Belonging, Being, and Interculturality: A Narrative Exploration of the Experiences Endured by Students Labelled International in a British University

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his/her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

This research probes into the experiences of students labelled international within a British university in the north of England. Narratives shared by several international-fee-paying postgraduate researchers reveal several intricate trajectories that transcend the essentialist representation of the 'international other' as a deficient, pre-cultured cash cow. The study explores a plethora of generative mechanisms that are arguably implemented in a systematic manner to impose a sense of alienation and difference, and to justify the financial exploitation of students labelled international. Students' narratives serve to uncover some of the restrictive policies and deficit-laden encounters that impact their very sense of being. This involves reflections on border-crossing experiences, police registration, struggles to fit within certain predefined ethnic labels, and even problematic encounters with supervisors, staff, and other individuals. The research debunks the false homogeneity attributed to the international label and argues that cohorts of students labelled international are not homogeneous, but rather actively and purposefully homogenised. In spite of the current unprecedented interest in research about international students, students' intercultural experiences, and the internationalisation of higher education, this study manages to explore a seldom tackled facet of the experiences endured by students labelled international.

There are three main contributions that this research aspires to disseminate. First, it outlines the generative mechanisms sustaining the current trajectories of students labelled international. Second, it poses relevant questions vis-à-vis the analytical affordances of the current theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinning research about international students, especially within the field of Intercultural Studies. Third, it suggests an alternative conceptualisation of culture as a form of belonging which could serve to inform policies and practices involving international students.

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List of Acronyms

BRP: Biometric Residence Permit

ESRC: Economic and Social Research Council

HE: Higher Education

HEIs: Higher Education Institutions

HEPI: Higher Education Policy Institute

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

IC: Intercultural Competence

IELTS: International English Language Testing System

IEPs: Intensive English Programmes

IPGR: International Postgraduate Researcher

IS: International Student

LE: London Economics

MAC: Migration Advisory Committee

NSS: National Student Survey

NUS: National Union of Students

OFS: Office for Students

PGR: Postgraduate Researcher

QDAS: Qualitative Data Analysis Software

SAC: Student-As-Consumer

TA: Thematic Analysis

UUK: Universities UK

Chapter 1
Introducing the Research

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research and outlines the research questions. It begins with a short overview about the state of international students mobility, in addition to the increasing interest in certain research areas that accompanied this phenomenon. It also briefly highlights the economic impact of international students in UK HE and the differential forms of treatment that they experience throughout their degrees (A more detailed analysis of international students' economic impact and an exploration of the policies underpinning their experiences are tackled in chapter 2). Moreover, this chapter articulates the importance and rationale for conducting this research and indicates the contribution it adds to the areas of higher education studies and intercultural studies. Finally, the chapter provides a thesis map and a table that maps out what chapters address, how they are organised, and the rationale for this arrangement.

Coming across research that explores a presumed international student experience is neither novel nor uncommon. In fact, research around this topic grew exponentially in the last three decades, with dedicated journals, consultancies, and think tanks that tackle every facet of international students' experiences (e.g. the Journal of International Students, London Economics, and the Higher Education Policy Institute). Such increasing interest is evident since these cohorts not only make up a notable proportion of the total number of students in major destinations (such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), but also establish a competitive market underpinned by governmental and institutional desires to capitalise on the recruitment of international students as much as possible. A notable example of such endeavour is the UK, where recent findings published by Higher Education Statistics Agency

([HESA](#)) and London Economics ([LE](#)) show that the 2020-21 international student cohort accounted for 22% of the total student population, with a net[1] economic contribution of £28.8 billion.

This interest in international students as constituents of a lucrative market is accompanied by a problematic tendency to research their intercultural trajectories. It is problematic as the majority of research underlying international students' intercultural experiences frames their cultural realities within an ossified and homogeneous whole, where any international student is deemed an ambassador of some national culture. This subsequently renders students' intricate trajectories and actively negotiated intercultural realities inaccessible. In the UK, the constant discursive construction of international students as essentially different beings within research, policy, and mainstream media is arguably sustaining a large body of mechanisms that impose a sense of alienation. This differential form of treatment is not random, but rather deployed systematically via a spectrum of policies and bureaucratic constraints that accompany these students' trajectories prior, during, and even after finishing their degrees.

This research attempts to unveil the mechanisms underpinning the trajectories and experiences of what I perceive to be an actively homogenised group of students labelled international. In so doing, it questions the basis upon which the label is mobilised to refer to these students (as discussed in chapter 7), the status resulting from such affiliation, the mechanisms sustaining this differential status quo (these are tackled in several sections throughout chapters 5-6-7), and the wider implications and ramifications endured by students and the wider community. The thesis provides an in-depth exploration of students' experiences by critically examining the underpinnings of the international label, and how culture and interculturality are mobilised to homogenise anyone who does not fit within the definition of a home student (Chapter 6

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[1] This is the net economic benefit after excluding all costs and expenses.

analyses an array of extracts that revolve around this idea). This is achieved via a narrative approach which is employed throughout the study to explore students' endured realities as they are narrated in interviews.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

The aim of this study is to probe into the actual experiences of students labelled international by showcasing their intricate intercultural and/or student trajectories, along with the realities they endure on the go. It also involves a critical exploration of the generative mechanisms that sustain this arguably uneven reality. The generative mechanisms expression recurs frequently throughout this thesis. Its usage is influenced by my reading of, and partial affiliation with, the work of critical realists. A generative mechanism is defined as "nothing more of a way of acting of a thing (Bhaskar, 2008, p.51). Generative mechanisms in this study are the factors, events, policies, narratives, and discourses that impact the realities experienced by students labelled international. Examples of this could comprise students' differential border crossing experiences, the implications of being labelled international, the experience of registering with the police, etc. One of the research objectives is to demonstrate how the mobilisation of these mechanisms within institutional and governmental policies is actively constraining, and in some instances denying, students' being. This can be explored in detail in sections 8.2 and 8.3 where the generative mechanisms and their impact are outline.

To quote from my final discussion chapter, there is an active tendency to 'culturize' and 'exoticize' experiences whenever the international is mentioned. What can be considered an 'encounter with a new environment' in the case of 'local' or 'home' students suddenly becomes an 'encounter with a new cultural environment' for international students. There is a prevalent obsession with culture (regardless of what it implies) whenever the international student is mentioned. Another important aim of this research is to capture whatever students deem to be part of a cultural or intercultural experience. Hence, this research does not employ a cultural model that

presumably assists in tracing individuals' cultural realities or intercultural competences. Instead, it builds on students' narratives to portray the intricacy of cultural realities, and the impossibility of reducing international students to a state of cultural ambassadors. Endeavours to depict cultural complexity through narratives is initiated in section 6.3.1 where I introduce a novel theoretical conceptualisation of culture as a form of belonging and elaborate on it further in section 8.4.

Finally, this research aims to unveil students' positions vis-à-vis the institutional mobilisation of the international label. In so doing, it attempts to uncover what makes a student international, and whether the need for a distinctive status is legitimate and justified according to the arguments and perceptions voiced through students' narratives. Drawing back on the problematic utilisations of the culture concept, the international label is a parallel marker of difference. It creates a problematic binary where systemic forces become entitled to treat non-home students as outsiders, eventually yielding an uneven educational terrain. Such a problematic state is hardly addressed in academia, and the proliferation of the aforementioned void (empty) terminologies serves to conceal student's endured realities even further.

In sum, this research tackles the following questions:

1. What mechanisms impact the trajectories and experiences of students labelled international?
2. What implications do these mechanisms exert on students' experiences, choices, and realities?
3. How do students labelled international perceive and construct their intercultural and student experiences?
4. What perceptions do students hold about the international label?
5. Why is labelling students problematic?

1.3 Research Significance and Contribution

There is an abundant body of research that revolves around international students' experiences, their intercultural trajectories, their encounters with allegedly intact 'cultures' or 'native' languages, their presumed acculturation, assimilation, or integration within some homogeneous whole, and issues surrounding their recruitment within policy and promotional discourses. Moreover, there is a concurrent obsession with generic buzzwords that tend to resurface in contexts that centre around international students' experiences. Expressions along the lines of global citizenship, intercultural competence, diversity, and decolonisation proliferate in the majority of grant-sustained research projects. Although the ongoing interest in international students and their experiences spans a wide array of research facets, little is investigated about the underpinnings of being international and the realities endured by those who find themselves subsumed within the confines of the label. Therefore, it is uncommon to encounter research that uncovers the problematic positioning of students labelled international and the mechanisms sustaining that.

The significance of this research lies in the contribution it aims to bring to the areas of higher education studies, internationalisation of higher education, and intercultural studies. This is achieved by shedding light on the actual realities that these students endure throughout their degrees. In this study, interviewed participants are not approached as international students per se. Instead, they are given the space to reflect on their understandings of the connotations of the label along with their views about finding themselves institutionally framed as international. What this research strives to highlight is reality as endured by students themselves. There is an urgent need to research the actual experiences of students labelled international, beyond the realm of metric-driven buzzwords. The brief exploration of the mechanisms underpinning the events narrated by these students presents a seldom researched context, one that does not comply with the aforementioned empty terminologies. Therefore, the facets tackled throughout this research are incompatible with the current institutional

visions and promotional discourses that project an image of an international, equal, diverse, inclusive, and decolonised global campus.

This study contributes to several ongoing discussions in the areas of higher education studies and intercultural studies. At the empirical level, the thesis outlines a plethora of mechanisms that dictate the realities endured by students labelled international. Attending to these mechanisms via research-informed policy reformations would alleviate several hardships and lead to a more equitable educational terrain. The thesis also attends to issues around the ongoing preoccupation with culture in contexts involving international students. In so doing, it provides a rich account of students' intercultural experiences, with events and discussions that defy the superficial conceptualisation of international students as pre-cultured beings, meaning that they are assumed to have affiliations predetermined by their country of origin. Building on a series of critical narratives, the study suggests a conceptualisation of culture that transcends this institutional reductionism by acknowledging the intricacy of belonging to or forming a cultural affiliation. Throughout the thesis, there are points where I actively question the analytical affordances of the current theoretical frameworks underpinning research in these areas. An ongoing unease with the current paradigms is discussed in the methodology chapter and highlighted whenever relevant during the analysis and discussion phase.

1.4 Thesis Map

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter provides a general introduction to the research, the aims and questions that I tackle throughout the study, and the contribution this research adds to the current discussions, policies, practices, and literature around the experiences of international students. This chapter concludes with a brief definition of the concepts and terms that recur frequently throughout the thesis. The second chapter maps the research context. There are three aims underpinning this chapter: First, to contextualise the research by briefly exploring and describing the state of international students in UK HEIs. Second, to probe into some of the key

reports and policy documents where international students are mentioned. Third, to present one of many international student trajectories by reflecting on my experience in the UK. This chapter helps to contextualise and clarify the narrative extracts shared by participants in chapter five, six, and eight.

The third chapter probes into the literature by tackling relevant concepts, theories, modalities, and critical discussions. This chapter is divided into two main sections: The first section deals with aspects that are arguably part of the area of intercultural studies. The second section delves into the area of internationalisation and student experiences. Both sections converge frequently and are informed by a body of literature that spans an array of disciplines. The fourth chapter addresses the methodological aspects of the research. It establishes the theoretical framework underpinning the research and provides a brief delineation of the ontological and epistemological affordances of the main standpoints. This is followed by a description of the research approach and methods along with the analytical framework used to analyse students' narratives. This chapter concludes with a brief introduction of the students who contributed to the study.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters tackle the narratives shared by research participants during interviews. The fifth chapter deals with three main headings that cover international students' experiences with crossing borders and navigating policies, the trajectories they endure on the go along with the preconceptions that sustain feelings of deficiency, and their relationships with their supervisors. The sixth chapter unpacks what can be considered part of students' intercultural experiences. This comprises the preconceptions and expectations they held/hold about the UK as a Western European study destination, the problematic culturist discursive construction that they either construct about others or find themselves subsumed within, and several single stories that reveal a problematic situations on and off campus where being international is demonised, exoticized, or perceived as a deficiency. This chapter concludes with narratives which portray stances that contest some of the essentialist statements that students come across throughout their research degree.

The seventh chapter delves into students' views vis-à-vis the proliferation of metrics and league tables, and the underpinnings of the international label. In so doing, it explores the interplay between league table indicators and prospective students' destination choices, along with the relevance and transparency of the criteria used to dictate institutional rankings. The chapter concludes with a brief exploration of students' attitudes regarding their daily encounters with the international label. The eighth and final chapter discusses most of the aforementioned headings with references to relevant literature and theories. It also articulates the research implications, a continuation of the limitations tackled throughout the thesis chapters, and concluding remarks.

The thesis is constructed in a way that aims to highlight complete and unedited narratives. The long extracts serve to showcase the depth of students' experiences, and the overall presentation of findings (especially in chapters five, six, and seven) portrays a plethora of detailed stories. Each heading in the analysis chapters is followed by a section discussion where I summarise and reflect on the insights shared by participants. In total, there are eight section discussions that summarise the eight themes outlined in this research. This is followed by a more theoretical discussion in the final chapter, where each section is informed by the research findings and the wider literature. Another important facet of this thesis is the reflection entries that are presented in separate grey boxes mainly throughout the methodology and analysis sections. These entries are personal observations that were informed by major events at the time of writing and which relate to or elaborate on one of the points shared by participants.

Chapter title	Contents	Rationale
Chapter 1: Introducing the Research	▪ General introduction ▪ Research aims and questions ▪ Significance and contribution ▪ Thesis map	This chapter introduces the main research topic which revolves around exploring the experiences of students labelled international. It briefly points to some of the recurring concepts in this

	• Recurring concepts	research. These are explored in detail at several instances throughout this thesis.
Chapter 2: Mapping the Research context	• Analysis of reports about international students in the UK. • Statistics including cohort sizes, nationalities, and net economic impact. • Policy documents and scholarly work that probes into policies and reports that revolve around students in UK HE. • Analysis of my own personal trajectory as a student labelled international in the UK.	This chapter serves to contextualise my research by exploring the current state of UK HE, mainly in regard to international students' mobility. Undertaking this initial policy-informed investigation revealed an array of valuable findings. These findings were utilised to inform and guide the research and data collection processes, especially when deciding about how to use the international label when approaching research participants, and what areas to explore in interviews.
Chapter 3: Exploring the Literature	• The contents of this chapter explore an array of concepts and theories that relate to the areas of intercultural studies, higher education studies, internationalisation, and students' experiences.	This chapter also adds to the contextualisation of the research, since it navigates a plethora of scholarly works that tackle at least one of the relevant areas. It helps to indicate the theoretical underpinnings and direction of the research. Exploring the literature allowed me to narrow the scope of my investigation, and to critically examine some of

		the recent studies that deal with similar topics.
Chapter 4: Outlining the Research Methodology	▪ The methodology chapter establishes and summarises my theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices. ▪ An outline of the research methods and analysis approaches used, and the rationale for using them. ▪ A brief reflection about the ethical considerations. ▪ A dedicated section that introduces and acknowledges the contributions of research participants. ▪ A summary of the analysis chapters and major findings.	This chapter builds on some of the critical discussions initiated in the literature chapter and offers an overview of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research. This involves a brief exploration of three main paradigms: Positivism, Constructivism, and Critical Realism (The affordances and limitations of these paradigms are explored in section 4.2). Moreover, the chapter lays out the methodological and analytical choices that were adopted to collect and analyse data. This chapter serves to indicate and explain the direction of this research. The research methodology and methods adopted are largely informed by my ontological and epistemological stances.
Chapter 5: The Actual International Student Experience	▪ Chapters 5, 6, and 7 tackle the findings of this research.	Overall, the three analysis chapters tackle three major topics: the actual

Chapter 6: Intercultural Encounters and Perceptions	▪ Overall, findings are divided into 8 themes. Each major theme comprises several sub-sections, followed by a section discussion that summarises and reflects on the main points.	experience, the intercultural trajectory, and the international label. These are three prominent facets of students' endured realities. This division is primarily based on participants' narratives, in addition to my interview questions, and the wider areas that inform this research. The aim of these chapters is not to provide a full account of the experiences endured by students labelled international (as that is not feasible, especially when considering the rich trajectories of mobile individuals). Instead, the aim is to approach endured realities from the facets that IPGRs deem to be relevant and worth highlighting.
Chapter 7: League Tables, Labels, and the Neoliberal University	▪ A detailed outline of themes and findings is provided in section 4.8.	
Chapter 8: Final Discussion and concluding Remarks	▪ Critical discussion that links findings explored in chapters 5, 6, and 7 to the wider literature. ▪ Theory-informed discussion that summarises the main research themes. ▪ Implications and suggestions for individuals and HEIs. ▪ Research limitations.	This chapter links the research findings to the wider literature. It makes use of relevant critical theory to approach and summarise the research findings. The contributions of this research are outlined in five separate headings, with each tackling a specific topic (the mechanisms underpinning students' experiences, the alienating

| | | 12 | state of belonging experienced by IPGRs, a conceptualisation of culture as a form of belonging, the affordances and limitations of strategic essentialism as an alternative position, and the economic drivers of the international label).

The chapter summarises the contribution of this research by highlighting and discussing the main points tackled in the analysis chapters. |
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Table 1 Thesis Map

1.5 Brief Description of Recurring Concepts and Expressions

Throughout this study, I use certain terms and expressions repetitively with the assumption that readers would understand what I intend to convey in this context. In order to further clarify this study, I decided to provide brief definitions that articulate my understanding of the frequently-used expressions and terms. Some of these are also duly-tackled in connection with relevant literature in the third chapter.

- **Students labelled international:** I use this expression along with the expression of international students interchangeably. It refers to the cohorts of students who are subsumed within the international status category by their respective universities. Because the Brexit transition period occurred at some point during this study, European Union students who used to be treated as Home students were suddenly classed by the UK HE sector as international students. The intentional use of 'students labelled international' is an attempt to uncover the politics underpinning the label, and to give students the liberty to

negotiate it during interviews. Section 7.3 focuses on IPGRs' perceptions about the international label.

- **Endured reality/experience:** A dictionary definition notes that "If you endure a painful or difficult situation, you experience it and do not avoid it or give up, usually because you cannot" (Collins). In this study, I resort to referring to the realities experienced by international students as endured, rather than constructed. An endured international student reality signals the events, trajectories, and choices that are actively constrained by structural forces that operate beyond individuals' ability to construct them. For example, an international student cannot simply decide to pay home tuition fees, cross the UK border via the UK citizens gate, or ignore the mandatory police registration. A more detailed illustration of the manifestations of this endured reality is outlined in the second chapter.

- **Deficit framework:** This expression is used repetitively to denote a common trend to associate certain deficiencies (e.g. lack of criticality) with being international. This is one of the problematic connotations of the label, with instances where even nationalities, presumed cultural affiliations and ethnicities are mobilised as a source for this alleged deficit. My understanding of deficit frameworks stems from reading the works of Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Adrian Holliday, among others.

- **Essentialism**: There is a dedicated section in the third chapter where I unpack this concept in detail (section 3.2.3). Overall, essentialism within the area of intercultural studies is generally regarded as the view which perceives a person's behaviour as a product of their cultural origin. In the context of international students' experiences, there is a common institutional trend to frame non-home students as representatives of homogeneous and distinct national cultures.

- **Agency:** When considering the realities experienced by students labelled international throughout their degree, it is possible to trace a plethora of established structures that predate the possible actions undertaken by students to question or transform them, a process

described by Margaret Archer as structural elaboration. Agency in this study is the ability to hold an active stance in regards to a particular determining structural force. The active stance is not always an attempt to question, contest, discard, or transform the encountered structural force. Instead, individuals' stances could even affirm the encountered structure or perceive it as unproblematic.

- **Grand narratives:** In their book *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture*, Stephens and McCallum argue that a grand narrative (also known as metanarrative) "is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (1998, p.6). The term was first introduced in philosophy and rigorously challenged by Jean-François Lyotard whose simplified definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives (1979/1984, p.xxiv) eschews the relevance of grand narratives in postmodern times. In spite of this, grand narratives are still prevalent, especially in contexts that involve international students, where grand narratives of Confucianism, Individualism, and Collectivism are actively employed to denote some alleged universal truths.

Chapter 2

Mapping the Research Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter maps the wider research context where the study was carried out. It begins with a brief overview about international students in the UK by looking into recent statistics that trace the influx of international students in the last decade, their distribution across constituencies and subject areas, and their economic contribution. The chapter then proceeds to examine relevant and publicly-accessible policy documents that revolve around the discursive construction of students in UK tertiary education. This is followed by a more specific policy-informed enquiry that uncovers the problematic governmental and institutional framing of international students as a mere source of income. I then provide a brief description of my personal trajectory and experiences in the UK, with a major focus on the differential mechanisms that create a sense of alienation.

2.2 International Students in the UK: Recent Statistics

Recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows that in the 2020-21 academic year, 605130 international students were enrolled in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This is 25% higher compared to the 2016-17 cohort where the total number of enrolments was 450835 students. Of the 2.7 million students enrolled in UK universities in 2020-21, around 22% are either EU or international students. In terms of total tuition fees, Home students contribute around £13.5 billion in tuition fees within the same year, compared to around £8.7 billion by non-Home domiciled students. This means that 22% of the enrolled students contribute around 40% of the total tuition fees generated by HEIs. This is mainly due to the wide tuition fee gap that results from being labelled international. For instance, the university where this data collection was undertaken charges Home PhD students a fixed annual fee of £4600, and international students

a variable annual fee that ranges between £20250 and £36250 depending on the pursued PhD degree. Therefore, international students are required to pay a fee that is 4.40-7.88 times higher than Home student fees.

