the number since 2000. An understanding of student satisfaction is critical to develop policies and practices that effectively support a diverse student population (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and provide global educational experiences (Arkoudis, Dollinger, Baik, & Patience, 2018). Universities have begun to pay close attention to the experience of international students as competition for these students spreads beyond the traditional destination countries to education hubs and major sending countries now emerging as receiving countries (de Wit, Ferencz, & Rumbley, 2012; de Wit, Hunter, & Coelen, 2015).

Ensuring international student satisfaction offers a competitive advantage, with links to increased student loyalty (Thomas, 2011), retention (Schreiner, 2009), and higher word-of-mouth recommendation (Garrett & Merola, 2018). There is evidence that international students differ from domestic students in their adjustment to the university experience (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Aubrey, 1991). Universities can facilitate interaction between domestic and international students through curriculum design and pedagogic interventions (Leask, 2009; Leask & Carroll, 2011). Going straight to the source, data gathered from students themselves can be a useful tool to create and carry out the policies, practices, and interventions that will influence their experience (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), including internationalization of the curriculum (Knight, 2004). Scholarly research on the experience of international students extends close to a century, however, existing literature points to a key sub-question that merits further analysis: how do academic and social integration influence a student's level of satisfaction? In this study, satisfaction is viewed as a short-term attitude that can be measured (Athiyaman, 1997) and defined as "a common evaluation based on the result of the product perceived" (Fornell, 1992)—in this case, the 'product' is the university experience.

Research indicates that student satisfaction and integration vary among nationalities (Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Garrett, 2014; Archer, 2015), and that both social and academic integration impacts student satisfaction levels (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). This study goes further down these avenues of research, exploring the role that integration plays in understanding differences in student satisfaction among nationalities. It focuses on degree-seeking undergraduate students from China, India, and South Korea studying in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia- the top three sending and receiving countries for international students, respectively.

## **LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Studies about international student experience have repeatedly indicated that differences exist among nationalities (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Garrett, 2014; Arambewela & Hall, 2007). For example, among international students studying in the US, European and Indian students expressed the highest overall satisfaction rates (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016). There is evidence of a link between proficiency in English and international students' academic outcomes, which may lend an advantage to international students from countries where English is spoken (Poyrazli et al., 2001; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Andrade, 2006).

Both contextual and cultural factors contribute to differences in the student experience—for example, students from Saudi Arabia supported by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) may be able to avoid some of the financial challenges associated with studying abroad, and so may be less cost-sensitive than students without scholarship support in deciding where to study (Alhazmi, 2010). Graduate students from Asia studying in Australia tend to be more concerned with safety, which therefore plays a larger role than other factors in determining their satisfaction (Arambewela & Hall, 2007). Differences between nationalities raise the question of why they exist, and whether indirect effects from other variables play a role. There is a gap in existing research exploring the role of integration in differences in satisfaction among nationalities.

Concerning integration, abundant research suggests that how a student relates to peers influences his/her integration (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). In particular, positive links have been found between interaction with other students and satisfaction (Kennedy, 1999; Perrucci & Hu, 1995), adaptation to life in a foreign country (Zimmerman, 1995; Rohrlach & Martin, 1991), and academic success (Pruitt, 1978). This may be in part because students entering higher education place high importance on relationships with peers and faculty (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009).

A 2018 study by Arkoudis et al. identifies a lack of social integration and sense of belonging perceived by international students, despite reporting relatively high levels of satisfaction. Furthermore, differences exist between nationalities in integration (Han et al., 2013; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Liberman, 1994). A seminal study from Rienties et al. (2012) found that international students studying in The Netherlands with non-Western backgrounds were less integrated compared to other international students, despite having a similar study-performance. The body of research points to integration as a potential predictor of international student satisfaction, which this study will investigate.

Integration takes many forms; therefore, social and academic integration may be studied as separate constructs. Aspects of social integration, including size of social networks and quality and quantity of interaction with peers, has a large influence on adaption of international students (Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Tinto, 1975; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Integration with local students has been linked to higher satisfaction (Rohrlach & Martin, 1991), and reduced psychological problems (Furnham & Li, 1993). Even social media can enhance the international student experience, depending on how it is used (Sleeman, Lang, & Lemon, 2016; Binsahl, Chang, & Bosua, 2015).

Likewise, academic integration merits separate examination. The learning experience of international students has been shown to have a greater impact on satisfaction than the arrival, living, or support

services experiences (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Furthermore, “the preparation of graduates who have a strong knowledge and skill base in intercultural relations and communications is considered by many academics as one of the strongest rationales for internationalising the teaching/learning experience of students” (Knight, 1999, as cited Briguglio, 2006, p. 2). The classroom experience and taught curriculum play important roles in supporting interaction and integration. Educators can make use of cultural diversity in the classroom to foster cross-cultural perspectives (Commons, Mabin, & Gao, 2012). Facilitating interaction between international and domestic students both inside and outside the classroom improves communication skills, cognitive skills, and cultural awareness (Arkoudis et al., 2013).

While there is a wealth of research on the role of integration in the international student experience, few studies have taken a large scale (N>1,000) quantitative approach to measuring these differences. In a comprehensive literature review, no large-scale quantitative studies specifically exploring the influence of integration on international student satisfaction were found.

### **THEORIES RELATED TO INTEGRATION AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

Further backing the relevance of these research questions are seminal theories related to integration and student experience. Acculturation can be defined as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Acculturation models developed by Berry (1997), Safdar, Lay, & Struthers (2003), and Ward, Bochner, & Furnham (2001) support the notion that international students likely experience numerous life changes as a result of being in a new culture. These life changes have the potential to become stressors depending on how they are dealt with (Berry, 1997, 2006; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Smith and Khawaja (2011) cite the main sources of stress as linguistic, educational, sociocultural, discriminatory, and practical, and note the need for further research to determine how the cultural backgrounds of international students play a role in dealing with stressors.

Astin's (1999) *Student Involvement Theory* (SIT) provides a framework to define *integration* and understand its significance. SIT argues that students change and develop because of being involved and integrated in their higher education institution, and that level of involvement is linked with student outcomes. It considers student demographic variables such as nationality and cultural context, as well as the student's environment, including level of involvement and integration. All these elements support the use of nationality and integration as a lens to understand student satisfaction, as is done in this study.

Another theory that this study draws on is intercultural adaptation theory. Research on intercultural adaptation has evolved from early findings, which viewed intercultural adaptation and culture shock as "occupational" diseases, listing symptoms including a feeling of helplessness, homesickness, and irritability (Oberg, 1954). A more recent model of intercultural adaptation, developed by Searle and Ward (1990) broadly divides it into two dimensions, both of which are situated within a culture learning framework: psychological, which is based on affective feelings of well-being and satisfaction during adaptation, and sociocultural, which is based on behaviours that allow one to integrate in a new environment.

An important model for understanding student satisfaction comes from Vincent Tinto (1975), whose Student Integration Model (SIM), updated in 2012, suggests that a students' sense of belonging, defined as "the feeling of being a member of one or more communities at university and feeling support for being present at the university", is a crucial element in their satisfaction level, academic success and retention. Other studies back the notion that academic and social integration are distinct and impactful elements of the student experience (Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Rienties et al., 2012). Taken together, these models provide a foundation to examine social and academic integration, while seeking to understand their relationships with nationality and satisfaction.

## **RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

While research indicates the student experience differs among nationalities, this study deepens the understanding of why these differences exist, investigating the explanatory value of integration in student satisfaction.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Based on the evidence above, this study poses the following research questions and associated hypotheses:

### **Differences in Integration and Satisfaction among Nationalities<sup>4</sup>.**

Research Question 1: How do students from different nationalities vary in their levels of satisfaction and integration?

Hypothesis 1: Satisfaction and integration vary significantly among Chinese, Indian, and South Korean students studying in the US, UK, and Australia, with Indian students displaying higher levels of satisfaction and integration.

### **Integration and Student Satisfaction.**

Research Question 2: What is the effect of academic and social integration on international student satisfaction?

Hypothesis 2: Academic and social integration are both predictive of self-reported satisfaction among international students, with higher integration levels resulting in higher satisfaction, particularly in the case of academic integration.

### **Explanatory Value of Integration.**

Research Question 3: What is the role of integration in mediating the relationship between nationality and satisfaction?

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4 Social integration is based on reported satisfaction of students in the Living Section of the ISB: "Making friends from my home country", "Making friends from this country", "Making friends from other countries", "Opportunities to experience the cultures of this country", "The social activities", "The social facilities", and "Making good contacts for the future". Academic integration is based on reported satisfaction of students in the Learning Section of the ISB: "Studying with people from other cultures", "Help to improve my English language skills", "Academic staff whose English I can understand", "Getting time from academic staff when I need it/personal support with learning", "Feedback on coursework/formal written submissions", and "Advice and guidance on long-term job opportunities and careers from academic staff".

Hypothesis 3: Integration partly explains the relationship between nationality and satisfaction, with other unknown factors also playing a role (figure 2.1).

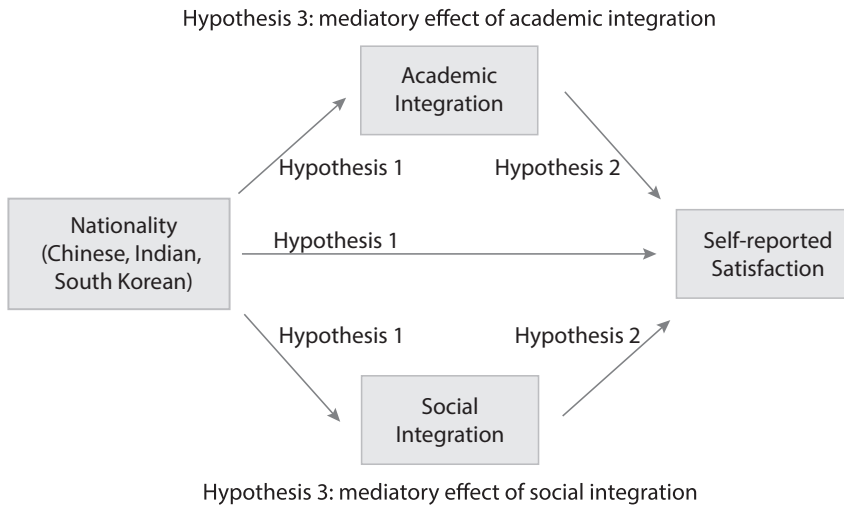


Figure 2.1: Relationships between variables being explored

## Methods

### Design and database

To explore these hypotheses, this study uses a quantitative approach, drawing on student responses from the International Study Barometer (ISB). The ISB is a survey launched in 2005 by the International Graduate Insight Group Ltd. (i-graduate) that encompasses nearly 3 million student responses across all student types, levels and years of study including more than 30 countries and 200 institutions. This is the largest and most widespread dataset of student responses in existence.

The ISB tracks satisfaction levels of international students across specific areas of key importance to them, including the arrival experience, learning experience, living experience, and support

services. Students are asked to indicate their satisfaction with a particular element on a Likert scale of 1-4 (1=very dissatisfied, 4= very satisfied). While there are many possible metrics that could be used to measure the experience of international students, self-reported satisfaction provides a direct, subjective measure of how the student rates their experience in a given area.

This study draws on the 2016 ISB dataset, filtered to contain only institutions based in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia and only undergraduate, degree-seeking students from India, China, and South Korea. Of the total student responses received in 2016 (N=66,272), selecting these parameters resulted in a subset of 5,242 responses.

### Variables

The study was conducted in three parts. First, constructs were created to measure social and academic integration among nationalities using factor analysis in SPSS. These constructs were then used to test for and measure differences among nationalities in integration levels and satisfaction levels (Table 2.1). Having explored these links, the study used linear regression to examine the role of integration in determining satisfaction. Finally, a model was created to show to what extent integration explains the relationship between nationality and self-reported satisfaction.

Table 2.1 *Variables and Measures*

Variable	Measure
Student Satisfaction (Dependent Variable)	Student's self-reported level of satisfaction with university experience (1-4 scale)
Academic Integration (Dependent Variable)	Construct of Academic Integration based on 6 questions from ISB
Social Integration (Dependent Variable)	Construct of Social Integration based on 7 questions from ISB
Nationality (Independent Variable)	Set of Dummy variables: Chinese, Indian and South Korean
Gender (Control)	Dummy (female = 1)
Stage of Study (Control)	Set of dummy variables (First year = 1, last year, other year)



## Analysis strategy

To investigate the role integration plays in understanding differences in international student satisfaction, we sought to create constructs of social and academic integration. A factor analysis of 13 Likert scale questions from the ISB was conducted on a sample of 5,242 subjects who answered all 13 questions. An examination of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggested that the sample was factorable (KMO= .912) and resulted in a sound model of two constructs of integration: social and academic.

The first construct, "Social Integration", was comprised of 7 items reported on a 4-point Likert scale that explained 44.8% of the variance with factor loadings from .574 to .813. The second construct, "Academic Integration", was comprised of 6 items reported on a 4-point Likert scale that explained 14.0% of the variance with factor loadings from .715 to .810. Cumulatively, the two constructs explain 58.8% of total variance.

Table 2.2 *Factor loadings and communalities based on a principal components analysis for 13 items from the International Student Barometer (ISB) Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. (N = 5,242)*

Element from ISB	Social Integration	Academic Integration
Making friends from my home country	<b>.574</b>	.326
Making friends from this country	<b>.796</b>	.374
Making friends from other countries	<b>.792</b>	.368
Opportunities to experience the cultures of this country	<b>.802</b>	.406
The social activities	<b>.773</b>	.383
The social facilities	<b>.813</b>	.406
Making good contacts for the future	<b>.810</b>	.418
Academic staff whose English I can understand	.298	<b>.743</b>
Getting time from academic staff when I need it/personal support with learning	.355	<b>.810</b>
Feedback on coursework/formal written submissions	.346	<b>.778</b>
Advice and guidance on long-term job opportunities and careers from academic staff	.412	<b>.715</b>
Studying with people from other cultures	.488	<b>.735</b>
Help to improve my English language skills	.476	<b>.758</b>

Note: Factor loadings < .2 are suppressed.

The constructs of academic and social integration emerged from a set of thirteen independent variables selected from the ISB which were evidenced to be valid proxies of integration. Cronbach's alpha was obtained for each construct, and a chi-square goodness of fit test indicated a p value of <.000, suggesting that the distribution is not due to chance.

Table 2.3 *Descriptive statistics for the two integration factors (N = 5,407)*

Construct	No. of items	M (SD)	Cronbach' s $\alpha$
Social Integration	7	2.964 (.52)	.878
Academic Integration	6	3.105 (.50)	.848

ANOVA and linear regression were used to determine the relationships between *nationality and integration*, *nationality and satisfaction*, and *integration and satisfaction*. As a final step, a model was created to show how including academic and social integration explains the relationship between nationality and satisfaction.

## RESULTS

Results from the study found support for all three hypotheses, though with some limitations. First, there are significant differences among nationalities in satisfaction levels. Specifically, Indian students have higher mean satisfaction than Chinese and South Korean students. Second, both social and academic integration are predictive of self-reported satisfaction, particularly in the case of academic integration. Third, integration does play a role in explaining the relationship between nationality and satisfaction, though it does not explain the relationship fully.

### *Links between Nationality, Integration, and Satisfaction*

Research Question 1: How do students from different nationalities vary in their levels of satisfaction?

Results indicate differences among the mean satisfaction levels of Chinese, Indian, and South Korean students. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that the mean satisfaction of Indian students was significantly higher than the means of Chinese and South Korean students (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4 *Descriptive statistics for mean satisfaction levels and academic and social integration levels by nationality*

Nationality	Number	M (SD) Satisfaction	M (SD) Academic Integration	M (SD) Social Integration
Indian	918	3.23 (.64)	3.24 (.49)	3.11 (.53)
Chinese	4701	3.03 (.60)	3.10 (.49)	2.96 (.49)
South Korean	596	2.98 (.62)	2.97 (.52)	2.79 (.60)

Linear regression confirmed that nationality is predictive of satisfaction levels. Specifically, Indian students demonstrate higher mean satisfaction, whereas South Koreans and Chinese students demonstrate lower mean satisfaction. Table 2.5 shows the unstandardized beta (B), the standard error for the unstandardized beta (SE), the standardized beta ( $\beta$ ), and the probability value (p) for each nationality.

Additionally, linear regression confirmed that nationality is predictive of integration levels, with Indian students demonstrating higher academic and social integration than South Korean and Chinese students. Table 2.6 and Table 2.7 show the unstandardized beta (B), the standard error for the unstandardized beta (SE), the standardized beta ( $\beta$ ), and the probability value (p) for each nationality for Academic and Social Integration, respectively.

#### Research question 2: Links between Integration and Satisfaction

A linear regression revealed both academic and social integration were significantly associated with satisfaction ( $p < 0.001$ ). Specifically, students with higher levels of *academic* integration are more satisfied with their experience. Students who have higher levels of *social* integration are also more likely to report higher satisfaction with their experience, but to a lesser extent (Tables 2.8 and 2.9).

### Research question 3: Roles of academic and social integration in the relationship between nationality and satisfaction

Linear regression revealed that nationality and integration together explain 14.2% of the variation in international student satisfaction, controlling for gender and stage of study (Figure 2.2). The combined effect of these variables is greater than the independent effects of each variable. Table 2.10 shows the unstandardized beta (B), the standard error for the unstandardized beta (SE), the standardized beta ( $\beta$ ), and the probability value (p) for each of the variables.

Results show that there is partial mediation present; in other words, the relationship between nationality and satisfaction is strengthened when integration is included in the model. The higher satisfaction of international students from India may be explained by their higher levels of integration relative to other nationalities. Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported. However, while the model is elucidatory, satisfaction is not completely, or even majorly, explained by nationality and integration, indicating that other factors must also play a role.

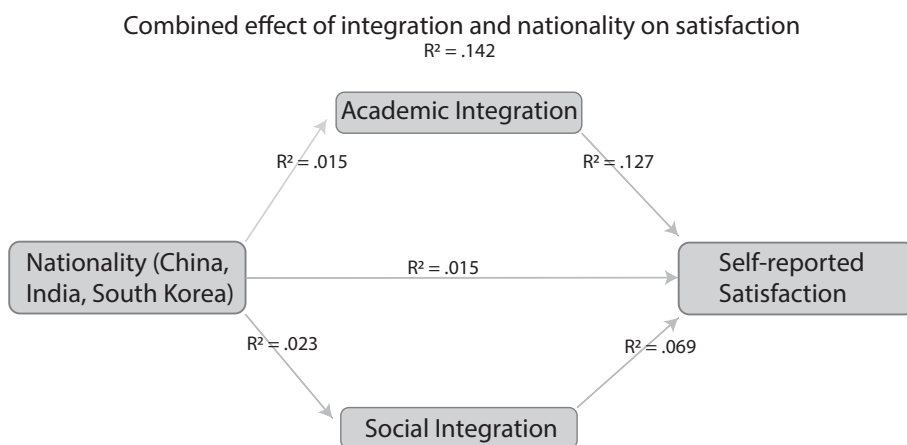


Figure 2.2: Relationship between all variables and self-reported satisfaction

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, results add to the existing literature on the international student experience, setting the stage for continued research in this area, and offering policy and practice implications. The finding that

satisfaction and integration vary by nationality is not unexpected; it is therefore worth exploring why this is and what universities can do to address these differences. Previous research demonstrates that Indian international students have some of the highest satisfaction levels in the US among international students (Roy, Lu, & Loo, 2016), and that Asian international students have more difficulty in making friends in Western cultures (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Han et al., 2013). Cultural differences may partly explain this finding: cultural similarity–dissimilarity impacts the sociocultural adaptation of students, with increases in interaction associated with decreased social difficulties, increased communication skills, and better adaptation to life abroad (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a; 1993b).

Likewise, contextual factors may also be at play: it's not known, for example, what the proportion of Indian, Chinese, and South Korean students is at each university, which could have an impact on opportunities to interact with domestic students. It's important to note, too, that international students cannot be stereotyped under one umbrella when it comes to their satisfaction and integration, as their social networks have been shown to be complex and difficult to categorize (Gomes et al., 2015). Social networks and the digital environment are important parts of international students' lives. International students may have distinct social networks not determined by nationality, e.g. some Chinese students may have social networks composed mostly of other international students from their country, whereas other Chinese students may have social networks mainly composed of local students and international students from other countries. This makes identifying predictors of the student experience more complex than the measures of the ISB.

Compellingly, results indicate that integration partly explains the relationship between nationality and satisfaction, with other unknown factors also playing a role. While nationality alone explains only 1.5% of the variation in satisfaction, the model including integration explained more than 14% of the variation in satisfaction. This is a novel finding, as it suggests that a student's level of integration is more predictive of

satisfaction than his or her nationality. Further research is required to better understand what explains that remaining 86% of variation in student satisfaction.

Placed in the context of current research, students that are well-integrated academically and socially, regardless of from where they come, are more likely to have a positive experience (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975; Oberg, 1954). This emphasizes the role of a student's context and personality traits in determining their experience. A 2016 study by Brouwer et al. indicated that two categories of social capital- peer capital (help seeking, collaboration, and fellow students' support) and faculty capital (mentor support)- contribute positively to study success among first year students. Self-efficacy, in particular, has been shown to be a predictor of academic success and may be a student characteristic through which the effects of social capital are mediated, as students enter university with beliefs about their ability to succeed (Bandura, 1977).

This strengthens the case for universities to focus on enhancing students' social capital through strategies such as small-group teaching, which in turn fosters interaction and academic success (Webb, 1982; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Interventions such as working in groups or assigned pairs, and encouraging peer tutoring during class can enhance students' social capital and academic integration (Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997). Though benefits of collaborative and experiential learning have been documented (Clark, Baker, & Li, 2007; Skon, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981), universities must consider the cultural context of students. Results of this study and others suggest students from Confucian heritage countries may have less familiarity Western-style classroom environments (Phuong-Mai, Cees & Pilot, 2006). Therefore, universities should consider how to best support students to reap the benefits of curriculum and teaching strategies designed to foster integration.

