



Navigating Opportunities, Overcoming Challenges: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Asia-Pacific International Postgraduate Students in Australia

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Abstract

With the prominence of international student mobility as a key aspect of internationalization of higher education (OECD, 2022), recent scholarship has examined various dimensions of international students' lived experiences (Ellis, 2024; Ghazarian, *et al.*, 2024; Mok, *et al.*, 2024; Pearson, *et al.*, 2022; Salinas, *et al.*, 2022; Vidal & Kamp, 2024). Responding to the limitations of existing discourse particularly in the context of international postgraduate students from developing and emerging economies, this transcendental phenomenological study investigated the shared meanings attributed by 15 international postgraduate students from Asia-Pacific in their experiences of studying in Australia. Drawing on Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological framework, five themes describing the lived experiences of the participants emerged: opportunities to earn while studying; access to health, wellbeing, and recreational support; acknowledgment of student agency; adjustment to a multicultural society; and access to a balanced work-life integration. Four themes highlighting how the participants navigated the challenges associated with their experience were generated: prioritizing tasks to optimize time and overall experience, leveraging advanced university infrastructures and comprehensive services, connecting with peers of the same ethnicity, and building professional connections and personal support networks. Findings revealed that as temporary student immigrants, the participants navigated a complex mix of academic and social challenges and opportunities, resulting in varying degrees of adjustment, adaptation, and success. Based on these, practical implications for improving the internationalization strategies of higher education institutions in the Philippines and beyond are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of literature over the years has been dedicated to exploring how globalization impacts higher education (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Ghazarian, *et al.*, 2024; Halpern, *et al.*, 2022; Kilinc, *et al.*, 2020; Themistocleous, 2024)^[18, 25, 28]. Considered as one of the central features of higher education in the 21st century, internationalization of higher education compels universities worldwide to adapt strategies responsive to the needs of the increasingly global education landscape (Kilinc, *et al.*, 2020; Themistocleous, 2024)^[64]. Governments are progressively examining transnational educational trends, opportunities, and outcomes to design policy frameworks that meet emerging social, economic, and educational demands (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020)^[47]. Regional integration of economies and societies and overall globalization trends provide a backdrop for a comprehensive framework for internationalization in higher education (de Wit, 2020)^[18].

The deliberate adoption of academia of various approaches to internationalization is evident in numerous policy frameworks and various levels of practice applied within the higher education sector. Defined as “a process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the goals, functions, and delivery of higher education,” internationalization of higher education comprises multidimensional aspects of education service delivery (Shkoler *et al.*, 2020, p. 1) [58]. Citing van der Wende (2001), de Wit (2020) [16] identified significant features of internationalization in higher education over the last few decades: cross-border mobility of students, staff, and programs; institutional reputation and brand identity; and paradigm shift from cooperation to competition. Similar features that support internationalization in higher education institutions are noted by Kilinc, *et al.* (2020). Study abroad programs, international student and staff mobility, adoption of global curriculum, overseas expansion through branch campuses, and transnational institutional networking are some of the ways internationalization manifests in higher education institutions (Kilinc, *et al.*, 2020).

Among these practices that accentuate the prevalence of internationalization among universities, international student mobility appears prominently within the context of international higher education literature (see Darmody, *et al.*, 2022; Halpern, *et al.*, 2022; Van Mol, *et al.*, 2021; Vidal & Kamp, 2023) [15, 28, 65, 66]. International student mobility in higher education is defined as “crossing country borders for the purpose of or in the context of tertiary education” (Richters and Teichler, 2006, p. 78, as cited in Gumus, *et al.*, 2020, p. 498). The rapidly growing interest for cross-border education that involves international mobility of students result to demographic changes in higher education communities to be racially, culturally, religiously, and ethnically diverse (Darmody, *et al.* 2022; Ghazarian, *et al.*, 2024) [15, 25].

Reports from OECD in 2021 show that 6.1 million international students were enrolled in 2019, making international student mobility a dominant aspect of global higher education (Vidal & Kamp, 2024) [66]. Not only is international student mobility a significant factor in internationalization policies worldwide (de Wit, 2020) [18], it also garners considerable attention in global higher education discourse (Gumus, *et al.*, 2020; Van Mol, *et al.*, 2021) [65]. Previous studies have examined diverse dimensions of cross-border education and the cultural, social, and psychological concerns international students contend with (see Anandavali, 2019; Koo, *et al.*, 2021; Ma, 2020; Teneisha, *et al.*, 2024; Vidal & Kamp, 2024) [36, 39, 63, 66]. Quantitative analysis of mobility flows and numerical trends including volume, growth trajectory, and geographical distribution have also been explored (see Gumus, *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the wealth of literature that centers on international students, current research reveals that distinct experiences of international students have historically been neglected (Wekullo, 2019) [67]. The “current literature lacks sufficient research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the expectations, motivations, and experiences of international students” (Qadeer, *et al.*, 2021, p. 2) [53]. There is a prevailing trend of attempting to homogenize the sociological phenomena and experiences of international students (Tavares, 2021) [61].