	Financial Year End ↕	Total Home fees ↕	Total Rest of UK fees ↕	Total UK fees ↕	Total Other EU fees ↕	Total UK and EU fees ↕	Total Non-EU fees ↕	Total HE course fees ↕
							(£000s)	
University of South Wales	2021-07-31	77,110	29,607	106,725	7,684	114,407	22,902	137,309
The University of Wales (central functions)	2021-07-31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The University of Warwick	2021-07-31			153,157	26,444	179,601	194,251	373,852
Waverley Abbey College	2020-08-31			997	4	1,001	4	1,005
University of the West of England, Bristol	2021-07-31			186,263	10,115	196,378	44,775	241,153
The University of the West of Scotland	2021-07-31	20,304	4,297	24,601	3,316	27,917	14,943	42,860
West Dean College	2020-09-30			471	109	580	120	700
The University of West London	2021-07-31			79,397	16,325	95,722	15,446	111,168
The University of Westminster	2021-07-31			110,237	16,866	127,103	50,807	177,910
The University of Winchester	2021-07-31			61,903	1,086	62,989	4,189	67,178
The University of Wolverhampton	2021-07-31			113,571	1,852	115,423	22,560	137,983
University of Worcester	2021-07-31			67,780	4,081	71,861	2,873	74,734
Writtle University College	2021-07-31			5,967	218	6,185	200	6,385
York St John University	2021-07-31			52,155	505	52,660	7,256	59,916
The University of York	2021-07-31			126,683	7,498	134,181	83,910	218,091
Year to date total		829,379	537,066	13,532,632	1,334,768	14,867,400	7,426,955	22,294,355

Figure 1 Tuition Fees of UK HEIs 2020-21 Academic Year (HESA)

International students enrolled in UK HEIs come from almost all countries. China is the biggest sending country with 143820 enrolled students (2020-21 academic year), way ahead of India which comes second with 84555 enrolled students. This is followed by Nigeria (21305), the United states (19220), Hong Kong (16655), Italy (14605), and France (14090). As will be noted in section 2.4, the UK's endeavour to outperform other prominent destinations (such as the USA, Canada, and New Zealand) in terms of international student numbers is profit-driven, especially with the huge financial contribution that international students bring to the UK economy.
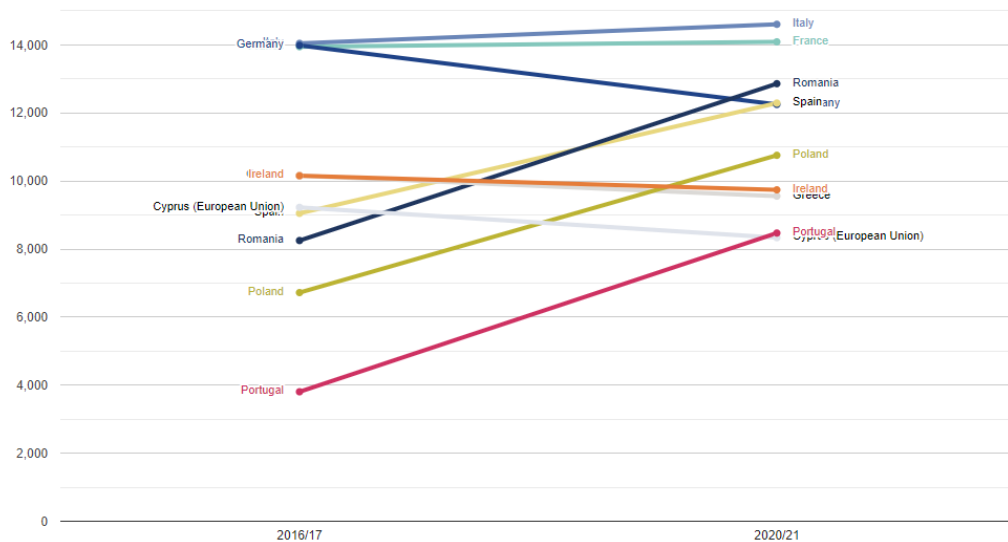
Figure 2 EU Students' Country of Domicile ([HESA](#))
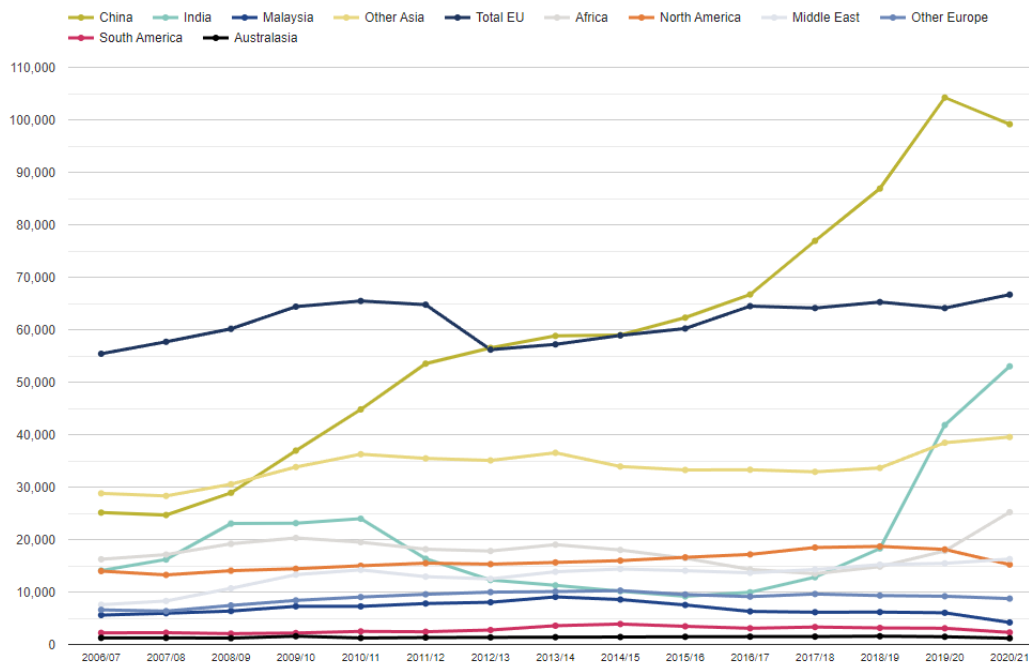
Figure 3 Non-EU Students Country of Domicile ([HESA](#))

The distribution of international students is uneven across the different degrees offered by UK HEIs. Data from HESA for the 2020-21 academic years shows that while UK-domiciled students make up the majority of enrolments at undergraduate full-time and part-time degrees (78% at full-time and 95% at part-time), non-UK domiciled students make up the majority of enrolments at full-time postgraduate degrees, with a combined percentage (EU and other countries) of 56% or 264390 students compared to 204185 UK-domiciled students.
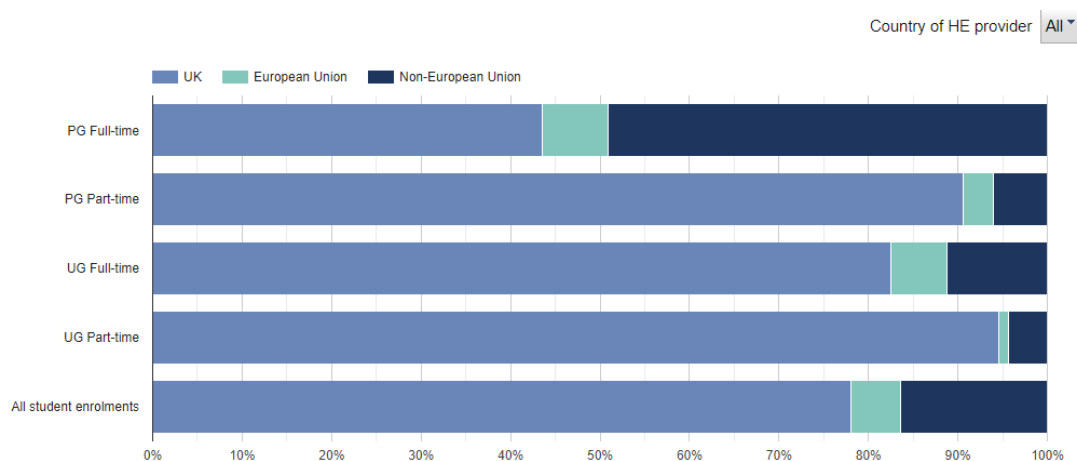
Figure 4 Percentage of Enrolments per Degree (HESA)

The reasons underpinning this need to briefly explore the research context is to highlight the notable number of international students enrolled in UK HEIs. As shown from the data obtained from the HESA website, the total number of enrolled students is increasing both gradually and consistently, showcasing the growing interest in the UK as a major study destination. This influx is equally matched by a very influential and complex ranking system where many UK universities appear to tick most of the boxes in regards to what has come to be perceived by institutions and individuals as 'excellence indicators'. Of the allegedly top 500 universities in the world, 46 are UK universities. 18 of these universities are ranked 96th or higher, and 4 of them rank in the top 10 universities in the world (Data obtained from QS World University Rankings 2023).

2.3 Positioning Students within Policy Documents

There are numerous studies that deal with the positioning of students in UK tertiary education (Sabri, 2011; Brooks et al., 2016; Jones, 2017; Brooks, 2018; Hayes and Jandrić, 2018) and the implications that certain positionings might have on the decisions carried out by governments and Higher Education Institutions. As Sabri (2011, p.659) notes, a "reified 'student experience' is wielded as a criterion for judgment about what is, and is not, worthwhile in higher education". At the outset, such experience appears to be predicated on students' 'desires' and the 'services' they aspire to receive by enrolling at a particular institution. This generic assumption is clear in the following extract:

> As they are the most important clients of higher education, students' own assessments of the service they receive at university should be central to our judgement of the success of our higher education system. Their choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping the courses universities provide and in encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service. (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009, p.70).

This presumed prevalence of what many policy documents call the 'student experience' is further emphasised in the Browne Review. The latter highlights 'student choice' and its role in determining the structure of higher education. In doing this the review appears to combine two contradictory statements that reveal the tension resulting from a consumerist approach: Sabri (2011, p.660) contends that the Browne Review claims that students' choices and decisions should be fed by a consumer approach that prioritises the value of the 'services' they intend to 'purchase'. At the same time, the same review argues that students are not anticipated to see the high tuition fees they pay as barriers that push them away from undertaking a degree. In other words, they are "expected to be simultaneously close-up to, and distant from the financial transaction that will shape their higher education" (ibid.). This ostensible repositioning of students in policy documents as the ultimate shapers of higher education does not only pretend to consider

students as agents, but it also undermines the importance of other institutional members like academics in having active roles in shaping a sector they are part of.

The discursive construction of the student as a knowledgeable consumer who seeks to purchase the most valuable experience package (a degree) is what characterises many of the policies that mobilise the 'student experience' discourse (along with other expressions like student choice, engagement, satisfaction and well-being). Such expressions employ 'student' as an adjectival noun, which suggests a broad, disembodied and arguably void, conceptualisation of students which "can be made to fit any and every scenario" (Sabri, 2011, p.660). These "shallow conceptions" (p.661) contribute to the dominance of the student experience discourse which becomes applicable in different contexts and enables the consolidation of a neo-liberal university. The sacralisation of a generic student within HE policy documents is therefore market-driven rather than student-led. This will be elaborated in the following paragraphs that tackle the different representations of students in HE policy documents.

The problematic representations of students by different bodies is also vivid in interactions between HEIs and the National Unions of Students (NUS) where relationships are both shaped and affected by various factors. NUS, which claim to represent HE students in several matters, subscribe to three different positions as explained by Brooks et al.'s study that explored the views' of 42 senior managers and 46 students' union officers in 10 different UK universities along with analysis of several policy documents issued by NUS (2016, pp.1211-28). Reported findings show that student representatives can be subservient to the neo-liberal agenda outlined by employers, HEIs and governments. This occurs when the goals of senior managers within HE and unions are aligned (ibid. p.1218). For instance, the National Student Survey (NSS) now considers unions' performance as one of the evaluation criteria that impact unions' rankings and therefore universities' rankings as well. While one can assume that such evaluation criteria should render unions "vociferous in pushing student concerns" (ibid.),

the researchers reported that this measure "increased the performative pressures on unions" and arguably reduced unions to a state of subservience to the "senior management agenda" (ibid.).

NUS, while condemning the consumerist agenda that HEIs attempt to implement, also subscribe to and adopt consumerist approaches by running services to get revenues from students (bars, shops, clubs, and even accommodation). This ambivalence is due to what many union role holders within the aforementioned study perceive as a desire to remain autonomous by not depending solely on HEIs' block grants. This approach to resisting an imposed consumerist agenda by willingly adopting one's own agenda to sustain the union's independence is quite problematic and its repercussions on students' perceptions regarding the purpose of HE are still under-researched. The third position that some role holders align with includes unions whose exclusive source of income is the block grants they receive from their respective universities. For these unions, it is "difficult to do anything other than follow the agenda set by the wider university" (Brooks et al., 2016, p.1219-20). The reasons underpinning such a position might range from a complete rejection to take part in any consumer-oriented activities within HE to an imposed limitation from universities to halt the 'competition' that might emerge from unions running services. Amidst these ambivalent discursive positionings, the conceptualisation of students remains problematic as the extent to which unions subscribe to neo-liberal practices could imply the influences they exert on students' daily lives and views. However, this does not necessarily determine either role holders' or students' perceptions, as on many occasions they appeared to hold "values beyond value" (ibid., citing Skeggs, 2014).

While the previous paragraphs briefly articulated the positionings some HE managers and union members align with, and which can be manifested through their behaviours and policies, the following part attempts to capture the different constructions of HE students within a range of policy documents produced by government departments, employers, politicians concerned with HE, and students' and employees' unions in UK (Brooks, 2018, p.747).

Several policy documents which strive to project the image of HE students as 'knowledgeable and independent consumers' fall into evident contradictions by referring to students as 'children' who are "vulnerable and in need of protection" (Brooks, p.750). Governmental documents justify this 'vulnerability' by blaming academics who, according to the Minister of State for Universities and Science, "don't want to have to sit and mark much by way of essays and assignments which would be a distraction from [their] research" and would in turn offer students the degree in exchange for "minimal academic requirements and due receipt of fees" (cited in Brooks, 2018, p.749). This clear governmental distancing from a neo-liberal consumerist agenda serves as a strategy to consolidate it by blaming actors within HE for their presumed 'unwillingness' to perform in a way that ensures a convenient value for money. The discursive positioning of students as vulnerable and disempowered is also present in unions' documents. However, the reason behind this vulnerability is aligned with the government's controversial market reforms which make it easy for HE providers to deliver 'unsatisfactory' degree-oriented education (p.750).

Another positioning of students within governmental documents (like the Green and White governmental policy papers) views students as 'future workers' and therefore stresses the need for HE to ensure "the work-readiness of students" (Brooks, 2018, p.750). Speaking on behalf of students, these policy and legislative documents argue that employment is the main motive behind students' interest in HE, which therefore renders HE accountable by making accessible a factsheet that determines the conformity of certain subjects/courses to employers' needs which, according to these documents, would help students decide about their trajectories and choices (p.751). This discursive construction is largely absent in NUS documents whose scepticism places employers and businesses as profit-hunters whose least concern is to care about social and economic needs.

Reference to students as learners is relatively absent which implies a shifting emphasis from HE as a source for the "generation and transmission of knowledge" to "preparation to the labour market" (Brooks, 2018, p.753).

Instead, representing students as political agents is more prominent especially in government documents (p.754). What these policy papers refer to as the student voice is manifested in the Office for Students (OFS). The latter is the regulation body concerned with voicing students' interests and concerns. However, the NUS' documents reviewed in the article show a degree of scepticism with regards to the representativeness of such controversial body which is not run by students or student representatives. One of the documents analysed contends that "OFS will have a 'duty to promote the interests of students', but who is deciding what the student interest is? It obviously should be students and students' unions, not government or their barrage of new metrics" (NUS, 2013, 2015, cited in Brooks, 2018, p.755). While this suggests NUS's attempts to establish themselves as the sole regulator of students' concerns, issues arise regarding their 'partnership' with governmental and market entities, which in turn renders their position equally problematic.

2.4 International Students and HEI Policy

One of the striking observations that one can make when dealing with governmental and institutional policy documents, or research that tackles student-related HE policy, is the relative absence of international students. Brooks (2018, pp.755-756) claims that this tendency to discard international students is particularly prominent in documents from employer organisations where "international students [are] not mentioned in any of the four documents" tackled in her research. Reference to international students in the examined governmental documents is equally brief as she suggests, with a single "sustained" discussion in a speech by the Minister of State for Universities and Science addressing attendants of the 2016 Universities UK (UUK) conference. The following two extracts are obtained from the full speech published by the UK Government.

> The contribution that international students, as Julia said in her remarks, make to the UK's world-class universities is important, and we want our universities to continue to attract the best and brightest

students from around the world, those who will be able to benefit from their studies here, contribute to the experience of domestic students, strengthen the UK economy, and build valuable and lasting bridges around the world (Jo Johnson, no page number)

As the PM has outlined, we need to root out abuse in our immigration system, and to this end we have already stopped more than 900 colleges from bringing both low-quality or sham students to the UK, who will not contribute to UK academic life and the research eco-system, demonstrating that student fraud will not be tolerated (Jo Johnson, no page number)

In the first extract, the presence of international students appears to be justified on grounds of their contribution to the experiences of UK-domiciled students, along with the economic impact they exert on the UK economy thanks to the uncapped tuition fees and other contributions. Such positioning of international students echoes similar manifestations of international students' appreciation in the US context, where "the global "other"" is framed "as an object of knowledge, cultural capital, and/or personal development for the local subject, rather than an equal partner in a reciprocal engagement" (Buckner and Stein, 2020, p.162). Emphasis on attracting only the 'best and brightest' is matched by a governmental endeavour to limit what the minister calls 'low-quality' and 'sham' students in the second extract. In response to these statements, Brooks claims that this emphasis to attract the best international students contradicts "the strong rhetoric that pervades most of the official documents and speeches about the government's commitment to social mobility and the importance of opening up opportunities for a wider range of (domestic) students", which serves as an evidence of the "strong geographical boundaries to social justice, with international students falling outside the nationally defined realm of demands for educational equality" (2018, p.756). Brexit, the refugee crisis, and the Ukraine war have arguably exacerbated this differential rhetoric even further.

In the following paragraphs, I intend to briefly tackle three policy reports where international students are mentioned frequently. Unsurprisingly, these

reports broadly deal with the economic impact of hosting international students in the UK. The reasons underpinning the need to explore these reports is to once more indicate the absence of international students' voice unless the discussion revolves around the economy, to highlight their significant economic impact, and to raise the argument that any changes to the realities endured by international students are never student-led, but rather driven by profit and competition.

The tackled documents comprise a 2018 report that was collaboratively backed by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and KAPLAN, and produced by London Economics (LE). This report is titled 'the costs and benefits of international students by parliamentary constituency'. The report looked into the cost and net impact of hosting international students in the 2015-16 academic year. A recent update that looks into the 2018-19 academic year was issued in 2021. The second document is published in 2018 by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), a public entity that provides advice and conducts migration-related research on behalf of the government. Its report is titled 'Impact of international students in the UK'.

Finally, and to a lesser extent, this section also relies on findings from a 2018 report by UUK which deals with 'Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education'. The selection of these reports was based on availability, accessibility, impact, and relevance. The reports probe into a plethora of areas including the competitiveness of the UK as a study destination compared to other countries, statistics that cover the economic impact per constituency, the impact of current migration and post-study policies, etc. The following paragraphs will mainly focus on two major points that could help in clarifying the research context.

The MAC report starts with the Chair's forward which argues that "there is no doubt that international students offer positive economic benefit, including cross-subsidising the education of domestic students and research" (Manning, 2018). Numbers from the 2015-16 London Economics' report rightly support this claim, as the net benefit of hosting non-UK domiciled students was £20.34bn, compared to a hosting cost of £2.3bn within the

same period. This benefit increased considerably in the updated report, where the net benefit of hosting international students in 2018-19 increased by around 21% to £25.9bn, compared to a hosting cost of £2.9bn. It is important to note that the net economic impact of international students is expected to witness a notable hike starting from 2021-22 academic year, as EU applicants will no longer be considered home-fee-paying students.

Academic Year	Gross Impact	Hosting Cost	Net Benefit
2015-2016	£22.64bn	£2.3bn	£20.34bn
2018-2019	£28.8bn	£2.9bn	£25.9bn

Table 2 Economic Impact of International Students (Adapted from LE)

To put this into perspective, the 2021 LE report shows that the 2018-19 non-UK domiciled cohort contributes an average of £390 per UK resident (p.13), with some constituencies accruing up to £2520 net impact per resident (p.14). The LE reports conclude with the claim that "alongside the social, educational and soft power benefits, international students bring enormous financial benefits to every corner of the United Kingdom" (p.47). It is therefore in the interest of the UK economy and HEIs to maintain the alienating and differentiating characteristics of the international label, since that would guarantee and justify the wide tuition gaps between alleged insiders and foreigners. To reiterate Brooks observation (2018, p.756), international students are deliberately positioned outside the educational justice perimeter, and as will be demonstrated in the analysis chapters, such deliberate othering is concealed via a plethora of void buzzwords, such as equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Going back to the MAC report, it appears that this net impact directly "subsidises the education of domestic students, for example through wider availability of courses or improved facilities" (MAC, p.3). Throughout all of these reports, international students seem to be dehumanised or solely perceived as assets whose presence is warranted exclusively upon the net impact they have on the UK economy. Probing further into the realm of this commodified knowledge-provision business, I discovered that even

decisions that are presumably undertaken to ameliorate the experiences and realities of international students in the UK are not informed by a genuine endeavour to achieve a certain degree of parity among students. Instead, as the MAC report reveals, favourable decisions or policies are generally driven by the UK's desire to maintain its position as a major study destination.

For example, the UK launched a new immigration route in July 2021, allowing international students to extend their stays for two extra years post-graduation[2]. The decision was hailed by the media and HEIs, and on some occasions, even mobilised to project the UK as a global and welcoming destination that caters for the needs of foreign students. When looking into the MAC's report recommendations, which predate and possibly underpin this decision, it was possible to trace the real reasons that led to the inauguration of this immigration policy. After a detailed exploration of the in-study and post-study work opportunities that other major destinations offer (namely USA, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, and France), the report argued that "most of the countries considered seem to be more generous than the UK in post-study work policies" (p.42) and reiterated concerns by renowned entities like British Council and the Department for the Economy that signalled that the UK is losing competitiveness.

The current approach in dealing with international students is neoliberal par excellence. Regardless of their actual needs, such as the necessity to ease the mechanisms that constrain their experiences, these students find themselves at the mercy of market-informed decisions. Recruitment numbers, net economic impact, and competitiveness are the actual drivers of international students' realities. Global citizenship and other slogans are but a smokescreen that actively masks a dehumanised and prescribed reality, one where feeling voiceless is a daily struggle. As I highlighted in a 2021 blog article[3], market-driven policy changes result in the leading

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[2] https://www.gov.uk/graduate-visa

[3] https://internationalstudentsvoices.com/2021/08/04/why-am-i-international-tuition-fees/

destination countries and their respective institutions' endeavours to offer 'the best worst conditions possible' for them to stay competitive, with very little done to stimulate genuine student-informed transformations.

GOV.UK

Graduate route for best and brightest launches

A new immigration route has opened today (1 July 2021), allowing international graduates to kick-start their careers in the UK after they have finished...

1 Jul 2021

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The UK Home Office has opened its new post-study work visa for international students on July 1, which would allow international graduates to apply for the...

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UK opens new post-study work visa route for Indian students: How to apply, other details | Mint

The United Kingdom Home Office today formally opened its new post-study work visa for international students, which would offer overseas graduates from...

1 Jul 2021

BusinessBecause

PSW UK: What Is The UK Graduate Route?

If you're an international student at a UK b-school, you don't need a graduate job to stay in the UK. Find out what the new UK post-study work visa route,...

6 Jul 2021

Figure 5 Representative Search Results of the 2021 Graduate Route

2.5 Summarising my Personal Trajectory

In this section I intend to cover my personal trajectory as a postgraduate researcher who is implicated in the research context as much as other participants are. I aim to unveil how I went through the process of enrolling at university which, like many other students labelled international, is not a smooth experience. While all students, regardless of background or status, encounter the same basic demands to be admitted at university level, those subsumed within the international label endure additional layers of requirements that appear to underpin the differential discourses that frame

students as foreigners, temporary residents, deficient and uncritical beings, and students who need to tick a plethora of boxes that enable certain governmental bodies to track and monitor their trajectories. While many students submit to such controversial treatment, investigating the underpinnings of such requirements might uncover the deficient and essentialist framework beneath tertiary education. Exploring my trajectory involved clashing moments where I found myself both contesting and reproducing the neo-liberal agenda that dictates my experiences to a large degree. Another important point is that while many students experience the same process that I intend to highlight, not all of them perceive/interact with it in the same manner. Therefore, what is explored mainly stems from my personal experience and is not representative of the wider international student community.

Starting from a young age, I grew up in a context where the west is perceived as the place where all dreams come true. Many people around me frequently conversed about going abroad and the opportunities they can find in the west. I subscribed to this discourse by default as it was very powerful to question or discard. I always had dreams to live abroad, specifically in London. When I created my Facebook account a decade ago, I proudly chose London as the place where I live (although I was living in a city called Guelma). Growing up within the confines of the West/East blocks, I along with many people around me perceived the west block as superior, developed, organised, full of opportunities, etc. I was not surprised when I first encountered the ideas tackled by Stuart Hall's work on the west and the rest. The West as Steward discourse did not only define the west, but it also automatically defined us, easterners and/or southerners, as the complete opposite. This accompanied me for more than a decade and until 2018 it was unquestionable. I believe it takes tremendous effort to look beyond such powerful framing dichotomies.

The reason behind briefly discussing my admiration of the west is mainly because such 'belief' made me work very hard to live in an EU country. For me, and many people like me, living here was always perceived as an end

or achievement. The impact of such discourse shaped my trajectory and decision to apply for PhD in UK. At the time of applications, I took it at granted that UK HE is superior to that of Algeria. The endless websites and ranking systems praising western universities played a considerable role in deciding about which institutions to apply for. The following screenshots show some of the platforms I made use of for comparisons. At the time, I unquestionably subscribed to the idea that the higher the fees are, the better education is likely to be. I equally linked ranks to prestige and value, and arguably to how employable a western university degree would make me. While this quantitative selection process affected my choices to a large degree, it is fair to say that trying to find a supervisor whose ideas aligned with my proposed research was also important.

Figure 6 The Complete University Guide

Rank	Name Country/Region	No. of FTE Students	No. of students per staff	International Students	Female:Male Ratio
1	**University of Oxford** United Kingdom	20,967	10.6	42%	48 : 52
2	**Harvard University** United States	21,887	9.6	25%	50 : 50
=3	**University of Cambridge** United Kingdom	20,185	11.3	39%	47 : 53
=3	**Stanford University** United States	16,164	7.1	24%	46 : 54
5	**Massachusetts Institute of Technology** United States	11,415	8.2	33%	40 : 60

Figure 7 [Times Higher Education World University Rankings](#)

The process of applying to a UK university is very complex and demanding. The requirements are rigorous that only a minority are expected to tick all the mandatory boxes. This is another facet of UK HE where access is exclusively granted to international students who are either rich or scholarship-holders. The impact of such admission dilemmas that result in unequal access to education and the emergence of privileged/unprivileged students is still under-researched. It should however be noted that there are some genuine institutional initiatives that aim at widening participation, albeit mostly locally. The first obstacle that anyone interested in studying in the UK would encounter is sitting for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or an equivalent recognisable test. The three-hour long exam tests the four basic skills (Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening). The overall score band will determine whether you can apply to study in the UK or not.

At first, I perceived this to be a legitimate step towards becoming admissible. However, I soon realised that IELTS stands for more than just a universal test. It is a very lucrative source of profit with testing centres and providers earning billions every year. The test which costs around £200 (which is more than twice the Algerian basic monthly income) can arguably be considered part of the mechanisms used to limit access to English-speaking countries' HEIs. Equally, the test format seemed controversial, as on many occasions during my preparations I managed to outscore my native-English-speaking language teacher.

Figure 8 Sample of an IELTS Certificate

The requirements do not stop at this stage. As part of applying for a visa to enter the UK, students have to submit several documents along with paying insurance and visa fees (in my case around £1500). All submitted documents (degree certificates, transcripts, birth certificates, etc.) should bear the stamps of the Algerian ministries of higher education and foreign affairs respectively. This can only be done in person in Algiers (capital of Algeria) which is a seven-hour overnight bus ride from my city. All prospective students should also get a medical certificate testifying that they do not suffer from tuberculosis. The British Council recognises one clinic only to obtain such document (in Algiers) which implies that any of the 45 million Algerians interested in enrolling at a UK university should pay that clinic a visit regardless of where they live (some people live more than 2000 kilometres away from the capital).