Additionally, universities should pay attention to the social environments of their international students. Because integration

is boosted by having friends from both home and host countries (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985), student associations and institutions must work collaboratively to facilitate this (Pérez Encinas, 2015), through, for example, orientation events, buddy programs, and educating domestic students on the benefits of cross-cultural friendships. Likewise, there are social integration benefits to sharing accommodation with other students (Ward et al., 1998), presenting an opportunity for institutions to foster this through housing policies. Organized social activities can help students develop social capital, establish friendships and create a support network, which in will positively influence academic outcomes and integration (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010; Severiens & Wolff, 2008), and in turn satisfaction.

Curriculum can be used to leverage the diversity on campus to benefit both domestic and international students and encourage interaction. The power of curriculum is so strong, in fact, that if it does not promote understanding, students working in multicultural groups can have negative stereotypes reinforced rather than diminished (Briguglio, 2006). Strategic and informed interventions grounded in research and evaluated comprehensively have been shown to improve engagement and interaction. To do this, both informal and formal curriculum must be aligned, and faculty and staff must be committed to the task (Leask & Carroll, 2011).

Research suggests that experiential learning can help students acquire intercultural communication competence. One example is Excell, an experiential learning and leadership program that teaches cross-cultural communication and encourages international students to step outside their usual communication techniques (Mak et al., 1999). Evaluations of Excell indicate that both domestic and international participants gained increased confidence, and international students report increased interaction with people from different cultures (Commons & Gao, 2011). Programs such as this demonstrate that curriculum and teaching strategies can play a role in facilitating integration and positively influencing the student experience.

It is also important to design teaching and support systems geared toward boosting language proficiency and supporting learning both inside and outside the classroom. Academics play a role in this, as they are the ones who will communicate expectations and oversee the feedback and grading/marking. Teaching staff and academic advisors may be the first to notice when a student is falling behind academically, and therefore best placed to trigger an intervention. Support services play a role, too, in offering programs during orientation and throughout the university experience that help students anticipate academic expectations and providing links to resources and support for international students struggling academically.

This study has implications for both theory and practice in international higher education. It lifts fog from the factors that may be mitigating the link demonstrated in previous research between nationality and satisfaction. Though findings suggest that social and academic integration are important factors, they only partially explain the variation in student satisfaction. Qualitative analysis of the comments written in to the ISB by the international students would add insight to the findings. Analysis of the effectiveness of curriculum and teaching strategies in promoting integration, and thus satisfaction, would be elucidating to universities seeking to develop such interventions. However, further research down this line should acknowledge that 'integration' is not always the end-point or goal of interaction. Anderson (2008) asserts that interactions in higher education occur multi-directionally, not only between international and domestic students; and that practitioners must recognize students as unique, with 'complex and unexpected' similarities and dissimilarities. Considered in this light, a qualitative approach focused on the experiences of individual students would allow a nuanced understanding of how culture, context, and personal characteristics interact to shape the student experience.

The International Student Barometer, which provided the dataset used for the study, has limitations. It does not measure university



characteristics such as quality, proportions of international and domestic students enrolled, student performance or outcomes. Student characteristics such as openness to new experiences, self-efficacy, and study habits are not available to determine their role in satisfaction and integration. Because the ISB survey is based on voluntary self-report, students' interpretation of questions may vary. Results may be impacted by demand characteristics of the study and what types of students choose to respond to the survey. All of these factors potentially affect the validity of the ISB and must be acknowledged as limitations of the study.

Notwithstanding, these results contribute to the body of research in the area of international student experience, strengthening the notion that integration plays a key role in determining the satisfaction levels of students. Examining a wider scope of international students may reveal additional insights into what hinders or helps integration. More insight into the minds of international students is at the core of understanding their experiences, including why a student's level of integration, despite his or her nationality, is predictive of satisfaction.

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# Chapter 3

## FACTORS IMPACTING SATISFACTION AMONG INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: THE CASE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter is based on: Merola, R., Coelen, R., & Hofman, W. (2022). What really matters? Factors impacting international student satisfaction: The case of the UK. *International Journal of Management in Education*. Vol.16 No.1, pp 83-101



## INTRODUCTION

The international student experience is a heavily researched topic in higher education, and for good reason: the most recent OECD statistics report 5.6 million internationally mobile students, more than twice the number in 2005 (OECD, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated many of the transitions already taking place in international higher education, perhaps triggering a 'fourth wave' in international student mobility (Choudaha, 2017; 2021). Understanding what shapes the international student experience is imperative to help institutions develop data-driven approaches to navigate through the tumult brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and recover quickly when a 'new normal' emerges.

This study defines international students as “those who received their prior education in another country and are not residents of their current country of study” (OECD, 2019). Early signs signal major shifts in international student flows in the 2020-21 academic year, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research by Universities UK International (UUKi) and IDP Connect on the attitudes and behaviors of international students in the United Kingdom (UK) revealed 45% of students would consider switching study destinations if it would allow them to start face-to-face learning sooner (Duffin, 2020). A report from the European Migration Network on the impact of COVID-19 on EU and OECD member states concludes that the host country and university's response to COVID-19 and support for international students has become a major new pull factor for study abroad destinations (European Commission, 2020). While evidence suggests that international student mobility has declined on the whole in 2020, there may be a rebound in 2021, as some students who postponed higher education plans during the COVID-19 pandemic take them up again. Research from EY Parthenon predicts this may result in an increase of up 1.85 million new enrolments in foreign countries (Lundy & Duncan, 2020).

This research focuses on the United Kingdom to examine the international student experience, in part since the nation hosts the

second highest number of international students. Though the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) reported a 9% increase in the number of undergraduate students from outside the UK and the EU accepted in autumn 2020 (UCAS, 2020), rising to a new record total of over 44,000 international students, data on how many of those students actually took up their place has not been released as of January 2021. Furthermore, the Brexit deal, completed in December 2020, officially withdrew the UK from the EU, and students from outside the UK that took up their place after September 2020 will be subject to pay international student fees from 2021 onward. A 2020 survey by Study EU of more than 2,500 EU students interested in studying in the UK found that up to 84% will reconsider their choice if their home fee status is lost (Study EU, 2020). The UK's exit from the EU will undoubtedly be a consideration in international student decision-making, further highlighting the need to understand what factors influence international student satisfaction.

More broadly, the international student experience must be better understood because international students bring significant benefits to the universities and communities where they study. Research from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) indicates that domestic students gain connections and communication skills through interaction with international students, better equipping them for the global labor market (HEPI, 2015). A study by Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2013) showed that **five**, ten, and twenty years after graduation, domestic students who interacted with international students regularly had increased self-confidence, leadership, and quantitative skills than peers who did not. The myriad contributions of international students to both the universities and countries in which they study demonstrate the key role they play in *internationalization of higher education*, defined as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (De Wit, Hunter, & Coelen, 2015, p. 281).

International students not only foster cultural exchange and international competencies in their academic communities, but also bring economic benefits. International students contributed over 300 billion USD to world economies in 2017, according to a study using UNESCO data (Choudaha, 2019). International students sometimes seek to remain in their host country after graduation, comprising much of the international labor migration flows in many countries and making significant contributions to the economy (OECD, 2020). Many countries, including the UK, allow international students to remain in the country for a certain period of time after graduating to seek employment or start a business, potentially bringing valuable skills and economic contributions to the country.

## FACTORS IMPACTING THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

### 1. *Reputation*

Much research has been conducted to understand how a university's reputation affects student behavior, particularly in student decision-making (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Griffith & Rask, 2007; Palmer, O'Kane & Owens, 2009). There is evidence that—for better or worse—rankings and league tables influence the reputational assessments of prospective students (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010). Research by Lenton (2015) found that traditional universities in the UK elicited higher scores on the NSS (National Student Satisfaction) survey than modern universities, which they speculate is “possibly because the graduating body is aware of the reputational element of the university that is attached to their degree” (p. 126). Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton (2014) postulate that attendance at a university with a high reputation may confer certain unobservable attributes such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, and other skills valued by employers. It follows that a student's satisfaction with their university experience might be influenced by their belief in bright prospects after graduation.

In contrast, some research suggests perceived reputation is a poor predictor of student experience, and that rankings and league tables can be harmful to higher education. Research by Nurunnabi, & Abdelhadi (2018) found no statistically significant difference on

student satisfaction rating between Russell Group and Non-Russell Group universities<sup>6</sup>. Pusser and Marginson (2013) suggest the most well-known rankings/league tables propagate dominant norms in global higher education rather than providing a useful tool to comprehensively evaluate institutional quality. Others have critiqued ranking systems for frequently changing their methodologies and call for quality assessments using other metrics (Altbach, 2012; Taylor & Braddock, 2007).

## ***2. Size and Proportion of International Students***

Research suggests that both quantity and quality of contact with domestic students impact international student satisfaction (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward & Searle, 1991). The benefits of peer interaction are well-documented in literature and include *social benefits* such as improved communication skills inside and outside the classroom and higher intercultural understanding (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Westwood & Barker, 1990); more confidence in communication in the second language (Noels, Pon & Clement, 1996), *psychological benefits* including reduced stress (Furnham & Li, 1993), and *learning benefits* including better adaptation to study abroad, fewer academic problems and more in-class peer interactions (Brouwer et al., 2016; Abel, 2002; Searle & Ward, 1990). A lower proportion of international students may mean more opportunities for interactions with domestic students due to increased exposure, resulting in higher satisfaction.

Few studies look specifically at the effect of the proportion of international students on the international student experience. A study by Spencer-Oatey & Dauber (2015) found that as the international student proportion increases, overall satisfaction decreases. Perhaps universities with a high proportion of international students allow fewer opportunities for interactions with host nationals, lowering satisfaction. Class size—an aspect that can be influenced by enrolment numbers—has been shown to negatively impact both satisfaction (Mavondo, Tsarenko, & Gabbott, 2004) and academic

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<sup>6</sup> The Russell Group is a self-selected association of 24 public research universities in the UK, established in 1994 and perceived by some as representing the universities with the best reputations in the country, although this is disputed (Russell Group, n.d.).



achievement (Bandiera, Larcinese, & Rasul, 2010; Neves & Hillman, 2017). The influence of size on satisfaction may extend to a university's surroundings, as well: a 2014 report from Study Portals analysing over 16,000 comments made by nearly 7,000 students revealed that "in smaller cities and universities, or those with well organized activities, students find it easier to connect to others, while in large cities and universities they find it harder".

### ***3. Student Characteristics***

This study considers how stage of study may impact satisfaction, drawing on theories related to sojourner adaptation and adjustment. Some research suggests that sojourner adjustment follows a "U-curve", first conceptualized by Lysgaard in 1955, in which an individual transitions from a "honeymoon" period, in which satisfaction is high, into culture shock, and later enter a recovery and adjustment. Other theories conceptualize a "W-curve" in which the initial culture shock is followed by reverse culture shock upon re-entry into the sojourners' home country (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). While the applicability of these curves has been disputed (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Berardo, 2006), examining how a student's stage of study may affect their experience merits further understanding.

This study also explores whether male and female international students differ in satisfaction. A study on international student satisfaction in Ireland found that female students had higher satisfaction with their studies than male students (Finn & Darmody, 2017), and that female international students were more likely to have meaningful relationships with host nationals than male students (Yang, Teraoka, Eichenfield & Audas, 1994). Previous research has revealed gender differences in satisfaction in many consumer contexts, including education (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2002), and that males and females differ in social and interpersonal skills relevant to multicultural settings (Sinangil & Ones, 2003).

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Existing research notwithstanding, there is a lack of large-scale quantitative studies examining international student satisfaction; this study seeks to contribute to both theory and practice by delving into this topic. This study explores the following research question:

*How do aspects of the student experience, including university reputation, undergraduate enrolment, proportion of international students, and local population<sup>7</sup>, as well as student gender and stage of study, predict the satisfaction of undergraduate international students?*

*Hypotheses:* Looking at university characteristics, we predict a significant positive relationship between universities' *reputation* and the satisfaction of their undergraduate international students. We predict a significant negative relationship between *undergraduate enrolment, proportion of international students, and local population* and the satisfaction of undergraduate international students.

Looking at student characteristics, we predict a significant relationship between *stage of study* and satisfaction of undergraduate international students, with first year students reporting significantly higher levels of satisfaction than other and last year students. We predict a significant relationship between *gender* and satisfaction of undergraduate international students, with female students reporting significantly higher levels of satisfaction than male students.

## METHODOLOGY

While there are many ways to evaluate the international student experience, self-reported satisfaction is a useful metric as it considers the varied experiences of international students. Subjective measures are well suited to investigate psychometric variables (i.e., student experience, quality of life, sense of belonging, etc.) that are conceptualized differently by individuals (Elasz & Gaddy, 1998). In this study, student satisfaction is defined as "the extent to which students are satisfied with the organization and management, quality of

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<sup>7</sup> Local population is defined as city size (in thousands) as reported in the 2011 UK census.

teaching, personal development, assessment and feedback, learning resources and academic support” (Alnawas, 2015).

The study uses a quantitative approach to explore the above research questions, drawing on the 2017 International Student Barometer<sup>8</sup> (ISB) dataset, filtered to contain only institutions based in the UK and only undergraduate, degree-seeking international students studying full-time, on-site, who answered the sections related to this study’s research questions. Of the total student responses received in the United Kingdom in 2017 (N=35,410), applying these parameters resulted in a subset of 11,652 responses. Individual student responses and university characteristics are contained within each university; therefore, a nested model was used in analyses (Field, 2013). Twenty-five of the universities were located in England, five in Scotland, and one each in Wales and Northern Ireland. Likewise, the bulk of responses came from international students studying in England (82%), followed by Scotland (12%), Wales (5%), and Northern Ireland (1%). Demographic information on the study sample as well as the wider population of international students in the UK is presented in Table 3.1.

In addition to overall satisfaction, the ISB tracks satisfaction levels of international students across specific areas of key importance, including the learning and living experiences. Students are asked to indicate their satisfaction with a particular element of their experience on a 4-point Likert-style scale (1= very dissatisfied, 4= very satisfied)<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> The ISB is a survey launched in 2005 by the International Graduate Insight Group Ltd. (i-graduate) that encompasses nearly 3 million student responses across all student types, levels and years of study including more than 30 countries and 200 institutions.

<sup>9</sup> Overall Satisfaction was measured by student’s answer to the question: “Overall, how satisfied are you with all aspects of your experience at <University Name>?” Learning Satisfaction was measured by student’s answer to the question: “Overall, how satisfied are you with the LEARNING EXPERIENCE at this stage in the year?” Living Satisfaction was measured by student’s answer to the question: “Overall, how satisfied are you with the LIVING EXPERIENCE at this stage in the year?” Answer choices to each of these questions were: Very dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Satisfied, and Very satisfied.

Table 3.1 *Descriptive statistics for study sample and international students enrolled in UK (HESA, 2017-18)*

		Study sample	International Students in UK
Age	18-20	57%	62%
	21-24	35%	27%
	Other age	8%	11%
Nationality	Non-EU	54%	63%
	EU	46%	37%
Gender*	Male	42%	44%
	Female	58%	56%
Stage of study	First year	44%	39%
	Other year	56%	61%
Top six fields of study**	Business & administrative studies	18%	26%
	Engineering & technology	10%	12%
	Social studies	10%	10%
	Creative arts & design	5%	9%
	Biological sciences	8%	7%
	Law	5%	6%
	Percent of total fields	57%	69%
Top nationalities of non-UK students***	China	24%	23%
	India	5%	4%
	United States	9%	4%
	Hong Kong	5%	4%
	Malaysia	9%	3%
	Nigeria	1%	2%
	Saudi Arabia	1%	2%
	Singapore	4%	2%
	Thailand	1%	1%
	Canada	3%	1%
	Total % of international student enrolments	63%	47%

\* Gender data for the UK reflects both domestic and international undergraduates

\*\* Fields of study data for UK reflects both domestic and international undergraduate students

\*\*\* Top nationalities data for international students in UK includes both undergraduate and postgraduate students

This study is composed of two parts. The first part explores which aspects of the student experience predict the satisfaction of undergraduate international students. To do this, the study used factor analysis in SPSS to test for a sound construct of 'university reputation'. The resulting construct was then used in a multilevel model to determine whether there is a relationship between university reputation, size, international mix, and local population, as well as

student gender and stage of study on satisfaction of international undergraduate students. Summative content analysis of student comments was used to help interpret results (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## VARIABLES

Seven independent variables were used as reputational indicators in the factor analysis: 2017 Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) Ranking<sup>10</sup>; 2017 Complete University Guide Ranking<sup>11</sup>; 2017 Times Higher Education (THE) Ranking<sup>12</sup>; Russell Group Membership<sup>13</sup>; 2017 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Rating<sup>14</sup>; 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) Power Ranking<sup>15</sup>; and the 2016-17 Degree Completion Rate<sup>16</sup>.

Data used in the study come from various sources. Rankings/league tables used in the study were drawn directly from the league tables and rankings websites. Undergraduate and international student enrolment data came from 2016-2017 HESA data. The population of the town/city in which the university is located was determined using data from the most recent UK Census (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Student gender and stage of study were self-reported by ISB respondents.

Six independent variables and four dependent variables were included in the multilevel regression to determine their influence on international student satisfaction.

## ANALYSIS STRATEGY

To investigate the role that reputational indicators play in international student satisfaction, a construct was created using seven variables that have been evidenced to be proxies of reputation—five rankings/league tables, membership to the Russell Group, and the degree completion rate of each university. One factor accounted for 77.44%

10 1= ranked, 2= not ranked

11 Continuous

12 1=0-300, 2=301-600, 3=601-800, 4=not ranked

13 1= Russell Group, 2= not Russell Group.

14 1=gold, 2=silver, 3= bronze

15 Continuous

16 2016-17 HESA data obtained via Complete University Guide

Table 3.2 *University and student characteristics included in multilevel model*

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Overall Satisfaction (Dependent variable)	12,236	3.19	0.66
Learning Satisfaction (Dependent variable)	11,711	3.12	0.63
Living Satisfaction (Dependent variable)	11,087	3.11	0.66
Undergraduate enrolment <sup>17</sup> (Independent variable)	12,236	13,820	4,811
Proportion undergraduate international students <sup>18</sup> (Independent variable)	12,236	0.19	0.09
City size (in thousands) <sup>19</sup> (Independent variable)	12,236	817	2,022
Reputation Construct (Independent variable)	11,652	0.00	0.00
Gender (Independent variable)	12,236		
Female	7,094	3.23	.64
Male	5,142	3.22	.68
Stage of Study (Independent variable)	12,236		
First/Single Year	5,415	3.26	.67
Other Year	4,311	3.22	.62
Last Year	2,510	3.17	.69

of the total variance in the dataset. None of the other components had eigen values greater than 1, and all items loaded highly onto the one component (factor loadings: .644-.962). Bartlett Factor Scores were generated to capture overall university reputation and account for this in subsequent models (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3 *Factor loadings and communalities based on a principal components analysis for seven variables related to reputation. Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. (N = 12,097)*

Variable	Reputation Indicator
2017 Complete University Guide Ranking	.941
2017 Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU)	.910
2017 Times Higher Education Ranking	.938
Russell Group Membership	.798
2017 Teaching Excellence Framework Rating	.644
2014 Research Excellence Framework Power Ranking	.962
2016-2017 Degree Completion Rate	.923

*Note: Factor loadings < .2 are suppressed.*

A multilevel model was then used to estimate international student satisfaction, measured as a series of student self-rated outcomes indicated on the ISB. Six independent variables were included in the model. Random intercepts were included for both institution and

<sup>17</sup> HESA data 2016-17

<sup>18</sup> HESA data 2016-17

<sup>19</sup> UK Census 2011

nationality; stage of study was allowed to vary randomly across both institutions and nationality. Degrees of freedom vary across analyses due to missing data and the inclusion of the random slope for study stage. The variable *undergraduate enrolment* was scaled by dividing by 100 ( $M = 138.61$ ,  $SD = 48.12$ ), and the variable *proportion undergraduate international students* was scaled by multiplying by 100 ( $M = 19.02$ ,  $SD = 8.86$ ).

Following quantitative analysis, student comments were explored to interpret results. Comments written into the survey, which contains sections concerning the learning experience (1,446 comments), the living experience (1,384 comments), and the support offered (979 comments). Specific comments from students are included in the results to further understand quantitative findings.

## RESULTS

### *Multilevel Model of University and Student Characteristics' Effect on Satisfaction*

#### *Overall Satisfaction*

Satisfaction with the overall university experience was predicted by *stage of study* ( $F(2, 56) = 8.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Students in their first year were more satisfied ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ) than students in their last year ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ),  $t(56) = 4.02$ ,  $p < .001$ . They were also more satisfied than students in other years ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ),  $t(56) = 2.68$ ,  $p = .01$ . See Table 3.4 for full results. None of the other variables were predictive of overall satisfaction.

Summative analysis of comments from the International Student Barometer (ISB) provide a means to interpret the significant findings: first year students constituted 44% of the respondents yet were responsible for only 32% of comments; other year students constituted 35% of respondents and 41% of comments; and last year students constituted 20% of the respondents and 27% of comments. Students in later stages of study supplied a disproportionately high number of comments relative to their representation in the data; this could

be due to having more experience to draw on, resulting in a greater propensity to write in comments. Conversely, first year students supplied a disproportionately low number of comments, perhaps due to the fact they only had been at the university for several months and had not yet formed an impression.

### *Learning Satisfaction*

For satisfaction with learning, none of the variables were significantly predictive. See Table 3.4 for full results.

### *Living Satisfaction*

Satisfaction with the living experience was predicted by *university reputation* and the *proportion of international undergraduate students*. There is a positive relationship between reputation and satisfaction: as the reputation of the university increases, satisfaction with the living experience increases  $F(1, 1E4) = 8.49, p = 0.0036$ .

Conversely, there is a negative relationship between the proportion of international students and satisfaction: as the proportion of international students increases, satisfaction with the living experience decreases  $F(1, 1E4) = 4.44, p = .035$ . For each one-unit increase in the proportion of international students, there is a .00334 decrease in satisfaction with living experience. In other words, a university that is 10% international would, on average, be rated .0334 points higher than a university that is 20% international on the 1-4 Likert scale used in the survey. See Table 3.4 for full results.