Moreover, another crucial aspect in internationalization of higher education and research on international students is that

these concepts traditionally focus on the context of the global North (Chukwuezi, 2024) [10]. As Heleta and Chasi (2023) [29] contend, the existing definitions of internationalization are colonial and hegemonic, at least in South Africa, and arguably, in other parts of the world. Internationalization of higher education is primarily shaped and defined by Western-centric paradigm, and that is a result of scholars’ interpretation and practice that favor Western hegemony of the concept (de Wit, 2024) [17].

It is essential to address these views of internationalization and understand the multifaceted experiences not only of international students coming from developed countries in the global North, but also of developing countries in the global South. The need for a cohesive scholarly work on internationalization of higher education persists (Doyle, *et al.*, 2020) [21]. It compels scholars and academics to engage in research that aids in the development of policies and frameworks that address multidimensional complexities of concepts of internationalization in higher education across societies and economies.

To this end, this study aimed to contribute to the ongoing and continuously evolving discussions of internationalization in higher education and address the limitations in the current international higher education discourse in the context of international postgraduate students from developing countries in Asia-Pacific, with Asia comprising the largest and fastest growing group of international and foreign students (OECD, 2020) [47]. Utilizing transcendental phenomenological inquiry, this study explored the lived experiences of international postgraduate students from Asia-Pacific in Australian universities and how they faced the challenges and demands of Australian higher education. Understanding the complexities of the lived experiences of international postgraduate students will provide qualitative insights to and will inform higher education institutions, especially in the Philippines, to craft research-based policy frameworks and practices that benefit all education stakeholders at the midst of local and global initiatives for internationalization of education.

Methods

This qualitative study was grounded in the social constructivist worldview postulated by Vygotsky (1934) who asserted that individuals endeavor to comprehend their known world through their own experiences (Boyland, 2019) [8]. Guided by Berry’s (2003) [6] Framework of Acculturation, the study explored the lived experiences of international students from Asia-Pacific who were studying in Australia through the lens of transcendental phenomenological approach put forward by Moustaka (1994) [46]. Framed within the context of this qualitative approach, the study aimed to capture and describe the universal essence of a shared phenomenon based on the individual experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2023) [14].

Participants of the study

The study involved fifteen international postgraduate students from three universities across the states of Victoria and South Australia. The participants were enrolled in master’s degree programs in fields such as Education, Development Studies, Law, Engineering, and Public Policy, and had been residing in Australia for at least one year at the time of the study. Participants were selected using purposeful criterion sampling, following Moustakas’ (1994) [46] three

key criteria for phenomenological research: first, they experienced the phenomenon under investigation; second, they were interested in understanding it; and third, they were willing to participate in the study. The diverse group of participants provided a rich dataset, ideal for exploring lived experiences in a phenomenological inquiry.

Instrumentation

The present study employed interview with the participants in an online setting as the main research instrument and data collection strategy. To guide the interview process, a semi-structured interview schedule was used. The interview questions were in line with both the theoretical perspectives offered by Berry's (2003) [6] Theory of Acculturation and the inherent features of a phenomenological study design by Moustakas (1994) [46]. The first part of the semi-structured interview consisted of questions about what the participants' experiences are in different aspects of their life as international postgraduate students. The second part of the semi-structured interview focused on questions related to how they faced the issues and challenges they have encountered while living and studying in Australia.

To ascertain the validity of the semi-structured interview questions and ensure that the research instrument accurately captures the lived experiences and subjective realities of the participants, validation of the tool was done. Two external language experts and doctorate degree holders were consulted to assess methodological rigor of the tool and evaluate it in terms of its contents.