Once admitted into university and granted BRP (Biometric Residence Permit) to enter the UK, a new chapter of perplexing procedures starts. This can be summarised in attending workshops tailored for 'international' students, complying with the Home Office rules by continuously proving my attendance and progress, and registering with the police. On many occasions, I was invited to attend workshops that allegedly claimed to help international students integrate or adapt. In the course of the first year, I repeatedly questioned the relevance of such events, especially that most of them were attended only by international students. This resulted in a deeper feeling of deficiency and the need to receive special support to be able to cope with UK HE or life in general. Adding to that, the need to not go beyond certain number of working hours (20hrs/week) along with the obligation to register with the police[4] made it more difficult for me to resist the idea that the Home Office regards me as a deficient, potentially dangerous, other. While universities advise (with no obligation) all students, regardless of their status, to not work more than 250 hours per year, the Home Office

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[4] Police registration has finally been discontinued in August 2022.

regulations are put forward to restrict the mobility of 'international' students exclusively.

Figure 9 Sample of a Biometric Residence Permit

The same governmental body is also responsible for keeping track of international students' progress. Based on the emails I get from my university, the Home Office receives information regarding my progress, supervisory meetings, and attended/organised events, etc. Therefore, I am required to prove my presence and progress regularly to avoid any potential repercussions. Differential treatment is also present in the police registration process which requires international students from certain countries to physically attend a police department and register themselves by submitting certain documents and paying a fee. The concerned students are required by law to register within two months of arrival, update their address (by physically attending the police department again) every time they move out. They are also required to report any marital status changes and any absences if they plan to leave the UK for more than 2 months. Such events affected my trajectory and are affecting the direction of this research. They also allowed me to understand that while the neo-liberal agenda underpinning higher education and governmental bodies recklessly attempts to homogenise the international students' cohorts, differential practices are present within the international category itself. So, while I am treated as a dangerous international who must be monitored by the police, a US international, for instance, is not expected to comply with such regulation.

There are numerous events and experiences that affect my positioning within the research and the approaches that I adopt in order to establish the need for the research to be carried out in certain ways. While several factors contributed to me along with many international students to be subject to labelling, generalisations, otherizations, culturist assumptions, etc., I simultaneously cannot deny being part of the same neo-liberal entity that I am contesting. This is embodied via my affiliations within a UK HEI which contributes to its existence and continuity. By paying huge fees (in spite of the fact that such fees are paid in the form of a scholarship), and by serving in teaching and administrative positions, I end up either subscribing to, reproducing, and sometimes generating discourses that can be mobilised to celebrate the 'efficiency' of the university.

Notes to this Certificate of Registration

1 **Change of address**
If you change your address, you must let the police know within seven days of moving.

2 **Temporary absence from your registered address**
Absences up to 2 months do not need to be reported. All absences over 2 months have to be reported to the police in the district where you are registered. Also provide details of addresses where you will be staying and your expected date of return.

3 **Changes to any of the details recorded overleaf**
Any changes which affect your registration such as name change, marital status, nationality, passport or other document for establishing identity and nationality, employment, business, profession or occupation must be reported to the police in the district where you are registered within 8 days.

4 **Reporting changes by letter**
Changes may be reported by letter, enclosing this certificate.

Important notes to ~~_____~~ this certificate
Failure to report te~~mporary absences~~ from your registered address or changes to any of the details recorded overleaf.

or Failure to produce your certificate when asked to by an immigration or police officer.

or Having in your possession (or using) a forged, altered registration certificate, passport or similar document or any of the above could result in either a fine of up to £5000 and/or 6 months imprisonment.

If you wish for an extension or other changes to your conditions of stay please send your Certificate of Registration and Passport or Travel Document to:

Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate
Lunar House Wellesley Road Croydon
CR9 2BY

Figure 10 Police Registration Certificate

2.6 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I aimed to provide a brief, yet unconventional, exploration of the research context. By looking into relevant statistics, policy and policy-informed research, along with my own student trajectory in the UK, I aspired to shed light on a seldom-tackled facet of the student experience. These are facets that cannot be mobilised to project the positive image that HEIs tend to disseminate, where the UK is presented as a global, international, welcoming, and inclusive educational destination. This policy-informed investigation does not intend to defy HEIs' promotional rhetoric, it rather presents a less appealing, yet frequently experienced, set of mechanisms that act alongside the promotional discourses, and exert a significant influence over what is endured by those subsumed within the international label.

Chapter 3
Exploring the Literature

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections that briefly cover two broad areas of research: Intercultural Studies and Higher Education Studies. The culture and interculturality section provides a general overview of the major concepts of culture, essentialism, and othering, and examines some alternative conceptualisations where culture is approached critically. It then proceeds to consider three modalities of interculturality that broadly reflect the current theoretical clash between neo-essentialist and anti-essentialist paradigms. The second section begins with exploring two frequently-employed concepts throughout the thesis: internationalisation and neoliberalism in HE. It then proceeds to explore the idea of the British university as a manifestation of a McDonaldised Edu-factory and the implications resulting from this institutional approach. The last title is an attempt to draw relevant similarities between the two sections, and to highlight how interculturality and international students' experiences converge in this research.

Section 1: Culture and Interculturality

3.2 Concepts and Terms

The following section briefly explores several concepts and terms that are expected to recur throughout the whole study. In this respect, I do not intend to merely attribute a specific definition to every concept. Instead, I plan to exhaustively probe into each concept through exploring the way it was employed and dealt with from different facets and perspectives, and where relevant, provide my own understanding along with the way it fits into my study. Starting with culture, "many scholars now acknowledge that any definition of culture is necessarily reductionist" (Sarangi, 2009, p.87). It is

therefore plausible not to simply define culture or deal with the set of definitions that reduce culture to a particular 'thing', or 'practice'. This part will rather stress the complexity of culture through making references to scholarly work which contests essentialism, either by highlighting what culture 'is not' or by looking into concepts and ideas that strive to rearticulate culture (small culture, rich points). This section then proceeds with an account of the remaining concepts that inform my research. It sheds light on essentialism, a problematic term quoted extensively in Intercultural Studies without a clear consensus over what it stands for. Other concepts include othering, a process where individuals are reduced to reductionist descriptions and which arguably can be considered an outcome of essentialism.

3.2.1 Culture

As one of the most problematic concepts in academia, culture was and is still subject to many framings. Recurring endeavours to understand 'what culture is' are still relevant until the present moment with some research output accentuating cultural separatism, national homogeneity, and culture's ability to predict, define and explain behaviour. Other scholarly work, on the other hand, appears to contest this traditional reductionist understanding in favour of a more malleable and complex view of culture. This part of the chapter is not intended to define culture *per se*, it rather aims to position culture in this research through exploring what culture 'is not'. I then proceed to highlight some of the recent manifestations of culture that contest the traditional view. The latter is underpinned by essentialist ideas which, despite scholarly work, are still employed to establish a problematic understanding of difference among individuals and groups. This tends to be apparent in contexts where grand narratives are more likely to take over individuals' understandings of themselves and others, such as study abroad, immigration, sojourning, asylum-seeking, etc.

In her book *Multiculturalism without Culture*, Phillips (2007, pp.42-72) provides a brief overview regarding how culture is approached and mobilised in old and recent scholarly work. She contends that "characterising a culture

is itself a political act, and the notion of cultures as pre-existing things, waiting to be explained, has become increasingly implausible" (p.45). The tendency towards treating culture as if it is a 'thing' with clear and distinctive markers and boundaries has been recently contested (Keesing, 1981, 1994; Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990; Sarangi, 1995; Baumann, 1996, 2000; Holliday, 1999, 2011, 2017, 2019; Agar, 2006; Phillips, 2007; Dervin, 2009, 2011, 2015, 2016). In her attempt to challenge the long-established rigid view of culture, Phillips (2007, p.45) signals that

> People draw on a wide range of local, national, and global resources in the ways they make and remake their culture. (So culture is not bounded.) There are always internal contestations over the values, practices, and meanings that characterise any culture. (So cultures are not homogeneous.) There is often some political agenda— reflecting power struggles within the group or the search for allies outside—when people make their claims about the authoritative interpretation of their culture. (So cultures are produced by people, rather than being things that explain why they behave the way they do.)

The unprecedented influx of individuals witnessed nowadays, especially in contexts of higher education mobility and displacements caused by wars and other factors, therefore calls for the need to discard the essentialist discourse of culture in favour of a non-essentialist approach which could help in perceiving culture "as a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways" (Holliday, Kullman, and Hyde, 2017, p. 3).

Gerd Baumann's ethnographic study reported in his book *Contesting Culture* (1996) highlights the different ways culture is constructed by 'immigrants' in a London suburb. Having lived with several communities, Baumann cautions against the dangers of 'tribalizing' people. He adds that although ethnic reductionism is politically and academically wrong, this phenomenon seems to be widespread in Britain with a plethora of research output mobilising 'ethnicity', 'culture', 'identity', and 'community' as means to justify individuals'

practices. In so doing, "all agency seemed to be absent, and culture an imprisoning cocoon or a determining force" (1996, p.1). Baumann's endeavours to answer several problematic questions about the way culture is constructed, the false attribution of homogeneity to national culture and the manner through which such discourses are employed to juxtapose communities led him to conduct a six-year study in Southall, a suburban district in West London. He indicates that his study does not intend to adopt the traditional way of conducting similar research which usually starts with 'group isolation' and concludes with 'group encapsulation'. This tendency is still relevant in present day research, with many researchers isolating a particular group based on 'ethnicity', 'race', 'religion', etc. For Baumann, this does not seem to fit in with the actual context which seems to encompass "communities within communities, as well as cultures across communities" (p.11). The establishment of ethnic, racial, and national boundaries stems from a consistent tendency towards the reification of cultural practices. The latter "falsely fixes the boundaries between groups in an absolute and artificial way" (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990, p.9). Nevertheless, Baumann (1996, pp.13-14) argues that some sort of reification is necessary, especially for political purposes where the need for a collective presence is crucial for the contestation of certain exclusionary discourses and inequalities. This concurs with the idea of strategic essentialism which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Findings reported by Baumann show that Southallians "reify cultures while at the same time making culture" which implies that "culture-making is not an ex tempore improvisation, but a project of social continuity placed within, and contending with, moments of social change" (1996, p.31). Holliday (2016) comments on Baumann's ability to unveil individuals' agency along with their potential to produce and subscribe to multiple cultures. He claims that Baumann reached this realisation by "thinking of his participants as people rather than starting with the view that they belong to specific cultures" (p.33). This idea echoes some of the theoretical underpinnings of this study which advocate individuals' ability to belong to different cultural realities and even transcend national boundaries and dominant discourses.

The notion of culture has been used in several ways and for different purposes. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) for instance, subscribes to what is labelled as cultural fundamentalism. The latter perceives cultures as "distinct and incommensurable, relations between bearers of different cultures are intrinsically conflictive; [and considers] human nature to be xenophobic" (Hannerz, 1999, p.395). This essentialist, somehow radical view of culture appears to be similar to racism as it implicitly calls for exclusion and segregation (Stolcke, 1995; Hannerz, 1999). Other uses include what is known as multiculturalism which also strives to separate cultures based on certain ethnic differences and allocates different characteristics to different cultures (Hannerz, 1999, p.397). These essentialist uses of the concept of culture in addition to other ones have, either directly or indirectly, led to the emergence of the so-called 'interculturalists'. These people, as Hannerz (1999, pp. 397-399) claims, seem to reinforce and exaggerate cultural separatism and stereotyping, making their profession crucial and indispensable. Discarding both cultural fundamentalism and cultural celebrationism, Hannerz suggests a "processual view" (p. 401) of culture. The latter acknowledges individuals' significant role in reshaping structures unlike cultural fundamentalism which seems to "naturalize cultural immutability and persistence" and places "the greater weight … on structure" (ibid.). The processual perception of culture also helps in questioning the alleged neatness of cultures. Hannerz builds on this idea to problematize the tendency of using the word culture in the plural form, arguing that such usage may imply that cultural "entities exist side by side as neat packages, each of us identified with only one of them" (p. 402). Although plausible, the usage of culture in the plural form may also entail a multiplicity of cultural memberships. This idea will be further discussed in the following sections.

3.2.2 Alternative Conceptualisations of Culture

Among the ideas that challenge the still-dominant essentialist discourse of culture are Holliday's concept of small culture (1999) and Agar's notion of rich points (2006). Holliday (1999, p.237) maintains that the concept of small

culture "attaches 'culture' to small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour". The rationale behind employing culture to describe a particular group is therefore not grounded on grand narratives of 'race', 'ethnicity', 'nation', 'religion', etc. It rather transcends such reductionist obstacles through highlighting similarities in behaviours/practices shared by individuals across communities and nations (e.g. A regular yoga class can be considered a small culture). Small culture differs from what many refer to as sub-culture. While the latter signals a smaller entity within a larger one, small cultures "do not necessarily have this Russian doll or onion-skin relationship with parent large cultures" (p.239). He (1999, p.241) goes on to make the link between large and small cultures claiming that small culture is the basic constituent "of which large culture is a reification". A reified large culture is then brought into play as a tangible entity with clear boundaries and behaviour-determining powers (p.242). Instead of reifying small cultures, Holliday asserts that they should be used as a tool-kit (p.248) or a "heuristic model to help understand cohesive behaviour" (p.253). The concept of small culture is one of the major constituents of Holliday's recently-forged grammar of culture (2013, 2018) model.

While Holliday's small culture concept does not entirely discard the usage of the term 'culture' and rather opts for rearticulating what it stands for, Agar's approach appears to side against it. He argues that "culture is one of the most widely (mis)used and contentious concepts in the contemporary vocabulary" (2006, p.2). In his attempt to "rethink" culture which used to be perceived as a "closed, coherent system" where individuals' practices could be justified by "their membership in that single, shared culture" (p.3), Agar introduces what he calls rich points. These are "moments of incomprehension and unmet expectations" (p.4) which recur more than once within a particular group of people. Rich points emerge only when an 'outsider' encounters a specific group. This in turn means that what becomes "visible in any particular case depends on the LC1 (i.e. Languaculture) that the newcomer brought with them" (p.5). Culture, therefore, is a mere "translation" that exists at that moment of encounter. It is "the property of no one" (p.6). Besides being relational, Agar (ibid.) asserts that culture is partial

due to the fact that individuals cannot be reduced to a single culture since different combinations result in different translations. People, therefore, display different selves depending on the "contingencies and constraints of the moment" (p.7). He consequently argues that one should use the plural whenever they make reference to culture. This non-essentialist conceptualisation of culture is also relevant to my current study.

To sum up, the different approaches to culture discussed in the previous two sections along with the case studies explored appear to reject essentialist discourses in favour of a liquid approach that either advocates group membership across national, racial, and ethnic boundaries, or perceives culture to be a moment of confusion which occurs when particular group patterns are observed by an outsider. This section also briefly explored notions of cultural fundamentalism and multiculturalism and the need to subscribe to a processual view of culture since it recognises individuals' agency and ability to contest the prevalence of rigid structures. Although endeavours to advocate a non-essentialist discourse of culture are vocalised via the aforementioned 'liquid' approaches, the traditional essentialist approach is still prevalent with numerous research in Intercultural Studies/Communication, Cross-Cultural Communication, Study Abroad, etc., continuously mobilising problematic conceptualisations of culture, nationality, ethnic origins, etc., as means to explain, predict or justify behaviour (e.g., Tinmaz and Ozturk, 2022; Resch and Amorim, 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2020; Gbadamosi, 2018; Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Rienties and Tempelaar, 2013; Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

3.2.3 Essentialism

Essentialism is one of the recurring concepts in this study. Although it may entail different things depending on the contexts in which it is employed (Phillips, 2010, pp.47-60), the most relevant understanding is the one which "presents people's individual behaviour as entirely defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are." (Holliday, 2011, p.4). Essentialism implies a reductionist approach where nation and culture are perceived as inseparable

entities, with the potential to explain individuals' behaviour (Holliday, 2018, p.2; Holliday et al., 2017, pp.4-5). This tendency towards generalisation results in the production and consolidation of stereotypes and the reification of imagined categories. It also implies a lack of individual criticality and agency, as it denies people the ability to negotiate statements about behaviours and practices. This version of essentialism thereby considers humans to be "robots programmed with 'cultural' rules" (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p.158).

Relevant examples of Essentialism involve the current trends towards incorporating grand narratives such as Confucianism, Individualism and Collectivism, etc., to describe a particular behaviour. This way of using labels to categorise individuals "under a grossly simplistic, exaggerated and homogeneous, imagined, single culture" (Holliday, 2011, p.5) is still prevalent in academia with a plethora of research output reinforcing the myth of national cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Deardorff, 2006). Examples of essentialist discourses of culture may range from local to universal ones. In Algeria for instance, there is a common stereotype which links stupidity to people from Mascara (a city in west Algeria). People from Soukahras (eastern Algeria), on the other hand, are usually described as sorcerers. Widespread stereotypes include the idea that all Muslims are terrorists which resulted in what is known as islamophobia. The latter had a remarkable impact on Muslims ' lives (e.g. strict airport regulations and visa procedures). It even had a direct impact on major world events such as the election of Donald Trump as a US president.

According to Phillips, the concept of essentialism comprises several meanings (2010, pp.47-60). It can refer to:

> - The attribution of certain characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category: the '(all) women are caring and empathetic', '(all) Africans have rhythm', '(all) Asians are community oriented' syndrome.
> - The attribution of those characteristics to the category, in ways that naturalise or reify what may be socially created or constructed.

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- The invocation of a collectivity as either the subject or object of political action ('the working class', 'women', 'Third World women'), in a move that seems to presume a homogenised and unified group.

- The policing of this collective category, the treatment of its supposedly shared characteristics as the defining ones that cannot be questioned or modified without undermining an individual's claim to belong to that group.

It is important to recognise the different facets of essentialism and the way in which it is employed. In so doing, one should be aware of the dangers underlying the excessive use of this word to refer to every reductionist conceptualisation of culture and interculturality. One could, instead, strive to understand the reasons behind reproducing an essentialist discourse of culture, the context where it is used, and the different power relations underpinning such constructions. This applies to me on several occasions where I felt that I was using the concept in an exaggerated way to reject any cultural reductionism without even investigating its precedents. In this vein, Ian Hacking (1999, p.17) argues that "most people who use (essentialism) use it as a slur word, intending to put down the opposition". It is therefore crucial to engage critically with such concept in order to not to not eventually reproduce the same essentialism that we strive to avoid. In a nutshell, rejecting an exaggerated dependence on the concept of culture as a justification for different behaviours and practices necessitates rejecting an excessive dependence on the concept of essentialism to explain what may at first appear a rigid understanding of culture. In this regard, Phillips (2010, p.48, citing Fuss, 1989) states that "the essentialism/constructionism binary blocks innovative thinking, providing people with too easy a basis for unreflective dismissal". Therefore, although I believe that a constructivist approach is partially convenient for the purposes of this research (mainly for its epistemological affordances as will be discussed later), it is important to be aware of the different approaches and frameworks underpinning research conducted in the field of intercultural studies.

According to Angouri (2018, p.40) "anti-essentialism thinking, however, soon came under scrutiny, too, for undercutting political action, particularly in relation to feminist politics, ethnic minorities, or discrimination at work, to name but a few". On this matter, many researchers argue that essentialism can be used for positive political purposes as long as its reductionist nature is recognised (ibid.). This practice is usually labelled strategic essentialism. The rationale behind opting for this version of essentialism stems from the claim that "by reducing a complex reality or by focusing on a single attribute or set of attributes, a political goal becomes achievable" (ibid.). In so doing, essentialism turns into a "descriptively false but politically useful" (ibid.) means to advocate a specific cause. Although reasons underlying the employment of strategic essentialism seem to be plausible and well-grounded, a major concern arises with regards to "whose voice is being heard" along with "how the researchers' understanding of what the agenda is (or should be) is to be aligned with the participants' perceptions" (ibid., p.42). Therefore essentialism, in all its manifestations, remains problematic.

3.2.4 Othering

One of the major outcomes of essentialism is what is known as othering or otherization. The latter is particularly apparent in the process of in-group/out-group formation where tensions surrounding 'who belongs where' seem to prevail via certain inclusion/exclusion practices (normalisation, reification/racism, sexism, culturism, etc.). Othering, which is "basic in the formation and maintenance of group behaviour…can be defined as constructing, or imagining, a demonized image of 'them', or the Other, which supports an idealized image of 'us', or the Self" (Holliday, 2011, p.69). Othering is fuelled by the creation of differences and boundaries between imagined groups. It therefore confines "the other to a restricted understanding of who she is and what she represents" (Dervin, 2015, p.2). Although othering is usually discussed in relation to the big west/east binary, the influence it exerts can be observed in everyday practices everywhere (e.g. a school playground). This is clearly echoed in Holliday's discussion of the politics of othering (2011) where he highlights its commonness "in many

aspects of everyday life, from racism to sexism to orientalism" (p.94). Othering is dangerous as it may result in the emergence of racism, sexism, terrorism, hatred, and prejudice (Dervin, 2015, p.5), and as will be noted in the context of international student mobility, a sense of systemic alienation. This concept informs much of the research I am intending to carry out and will therefore recur throughout the thesis. I am particularly keen on exploring the way the concept is employed by Holliday (2011), Dervin (2015) and how it is manifested in the West/East dichotomy, Orientalism, and many other cases (Said, 1985; Hall, 1992).

To begin with, Holliday (2011, pp.69-79) provides a plethora of situations where othering seems at first to be a neutral process. The situations range from a simple punctuality in business meetings, to more complex cases of Orientalism, Native-speakerism, and US involvement in Iraq. The following paragraphs attempt to sum up three main accounts:

A common belief about Western punctuality in business meetings stems from certain "idealizations of the self" (p.70) which tend to overgeneralise a particular 'universal' behaviour over a specific group of people. This statement does not only assume a shared positive trait, it necessarily implies a non-punctual different other, though the lack of punctuality may be apparent within the same category. This tendency towards juxtaposing the self/other is explained by Hall (1992, p.186) where he argues that the idea of the West "provides criteria of evaluation against which other societies are ranked and around which powerful positive and negative feelings cluster". However, such ideological constructions which tend to otherize and demonise people are not exclusively western as will be argued below.

Orientalism stands for the different images, statements, and discourses that the west creates to define and/or control the east (Said, 1985; Holliday, 2011). Although it is crucial to recognise the flawed theoretical position

underpinning the idea of Orientalism[5], as it seems to reproduce the same ideological constructions it strives to uncover and contest, the arguments put forward by Said to construct his theory remain plausible. Holliday (2011, pp.71-73) makes use of Gérome's painting Le Marché d'Esclaves (1857) as one of the manifestations of orientalist thought. The image portrays what appears to be a slave market with a naked woman being checked by an Arab customer. This imagined portrayal of an exotic, erotic, and barbaric other is manifested in different ways and for different purposes. A western tendency to accentuate an imagined eastern deficiency, patriarchy, tyranny, lack of criticality, barbarity, serves as a justification for the implementation of certain policies and doctrines such as economic exploitation, military presence, and so forth. The implication of such activity is manifested through the othering practices that Middle-Easterners and Arabs in general face on a daily basis as people who need help and liberation and who appear deficient and uncritical regardless of what they achieve.

Othering may also emerge when people find it difficult to grasp the fact that this world comprises multiple 'normalities', that being normal does not necessitate an adherence to a specific structure. In this vein, although US and UK soldiers are presumably acquainted with this multiplicity of normalities, many seem to perceive the ways Iraqi people live/behave as abnormal. Holliday (2011, p.78) makes use of extracts from Beaton et al. (2005) and Langan (2004) to explain this idea. In Langan's (2004) extract, a US soldier asks, "why can't they understand that they need to commit themselves, to do something, if they want to have freedom and democracy". He then adds "They don't seem to want liberating". Holliday notes that these soldiers "are unable to accept the normality of the life they observe" (2011, p.79). Essentialist discourses are so powerful that people may end up taking

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[5] Whenever Orientalism is approached, it is crucial to highlight that while Said's attempts to debunk the images associated with the 'east' are legitimate, they risk to construct the east and west as distinguishable and completely different blocks, eventually feeding a problematic us/them categorisation.

them for granted or treating them as neutral facts. It is therefore very difficult to transcend the preconceptions we tend to hold about the other which eventually results in othering them. This idea concurs with Abu-Lughod's (2002, pp.783-790) attempt to uncover the politics behind the current 'war on terrorism' and the mobilisation of 'women liberation' discourses as a justification for the US military presence in Afghanistan.

The last idea that I intend to discuss under this section relates to the instability of the process of othering. My discussion of othering does not, by any means, assume that it is a western practice. As noted earlier, othering takes places everywhere and operates at many levels such as denying a child the ability to play with a particular group of children or through imposing a 'discourse of liberation' which implies the other's deficiency and inability to solve their own problems. For instance, Christianity was used as a justification to exploit many territories in Africa. Islam, on the other hand, was used as a justification to invade Europe. Othering Africans as savages and in need of civilization can be easily matched with othering Europeans as non-believers who need to be saved. In this vein, Dervin (2015, p.3) contends that "othering is a complex phenomenon, which might differ overtime, depending on how collective and intersubjectively constructed ideologies evolve in specific contexts". The question of whether othering is a natural process and a precondition to the construction of social groups is debatable. However, even if othering is natural, is it a must for it to operate from a deficit framework? To sum up, a new conceptualisation of othering requires one's ability to perceive otherness within the self along with a recognition of others' selves and the different power differentials and ideologies surrounding this self/other relation.