Many comments from the living experience section of the survey related to issues with interaction and integration—areas likely to be affected by the density of international students. One student noted that his university “has one of the most diverse campus cultures, but it would be nice to see some sort of integration programs. For example, I see a lot of Chinese and Arab students always huddling together, it would be nice if the university made it possible for them to integrate easier.” Another student noted she enjoyed the “small class sizes in my department, meaning lots of opportunity to ask questions and



work with others on course". Whether interaction and integration partly explain the apparent link between proportion of international students and satisfaction is explored in the discussion below. None of the other variables were predictive of overall satisfaction.

## DISCUSSION

Results indicate that international student satisfaction is influenced by the student's stage of study, the reputation of the university, and the proportion of international students enrolled. None of the other variables were found to be predictive. Though associations are generally small, suggesting that there are other factors that also play a role in this complex relationship, knowing that these factors influence satisfaction allows decision-makers at universities to better plan for and adapt to changes affecting the international student experience.

Some of the factors, including gender, city size, and the number of undergraduates enrolled, did not predict satisfaction. It is nevertheless worth considering further what role gender may play in student satisfaction, since previous research has revealed gender differences in satisfaction with education consumption (Bendall-Lyon & Powers, 2002). In particular, females are more likely than males to consider the strength of their relationship with a service provider when making judgements (Bhagat & Williams, 2008), which might apply to the higher education context. Male and female international students may experience their time abroad differently, as there is evidence that they differ in social and interpersonal skills relevant to multicultural settings (Sinangil & Ones, 2003). While previous research has found evidence that differences exist, gender was not found to predict international student satisfaction in this study.

The three factors that were found to be predictive of international student satisfaction are discussed below.

### *Reputation of University*

International student satisfaction with the living experience is positively correlated with the reputation of the university. An organizational

perspective helps explain the positive correlation between university reputation and student experience. For example, it could be that universities with more prestigious reputations have more resources to offer to students—i.e., more faculty and smaller class sizes—which then leads to higher satisfaction. Research indicates that students gravitate toward highly ranked institutions at least in part due to a perceived resource advantage (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2001; Volkwein & Sweitzer, 2006). Indeed, it could be an abundance of resources that allows that university to enjoy a high reputation in the first place, as many rankings/league tables take this into account in the methodology.

#### *Proportion of International Students*

Results suggest that in instances where the proportion of international students decreases, satisfaction of international students increases. Universities must consider the factors that may mediate the relationship between proportion of international students and satisfaction, such as friendships with domestic students (Ward & Kennedy, 1993b) and sense of belonging, defined as “the feeling of being a member of one or more communities at university and feeling support for being present at the university” (Tinto, 1975), which is a key part of sojourner adjustment (Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Rienties et al., 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic may affect this apparent relationship, as it has given rise to increased online learning options (Tandy 2020), social distancing measures (Scott, 2020; Kim & Maloney, 2020), xenophobia (Brewis, Wutich, & Mahdavi, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020) and stigmatization (Yellow Horse & Leong, 2020)—all of which may ostensibly lead to decreased in-person interaction with peers.

#### *Stage of Study*

First year students were found to have higher mean satisfaction with their experience than students in their middle and last years. This could indicate a potential honeymoon effect, in which students’ perceptions of their experience start out positive and become increasingly critical as time passes. Previous research has shown that international students’ attitudes toward domestic students began as positive and

became more negative as their time abroad passed (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Stroebe, Lenkert & Jonas, 1988).

Data from the 2017 HEPI survey corroborates this: 29% of first year students—including domestic students—were significantly more likely than average to find their experience better than expected. A 2010 study by Peat, Dalziel, and Grant found that that long-term student satisfaction and performance was higher from students who participated in a first year ‘transition workshop’; universities could consider transition workshops, mentorships or buddy programs for international students to offer support, and hopefully bolster satisfaction, throughout their time at university.

Higher education is constantly changing; the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened trends affecting the international student experience in both direct and indirect ways, making an understanding of what predicts student satisfaction even more important. Bean’s (1983) often-cited student attrition model posits that a student’s beliefs are influenced by their experiences at the institution, which become their attitudes about the institution, and, finally, shape their sense of belonging at the institution. There may be an effect on student attrition rates, as students—particularly those already struggling—suffer lower academic performance in online courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2013; Husbands & Day, 2020).

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Despite careful methodological planning, this study is not without limitations. First, the analysis does not include demographic information such as student nationality, age, or area of study. It also, albeit intentionally, only considers undergraduate student satisfaction, and so does not allow insight into other levels of study. It also, intentionally, does not include students in short term, study abroad, part time, or online programs. The rationale for this is that the experiences of students in these categories are diverse and distinctive. Because results are limited to undergraduate, full-time, on campus international students, there remains room for future analysis on other

groups of students. For example, might the reputation of a university not have a greater attractive effect for postgraduate students and shape their satisfaction accordingly?

Response bias is prevalent in surveys using self-report. With international students, many of whom do not speak English as a native language, interpretations of questions may vary. Some research has suggested that variation in response styles can be partially attributed to specific cultural traits including individualism and collectivism and power distance (Harzing, 2006; Johnson et al, 2005), as well as gender (Meisenberg & Williams, 2008). Additionally, a students' propensity to answer the survey, which is optional, would be influenced by their own characteristics, satisfaction, level of engagement with the university, and gender—it is notable that the study sample included 58% female students and 42% male students. Trust in the confidentiality of individual survey responses would also be a source of bias. Students who have either very high or very low satisfaction may be more likely to comment on the survey than students who are neutral.

It is worth noting that satisfaction with the learning experience was not influenced by any of the variables included in the study. This deepens the desire to identify what factors influence satisfaction with the learning experience, if not the ones in this study. Previous research has lent support to the notion that a university's learning environment plays a key role in facilitating interaction between home and international students and promoting social adjustment (Leask, 2009; Westwood & Barker, 1990). Exploring which pedagogical practices and learning environments are conducive to a positive learning experience would be a relevant path to explore.

Finally, results suggest that additional variables—which were not included in the study—would be prudent to explore. For example, while the finding that living satisfaction is influenced by the proportion of international students is intriguing, the small effect suggests that other factors which were not considered in this study also contribute to living satisfaction, i.e., type or cost of student accommodation.

Knowledge of the backgrounds of students, how they are funding their studies, their decision-making when choosing where to study, and what they expect to gain from their experience would lend valuable insight into what shapes their experiences. Reviews of existing literature (Petrie et al., 2019; McInnis, 2001) found that, despite the best intentions of researchers to share and compare data, it does not often happen, which prevents the emergence of a larger picture to drive forward policy and practice. This study offers common data—supplied by the students themselves—to help complete the picture of the international student experience.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to ongoing research on the international student experience, suggesting that it is a multi-level, multi-layer construct where many variables interact in complex ways, changing over time. While we do not know with certainty what higher education will look like after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, we can be sure that many aspects of the student experience will be altered, if not altogether transformed. In addition to the profound effect of COVID-19, universities will continue to be impacted by innumerable additional forces unique to each institution—in the case of the UK, for example, Brexit will have far-reaching implications for higher education. This study sets the stage for future research and offers new understanding of the international student experience based on data from the students themselves, helping university leaders ensure a high-quality experience under rapidly changing and unpredictable conditions.

[illegible]

# Chapter 4

## DIFFERENCES IN SATISFACTION BETWEEN STUDENTS ENROLLED AT IBCs AND HOME CAMPUSES<sup>20</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

International branch campuses (IBCs) can be a complex and high-risk form of transnational education, at times requiring large upfront investment with no guarantee of success (Healey, 2018; Garrett et al., 2017). Despite this, the number of branch campuses worldwide continues to increase, with 263 campuses identified in the most recent IBC report by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) and the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT). The report, and this study, define an IBC as “an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider” (Garrett et al., 2017, p. 6).

IBC expansion has taken place around the world: the OBHE/C-BERT reports that in 2017 there were 77 countries that hosted IBCs, and in that year alone IBCs opened in Mexico, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sierra Leone, Malta, the United Kingdom (UK), Qatar, South Korea, and China. Though founding institutions of IBCs can be found in 33 countries, the majority come from a small set of countries. Seventy-three percent of the 263 IBCs come from institutions based in the United States (US), UK, Russia, France, and Australia. Furthermore, around half of the IBCs currently under development worldwide come from institutions based in the US and UK (Garrett et al., 2017).

Institutions that seek to open IBCs do so for a variety of reasons, however most come under four primary rationales: internationalization, revenue, status enhancement, and existing connections (Garrett et al., 2016). Some use IBCs as a strategy to grow and diversify international student enrollment (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015; McNamara & Knight, 2014). Host countries, likewise, have many reasons for opening their doors to IBCs. The governments of countries that host IBCs often do so to prevent ‘brain drain’, in which students and academics pursue opportunities outside their countries (Ziguras & Gribble, 2015; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). Host countries may also have economic incentives, anticipating a potential boost to the

economy and research capacity from collaboration with industry and influx of international students and experts (Garrett et al., 2017).

While the net effects stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic on global student mobility are yet unknown, mid-pandemic data—as of December 2020—from the top three English-speaking destination countries show evidence of reduced international student enrollments. The US experienced a drop of 43% in new international student enrollments in the in the 2020-21 academic year (IIE, 2020); Australian researchers predict a 50% decrease in international students in Australia by mid-2021 if borders are not reopened (Hurley, 2020); and the UK's Office for Students (OfS) has projected at least a 10% decrease in revenue from non-EU students in 2020-21 (OfS, 2020). The changes in international student flows may lead to increased consideration of IBCs as an alternative to international study—or as a closer-to-home option—for prospective international students.

Given the widespread presence of IBCs and their important role in the delivery of transnational education (TNE)—possibly to become even more significant by the COVID-19 pandemic—there is a need to understand the unique academic experience offered at these campuses. This study endeavors to explore if, and how, home and IBC-enrolled international undergraduate students differ in their satisfaction with the academic experience. The study will consider students' gender and stage of study, and the particular institution at which the student is enrolled, in order to account for any variance these variables contribute to satisfaction.

### **Importance of Academic Experience**

Regardless of reasons for opening and hosting IBCs, there is high incentive to support their success and the satisfaction of the students enrolled. Central to success is the ability to offer students the same style of academic experience they would receive at the home campus. This study defines “academic experience” as described in a 2014 report from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) as “students' interactions

with the institution associated with their studies,” including the teaching and learning processes.

Various studies have looked at the satisfaction of students studying at IBCs, as well as the factors that influence it. While some studies show that students are generally satisfied with the teaching and learning at the IBCs where they study (Ahmad, 2015; Pieper & Beall, 2014), there is also evidence that students may have difficulty adapting to the teaching methods at the IBC, which are intended to be similar to those of the home university (Kelly & Tak, 1998; Wang, 2008; Pimpa, 2009; Heffernan et al., 2010; Prowse & Goddard, 2010; Marginson, 2011; O’Mahoney, 2014). For example, a study by Ahmad (2015) of students at IBCs in Malaysia found that satisfaction would be improved if course content was more geared toward the Asian/Malaysian context.

Other research notes that IBC students sometimes have low satisfaction with the campus facilities and environment, stemming from a perceived difference between the IBC and the home university (Ramsden, 1979; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012). A study analyzing a sample of over two hundred students enrolled at IBCs in Qatar found that students’ perceptions of service quality are lower than their expectations (Bhuian, 2016). These findings support the notion that simply replicating the home institutions’ model of education in the distinct context of the IBC may not be sufficient to ensure the satisfaction of the students enrolled, as perceptions and expectations play a role.

Ensuring that the same academic quality exists at both IBC and home campus is a top priority for institutions engaged in TNE, and a number of studies offer evidence both for and against this being the case (Wilkins, 2020; Hodson & Thomas, 2001; Coleman, 2003; Castle & Kelly, 2004; Craft, 2004; Cheung, 2006; Blackmur, 2007; Edwards, Crosling, & Edwards, 2010; Lim, 2010; Smith, 2010). There are many motivations for studying at an IBC, including (but not limited to) institution and academic reputations, marketability of the degree, and similarity of education systems (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017), and prospective

students are concerned with earning an academic qualification that is equivalent to the one earned at the home campus (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012). The global pandemic of COVID-19 has raised the question of whether increasing numbers of prospective international students may instead choose TNE in their home country. For these reasons, the question of equivalence of academic experience becomes even more salient to explore.

Likewise, the physical location of the international branch campus has bearing on the academic life of the campus. A case study from OBHE/ C-BERT on Nottingham Malaysia (UNMC) highlights this, quoting Provost Graham Kendall saying “We put GPS collars on elephants. They cannot do that in the UK. We do research on tropical plants. They can’t do that” (p. 29). In addition, the host countries of some IBCs may require certain coursework not required at other sites. In Malaysia, for example, the MQA mandates that all degrees must include Bahasa and Islamic Studies, resulting in additional credits required for students at UNMC than students at the UK campus to earn the same qualification.

Several seminal studies on student experience suggests students’ own perceptions of their learning environment, in light of their motivations and expectations, determine their approach to learning and academic outcomes (Biggs, 1989; Ramsden, 1979). Asking students themselves is an effective method of understanding their experiences (Chapman & Pyvis, 2007); for this reason, numerous studies have focused on evaluating transnational education from the student perspective (Humfrey, 2009; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012; Bhuian, 2016; Lee, 2017).

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

There are several theories that provide a foundation for looking specifically at academic satisfaction to understand how this affects the student experience. Theories grounded in psychology and sociology lend support to a student-centered approach to understanding their experience and, ultimately, outcomes, in higher education, focusing on factors such as perception of and attitude towards academics (Bean

& Eaton, 2000), and the role played by learning quality (Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 2003). Metzner & Bean (1987) theorize that factors such as participation, communication and membership in academic communities are at the center of understanding student experience. Astin's *Student Involvement Theory* places the student at the center of the learning process, and asserts that the level of learning and growth that takes place as part of an education program is directly proportionate to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program (Astin, 1999).

It is clearly important for universities to understand how international students experience their life on campus—particularly the academic experience—and what aspects they most value. The above research highlights both the importance of, and difficulties in, creating an equivalent academic experience between IBCs and home campuses. However, there are no large-scale quantitative studies examining differences between home institutions and their associated IBCs. This study seeks to investigate differences in international student satisfaction at home institutions and IBCs concerning academic experience using a set of home campuses and their associated IBCs. This research draws on the global integration–local responsiveness (I–R) paradigm, developed by Prahalad and Doz (1987) and adapted to the context of IBCs by Healey (2018), as the key theoretical lens used to examine student satisfaction and experience in transnational settings such as IBCs. The I–R paradigm describes the tension faced by multinational corporations (MNCs) in balancing standardization across all markets versus adapting a service—in this case, education—to a local market.

Healey notes:

*“On the one hand, providing a standardized product or service globally allows them to exploit economies of scale and build a powerful global brand. For example, Coca Cola and Apple, the two most valuable manufacturing brands in the world (Interbrand 2014), sell standardized products across the world. On the other hand, if demand conditions vary between national markets, MNCs may be able to grow sales and profits by*

*selling differentiated products tailored to local requirements. McDonalds, for example, offers a standardized core menu across its restaurants, but allows a high degree of localization at national level—for example, McDonalds substitutes chicken for beef in its 'Big Macs' in India and sells teriyaki pork and fried shrimp patties in Japan" (p. 624).*

While universities are not multinational corporations, understanding that similar tensions may exist for universities that choose to open IBCs is an important starting place for understanding differences in the student experience at each campus.

For the purpose of this study, international students are considered "students who are not citizens of the country in which they study" (OECD, 2020). For example, a Chinese student enrolled at an IBC based in China would not be considered an international student, however, a Malaysian student enrolled at that IBC would be considered an international student.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Based on the above literature, the central research question is: *Do home and IBC-enrolled international undergraduate students differ in their satisfaction with the academic experience?* The study will take into account students' gender and stage of study, and the particular institution at which the student is enrolled, in order to account for any variance these variables contribute to satisfaction.

## METHODS

### Design and Sample

This study uses a mixed methods approach to explore the research question above, drawing on the responses of undergraduate international students who answered the International Student Barometer (ISB) at the start of their academic year—Spring or Fall 2018, depending on the university's location (Northern or Southern hemisphere) and corresponding academic calendar. The sample was limited to international students enrolled full time in degree granting programs and who were attending in person and on campus.

The ISB is a survey launched in 2005 by the International Graduate Insight Group Ltd. (i-graduate). It encompasses nearly 3 million student responses across all student types, levels and years of study including more than 30 countries and 200 institutions, making it the largest and most widespread dataset of student responses in existence. The ISB tracks satisfaction levels of international students across specific areas of key importance, including the academic, living, and support experiences. Students are asked to indicate their satisfaction with a particular element of their experience on a Likert-style scale of 1 to 4 (1= very dissatisfied, 2= dissatisfied, 3= satisfied, 4= very satisfied). While there are many possible metrics that could be used to measure the experience of international students, self-reported satisfaction provides a direct, subjective measure of how the student rates their experience in each area. Additionally, using an ordinal 1 to 4 scale results in a 'forced choice', which requires respondents to deeply process each question and response option (Allen, 2017).

This study draws on the 2018 ISB dataset, which contained over 65,000 student responses. Data was filtered to contain only institutions that had international branch campuses that also participated in the ISB in 2018. It was further filtered to contain only undergraduate international students studying full time, on campus, in degree-awarding programs<sup>21</sup>. Applying these parameters resulted in a subset of 2,145 responses, of which 812 (38%) responses came from international students at IBCs and 1,333 (62%) responses came from international students at home campuses. Universities had varying levels of international student responses, ranging from 256 responses at one university up to 1,127 responses at another. In total, there were four universities included in the dataset, resulting in four home campuses, and six IBCs.

Two of the universities had multiple IBCs included in the sample, accounting for the difference in total number of IBCs home campuses. The identities of the home campuses and IBCs are not revealed in this study to protect their anonymity. All of the institutions were based in

<sup>21</sup> The data does not include students studying in exchange programs, short courses, and part-time and/or distance learning students.

either the UK or Australia, and all of the IBCs were hosted in countries in Asia, including Malaysia, Singapore, and China.

Within the sample, 686 students (32%) were in their first year of study, 615 (29%) were in their last year of study, and 844 (39%) were in a middle year of study. Looking at gender, 965 (45%) of the international students in the sample were male and 1,180 (55%) were female students.

### **Variables**

Differences in academic satisfaction between international undergraduate students enrolled in IBCs and home campuses were measured using the independent and dependent variables outlined in Table 4.1. Students' gender (male/female), stage of study (first/single year, other year, or last year), and at which university they were enrolled were controlled for in analyses.

#### *Independent/Control Variables*

The independent variable was enrollment type (home campus or IBC). Student gender, stage of study, and institution were included in analyses to account for any variance they contribute.

#### *Dependent Variables*

Using factor analysis in SPSS, constructs were created as measures of aspects of the academic experience of students in the sample. As quantitative research on the student experience at IBCs is scarce, the literature revealed no specific set of constructs that could be adopted in its entirety (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). Based on research and expert knowledge, the primary aspects of the academic experience considered in the factor analysis were elements from the ISB related to academic and teaching quality, academic environment, and academic engagement.

An exploratory factor analysis of 28 items from the ISB was conducted on a sample of 2,124 subjects who responded to all of these items. A three-factor solution was selected based on the scree plot, which



demonstrated a 'leveling off' of eigen values after three factors, and by theoretical foundations that suggest distinct areas of academic experience. All 28 items correlated at least .421 with at least one other item, and items with loadings less than .5 were excluded, resulting in the exclusion of four items<sup>22</sup>. An examination of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggested that the sample was factorable (KMO= .940). The factor analysis resulted in three constructs of academic experience, called "academic and teaching quality", "academic environment", and "academic engagement". Cumulatively, these factors explained 49.27% of variance in satisfaction with aspects of the academic experience (Table 4.2).

The first construct, which researchers called *Academic and Teaching Quality* included fourteen items, explaining 36.09% of variance<sup>23</sup> with Cronbach's alpha .922. The second construct, called *Academic Environment*, was constructed of five items that explained 6.85% of variance<sup>24</sup> with Cronbach's alpha .842. The third construct, called *Academic Engagement*, was constructed of five items, explaining 6.33% of variance<sup>25</sup> with Cronbach's alpha .754.

### *Analysis Strategy*

Using the constructs of academic experience, composite scores were created for each respondent for each of the three factors. In order

22 The four items excluded (due to correlations of <.5) were: Help to improve my English language skills (if applicable); Studying with people from other cultures; The size of the classes; and Student feedback on my course is taken seriously and acted upon.

23 Students satisfaction with the quality of lectures; the subject area expertise of lecturers/supervisors; the academic content of my course/studies; the organisation and smooth running of the course; the level of research activity; the teaching ability of lecturers/supervisors; academic staff whose English I can understand; getting time from academic staff when I need it/personal support with learning; feedback on coursework/formal written submissions; explanation of marking/assessment criteria; fair and transparent assessment of my work; advice and guidance on long-term job opportunities and careers from academic staff; learning that will help me to get a good job; and opportunities for work experience/work placements as a part of my studies.

24 Student satisfaction with the quality of the lecture theatres and classrooms; the physical library facilities; the online library facilities; the learning technology; and the Virtual Learning Environment.

25 Student agreement with the program challenging them to analyze ideas or concepts in greater depth; use information, ideas or concepts from different topics to solve problems; do their best work; feel part of a student community committed to learning; and feel engaged with their studies.

to compare these scores in the two groups, while considering other factors, a One-way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was selected (Field, 2016). The ANCOVA tests for differences in mean satisfaction with these three constructs between international students enrolled at IBCs and home campuses, while controlling for student gender, study stage, and institution. Comments written into the ISB by students who responded were analyzed to gain further insight into the results. Verbatim comments were included when relevant in order to “add life to the narrative on often convey the point very expressively – without it being mediated or softened by the academic language of the researcher” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 553). A table of comment frequency and sentiment, categorized by enrollment type (IBC/Home Campus) was created. Though positive/negative sentiment coding has limited power on its own (Cohen et al., 2011), it is used in this study to search for patterns in the comments that relate to satisfaction with the academic experience.