Data collection procedure

Following Creswell and Poth's (2018) [13] conceptualization of data collection as a series of interconnected activities to gather sufficient information that address the research questions, several steps were undertaken to collect data in this study. First, using purposeful criterion sampling and in accordance with Moustaka's (1994) [46] criteria for selection of participants in a phenomenological study, prospective participants were selected and contacted via email to invite them to participate in the present research. Second, an Informed Consent Form was individually sent to those who expressed interest in participating. This form provided essential details about the study, including its nature, objectives, rationale, types of data to be collected, procedures, duration, as well as potential risks and benefits. A positive response to the Informed Consent Form signified the participants' consent to join the study. Third, interviews were scheduled with the consenting participants, using Zoom, an online video conferencing application. The interviews were conducted from September to November 2024, with each one lasting from 30 minutes to one hour. Fourth, after the interview, individual copy of the interview transcripts were sent to the participants for their review and verification. Follow-up correspondences occurred, and after the participants' approval, the interview transcripts served as the data for subsequent analyses.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data obtained from the interviews, the study utilized Moustakas' (1994) [46] structure of phenomenological analysis as simplified by Creswell and Poth (2018) [13]. This analytic framework for analysis includes several steps to capture the essence of the phenomenological experience. These steps include bracketing, horizontalization, clustering

into themes, describing, and synthesizing textural and structural descriptions.

To ensure methodological vigor, this study employed verification, validity, and validation (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [13]. Following Creswell's (2013) steps in verification to achieve validity of a research project, the researcher conducted thorough literature searches, observed strict procedural approach in a phenomenological study design, bracketed past experiences to achieve methodological rigor, kept research notes and journals, and utilized sufficient sample of participants. Attainment of validity was done through external review of the study by competent researchers, while validation was accomplished through adherence to stringent data collection and data analysis procedures.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this phenomenological study provide a rich description of the lived experiences of international students from Asia-Pacific while they were pursuing postgraduate education in Australia. Nine (9) themes emerged from thirty-six (36) formulated meanings. Five textural themes were generated with respect to the participants' accounts of their lived experiences as international postgraduate students: (Theme 1) opportunities to earn while studying; (Theme 2) access to health, wellbeing, and recreational support; (Theme 3) acknowledgment of student agency; (Theme 4) adjustment to a multicultural society; and (Theme 5) access to a balanced work-life integration. As for the challenges and issues faced by the participants as international postgraduate students and the mechanisms they employed to overcome them, four themes were generated: (Theme 6) setting priorities to maximize the time and overall experience; (Theme 7) utilizing advanced university infrastructures and comprehensive services; (Theme 8) connecting with peers of the same nationality; and (Theme 9) building professional connections and personal support networks.

1. As to the lived experiences of international postgraduate students from Asia-Pacific:

Theme 1 – Opportunities to earn while studying

This theme emerged from the analysis of the statements of the participants encompassing both their academic and social experiences. This particular theme of being able to earn while enrolled in the university was relatively easy to develop from the accounts of the participants. Recurring ideas that relate to the participants' favorable disposition towards working while studying include mentions of "looking forward" and "good opportunity" together with explicit mentions of "extra cash", "salary", and "part-time work".

It is important to note that international students earn while studying due to opportunities inside and outside of the university. Participant 2 and Participant 13 both directly earn from participating in activities and programs inside the university – being employed as a student-staff and participating in a paid research as a respondent, respectively. For Participant 15 and Participant 1, singing on the streets and working in a grocery store gave them extra cash. Participant 3 works in a third party organization as part of the requirement in the program.

This theme that relates to how international students strive to acculturate in their new environment by doing well (i.e. participating in productive activities inside and outside of the university) aligns with Desai's (2024) conclusion that

international students demonstrate a strong focus to get adjusted in their new culture.

This theme is evident in the following responses:

I was looking forward every fortnight because aside from the allowance I receive from the university, my salary from my part-time work also gets credited. (Participant 15)

My time, I would say, was maximized because I get to be employed by the university during the sem. (Participant 2)

I was feeling bored at the student accommodation, and since I sing, I thought of using it for extra cash. (Participant 1)

Talking to my classmates is also a good opportunity. One girl introduced me to participate in an economic research. (Participant 13)

I worked at the office I was just acknowledging in one of our papers... (Participant 3)

Theme 2 – Access to health, well-being, and recreational support

Consistent with one of the major themes in Anandavali's (2024) study that international students develop and employ coping strategies as they live in a foreign environment, the second emerging theme in the present study subtly emphasizes the need for and availability of health and well-being support for students.

For Theme 2, access to health and wellbeing support, most of the responses that were considered to generate the theme were from a single university. Participants from the two other universities included in the study did not explicitly state a need for or access to health and recreational services.