3.3 Modalities of Interculturality

3.3.1 Grammar of Culture

Among the major ideas that inform my research project is Holliday's Grammar of Culture (2011, 2013, 2016, 2018). The latter is a model that can be employed to 'read' intercultural events. However, one should be aware of

the fact that this model cannot trace what exactly happens in reality as it just provides an approximate simulation of the complex cultural domains. It should also be noted that this notion does not imply a fixed cultural environment with predetermined national cultures that define people's behaviour (like the 'Hofstedian' approach or Durkheim's structural functionalism), it rather goes beyond what people usually perceive as 'culture' (e.g. cultural artefacts) to encompass a broader understanding of cultural environments. The latter, as Holliday claims, revolve around the interplay between three main components: the particular social and political structures, the universal cultural processes, and the cultural products. These components are in constant dialogue and help understand intercultural events to a certain extent. The Grammar is influenced by Holliday's reading of Max Weber's theory of social action. Although the name invokes cultural fixity, the grammar is "purposefully loose and complex to emphasize an unwillingness to define culture too closely, to mirror its ill-defined nature in everyday reference" (2016, p.24).
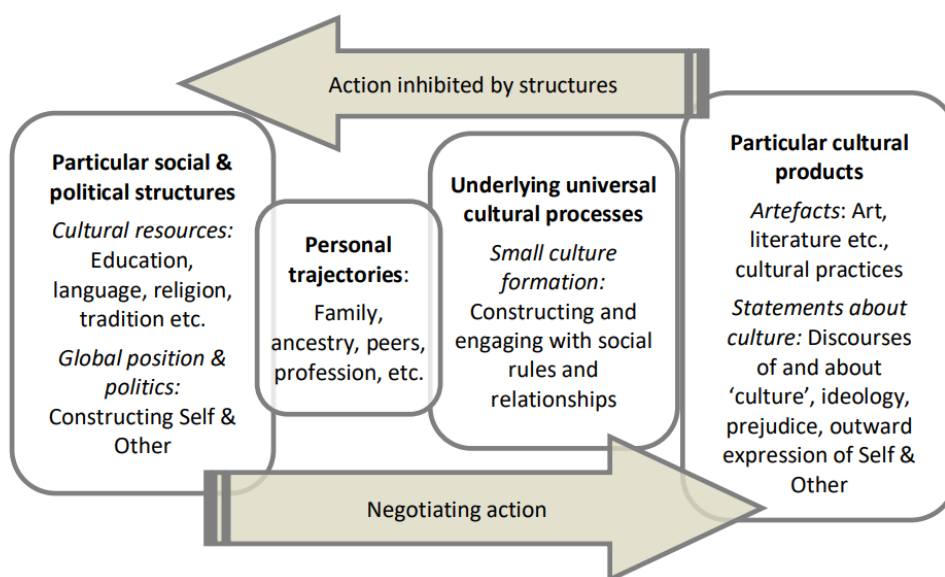
Figure 11 Grammar of Culture (Adapted from Holliday, 2013, p.2)

The particular social and political structures comprise the different institutions which "form us and make us different from each other" (Holliday 2013, p.1). They stand for the resources that "we draw on" (Holliday, 2016, p.26) and that affect the way we perceive ourselves and others. Resources

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may include religion, economy, education, language, etc. Researching this domain entails asking individuals about the cultural resources they draw upon when they come into contact with different cultural domains. However, one should avoid asking direct questions which may elicit easy answers that tend to be influenced by common stereotypes (p.27). Global position and politics is the domain that deals with the way people position themselves in relation to others. While positioning themselves, individuals tend to construct images about their societies through making use of the cultural resources available. Holliday contends that this area is "often ignored in intercultural studies texts" (2013, p.2). He adds that this domain is "very hard to see around because of the degree to which we are all inscribed by long standing constructions of who we are in relationship to others in our histories, education, institutions, upbringing and media representations" (pp.2-3).

Central to my thesis are the personal trajectories which stand in-between the particular social and political structures and the universal cultural processes. This sub-domain refers to individuals' personal travel and dialogue with the particular structures in their society and the ones they encounter in different cultural environments (Holliday, 2016, pp.27-28). The relevance of cultural trajectories to my research lies in the fact that this study aims to explore "narrative accounts from individuals who have travelled culturally or lived at cultural interfaces" which is the main focus of this domain. Another domain that appears to be of considerable relevance to the present research is the universal cultural processes which "involve skills and strategies through which everyone, regardless of background, participates in and negotiates their position within the cultural landscapes to which they belong or with which they engage." (Holliday, 2016, p.29). This domain is informed by Holliday's notion of small culture discussed earlier. Here Holliday argues that researchers should not aim to spot "miscommunication" problems and then attempt to resolve them through raising people's awareness with respect to "foreign practices". People should rather make use of the pre-existing strategies to go beyond miscommunication. This might be through "asking questions, making allowances, finding middle ways, negotiating, sorting out face, and managing Self and Other" (2016, p.29).

The last domain in the grammar comprises artefacts and statements about culture. Artefacts refer to the different constituents of our big-C culture such as the media, literature and arts which characterise our cultural practices. They involve the different routines we do on a daily basis, including the way we greet people, interact with them, eating habits, etc. Although such practices may be employed to denote certain national cultures (e.g. British people eat dinner at 7 pm), they actually "differ between small groups within a particular society" (e.g. Some people eat dinner at 9 pm while others do not follow a particular schedule). A critical cosmopolitan view, as stated by Holliday, would not perceive such behaviours as unique constituents of a particular culture, it rather considers them to be "accessible to outsiders" (Holliday, 2016, p.30). The second part of this domain includes statements about culture. They designate the "way that we present ourselves through what we choose to say about our cultural background" (ibid.). Holliday cautions against taking such statements (e.g. we value family gatherings) for granted as they usually tend to signal "idealized images of how we see ourselves" (ibid.). The relevance of this domain is related to this research's endeavour to explore the underpinnings of the simplistic (or reductionist) statements about culture that individuals may produce during interviews.

The arrows indicate the constant negotiation between the different domains of the grammar. In the left-right movement, individuals might employ their personal trajectories along with the universal cultural processes to cross, negotiate and even rearticulate the social and political structures (Holliday, 2013, p.4). Influenced by Weber's theory of social action, the grammar recognises people's agency and ability to transcend national boundaries and even belong to several cultural realities simultaneously. However, the degree to which such negotiation might be successful is affected by "tradition, politics, hierarchy, and prejudice acting against it" (Holliday, 2016, p.31). Movement from right to left designates the action that tends to be introduced by cultural travellers into new social and political structures. These individuals may be tourists, sojourners, study abroad students, immigrants, asylum-seekers, etc. Likewise, the degree to which action ("creative engagement") can take place is affected by several factors such

as "prejudice, hierarchy and tradition which we carry with us" (ibid.). Although my research focus is on the right-left movement, it is also important to understand the mechanisms underpinning movement within the same social structure. In other words, a question to be raised here is whether left-right movement, or the degree of agency within the same social structure, has any impact on individuals' creative engagement with structures across borders. In sum, the grammar provides valuable information with regards to the interplay between the structures, the universal cultural processes, and individuals' agency and ability to employ their personal trajectories to rearticulate structures.

3.3.2 Cultural Blocks/Threads

The concepts of cultural blocks and cultural threads first appeared in a blogpost by Holliday (2015). They were then used in research in Holliday (2016), Amadasi and Holliday (2018, 2017), and Dippold et al. (2018). Blocks and Threads represent "two modes of thinking and talking about cultural difference within a non-essentialist paradigm" (Holliday, 2016, p.1). A cultural block reproduces a soft essentialist or neo-essentialist discourse of culture since it "promotes the idea of national cultures as the prime, defining and confining units of cultural identity … [and] builds boundaries and restricts cultural travel" (Amadasi and Holliday, 2017, p.259). In contrast, a cultural thread employs elements from individuals' personal trajectories (family, ancestry, cultural travel within home society) that people, regardless of nationality, can identify with easily. A thread, therefore, "has the power to extend and carry us across the boundaries that are encouraged by cultural blocks" (p.259) and to "bring us together" (p.260).
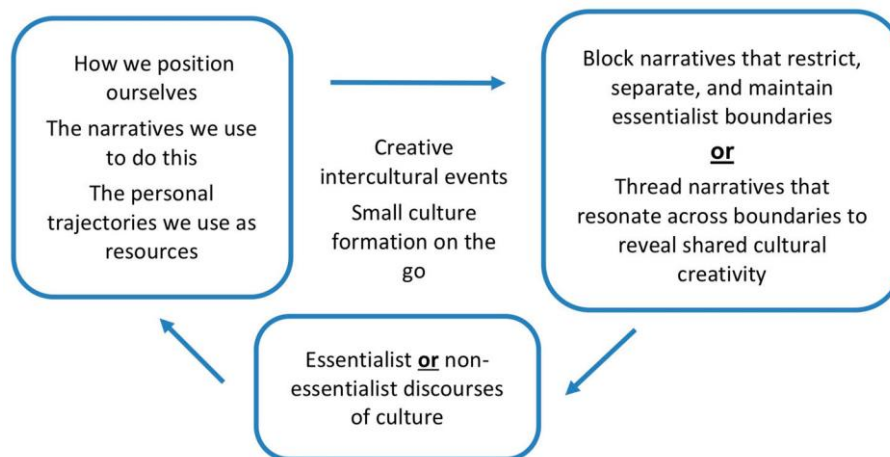
Figure 12 Elements of creative intercultural negotiation (From Amadasi and Holliday, 2017, p.258)

Blocks and threads are major constituents of Holliday's Grammar of Culture. The emergence of threads in participants' narratives is not an easy task, and it sometimes requires an interventionist methodology with prompts that enable both interviewers and interviewees to transcend a block narrative. The latter is still considered to be the default means of interaction amongst individuals. Threading has the potential to enrich the cultural domains that cultural travellers visit as they creatively negotiate and rethink the structures they encounter. In so doing, they rely on the personal trajectories and the individual experiences they bring along, which signals their agency and ability to go beyond the essentialist block of 'us' and 'them'. The latter (i.e. blocks) may even disappear as individuals make further links with the new cultural domain. A relevant example of continuous threading may be observed in my personal experience as a cultural traveller in a new cultural environment. A block approach would reduce me to a product of my 'home' culture which would presumably characterise and define my behaviour. It therefore leads me to unquestionably subscribe to the pre-established national differences between Algeria and the UK, and to define my 'self' in juxtaposition to the British 'other' whom I would perceive as a member of a homogenous entity. In contrast, a thread approach enables me to transcend the essentialist block, to question the current practices and their different manifestations within and across cultural domains. I therefore end up making

links at the micro level through discussing casual topics with the same manner I would do in my 'home' cultural domain. For instance, while cleaning the kitchen with my 'British' flatmate, we had a discussion about 'girlfriends' and 'marriage'. Surprisingly, the 'in my culture girlfriends are…' or 'marriage is…' expressions did not surface at all. Both of us seemed to agree that having a 'spark' for a girlfriend (or wife) is a temporary feeling, hence why divorce is prevalent. We made references from our personal trajectories and how both our family histories are full of divorces. This discussion helped us to open up and to understand each other, tracing the link between our trajectories and the fact that both of us have girlfriends. I reimagined our discussion and made use of previous discussions about the same topic with other people to come up with a fictional narrative. The following is a small extract:

> Him: Oh, I thought that you are not allowed to have girlfriends in your culture.

> Me: Well, having a girlfriend is forbidden by certain Islamic laws which constitute a major part of the so-called Algerian national culture. However, people do have girlfriends. Actually, I used to live with my girlfriend when I was in Canterbury.

> Him: Although it is normal in my culture to live with a girlfriend, I don't think that I am into doing that. I just feel that there should be an official thing, something like engagement or marriage before living with her.

A cultural block would probably look like the aforementioned extract. Essentialist ideas indirectly lead individuals to make use of national cultures as means to define one's practices. Though fictional, I encounter similar discussions frequently. Threading, however, is rare as most people I come across tend to start the discussion with the 'where are you from' question, which eventually results in a superficial conversation where presumed national norms and values are mobilised as a means to predict, compare and contrast behaviour. The afore-mentioned extract can be (re)imagined several times with expressions that juggle between blocks and threads.

In their attempt to explore first year university students' experiences of culture, Dippold et al. (2018) employ Holliday's concepts of cultural blocks and threads as means to analyse the emergent narratives from interviews with students in four higher education institutions. The initial remarks that emerged from reading through this work relate both to the theoretical and analytical underpinnings of the research which lead me to argue that Dippold et al.'s usage of cultural blocks and threads does not actually align with what the concepts intend to convey. To begin with, the concept of the global graduate is taken for granted in the research, and no effort is made to problematize what it may stand for. For instance, Dippold et al. (2018, p.2) mention, amongst a list of qualities of the global graduate, "awareness of their own cultures and its perspectives on other cultures and their perspectives" (citing Leask, 2015, p.57). This quality does not provide the researchers' position with regards to the concept of culture. Likewise, reference to competency frameworks as a means of fortifying the qualities of the global graduate is also problematic for such frameworks (e.g. The Pyramid Model, Deardorff, 2006) tend to quantify competencies which is in conflict with the theoretical underpinnings of cultural blocks and threads. A third point to be raised concerns the way data was analysed. In a discussion with one of the recruited participants, the interviewer asks him about the nationality of one of his classmates (p.6):

Interviewer   And what- what nationality is she?

Brad   She's Chinese.

The accompanied analysis argues that "the identification of the classmate as part of a national group (Chinese) after the interviewer's prompt makes this another co-constructed block narrative" (p.7). The interviewee does not seem to construct a cultural block due to the fact that he clearly answered a simple question. In the following narrative the participant did not link "being a Chinese national" to behaving in a specific manner. He rather focused on personal traits like shyness and addressed general issues that may take place in any environment: "when you're shy in a new environment, that's hard enough" (p.7) which rather signals a cultural thread. To sum up, it is

always problematic to conduct research where the concept of culture is involved. The process of selecting the relevant theoretical and analytical frameworks that inform the research should be given considerable attention. It is common and indeed problematic to combine a neo-essentialist understanding of 'global citizenship' or the 'global graduate' with the non-essentialist concept of cultural threads. Therefore, further research into appropriate ways of employing this concept in research is crucial.

3.3.3 Research-Based Intercultural Competence Framework

Deardorff (2006, p.241) argues that the "lack of specificity in defining intercultural competence is due presumably to the difficulty of identifying the specific components of this complex concept". Out of the need to forge a 'convenient' way that can help HEIs in the process of keeping track of learners' intercultural competence, she develops what she claims to be the first research-based model (Deardorff, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2016). In her attempt to reach a consensus over a clear definition of IC, she employs a questionnaire and a Delphi technique to involve both US institutional administrators and renowned national/international scholars in the field of interculturality (2006, pp.243-246). As far as the definition is concerned, Deardorff (2006, p.245) distinguishes between a western and eastern view of IC. While the former signals that IC "resides largely within the individual", the latter perceives the group as the major "unit of analysis", hence why 'eastern' contribution to the formulation of the definition was limited. This problematic distinction between an eastern and western perception of interculturality in general and IC in particular generates several controversies. The distinction, though pretending to be backed by research, does not highlight a plausible underlying reason. In other words, it takes Hofstede's cultural dimension of collectivism/individualism at face value, without even investigating its validity against what participating 'eastern' scholars have to say. Second, presuming this to be relevant, how can a 'western' definition be employed in assessing international students' IC? Another issue to be raised in this regard relates to the main objectives of the model. In this vein, one can arguably claim that it strives to conceptualise IC

from an institutional and organisational point of view where competency is subject to the needs of the marketplace rather than what learners demonstrate in the real world.

Apart from these issues, the subsequent model (Deardorff, 2006, p.256) in addition to other models of IC such as the Pyramid model (Deardorff, 2004), The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), the ICOPROMO Model (Glaser et al., 2007) and many others, seem to deconstruct IC into several skills that can be mastered and developed by individuals through intercultural training programs. It thereby implicitly champions a link of causality between mastering certain skills and becoming interculturally competent. This poses another problem with regards to what 'actually' takes place in real world situations, where the self/other interaction is shaped by certain power differentials and other mechanisms. Furthermore, such models seem to neglect the role of 'the other' in shaping intercultural interaction as the "emphasis" is merely "placed on skills, and measurable, realistic outcomes" (Ferri, 2018, p.76). Ferri adds that "what Deardorff interprets as inter-relationality is a static notion of culture occurring after the acquisition of competences, rather than through a process of transformation originating from the 'inter', the processual act of interaction" (ibid.). In so doing, interculturality is perceived as the encounter of separate cultures which is 'facilitated' by trainers who "provide the tools to help navigate and interpret behaviour as expression of cultural difference" (ibid., p.81). In sum, similar models appear to construct an 'idealised intercultural speaker' through turning IC into a measurable and quantifiable product that can be mastered through the acquisition of certain skills. In so doing, such models fail to acknowledge the reality of intercultural dialogue and the power differentials affecting interaction. Therefore, what can be projected as an attempt to acknowledge diversity is yet another problematic approach where difference is established on an a priori basis, and presented in the form of acquirable skills.

Section 2: The Internationalisation of Higher Education

3.4 Concepts and Terms

3.4.1 Internationalisation of HE

The internationalisation of the UK's higher education sector has proved to be very lucrative (Jones et al., 2016, p.9) that many HEIs are continuously competing to forge their 'global outlook'. Endeavours for establishing and maintaining a competitive internationalised education led to the reformulation of a plethora of national and institutional policies, the introduction of new laws and regulations, the internationalisation of curriculums and activities, and the proliferation of inbound and outbound mobility of students which remains, as Jones et al. argue, "a bedrock component of the internationalization agendas" (2016, p.7). Although such initiatives have for long been associated with the UK's effort to create welcoming 'global' campuses, it can equally be argued that genuine endeavours to cater for the needs of international students and their experiences remain of secondary importance. Universities' main goal, therefore, seems to champion the accumulation of profit along with improving their "global rankings" and their respective countries' "global profiles" (ibid., p.9). Central to this claim is HEIs growing dependence on third party agencies which include both non-profit and for-profit entities to forge and maintain their internationalisation agendas. Such inevitable dependence on external entities seems to have a direct impact on students' experience. The latter is excessively commodified and commercialised, sometimes to a degree where promoted realities are completely detached from the actual experiences endured by students. This is especially common for those labelled international, as they are heavily exposed to these promotional discourses prior to embarking on their educational trajectories.

Among the obvious outcomes of internationalisation within UK HEIs is the emergence of the home and international student labels. Even though such labels may appear innocent and value-free when utilised to refer to geographical locations, the way they are currently mobilised in institutional

discourses imply an uneven and irrational categorisation. On many occasions, the international is believed to be the other who is by definition different/alien to the self. In this respect, HEIs appear to align with a plethora of policies that adhere to a deficit framework where being international entails specific requirements (high fees, language tests, pre-sessional programmes, workshops, police registration, etc.). These labels can serve as powerful means to disseminate certain misleading representations, especially when the label is actively used to describe an allegedly homogeneous group of individuals.

To challenge this imposed alienation, Jones (2017, p.933) argues that some international students may be acquainted "with the social and academic culture of the host country, and may be expert in, or even a native speaker of, the language of study". On the other hand, "domestic students may have similar needs to students identified as international" (ibid.). This "false dichotomy" (ibid., p.934), therefore, does not acknowledge the degree of diversity within the international itself. Nonetheless, these uneven categories are actively informing much of the comparative studies between domestic and international students in recent years, and even shaping the realities that students experience on the go. In an attempt to rearticulate this problematic distinction, Hanassab (2006, cited in Jones, 2017) suggests an alternative categorisation where nationalities are adopted as means to distinguish between students. The implications of such approach are equally controversial since it maintains the discursive construction of students as national ambassadors, or bearers of a distinctive national culture.

Internationalisation has proved to be one of the widely contested concepts in the last two decades. This is mainly in higher education, since the term existed for very long in political sciences and governmental relations (Knight, 2003, p.2). The continuous attempts to conceptualise internationalisation and outline its implementation in higher education has contributed to sustaining the current neo-liberal agenda underpinning UK, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and US HEIs' policies. Such policies, as Luke (2010, p.44) contends, lead to a "complex, chaotic, and unpredictable edubusiness"

which prioritises "the financial 'bottom line'" and constructs "different versions or 'namings' of the international Others of international student cohorts".

In the UK, a long-standing student-as-consumer approach (Bunce et al., 2017) intensified straight after the publication of the Browne Report (Browne et al., 2010) which allowed universities to triple tuition fees for UK-domiciled students. While this change is capped at a particular rate that public universities cannot exceed, the tuition fees for international students are not capped. Therefore, it enables universities to capitalise on this by charging non-UK domiciled students huge tuition fees that, in some instances, are eight times higher than the amount paid by home students[6]. The impact of such approach, which characterises the current UK HEIs internationalisation agenda, transcends a mere financial abuse, since it equally fuels a deficit framework where those subsumed within the international label are equally portrayed as deficient and uncritical beings.

In the context of internationalised western HE, there are two widely-referenced definitions of internationalisation. The first definition is provided by Knight (2004, p.11) who describes internationalisation as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". This was then revised by the European Parliament through describing this process as "intentional" and contending that it aims 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, p.29). Of interest to this discussion is the inclusion of the term 'intercultural' in the definition of internationalisation, which arguably signals that such intercultural dimension did not exist prior to internationalisation. This is yet another manifestation of a problematic discursive framing of a 'self' and 'other', where the other is presumed to originate beyond the border. References to a 'global' dimension are equally problematic. In this respect, Abdi et al. (2015, p. 3) argue that

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[6] https://www.leeds.ac.uk/research-fees/doc/research-degrees-fees

"anything that is classified as global … can too easily be co-opted into serving neo-colonial, neo-imperial or even neo-patriarchy systems that deliberately globalize neoliberal ideologies which de-legitimate the needs and aspirations of marginalized populations". A relevant example in UK HEIs is the frequent reliance on the elastic and all-subsuming 'global citizenship' buzzword.

3.4.2 Neoliberalism in HE

The current HE context in the UK is largely underpinned by a "neoliberal rationality that challenges the very idea of a public good" (Brown, 2015, p.119). This rationality is vigorously "transferring the cost of higher education from the community to the individual" (Mintz, 2021, p.85) and positioning students as customers or consumers (Bunce et al., 2017; Smyth, 2017; Mintz, 2021). In so doing, the 'old' endeavour of educating individuals at a local scale for the sole aim of disseminating knowledge and public good (Fleming, 2021, p.22) is substituted by a system where knowledge-provision is "recast as a service and educators as service providers" (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018, p.216). This institutional direction defies the very founding mission and aims of universities in exchange for a market-driven commodification and marketisation of knowledge for the ultimate goal of generating profit.

Neoliberalism is a term which designates a long-standing economic doctrine that currently exerts a major influence on every sphere of life. It can be traced to an array of origins which comprise the Chilean economic shift between 1970-1975 after a US-supported military coup saw the replacement of Salvador Allende by General Augusto Pinochet (Maisuria and Cole, 2017, p.603). The doctrine is equally associated with the economic reforms and deregulations introduced by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Interestingly, one of the earliest usages of the term is attributed to Armstrong (1884) "who characterized "neo-liberals" as desiring and promoting increased economic intervention from the state" (Cited in Schraedley et al., 2021, p.3), a definition that stands in sharp contrast to the current conceptualisations of the term.

Broadly speaking, neoliberalism stands for the systematic spread of "the principles of deregulation, marketization, and privatization of all public goods, a forthright attack on the public sector, and the beginnings of casting every human endeavour and activity in entrepreneurial terms" (Brown, 2015, p.118). Martinez and Garcia (2000) identify the major tenets of this doctrine. These include the prevalence of free markets with minimal governmental intervention, compromised or slashed public spending, the privatisation of key sectors and industries, and the eradication of the idea of public good in favour of individual responsibility. A neo-liberalised economy, and in turn society, results in a status quo that is largely shaped by economic practices, "where all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized" (Brown, 2015, p.10).

Extending these principles to HE turns universities into "business enterprises obsessed with income, growth and outputs". The latter is an approach that arguably underlies the UK's current "strategy regarding the lucrative international student market" (Fleming, 2021, p.10). Within the confines of neo-liberalised universities, knowledge is commodified, impact is quantified via a spectrum of complex metrics, university is turned into a "marketplace" or a "corporation run by profit-minded managers" (Boyer, 2011, p.180), and attaining a degree is portrayed as purchasing a commodity, hence rendering the "learning experience no different to choosing from which supermarket to buy a product", especially when the commodified degrees are protected with dedicated consumer rights[7] regulations. However, as noted by Mintz (2021, p.80), this altered student identity is dictated by "the way that we think about, organize, and fund education, rather than any fundamental change in young people".

The pinnacle of neoliberalism is arguably witnessed in contexts that involve the recruitment of international students, since this cohort is barely protected

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[7] Students enrolled in UK universities are protected by the Competition and Markets Authority (Maisuria and Cole, 2017, p.610).

by the policies and regulations that underlie the recruitment of home students (e.g., capped versus uncapped tuition fees). This is why international students constitute a very competitive market, with fierce competition and institutional ambitions that sometimes result in unethical promotional activities where the student experience is turned into a purchasable package, with an array of buzzwords and representations that conceal the numerous inequalities resulting from such doctrine and label. In many universities, students labelled international "make up a significant proportion of enrolments … and cash-flow depends on signing up more kids" (Fleming, 2021, p.38). Such a problematic dependence is unsustainable, as in many instances, the need for cash could result in admitting high-fee-paying students regardless of their qualification. As highlighted by Fleming (2021, p.38), "it's been alleged that some universities turn a blind eye to English language standards to get more through the door".