## RESULTS

Results indicate that academic satisfaction does differ between international students enrolled at IBCs and home campuses. Specifically, international students enrolled at home campuses demonstrate higher mean satisfaction with Academic and Teaching Quality, Academic Environment, and Academic Engagement than international students enrolled at international branch campuses. While significant differences in satisfaction were found even without inclusion of the control variables, including these variables as controls explained part of the variance. In particular, satisfaction with Academic Environment and Academic Engagement are both sensitive to at which university the student was enrolled. Student gender and stage of study did not significantly affect their satisfaction with the academic experience.

Levene’s test indicated that equal population variances for home and IBC-enrolled students could be assumed for satisfaction with Academic and Teaching Quality and Academic Engagement ( $p > .05$ ). The variances for home and IBC-enrolled students in satisfaction with

Academic Environment were significantly different ( $p=.025$ ), however the variance ratio was calculated to be 1.06, indicating that variances are likely homogenous (Field, 2016).

### **Academic/Teaching Quality**

There was a significant effect of enrollment type on international student satisfaction with Academic/Teaching Quality after controlling for gender, stage of study, and university  $F(1, 1426)=45.13, p<.05$  (Table 4.3). Effect sizes were small but significant. Specifically, international students enrolled at home campuses demonstrate higher mean satisfaction with Academic and Teaching Quality than international students enrolled at international branch campuses (Table 4.4). The control variables did not have a significant effect on satisfaction.

### **Academic Environment**

There was a significant effect of enrollment type on international students satisfaction with Academic Environment after controlling for gender, stage of study, and university  $F(1, 1420)= 95.39, p<.05$  (Table 4.5). Specifically, international students enrolled at home campuses demonstrate higher mean satisfaction with Academic Environment than students enrolled at international branch campuses (Table 4.6). The model showed a small but significant effect of university on satisfaction with Academic Environment after controlling for gender, stage of study, and enrollment type. While satisfaction with Academic Environment varied significantly between universities, this study does not wish to highlight differences among specific universities, only to account for the different academic experiences provided by universities to international students.

### **Academic Engagement**

There was a significant effect of enrollment type on international students' Academic Engagement after controlling for gender, stage of study, and university  $F(1,1418)=31.11, p<.05$  (Table 4.7). Specifically, international students enrolled at home campuses demonstrate higher Academic Engagement than international students enrolled at international branch campuses (Table 4.8). The model demonstrated

that Academic Engagement varied significantly between universities after controlling for gender, stage of study, and enrollment type.

### **A Qualitative Interpretation of the Results through ISB Student Comments**

Comments from the International Student Barometer help understand how the experiences of international students differ, helping to explain the quantitative findings. Summative comment analysis revealed different proportions of comments from international students at home campuses and IBCs, with 23% of the IBC sample and 16% of the home campus sample writing in comments in the learning experience section of the survey (190 and 225 comments, respectively). On the whole, 61% of comments written in were negative in sentiment (i.e., complaints about academic facilities, lecturer's teaching styles, program content, etc.). Looking at sentiment by enrollment type, 66% of comments from students enrolled at IBCs were negative, compared to 57% of comments from students enrolled at home campuses. Positive sentiment was identified in 16% of comments from IBC-enrolled students and 27% of home campus-enrolled students. The remaining comments were categorized as mixed or neutral in sentiment. Overall, this supports the notion that international students enrolled at IBCs have lower satisfaction with their academic experience than students at home campuses. See Table 4.9 for an index of frequency and sentiment by enrollment type (IBC/Home Campus).

Students enrolled at IBCs sometimes commented on perceived differences between the home campus and IBC, whereas no such comparisons were found in comments from students enrolled at home campuses. For example, a student at an IBC noted "The fact that [IBC Name] is an international branch of [Institution Name], I expected the same services and facilities, that will allow the students to experience robust learning and understanding. But, having met many exchange students from [Home Campus Name], I got to acknowledge the differences in both campuses; regardless of the lecturing/knowledge delivering skills incompetence." Another IBC student noted that "The optional modules are too little limited compared to [Home Institution

Campus]. I have to select the module that not really interest me out of no choice.” While not all comments were to this effect, it is notable that some IBC students commented on perceived differences, whether it was reality or not.

Comments elucidate the finding that there is lower satisfaction with academic and teaching quality at IBCs than at home campuses. Though it was raised by students at both types of campuses, overall, dissatisfaction with teaching ability was a theme that showed up more frequently in comments from IBC students than in comments from home campus students. Some comments related specifically to the fact that non-native English speakers were employed as lecturers. One student wrote “there are a lot of professors whose English is the main reason or sole reason that many students just give up going to classes due to the fact that it is not efficient to attend a class where you achieve nothing and students would rather study themselves with the ppt slides.” Another IBC student noted that “there are few professors that has worse English than the students themselves. As an international student I believe that lecturers should get further training in the English capabilities.” Though staff and lecturers whose first language is not English are employed at both the home campuses and IBCs of all universities in this study, students at IBCs may be more likely to evaluate whether they are receiving an education experience akin to what they envision being offered at the home campus.

A report from the OBHE (Garrett et al, 2017) corroborates this, finding that “There is a clear preference to use faculty based in the country, and an avoidance of the “flying faculty” model. Mature IBCs have introduced academic staff development and elements of home country academic practices, especially around pedagogy and assessment of student learning” (p. 8). While complaints about the quality of English spoken by lecturers was a theme in comments from both IBC and home campus-enrolled students, it was more prevalent in the former group. It may be that IBC students are more sensitive to perceptions of receiving an “authentic” Western education and, as a result, comment on it more.

## DISCUSSION

It is compelling that there are indications of differences between international students enrolled at home campuses and IBCs in all areas of satisfaction with academic experience investigated by this study. To date, there have been no large-scale quantitative studies investigating this question. Results corroborate the body of research that suggests that differences exist between the academic experiences offered by home campuses and their international outposts (Garrett et al., 2016; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011; Wang, 2008); though they may be altogether comparable (Wilkins, 2020).

This study has important implications for how IBC leaders, faculty, and administrators consider the role of academic satisfaction in the international student experience. The successful replication of satisfaction with the academic experience may be a crucial element of an IBC's success—this has been noted in research and by leaders of both home campuses and IBCs (Clifford, 2015; Garrett et al., 2017; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013; Shams & Huisman, 2012, 2016). Results highlight the key role that academic satisfaction plays in the international student experience, suggesting that universities should make this area a top priority.

National policies and regulatory frameworks have an impact on the delivery of TNE (Hou et al., 2018), including on the international/local mix of staff; the coursework required to receive a qualification; how the campus is structured and governed, and many other areas. Nonetheless, universities must ensure that the academic experience is replicated in the areas that they can control, and that any discrepancy is made clear to the student during the decision-making process. A 2014 report on transnational education in the UAE by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), suggests that institutions must work harder to replicate the standards they achieve at their home campuses at their overseas branch campuses, recommending good practices such as “engaging branch campus staff in academic governance and quality assurance; encouraging a culture of scholarly enquiry” and “providing better staff training and support to locally recruited part-time and fixed-contract staff” (p. 24).

Beyond the differences in academic satisfaction found between international students enrolled at home campuses and IBCs, the study found that academic engagement is affected by at which university the international student is enrolled, regardless of whether they are enrolled at a home campus or an IBC. While factors such as institutional prestige/reputation may partly underlie this finding, previous studies provide actionable ideas for how to increase engagement. For example, long-term student satisfaction and performance is higher among international students who participated in a first year 'transition workshop' (Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2001), and foundation and first year programs set the stage for international students' "academic empowerment", helping them with the acculturation process, academic preparedness, and managing their studies (Lee, 2017). Viewed within the lens of Astin's *Student Involvement Theory*, ensuring that academic programs put the student at the center of the learning process and foster involvement may help foster academic engagement.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study is not without limitations. First, because it draws on a convenience sampling technique, based on universities that opt in to administer the ISB survey, sampling bias is a limitation. Universities that take part in the ISB may differ somewhat in their characteristics from universities that do not take part in the ISB. In particular, universities that take part in this survey may have budget allocated to endeavors designed to understand and improve the international student experience. These universities perhaps have a.) more resources; b.) more international students; and/or c.) more focus on student experience than universities that do not take part in the ISB. All these factors could mean that the experience of international students at universities in this sample is not representative of the experience of international students at all universities.

A second limitation is in the instrument used: the International Student Barometer (ISB). While comprehensive, there are aspects of the student experience not measured by the ISB, which covers only

institutional dimensions. Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott (2009) posit that the factors found in the literature that appear to influence the student experience can be grouped broadly into four dimensions: institutional, student, sector-wide, and external. The ISB instrument captures only the first dimension comprehensively. Furthermore, the fact that the survey is intended for student feedback rather than research purposes reduces the validity of the responses as well as content analysis of comments (Cohen et al., 2011). Comment sentiment may have been mostly negative in part because students were being prompted for feedback which they hoped would be acted upon and used to make improvements.

This study opens pathways for several areas of future inquiry. For example, what role does cultural distance play in international student satisfaction, and does it help explain the apparent difference in satisfaction? It would be intriguing to compare data from new IBCs to mature ones, as this might shed light on what factors lead to long term success. Finally, the effect of COVID-19 on international student decision-making and experience must be explored. A “push-pull” perspective of study abroad highlights the notion that certain factors “push” a student away from their home country to seek study abroad, and other factors “pull” the student toward certain universities and countries (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). These push-pull factors may change as a result of this global pandemic, and would be worth exploring in the context of international branch campuses.

Overall, this study suggests that universities must carefully consider and prioritize the academic experience of both their domestic and international students to ensure their satisfaction. The ever-changing landscape of transnational higher education attracts a mix of students—international and domestic alike—that share in their desire to know what academic experience is in store for them. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing uncertainties will likely heighten the need to provide an academic experience at IBCs that is carefully designed and thoughtfully controlled by the university.







# Chapter 5

## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CHANGED INTERNATIONAL BRANCH CAMPUSES' ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE AND HOME CAMPUS RELATIONSHIP<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Merola, R. H., Coelen, R. J., Hofman, W. H. A., & Jansen, E. P. W. A. (2022). Through the Looking Glass: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed International Branch Campuses' Academic Experience and Home Campus Relationship. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153211070112>



## INTRODUCTION

For decades, international branch campuses (IBCs) have flourished and floundered in all regions of the world—the most recent statistics by the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) and Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) reveals 305 campuses spanning 77 host countries (C-BERT, 2021; Garrett et al., 2017). Growth has been steady in recent years, with a net increase of 56 IBCs from 2016–2020; 66 from 2011–2015; and 67 from 2006–2010. Most IBCs are in countries in Asia and are founded by institutions based in Western countries (Garrett et al., 2016).

It is difficult to use a “one size fits all” approach to describing IBCs, given the diversity present among these institutions. This study uses the definition put forth by the OBHE and C-BERT in their report on success factors of mature IBCs: “an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider” (Garrett et al., 2017, p. 6).

An understanding of the student experience at IBCs, which often differs from the experience offered at the home campus (Altbach, 2010), allows universities to develop support services that address the needs of students and attract a diverse student body (Altbach & Knight, 2007). A study by Wilkins (2020) concluded that institutional claims of replicability between the student experience at IBCs and home campuses were “somewhat fanciful”, though overall the experiences may be “largely comparable”, in particular at larger branch campuses. Various studies have found evidence of dissatisfaction with aspects of the academic experience and student support services at IBCs (Ahmad, 2015; Bhuian, 2016; Marginson, 2011; Merola et al., 2021; O'Mahoney, 2014). Given the unique setup and context of IBCs, there is a need to better understand the experience of the students enrolled. In this study, “academic experience” is defined as “students’ interactions with the institution associated with their studies” (Higher Education

Academy, 2014), including both the informal and formal curriculum (Leask, 2009).

Nearly all higher education institutions (HEIs) transitioned to online teaching at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson et al., 2020), greatly changing the academic experience for most students. Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education students shows a variety of effects, particularly related to wellbeing (Debowska et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Kakuchi, 2021) and the academic experience (Baber, 2020; Basuony et al., 2021; Fatani, 2020; Means & Neisler, 2020). Understanding the effects of the switch to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is important due to the unprecedented nature of the situation: as one study's authors pointed out, "well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster" (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 1).

This study focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the academic experience IBCs and changed the relationship between the IBC and home campus. No academic research looking specifically at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on IBCs has yet been published, to the authors' knowledge, making this study the first of its kind. It focuses on IBCs located in Malaysia from universities in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, for reasons described in the following section.

## **THE MALAYSIA CONTEXT**

Malaysia was selected as the host country in this research because it is often regarded as an "education hub", due in part to favorable government policies toward TNE as well as a large student market. Malaysia accounts for 40% of enrollments of ASEAN students that study abroad within the region (Atherton et al., 2018), and TNE management processes in Malaysia are "generally well developed", according to an analysis by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2020).

Presently, Malaysia hosts twelve international branch campuses, of which five are campuses of institutions in the UK, three are campuses of Australian institutions, and the others are campuses of institutions in China, France, Ireland, and Singapore. The UK and Australia were selected for this study due to these nations' high levels of TNE activity: the UK alone has 36 IBCs in 18 countries (Garrett et al., 2017). Malaysia's historical ties to the UK has resulted in compatibility between the two education systems, allowing UK universities to offer almost identical programs without making major adaptations to the local context.

Australian universities currently operate twenty IBCs in ten countries, and the nation is widely considered an early pioneer in IBC development, accounting for much of the growth in the 20th century (Garrett et al., 2017). Of the 120,000 students worldwide enrolled in Australian TNE programs in 2019, nearly 20,000 (17%) were enrolled in programs offered in Malaysia (Australian Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2019). The geographic proximity and longstanding TNE links to Southeast Asia have attracted some Australian universities to open IBCs in Malaysia.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This study is informed by Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1999), which postulates that students are at the center of their learning experience. For development and growth to occur, students must face challenges in their student life while having access to university and social support. SI theory views the role of the campus as providing students with the opportunity to encounter and engage with new ideas, people, and routines, proposing that each campus should be tailored to the needs of the students enrolled (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This recognizes the importance of understanding the unique academic experience at international branch campuses and examining how it is being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Global Integration–Local Responsiveness (I-R) framework analyses the tension between integration and differentiation in multinational subsidiaries (Prahalad & Doz, 1987). Global integration refers to “the

degree to which the company is able to use the same products and methods in other countries,” whereas local responsiveness refers to “the degree to which the company must customize their products and methods to meet conditions in other countries” (Lumens, 2021). Within this framework, IBCs are viewed as multinational subsidiaries that compete in local markets while retaining strong ties to the parent company (Brock & Siscovick, 2007).

Previous research using the I-R framework revealed a central challenge of IBC operations to be balancing the need to localize teaching and learning while providing an educational experience equivalent to the one offered at the home campus (Healey, 2018). For example, a joint venture partner may prioritize profit over quality; a host government may make certain coursework mandatory; or the home campus may resist localizing the curriculum. To this end, this research seeks to better understand the relationship between the IBC and the home campus and how it is being shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic change the academic experience at IBCs?
2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic change the relationship between the IBC and the home campus?

## METHODS

### Participants

Twenty-six interviews were conducted virtually with leaders, academic staff, and students at the campuses of seven international branch campuses of UK and Australian universities operating in Malaysia. These individuals were selected using purposive sampling, having been identified by the researchers using their publicly available credentials as possessing relevant insight into the research questions due to their roles and experiences.

While other stakeholders (i.e., alumni, prospective employers, and staff from the home campus) were considered for inclusion, the research



seeks the insights from those who are located on the branch campus, with direct experience with the academic operations and perception of the relationship with the home campus. Including leaders, academic staff, and students in the sample was a way to triangulate data and better understand the various perspectives that shed light on the research questions (Cohen et al., 2011). Limitations of the sample are discussed later in the paper.

The sample included six heads or senior leaders of IBCs (Pro-VCs, Presidents, Vice-Presidents, and CEOs), eight academic leaders (Provosts, Deans, and Heads of faculties, departments, or schools), three junior or mid-career academic staff (professors and lecturers), and nine undergraduate students. Table 5.1 displays the sample characteristics and interview schedule.

The identity of individuals and of the IBCs are anonymized or pseudonymized (for example, the President of an IBC from Australia in Malaysia will be referred to as “the head of an IBC”). Other identifying information is excluded, anonymized, or pseudonymized.

Researchers used semi-structured interviews to explore the research questions to allow for less bias and greater response flexibility (Cohen et al., 2011). The length of the interviews was adjusted according to experience of each interviewee and time constraints. Interviews lasted between 23 minutes and 65 minutes.

### Data Collection

The interview instrument contained questions organized by categories and subcategories relevant to the research questions. The categories included *IBC Context and Operations*, *Academic Experience at IBC*, and *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Interviews were conducted remotely via Bluejeans, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams—all of which are secure video conferencing platforms—as the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person interviews impossible. Audio of the interviews was recorded and transcribed.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Groningen, and interviewees gave consent prior to participation.

The number of interviews conducted was determined by saturation, which is a frequently used criteria for qualitative rigor referring to the point in data collection at which no additional data are being found that allow the researcher to develop properties of the category (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Data Analysis and Coding Procedure**

To efficiently store and organize data, the interview audio and transcripts were uploaded to NVIVO. In addition, researchers wrote memoranda to record any methodological notes or reflections.

To begin the coding process, a small number of provisional codes were developed based on the theoretical foundations, research questions and interview guide (Saldana, 2015). The interviews were then perused iteratively, which allowed the codes to be applied and/or refined. The resulting set of codes was then applied to all interviews. Table 5.2 contains the codes used to classify information in relation to the two research questions.

After the transcripts had been coded, qualitative analysis to explore each code was conducted. Analysis of each code revealed themes, which were then organized by research questions. For research question 1, the themes that emerged at IBCs were:

- Pre-existing online learning and networks made IBCs well-placed to quickly switch to online delivery
- Student disappointment with halted mobility and lack of in-person academic and social interaction with peers
- Student desire to continue asynchronous online modalities (i.e., recorded lectures available online)
- Expanded services and resources provided by the IBC to support student wellbeing
- Increased effort on the part of the IBC to foster a sense of community

For research question 2, the themes that emerged were:

- More inter-campus and intra-campus collaboration in teaching
- IBCs playing a larger role in enrollment, recruitment, and mobility initiatives of the university
- IBCs helped minimize the impact of halted/reduced student mobility on the university
- Progression of a university vision of campuses as equal parts of a global university

A content analysis was performed in which the frequencies of themes were counted by the number of interviewees that expressed that sentiment. This gave a sense of which themes were most prevalent among interviewees (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

## RESULTS

Qualitative data analysis of the interviews revealed themes that elucidate the research questions. These are presented below.

*RQ1: How did the COVID-19 pandemic change the academic experience at IBCs?*

All interviewees agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting switch to online learning, has greatly impacted the academic experience at IBCs. In particular, interviewees expressed a belief that their campus was well placed for a quick switch to online delivery due in large part to the pre-existing online learning, infrastructure used for teaching and learning at the IBC. For example, a professor noted that “we used a learning management system (LMS) even before COVID, so we just went back and used it... the transition wasn’t so difficult compared to universities that did not have a platform to fall back on.” The leader of an IBC explained that “normally change at universities is relatively slow, but our model is ‘one university’ and has always had more of a blended model.”

While the top-down view from the leaders’ perspectives suggested a seamless transition to online learning, academic lecturers and

students observed a drop, at least initially, in engagement and teaching effectiveness. One student felt that the quality of the lectures dropped because lecturers could not see the reactions of students who had their cameras off and so could not teach as effectively; several others attributed the initial dip in the effectiveness of the learning environment to what one undergraduate described as “shell-shock”, since the COVID-19 pandemic began abruptly. “I give them props for attempting to deliver the same quality of education as [they did] in person. Granted, it has not been the easiest,” said one student. All students felt that the IBC had effectively solicited and acted on feedback to improve, including, for example, shifting the times at which courses were scheduled in order to allow for breaks between online sessions; offering leniency for IT-related difficulties in completing online assignments or exams; and making lecturers more available to students to answer questions outside of class time.

Content analysis points to a differential effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on campuses of the same institution, often resulting from different national regulations. For example, Malaysia retained the requirement that counseling training be conducted in person, leading to delays in completing qualifications for some students at the Malaysia campus that were not experienced by students at the UK or Australia campuses. One student who was on an exchange program at the Australia campus at the start of the pandemic felt that the movement control order was stricter in Malaysia, noting that “the Malaysia campus was totally closed, whereas in Australia, when the lockdown wasn’t in place students could still go to campus for labs.”

On the other hand, two of the leaders of IBCs specifically mentioned that they felt the Malaysia campus was a better place to experience the pandemic than other campuses. One leader declared, “Malaysia adapted quickly. We just got on with it, and did some really great work, whereas in the UK, they took a bit longer to adapt.” The onset of the pandemic prompted one student to transfer from a large research university in Australia to an IBC in Malaysia—his home country. In addition to being closer to family and cheaper, he felt that the IBC

had superior online infrastructure to the Australian university where he was studying pre-COVID.

Notably, all students were positive about the **increased availability of asynchronous online learning modalities** that resulted from the pandemic. Students valued being able to access lectures at any time and hoped this feature would remain. However, as one student pointed out, “it takes a lot of self-discipline to actually re-watch lectures” and, in his opinion, in-person classes prevent students from procrastinating and eventually becoming overwhelmed with work. Students were pleased about the increased online interaction with students on other campuses—for example, the ability to post questions on a Blackboard forum shared by students enrolled in the course across all campuses. This helped foster the feeling that the academic experience is the same across all campuses—or, as one student put it, “if you are suffering, you know the other guy in Australia is also suffering.”

Despite understanding the reasons for it, students expressed disappointment with the **lack of in-person learning and the inability to pursue mobility plans**. Four students had been forced to cancel plans to study at another campus of the university due to the COVID-19 pandemic; only one had been able to carry out his plan to spend a year at the UK campus (the other four students had not had plans to study at another campus). One of the Malaysian students had enrolled in the IBC in 2020 instead of the home campus due to her parents’ desire for her to stay close to home during the pandemic. While she felt “going abroad is a waste of money right now,” she admitted “honestly, I am waiting for things to change. Just being at home, studying, doesn’t give much of a university experience.” For the five Malaysian students interviewed, enrolling at an IBC in their home country is a way to have an international education experience.

Relatedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the **importance of fostering a sense of community, both online and in person, that is unique to the IBC**. “The lack of human interaction is really serious because we are staying at home, and university is the place where

you build your network and meet new people, and we haven't gotten that experience like pre-COVID students did," explained one student. A student from Pakistan explained that for students from outside Malaysia, "our homesickness goes away when we meet our friends, so it was very difficult to talk to walls and not meet friends during the pandemic. That played a role for some in not performing well academically."

Interviews revealed all of the IBCs made efforts to maintain a sense of community online during the COVID-19 pandemic—for example, creating a weekly bulletin with photos from campus, keeping students up to date using social media, and holding events like graduation ceremonies online; however, leaders, staff, and students alike acknowledge that it is difficult to replace the benefits of being together physically. One head of an IBC remarked that "even with all this great tech, we cannot replace that sense of community... there are benefits to being physically together on campus, doing activities together, being part of a community." Likewise, all students felt that there was no effective substitute for in-person interaction with peers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted IBCs to develop **more campus resources for student mental health and academic support**, as opposed to relying on those of the home campus. IBCs dedicated more resources to support students, including, for example, hiring mental health counselors, launching wellbeing seminars, opening a mental health hotline, and appointing a virtual wellbeing officer. Students were supported in their daily lives as well—for example, a student from Saudi Arabia recounted that the university helped students living on campus by providing free food vouchers and food delivery for one month, despite it being summer break. Overall, the pandemic prompted IBCs to focus more energy and resources on mental health and wellbeing, rather than relying on the home campus or simply not having them available.

Interviewees also reported initiatives specific to the IBC to offer more academic support to students. A lecturer reported that the IBC now

required weekly virtual check-ins between students and academic tutors. The head of Engineering at an IBC created a temporary “academic safety net” to allow students to erase any failing grades during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several academic staff divulged offering more lenient grading; one noting that it was “the least that could be done” given all that students were going through. Students who were asked did not feel that the grading had become more lenient, however. An engineering student pointed to the opposite, saying “There are a lot of changes in how the questions are being asked in exams” and that the online versions are harder than the physical versions.

*RQ2: How has the relationship between the IBC and the home campus changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?*

All leaders and academic staff interviewed reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in **increased inter-campus and intra-campus collaboration in teaching**. All reported having increased meetings with counterparts at the home campus. Additionally, in many cases, universities used IBCs to continue operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, leveraging resources to respond and adapt to the crisis. For example, one interviewee recounted that the home campus had to look to the Malaysia campus to help deliver classes to students; another shared that academic staff at all campuses had pooled together to mark exam papers.

The pandemic’s disruption to established teaching routines made academic staff think of new ways to teach effectively, resulting in increased collaboration within and between campuses. A student recounted that lecturers for her engineering course carried out experiments over Zoom for them to observe, since the students themselves could not access the labs on campus. A lecturer at an IBC pointed out that, prior to the pandemic, “we were kind of doing our own thing, and if we were to talk it would be about other things. The move to online has made us talk more about teaching, and there is a lot more collaboration in terms of teaching.” Because IBCs and home campuses moved online at the same time, academic staff across campuses collaborated to find ways to create an engaging learning experience.

Many interviewees stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential of IBCs to offer pathways to, and through, the university. In particular, interviewees noted plans for IBCs to play a **larger role in enrollment, recruitment, and mobility initiatives**, including 2+1 programs, foundation and pathway programs, and programs with built-in mobility schemes. One IBC head commented that their campus is “at the center of envisioned mobility schemes,” noting that “Since COVID-19, we’ve started to promote that students who are worried about travelling to the UK can spend a year or two on our campus before transferring. We’re giving them more options for their education.” All Malaysian students who were interviewed cited the lower fees and lower cost of living as reasons why they chose to study at an IBC in their home country—a trend that may grow in the wake of price sensitive prospective students and parents.

IBCs appear to have helped **minimize the impact of halted/reduced student mobility** for the institution. Several academic staff and leaders, when asked, reported that they had absorbed some of the students who were initially planning to study at the home campus, and that this may be an increasingly popular pathway in the future. The head of an IBC hypothesized that some students choose to enroll there rather than at the home campus, with the rationale that if they would have to study online regardless, they would prefer to do so at the IBC, where tuition is cheaper.

For the IBCs in this study, the COVID-19 pandemic has aided the development of a **university vision of campuses as equal parts of a global university**. All interviews with leaders revealed examples of the IBC playing a part in the university’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These interactions advanced the view of IBCs as strategic footprints that can make valuable contributions to the university. One IBC leader postulated that, perhaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university was becoming more focused on “What is happening in this part of the world, what’s changing, and how can we be a part of that. I’m not sure we’ve always been so visionary. In the past the thinking was: ‘a trend is happening; how can we be a part of that?’”



Several interviewees pointed out that the switch to online learning may have had the ancillary effect of 'levelling the playing field' between IBCs and home campuses, in terms of the academic experience. One IBC head noted that the move to online learning "helped standardize the academic experience, ensuring that campuses are operating as an integrated institution." Another interviewee mused that "Before [the pandemic], faculty on the home campus viewed our existence with indifference." Another said "Now, lightbulbs are going off in Australia, realizing we have a big resource in Malaysia. The campus is not seen as an outpost, but as a group of [a number of] collaborators that can help respond to this crisis." One university responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by launching an online student community with virtual events open to students from all campuses, which "gave a sense of coherence to the student experiences across campuses," according to one student.

A recurring theme was that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped shift from an academic model based on duplication to one based on collaboration. "[The COVID-19 pandemic] has brought up how we can use our resources in the most efficient way," said one IBC head. "It's moved us from the traditional IBC model of *'how can we duplicate?'* to what I am working toward, which is a collaborative model, in other words, *'how can we teach the best Bachelor of Science in a global classroom?'*" Another IBC leader explained, "It simply doesn't make sense to have me teaching microeconomics in Malaysia online and you teaching microeconomics in Australia online. Why don't you teach weeks one to seven and I teach weeks eight to thirteen to a combined class? Then we start looking at what I call a global classroom."

## DISCUSSION

Results speak to the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both the academic experience at IBCs and the relationship between the IBC and the home campus. It is notable that interviewees, including students, believed that their institution did a good job at moving online. This is supported by recent studies indicating that university students generally feel their institution was successful in the switch to online and blended learning; for example, a study by the Irish Higher

Education Authority found that more than 80% of students in the country felt supported academically during the COVID-19 pandemic (Donnelly, 2021). However, given that some aspects of the move to online learning are likely to be permanent, it is critical that IBCs invest in training academic staff and putting supports in place to successfully offer online and blended learning. The finding that, in some cases, academic staff were being more lenient in marking/grading, as well as the policy of one faculty to erase failing grades, is likely a departure from the academic quality the university seeks to offer and the assurance of academic equivalency across campuses.

Results suggest that fostering a strong sense of community that is specific to the IBC gives students reasons to enroll at the IBC, rather than, for example, enrolling in the degree program online. Interviews with students revealed that they primarily identify as part of their campus community, and secondarily as a part of the wider university community. It stands to reason that IBCs that are not able to maintain a sense of community unique to their campus may struggle to attract and retain students. This is supported by Astin's Student Involvement Theory (1999) as well as research indicating that students' level of integration is predictive of their satisfaction with their experience (Merola et al., 2019). IBCs that are teaching online must community as a part of the value proposition for students to make enrolling an appealing option.

Results highlighted the potential of IBCs to increase education pathways and mobility options. IBCs aided universities in student enrollment during the pandemic by allowing some students to study at their campus instead of at the home campus, for those that could not do so for various reasons. Universities had begun to promote the various education pathways and programs available more heavily in connection with the IBC, for example, the option to begin a degree at the IBC and then transfer to the home campus. Going forward, universities may leverage the greater quality and availability of online provision to make education pathways and mobility options within the reach of more students.

An indirect effect of the move to online learning may be increased higher education internationalization, defined as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit et al., 2015). HE internationalization has evolved from being conceptualized as a *response* to globalization to an intentional *process* that considers impact on local and global communities (Leask & de Gayardon, 2021). As interviewees noted, the sudden move to online teaching caused academic staff to work together with the intention of delivering high quality education to their diverse student bodies on multiple continents. Virtual academic exchange between campuses, informal online learning between students at different campuses, online social events open to students across campuses, and exchange of best practices in teaching between faculty on different campuses are all examples from the interviews of how the universities are integrating international, intercultural, or global dimensions into education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study offers several takeaways for IBC leaders and academic staff. First, IBCs must find ways to foster a sense of community and belonging that is specific to their campus, and provide support and resources tailored to the needs of their students. Interviewees made clear that an effective replacement for in-person interaction has yet to be found; this is a finding for leaders to take into considering when deciding which aspects of the student experience to offer virtually vs. in person. Additionally, results demonstrate the potential for IBCs to lend versatility to the university in both where and how education is delivered. As necessity is the mother of invention, the COVID-19 pandemic forced IBCs to find new ways to offer education, and as universities reassess their international strategy, IBCs may leverage their location and desirability to play a larger role in the university's enrollment, recruitment, and mobility initiatives. The increased communication between the IBC and home campus can be used to develop more pathways to—and through—IBCs.

Despite measures to improve the trustworthiness of the data, including cross-checking codes and interviews, there are limitations to this research. None of the researchers were able to travel on site to the IBCs included in the study to gather data in person, though they had visited some of the campuses in the past. Data was collected over a nine-month period (February through November 2021), during which time the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic evolved. The academic experience and role of IBCs will continue to develop over time, opening potential for follow up studies.

The decision to focus on one host country (Malaysia) and two home countries (UK and Australia) was deliberate, to avoid the complexities of multiple national regulatory frameworks. However, given the wide geographic presence of IBCs, it would be elucidating to see a greater variety of home and host countries represented. Including a greater breadth of home and host countries would make findings more easily transferable to other contexts. Another angle of inquiry involves comparing IBCs to the home campus, to demonstrate how the pandemic affected these two types of campuses differently. While this study considered how IBCs were uniquely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, a comparative methodology would highlight differences between the IBC and home campus.

There is inevitable bias in both the participants and the researchers. This research includes some powerful individuals as subjects, who “are well able to deal with the interviewers, to answer and avoid particular questions to suit their own ends, and to present their own role in events in a favorable light” (Walford, 2013). As a result, the views expressed by the IBC leaders may have been carefully calibrated rather than completely candid. The researchers were subject an uneven power dynamic between the researcher and subject; awareness of the existence of interpersonal dynamics and potential bias is one strategy to counter their effects.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed how higher education is carried out around the world, and stress-tested universities. It

has made clear that the landscape of higher education is constantly changing, and institutions must change along with it. In the words of author HG Wells: “adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature’s inexorable imperative.” This research suggests that international branch campuses have been able to adapt the academic experience and help the home campus navigate the challenges of the pandemic. As a result, the IBCs in this study have become a more important component of the university’s internationalization strategy.

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# Chapter 6

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS





This chapter reviews the results of the four empirical studies and highlights the theoretical and practical implications of the findings. It addresses the limitations of the data and suggests avenues for further research.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The research in this thesis reveals factors that impact the international student experience, and how they impact it. Taken together, these studies underscore the importance of examining the student experience from the perspective of the students themselves. Below is a summary of the findings from each study.

### **Study 1:** *The Role of Integration in Understanding Differences in Satisfaction Among Chinese, Indian, and South Korean Students*

This study examined the relationship between integration, nationality, and self-reported satisfaction among international students from China, India, and South Korea who studied in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia in 2015. The study took a quantitative approach based on data from the International Student Barometer (ISB), which included 5,242 student responses in the areas of academic and social integration and satisfaction with the learning, living, and support experience at university. The study used factor analysis to identify constructs to measure social and academic integration across nationalities. These constructs were then used to test for differences between nationalities in levels of integration and self-reported satisfaction. ANOVA and linear regression examined the relationships between nationality and integration, nationality and satisfaction, and integration and satisfaction. These analyses were used to build a model that integration plays a mediating role in the relationship between nationality and satisfaction.

The first research question in this study aimed to understand how satisfaction and integration differ among students of different nationalities. The researchers hypothesized that satisfaction would vary significantly among Chinese, Indian, and South Korean students

studying in the US, UK, and Australia, with Indian students exhibiting higher levels of satisfaction. The results confirmed the hypothesis and showed that Indian students have higher levels of satisfaction and integration than Chinese or South Korean students. The study then examined the effects of academic and social integration on international students' satisfaction and hypothesized that both factors influence international students' self-reported satisfaction and that higher levels of integration are associated with higher satisfaction, especially in the case of academic integration. Both of these hypotheses were confirmed.

Using these findings, the study examined the role of integration in mediating the relationship between nationality and satisfaction. The researchers hypothesized that integration partially explains the apparent relationship between nationality and satisfaction, with other unknown factors also playing a role. The results support this hypothesis and show that integration-particularly academic integration-plays a role in the relationship between nationality and satisfaction, but does not fully explain this relationship.

Taken together, these results underscore the complexity of the student experience. While the results show a significant relationship between nationality and satisfaction, the correlation is low, suggesting that a combination of other or additional factors likely plays a larger role.

The second research question of the study continues this approach and examines the role that student integration plays in explaining their self-reported satisfaction. Both academic and social integration were found to have an impact on international students' satisfaction, with higher levels of integration leading to higher satisfaction. This relationship was particularly strong for academic integration. These findings add to existing research suggesting that international students face high pressure from friends and family back home, making academic success an important factor in their satisfaction with their studies (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Wu & Hammond, 2011). International students are often accustomed to being academically successful (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015), and may be surprised to find

that their academic success is influenced by their English language proficiency and cultural knowledge (Andrade, 2006; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), as well as their ability to adapt to unfamiliar teaching styles and marking and grading metrics (Aubrey, 1991; Roberts et al., 2017).

Chinese and South Korean students—the 1st and 3rd largest groups, respectively, among international students—may be particularly vulnerable to academic stress because the education systems in China and South Korea differ greatly from those in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. A university survey by Han et al. (2013) found that the most frequently cited problem among Chinese international students was academic stress, followed by social isolation, culture shock, language difficulties, uncertainty about the future, financial stress, homesickness, lack of coping strategies/leisure activities, lack of familiarity with mental health counseling, lack of spiritual/religious life, long-distance relationship, and relationship with a counselor. These items support the idea that the frequency and intensity of student-staff and student-academic relationships and contact are at the core of academic integration as well as satisfaction.

The finding that integration plays a key role in satisfaction can be understood using an influential framework developed by Moos (1973) that describes the human environment in terms of three domains: (a) personal development or goal orientation, (b) relationships, and (c) system maintenance and change. An empirical test of this framework by Schönrock-Adema, Bouwkamp-Timmer, van Hell, and Cohen-Schotanus (2012) suggests that it is useful for assessing the quality of educational environments. A student's level of integration is part of the relationship dimension, which includes "student involvement, affiliation, (emotional) support, and teacher support" (Schonrock-Adema et al., 2012, p. 736). Thus, Moos' framework provides a theoretical basis for the assumption that higher levels of integration indicate higher quality educational environments.

Social integration is also associated with satisfaction, although to a lesser extent than academic integration. In the case of social integration,

language skills may be of critical importance. Social integration was found to be lower for Chinese and South Korean students than for Indian students. Again, this could be due in part to language proficiency, which limits interaction and thus the development of friendships. Previous research has shown that there is a relationship between English proficiency and relationships with native students (Barratt & Huba, 1994) and that English proficiency may be a predictor of adjustment (Poyrazli et al., 2002). Smith & Khawaja (2011) point out that “cultural norms, language barriers, and the nature of friendships in the host country may also impede international students’ ability to establish friendships, and thus contribute to their feelings of loneliness” (p. 703). This underscores that the “cultural distance” between the student’s home country and the country in which they are studying can play a predictive role in their integration and satisfaction.

Both social and academic integration were found to be important components of student satisfaction. However, academic integration played a stronger role and explained 12.7% of the variance in satisfaction, while social integration explained 6.9% of the variation in satisfaction. The higher importance of academic integration could be related to how much the student has invested. If they do well academically, they may be more satisfied with their experience because they receive recognition from those who support them at home and feel that their experience is worthwhile. Previous studies have also found that while interaction between international students and domestic students has benefits and increased satisfaction, the extent of this interaction is often limited (Zhao et al., 2005; Ammigan & Jones, 2018), suggesting that other factors are also at play.

There is also evidence that lack of English proficiency contributes to academic difficulties. Research has shown a relationship between a student’s English proficiency and academic achievement (Poyrazli et al., 2001, Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Andrade, 2006). Specifically, the inability to communicate effectively with professors and classmates, understand expectations, and complete assignments and exams leads to poorer academic performance (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). English is

widely used in India and is one of the languages of instruction in many secondary education institutions (Ghosh, 2014). Therefore, students from India may have an advantage over students from China or South Korea in academic integration.

Pedagogical differences between the home and host countries may also contribute to the differences in integration and satisfaction between nationalities found in this study. Moos' framework for evaluating environments (1973) suggests that students' understanding of the educational environment and classroom expectations influence the quality of their experiences (Schonrock-Adema et al., 2012). In particular, studies by Townsend & Poh (2008) and Liberman (1994) found that the international students in their samples had difficulty adapting to the Western style of teaching, which emphasizes interactivity and critical thinking. The Chinese and Korean education systems have been shaped by Confucian principles that are deeply infused into education, including pedagogical styles (Redfern, 2016). In contrast, the Indian education system was modeled after the British education system, which was established by colonial rule that lasted until 1947 (Ghosh, 2014). Given these findings, students from Indian education systems may find it easier to adjust academically than students from Korean or Chinese education systems because they are more familiar with the education systems of the UK, Australia, and the US.

### *Study 2: Factors Impacting International Student Satisfaction: The Case of the UK.*

This study explored *how aspects of the student experience, including university reputation, undergraduate enrolment, proportion of international students, and local population, as well as student gender and stage of study, predict the satisfaction of undergraduate international students*. The study hypothesized a significant positive relationship between universities' *reputation* and the satisfaction of their undergraduate international students. In contrast, the study predicted a significant negative relationship between *undergraduate*

*enrolment, proportion of international students, and local population* and the satisfaction of undergraduate international students.

When looking at student characteristics, the study predicted that first-year students would report significantly higher levels of satisfaction than second- and final-year students. We also predicted that female students would be significantly more satisfied than male students. The researchers used a quantitative approach to test these hypotheses, relying on data from the 2017 International Student Barometer (ISB).

Factor analysis resulted in a robust construct 'university reputation,' which was then used in a multilevel model to test the relationship between the independent variables -university reputation, size, proportion of international students and local population, and student gender and stage of study - and the dependent variables - overall satisfaction, satisfaction with learning experience, and satisfaction with life experience at the college. Results were analyzed and interpreted using a summative content analysis of student comments.

The results confirmed some, but not all, of the hypotheses. *Overall satisfaction* with the university experience was predicted by the students' stage of study, i.e., first-year students were more satisfied than final-year or other students. None of the other variables were predictive of overall satisfaction. Summary analysis of comments from the ISB showed that students in later academic years made a disproportionately high number of comments relative to their representation in the data and first-year students made a disproportionately low number of comments. None of the variables were significantly predictive of satisfaction with the learning experience.

Satisfaction with the living experience was predicted by university reputation and the proportion of international undergraduate students. As the university's reputation increases, satisfaction with the living experience increases. The opposite was true for the proportion of international students and satisfaction: the higher the proportion of

international students, the lower the satisfaction with life. Comments used to interpret the results indicate that interaction and integration were frequently addressed-both of which depend on the density of international students.

University characteristics such as reputation become relevant when considering the student experience from an organizational perspective. A study by Lenton (2015) found that traditional universities in the UK scored higher than modern universities in the National Student Satisfaction (NSS) survey. They believe this is because “traditional universities provide better teaching quality, or alternatively that the reputation of these universities serves, rightly or wrongly, to signal a better quality student to employers, a so-called ‘sheepskin effect’, making the students perceive themselves as more employable in the labour market and hence more satisfied with their university programme quality” (p. 124). A study by Pitan and Muller (2019) develops this idea further, suggesting that graduates of universities with high reputations may have better employment prospects than graduates of universities with low reputations. A university’s reputation may serve as a signaling mechanism in the labor market and/or an indication of a high-quality learning environment; both would likely have a positive impact on student satisfaction.

The results indicate that there is a need to better understand why universities with a higher proportion of international students have lower life satisfaction among international students. Bean’s (1983) model of student turnover helps explain this finding because it assumes that a student’s beliefs are influenced by his or her experiences at the institution, which become his or her attitudes toward the institution, and ultimately shape his or her sense of belonging to the institution. An individual’s sense of belonging, defined as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 172), is an important component of adjustment for visiting students (Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Rienties et al., 2012). It is possible that students at universities with a high proportion of

international students feel they receive less individualized attention, which has been shown to influence student satisfaction (Luo et al., 2019).

In addition, previous research suggests that international student satisfaction is influenced by the quantity and quality of contact with domestic students (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). Educational quality is also measured by “open communication, friendliness, social and interpersonal support, cohesion, and feelings of group spirit” (Schonrock-Adema et al., 2012, p. 736). This may be more difficult to achieve in environments with a high proportion of international students, which could limit the ability to interact and build friendships with local students and thus negatively affect satisfaction with daily life.

### *Study 3: Differences in Satisfaction among International Students Enrolled at International Branch Campuses and Home Campuses*

This study examined differences between home and IBC-enrolled international undergraduate students in their satisfaction with the academic experience. It was hypothesized that students enrolled at IBCs would report lower satisfaction than students enrolled at the home campus of the same institution. To examine this question, the researchers used data from the International Student Barometer (ISB), relying on responses from international students who answered the survey at the beginning of their academic year.