It can be gleaned from the responses that access to support services related to health and recreation varies, but these forms of support are vital for international students. For instance, Participant 11 was feeling the academic pressure during the assessment period in the university and there was no immediate family around to give Participant 11 support so she opted to reaching out to the university's wellbeing support services office. Participant 14 also had to avail of the services offered by the university because of an acne breakout which made her conscious of her looks. The university's teleconsultation option, part of the wide array of services available for students, helped her. In the case of Participant 4, Participant 12, and Participant 5, access to recreational and health services offered by the university complimented their current lifestyle and need for adjustments in the new environment.

Theme 2 highlights the need for universities to offer a range of health, wellbeing, and recreational services for the students both for emergency and leisurely purpose. This finding is in congruence with Anandavali's (2024) finding in his study that international students of color face different types of stress, medical, and mental health issues and thus, support is vital. Interestingly, another finding of this study that is similar with Anadavali's (2024) is the tendency for international students to seek support, formal or informal, from other international students, as in the case of Participant 12.

Theme 2 is evident in the following responses:

I had to ask for help because I was feeling pressured and lonely. (Participant 11)

While at uni, I pursued my fitness goal... (Participant 4)

Haha! No it was just an exhibition game of Unimelb's Futsal Club. (Participant 12)

Going to South Melbourne Beach with good swimmers was

an experience! (Participant 5)

Not going out for a few weeks because of acne was terrible. (Participant 14)

Theme 3 – Acknowledgement of student agency

This particular theme involves the agency enforced or given to students – either directly or indirectly—by the community they belong with. This community can be the university or academic setting or the community and workplaces they join. Textural descriptions of students' responses reveal the active role they take in their own learning, inside and outside of the university.

The participants' answers on questions relating to their academic experience provide an interesting layer of international student experience – being accorded of student agency. Their responses to how they integrate with the new society as a student and as a professional show that they take ownership of their academic and professional lives as international students. Responses of Participant 7 who attended a conference in Indonesia on his own accord, Participant 4 who was given a job in Australia because of being already a professional back in Papua New Guinea, and Participant 3 who held a Representative position at the Graduate Student Association of the university show student agency. International students show their own voice and choice in the actions they make, and the community acknowledges it too.

The following are representative samples of participants' responses related to the third theme of acknowledgment of student agency:

We weren't required to go but I took upon it myself to apply for the conference and fly to Indonesia. Being back home was enough reason actually. (Participant 7)

Not really alienated, but I was nervous at first joining the GSA (Graduate Student Association) while having internship as well. (Participant 3)

I just applied and when they learned I'm already a professional in PNG, they accepted me. (Participant 4)

I gained Aussie friends working at a local firm. (Participant 4)

I was alone most of the time because I had to study. (Participant 10)

This theme which pertains to student agency of international students is also echoed by Mili and Towers (2022) ^[43] who contend that postgraduate university students in foreign higher education settings construct their own identities as learners in a multicultural setting. Similar with how the participants in the present study were afforded with agency and autonomy in their own learning by their academic and social environment, Mili and Towers (2022) ^[43] emphasize the need to examine how social actors portray international students as they construct their identities as foreign learners.

Theme 4 – Adjustment to a multicultural society

The fourth theme shows varied lifestyle and cultural adjustments made by international students during their stay in Melbourne, Victoria and Adelaide, South Australia. They were confronted with new norms that they were not accustomed to. Examples of these adjustments to a multicultural society that international students experienced are found on their responses.

The lived reality of adjusting to a new culture, most

especially for international students are evident in the personal accounts of Participant 10 who was not accustomed to shops closing early, Participant 11 who was taking extra time to comprehend the thick Australian accent of people in her class, and Participant 2 who got delighted by the diversity of culture in the city center of Melbourne. Similarly, the experience of Participant 6 having encountered relatively unruly teenagers, while not exactly negative or bad, presents a reality for international students living in a foreign land.

The following are representative samples of Theme 4:

I was extra conscious and careful when riding the bus going back home because living in the regional area, one time there were unruly teenagers in the bus and I noticed it's common outside of the city. (Participant 6)

Eating early dinner! It wasn't my cup of tea. (Participant 10). I would say I like it because Asians are everywhere in the CBD. When riding the tram I was counting how many Asians, Europeans, or other nationalities are there, haha! (Participant 2)

Thick Aussie accent really gets me thinking hard. (Participant 11)

A great deal of literature supports this thematic formulation that focuses on international students adjusting to a multicultural society. Chukwezi (2024) looked into the perspectives of international students of color and noted that cultural differences play a vital part in their overall experience. Contrary to the accounts of the participants of this study that generally describe favorable experiences for international students in Australia, Salinas, *et al.*'s (2022) [56] findings revealed that Middle Eastern men studying in the United States of America had to contend to negative perceptions and academic and social isolation. These stark differences in international student experiences are noted by Heng (2019) [30] in his study of Chinese international students in the United States of America. For him, international students have heterogeneous characteristics and they face diverse range of experiences, too (Heng, 2019) [30].