In sum, the proliferation of neoliberal practices in UK HEIs is increasingly altering the educational landscape. The latter is characterised by a shifting interest from a perception of universities as a manifestation of democracy and public good, to a dogma that champions individual responsibility and metric-fuelled visions and strategies, where the financial bottom line serves as the chief driver of institutional policy. In spite of impacting faculty and students alike (from casualisations, excessive workloads, compromised freedoms, to student debt), neoliberal practices are more prominent in contexts that involve the exploitation of cohorts of international students. This is achieved by selling packaged student experiences and commodified degrees that allegedly align with market requirements, are accredited via several 'excellence' markers, are promoted through an array of ranking indicators and league tables, and which arguably benefit from a long-standing 'west as steward' discourse that not only valorises western degrees, but equally disseminates a presumed international student deficiency that can be 'solved' in exchange for a high fee.

3.5 The McUniversity

The publication of the Browne Review (Browne, 2010) has directly contributed to the intensification of what Bunce et al., (2017) termed the Student-as-Consumer Approach (SAC). Such approach altered UK Higher Education (HE) as universities 'forcedly' shifted towards the marketization and commercialization of their degrees in order to 'compete' in the 'student market'. This significant turn has recently contributed to the emergence of a plethora of promotional expressions that strive to conceptualise students and their experiences within a particular framework (Such as the student experience, student engagement, well-being, satisfaction, student employability, etc.). The latter is largely underpinned by the demands of the market, governmental policies, and in some cases by students. HE has therefore been reshaped into a market-driven sector (Tomlinson, 2017, p.450) that endeavours to meet certain industrial pre-requisites (Hayes, 2015, p.125) dictated by entities that are largely unaware of the realities of the educational context.

Before elaborating on the rhetoric of the student experience and how it is approached by policymakers in UK HE, we should first critically examine the idea of students as consumers along with the notion of experience itself. In this regard I shall start by referring to what Ritzer (2019) described as 'McDonaldization'. The latter designates "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world" (2019, p.22). In the following paragraphs I will argue that UK HE is striving to mimic/already mimicking a 'business model' similar to that of McDonald's which results in the proliferation of neoliberalism within HE, the shifting view from education as a learning process undertaken by students to education as a product purchased by consumers (or prosumers as we shall see later), and the decline of educational freedoms due to a highly marketized and pre-determined 'student experience'.

In his book The McDonaldization of Society (2019), Ritzer critically examines the basic principles underpinning McDonalds' fast food chain. These include

efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (p.20). These principles seem to transcend food franchises as they are also adopted by HEIs around the world, resulting in what Ritzer calls the "McUniversity" (pp.74-75). The latter "exhibits greater managerial power, structural centralization, substantial growth of organisation size, rising student-staff ratios, more emphasis on marketing and business generation and the rationalization and computerization of administrative structures" (Parker and Jary, 1995, p.324). The implementation of such principles within tertiary education is increasingly contributing to the homogenisation of every aspect of university life including staff's behaviours and perceptions, academics' teaching content and positions within institutions, and most importantly students' trajectories and experiences.

Efficiency stands for "choosing (or having chosen for you by others) the optimum means to a given end" (Ritzer, 2019, p.69). Ritzer (p.75) links this to the increase in students' efficiency within universities especially in respect to performing tasks like surfing the internet and accessing resources while studying, or purchasing research papers to avoid the hassle of writing them, which might contribute to the current dehumanization of the educational sector and widening the privilege gap between individuals from different parts of the world.

Calculability is present in every aspect of UK HE and shapes students' concerns, and universities' resolutions and attempts to enhance or sustain their global outlook. Calculability is manifested in different ways ranging from a pre-determined/standard number of weeks to teach a course/subject regardless of the actual time needed to deliver that course, students' concern with grades/numbers, and the quantification of students feedback and other statistics into percentages that can later be used in league tables. As stated by Ritzer (2019, p.88) "calculability makes it easier to determine efficiency". In this context, however, efficiency is not about enhancing the conditions of actors (students, staff, and administration) within HE, it rather signifies targeting certain areas within league tables to improve the university rankings.

Predictability refers to "the assurance that products and services will be much the same over time and in all locales" (Ritzer, 2019, p.21). Control, on the other hand, signifies the degree to which the company, in this case HEIs, exerts control over individuals' choices and freedoms. This can be witnessed in universities through their attempts to 'structure' how administrative staff interact with students, the training that both academic and non-academic staff should/must undertake, and even restrictions on what an academic can tweet about. These principles along with the previous ones contribute to sustaining a neo-liberal educational system that tends to favour the quantification of the student experience and the proliferation of 'McJobs' where everything is structured, and agency is quite limited.

The reason behind critically examining the current state of UK HEIs is not to romanticize about previous times but rather to uncover the direction and future of tertiary education and the impact that a neo-liberal paradigm could have on university actors in general and students in particular. Based on the previous short analysis of how 'McDonaldization' is taking over UK HEIs, one can argue that universities' ultimate aim is shifting towards the prioritization of the "financial 'bottom line'" (Luke 2010, p.44) over other aspects of HE that might be of interest to university actors. As of now, this section will tackle several points that revolve around the expansion of neo-liberal education but exclusively in relation to what students go through, or as 'eloquently' termed by university marketing discourses and governmental policy documents: 'the student experience'.

3.6 Embodied Nothingness and the Metaphor of the Cage

Towards the end of his book about McDonaldization, Ritzer (2019, p.187) discusses his metaphor of the cage and how it simulates individuals' perceptions regarding McDonaldization. Metaphorically, there are three cages: Weber's iron cage which is made of iron bars that prevent individuals from escaping. Within the confines of this cage, "one is trapped in this rational world" (Hayes et al., 2018, p.116). The velvet cage, on the other hand, does not have confinement properties but it is so appealing that

individuals end up trapping themselves inside of it willingly. And finally, the rubber cage which is quite "flexible, so people can pull the bars apart and get away when they want to get away" (ibid.). This metaphor can be linked to HE in many ways.

Many students subscribe to a McDonaldized tertiary education system and may not be aware of the implications that such system might have on the homogenization of their experiences and on higher education in general. For many students, things like picking the 'best' university based on league tables, paying high tuition fees, and even purchasing a cappuccino using on-campus coffee machines for double the price of a cappuccino in a local store across the road are not even problematic. For others, however, the cage is velvet one as they are completely aware that HE institutions perceive them as consumers, but they still like it. On some occasions they might even voluntarily act as ambassadors of their respective institutions and might even engage in debates to argue how their university is the 'best' provider of student experience. The last cage, which is made of rubber, comprises individuals who are aware of the consumerist agenda beneath university promotional discourses. These individuals creatively navigate such discourses at times by conforming to or adopting them, but they also "seek to escape [the cage] when they can" (Ritzer, 2019, p.187).

An example of a rubber cage within a McDonaldized HE is Litzenberg's investigation of the covert neo-liberal discourses underpinning Intensive English Programmes' (IEPs) decisions (2020, pp.1-23). Employing an autoethnographic approach, Litzenberg describes his interaction with and navigation through neo-liberal pedagogical agendas. He states that "If I don't do it, somebody else will" (p.19) in reference to neo-liberal decisions that should be carried out to "maintain employment for those involved and provide new professionals with opportunities to gain valuable experience" (ibid). Similarly, though, he contends that awareness of the implicit dangers of neo-liberalism enables actors to "contest the extent of … complicity and balance the scale in favour of pedagogy" (p.20). Such argument reflects many academics and students' approaches to navigating the present HE

system. Although the representation of the metaphor of the cage by Ritzer implies a solid positionality where one might not belong to different cages simultaneously, I argue against that as based on my trajectory as a research student who is in constant interaction with a McDonaldized university system, I sometimes find myself unconsciously reproducing certain neo-liberal discourses (iron cage). Other times, however, I subscribe to certain discourses by choice as I find them appealing (velvet cage) or reject them entirely when they appear to be restrictive (rubber cage).

The development of the McDonaldization theory goes further with an esoteric conceptualisation of nothingness and somethingness. Ritzer (2004), who cautions that his thesis is "controversial" and might be purposefully offensive (Ritzer et al., 2018, p.117), regards "McDonald's, the food that they serve, and the people who work there, as nothing" (ibid.). The centrality of globalization contributes to the homogenisation of social services which are increasingly becoming "devoid of distinctive substantive content" (Ritzer, 2004, p.3). This state of nothingness is continuously replacing what Ritzer terms 'something'. The latter is manifested in "social forms which are indigenously conceived and controlled, and relatively rich in distinctive substantive content" (Rumford, 2005, p.241). Linking this theory to education, a similar process is manifested via the attempts to produce "uniform kinds of higher education procedure" (Ritzer et al., 2018, p.117).

This homogenisation of HE is arguably implemented to sustain the pillars of a neo-liberal education that adopts a top-down commodification agenda. In so doing, it both denies and hinders individuals and actors within the educational system from becoming something. The latter can only be done in situations where "work is free, creative and unconstrained" (Ritzer et al., 2018, p.117), but that is becoming increasingly difficult for it might result in individuals being fired, expelled, or affected negatively. The main concern here relates to the way through which such systematic rationalisation affects students' experiences. This can be explained by universities' endeavours to promote and consolidate a unified 'student experience' discourse that can serve both as means to stand out in league tables and to pretend to cater for

the student community while in fact the spread of such discourse overshadows the reality of what university actors undergo. Here, individuals who either willingly or unwillingly subscribe to such discourses end up acquiescing a state of nothingness as agency is constrained via a pre-determined HE structure.

3.7 A Controversial Theory

While this theory and my views regarding its proliferation in HE might be exaggerated, the current quarrel over the degree of agency that HE actors can exercise is alarming. As dehumanization within McDonald's is soaring, this can transcend to HE where the financial bottom line has already taken over the teaching/learning experience. Ritzer's controversial theory of nothing, however, can easily be flawed as by attempting to combat the centrality of social forms brought up by the McDonaldization and Americanization of the world, he ends up producing another form of nothingness by discarding the possibility of actors interpreting things differently from his thesis (Rumford, 2005, p.242). In this regard, I distance myself from a blind adherence to his theory by arguing that agency transcends any forms of restrictive structures bred by rationalization of the educational sector as individual actors within the institution will always find a way to exercise their freedom and express their agency and creativity. What I perceive as nothingness is therefore only what the current university discourses attempt to achieve through establishing, fixing, and homogenizing certain discourses such as the 'student experience'. The degree to which individuals subscribe to such discourses is, unlike what Ritzer claims, always relative and creatively negotiated.

> A recent shift in certain staff positions within one of the schools at [University Name] meant that the 'Postgraduate Research Officer' within the school is obliged to move to another building to join a centralised doctoral college. This also meant that the concerned member of staff will not be able to take care of, and respond to postgraduate researchers'

concerns, and face-to-face interactions are to become scarce despite the need for someone who deals with their concerns and enquiries and raises their issues to higher bodies. The PGR community within the school expressed their outrage and demanded that the person stays within their position because the person plays a significant role in their experience as student researchers at the university. Despite repeated attempts to voice their concerns regarding the decision (by means of petitions, surveys, and emails to higher bodies), their demands were not approved as a higher authority within the university claimed that a centralised doctoral college would increase the efficiency of staff and the 'student experience'.

In the previous extract it is clear how university decisions are carried out primarily to maintain the constituents of the McDonaldised Edu-factory. Students' concerns, or what I perceive as the 'real' student experience, are largely ignored as PGRs have no power to reverse this detrimental repositioning. While a centralized doctoral college will increase efficiency and add to the tidiness of the university's global outlook, it distances the current postgraduate researchers from a very important person within the school as this member worked very hard to establish and maintain a small culture of researchers within the school by means of regular informal meetings where researchers discuss their progress/issues/concerns, etc. The following extract further uncovers this systematised spread of nothingness which, in this case, stems from an ongoing issue of 'hot desking'.

'Hot desking' or the shortage of working spaces within the school's postgraduate offices has proved to be a non-ending issue in the last 4-5 years at [University Name]. Thanks to the effort done by many representatives over the years, and the concerns that were repeatedly raised to higher bodies, the university expressed readiness and willingness to invest £50000 in creating a new space for PGRs within the school. At first this was a tremendous victory for the school's PGR community.

However, they soon realised that the space is going to be fully open, without any walls/glass to ensure privacy and security. PGR representatives expressed their outrage regarding this decision and refused it altogether as what researchers usually need is a quiet/silent space with basic facilities (a computer, a table, and a chair). Despite endless emails to revise this decision, in addition to meetings and complaints, the university did not listen to PGRs' suggestions. The PGRs unanimously decided that they do not want that space as it does not reflect their actual needs.

The event described in the previous extract shows how a top-down process of dealing with the 'student experience' is attempting to disguise a 'bottom-up' process embodied in PGRs' creative attempts to navigate the neo-liberal layers of the university. This is applicable in many settings, and it is not exclusive to one university. What HE perceives as 'the student experience' is therefore a void conceptualisation that does not reflect what students strive to attain. Borrowing from Benedict Anderson (1983), one can arguably point out that HEIs' barely create an 'imagined community' of postgraduate researchers to be mobilised in university discourses and promotional materials. Here, space is 'real', but its exclusiveness to the PGR community is the social construction that university discourses attempt to engrain. This can apply to a plethora of facilities and premises like car parks and business centres.

3.8 Students as Consumers/Prosumers

As education has come to be perceived as a process whereby consumers (who are in many cases prosumers as it will be explained later in this section) purchase a product (i.e., degrees) "to secure future employment" (Hayes and Jandrić, 2018, p.127), a critique of the emergence and spread of consumer culture within higher education can uncover the shift in the educational context. The latter is nowadays characterised by a "mode of existence, where students seek to 'have a degree' rather than 'be learners'"

(Molesworth et al., 2009, p.277). While I perceive this as a bold statement that ignores a plethora of factors underpinning students' choices and perceptions, I still intend to critically examine the position of authors as it contributes to understanding the SAC approach.

Molesworth et al. (2017, p.278) argue that due to the increased marketisation of UK HEIs, the role/aim of universities and the enrolled students revolves barely around complying with the dictated requirements of the market. Universities, therefore, "prepare the student to a life of consumption by obtaining a well-paid job" (ibid.). This, as they caution, reduces the role of HE to a "mission of confirmation" in contrast to having an active endeavour in leading students to personal metamorphosis. What is controversial about the authors' take on the spread of this consumer culture is the way through which they position university students. In this respect, students are distanced from any desire to learn and explicitly presented as graduate-job hunters whose least important objective is "immersing themselves in their subject" to "change as a person" (ibid., p.279).

Such reasoning renders students as blind followers and even reproducers of a consumerist approach. The authors draw on Fromm's understanding of 'having' and 'being' as modes of existing where 'having' can be summarised in the sentence "I am more the more I have" (1976, p.5). Molesworth et al. (2017, p.280) employ this mode to argue that students' interest in education stems solely from their desire to possess or buy ideas, skills, or degrees that prove they learned something. Such reductionist view does not capture the reality of students' goals as while it rightly condemns the pillars of the neo-liberal university, it blames students for being part of the problem. As much as the university is under continuous pressures to adopt a mass-consumption approach and compete by coping with the demands of the market, the government, and eventually to sustain its survival, students also deal with several factors that influence their perceptions of the purpose behind undertaking a university degree. The following reflective extract is based on my own experience as a university-contracted employee concerned with delivering sessions in different schools around the UK.

> As part of my role as an [Role Name] at [University Name], I always find myself struggling with the discourses that certain actors within the university expect me to subscribe to and reproduce in my presentations on/off campus. On several occasions I have been approached and strangely 'instructed' on what to exactly present to students. This mainly concerns the theme of 'employability' and how a university degree is the lottery ticket that has the right numbers to secure a graduate-level job with a competitive salary. Such neo-liberal representation of the role that universities should play does not only affect prospective students' trajectories, it also undermines any chance for students to critically examine the role of university.

It is inevitable that the prevalence of the new terminology which advocates a SAC orientation might be "internalized and utilized by students" (Tomlinson, 2017, p.451) which in turn results in increased students' tendency to question "the economic value of participating in higher education" (ibid.). While Fromm's dialectic of having and being might be useful in illuminating certain discursive constructions underpinning tertiary education, the neat separation between the two modes is misleading as both students and university actors employ these modes simultaneously. Consequently, instead of blaming students for falling victims of this increasingly-marketized HE system, one might rather explore how governmental and educational policies are recklessly distancing students from the image of the "academic apprentices or critical agents [who are] on a path towards self-formation" (ibid. p.453).

While there is enough evidence to suggest that the commodification of knowledge within higher education results in viewing students as potential customers or purchasers of goods, and other actors (like academics) as accountable employees "whose very institutional existence [is] contingent on both students' enrolment …. [and] the way in which their performance [is] appraised" (Tomlinson, 2017, p.459), the point that I intend to raise here does not concern how university actors comply with this consumer culture

but rather how we, as students and academics, play a significant role in sustaining this system, mainly by acting beyond the confines of consumerism to prosumerism*. Prosumers are customers or consumers who voluntarily engage in producing what they consume. In the case of McDonald's where instead of "having waiters, … they have the con(pro)summers carry their own food and clear their own tables" (Ritzer et al., 2018, p.118). This can also be traced to companies that function digitally like Amazon and Facebook, where consumers actively produce what they consume (creating and sharing data that can be used to internalise consumption behaviour). In the case of HE, the landscape is quite unique and different. I perceive the emergence of prosumerism* in different areas, these are explained in the following bullet points:

- Students engage in providing feedback by means of different surveys like the NSS which in turn informs the ranking criteria and areas of interest (student satisfaction, student well-being, student experience, etc.) within league tables and ranking systems (Times Higher Education, The Complete University Guide, The Guardian league tables, etc.)
- Students reproduce certain university discourses by sharing university rankings on Twitter, celebrating certain investments and collaborations with business companies and supporting promotional discourses that usually treat places and experiences (e.g. study abroad) like commodities to be purchased from institutions.
- Students, academic staff, and even policymakers at university and faculty levels sometimes fail to recognise the consumer-oriented and reductionist agenda underpinning certain policies and terminologies where excessive use of controversial concepts is employed (e.g. reproducing discourses of excellence and impact).

3.9 Essentialism as the Backbone of Neoliberal Universities

The brief exploration of the areas of Internationalisation and Intercultural Studies in the previous sections is a deliberate attempt to unveil the underpinnings of the discursive and systematic otherization of international

students in UK HEIs. Culture, in spite of its numerous problematic conceptualisations in literature, is one of the most commonly-mobilised institutional notions in contexts that involve dealing with or researching the experiences of students labelled international. In so doing, a presumed cultural difference is frequently established on an a priori basis whenever these students are mentioned. The ramifications of these prescriptive discursive constructions do not only associate a problematic belief of cultural fixity among cohorts of international students (e.g., when students are framed as cultural ambassadors or representatives of distinct national cultures), but also frame home students and the UK HE context as constituents of a distinct and homogeneous whole, one that only those labelled international should strive to integrate within.

This differential rhetoric obscures several endured student realities, where both home and international students actively attempt to navigate and make sense of their intercultural and student experiences. Equally, this is the same rhetoric that projects a rigid understanding of diversity, one where being a diverse campus is predicated upon the presence of necessarily-different international students. In many instances, this discursive construction appears to be, or is made to appear as a neutral and value-free celebratory approach that projects the idea of an inclusive and diverse campus, where all 'differences' are equally catered for. However, what is often discarded is the sustained differential realities that students labelled international encounter on the go. This is where the constraining facets of this celebratory approach come to the fore, with students undergoing a pre-established process of othering due to the ossified set of patterns, values, norms, and behaviours that the institutional rhetoric expects them to uphold.

Whether such rhetoric is systematically-deployed or not is in the eye of the beholder. What can be noted though is the fact that this prescribed difference is sufficient to subserve the differential mechanisms that sustain the current constraints, hardships, and inequalities endured by this homogenised group. Is it in the interest of neo-liberalised universities to align with a discourse that imposes a sense of alienation on account of one's

nationality for the sake of financial exploitation? The short answer would be yes. After all, who would not capitalise on a sector where the 2020-21 net economic impact of international students equates to around 68% of the UK's defence budget[8]? Essentialism is indeed a major backbone when deciding international students' entitlements.

In a world where metrics and league tables dictate one's job prospects and life choices, international students are increasingly obliged to navigate these differential discourses for the sole aim of obtaining a recognisable degree. Within the confines of this intricate reality, students encounter a state of being that simultaneously frames them as insiders and outsiders, assigns them a cultural affiliation, and mobilises that affiliation to impose differences, highlight deficiencies, and eventually justify the differential treatment. The same differences are simultaneously utilised to fuel a problematic repertoire of buzzwords, along the lines of global citizenship and international campuses.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter introduced and probed into the main concepts that inform this research. In so doing, the aim was to highlight the theoretical underpinnings, along with the analytical affordances/limitations of these concepts. The chapter also critically engaged with relevant literature in the areas of Intercultural Studies and the Internationalisation of Higher Education. The main discussion points revolved around the problematic mobilisation of the notion of culture, especially in contexts that involve international students. Equally, the chapter aimed to unpack the tenets of neoliberal HEIs, by problematising the idea of students-as-consumers, and linking current university practices to relevant, yet controversial, views about manifestation of McDonaldization within British universities. Finally, the chapter concluded

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[8] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8175/

with an attempt to highlight how the aforementioned areas converge in this research.

Chapter 4
Outlining the Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter maps the research methodology sections. I begin by articulating my theoretical stance that stems from subscribing to certain understandings of reality and knowledge. I then delineate the main research approaches that underpin my research along with the reasons and aims that justify my choice. The chapter continues with an overview of the different data collection methods that I employed to gather data, the research timeline, and the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the data collection process. This is followed by an explanation of the analytical framework and the reasons behind opting for thematic analysis. Closely towards the end of this chapter, I tackle the ethical considerations accounted for prior to, during, and after data collection. I conclude by setting the ground for the upcoming analysis and discussion chapters. This is mainly by introducing the research participants and expressing my direct contribution and influence over the data.

4.2 The Theoretical Framework

4.2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Stances

Ontology concerns one's understanding vis-à-vis the nature of reality. Ritchie et al. (2013, p. 4) pinpoint that "social science has been shaped by two overarching ontological positions (…) – realism and idealism". The former advocates the existence of an 'external reality' which is separate from people's perceptions of it, whereas the latter rejects realists' premise that reality is independent, and considers it to be contingent upon the mind, and accessible solely through the meanings that people construct. However, one should be aware of the fact that these ontological positions include several variations. For instance, while naïve realism claims accuracy in observing reality, cautious realism contends that it (i.e. reality) can only be observed

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approximately. As one of the variants of realism, materialism acknowledges what is tangible and concrete as the sole source of reality and perceives values and experiences as 'features' that do not affect or shape the world. Idealism, on the other hand, has two main variants: subtle idealism, which views the world as a collection of shared constructions, and relativism, which regards reality as a series of individual constructions.

Epistemology deals with how knowledge about the social world is acquired (Ritchie et al., 2013, p.6). While proponents of the inductive or the 'bottom-up' process claim that knowledge is derived from observing the world, proponents of the deductive approach agree that the acquisition of knowledge occurs through a 'top-down' process, where researchers develop hypotheses, and then collect evidence/data to confirm/reject them. According to Ritchie et al. (2013, p.6), referring to qualitative research as inductive is a "misleading simplification". Therefore, they stand against the idea of 'pure' induction/deduction, and subscribe to Blaikie's (2007, cited in Ritchie et al., 2013, pp.6-7) strategies of retroduction and abduction.

Other epistemological issues involve the relationship between the researcher and the participants. In this respect, three main positions emerge: objective observation, value-laden observation, and emphatic neutrality. The latter recognises the impossibility of being objective but advocates reflexivity as a means to achieve a degree of transparency. To build on this, Dervin and Risager (2014, p.4) argue that "it has now become a truism to say that identity is co-constructed by interlocutors, yet very few researchers look at how they themselves, as interlocutors in e.g. interviews, contribute to creating discourses on the self and the other". Qualitative research should be perceived as a process where both researchers and participants are involved, and where the impact is always reciprocal. As a result, data collection should not be reduced to a process of picking "mushrooms in a forest" (ibid., citing Bensa, 2010).

While it is almost impossible, and far from the scope of this research, to capture the vast and intricate array of theoretical standpoints, I still intend to establish my stance by referring to three major paradigms: Positivism, Social

Constructivism, and Critical Realism. These will serve as a starting point for me to justify my reluctance to be enmeshed in the realms of one paradigm. My intention to challenge my theoretical subscriptions and ascriptions is grounded in my inability to settle either with a constructivist or a critical realist paradigm. My final standpoint, which will be covered in the upcoming title (4.2.2) might be conceptualised and discussed elsewhere, but I haven't come across it at the time of writing this section. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to unveil the underpinnings of the aforementioned paradigms and try to link them to the main concepts tackled in this research: internationalisation, interculturality, and the student experience.