Factor analysis revealed three constructs of the academic experience: *Academic and Teaching Quality*, *Academic Environment*, and *Academic Engagement*. The researchers then created composite scores for each of these three factors for each respondent. An ANCOVA tested for differences in average satisfaction with these three constructs between international students enrolled at IBCs and home campuses, adjusting for student gender, stage of study, and institution at which they were enrolled. Results were interpreted based on comments written in the ISB.



The results support the hypothesis, revealing higher mean satisfaction among international students enrolled at home campuses in the areas of *Academic and Teaching Quality, Academic Environment, and Academic Engagement* than international students enrolled at international branch campuses. Including controls in the model explained some of the variance in satisfaction. Both satisfaction with the academic environment and academic engagement depended on which university the student was enrolled in, while the student's gender and stage of study had no significant effect on satisfaction with any area of the academic experience.

There are no large-scale quantitative studies of differences in student satisfaction at IBCs and home universities, which makes these findings compelling. There are several plausible possibilities for why we found differences in student satisfaction between IBCs and home campuses. First, because most degree programs originate from home campuses, academic content may be adapted to students and the IBC environment to varying degrees. A study of Australian IBCs found that “universities are responsible for curriculum, teaching and assessment, and quality assurance; the responsibility for provision of study location, marketing, promotion, and financial administration rests with the offshore partner” (Banks et al., 2010). Shams and Huisman (2012) also state, “The challenge for the university therefore, seems to be to localize the curriculum while at the same time trying to offer identical courses, degrees, and learning experience to both groups of students” (p. 110). If the context and student body of the home campus is the default in designing the formal curriculum and academic support, students enrolled at IBC may feel that it is not as well tailored to their needs.

Teaching is one of the main activities of a university, and directly affects students' educational experience (Athiyaman, 2001). Some studies have found that IBCs face challenges in ensuring student satisfaction with teaching; this “highlights the issue of differing levels of satisfaction with University (Australian) and local (offshore) instructors among students of the evaluated programmes where both

types of instructors participated in teaching” (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012, p. 14). A study by Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2015) states, “While it is generally accepted that students at branch and home campuses cannot possibly have the same educational experience, students, parents, employers, and quality assurance agencies expect the non-educational aspects of the student experience at each location to be at least comparable or equivalent” (p. 3). The researchers suggest that in lieu of academic equivalency and in response to rising expectations of prospective students, some universities have sought to differentiate themselves through support services, facilities, and resources available to students.

Students at IBCs may also be more sensitive to perceived differences between the IBC and the home campus. This is related to what Miliszewska and Sztendur (2012) refer to as the “brand promise” of the home university which includes the quality of the campus, teaching, libraries, and information technology. Lower satisfaction may result if students perceive a discrepancy between the home campus and the IBC, which may have more limited resources. Comments from students written into the ISB corroborated this idea: some students enrolled at IBCs compared their experiences to those they envisioned at the home campus; however, students enrolled at the home campus never made this comparison.

#### *Study 4: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed International Branch Campuses’ Academic Experience and Home Campus Relationship*

This study sought to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the academic experience at IBCs, and, secondly, how the relationship between the IBC and the home campus has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We took a qualitative approach to explore this question by conducting semi-structured interviews with 26 leaders, academic staff, and students at seven IBCs in Malaysia. Findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the experience at IBCs in unique ways, including collaboration and communication with home campuses, increased campus-specific resources for student

well-being, and a greater role in student enrollment, recruitment, and mobility.

There are many reasons why the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted the academic experience at IBCs. The effects were varied and far-reaching, in part because the pandemic removed the effects of what Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988) called status quo bias: a preference for the current state. The widespread adoption of asynchronous learning methods, expanded services and resources to support student mental health, increased effort on the part of the IBC to foster a sense of community, and a greater role for IBC in enrollment, recruitment, and mobility initiatives of the university; all are examples of changes catalyzed by the pandemic, according to the findings of this research. The COVID-19 pandemic required greater communication between IBCs and home universities, which could then be leveraged for renewed teaching collaboration, more study opportunities for students, and more opportunities for international experiences for students at both universities.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought enormous disruption to higher education, including the operations of the IBCs. It forced an abrupt shift to online learning, slowed student mobility in most parts of the world, and profoundly affected students' daily lives. However, some research suggests that the learning medium does not influence satisfaction. Rather, the didactic support offered and the belief that one's learning goals were achieved are the most important predictors (Foerderer et al., 2021). The interviews with students confirmed this finding, as all students interviewed had found both positive and negative aspects to the switch to online learning and hoped that some aspects of it would remain in the long term.

The results of the study provide several points of reference for managers and academic staff at international branch universities and the home universities with which they are affiliated. The finding that IBCs are devoting more resources to student wellbeing supports evidence of the heavy toll the pandemic is taking on student mental

health. Because IBCs often do not provide the same student support services as the home campus (Altbach, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2012), it is critical that IBCs provide resources tailored to the needs of their own students. This may require greater campus investment—one study found that the majority of IBCs outsourced advising, career counseling, and other support areas to part-time specialists, with only a handful of the largest IBCs having full-time staff in these areas (Wilkins, 2020).

In addition, IBC leaders and academic staff must cultivate a sense of community, both in person and virtually, that meets the needs of their own students. IBCs tend to be smaller than home universities, which can be beneficial in fostering a sense of community and identity. The interviews suggest that as learning moves online, IBCs that do not offer a sense of community will not offer many advantages over enrolling in a degree program online.

Viewed through the lens of the Global Integration-Local Responsiveness (I-R) framework, the pandemic has recalibrated the balance between integration and local responsiveness. The leaders interviewed were able to manage the conflicting forces that exist in operating an IBC: the need to be global and local at the same time; to make students 6,000 kilometers away feel part of the campus community; to conduct research that is both locally impactful and valuable to the institution; and to provide an education that is equally valuable across campuses, yet contextualized to the local environment. The mix of determination and sensitivity required to balance these competing forces at IBCs may have helped leaders quickly adapt to and navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH**

### *Theoretical Implications*

The findings of this research shed light on Student Involvement Theory, which has been fundamental to the formation of the research in this thesis. Student involvement is defined by Astin (1999) as the “amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). Astin hypothesizes that the more a

student engages in academic and extracurricular activities, the more they can learn, develop, and build connections with the campus community, which in turn will increase the likelihood of graduation. In addition, research suggests that international students are more involved in activities that benefit academic performance than in social and/or extracurricular activities (Costa-String, 2016).

Despite its widespread use, Astin's theory does not specifically consider international students. The findings of the studies in this thesis suggest that international students exhibit unique patterns of involvement that need to be examined through the lens of student involvement theory. For example, is academic integration more effective than social integration in promoting the learning, development, and growth of international students, thereby increasing the likelihood of graduation? Applying Student Involvement Theory to research on student experiences can help understand which forms of involvement are most beneficial for international students.

Our research suggests other principles that may fit with Student Involvement Theory. Specifically, the data show that the proportion of international students can influence students' sense of belonging and inclusion. Applied to SIT, this means that a student's learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of their involvement. The reasons for this relationship remain to be explored: Perhaps a higher proportion of international students hinders engagement because it decreases interaction with domestic students and use of support services. It is also possible that a higher proportion of international students reduces English language learning, which in turn hinders involvement. The findings provide interesting starting points for further investigation of student involvement theory as it relates to international students.

Student Involvement Theory may also be supported by findings from interviews with students enrolled in IBCs about how the academic experience changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Astin suggests that students' time is their most valuable institutional

resource (1999). One of the most widespread changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic was the move to virtual learning, which is often done asynchronously. While this change may not reduce the number of hours a student needs to dedicate to academic studies, it does provide more options for when and where to study, which in turn provides more options for how the student can use their remaining time. Students in this study indicated that the ability to access lectures online at any time was a positive change, although not necessarily one that resulted in higher involvement.

The research in this paper also references Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model (SIM), updated in 2012, which assumes that students who exhibit higher levels of social integration in the university environment are more likely to feel connected to the institution, which in turn increases the likelihood of graduation. Updated versions of the model also consider factors such as self-efficacy, goal setting, and self-concept in student outcomes (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). The research in this paper on how the academic experience at IBCs was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic brings an important complement to this, as most of the social interaction had to occur online. The research suggests that IBCs need to work harder than other universities to foster a sense of community in order to differentiate themselves from other higher education offerings. Applying these findings to SIM theory implies that the extent to which international branch campuses can retain students is directly related to their ability to engage and integrate students into campus social and academic life both online and in person.

Two studies in this thesis have found that satisfaction is highest among international students in their first year of study. Student Involvement theory does not explain this. In fact, it could be argued that student involvement may increase throughout their studies, which should lead to higher satisfaction. Similarly, one would expect the most dissatisfied students to drop out of their studies over time.

### *Practical Implications*

The research findings presented in this paper have numerous implications for the practice of international higher education. First, it is worth noting that education is an important export commodity for OECD countries, accounting for a considerable portion of the global economy, and the global higher education market is expected to reach \$118 billion by 2027 (Choudaha & van Rest, 2018). In 2018, there were three inbound international or foreign students for each outbound national student studying abroad across OECD countries, and in some countries—namely Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States—this ratio exceeds 10:1 (OECD, 2020). The size and evolution of this sector make it all the more important to understand where, why, and how education is consumed.

Key applications arise from the finding that integration has a mediating effect on the relationship between nationality and satisfaction. Based on the findings, the researchers developed a model that indicated the extent to which academic and social integration explained differences in satisfaction among international students. This model was stronger when integration was included as a variable than when only nationality was considered. Moreover, the association between integration and satisfaction is stronger than the association between nationality and integration.

In practice, universities could use this finding as an opportunity to make the promotion of integration a central focus of their teaching, learning, student life, and support services. Other research shows that university support such as structured peer-pairing programs promote social adjustment (Westwood & Barker, 1990; Abe et al., 1998) and that targeted and effective support for international students facilitates academic and social integration (Jochems et al., 1996; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010). A study by Wu, Hammond, and Barnes (2009) found that adjustment is facilitated by adequate preparation for the study experience, academic achievement, social interaction, and successful language development. Linking these findings and focusing on student-centered programs and initiatives that accommodate a diverse mix of students may be an effective strategy to support international students.

This research also has implications for the role of language proficiency in promoting integration. The studies in this paper focused on international students studying in English-speaking countries. The finding that students from China and South Korea had lower levels of integration than students from India may be in part an effect of language familiarity. Previous research demonstrates that language proficiency and confidence influence cultural acclimation (Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996; Furnham & Li, 1993; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012; Clark, Baker, & Li, 2007; Wu, Hammond, & Barnes, 2009) and that language barriers are one of the main sources of stress for international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Providing structured language support inside and outside the classroom can help international students integrate academically and socially.

Integration is influenced by the differences between the home and host countries in terms of culture and pedagogical style. For example, students from China and South Korea, both of which are strongly collectivistic cultures, may face challenges in acclimating to the individualistic cultures of the US, UK, and Australia that international students from other individualistic cultures do not (Furnham & Li, 1993; Ahn & Class, 2011). Previous research has shown that Asian international students have difficulty forming friendships with students from Western cultures such as the US, UK, and Australia due in part to the clash of collectivist and individualist ideals (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Han et al., 2013). Further complicating the issue is that collectivist cultures tend to emphasize interdependence and relatedness, whereas Western cultures tend to emphasize assertiveness and self-sufficiency (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Hofstede, 1980).

International students may have strong international networks that domestic students do not, which affects their integration efforts. In addition, perceived prejudice or discrimination against international students may discourage them from participating in campus life. (Streeter, 2011). While advising and academic services are effective in helping students improve their academic outcomes and satisfaction with their experiences (Davis & Cooper, 2001; Ammigan & Jones, 2018), research by Simpson and Tan (2009) shows that East Asian students



face challenges in interactions and relationships at the administrative, academic, and support services levels. Taken together, these findings argue for making integration and language support a central aspect of support services, courses, and curriculum, ultimately leading to higher engagement and satisfaction.

Support services need to consider the diverse needs of international students and develop programs that promote integration. For example, East Asian students are often familiar with timed exams and may find other, more holistic assessment methods unfamiliar (Badur, 2003). Wu and Hammond (2011) point out that “Confucian education emphasizes effort, which often translates into memorization and rote learning. This contrasts with a more dialogic Western education in which students are encouraged to ask questions, challenge the ideas of the teacher and other students, and express their own ideas. Not surprisingly, East Asian students can find the dialogic approach disconcerting. They are described as ‘quiet’ in the classroom and do not contribute to seminars or group discussions, much less challenge their teachers or classmates” (p. 424). Teachers need to be aware of and responsive to the situation of international and domestic students in their classes. In this way, they can design courses in a way that promotes integration and allows domestic students to be ‘buddies’ with international students, which will also improve their language skills.

The strong role of integration in the student experience also lends potential explanatory power to other findings. For example, the results of another study in this paper show that satisfaction is higher at universities with a lower proportion of international students. Friendships with host country nationals have been shown to reduce psychological problems among immigrants (Furnham & Li, 1993). In turn, integration with native students has been associated with higher satisfaction, among other benefits (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991), and satisfaction with relationships with host nationals is associated with higher well-being and satisfaction. Considering integration as one of the fundamental components of the student experience, it must be placed at the center of theory and practice.

Another finding that is relevant to higher education institutions is that first-year students are more satisfied than mid-year or final-year students. If higher integration leads to higher satisfaction, then international students should be encouraged to engage academically at later stages of their studies. International students value career planning support because it can be more difficult for foreign nationals to find jobs. A study of postgraduate international students in Finland found that international students are concerned about their future careers in a country where English is not their first language (Calikoglu, 2018). Similar concerns were found among international students in other non-English speaking countries such as China (Li & Bray, 2007), Turkey (Kondakci, 2011), and Malaysia (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017). Non-native English speakers studying in English-speaking countries, such as the participants in our study, may have similar concerns.

Several studies have shown that international students exhibit higher levels of academic stress (Misra et al., 2003; Rasmi, Safdar, & Lewis, 2009; Hashim & Yang, 2003). High pressure from influential people in the home-particularly parents and teachers-who expect them to perform at high academic levels contributes significantly to this stress (Han et al., 2013; Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). Students in their later years of study may feel pressured to perform well academically and to get a coveted job after graduation. Because student visas provide a limited period of time in which to find a job after graduation, this may contribute to lower student satisfaction in their later years of study. One practical way for universities to address this issue is to offer specialized career counseling to international students nearing graduation. Obviously, the better prepared students feel for their graduation, the more positive they will be about their experience.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The research in this thesis attempts to use quantitative and qualitative approaches to shed light on various issues related to the experience of international students. However, the studies described in the previous chapters have several limitations. First, the ability to draw causal inferences from the data is limited. The associations found were small, suggesting that additional factors play a role in shaping

the student experience. The limited causality makes it difficult to derive specific practical recommendations from the results and raises the question of which factors or combinations of factors have the greatest impact on the experiences of international students. In addition, the availability of longitudinal data would have enabled the exploration of causal relationships and deepened understanding of differences in satisfaction between different phases of study. Nonetheless, awareness of limited causality in and of itself is helpful in understanding the complexity of student experiences.

In addition, the International Student Barometer (ISB), which we used in three of the studies, is primarily a quantitative survey instrument. In a study by Benckendorff, Ruhanen & Scott (2009), it was found that “in deconstructing the student experience, the range of factors identified in the literature that appear to influence the student experience can be grouped broadly into four dimensions” (p. 85), namely institutional, student, sector, and external. The ISB focuses exclusively on the institutional and student dimensions. While this provides insight into how universities and staff can better shape the learning experience and the perceived quality of the learning experience, it does not consider sector-wide dimensions such as trends resulting from competition or collaboration, nor external dimensions such as national policy, student mobility, or global pandemics. Access to data in these dimensions would paint a more comprehensive picture of the student experience.

Though ISB data were paired with qualitative data in the analyzes and to interpret the results, the survey was not modifiable in any way to fit the purposes of the studies. There are other aspects of the student experience that were not measured by the ISB that could have provided additional insight into the research questions. For example, research has shown that some pre-arrival factors-including proficiency in the host country language, familiarity with the host country, and previous travel experiences-significantly affect international students’ potential to adapt to their new environment (Schartner & Young, 2016). In addition, knowledge of students’ backgrounds, expectations of the experience, and motivations for studying abroad would have illuminated some of the

study findings. Future research that collects data on these parameters would be helpful to deepen understanding of the student experience.

Although all of the studies in this thesis include the perspective of international students, this remains a group that is often missing from higher education research. Discrepancies in definition and differences in data collection make analysis and comparison of international student data problematic at best and inaccurate at worst. Much of the research on student experiences focuses on domestic students by default, while international students are considered “other” students. As a result, the learning, living, and support systems of universities are sometimes influenced by research that focuses on the needs of domestic students and considers the needs of international students only secondarily.

In addition, the term ‘international student’ is very broad and encompasses an extraordinarily wide variety of students. The international student experience can be very different for an undergraduate or graduate student, for a full-time or part-time student, for a student at a branch campus or home campus, etc. While the studies in this thesis focus on full-time degree-seeking students studying abroad or at IBCs, there is room and a need to study other groups of international students to understand their motivations, expectations, and experiences.

On a practical level, more research to develop a more nuanced understanding of international student satisfaction could help create services that provide better support for students. Empirical research is fundamental to modern life, including the operation of higher education institutions. Universities can use the research in this paper to evaluate existing services and ensure they are effective. Insights into the student experience enable universities to meet expectations and ensure satisfaction. Student-level data can be used to design support services that enhance the academic and social experiences of international students and promote student engagement. Ideally, the data from this work will motivate further studies of the factors that shape international students’ experiences.

## CONCLUSIONS

This thesis examines international students' experiences and the factors that influence them. It offers insight into how students' experiences are shaped by perceptions of their environment both inside and outside the classroom. It takes into account characteristics such as students' nationalities, genders, and stages of study, as well as various indicators of the universities they attend. Four published studies addressing seven research questions contribute to the research findings on the experiences of international students.

Far from answering the research questions definitively, the findings suggest that the student experience is a complex web of interwoven threads. Each thread represents an aspect of the student experience, and all are interconnected; looking at any one thread provides little insight into what the overall concept looks like.

Thinking further about the metaphor, what this "experience tapestry" is made of and how it is woven is different for each student. While one student's tapestry may be woven with multicolored strands representing the importance of social relationships, another student's tapestry may be defined by a thick cord of employability that snakes along its length and grows thicker toward the end. In summary, each student's experience is as unique as his or her own DNA—there may be many common aspects, but none are identical.

This work underscores the importance of including student voices in research when it comes to influencing higher education policy and practice. Understanding students' perceptions is critical to meeting their needs because it is their subjective experiences that make up the reality of their lives. The research in this thesis uses data collected from students themselves to update and renew models for understanding the student experience. "All models are wrong, but some are useful," said statistician George Box; the most useful models provide an understanding of a phenomenon based on reality. Ultimately, this thesis offers an understanding of students' myriad realities based on their perceptions of their lived experiences.

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# APPENDICES

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Table 2.5: *Predictivity of nationality in satisfaction*

Model	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	P
Female	.031	.014	.025	.027
Stage (last year)	-.005	.018	-.004	.766
Stage (other year)	-.028	.016	-.022	.090
India	.135	.021	.078	.000*
China	-.202	.020	-.139	.000*
South Korea	-.263	.030	-.121	.000*

\* These values indicate statistically significant results

Table 2.6: *Predictivity of nationality in academic integration*

Model	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	P
Female	.010	.012	.009	.429
Stage (last year)	-.002	.015	-.002	.883
Stage (other year)	-.031	.014	-.028	.022
India	.129	.017	.081	.000*
China	-.094	.014	-.092	.000*
South Korea	-.211	.023	-.109	.000*

\* These values indicate statistically significant results

Table 2.7: *Predictivity of nationality in social integration*

Model	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	P
Female	-.042	.013	-.041	.000*
Stage (last year)	-.025	.017	-.022	.127
Stage (other year)	-.030	.015	-.028	.048
India	.139	.019	.096	.000*
China	-.139	.019	-.116	.000*
South Korea	-.306	.027	-.174	.000*

\* These values indicate statistically significant results

Table 2.8: *Predictivity of academic integration in self-reported satisfaction*

Model	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	p
Female	.004	.014	.003	.776
Stage (last year)	.000	.018	.000	.988
Stage (other year)	-.010	.017	-.008	.565
Academic integration	.442	.014	.357	.000*

\* These values indicate statistically significant results



Table 2.9: *Predictivity of social integration in self-reported satisfaction*

<b>Model</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>p</b>
Female	.018	.015	.014	.244
Stage (last year)	.004	.019	-.003	.849
Stage (other year)	-.022	.018	-.018	.211
Social integration	.313	.015	.264	.000*

\* These values indicate statistically significant results

Table 2.10: *Model of nationality and integration's combined effect on student satisfaction*

<b>Model</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>p</b>
Female	.023	.015	.019	.118
Stage (last year)	.017	.019	.012	.362
Stage (other year)	-.006	.017	-.004	.740
India	.135	.021	.078	.000*
China	-.135	.021	-.094	.000*
South Korea	-.130	.030	-.062	.000*
Social integration	.131	.016	.110	.000*
Academic integration	.360	.017	.292	.000*

\* These values indicate statistically significant results

Table 3.4 *Summary of Multilevel Regression Model on Overall, Learning, Living, and Support Satisfaction*

Variable	Overall Satisfaction (N = 11,652)				Learning Satisfaction (N = 11,147)				Living Satisfaction (N = 10,545)			
	B	SE	t	p	B	SE	t	p	B	SE	t	p
Reputation	0.03	0.02	1.66	0.10	0.00	0.02	0.07	0.95	0.04	0.01	2.91	0.004
City size	0.00	0.00	-1.62	0.10	0.00	0.00	-1.29	0.20	0.00	0.00	-1.09	0.28
Undergrad Enrolment	0.00	0.00	-0.06	0.95	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.10	0.00	0.00	-0.72	0.47
Proportion International	0.00	0.00	1.41	0.16	0.00	0.00	1.16	0.25	-0.003	0.002	-2.11	0.04
Gender												
Female	0.01	0.01	0.68	0.49	-0.010	0.01	-0.90	0.37	0.01	0.01	1.08	0.28
Male	0.00	-	-	-	0.00	-	-	-	0.00	-	-	-
Study Stage												
First/ single	0.05	0.02	2.68	0.01	-0.001	0.02	-0.08	0.94	0.02	0.02	0.83	0.41
Last year	-0.03	0.02	-1.67	0.10	-0.010	0.02	-0.53	0.60	0.04	0.02	1.79	0.08
Other year	0.00	-	-	-	0.00	-	-	-	0.00	-	-	-

Table 4.1 *Variables and Measures*

Variable	Measure
Home/IBC Enrollment Type (Independent Variable)	Dummy (Enrolled at Home Campus = 0, Enrolled at IBC = 1)
Satisfaction with Academic/Teaching Quality (Dependent Variable)	Construct of Academic/Teaching Quality based on 14 questions from ISB
Satisfaction with Academic Environment (Dependent Variable)	Construct of Academic Environment based on 5 questions from ISB
Satisfaction with Academic Engagement (Dependent Variable)	Construct of Academic Engagement based on 5 questions from ISB
Gender (Control)	Dummy (Male = 0, Female = 1)
Stage of Study (Control)	Dummy (First Year, Other Year, Last Year)
Institution (Control) <sup>27</sup>	Dummy (Institution 1, Institution 2, Institution 3, Institution 4)

<sup>27</sup> Home campus and IBC were grouped by the institution to which they belong.