Theme 5 – Access to a balanced work-life integration

The fifth theme revolved around healthy integration of work and leisure in Australia, at least in the perspectives of the participants as international students. The answers of the participants that led to the fifth theme of access to a balanced work-life integration vary from one another. For Participant 1, volunteering at the St. Kilda Eco-center and having beach clean-up among other activities is a form of rest. For Participant 3, attending events organized by the city specifically for students through Study Melbourne was an avenue to gain balance in work and play while also integrating to the new culture. Travelling, as noted by Participant 5, is an activity he does to maintain connection with his Vietnamese friends in the city. While not entirely a sign of separation, Participant 12 chose to live with her relatives even if it meant that she has to take a regional train to and from university. She considers studying in the city and living in the suburb a form of balanced structure in her life.

The fifth theme – access to a balanced work-life integration—is evident in the following responses:

Volunteering in St. Kilda Eco-centre is a must if you're new here. (Participant 1)

Us Vietnamese love to travel around Australia! We went to

Tasmania and Brisbane last month. (Participant 5)

Attending events by Study Melbourne, they have so many. (Participant 3)

I take the VLine (train) because it was convenient. (Participant 12)

This theme talks about the positive opportunities that are afforded to international students in the country they are studying. Similar to the essence of this experience of having access to a balanced work-life integration, Khanh and Ngoc's (2024) [33] investigation of Laotian and Cambodian students also generated themes related to the enjoyment of favorable conditions in the host country. These particular instances suggest that attainment of healthy work-life balance and favorable living conditions are a shared experience among international students. Although there are variations in how these experiences manifest, benefiting from ideal circumstances remain a common theme among international students

2. As to how the international postgraduate students address the challenges and demands of Australian higher education:

Theme 6: Prioritizing tasks to optimize time and overall experience

The participants noted that in tackling problems and confronting difficulties they encountered while navigating the life of an international student in Australia, setting their priorities right to optimize their limited time and to take pleasure in the overall experience is important. This particular theme emerged from critically analyzing the statements of the participants as to how they have experienced the phenomenon under inquiry.

This theme of optimizing time is evident on the responses of Participant 15. He shared that working on a part-time basis as a store staff at a certain grocery store in Australia while concurrently studying took most of his free time.

For Participant 2, joining Students-at-Work Program, a voluntary employment opportunity for currently employed student, was purely incidental. During her downtime at one of the university libraries, she got to talk to a student-staff who introduced her to the employment opportunity.

Having a relatively long break in between school schedule prompted Participant 1 to use her time on an activity that relates to what she is inclined to do which is singing. As for Participant 13, circumstances led her to regularly join academic survey research in the university as a participant. She recalled that she had to clear her schedule to give way to her new engagement. Related responses that corroborate to the other statements about maximizing time were from Participant 3. She shared that she appreciated the schedule set under her degree program as it enabled her to plot her schedule efficiently and plan for work, studies, and leisure.

Theme 6 emerged after careful analysis of the following responses:

I earn by working on a part-time basis at Woolies, store staff, during my free time. (Participant 15)

One time at the ERC library, I got to talk with a student-staff who is also at Students-at-Work program and she introduced me to it. (Participant 2)

Just out of boredom and curiosity, I went to the city hall to apply for permit for busking along Swanston, and I earned over 80 dollars! My time got useful! (Participant 1)

One Tuesday when we don't have classes, my Chinese classmate told me about the economic research and signed up and went there together. I was also looking for something to do so I went with her. They credited my pay in my CommBank account. (Participant 13)

...due to the requirement for internship in our MPPM program I was able to squeeze in a lot of productive tasks during my stay... (Participant 3)

Analyzing these statements in the context of how the participants recounted the various experiences they had led to the emergence of textural Theme 6. True to the OECD's (2022) [49] definition that international students "are not permanent or usual residents of their country of study", this theme suggests that the participants are fully aware that they have limited time as international students; thus, maximizing the experience is a must (p. 219). For the participants of this study, optimizing time to maximize the overall experience come in different ways, but its shared meaning remains the same.