4.2.2 Establishing my Theoretical Stance

Porpora claims that "sociologists are good at calling on others to recognise their presuppositions … because [they] underlie and shape everything we do" (2015, p.1). In so doing, sociologists often succeed at attaining the major aim of raising individuals' awareness, criticality and reflexivity. However, Porpora contends that "what we (i.e. sociologists) do not do much of is critical reflection on our critical reflection" (p.2). This tendency towards taking paradigms for granted, and as mere tools to justify researchers' positionality, feeds into what is known as normal science. The latter designates research that is informed by "one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice" (Kuhn, 1996, p.10). However, this does not imply the need to entirely discard the power of paradigms as means to explore, understand, or explain a particular research direction, it rather calls for the necessity to initially question the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of such paradigms for the research to be clearly justified. On this subject, the paradigm simply stands for a "consensus … on fundamental reality" (Porpora, 2015, p.3).

Much of the work conducted following a positivist paradigm attempts to establish a link of causality between two or more variables. The basic tenets of this paradigm are value-neutrality, objectivity, empiricism, and the absence of any form of agency. Positivism imposes a research paradigm

that is presumably convenient in natural sciences on other areas such as social sciences. Subscribing to a positivist research approach entails necessarily seeking a generalisable truth that can be deducted by putting variables or hypotheses to test. The emergent results are by default neutral, objective, and representative. The role of the researcher is rather passive, and they strive to remain as distant as possible to avoid or minimise 'bias'.

A positivist approach to the study of individuals' intercultural experiences "sets the nation state, or national culture as the 'default signifier' of who we are" (Holliday, 2018). This stance is employed in various ways: it can be 'imposed' on data to explain certain behaviours; it can result in the emergence of cultural categories that can be used either to link individuals' personal differences to national cultures, or to forge/test already forged competency models. An example of such paradigm can be a research that makes use of Hofstede's framework of intercultural dimensions to explain a behavioural difference (shyness for example) between 'western' and 'non-western' or 'home' and 'international' students.

As an empiricist paradigm in its entirety, positivism eschews the "ontological differences between natural and social reality" (Archer, 1998, p.189). It endeavours to highlight the primacy of correlations in explaining events. This results in a complete ignorance of the causal mechanisms underpinning those correlations and reduces "individual natures [to a state of] indeterminate material that the social moulds and transforms" (Durkheim, 1966, p.24). This is concurrent with Durkheim's tendency to discard the role of individual intentions in determining certain actions such as suicide.

A positivist stance can ultimately result in what Archer refers to as downward conflation. This is when culture and structure are seen as determinant of individual action, hence denying any form of agency and reducing individuals to a state of "robots programmed with 'cultural' [and structural] rules" (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p.158). Any social interaction is by definition a reproduction of already established social structures, and there is no room for individuals' creative negotiations. This is conceptualised by Archer as morphostasis. While the latter isn't employed by Archer to explain the positivist stance, I

see morphostasis as the default and only path that can 'exist' when experiences are perceived from a positivist lens.

When reflecting on the role of the neo-liberal university in sustaining a fixed and reductionist idea of 'the student experience', many points arise with regards to the aforementioned discussion. The prevalence of a positivist approach provides the necessary enablement mechanisms to reify students' experiences and presents them in the form of packages to be 'purchased' and 'adhered to' by students. It is not my goal to claim that a neo-liberal university's intention is to 'structure' and 'impose' a pre-determined student experience which can be quantified and even mobilised via league tables. Regardless of the university actors' intentions, the neo-liberal educational wheel seems to be steering in this direction. This equally applies to the cohorts of 'international' students as they encounter the same experience package, albeit with an additional layer of reductionism: an essentialist mobilisation of culture.

In sharp contrast to the methodological limitations advocated by positivist paradigms, the social constructivist paradigm champions a more epistemically-informed methodology. It underlies much of the work that is underpinned by a postmodern or anti-essentialist stance. The latter rests on the assumptions that advocate the co-construction of reality (Ritchie et al., 2013), the rejection of a 'solid' conceptualisation of the intercultural (Baumann, 1996, Bauman, 2000; Dervin, 2011, 2016; Holliday, 1999, 2016, 2019); individuals' agency and ability to transcend structures (Holliday, 2010; Weber, 1964), and the emergence of critical cosmopolitanism as a contestation to the "west as steward" (Holliday, 2011) discourse and as a tool to reveal the marginal (Delanty et al., 2008; Holliday, 2011; Holliday and MacDonald, 2019).

Social constructivism underpins an array of research in the social sciences and in dealing with individuals' intercultural experiences in particular. The paradigm's main theoretical pillars are useful for voicing participants'

narratives and researchers' active contribution to the co-construction of meanings of those narratives. An 'ideal' stance, constructivism discards structural and cultural fixity, and perceives them accessible solely through individuals' "discursive negotiation" (Archer, 1998, p.193). It therefore undermines the effect that social and political structures can have on individuals' agency. In fact, humans are perceived as creative agents who can transcend all structural boundaries and grand narratives of nation, identity, and ethnicity.

The theoretical position underpinning my research is partially informed by a postmodernist or constructivist paradigm. This is mainly fuelled by the paradigm's epistemological affordances which I perceive to be suitable for justifying my subjective position and active contribution to the research. Throughout the chapters, I do not show timidity in voicing moments of reflection through the brief entries highlighted in grey boxes. These stand as means to justify my positionality, be it regarding the literature discussed in the third chapter, the methodology chapter, or when analysing findings. I am thereby deeply implicated in and responsible for what emerges from this research, as much as my participants are involved in the production of narratives about their student and intercultural experiences, and as much as an array of micro and macro structures are involved in shaping these narratives.

While constructivism's epistemological emphasis is convenient for justifying my active role within the research, I intend to distance myself from its 'void' or 'incomplete' ontology. As contended by Bhaskar and other advocates of critical realism, the postmodernist paradigm contests the positivist ontic fallacy by introducing an epistemic fallacy, one which claims that "everything is socially constructed [and] all is relative" (Porpora, 2015, p.16). This premise does not only undermine the tangible impacts of social and political structures, but also entails a problematic state of 'theoretical' privilege that, in my view, exacerbates the current status quo. Archer argues that this "state of mind deemed possible in the West is a luxury dependent on the state of the rest. The post-modern experience is not on globally for those

needing bread not circuses and seeking freedom of expression not expressive freedom" (Archer, 1998, p.193).

Recently I shared on social media about the bureaucracy that I went through to request a Schengen visa for seven days. Living in a western country I was by virtue of my status entitled to voice my concerns without repercussions (As long as I am not openly criticizing my employer, which could lead to me losing my zero-hour-contract jobs). My desire to question the unjustified perplexity of the visa application process stemmed from my 'partial' constructivist view that has always undermined national/regional boundaries and the set of hierarchies/assumptions underpinning their existence. But does that make boundaries any less prominent? Does it make visa fees disappear, or special airport lanes cease to exist? I doubt it. The same would apply in discussions of culture, structure, student experience, or the 'international' label. A constructivist stance is useful for illuminating cultural or structural change but fails at accounting for and countering 'reductionist' forms of cultural and structural continuity. I cannot help but argue that a certain form of 'strategic' essentialism would yield a degree of 'tangible' social mobility justice that a privileged constructivist stance can merely advocate.

I therefore agree with Zotzmann's (2017) claim in response to constructivism's rejection of any form of essentialism as it is indeed "impossible [and] theoretically undesirable" to claim an anti-essentialist stance. The discursive view of cultural realities is useful in its endeavour to uncover and contest hierarchies, othering, grand narratives, and cultural blocks. However, this does not make cultural reality "any less real for those who find themselves living within the confines of its material manifestation of laws, borders, passports, language tests, prisons, clinics, and classrooms" (Jones, 2013, p.238). Additionally, following a constructivist stance would result in rendering 'strategic essentialism' theoretically unsound, which might

in turn lead to undermining or even undercutting legitimate political action (Angouri, 2018, p.40).

Placed in-between methodological individualism and holism, the critical realist paradigm advocates an intransitive, transfactual, and stratified social ontology. This theoretical stance "doesn't dictate a specific form of practical social theory [but still] commits itself to what exists" (Archer, 1998, p.194). It adheres to the universal formula of social ontology ➔ explanatory methodology ➔ practical social theories. For social matters to be explained, Archer argues that there should be intransitive states of being which are "independent of their identification" (p.195). Intransitivity contests both the constructivist's tendency to confuse "what is with what we take it to be" (ibid.) and the positivist's inclination to defy discursive constructions. This does not entail that social matters are absolute as intransitivity is located at the relational level between the individual and the societal.

Transfactuality refers to the endurance of certain mechanisms which are essential for the study of society. These mechanisms, however enduring, do not imply that social reality can be fully conceptualised by referring to historical contingencies. Instead, critical realism holds that transfactuality is "only relatively enduring and quintessentially mutable" (Archer, 1998, p.196). Stratification implies three domains of reality as explained by Bhaskar: The real stands for structures and entities that exist regardless of their empirical manifestation; the actual involves the (observable or unobservable) effects that causal mechanisms exert once they come into play; the empirical designates the events that have been experienced. This results in a degree of ontological depth compared to the flat ontology advocated by positivism. A stratified view of reality calls for the need to resort to vertical explanations in order to uncover and explain the antecedents of actualised and empirical events.

While the previous reflection notes in this section emerged long time ago and were employed in here as illustrative of how certain paradigms work, this entry is quite different as it emerged while reading for Bhaskar and

working on this section. Bhaskar argues that "explanation … always involves social predicates" so "a tribesman implies a tribe, the cashing of a cheque a banking system". What does a 'student experience' imply? The current neo-liberal forces prioritise 'experience'. The latter not only predates the 'student' who should experience it, but also employs an array of mechanisms to sustain its fixed and commodified status. I see the 'student experience' as the new 'culture' (in its essentialist sense) in the HE context. A McDonaldized university is, either implicitly or explicitly, contributing to a state of morphostasis by employing a priori 'student experience'.

After briefly probing into these three influential paradigms I intend to position myself and put forward the set of assumptions that I perceive to be useful for analysing data. The following bullet points cover the premises that I subscribe to throughout the research.

- My employment of the terms 'student experience' and 'international student' is not informed by reductionism. Both terms are fuelled by mechanisms that result in several actualised events. My role as a researcher is to critically examine the manifestations of such mechanisms and how they impact the experiences or narratives of students labelled 'international'.

- Social structures possess a degree of endurance that sustains their influence over individuals' agency. To what extent structures are influential depends on how they are approached. A constructivist stance would focus on individual's discursive negotiation of structures. It therefore functions at the empirical domain. I perceive the critical realist approach to social structures as more elaborate especially when subscribing to a stratified view of reality.

- I see abduction, fallibilism, and judgemental rationality as important notions that can help me untangle my theoretical position and role within the research.

- Abduction designates inferencing "to the best explanation" (Harman, 1965). It is a "logic of discovery" (Hanson, cited in Given, 2008). Abduction

concurs with the underpinnings of critical realism. I employ it throughout the research by linking certain ideas to establish a critical stance. My analysis of the context underpinning 'international PGRs' experiences', my established theoretical stance, and my upcoming data analysis chapters are all informed by an abductive reasoning.

- Fallibilism is a central argument underpinning critical realism. It supports the argument that knowledge cannot provide the absolute truth, hence why empirical knowledge is accepted. A fallible approach allows me to distance my role as a researcher and the collected data from being conclusive.

- Judgemental rationality is possible thanks to the intransitive states of being that stem from subscribing to a critical realist ontology.

The area of Intercultural Studies is shaped by an array of epistemological and ontological stances, partly owing to its interdisciplinary nature. This interdisciplinarity influences the research frameworks (theoretical, methodological, and analytical) adopted by researchers and educators alike. For instance, the framework that shapes the direction of this research (which is summarised in the afore-mentioned bullet points) was subject to a shift at a certain stage in the research process. This is mainly due to a shift in my theoretical and methodological assumptions. Instead of only including my current stance, I decided to also include the previous ideas that influenced the direction of this research. This can be found in **Appendix H**. Deciding about the research direction, including the theoretical, methodological and analytical choices, is not a straightforward process. This is clearly shown via **Appendix H** where I completely discarded the constructivist approaches to researching interculturality.

4.3 Qualitative Research Approaches

This study is informed by a qualitative research approach. The latter has been subject to several conceptualisations that attempt to transcend a 'fixed definition'. This can arguably be justified by the plethora of approaches and

research methods that tend to characterise current qualitative studies (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p.35). Overall, however, qualitative research seeks to investigate events in their natural settings, and attempts to "make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.3). In so doing, it ultimately aims to produce a "final written report or presentation [that] includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change" (Creswell, 2013, p.44). My desire to pursue this research following a qualitative approach is in line with my theoretical stance which rejects positivist thought that is characterised by objectivity, the quantification of individuals' perceptions and experiences, and the problematic attempts to generalise findings that emerge from a small sample over a larger population. It can also be justified by my aspiration to generate rich 'narratives' that can reveal the complexity of international students' trajectories and how they impact their perceptions of themselves and others.

4.3.1 Narrative Enquiry

There have been several attempts to categorise the different qualitative research approaches (these include Jacob, 1987; Wolcott, 1992; Miller and Grabtree, 1992; Lancy, 1993; Mason, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, etc.). However, I perceive Creswell and Poth's description of the narrative research approach (2018, pp.109-119) as convenient for the realisation of this study. This research, therefore, adopts narrative enquiry as an approach for the generation of findings. I perceive a narrative as "a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004, p.17) and which aims to capture "experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Cresswell and Poth, 2018, p.110). This approach is in line with my theoretical premises which allow me to engage in in-depth enquiry by giving participants the opportunity to develop their narratives in the form of stories. In this regard "narrative stories tell of individual experiences, and they may

shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves"
(ibid.).

Informed and influenced by several renowned philosophers like Paul
Ricoeur, Martin Heidegger, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, this
approach arguably advocates a postmodern epistemology that champions
"the relativity and multiplicity of truth" (Josselson, 2012, p.870). It therefore
discards epistemic factuality in favour of understanding the social
construction of events. Similarly, it does not defy the presence of an
independent reality. The ultimate objective behind employing a narrative
research approach is "describing and understanding, rather than measuring
and predicting, focusing on meaning rather than causation and frequency,
interpretation rather than statistical analysis, and recognizing the importance
of language and discourse rather than reduction to numerical representation"
(ibid.).

As it focuses on individuals' storied experiences, narrative research
advocates the social construction of meanings. The latter is perceived to be
context-dependent and accessible solely by the linkages that participants
establish when narrating their life experiences, and later through the
connections that researchers make during analysis and interpretation
(Josselson, 2012, p.871). The social construction of meanings also implies
the multiplicity of stories that describe the same set of events. This is mainly
due to the different factors and resources that shape individuals' stories
(their position within the story and the context, their worldviews, opinions,
emotions, wishes, etc., their perceptions of gender, race, culture, age,
sexual orientation, social class, nationality, etc.). All these factors in addition
to other ones contribute to the uniqueness of the emergent narratives. A
participant, therefore, is no longer viewed as "representative of some
universal and interchangeable, randomly selected 'subject'" (ibid.). This in
turn implies that narratives do not pre-exist but are constructed during
'interaction' events which entails the fact that "no two interviewers will obtain
exactly the same story from an individual interview" (ibid.).

In the following bullet points I intend to summarise the usual procedures for conducting narrative research. These procedures are mainly derived from Creswell and Poth (2018, pp.109-119) and Josselson (2012, pp.869-874):

- The basic aim underpinning the use of narrative research approaches is the collection of stories about individuals' experiences.

- Narrative research approaches usually make use of interviews as means to approach and interact with participants. However, other methods are increasingly being employed such as focus groups, visual methods (like auto-photography), and documents (diaries, memoirs, journals, etc.).

- Researchers frame questions in a way that can encourage participants to produce narrative accounts of their experiences. However, while it is advisable to prepare a list of pre-designed questions that centre on the main research questions, it is also favourable for the interview process to flow in an unstructured way so that participants can naturally build on their accounts.

- Researchers' intervention should be as minimal as possible with researchers only intervening to encourage participants to say more about their experiences.

- Since most research following a narrative approach will attempt to inquire into participants' personal trajectories, life events, and personal views/perceptions, confidentiality should be ensured.

- Narrative inquirers do not usually intend to reach a single truth about a particular individual/event. They rather acknowledge the impossibility of definitive answers, the multiplicity of socially constructed meanings, and the equal significance of both what is being co-constructed and how it is being constructed.

- Analysis of narrative accounts can be carried out thematically (by looking at the content of the stories), structurally (by considering the nature of the story), or dialogically by focusing on "who the story is directed toward" (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

- When approaching narrative stories, researchers usually attempt to locate moments of confusion, turning points, transitions, etc., as these can help identify the recurrent patterns within the same narrative and across

narratives as well. Daiute (2014) identifies four main patterns that can help in the construction of meanings. These comprise similarities, differences, change, and coherence.

Praised for its ability to elicit in-depth, complex and personal accounts, in addition to exploring experiences in their natural settings, far from pre-determined variables and hypotheses, this approach is equally challenging. In this regard, Josselson (2012, p.876) argues that "narrative research is … labor intensive, particularly in the analysis phase, where text must be read and reread as insights and interpretations develop". This concurs with Creswell and Poth (2018, p.118) who argue that "it takes a keen eye to identify in the source material that gathers the particular stories to capture the individual's experiences".

While arguably acceptable within certain theoretical frameworks that advocate the co-construction and subjectivity of knowledge, generalisability is one of the potential aspects that narrative research lacks as this approach is rather concerned with highlighting "the particularities of experience" (Josselson, 2012, p.876). Nonetheless, this does not prevent researchers from setting their analysis/interpretations of participants' narratives against previous/current findings from other researchers/research within the broader context of the topic under study which paves the way for further critical reflections.

4.4 Data Collection

4.4.1 In-depth Interviews

This research makes use of semi-structured in-depth interviews as means to collect data. This method involves interacting with research participants by engaging in conversations where the researcher usually asks questions in an attempt to "extract as much information as possible from a person (the interviewee) who has expertise on the topic/s the interviewer is interested in" (Morris, 2015, p.2). During interviews, researchers should pay considerable attention to the flow of the conversation with minimal interventions in order

not overinfluence interviewees and limit the scope of their responses. On this subject, Morris (2015, p.3) argues that researchers should direct "the conversation as discretely as possible so as to ensure that the interviewee conveys as much relevant information as possible … The expectation is that they tell their story in their own words". While many researchers tend to conduct a single interview, research shows that multiple interviews are required to gain deeper insights (ibid.). Although in-depth interviews are praised for their ability to generate rich and complex accounts by allowing researchers to probe into a particular topic, they are also criticised as interviewees might share inaccurate information for the sake of satisfying the researcher's objectives.

Since the intention behind opting for in-depth interviews is to generate rich narratives, I tried to leave my questions as open as possible. This is mainly by avoiding statements that require short responses (like yes/no) and questions that assume or establish certain realities. For instance, instead of adhering to the institutional definition of an 'international' postgraduate researcher in framing my questions, I did not initially assume that participants will label themselves international. This paved the way for rich narratives that counter the institutional discourses (analysed in detail in section 7.3). Some participants subscribed to the institutional definition, whereas others rejected the label altogether. Such positions were in turn justified by referring to events or incidents that served as enablement factors for participants to build their arguments.

The first phase of in-depth interviews started around January 2020 and lasted till the end of February 2020. During this short period, I conducted 14 interviews which lasted from 50-102 minutes. The interviews took place in different locations including pre-booked university seminar rooms, library booths, a park, and a participant's house. Since I devoted most of my time to data collection, I was very flexible and gave all participants the upper hand in deciding the time/location of interviews. This was among the factors that contributed to a certain degree of comfort and resulted in very rich interviews that lasted for considerable amounts of time. A single first phase interview

took place in August 2020 as one of the participants who did not respond in January expressed her interest in taking part.

The second phase of interviews proved to be unusual, challenging, and unexpected. Due to the impact of the global covid-19 pandemic, many participants left the UK and joined their families in other parts around the globe. These sudden geographical transitions affected the privileged accessibility I had during the first phase. It also required a higher level of flexibility as I needed to adapt my interviews to meet the technical requirements of different online platforms (Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger). This phase started around mid-July with the last interview held by mid-September 2020. The number of participants plummeted from 15 to 8. The seven participants whom I couldn't interview were either unable to take part due to personal reasons or irresponsive to multiple correspondences.

While reliance on online platforms lacked certain interactional elements that are useful for capturing the full picture of how data is negotiated in a physical setting, it provided a data collection setting that is flexible, asynchronous, and less stressful. Some of the interviews conducted during the second phase took the form of asynchronous chat discussions, WhatsApp audio entries, and synchronous face to face online meetings. Thanks to their potential in maintaining contact, some platforms were used by the participants for weeks after the scheduled interviews to keep sharing incidents and thoughts. This enabled me to ask further questions and update their transcribed interviews whenever they approached me.

4.4.2 Prompt Items: Relevant Policy Documents

I intended to employ prompt material to initiate and raise discussion in the one of the data collection events (focus group) which was cancelled due to the global pandemic. Prompt material stands for policy documents, mainstream media publications, emails, news articles, and events that appear to relate to the context of 'international' students and their experiences in the UK. Due to the impossibility of conducting focus groups, some of these items are now used to establish the basis for the third chapter

which probes into the context surrounding 'international' students' experiences. The array of materials compiled resulted either from probing into HEIs policy documents, daily readings from news outlets, university email correspondences, and content that is shared with me either by my supervisors or other fellow colleagues.

As it wasn't feasible to arrange a focus group between March 2020 and September 2020 where such prompt items were expected to be employed, some of these items now serve to establish the research context by providing contextual explanations to the topic in question. This is very important for understanding the set of causal mechanisms that structure the experiences of students labelled 'international'. While a focus group setting would have been useful for exploring participants' negotiation of such items, they are still crucial for informing the research context and the analysis/discussion stages.

4.4.3 Reflection and Observation Entries

I consider reflection notes to constitute one of the core sources of data. By reflection and observation, I refer to the entries in the grey boxes in this chapter and other chapters, my responses to critical comments from my supervisors, and notes that I constructed during or after interviewing participants. Most entries are implicitly embedded within the discussion chapter, though some are temporal in the sense that they assisted me in reaching a particular stage in my research. These can also be referred to as field notes but considering that the majority of these notes are autoethnographic (As I always end up linking my reflections to my personal trajectory), I refrain from using the 'field' term.

4.5 Data Analysis

4.5.1 Thematic Analysis

I resorted to Thematic Analysis (TA) to identify patterned meanings, extract codes, and eventually develop themes/sub-themes. Nowell et al. (2017, p.2) argue that TA "is a qualitative research method that can be used across a

range of epistemologies and research questions … [it functions through] identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set". This analytical method is characterised by theoretical flexibility. In other words, it does not adhere to a particular epistemological philosophy which makes it compatible with a plethora of methodological and theoretical approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013, Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

Codes, themes, and sub-themes are not predetermined by the core theoretical concepts or the research questions, they are rather expected to be informed by a complex interplay between participants' data, the theoretical framework, my interpretations, and the links established between participants' insights and the materials discussed in chapter three. This in turn adds to the flexibility of the research and reduces the influence that can be exerted by my preconceptions or anticipations. This concurs with Clarke and Braun (2013) who argue that one of the problematic practices that emerge when using TA is to identify themes based on the questions asked during data collection.

The process of conducting thematic analysis does not revolve merely around summarising data since a "good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of it" (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). In this respect, a very interesting distinction of themes has been put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.84): semantic themes and latent themes. While a semantic approach identifies themes "within the explicit or surface meanings of the data" and does not usually inquire "beyond what a participant has said", the latent approach acknowledges and even accounts for the different factors that impact the dataset (this might involve exploring "underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies"). In so doing, the emergent analysis does not only describe, but also interprets and theorises findings. As a researcher I align with the latent approach as the aim of my research is not merely descriptive, but also exploratory, explanatory and interpretative.

The following TA framework is extracted from Braun and Clarke (2006, pp.86-93). It comprises six phases that researchers willing to conduct TA can go through. I followed this framework to a certain extent to approach and deal with findings. However, coding and analysis are not straightforward processes, and the framework does not capture the intricacies underpinning my engagement with data. The latter was subject to reading and rereading, coding and discarding codes, establishing themes before codes, and juggling between the six phases in unexpected ways.

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 3 Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87)

4.5.2 Otter, oTranscribe and NVivo

By the end of data collection, I had to transcribe a total of 23 interviews, with each interview lasting 50-102 minutes. Thanks to Otter.ai, I was able to transcribe most of the interviews over a very short period of time. This website is AI-powered with a reliable transcription accuracy. It functions through uploading the audio to the cloud which is then processed for a short period of time before producing a transcript. In the case of my audio recordings, the website achieved 80-90% accuracy rates. Once transcribed, I downloaded the file and uploaded it to oTranscribe along with the audio file. oTranscribe enabled me to play the audio files with very slow speeds and monitor the transcribed text to spot mistakes and add pauses or reactions. All in all, the transcription phase went smoothly, apart from two interviews where the participants switched between three languages (English-Arabic-French), which required using manual transcription.