Table 4.2 *Factor loadings and communalities based on a principal components analysis for 24 items from the International Student Barometer (ISB) Varimax with Kaiser Normalization (N = 2,124)*

Item from ISB	Academic and Teaching Quality	Academic Environment	Academic Integration
The quality of lectures	.680		
The subject area expertise of lecturers/supervisors	.582		
The academic content of my course/studies;	.655		
The organisation and smooth running of the course	.612		
The level of research activity	.615		
The teaching ability of lecturers/supervisors	.519		
Getting time from academic staff when I need it/personal support with learning	.532		
Academic staff whose English I can understand	.597		
Feedback on coursework/formal written submissions	.733		
Explanation of marking/assessment criteria	.722		
Fair and transparent assessment of my work	.705		
Advice and guidance on long-term job opportunities and careers from academic staff	.648		
Learning that will help me to get a good job	.627		
Opportunities for work experience/work placements as a part of my studies	.613		
Quality of the lecture theatres and classrooms		.697	
The physical library facilities		.746	
The learning technology (PCs, networking, etc.)		.762	
The online library facilities (access to journals, etc.)		.782	
The Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard/ WebCT/ WebLearn/ Stream/ Moodle/ Canvas)		.738	
Analyse ideas or concepts in greater depth			.772
Use information, ideas or concepts from different topics to solve problems			.770
Do my best work			.744
Feel part of a student community committed to learning			.509
Feel engaged with their studies.			.557

Note: Factor loadings < .5 are suppressed.

**Table 4.3 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Enrollment Type (IBC or Home Campus) on International Student Satisfaction with Academic/Teaching Quality**

Dependent Variable: Composite Factor 1						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	9.574 <sup>a</sup>	7	1.368	6.746	.000	.032
Intercept	780.584	1	780.584	3850.310	.000	.730
Gender	.148	1	.148	.729	.393	.001
Middle Year	.468	1	.468	2.308	.129	.002
Last Year	.131	1	.131	.648	.421	.000
University 1	.039	1	.039	.192	.661	.000
University 2	.136	1	.136	.670	.413	.000
University 3	.137	1	.137	.674	.412	.000
Home_Campus	9.148	1	9.148	45.125	.000	.031
Error	289.097	1426	.203			
Total	13677.254	1434				
Corrected Total	298.670	1433				

a. R Squared = .032 (Adjusted R Squared = .027)

**Table 4.4 Parameter Estimates with Robust Standard Errors of Effect of Enrollment Type (IBC or Home Campus) on International Student Satisfaction with Academic/Teaching Quality**

Dependent Variable: Composite Factor 1							
Parameter	B	Robust Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		Partial Eta Squared
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Intercept	3.020	.051	58.839	.000	2.920	3.121	.708
Gender	-.021	.024	-.856	.392	-.068	.027	.001
Middle Year	-.074	.049	-1.524	.128	-.170	.021	.002
Last Year	-.040	.049	-.817	.414	-.135	.056	.000
University 1	.016	.038	.416	.678	-.059	.091	.000
University 2	-.031	.042	-.736	.462	-.114	.052	.000
University 3	-.025	.029	-.843	.399	-.083	.033	.000
Home campus	.175	.026	6.622	.000	.123	.227	.030
IBC	0 <sup>b</sup>	.	.	.	.	.	.

a. HC3 method

b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Table 4.5 *Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Enrollment Type (IBC or Home Campus) on International Student Satisfaction with Academic Environment*

Dependent Variable: Composite Factor 2						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	30.785 <sup>a</sup>	7	4.398	15.231	.000	.070
Intercept	836.513	1	836.513	2896.989	.000	.671
Gender	.514	1	.514	1.779	.182	.001
Middle Year	.163	1	.163	.564	.453	.000
Last Year	.302	1	.302	1.047	.306	.001
University 1	.003	1	.003	.011	.916	.000
University 2	1.853	1	1.853	6.418	.011	.004
University 3	1.486	1	1.486	5.146	.023	.004
Home Campus	27.543	1	27.543	95.386	.000	.063
Error	410.029	1420	.289			
Total	14905.350	1428				
Corrected Total	440.813	1427				

a. R Squared = .070 (Adjusted R Squared = .065)

Table 4.6 *Parameter Estimates with Robust Standard Errors of Effect of Enrollment Type (IBC or Home Campus) on International Student Satisfaction with Academic Environment*

Dependent Variable: Composite Factor 2							
Parameter	B	Robust Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		Partial Eta Squared
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Intercept	3.096	.059	52.727	.000	2.981	3.211	.662
Gender	-.039	.029	-1.334	.182	-.096	.018	.001
Middle Year	-.044	.057	-.772	.440	-.157	.068	.000
Last Year	-.061	.058	-1.053	.292	-.174	.052	.001
University 1	-.005	.046	-.100	.920	-.094	.085	.000
University 2	-.115	.047	-2.424	.015	-.208	-.022	.004
University 3	-.082	.036	-2.250	.025	-.154	-.011	.004
Home Campus	.305	.031	9.686	.000	.243	.367	.062
IBC	0 <sup>b</sup>	.	.	.	.	.	.

a. HC3 method

b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

**Table 4.7 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Enrollment Type (IBC or Home Campus) on International Student Academic Engagement**

Dependent Variable: Composite Factor 3						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	10.871 <sup>a</sup>	7	1.553	6.059	.000	.029
Intercept	711.117	1	711.117	2774.159	.000	.662
Gender	.254	1	.254	.992	.319	.001
Middle Year	.093	1	.093	.364	.547	.000
Last Year	.249	1	.249	.971	.324	.001
University 1	1.561	1	1.561	6.089	.014	.004
University 2	.714	1	.714	2.785	.095	.002
University 3	8.587E-6	1	8.587E-6	.000	.995	.000
Home Campus	7.973	1	7.973	31.105	.000	.021
Error	363.485	1418	.256			
Total	14349.556	1426				
Corrected Total	374.356	1425				

a. R Squared = .029 (Adjusted R Squared = .024)

**Table 4.8 Parameter Estimates with Robust Standard Errors of Effect of Enrollment Type (IBC or Home Campus) on International Student Academic Engagement**

Dependent Variable: Composite Factor 3							
Parameter	B	Robust Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		Partial Eta Squared
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Intercept	2.951	.056	53.115	.000	2.842	3.060	.665
Gender	.027	.027	.999	.318	-.026	.081	.001
Middle Year	.034	.053	.633	.527	-.071	.139	.000
Last Year	.056	.054	1.026	.305	-.051	.162	.001
University 1	.101	.043	2.356	.019	.017	.184	.004
University 2	.071	.043	1.641	.101	-.014	.156	.002
University 3	.000	.033	-.006	.995	-.065	.064	.000
Home Campus	.164	.030	5.419	.000	.105	.224	.020
IBC	0 <sup>b</sup>	.	.	.	.	.	.

a. HC3 method

b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Table 4.9 *Sentiment and Frequency of Comments Related to Academic Experience*

Enrollment Type	Positive		Negative		Mixed		Neutral		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Home Campus	60	27%	128	57%	31	14%	6	3%	225	100%
IBC	30	16%	126	66%	28	15%	6	3%	190	100%
Total	90	22%	254	61%	59	14%	12	3%	415	100%

Table 5.1 *Interviewee Characteristics and Interview Schedule*

Institution	Gender	Position type	Faculty/Discipline Affiliation	Interview date
1	F	IBC Leader	NA (Leadership role)	10-Feb-21
1	M	Academic Leader	Engineering and Science	20-Apr-21
1	F	Student (Second Year)	Finance	4-Mar-21
1	M	Student (Final Year)	ICT	10-Mar-21
2	M	Academic Leader	Engineering and Science	22-Apr-21
2	M	Academic Staff	Energy	18-Mar-21
2	F	Academic Leader	Psychology	14-Apr-21
2	M	Student (First Year)	Actuarial Science	26-Oct-21
3	M	Academic Leader	Engineering/IT	17-Feb-21
3	F	IBC Leader	NA (Leadership role)	3-Mar-21
3	M	IBC Leader	NA (Leadership role)	1-Mar-21
3	F	Student (Second Year)	Civil Engineering	6-Nov-21
4	M	IBC Leader	NA (Leadership role)	10-Feb-21
4	F	Student (First Year)	Law	2-Mar-21
4	F	Academic Staff	Psychology	24-Feb-21
5	M	Academic Leader	NA (Leadership role)	30-Mar-21
5	M	Academic Leader	Education	15-Apr-21
5	F	Academic Staff	Education	29-Mar-21
5	F	Student (Final Year)	Finance and Accounting	27-Oct-21
5	F	Student (Final Year)	International Business	07-Nov-21
6	M	IBC Leader	NA (Leadership role)	29-Mar-21
6	F	Academic Leader	Design	5-Apr-21
6	F	Student (Final Year)	Biotechnology	3-Nov-21
7	F	IBC Leader	NA (Leadership role)	15-Mar-21
7	M	Academic Leader	Business and Finance	30-Apr-21
7	M	Student (Third Year)	Electrical Engineering	2-Nov-21

Table 5.2 *Codes Used to Analyze Interviews*

Topic	Main Codes
Context and Operations	Changes at IBC since foundation Current research at university Hiring practices at IBC and at home campuses How IBC fits into intl strategy of university How IBC success is measured Level of autonomy Reason for creation Role in host country education system Role of alumni Student and staff mobility btwn campuses
Academic Environment	Differences in student support services Measure of student engagement Student mobility
Academic Offering	Collaboration between campuses in course delivery Contextualization of content Differences between campuses How courses are localized Perception of academic equivalency Process of localizing courses
Learning Outcomes	How they are measured and evaluated How they are standardized Role of employability
Teaching Quality	How and to what extent it is monitored Role of student feedback
COVID-19 Impact	Differential effect on campuses Effect on academic offering Effect on academic staff Effect on comm and collab btwn campuses Effect on course delivery Effect on HR policies Effect on QA and student feedback Effect on staff recruitment Effect on student enrollment Effect on student experience Differences in approaches Effect on student mobility Effect on student recruitment Effect on student well being Lasting changes from COVID19 Shifts in role of IBC in intl strategy



# SAMENVATTING IN HET NEDERLANDS

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## Hoofdstuk 1: Introductie, theoretische fundamenteën en methoden<sup>28</sup>

Het begrijpen van de ervaring van internationale studenten is van cruciaal belang door de belangrijke voordelen die ze bieden aan hun medestudenten, de instellingen waar ze zijn ingeschreven en zelfs de landen waarin ze studeren. Dit onderzoek is gericht op het identificeren en begrijpen van sommige factoren die een impact hebben op de ervaring van een internationale student. Een verkenning van wat hun ervaring vormgeeft, zowel binnen als buiten het klaslokaal, staat centraal en is de oorsprong van de onderzoeksvraag en de resulterende studies in dit proefschrift. De centrale onderzoeksvraag is 'welke factoren beïnvloeden de ervaring van internationale studenten, en hoe beïnvloeden zij deze'?

Onderzoek over internationale studenten vereist een definitie van de groep waarnaar de term verwijst. Dit onderzoek definieert internationale studenten als "zij die hun land van herkomst hebben verlaten en verhuisd zijn naar een ander land voor studiedoeleinden" (OECD, 2021). Deze groep is zeer divers en omvat alle studieniveaus, inschrijvingswijzen, type instelling en programma en talloze andere verschillen die de ervaring diepgaand bepalen. Het is buiten het bereik van dit onderzoek om de ervaring van alle internationale studenten te onderzoeken; daarom kijken we alleen naar de bachelorstudenten die voltijds studeren in programma's met oog op het behalen van een diploma op de campus. Dit bevordert de toepasbaarheid van resultaten op de groep. Het is immers moeilijk om te beweren dat de ervaring van een bachelorstudent deelnemend aan een 2-weekse studie in het buitenland programma overeenkomt met de ervaring van een student die een doctoraat in het buitenland volgt.

In dit onderzoek is de internationalisering van het hoger onderwijs (IvhHO) gedefinieerd als "het opzettelijke proces van het integreren van een internationale, interculturele of mondiale dimensie in het

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28 Dit hoofdstuk is gebaseerd op: Merola, R. H., Coelen, R. J., & Hofman, W. H. A. (2019). The Role of Integration in Understanding Differences in Satisfaction Among Chinese, Indian, and South Korean International Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(5), 535-553 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319861355>

doel, de functies en de uitvoering van postsecundair onderwijs, om de kwaliteit van onderwijs en onderzoek voor alle studenten en medewerkers te verbeteren en om een zinvolle bijdrage te leveren aan de samenleving" (de Wit, Hunter & Coelen, 2015, p. 281). Deze definitie reflecteert "een scherpere focus van internationalisatie als een lands *reactie* op globalisatie naar een *proces* gefocust op het *doel, functies en uitvoering* van hoger onderwijs" (Leask & de Gayardon, 2021, p. 325).

Om de focus van IvHHO uit te breiden en het doel, functies en uitvoering van hoger onderwijs te overwegen, is er een beter begrip van de belangrijkste factoren in het systeem nodig – met name de internationale studenten die aan de universiteit zijn ingeschreven. Miliszewska en Sztendur (2012) wijzen erop dat studenten de "ultieme insiders en experts" zijn op het gebied van de studentenervaring, terwijl hun stem ontbreekt in de meeste onderzoeken op dit gebied (p. 12). Nadat de redenen waarom een universiteit überhaupt internationale studenten ontvangt duidelijk is, kunnen gegevens die van studenten zelf zijn verzameld een belangrijk onderdeel zijn in effectieve IvHHO-strategieën en -initiatieven. Om hun ervaring te beschrijven, moet een student niet alleen uitleggen "wat" ze hebben ervaren, maar ook "hoe" ze het hebben ervaren. Als dit effectief wordt gebruikt, kunnen gegevens op studentniveau universiteiten in staat stellen internationale, interculturele en mondiale dimensies in het onderwijs te ontwikkelen die de kwaliteit van het onderwijs voor alle studenten verbeteren en een positieve bijdrage leveren aan de samenleving.

Dit onderzoek in dit proefschrift is een opstap in dit streven. Het onderzoekt de internationale studentenervaring en wat deze vormt, waardoor een dieper en meer holistisch begrip ontstaat over hoe internationale studenten bijdragen aan de samenleving en aan de kwaliteit van onderwijs voor de studenten en het personeel. De onderstaande subsecties vatten bestaand onderzoek over de voordelen die internationale studenten bieden aan hun medestudenten, de universiteiten waaraan ze zijn ingeschreven en de samenlevingen waarvan ze deel uitmaken samen.



## THEORETISCHE FUNDAMENTEN

Er zijn drie kerntheorieën en paradigma's die dit onderzoek hebben geleid. Ten eerste, Studentenbetrokkenheidstheorie, aanvankelijk ontwikkeld door Alexander Astin in 1984 en aangepast in 1999, biedt een kader om te onderzoeken hoe de tevredenheid van internationale studenten wordt beïnvloed door externe factoren. Ten tweede, het Studentintegratiemodel, ontworpen door Vincent Tinto in 1975, stelt dat studenten die een hoger level van sociale integratie in de universiteit omgeving hebben, zich vaker meer betrokken voelen bij de instelling en hierdoor ook vaker afstuderen. Ten slotte, de Mondiale Integratie – Lokale Responsiviteit (I-R) paradigma, ontwikkeld door C.K. Prahalad en Yves Doz in 1987, conceptualiseert een belangrijke uitdaging voor multinationale corporaties (MNCs) als het beheersen van de druk om zijn service op alle markten te standaardiseren met het aanpassen aan lokale markten.

## ONDERZOEKSVRAGEN

Hoofdonderzoeksvraag: Welke factoren beïnvloeden de ervaring van internationale studenten, en hoe beïnvloeden zij deze?

Deelvraag 1: Hoe verschillen studenten van verschillende nationaliteiten in hun mate van tevredenheid en integratie?

Deelvraag 2: Wat is het effect van academische en sociale integratie van een internationale student op hun tevredenheid?

Deelvraag 3: Bemiddelt integratie de relatie tussen nationaliteit en tevredenheid?

Deelvraag 4: Welke aspecten van de studentenervaring voorspellen de tevredenheid van internationale bachelorstudenten?

Deelvraag 5: Verschillen thuis- en IBC-ingeschreven internationale bachelorstudenten in hun tevredenheid over de academische ervaring?

Deelvraag 6: Hoe verandert de COVID-19-pandemie de academische ervaring bij IBC's?

Deelvraag 7: Hoe verandert de COVID-19-pandemie de relatie tussen de IBC en de thuiscampus?

Voor zover de auteurs weten, hebben geen grootschalige studies onderzoeksvragen 1-5 onderzocht. Eveneens hebben geen gepubliceerde onderzoeken zich gericht op vragen 6-7.

## METHODEN

Deze sectie verstrekt een samenvatting van de steekproeven, procedures, onderzoeksinstrumenten en statistische analyses gebruikt in vier onderzoeken. Hoofdstukken 2-5 presenteren de onderzoeken en schets de methodologie van elk onderzoek in meer detail.

Dit proefschrift gebruikt een mixed-methods benadering om de onderzoeksvragen te onderzoeken. De studies onderzoeken de perceptie van de proefpersonen met behulp van subjectieve metingen zoals 'zelfrapportage' in enquêtes en semi-gestructureerde interviews. Deze benadering is zeer geschikt om psychometrische variabelen te onderzoeken die anders geconceptualiseerd kunnen worden door individuen (Elasz & Gaddy, 1998), bijvoorbeeld, academische ervaring, tevredenheid met ondersteuningsdiensten en het effect van de pandemie op academische ervaring.

## Hoofdstuk 2: De rol van integratie in internationale studenttevredenheid<sup>29</sup>

Onderzoek toont aan dat studenttevredenheid en integratie variëren tussen nationaliteiten (Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Garrett, 2014; Archer, 2015), en dat beide sociale en academische integratie invloed heeft op de mate van studenttevredenheid (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Deze studie gaat verder in op deze onderzoeksmogelijkheden en onderzoekt de rol die integratie speelt bij het begrijpen van verschillen in studenttevredenheid tussen nationaliteiten. Het focust op bachelorstudenten met oog op het behalen van een diploma van China, India en Zuid-Korea studierend in de Verenigde Staten, Verenigd Koninkrijk en Australië – respectievelijk

<sup>29</sup> Dit hoofdstuk is gebaseerd op: Merola, R. H., Coelen, R. J., & Hofman, W. H. A. (2019). The Role of Integration in Understanding Differences in Satisfaction Among Chinese, Indian, and South Korean International Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(5), 535-553. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319861355>



de top drie van zendende en ontvangende landen voor internationale studenten.

### **Onderzoeksvragen**

Gebaseerd op het bovengenoemde bewijs, stelt deze studie de volgende onderzoeksvragen en geassocieerde hypotheses:

#### **Verschillen in integratie en tevredenheid tussen nationaliteiten <sup>30</sup>.**

Onderzoeksvraag 1: Hoe verschillen studenten van verschillende nationaliteiten in hun mate van tevredenheid en integratie?

Hypothese 1: Tevredenheid varieert significant tussen Chinese, Indiase en Zuid-Koreaanse studenten studierend in de VS, VK en Australië, met Indische studenten die een hogere mate van tevredenheid tonen.

#### **Integratie en studenttevredenheid.**

Onderzoeksvraag 2: Wat is het effect van academische en sociale integratie van een internationale student op hun tevredenheid?

Hypothese 2: Academische en sociale integratie zijn beide voorspellend voor zelfgerapporteerde tevredenheid onder internationale studenten, met hogere integratie levels resulterend in hogere tevredenheid, vooral in het geval van academische integratie.

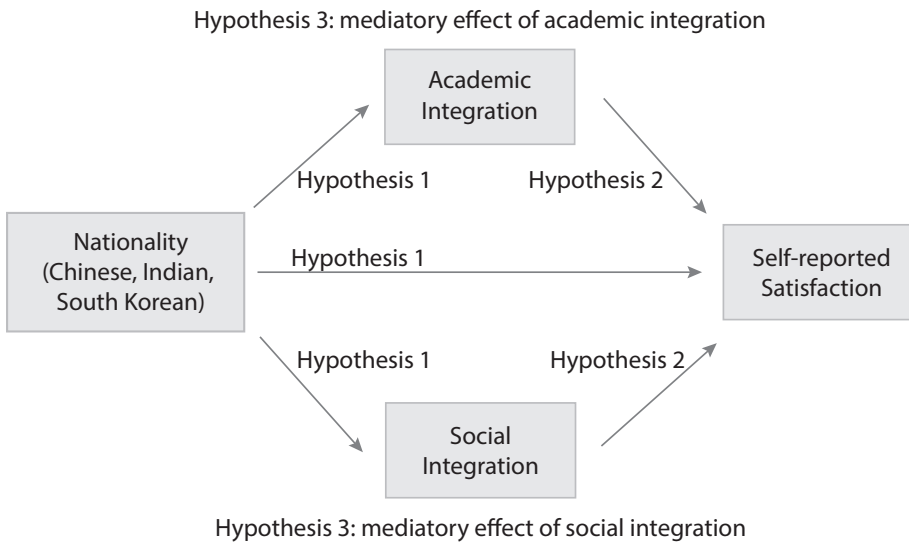
#### **Verklarende waarde van integratie**

Onderzoeksvraag 3: Wat is de rol van integratie bij het bemiddelen van de relatie tussen nationaliteit en tevredenheid?