Theme 7: Leveraging the advanced university infrastructures and comprehensive services

Theme 7 deals with the cutting-edge technological and physical infrastructures of Australian universities and the comprehensive services freely offered to students. Developing this particular theme is relatively straightforward. Statements of the participants that relate with how utilizing these advanced facilities and services were an integral part of their experience were recorded. Statements such as "full suite of sports equipment and facilities", "library was really cool and advanced", "university's vast, multi-use sports field", "teleconsult", are just some of the key responses that led to the development of this theme.

Selected significant statements that support the theme are given below:

I was feeling lonely for being away from home for more than a year. It was my assessment period so it added to the pressure. So I went to the uni's library and it was really cool and advanced, I got distracted in a good way... (Participant 11)

For 30 AUD monthly subscription, students can access the full suite of sports equipment and facilities of the uni. (Participant 4)

Just thought of joining to gain some more connections and I play it at home so it was just easy for me. I was with my classmates from Vietnam and Cambodia and we were astounded by the university's vast, multi-use sports field. (Participant 12)

I signed up for the uni's free swimming lessons, I was just at the beginning level! (Participant 5)

... no, just the teleconsult of the university's health center... (Participant 14)

Theme 7 clearly indicates the plethora of benefits of going overseas to study especially in major international education markets like Australia. As the participants' responses suggest, these benefits come in various forms. However, current literature show that these advantages can only be experienced by a select few. In a study comparing student mobility uptake in Hungary, Germany, Italy, and the UK, Schnepf, *et al.* (2024) noted that economic challenges affect international student mobility. This means that while

leveraging on the advanced university infrastructures and comprehensive services are a shared experience for current international students, this opportunity is offered only to a select few.

Theme 8: Connecting with peers of the same nationality or ethnicity

Familiarity and shared experience is the highlight of Theme 8 which focuses on international students connecting with their peers coming from the same ethnicity or nationality. It can be gleaned from the participants' responses that a sense of familiarity and comfort was instrumental in how they handled hurdles and challenges of studying away from their families and own home.

This particular theme was developed through a number of instances when participants recalled times they interacted with their peers, either unintentionally or deliberately. At both times, participants shared how it made them feel – generally positive and favorable—regardless of how the experience came to be. Participant 7 went back to his country Indonesia to join a conference even if it was not required. He clearly manifested his reason to visit his home country while still studying abroad. For Participant 13, Participant 4, and Participant 10, even though they have different instances of reconnecting with their fellow nationals, their responses suggest the notion of positive encounter, one that provides much needed comfort and enjoyment.

Selected statements that led to the development of theme 8 are presented below:

We weren't required to go but I took upon it myself to apply for the conference and fly to Indonesia. Being back home was the reason actually. (Participant 7)

Though previous Mongolian students were part of GSA as representatives, it was only me during my term. They helped me to become part of the council. (Participant 13)

I just applied and when they learned I'm already a professional in PNG, they accepted me. Good thing someone from PNG was there too. (Participant 4)

We have classes almost daily so that (studying) took most of my time, but I am enjoying it especially since I am with my friends from Timor Leste. (Participant 10)

Literature that explore the multitude of issues and challenges confronted by international students abound (Chukwezi, 2024; Kilinc, *et al.*, 2020; Park, *et al.*, 2022; Vidal, 2024) [66]. Given the occurrence of these hurdles, international students devise ways that will support them and help them survive in an unfamiliar environment. This theme provides structural descriptions that directly show how international students address these concerns, and that is finding the familiar in a foreign place.

Theme 9: Building professional connections and personal support networks

Similar with Theme 8, responses of the participants revealed that building professional connections and personal support network are integral part of how the participants fully experienced being an international postgraduate student. Participants navigated the stresses of studying abroad through unplanned encounters and intentional personal and professional networking.

Participant 1 joined a volunteer organization while studying in Melbourne, and she saw it while randomly scrolling in her

social media feed. For Participant 5, her responses revealed that she usually travels around Australia to meet new friends and acquaintances. In the case of Participant 3 and Participant 12, they were intentional in forging professional connections in Australia if ever opportunities for skilled migration come.

The following statements show Theme 9:

The center pops up in my feed when I was looking for options for volunteering and I immediately clicked on it. (Participant 1)

It was after our major assessments are finished that my friends and I went to travel around Australia to meet other people, friends. (Participant 5)

I just saw booths at the Fed Square and since I am interested on such kind of socialization activity, I signed up. (Participant 3)

Joining Welcome to Melbourne Program of the uni where I get to meet alumni who are noted professionals here was definitely a highlight of my stay (Participant 12).