All transcripts were then uploaded to the NVivo software. The latter is a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) that provides "the means to organize and conduct analysis of visual, textual, audio, and social media data" (Davidson, 2018, p.1166). Thanks to its ability to create classifications within and across data sources (Appendix G), NVivo can be very useful especially at the early stages of coding. However, referring to this software as an analysis tool is misleading as analysis cannot be automated or carried out using the software's tools. Instead, the only reason behind opting for NVivo is to achieve a degree of data organisation and establish initial nodes (codes) that can later assist in the analysis phase.

Among the downsides of NVivo is its inability to maintain a critical thinking flow that a researcher needs to establish a theme or build an idea from an array of scattered notes and thoughts. Compared to a conventional pen, paper, and highlighter method, NVivo lacks the possibility to keep track of changes as deleted/replaced items/thoughts/memos cannot be retrieved. Therefore, I decided to rely on NVivo mainly as a data organisation and initial coding tool where I can keep track of my transcribed interviews, and to establish basic links across data sources through nodes.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

This research received ethical clearance from the University of Leeds before the start of data collection (December 2019). In order to initiate contact with potential participants, a formal email was redacted and circulated among a group of postgraduate researchers labelled 'international' by the host university. The circulation of this email relied on convenience and snowball sampling techniques, where participants were contacted due to accessibility (e.g, attendants of mutual events) or suggestions/recommendations from fellow researchers and supervisors. Consent and confidentiality were respected and ensured when approaching participants for the very first time.

PGRs who expressed interest in the topic and willingness to contribute received another email which explained their role in detail. A consent form and a two-page long information sheet were enclosed. The information sheet duly tackled the participants' role, the aim of the research, the research methods employed, and information about how data is to be handled, stored, and processed in the most confidential and anonymous ways possible. All participants agreed with the terms of the consent form (attached in Appendix C) and did not express any enquiries, concerns or questions. During interviews, participants were reminded that their participation is voluntary. Two participants who shared very sensitive events were sent a copy of their respective transcribed (post anonymisation) interview and were given time to express any discomfort.

Throughout the research process, I ensured that my work complies with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Leeds ethics committee. I also referred to prominent frameworks such as Creswell's (2013) which is adapted from a plethora of reliable sources, in addition to the ESRC's framework for research ethics (2015). These served as a blueprint both before and during the planning of data collection, and even at the analysis stage. However, such frameworks can sometimes hinder the natural flow of the research process especially when followed step by step.

In spite of striving to maintain the confidentiality and fairness of this research, in addition to ensuring the wellbeing of research participants, I came across certain narrative extracts that raise some ethical concerns. Elizabeth and Huyam's narrated experiences with their supervisors (sections 5.4.2.1 and 5.4.2.2 respectively) and one of Alice's incidents during invigilation (as discussed in section 6.3.2.1) reveal very sensitive events that require reflecting on the ethical aspects underpinning my decision to include them in this research. First, the narratives comprise instances of racism, exploitation, and bullying. The detailed accounts provided by Alice, Elizabeth, and Huyam cannot be fully-verified as that would entail deviating from the scope of this research and involving individuals that can jeopardize the research confidentiality and participants' anonymity. Second, since there was a slight risk that the detailed and specific description of certain events may affect the anonymity of these participants, I opted to not disclose the name of the university where these IPGRs are/were enrolled. My decision to anonymise the university is equally influenced by the fact that these unverified incidents may impact the reputation of the university and the involved individuals. Third, I struggled to establish my analytical position when approaching the extracts that narrate these particular incidents. 'Should I simply act as a reporter of sensitive findings? Or, should I take the incidents as accurate representations of lived experiences?' were some of the questions that I struggled to answer. While the accuracy of these narrated events can be contested, this does not deny the fact that instances of racism, sexism, culturism, bullying, and exploitation are prominent in HE. This argument, in addition to participants' consent, are the two factors that motivated me to shed light on these incidents, especially when considering the uneven settings underpinning the experiences of students labelled international.

Sudden and unexpected adaptations occurred during the research and data collection processes. For instance, the unforeseen covid-19 outbreak

entailed a prompt response in regard to how to approach participants. It was not possible to redraft consent forms and information sheets to accommodate the implications of such change. The same is applicable in instances where certain theoretical and analytical frameworks are amended, which in turn impact the direction of the research and its terminologies. Being mindful of these events is important, but researcher flexibility should be exercised as long as participants' confidentiality and anonymity are maintained.

My position within the research can also be considered problematic. I am engaged in 'researching what I am doing' and therefore it is inevitable to observe a vivid struggle as I strive to untangle how being a researcher and researching what I am doing is informing and influencing both my trajectory as an IPGR and my flow of ideas as a researcher. I find the notions of 'thick participation', 'thick description', and 'making the familiar strange' very important to justify my inevitable presence and explain how I am 'making use' of such position to enrich the research. These are crucial for establishing a certain degree of reflexivity which in turn informs the ethicality of the research.

Thick description entails a detailed account of events through paying attention to the context under study and/or making use of a plethora of data sources (Geertz, 1973, pp.3-30). This is implemented through a critical and in-depth contextualisation of the research in chapter 3; reliance on interviews with more than one phase, and through the reflective notes that showcase my observations during data collection and the subsequent coding process. The 'international student experience' is a very loaded term that is informed by an array of discourses with various theoretical subscriptions. Being able to capture the interplay between these discourses requires engaging with data by means of thick descriptions.

Thick participation is an equally important notion for researching individuals' experiences. It is "a form of socialization in order to achieve a threshold for interpretive understanding" (Sarangi, 2007, p.573). This notion allows for transcending the ethical issues that emerge from being embedded within

and part of the research context. For instance, instead of perceiving my privileged position (researching what I am doing/being) as problematic, it can be employed to generate deeper understandings of 'the student experience'. Being part of the context (participant researcher) enables me to navigate this environment at an early stage of the research process since negotiating access is less time-and-effort-consuming.

Perhaps referring to my role as an insider is a misleading simplification, as that would infer a unidirectional researcher role that ignores the multifaceted nature of the positions that I held throughout the research. This concurs with Song and Parker (1995, p.243) who argue that "dichotomised rubrics such as 'black/white' or 'insider/outsider' are inadequate to capture the complex and multi-faceted experiences of some researchers". Nonetheless, it is ethically crucial to reflect on the "epistemic privilege" (Dawn, 2010, p.92) granted to me by virtue of my current status (IPGR). While such privilege can serve the purpose of transcending superficial insights and establishing a deeper understanding of students' experiences, my position should be held accountable in various ways.

As highlighted by Dawn (2010, p.92), the longstanding tradition of dichotomising researcher positions "silences the multifaceted nature of identities, lifestyles and perspectives". Nonetheless it is not methodologically sound to entirely discard the insider/outsider binary. Instead one should go beyond the exclusive reliance on one mode of proximity over the other. Throughout the research I strived to locate myself within a third space in regard to proximity, one which enables me to rely on my insider insights, acknowledge the multifaceted nature of positions and that my perspective "is always premised upon access to knowledge" (Skeggs, 2004, p.14, cited in Dawn, 2006), and most importantly to defamiliarize myself with the research setting by 'making the familiar strange'.

Making the familiar strange is not a straightforward process. It foremostly requires acknowledging and reflecting on what is 'familiar'. This can be very thought-provoking considering the difficulty of revealing the taken for granted. For instance, the decision to not impose the international label

when interviewing students yielded findings that are not "overshadowed by the enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding" (Dawn, 2006, p.94) that shapes my position. Therefore, it paved the way for the emergence of "destinations that lay beyond my repertoire of preconceived understandings of place and space" (ibid., p.96). Throughout the research, I strived to reach a state of being that is informed by bracketing. This involved "the task of sorting out the qualities that belong to [my] experience of the phenomenon" (Drew, 2004, p.215) so as not to 'impose' the array of preconceptions that I subscribe to on findings.

The concurrent reliance on thick description, thick participation, and making the familiar strange does not only contribute to my current state of reflexivity, but also informs the ethics of analysis and interpretation. The first two strategies go against the third one as thick description and participation demand active involvement and immersion within the research setting. In contrast, making the familiar strange entails distancing myself from the same setting in order to uncover the taken for granted. Consequently, achieving the aforementioned state of reflexivity entails navigating these intricate processes at different stages of the research process to gain insider and outsider knowledge.

4.7 Introducing the Main Research Participants

4.7.1 Alex

Alex's status is one of the most perplexing ones in this research. After voluntarily responding to my emails, we arranged an interview at his convenience. Alex explained how his institutional status contradicts with the way he perceives himself. A refugee with conditions that obliged him into forced mobility, Alex shared a trajectory that started in Africa where he lived in three different countries before moving to Asia to pursue a fully funded MA degree. By the end of his degree, Alex applied for a spouse visa to reunite with his wife who was granted asylum in UK. Listed as 'home' student in terms of fee-status, Alex defies this label and argues that the treatment, obstacles, and the general sentiments underpinning his current life are

constantly reminding him that he is 'alien', hence why he identified with the 'international' label and responded to my email. Among the expressions that stood out during our meeting is his claim that "to the university, I'm just a number. So as an individual, you're just a number in the system" (Alex).

4.7.2 Alice

Alice is a postgraduate researcher in her third year (at the time of the interview). The UK is Alice's very first experience beyond national borders. She responded to my meeting invitation and was very open about her trajectory. During the interview, Alice referred to league tables, The Russell Group, and their impact on her university choice. She also shared some instances of othering. During one of her invigilation sessions, Alice had a small chat with a lead invigilator. She initiated the discussion by offering help to carry a pile of heavy papers. The invigilator, who knew where she came from (from a previous discussion), responded: "I know you the Berbers you are used to carrying heavy things". This moment of "shock", as argued by Alice, is one of the events that constitute one of the core themes in the fifth chapter.

4.7.3 Amira

Amira is pursuing a postgraduate degree in linguistics. She lived in Saudi Arabia for most of her life before undertaking a degree in Canada, then the UK. She shared an array of interesting events that made both of us reflect and raise further questions. Amira's trajectory is characterised by moments of struggle: from supervision experiences that made her "always feel like ... women make it difficult for other women", to her questioning of the dress code in the UK and Saudi Arabia, and her reflections about being labelled 'international'. Amira's narratives populate several themes in this research.

4.7.4 Claire

Claire also comes from Saudi Arabia where she lived most of her life. A woman, a mother, and a researcher, Claire decided to undertake a research degree in UK. Her narratives were shaped by a constant comparison between British and Saudi Arabian education. She repeatedly referred to the

'absence of criticality' in Saudi Arabia compared to UK, arguing that "the way our education systems work in Saudi Arabia and in many countries in the Middle East is that they don't encourage criticality". During our meetings, we reflected on the role of league tables, the preconceptions attached to the 'international' label, living in a Muslim society, and other topics. The interviews went in unanticipated directions and yielded a spectrum of rich narratives.

4.7.5 Elizabeth

At the time of the first interview, Elizabeth was in her fourth year, conducting research in the field of translation. Prior to UK, Elizabeth grew and lived in China. Her interviews involved very sensitive narratives, that while useful to illuminate the actual student experience, also raise several concerns about confidentiality. During our meetings she compared Chinese and British HE systems, societies, manners and norms. We also reflected on the status of the 'Chinese female PhD holder'. She contended that "in China, people say there are three kinds of people in this world, man woman and female PhD. They see female PhD as monsters". Elizabeth's most revealing narrative was about her experience with her main supervisor. This is discussed under the theme of 'supervisors and students' experiences' in section 5.4.2.

4.7.6 Huyam

Huyam is a second-year postgraduate student (at the time of the first interview) researching the experiences of Saudi women in the UK with a major focus on identity and religion. Huyam comes from Algeria where she lived for 24 years. She is a recipient of a fully funded PhD degree. Her contribution to this research is tremendous as she dedicated hours of her time to sit and chat with me about her experiences. Her narratives provided a gateway to the exploration of the deficient discourses surrounding 'international students'. This was witnessed, among other situations, in her interaction with her main supervisor who repeatedly reminded her that "because you are an international student, things are going to be a bit difficult".

4.7.7 Lina

Lina shares some trajectories with Huyam. She is also a recipient of a fully funded scholarship and comes from the same country. In our meetings, we delved into the status of the postgraduate researcher, and our inability to identify neither as students nor as members of staff. Lina contrasted her expectations in reference to her experience with reality. She highlighted the absence of study spaces in her office, along with the lack of research communities, and how these contributed to feeling detached or excluded from the university. Lina demonstrated awareness of the workings of the neo-liberal university and was very articulate about the paths that a Russell Group university certificate can facilitate. She argued that the current educational system renders her more of a 'client' rather than a 'learner', but equally acknowledged that "it is horrible to think of universities in terms of the jobs they can offer".

4.7.8 Rachel

Of all research participants, Rachel was the only IPGR who paid international tuition fees for her BA, MA, and PhD degrees without any financial support or scholarship. This prompted us to probe into the financial requirements that being international entails. Throughout our meeting, Rachel seemed to question the idea of belonging. Born in Thailand, raised in Indonesia with parents settled in Singapore, Rachel's trajectory involved a brief period in the United States, a teaching experience in Japan, and an educational journey in United Kingdom. She reflected on her inability to identify with a particular 'home' arguing that "people who move around a lot … tend to feel most relaxed or most at home when they're in an airport, where everybody is kind of at a point where, everybody is going to leave at some point".

4.7.9 Sara

Sara identified as a Saudi Arabian teacher, researcher, and mother. The interview proceeded with her describing and reflecting on her experiences in Saudi Arabia, United states and United Kingdom. Sara shared an array of

hardships that a married researcher with children encounters. An IPGR in the school of Business, Sara expressed a unique standpoint in regard to the mobilisation of the 'international' label. She argued that "international students are more privileged here [UK]" and "being labelled as an international means you are a golden egg". She did not resist the label but rather adopted it as means to receive a more privileged treatment. Sara repeatedly referred to students as customers which eventually contributed to her establishing a 'value for money' approach when discussing the international label.

4.7.10 Stella

Stella is a French-Tunisian postgraduate researcher. Throughout the interview, Stella seemed to contest and resist the very essence of labels, highlighting their potential to reduce individuals to a set of realities that they do not even identify with. Stella expressed unparalleled criticality as she constantly questioned the impact of league tables and the set of metrics used to define where a university stands. Her narratives involved rich descriptions of her current student/research experience. On her arrival to UK, Stella decided to visit her research office. Her expectations were based on the images and videos she saw on the university website. In the following quote, she describes her first visit to the office: "the moment I walked in and I discovered I came all the way to be like trapped under the ground I was shocked. I was like wow … then to find out that it's like a common area you don't even have your own office. That's another shock". Stella's narratives exposed a range of situations that many fellow PGRs resigned themselves to living with rather than contest.

In addition to the 10 main participants in this research I should also acknowledge the contributions of 5 other participants who expressed their interest to participate and share insights. These are Mustafa, Hala, Nayla, Jasmine, and Zayn. While their contributions and impact on the direction of the research were not as significant as the main participants, ideas and remarks from their non-recorded narratives served to illuminate, fortify, and elaborate on certain themes within the research.

4.8 Outline Of Analysis Chapters And Research Themes

Chapters	Themes	Main Findings
Chapter 5: The Actual International Student Experience This chapter explores three facets of the actual experiences endured by students labelled international. The first major theme (Section 5.2) uncovers some of the restrictive policies underpinning IPGRs' experiences, with a major focus on how such hurdles serve as mechanisms to sustain the differential realities endured by students labelled international. The second theme (Section 5.3) deals with several aspects of IPGR's experiences. These comprise narratives of anxiety, uncertainty, silence, criticality, etc., that students highlighted as part of their actual experiences. The third theme (Section 5.4) sheds light on IPGRs' experiences with their supervisors. This involves narratives that probe into	**5.2 Constraining Borders and Policies** ▪ Airport Queues and the Struggle to Fit ▪ Restrictive Policies and the Quest for a Privileged Status	▪ IPGRs' trajectories involve a constant navigation of restrictive mechanisms that limit their mobility and entitlements. ▪ These mechanisms comprise police registration and monitoring, rigorous visa procedures, dedicated airport queues, and recurring encounters with parties that attempt to impose a specific label/marker (national, ethnic, racial, religious, etc.). ▪ The mechanisms serve to establish and sustain a state of alienation. They result in a differential treatment, which indicates who is entitled to be part of 'us' and 'them'. ▪ Therefore, although 'international' students are not representative of a homogeneous group, the mechanisms serve to homogenise them.
	5.3 Overwhelming and Unexpected Trajectories	▪ This section sheds light on the narratives of

the supervisor-PGR relationships, the conflicts and positive encounters that characterised some of these relationships, and their impact on students' trajectories.	▪ Being and the Experience: Grappling with despair
	   ➢ Anxieties: I know my life is in his hands
	   ➢ Uncertainties: What consequence would that have on me?
	▪ Silence and Embarrassment to Voice Opinions
	   ➢ Silence: I always stay at the back
	   ➢ Self-Attributed Deficiencies: Maybe I am not that good enough
	   ➢ Criticality: I felt at the beginning that I cannot criticise
		anxiety, uncertainty, silence, self-deficiency, and criticality that IPGRs shared throughout the interviews.
		▪ The alienating state of being that students labelled international endure partly due to the mechanisms tackled in the previous section, in addition to other factors, contribute to their feelings of anxiety and deficiency. Some IPGRs adopt the deficit discourses associated with the international label, which in turn impacts their mental wellbeing.
		▪ The constant homogenisation of students labelled international, the attribution of problematic behaviours to this allegedly homogeneous group, and the consolidation of this state of being via a set of restrictive mechanisms contributes to a state of silence. In most situations, the systematic categorisation and differentiation of IPGRs acts beyond their ability to question them.

	5.4 Supervisors and their Impact on the 'International' Student Experience	▪ Supervisors play a major role in shaping IPGRs' experiences and trajectories. Students' narratives unveiled a plethora of experiences that indicate the varying positions supervisors can have.

	▪ Supervisors and Students' Trajectories
	▪ Supervisors and Students' Experiences
	    ➢ Exploitation, Trust, and Single Stories
	    ➢ Negligence, Restrictions, and Bullying
	    ➢ Soft Experiences and Positive Encounters
		▪ These positions are largely influenced by the supervisors' social, religious, cultural, and political affiliations, and the extent to which these affiliations affect the supervisor-supervisee relationship.
		▪ Two major narratives highlighted two extreme positions, where supervisors' views were imposed to restrict IPGR's trajectories and experiences.

Chapter 6: Intercultural Encounters and Perceptions

This chapter is made of three major themes that probe into the intercultural facets of the lived and endured experiences of students labelled international. The first section covers extracts that shed light on IPGRs' expectations, encounters, and impressions at different stages within their trajectories. This is one of the instances where several grand narratives about self/other are duly unpacked by IPGRs. The second section continues with this intercultural focus. It introduces a novel conceptualisation of culture as a form of belonging and outlines the different forms of belonging that students labelled international negotiate on the go. This conceptualisation is then utilised to approach a plethora of events and experiences where participants either encountered or reproduced grand narratives and single stories about themselves | **6.2 Expectations, Encounters, and Preconceptions** | ▪ Student mobility is characterised by a constant interplay between problematic grand narratives and transient interculturality.
▪ In this context, the manifestation of essentialist representations is evident and inevitable.
▪ However, these representations are not rigidly fixed and continuously reproduced.
▪ Therefore, students labelled international should not be perceived as precultured beings whose intercultural encounters mainly result in getting to know and/or tolerate other precultured beings.
▪ Indeed, IPGRs identified with a plethora of positions: juxtaposing grand narratives, aligning with problematic counternarratives, striving to maintain a comfortable, albeit problematic, sense of community, or discarding grand narratives altogether.
▪ This complexity is completely ignored by the institutional discourses |

and/or others. The last section highlights moments of agency and social action. Some of the narratives tackled in this section helped to debunk the long-standing deficit frameworks that perceive IPGRs to be deficient, uncritical, and representative of a grand narrative that allegedly shapes their perceptions of themselves and others.		and the realities they aim to promote. ▪ The promoted reality portrays intercultural encounters via a lens that not only maintains, but also reinforces the imagined uncrossable difference, which sustains the problematic celebrationist understanding of diversity. ▪ The same promoted reality is therefore inattentive to the single stories that IPGRs' encounter throughout the course of their studies (such as the ones tackled in sections 6.3.2.1 and 6.3.2.2).

	6.3 Grand Narratives as Markers of Essentialist Difference
	
	▪ Assigned, Constructed, and Imposed Belonging
	  ➢ I found it hard to get along with Muslims
	  ➢ Sometimes you don't know what you are
	  ➢ Islam pretty much takes control of the culture
	  ➢ It's who they are, it's their roots
	▪ Unpacking IPGRs' Single Stories
		▪ A conceptualisation of culture as a form of belonging perceives IPGRs' intercultural trajectories as a constant navigation of three forms of belonging: Assigned, constructed, and imposed belonging.
		
		▪ The working of this conceptualisation is outlined in sections 6.3.1.1 - 6.3.1.4 where some of the major events narrated by students labelled international are tackled.
		
		▪ A common manifestation of imposed forms of

	➢ You the Berbers are used to carrying heavy things ➢ There are three kinds of people in this world: Men, Women, and female PhD	belonging observed through Alice's reference to the institutional tendency to ask individuals to identify with one of the ethnic, racial, and religious labels. ▪ Students labelled international are subject to a plethora of single stories and culturist narratives that impact their agency, personal trajectories, perceptions about themselves and others, and their very ability to navigate their student trajectories. ▪ Once more, it is possible to highlight how the current multicultural discourses adopted by HE institutions champion a superficial understanding of diversity that is inattentive to the problematic framings that students encounter within and beyond the university.
	6.4 Contesting Grand Narratives ▪ Don't make any eye contact with British people ▪ Some people think that Saudi Arabia is a backward country ▪ You are not a man!	▪ Despite the problematic representation of cohorts of students labelled international as representative of a distinctive national culture with unique and homogeneous behaviours and beliefs, many students

	114	are still able to demonstrate moments agency and social action by questioning the premises upon which these problematic representations are established.
		▪ Three manifestations of agency served to demonstrate IPGRs' ability to transcend reductionist narratives of nationality, student status, and gender.
		▪ It is through these endured experiences that one can observe the mechanisms that hinder any potential for genuine social action.
		▪ The international label serves to reinforce some of the problematic grand narratives by subsuming students from the so-called 'global south' as representative of a distinctive collectivist culture.
Chapter 7: League Tables, Labels, and the Neoliberal University This chapter comprises two sections that tackle two major themes. The first theme investigates the	**7.2 The Prevalence of Metrics and League Tables** ▪ Institutional Rankings and IPGRs' Destinations ▪ Overrated and Irrelevant Metrics	▪ League tables are actively influencing students' destinations with complex and sometimes irrelevant indicators that project a misleading image when set against what students endure.

prevalence of metrics and league tables, and the impact that such metrics have on students' destination choices. It also examines the relevance of these metrics, especially when set against IPGRs' endured experiences. The second section probes into IPGRs' attitudes vis-à-vis the international label. Several IPGRs reflected on the connotations they associate with the international label and the ways through which they perceive the label to function within and beyond their personal trajectories. The last analysis sub-section within this theme focuses on the differential treatment that the label reinforces, and the problematic state of alienation that results from this.		• The controversial divergence between the promoted and endured realities is facilitated via league tables and metrics. • IPGRs are strategically relying on these metrics when deciding about their institutional affiliations. This is partly due to the mere fact that such metrics exert a significant influence over IPGRs' trajectories and career prospects.
	7.3 Investigating the International Label: Students' Views • The International as a Cash Cow • Questioning the International Label • International Students and Differential Treatment	• The 'international' label functions beyond the allegedly neutral administrative categories that distinguish students who come from abroad. • In many instances, the label designates an imposed state of being that legitimises a differential form of treatment. • It is a marker of difference and can serve as a mechanism that sustains the homogenisation and otherization of cohorts of students. • Students labelled international are aware of the discourses that position the international student as a non-citizen,

	116	non-native, and non-critical individual who is portrayed as someone with distinctive needs that require special forms of support and resource provision. ▪ Individuals subsumed within the international label are constantly subject to a plethora of contradictory institutional discourses.

Table 4 Outline of analysis chapters, themes, and main findings

4.9 Conclusion

In the last two years, my perceptions about methodology metamorphosed in unanticipated manners to adapt to the requirements of this research. In this chapter I attempted to delineate the interplay between my theoretical stances, the design and realisation of the study, the analytical framework, and the ethical concerns that I reflected upon. This, however, does not serve as a research blueprint since what constitutes this chapter is a spectrum of major reflections informed by my readings, the research context, and the set of preconceptions that I carry along with me. It is important to acknowledge the possibility to employ alternative theoretical and analytical lenses to explore the experiences of IPGRs. This chapter paves the way for the upcoming analysis and discussion chapters where I present, reflect upon, and interpret participants' extracts.

Chapter 5
The Actual International Student Experience

5.1 Introduction

At this stage it is already established that the student experience or international student experience is employed in an array of marketing and promotional content in British HEIs and underpinned by a set of guidelines and policies that advise (and sometimes dictate) how experience in general and international student experience should be framed and institutionalised within faculties, schools, divisions, research centres, and in most extreme cases supervisory meetings. Such forms of mobilising the international label and experience keyword serve to create a student experience package which students are expected to undertake or commit to throughout the course of their degrees.