Hypothese 3: Integratie verklaart gedeeltelijk de relatie tussen nationaliteit en tevredenheid, met andere onbekende factoren die ook een rol spelen (figuur 2.1).

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<sup>30</sup> Sociale integratie is gebaseerd op gerapporteerde tevredenheid van studenten in de Woonsectie van de ISB: "Vrienden maken van mijn thuisland", "Vrienden maken van andere landen", Mogelijkheden om de culturen van dit land te ervaren", "De sociale activiteiten", "De sociale faciliteiten" en "Goede contacten maken voor de toekomst". Academische integratie is gebaseerd op gerapporteerde tevredenheid van studenten in de Leersectie van de ISB: "Studeren met mensen van andere culturen", "helpen om mijn Engelse taalvaardigheid te verbeteren", "Academisch personeel wiens Engels ik kan begrijpen", "Tijd krijgen van academisch personeel als ik het nodig heb/persoonlijke ondersteuning met leren", "Feedback op cursusopdrachten/formele schriftelijke opmerkingen" en "Advies en begeleiding voor lange termijn baanmogelijkheden en carrières van academisch personeel".



Figuur 2.1: Relaties tussen variabelen die worden onderzocht

[Hypothese 3: bemiddelend effect van academische integratie / sociale integratie Nationaliteit (Chinees, Indisch, Zuid-Koreaans) → hypothese 1 → Academische integratie / sociale integratie → hypothese 2 → zelfgerapporteerde tevredenheid]

Om deze hypothesen te onderzoeken, gebruikt deze studie een kwantitatieve benadering, gebaseerd op antwoorden van studenten van de Internationale Student Barometer (ISB).

Deze studie was in drie delen uitgevoerd. Eerst werden constructen gemaakt om sociale en academische integratie onder nationaliteiten te meten met behulp van factor analyse in SPSS. Deze constructen werden toen gebruikt om verschillen te testen en te meten onder nationaliteiten in integratie niveaus en tevredenheid niveaus (Tabel 2.1). Na deze verbanden te hebben onderzocht, gebruikte de studie lineaire regressie om de rol van integratie bij het bepalen van tevredenheid te bepalen. Ten slotte is het model gecreëerd om aan te tonen in hoeverre integratie de relatie tussen nationaliteit en zelfgerapporteerde tevredenheid verklaart.

Resultaten duiden dat tevredenheid en integratie variëren per nationaliteit en de discussie behandelt waarom dit kan zijn en wat universiteiten kunnen doen om deze verschillen te verhelpen. De resultaten wijzen er op overtuigende wijze op dat integratie deels de relatie tussen nationaliteit en tevredenheid verklaart, waarbij ook andere onbekende factoren een rol spelen. Dit is een nieuwe bevinding, omdat het suggereert dat het integratieniveau van een student meer voorspellend is voor tevredenheid dan zijn of haar nationaliteit.

Samengenomen dragen de resultaten bij aan de al bestaande literatuur over de ervaring van internationale studenten, wat de weg vrijmaakt voor verder onderzoek op dit gebied en implicaties voor beleid en praktijk biedt. Deze implicaties en mogelijk toekomstig onderzoek worden in het hoofdstuk besproken.

**Hoofdstuk 3:** Factoren die van invloed zijn op de tevredenheid van internationale bachelorstudenten: het geval van het Verenigd Koninkrijk<sup>31</sup>

Dit onderzoek focust op het Verenigd Koninkrijk om de ervaring van de internationale student te onderzoeken. De studie onderzoekt de volgende onderzoeksvraag:

*Hoe voorspellen aspecten van de studentervaring, waaronder universiteitsreputatie, bachelorinschrijving, proportie van internationale studenten en lokale bevolking<sup>32</sup>, evenals student gender en studiefase, de tevredenheid van internationale bachelorstudenten?*

*Hypotheses:* Als we kijken naar de universiteitskenmerken, voorspellen we een significante positieve relatie tussen de *reputatie* van de universiteit en de tevredenheid van hun internationale bachelorstudenten. We voorspellen een significante negatieve relatie

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31 Dit hoofdstuk is gebaseerd op: Merola, R., Coelen, R., & Hofman, W. (2022). What really matters? Factors impacting international student satisfaction: The case of the UK. *International Journal of Management in Education*.

32 Lokale bevolking is gedefinieerd als stadsgrootte (in duizenden) zoals gerapporteerd in de 2011 VK census.



tussen *bachelorinschrijving*, *proportie van internationale studenten* en *lokale bevolking* en de tevredenheid van internationale studenten.

Als we kijken naar de studentkenmerken, voorspellen we een significante relatie tussen *studiefase* en tevredenheid van internationale bachelorstudenten, waarbij eerstejaarsstudenten significant hogere niveaus van tevredenheid rapporteren dan andere en laatstejaarsstudenten. We voorspellen een significante relatie tussen *gender* en tevredenheid van internationale bachelorstudenten, waarbij vrouwelijke studenten significant hogere niveaus van tevredenheid rapporteren dan mannelijke studenten.

Deze studie bestaat uit twee delen. Het eerste deel onderzoekt welke aspecten van de studentervaring de tevredenheid van internationale bachelorstudenten voorspellen. Hiervoor heeft de studie factor analyse in SPSS gebruikt om te testen voor een betrouwbaar construct van 'universiteitsreputatie'. Het resulterende construct werd toen gebruikt in een multilevel model om te bepalen of er een relatie is tussen universiteitsreputatie, grootte, internationale mix en lokale bevolking, evenals student gender en studiefase en de tevredenheid van internationale bachelorstudenten. Summatieve inhoudsanalyse van opmerkingen van studenten werd gebruikt om de resultaten te helpen interpreteren (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

De resultaten duiden aan dat internationale studententevredenheid wordt beïnvloed door de studiefase van de student, de reputatie van de universiteit en de proportie van ingeschreven internationale studenten. Geen van de andere variabelen bleken voorspellend te zijn. Hoewel associaties vrij klein waren, wat suggereert dat er andere factoren zijn die ook een rol spelen in deze complexe relatie, wetende dat deze factoren de tevredenheid beïnvloeden, kunnen besluitvormers bij universiteiten beter plannen en zich aanpassen aan veranderingen die de internationale studentervaring beïnvloeden. De studie draagt bij aan lopend onderzoek over de internationale studentervaring en suggereert dat het een multilevel, meerlagig construct is waar veel variabelen interageren op complexe manieren,



veranderend na verloop van tijd. Beperkingen en toekomstig onderzoek worden in de conclusie van het hoofdstuk besproken.

#### **Hoofdstuk 4: Verschillen in tevredenheid tussen studenten ingeschreven bij IBC's en Thuiscampussen<sup>33</sup>**

Gezien de grootschalige aanwezigheid van IBC's en hun belangrijke rol in het leveren van transnationale educatie (TNE) – die mogelijk nog belangrijker zal worden door de COVID-19-pandemie – is er een behoefte om de unieke academische ervaring die op deze campussen worden aangeboden te begrijpen. Deze studie streeft ernaar om te onderzoeken of, en hoe, thuis- en IBC-ingeschreven internationale bachelorstudenten verschillen in hun tevredenheid met de academische ervaring. De studie zal de gender en studiefase van de student meenemen en de specifieke instelling waar de student is ingeschreven, om rekening te houden met eventuele verschillen die deze variabelen bijdragen aan de tevredenheid.

Gebaseerd op voorgenoemde literatuur, is de centrale onderzoeksvraag: Verschillen thuis- en IBC-ingeschreven internationale bachelorstudenten in hun tevredenheid over de academische ervaring? De studie zal rekening houden met de gender, studiefase van de student en de specifieke instelling waar de student is ingeschreven, om rekening te houden met eventuele verschillen die deze variabelen bijdragen aan de tevredenheid. Deze studie gebruikt een mixed methods-benadering om de bovengenoemde onderzoeksvraag te onderzoeken, op basis van de internationale bachelorstudenten die de Internationale Student Barometer (ISB) hebben beantwoord.

Resultaten duiden aan dat academische tevredenheid verschilt tussen internationale studenten ingeschreven bij IBC's en thuiscampussen. Met name internationale studenten ingeschreven bij thuiscampussen tonen een hogere gemiddelde tevredenheid met Academische en Onderwijs Kwaliteit, Academische Omgeving en Academische

<sup>33</sup> Dit hoofdstuk is gebaseerd op: Merola, R. H., Hofman, W. H. A., Jansen, E. P. W. A., & Coelen, R. J. (2021). Making the Grade: Do International Branch Campuses and Their Home Campuses Differ in International Student Satisfaction with the Academic Experience? *Journal of Studies in International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315321995524>

Betrokkenheid dan internationale studenten ingeschreven bij internationale branche campussen.

Deze studie discussieert de implicaties van de resultaten van hoe IBC leiders, faculteit en administratoren de rol van academische tevredenheid in de internationale studenttevredenheid beschouwen. Dit hoofdstuk wordt geconcludeerd met discussie van beperkingen en mogelijk toekomstig onderzoek.

**Hoofdstuk 5: Hoe de COVID-19-pandemie de academische ervaring en de relatie met de thuiscampussen van internationale branche campussen veranderde<sup>34</sup>**

Deze studie focust op hoe de COVID-19-pandemie de academische ervaring van IBC's hebben beïnvloed en de relatie tussen de IBC en thuiscampus hebben veranderd. Voor zover de auteurs weten, is er tot nu toe nog geen academisch onderzoek gepubliceerd dat specifiek kijkt naar de impact van de COVID-19-pandemie op IBC's, waardoor deze studie de eerste in zijn soort is. Het focust op IBC's gevestigd in Maleisië van universiteiten in het Verenigd Koninkrijk (VK) en Australië.

### Onderzoeksvragen

Hoe heeft de COVID-19-pandemie de academische ervaring bij IBC's veranderd?

Hoe heeft de COVID-19-pandemie de relatie tussen de IBC en de thuiscampussen veranderd?

Zesentwintig interviews werden virtueel uitgevoerd met leiders, academisch personeel en studenten bij de campussen van zeven internationale branche campussen van VK en Australische universiteiten actief in Maleisië.

Bij onderzoeksvraag 1 kwamen bij IBC's de volgende thema's naar voren:

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<sup>34</sup> Dit hoofdstuk is gebaseerd op: Merola, R. H., Coelen, R., J. Hofman, W. H. A., & Jansen, E. P. W. A. (2022). Through the Looking Glass: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed International Branch Campuses' Academic Experience and Home Campus Relationship. *Journal of Studies in International Education*.

- Reeds bestaande online leren en netwerken maakten IBC's goed gesitueerd om snel over te schakelen naar online levering
- Teleurstelling van studenten met stopgezette mobiliteit en gebrek aan fysieke academische en sociale interactie met medestudenten
- Behoeft van studenten om asynchrone online procedures te houden (d.w.z. opgenomen colleges online beschikbaar)
- Uitgebreide diensten en middelen geleverd door de IBC om studentenwelzijn te ondersteunen.
- Verhoogde inspanning aan de kant van de IBC om een saamhorigheidsgevoel te bevorderen

Bij onderzoeksvraag 2 kwamen de volgende thema's naar voren:

- Meer inter-campus en intra-campus samenwerking bij het lesgeven
- IBC's spelen een grotere rol in inschrijvings-, wervings- en mobiliteitsinitiatieven van de universiteit
- IBC's helpen de impact van stopgezette/verminderde studentenmobiliteit op de universiteit te minimaliseren
- Voortgang van een universitaire visie op campussen als gelijkwaardige onderdelen van een wereldwijde universiteit

Een inhoudsanalyse werd uitgevoerd waarin de frequenties van thema's zijn geteld naar het aantal geïnterviewden die dat gevoel uitsprak. Dit gaf een idee welke thema's het meest voorkwamen onder de geïnterviewden (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009).

Het hoofdstuk wordt geconcludeerd met aandachtspunten voor IBC leiders en academisch personeel, beperkingen van de studie en toekomstige onderzoeksmogelijkheden.

## Hoofdstuk 6: Discussie en conclusies

Dit hoofdstuk geeft een overzicht van de resultaten van de vier empirische onderzoeken en distilleert theoretische en praktische implicaties van de bevindingen. Het houdt rekening met de beperkingen van de gegevens en stelt toekomstige onderzoeksmogelijkheden voor.

### Theoretische implicaties

De bevindingen van dit onderzoek werpen licht op Studentenbetrokkenheidstheorie (SIT), die van fundamenteel belang is geweest voor de totstandkoming van ons proefschrift. Ons onderzoek suggereert aanvullende principes die zouden kunnen passen bij Studentenbetrokkenheidstheorie. In het bijzonder laten de gegevens zien dat de proportie van internationale studenten impact kunnen hebben op het saamhorigheidsgevoel en integratie van de student. Toegepast op SIT, suggereert dit dat het leren en persoonlijke ontwikkeling van de student recht evenredig is met de kwantiteit en kwaliteit van hun betrokkenheid.

Studentenbetrokkenheidstheorie kan ook worden geïnformeerd door inzichten van interviews met studenten ingeschreven bij IBC's en hoe de academische ervaring is veranderd door de COVID-19-pandemie. Astin stelt dat de tijd van de student hun meest waardevolle instellingshulpbron is (1999). Een van de meest grootschalige veranderingen door de COVID-19-pandemie is de overstap naar virtueel leren, wat vaak asynchroon gedaan wordt. Hoewel deze verandering misschien niet het aantal uur dat een student nodig heeft om aan academische studies te besteden zal verminderen, biedt het meer opties in waar en wanneer te studeren, wat op zijn beurt meer opties biedt aan studenten over hoe ze de resterende tijd kunnen gebruiken.

Onderzoek in dit proefschrift geldt ook voor Tinto's (1975) Studentintegratiemodel (SIM), aangepast in 2012, wat stelt dat studenten met hogere niveaus van sociale integratie in de universiteitsomgeving vaker toegewijd aan de instelling voelen, wat op zijn beurt maakt dat ze meer kans hebben om af te studeren.



Resultaten van ons onderzoek suggereert dat IBC's harder moeten werken dan andere universiteiten om een saamhorigheidsgevoel te stimuleren om te onderscheiden van andere hoger onderwijs opties. Het toepassen van deze bevindingen op SIM-theorie impliceert dat de mate waarin internationale branche campussen studenten kunnen behouden, direct verband houdt met hun vermogen om studenten te betrekken bij en integreren in het sociale en academische leven op de campus, zowel online als fysiek.

### **Praktische implicaties**

Onderzoek gepresenteerd in dit proefschrift heeft genoeg implicaties voor de werkwijze van internationaal hoger onderwijs. Resultaten laten zien dat integratie een bemiddelend effect heeft op de relatie tussen nationaliteit en tevredenheid. Universiteiten kunnen deze bevinding omarmen als een reden om stimulering van integratie een centrale focus te maken van hun onderwijs en leren, studentleven en ondersteuningsdiensten.

Ons onderzoek heeft ook implicaties voor de rol van taalbeheersing in het stimuleren van integratie. De bevinding at de studenten van China en Zuid-Korea lagere niveaus van integratie hebben dan studenten van India kan deels een effect zijn van taalkundige vertrouwdheid. Het bieden van gestructureerde taalondersteuning, zowel binnen als buiten het klaslokaal, zou internationale studenten kunnen helpen academisch en sociaal te integreren.

Integratie zou beïnvloed kunnen worden door veel factoren, waaronder verschillen tussen het thuis- en gastland in cultuur en pedagogische stijlen. Daarnaast zouden internationale studenten sterke internationale netwerken kunnen hebben waar geen lokale studenten bij betrokken zijn en daardoor hun inspanningen om te integreren beïnvloeden. Integratie beschouwen als een van de fundamentele delen van de studentervaring vereist dat het in het centrum van theorie en praktijk wordt geplaatst. In de praktijk betekent dit dat ondersteuningsdiensten de verschillende behoeften

van internationale studenten moeten overwegen en programma's moeten creëren die integratie stimuleren.

Een andere bevinding met implicaties voor hoger onderwijs instellingen is dat studenten in hun eerste jaar van de studie hogere tevredenheid hebben dan studenten in hun midden of laatste jaren van studie. Als hogere integratie leidt tot hogere tevredenheid, dan zouden internationale studenten in latere fasen van de studie gestimuleerd moeten worden om zich academisch te betrekken. Internationale studenten hechten belang aan loopbaanondersteunende diensten, omdat het vinden van werk voor buitenlandse inwoners een grotere uitdaging kan zijn.

### **BEPERKINGEN EN TOEKOMSTIG ONDERZOEKSRICHTINGEN**

Het onderzoek in dit proefschrift streeft ernaar licht te werpen op meerdere vragen gerelateerd aan de internationale studentervaring met behulp van zowel kwantitatieve als kwalitatieve benaderingen. Er zijn echter meerdere beperkingen aan de onderzoeken die in voorgaande hoofdstukken zijn beschreven. Ten eerste zijn er gelimiteerde mogelijkheden voor causale implicaties van de gegevens. De gevonden associaties waren klein, wat suggereert dat er andere factoren een rol spelen in het vormen van de studentervaring. De gelimiteerde causaliteit maakt het moeilijk om uit de bevindingen concrete praktische aanbevelingen te destilleren en roept meer vragen op met betrekking tot welke factoren of combinatie van factoren, de grootste impact hebben op de ervaring van internationale studenten. Daarnaast zou de beschikbaarheid van longitudinale gegevens het mogelijk hebben gemaakt om causale relaties te onderzoeken, evenals een dieper begrip van de verschillen in tevredenheid die tussen verschillende studiefasen worden waargenomen. Desalniettemin is een besef van gelimiteerde causaliteit op zichzelf nuttig om de complexiteit van studentervaring te waarderen.

Daarnaast is de Internationale Student Barometer (ISB), die we in drie van de onderzoeken hebben gebruikt, een voornamelijk kwantitatief enquête instrument. Hoewel ISB gegevens werden samengenomen



met kwalitatieve gegevens in analyses om om de bevindingen te helpen interpreteren, was de enquête op geen enkele manier aan te passen om aan de doeleinden van de onderzoeken te voldoen. Er zijn andere aspecten van de studentervaring die niet zijn gemeten door de ISB en die mogelijk meer inzicht zouden geven in de onderzoeksvragen.

Hoewel alle onderzoeken in dit proefschrift de perspectieven van internationale studenten bevatten, blijft het een groep die vaak mist van hoger onderwijs onderzoek. Omdat er geen gemeenschappelijke definitie is van 'internationale student' gebruikt door alle nationale instanties, onderzoeksorganisaties en overheidsinstanties, is het moeilijk om een conclusie te trekken uit onderzoek over deze groep. Deze definitieverschillen, naast de databeschikbaarheid, kan een vergelijking van internationale studentengegevens op zijn best ingewikkeld, en in het slechtste geval onnauwkeurig en misleidend maken.

Op praktisch niveau zou aanvullend onderzoek om een meer genuanceerd begrip van internationale studenttevredenheid te ontwikkelen, kunnen helpen om diensten te creëren die betere ondersteuning voor studenten bieden. Inzichten in de ervaring van studenten maakt het mogelijk voor universiteiten om te voldoen aan verwachtingen en tevredenheid garanderen, en gegevens op studentniveau kunnen gebruikt worden om het ontwerpen van ondersteunende diensten die de academische en sociale ervaringen van internationale studenten verbeteren en de betrokkenheid van studenten bevorderen te informeren. Idealiter zullen de gegevens uit dit proefschrift verdere onderzoeken naar de factoren die de internationale studentenervaring vormgeven motiveren.

## CONCLUSIES

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de internationale studentenervaring en de factoren die dit beïnvloeden. Daarbij benadrukt het belang van het opnemen van de stemmen van studenten in elk onderzoek dat bedoeld is om het universitaire beleid en praktijken te informeren. Het begrijpen van de percepties van studenten is van cruciaal belang om



aan hun behoeften te voldoen, omdat het hun subjectieve ervaringen zijn die hun geleefde realiteit creëren. Onderzoek in dit proefschrift gebruikt gegevens die zijn verzameld van studenten zelf om modellen voor het begrip van studentenervaring bij te werken en innoveren. “Alle modellen zijn fout, maar sommige zijn nuttig”, vermeldde statisticus George Box; de meest nuttige modellen laten toe een fenomeen te begrijpen dat gegrond is in de realiteit. Uiteindelijk biedt dit proefschrift inzicht in de talloze realiteiten van studenten op basis van hun percepties van hun geleefde ervaringen.





*It takes a village to raise a child*, they say. That's true. It also takes a village to complete a PhD.

My PhD journey has been possible thanks to the support of many wonderful humans. Regardless of whether you are named below, I want to express my sincere gratitude for your support along the way. I would like to especially acknowledge the following people:

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

author  
appendices  
acknowledgements  
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het  
nederland

Rachael H. Merola was born November 18, 1983, in Nuremberg, Germany, and lived in Germany, Hawaii, Virginia, Texas, and New York while growing up. While an undergraduate at Tufts University, she studied abroad in Havana, Cuba, and experienced the transformative power of international education. After graduating, she moved to Barcelona, Spain to work at the Barcelona Graduate School of Economics. There, she found a passion for working in international education, in particular for understanding and optimizing the student experience.

Eager to expand her knowledge and research skills, in 2010 she obtained her Master's degree in International Education Policy from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She spent the next decade working in higher education research and practice, including roles at higher education consultancies and research institutes in London, New York, and Seattle, and as an international administrator at a large women's university in Seoul, South Korea.

Driven to continue her research and contributions to the field of IHE, in 2017 she began her doctoral studies as a student in the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen and as part of the Centre for Internationalisation of Education (CIE) at the University of Groningen, Campus Fryslan. The research in this thesis is the product of her time in the program.



THE END