Forging professional connections and building personal support networks are common experiences among the participants as international students. This shared understanding contributed to the development of structural descriptions for Theme 9. As highlighted in Salina, *et al.*'s (2022) ^[55] study, social integration plays a crucial role in the success of international students. The experiences of the participants in this study clearly demonstrate a shared recognition of this reality.

Textural Description

The participants shared various accounts of their experiences while studying and living in Australia as international postgraduate students. Highlighting significant statements that encompass their experiences as international students coming from different countries in Asia-Pacific, textural descriptions of their lived experiences created themes marked by a constant navigation between multitude of opportunities and challenges of living and studying in a foreign land. While pursuing postgraduate education in Australia, international students from Asia-Pacific found themselves at the intersection of an unfamiliar culture, rigorous academic expectations, and the pursuit of personal and professional growth leveraging on the opportunities they have at hand.

For the participants, being an international student in a highly multicultural and diverse society like Australia means adjusting to a social system characterized by a complex mix of different cultural norms, languages, and lifestyles. The students spoke of being culturally immersed as they were exposed to diverse cultural and societal practices which necessitated a deliberate effort to comprehend and get accustomed to.

Similarly, the participants' experiences as students in Australian higher education institutions mean taking full ownership of their own learning. They were accorded opportunities inside and outside the academe that enabled them to practice student agency and autonomy, empowering them and letting them take active part in their own respective educational journeys and beyond. For some, it meant doing overseas internships and workshops and engaging with peers and professors in thought-provoking discussions and networking, for others it meant taking control of their schedules studying, working, and earning at the same time. In addition, the participants' lived experiences were also

significantly characterized by enjoyment of the privileges that enriched their lives while studying and living in a foreign land. Leveraging on the abundant opportunities and accessible educational and social services provided by both the universities and the Australian society at large, the participants optimized their time abroad and maximized their experience. Inside the university, international students basked in a supportive academic environment with complete access to world-class resources and facilities. Outside it, they enjoyed a wealth of health, wellbeing, and recreational support services that led them to achieve a balanced work-life integration even as a temporary student immigrant to a foreign land.

Structural Description

Several processes shaped the overall experience of international postgraduate students from Asia-Pacific while they were living and studying in Australia. As seen on the textural descriptions of their experience, the international postgraduate students' journey was not only characterized by possibilities and opportunities, it was also fraught with challenges. Their responses as to how they were able to hurdle the challenges and issues while studying and living in a foreign land formed the underlying conditions that led to the development of the structural descriptions of their experiences.

Themes and qualities that accounted for how the participants made sense of their experience and addressed its challenges include the critical aspects of setting priorities to optimize their time and overall experience, utilizing advanced university infrastructures and comprehensive services, connecting with peers of the same nationality or ethnicity, and building professional connections and personal support networks. Together, these strategies formed the structural descriptions of this study.

It was evident in the participants' responses that to address the challenges of studying and living in a multicultural society, they had to deliberately connect with their peers of the same ethnicity or cultural origin and forge personal and professional networks with the locals of Australia. For them, connecting with their peers of the same ethnicity provided a sense of home and security on top of the actual assistance and support they can provide. In addition, for the participants, building professional connections and personal support system with the locals of and other nationalities in Australia was a way of finding the familiar in an otherwise unfamiliar terrain. Living in a highly heterogenous society, the international students forged social and professional connections that helped them survive during their time in Australia, and according to them, even beyond.

Similarly, the participants were also able to optimize their time and fully maximize their experience as international postgraduate students in Australia by strictly setting their priorities for studies and other things. For some of the participants, this meant setting definite time and schedule for studies and part-time work to earn, and for others setting priorities meant travelling and engaging in leisure activities in-between schooling.

As noted by the participants, a crucial aspect of being able to deal with the challenges of living and studying in Australia was the presence of a wealth of supportive social and academic systems and mechanisms that made their stay in the country bearable and even enjoyable. Inside Australian universities as international students, the participants were

fully utilizing the advanced physical and technological infrastructures and comprehensive services available. Outside the university and as temporary immigrants in a highly progressive cosmopolitan society, the participants enjoyed a plethora of accessible and equitable social services that enabled them to fully immerse in the Australian society.

Essence

After integrating both textural and structural descriptions of the participants' experience, a composite structure that conveys the overall essence of their experience was formed. The essence of the experience of the international postgraduate students from Asia-Pacific studying and living in Australia revolved around the dynamic journey of navigating through opportunities and overcoming its challenges. While navigating the challenging life of a temporary student immigrant, the participants faced a complex interplay of academic and social challenges and opportunities, and in the process experienced varying degrees of adjustments, adaptations and success.

Initially, students had to make necessary adjustments on living in a multicultural society while studying in Australian higher education institutions known for their intense academic rigor. To work through the challenges of living in a heterogenous society, international postgraduate students started to forge personal and professional alliances that would support them during their time in Australia and beyond. Tapping the vast network provided by established peers of similar ethnicity in Australia, they not only found the comforts of home but also extended their reach by forging connections with the locals of Australia and other nationalities. International students utilized available resources, services, and support provided by their respective universities and communities to adjust to the demands of their newfound—albeit temporary—home.

Taking full advantage of the opportunities presented by living in a progressive and supportive society, the participants maximized their time by engaging in productive ventures that enriched both their personal experiences and even finances. The international postgraduate students leveraged their professional expertise to thrive in the academe and Australian society, drawing on their credentials as certified professionals in their home countries. In their quest to adjust and adapt to their new, foreign environment, they developed better versions of themselves, harnessing the transformative power of their Australian higher education experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Consistent with the theoretical foundations of this study and the prevailing scholarly literature in the field, the study revealed that the lived experiences of international higher education students and the acculturation processes they go through are characterized by a complex mix of academic and social challenges and opportunities, resulting in varying degrees of adjustment, adaptation, and success.

As revealed by the study, the lived experiences of the participants as international postgraduate students were marked by intricate accounts reflecting a broad range of opportunities—earning while studying; gaining access to health, wellbeing, and recreational support; exercising student agency and independence; adapting to a multicultural society; and attaining balanced work-life integration. These conceptualizations on the essence of the international postgraduate students' experiences, particularly those from

the Asia-Pacific region studying and living in Australia, centered around a dynamic process of navigating through opportunities as temporary student immigrants in a highly developed society.

Furthermore, the study revealed that international postgraduate students were also confronted with challenges and issues associated with pursuing higher education abroad. To cope with these, international postgraduate students, during the course of their studies, learned to connect with peers of the same nationality and build professional connections and personal support networks. By making the most of their time and overall experience and by effectively utilizing the university's advanced infrastructure and comprehensive support services, the international students not only successfully acculturated to their new environment, but also overcame challenges and ultimately flourished within their new environment.

Given these findings and conclusions, several recommendations for future directions can be drawn out. First, current and prospective international students should build personal and professional support networks by engaging with relevant individuals and communities that offer a broad range of support mechanisms, including academic, cultural, social, and psychological assistance. By seeking out and utilizing these support networks, students can enhance their overall experience, fostering a greater sense of integration and confidence while living and studying in a foreign environment. Second, school administrators of higher education institutions should develop tailored internationalization strategies responsive to the varying needs of international students before, during and after their studies. This would include post-arrival orientations and guidance, cultural and social integration support, continuing and on-demand academic advising, and post-graduation networking. By tailoring internationalization strategies, school administrators of higher education institution can ensure that international students are holistically supported, leading to their improved personal and academic outcomes. Third, government entities and policymakers should ensure that existing and relevant legislations and regulations on internationalization of higher education are followed and rightfully observed. This can be done by tapping the support and working with other government agencies and functionaries in charge of immigration, international exchange, and multicultural affairs. In doing so, the protection and welfare of international students and higher education institutions will be safeguarded, while also serving the broader interests of the country and its national priorities. Finally, future researchers and academics should delve deeper into the complex and multifaceted experiences of international students across various academic levels by conducting longitudinal studies that incorporate a broader range of students and perspectives. This approach would provide researchers and academics a more comprehensive understanding of the shared experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by international students.

As the study revealed, understanding the lived experiences of international students brings forth essential insights for higher education institutions in their quest for internationalizing their practice in the midst of the increasingly competitive field. With the pressure for higher education institutions to evolve and adapt to the changing demand of the contemporary education landscape (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Ghazarian, *et al.*, 2024; Kilinc, *et al.*, 2020;

Themistocleous, 2024) ^[25, 64], it is important that lived experiences of international students as key players of internationalization of higher education be investigated. This study shed light on the diverse dimensions of the lived experiences of international students and offered a more nuanced understanding of their multifaceted nature amidst the growing global interest in the phenomenon.

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