This approach to framing the 'international student experience' is prominent and powerful, and in many cases, it can result in university actors affiliating with and even reproducing the same mechanisms that feed the prevalence of certain international student experiences. This chapter addresses the 'experiences' of students labelled 'international'. The framing in the previous sentence is intentional for two reasons: First, not all students identify with the 'international' label. In fact, the collected data shows that many postgraduate researchers contest the label and condemn its usages which transcend innocent administrative purposes to involve imposed hierarchies, restrictions, inequalities, and deficiencies. Second, most of the experiences that participants narrated throughout the interviews do not converge with the institutional and promotional representations of 'international students' and their 'experiences'.

By distancing myself from imposing a 'label' on my participants and opting for giving them the space to reflect on how they perceive it I managed to gain access to insights that would not be accessible if I departed from the claim that they are 'international'. Therefore, the mobilisation of the

'international' category was carried out mainly at the recruitment stage. This also allowed me to probe into whether the category is actually as homogenous and binding when employed beyond its institutional usages or not. Having said that, it is noteworthy that this chapter does not tackle the 'international' label/category per se (As this will be dealt with in a later chapter), but rather deals with participants' narratives of their experiences. This includes references to the impact of policies and borders on their mobility, the unanticipated hardships they had to deal with, and their experiences with their supervisors.

5.2 Constraining Borders and Policies

5.2.1 Airport Queues and the Struggle to Fit

One of the very first events that impact the trajectories of postgraduate researchers labelled 'international' is their encounters with borders and policies. This is an inevitable set of procedures that precede their ability to live/study in the UK and accompany them when they embark on their degrees. The complexity of such events is dependent on where the 'potential' IPGR is applying from. Nevertheless, in spite of the minor differences that characterize these procedures, the bigger picture remains representative of the hardships undertaken by students labelled international in the hope of securing and sustaining a legal presence in the UK.

Such treatment labelled 'bureaucratic barbarism' by one of the participants, is mainly visible to the students who navigate them. Most participants agreed that dedicated airport lanes, visa and work restrictions, police registration and regular location updates, and high tuition fees, are all illustrative of the same imposed reality: That the status of the individual labelled 'international' is by default lower than that of individuals labelled 'Home' or 'EU'. This is eloquently put in Stella's response to my enquiry about the reasons underpinning the spectrum of restrictions that the 'international' is expected to adhere to.

R: How about the police registration?

Stella: Just like I told you earlier, everyone belongs to a certain package: paradise, gold, and silver. It's all like literally dealt with like a company selling products and services and it's degrading from the best to the worst. You feel like you are stuffed on the side as if we are more likely to do criminal stuff or we have to be closely monitored. That's not that's not really like, respectful, to say the least. To us as human beings and to them as like a community or like an organisation that says they are like, they hold international values and value all of their students.

(Interview: 'Stella' August 2020)

The analogy put forward by Stella in the above extract conveys a prominent feeling of imposed deficiency among cohorts of IPGRs. She claims that the labels mobilised by HEIs mimic the set of packages that are marketed by certain companies, especially in the tourism and entertainment sectors. The labels are not innocent administrative terms. They define the status and experience that the student is expected to receive, in addition to the obligations that they must commit to in order to maintain their legal status. According to Stella, the way the actual experience is packaged implies that IPGRs are more likely to commit criminal offenses and therefore a monitoring system in the form of police registration is necessary. This contradicts with the promotional slogans within HEIs which advocate international values.

Stella went on to reflect on her initial encounter with borders, the special airport queues dedicated for international travellers, and the paperwork she had to fill in.

Stella: You feel like you're a prisoner. They don't try to make you like feel like part of the society. You will always be kept on the side. Even the moment you walk in and like the airport, EU, and nationals, go on one-way, international students wait 3-4 hours. I didn't even expect that that would happen. Like 3-4 hours in an endless line. You have to fill in everything and it has like to fit in under one of their labels. For example, I don't I don't identify as an Arab and I always put other. You

have to label yourself. They keep saying we are not racists and then they impose labels like Asian, Mixed Background, Black. What do you call this? It's like two faces to the same coin, same story. And then when it comes to the to the police registration, I don't know I would consider it like, and the monitoring bit.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Stella' August 2020)</div>

What is notable in the previous two extracts from Stella's interview is her repetitive use of the pronoun 'they'. The way the pronoun is employed can at first be indicative of an us-versus-them way of approaching the incidents she encountered at the airport. However, the second extract reveals Stella's inability to fathom the necessity to fit under one of the labels prescribed in the airport's paperwork. The understanding of the pronoun therefore shifts from being used to juxtapose or condemn a bounded category to being used strategically to highlight her unwillingness to identify with a prescribed label. The need to fit within a label designates one of the very first events that shape IPGRs' experiences. This goes beyond airport paperwork as shown in the following note:

> The need to fit within a label followed me throughout my trajectory as a student in UK. I had to identify my race and/or ethnicity when applying for visa, when registering at university, when registering with a general practice (GP), during police registration, and when applying for internships/jobs at university. I recall an incident when I took my friend who suffered from food poisoning to the hospital. The receptionist at the emergency desk asked for my friend's credentials and then asked me if I knew her religion and ethnicity. Puzzled by the questions, I declined to answer. The receptionist then asked me to ask my friend, who was crying and screaming loudly, what her religion and ethnicity were.

Feeling "like a prisoner" as Stella noted is not an exaggeration. The very first events in the UK demonstrate a systematised attempt to make students from certain 'nationalities' adhere to a set of labels. Labels are one of the

generative mechanisms underpinning the attempts to reify difference. Such events exacerbate the already-existing feeling of otherness and even result in anxiety as shared by Rachel:

> R: So, let's go to your very first days in the UK. Tell me what happened when you first arrived here and how did you feel about it?
>
> Rachel: Um, first arriving here. I just remember being at Heathrow Airport, and there was like, tons of students because they would separate like immigration, all those tier four students have to line up this way. And I think there was like 300 students or something because everybody was going to Heathrow. And I was feeling quite nervous, but also, I felt like okay, at least we're all in the same boat. We're all like it was. It was all right.
>
> R: Why did you feel nervous about it?
>
> Rachel: Like I was afraid like, oh, what if they're separating us because they're going to like … deny us and kick us back home or something. I think it was my first time to the UK at that point like coming here to study it was my first time visiting the UK ever.
>
> (Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)

The airport experience recurs throughout the narratives shared by the participants. What is prominent is the separate queues dedicated for visa holders. These are perceived to establish difference or distinguish 'us' and 'them'. As noted by Stella and Rachel, the shared feelings of anxiety and discomfort are exacerbated when encountering the special airport queues and the long waiting hours. This is echoed in one of the pictures shared by Mustafa when asked about what characterizes his student experience in the UK.

Figure 13 Airport Borders

Mustafa: I got the airport picture from the Guardian's website. I argue that the meaning of a land differs from one to another. For example, the UK is a home to a British while it is a western European country to get a degree in English language, temporarily. The UK border is the first place that eliminates who are the local and who are not according to their identity on the passports.

(Interview: 'Mustafa' February 2020)

As illustrated by Mustafa, the UK border manifested in the form of an international airport serves as one of the forms of othering students labelled 'international'. The airport experience attempts to engrain a feeling of essentialist otherness. The latter is dictated by an array of pre-conceptions that in turn shape the policies established to restrict mobility. This early experience characterizes IPGRs' struggle to fit, as they are constantly reminded to self-categorise themselves. The following section will discuss participants' encounters with, and perceptions about the policies that accompany their experience.

5.2.2 Restrictive Policies and the Quest for a Privileged Status

In the previous section I uncovered some of the airport experiences of students labelled international. I argued that labels such as the 'international student', along with other national, ethnic, and racial categories serve as generative mechanisms underpinning an 'actual' set of realities. These 'imposed' realities are constantly experienced by individuals who embark on a degree in the UK and they affect their perceptions of 'difference'. However, the same realities are absent from UK HEIs' promotional discourses of 'international campuses' and 'global citizenship'. In this section I continue my exploration of the impact of borders and policies by sharing students' encounters with the restrictive events that impact their attempts to exercise a degree of agency equal to that of students labelled 'home' or 'EU'. In the following extract, Stella shares two events that can be illustrative of the restrictive policies impacting the experiences of students labelled international:

> Stella: I applied for this job at an international school, but I couldn't get the job because their part time job is 25 hours and mine is restricted to 20. So that's one. And the other one was for a training course. It was only available for like EU and UK students. And when I applied there, in the form it had, like, 'are you EU citizen?' and I said yes and everything then I did the course and everything. And then I was I was talking to them, and I mentioned that I have like a second passport and stuff and they were like 'oh, then we may not be able to give you the certificate because you're not supposed to do this'. I spoke to someone, and I did it, but you see there are like more chances, more programmes to support you as a local or EU student but as an international you feel eliminated, rejected. Just like a fly, whenever you go, they cast you away. I thought we would find like programmes that are literally made for international students to prepare them. But everything is made up like to make out as much money as they can from you, whether it's from rent, whether it's from education, anything that's specific to your state and you feel like everything is working

against you being integrated into society. And, like, staying there, they're trying to prevent it in every way possible. So, if you don't get so many programmes and chances of getting a job, you're not going to have the needed experience, you're not going to stay. And that's how it goes, they leave all doors shut in your face, you can see what is happening inside, you are free to apply; but are you really having a fair chance to be accepted? Hmm No they always put an obstacle there to ruin it for you.

(Interview: 'Stella' August 2020)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Stella holds dual citizenship (French Tunisian) but was admitted as an international student as her degree is sponsored by the Tunisian government. Stella highlights the restricted working hours which are capped at 20 hours per week for students labelled 'international'. This, however, does not apply to students labelled 'Home' or 'EU' who can hold full-time positions while pursuing a research degree. This restrictive policy is illustrative of a privilege gap between the 'international', the 'home', and the 'EU'. It implies that institutions such as the Home Office (a government body in charge of regulating migration and other matters) implement a set of policies that consolidate this gap.

The second part of the narrative involves Stella's reflections about an event she attended for training purposes. A French national, with Tunisian citizenship, Stella was denied a certificate due to her 'international' status. The lack of privilege is once again prominent in this extract as Stella narrates the difficulties that 'internationals' face to negotiate equal chances. According to her, this is part of a wider context of systematized hurdles that serve to prevent students labelled international from gaining the needed experience that would eventually enable them to secure a job or even settle in the UK.

Students labelled 'international' have always been seen by the university and government institutions as 'lucrative' sources of income. This is confirmed by the policies implemented to prevent these students from attaining equal privileges

compared to students labelled 'home/EU'. The 'international' is always expected to be funded/sponsored by an external entity and are therefore denied access to the same level of support that other students get. This is exacerbated post-graduation as students are expected to undertake visa procedures once again (if they intend to work) and can only stay if they manage to find a job with a certain salary threshold and an employer that can sponsor them.

Edit February 2021: Two events occurred recently and made me reflect more about this privilege gap. The first event was the Home Office announcement that a new law will come into effect by July 2021. The law extends postgraduate researchers' entitled period of stay post-graduation to three years. It also waives the salary threshold and employer sponsorship requirements. The second event was WRoCAH's (White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities) decision to accept studentship applications from 'international' students for the very first time since its creation. While both events can be perceived as successes for the 'international' PGRs' community, these decisions coincide with EU students' status change from Home/EU to 'International'. At the time of editing this reflection note I grappled with several questions: Is the 'international' becoming visible due to EU students' status change? Do these events benefit IPGRs? Or are they a mere smokescreen that conceals an implicit layer of sub-categorization and privilege gap?

The privilege gap that results from governmental and institutional policies characterizes several narratives shared by participants. While each participant perceived and experienced these policies differently, they all agreed that several policies made them feel alienated, treated differently, and prevented from exercising the same degree of agency and control over their trajectories as their Home/EU counterparts. A plethora of policies appear to transcend their regulatory purposes as they result in a state of inequality among cohorts of postgraduate researchers. This affects the experience as explained by Alice and Rachel:

> Alice: The European or UK students get more privileges than me for
> instance. It's all about privilege again. Maybe they are considering

that I may stay here, but it's the stereotype that they are more of a citizen than any international student. So, there is the hierarchy if we may term it ... where you see that the home students, UK, or Europeans are perceived as being there. And then they've got their privilege. They've got everything on top only if they want to access it. It's up to them, it's their choice ... for us ... we don't have the choice ... really. So, to climb the ladder, we actually need to go through loads of hurdles ... to be at the same level. And it's not ... again, it's not a level that's real ... but they do have those advantages ... they do have those privileges that international students don't have ... so we need to make triple the efforts.

(Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)

Rachel: I find that quite unfair, like I found this quite unfair for a long time that they have such a freedom of movement, like they don't have to stress about finding not only a job, but a job that will sponsor your visa and that's quite a big commitment for the job or the company. So, I feel like it's not like you're only competing with your peers, you're also competing to be the best. And you'd have to convince the company to go through the extra kind of like steps to, to sponsor you. And I feel like that's kind of a tough, tough thing to be done. But that's just how it's always been like, even when I was working in Japan having to apply for jobs there. It was like I had to go through so many hurdles, and everybody else like people who are from the UK or the US, because they're from English speaking countries, they had no kind of issue getting like getting qualified, not qualified, but getting interviews or anything. But I had to go through so many steps trying to prove that I was on at least the same level as them, at least the same. I think having my masters and other people only have their bachelor's, or undergrad. It was kind of like that's what kind of allowed me to gain access into their interview steps and all that.

(Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)

The need to make more effort to be on par with students labelled 'home' or 'EU' reverberated throughout the narratives, either due to the inequal access to opportunities experienced by students labelled 'international' or due to other stakeholders' imposed deficient preconceptions which led students to do tremendous efforts to transcend the image associated with being 'international'. The latter will be highlighted later when dealing with the 'imposed deficient preconceptions' sub-section. For students labelled 'international', the process of embarking on a research degree and subsequently trying to exercise a similar degree of social mobility to that of other students involves navigating an array of hurdles. This entails negotiating policies and transcending preconceptions. For some students, however, reductionist hurdles are integral parts of the journey and provide the only accessible reality there is.

5.2.3 Section Discussion

The recurring encounter with borders and policies impacts a significant part of the actual 'international student experience'. Such 'hurdles' as described by participants serve as generative mechanisms that underpin and consolidate the set of experienced empirical realities. Police registration and monitoring, rigorous visa procedures, dedicated airport queues, and other events are implemented to engender a state of difference. Within the confines of these realities, students are expected to fit in one of the pre-established ethnic and racial labels, and to conform to the policies that sustain this difference. This in turn yields a privilege gap within the same community of postgraduate researchers as the aforementioned policies transcend a regulatory purpose to even dictate and constrain certain forms of mobility and being.

The significance of such events and their impact on the 'actual international student experience' are absent at many levels. My research thus far has not come across a published work that refers to the afore-discussed hurdles. The same applies to the promotional discourses disseminated by [the university] and HEIs in general as they tend to focus on how smooth and rewarding the experience is. While universities cannot be held accountable

for the impact of borders and policies, since the laws governing students' trajectories are dictated by governmental institutions such as the Home Office, universities are still responsible for internalising the privilege gap that results from these constraining factors.

The generative mechanisms underpinning the set of realities experienced by students labelled 'international' establish and sustain a state of othering. The latter functions through "constructing, or imagining, a demonized image of 'them', or the Other, which supports an idealized image of 'us', or the Self. Othering is also essentialist in that the demonized image is applied to all members of the group or society which is being Othered." (Holliday, 2011, p.69). The set of policies experienced by participants are illustrative of how a 'demonized image of them' is established. The implications of such image involve a problematic homogenization of the 'international', the 'home', and the 'EU' categories, and the attribution of certain characteristics to every group of students. This is one of the crucial factors underpinning students' self-attributed deficiencies and embarrassment to voice opinions. The characteristics can even be internalized by university actors, which in turn results in imposed deficiencies.

Encountering borders and policies raises several dilemmas that accompany IPGRs' trajectories. The 'actual experience' contradicts with the 'promoted experience'. While institutional discourses disseminated via the university's marketing materials adopt an all-embracing approach that is fuelled by another layer of global citizenship and student well-being discourses, the 'actual experience' reinforces a differential discourse where 'us' and 'them', and the hurdles that result from belonging to one of these camps, are dictated by one's status. The 'promoted experience' is therefore inattentive to what is being/to be endured. I conclude this section with a final extract from my interview with Lina, where she comments on the role of policies.

> Lina: Well, basically, if you think about the global politics this is how it works. Immigrants whether you're a student, whether you're working, you will always be perceived as a kind of an intruder, a kind of a potential danger that they need to keep an eye on you […] So based

on this they think that having certain policies is kind of precautions that they will keep an eye on students and make sure they are monitored. Although they assume that it's kind of safe for you, it's not done for safety purposes but instead safety for the UK government in terms of visa and everything. But again, as I said, I haven't really understood why, I think it's done is done just to kind of see whether you are not really a danger for the country.

(Interview: 'Lina' February 2020)

5.3 Overwhelming and Unexpected Trajectories

In addition to the enduring impact of borders and policies, the 'actual' experience is also characterised by an array of discernible states of being that impact students' trajectories and wellbeing. The most prominent narratives within this section uncover students' reluctance to voice opinions, recurring feelings of incompetence due to self-attributed deficiencies, and a sense of discomfort and uncertainty vis-à-vis students' trajectories during and post-study. Such factors stem from students' perceptions of themselves and others, along with their interaction with the narratives and discourses they encounter on a daily basis. The following sub-headings unveil intricate layers of individuals' continuous navigation of structures and discourses, and a glimpse on the interplay between agency and the generative mechanisms influencing IPGRs' experience.

5.3.1 Being and the Experience: Grappling with despair

The research experience can be daunting for many students as the very first events encountered in this trajectory can be characterised by anxieties, uncertainties, and actual realities that contradict expected or anticipated realities. A prevalent state of being that arises within the very first months of the research degree can be termed an imposter syndrome. The latter affects students' perceptions of themselves and results in feelings of incompetence, self-doubt, and self-deception. While this state of being is prominent

amongst cohorts of postgraduate researchers regardless of status, the mechanisms underpinning its emergence in cohorts of students labelled international can be distinctive due to the self-attributed and imposed deficient preconceptions at play. 'Anxiety by status' appears to exacerbate the anxieties that students labelled international experience due to self-doubt.

5.3.1.1 Anxieties: I know my life is in his hands

Several participants voiced moments of despair and anxiety. This can result from an array of factors, some of which are controllable, while others are beyond control. In the following extract Elizabeth narrates her struggle with anxiety due to family and supervisor issues:

> Elizabeth: I think doing PhD is not difficult, the difficult thing is anxiety, it is with you every single day. Plus, I went through family issues. The first year I did PhD I did surgery, my dad for once, and my mom for three times in a year. My mom's problem was really serious so I thought I would lose her at that time. So, I think I got depressed for three years but after finishing PhD I felt better. I didn't go to see the doctors. Supervisors are one of the problems. Because still about culture. My supervisor is Chinese. In China the tutor and the student ... how to say ... the tutor has more power distance than those in UK ... so sometimes I know that if my supervisor was British [giggles] life would be a lot easier because you can just reply his email at working time. You meet him at the working time and he won't ask you to do any extra work that is irrelevant to your PhD study, but if your supervisor is Chinese even if he is living here for over 30 years, he is still him [giggles] ... he is still Chinese ... so if ... how to say ... I have to like, I felt like I was on call all the time ... I used to correct my thesis with my supervisor at 8 o'clock on a Saturday and if I pick up the phone late ... he would be very unhappy. This happened many times, still today [giggles] ... I actually feel a bit pressured because I know my life is in his hands when I am doing PhD.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)</div>

Elizabeth's extract is part of a very detailed narrative where she narrates her experience with her supervisor (This will be presented later). For Elizabeth, anxiety emerged due to her and her parents' health issues. Having undergone several surgeries, the conditions endured by Elizabeth's family had a negative impact on her experience. Adding to that, she referred to her supervisors as 'one of the problems'. This is accompanied by a comparison between 'British' and 'Chinese' supervisors with a reference to the concept of power. In her view, being 'Chinese' entitles tutors to have more power over their students compared to their 'British' counterparts. Regardless of how long her supervisor spent in UK, she claims that this trait is enduring. The Saturday 8 o'clock supervisory meetings are illustrative of her claim. Reference to enduring cultural practices will be discussed in a later section. What I intend to highlight here is the impact that several factors exert on students' experiences. What exacerbated Elizabeth's situation is her supervisor's lack of understanding. This is demonstrated in the following extract:

R: Did he know about the health issues?

Elizabeth: Yes ... and when my mom got really sick, I said I wanted to go to China and he said after 4 days we are going to have a conference, you should finish your job in the conference and go back to China. At that time, my mom was really in danger and I told him, but he didn't believe me, he said you are just emotional, you should go to the conference and help because we don't have anyone, so I did. So after that time that was the end of the first year after my transfer ... so after that one, the second one and the third one I didn't go to any supervisory meeting, I didn't want to meet him or see him.

R: Did you decide to do that willingly?

Elizabeth: No I just, I was depressed ... you know when people are in depression they are not motivated to do anything ... for the research I didn't do any textual comparisons ... I didn't do anything for year two and year three, just laying in bed and being depressed ... so that was the hard thing.

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Elizabeth's narrated event shows her supervisor's lack of understanding vis-à-vis her specific situation. Amidst a lonely and stressful research journey, supervisors can sometimes be the only refuge for students. The supervisor's approach in dealing with Elizabeth contributed to her feeling of despair, which in turn affected her willingness to work on her research in subsequent years. Elizabeth's supervisor exacerbated what is already a very stressful and daunting journey as many students embark on research for the very first time and grapple with an array of uncertainties. This can be observed in Sara's narrative about her experience:

> R: Yeah. Okay, so how do you perceive your postgraduate experience so far?
>
> Sara: Very tiring, very confusing, because you always feel like, I am not sure if I am doing the right thing, I am not sure if this is right or wrong. It feels always like it is open to interpretations. So, there is no right or wrong. So, this uncertainty sometimes is good because it opens doors to you but sometimes you feel like okay, is this right or wrong? There is not an answer for that even like for example, I remember when I asked about the number of interviewees, like for my study, everyone was saying it depends, there is no right or wrong. It depends. So, this uncertainty about everything ... It is really scary. Because you feel like you have the decision. And I am a person who really hates to take decisions. It is scary. You take responsibility. And yeah, I'm not going to feel good till I finish the PhD. Because at that time or at that point, I would feel that, okay, that is certain.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Sara' February 2020)</div>

5.3.1.2 Uncertainties: What consequence would that have on me?

Uncertainty is a common thread within many narratives. The inability to take full responsibility for a research project stems from PGRs' previous educational trajectories which tend to involve working on small milestones.

Such uncertainty can also be affected by the obscurity underpinning the degree guidelines as expressed by Claire:

> Claire: The first year was very very traumatizing for me on a personal level and academic level here. And if I had known what to do, at the very beginning, I think I would have approached the situation differently. But I think as international students, and this is something that I think I need to voice very well, we are not always aware of what is available to us. I mean, they do say that we do they have, they have the handbooks available to you on Minerva and you do read them, but it doesn't state very clearly specific situations in which, for example, you're not feeling at ease with one of the supervisors and what to do. Yeah. And they do mention that, that okay, you can talk to the director to the programme tutor or all that, but what kind of consequence would that have on me? So, it's that kind of assurance that you would need in terms of Okay, if I take that decision and do that, what will happen? So, the kind of familiarity that I think international students need is knowing what to do in these kinds of situations, and that was not very forward or direct or clearly stated to us in the very beginning it should have for non-international students, I feel like they do know what to do. They are very much aware they are very much at advantage compared to us. And I felt this now as a representative, I see many international students struggling, you know, as pretty much similar to the way I was in my first year.

> (Interview: 'Claire' September 2020)

Claire flags lack of awareness as one of the potential factors leading to a traumatizing experience. However, she seems to link this with being 'international' and even argues that such lack of knowledge does not apply equally among cohorts of international and non-international students. It is possible to claim that non-international students may be more acquainted with the educational environment compared to their international peers. Nonetheless, this should not be taken for granted as it can result in reifying a dangerous association of incompetence with cohorts of international

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students. The hesitation with which Claire approaches certain events such as 'not feeling at ease with one of the supervisors and what to do' highlights one of the deficient preconceptions that students labelled international affiliate with when trying to navigate institutional structures. The following entry is partially illustrative of this situation.

A heightened feeling of anxiety can be noticed in situations where PGRs interact with and navigate institutional structures. Potential repercussions appear to be one of the reasons underpinning this feeling. A PhD candidate is willing to carry on working with a supervisor that is inconsiderate of their situation just to avoid any unpleasant repercussions. I was recently approached by a fellow PGR (nicknamed Huyam in later extracts) whose supervisor 'ordered' her to opt for interviewing 30 participants for her research and discarded her desire to approach data collection differently (The student wanted to interview less participants and opt for three interviews per participant rather than a single interview). The student's main supervisor promised to fail the student in her transfer if she does not comply. The student, supported by her second supervisor, decided to opt for her approach. This resulted in the main supervisor criticizing her in the upgrade report. The upgrade examiners deferred her research on grounds of the main supervisor's comments.

As it will be demonstrated later, the same supervisor from the previous entry will repeatedly remind Huyam that she is 'international' which allegedly entails that the student is less competent than local students. At this stage of the research, it is clear that self-doubt and lack of confidence can result from an array of factors. However, while all PGRs, regardless of status, experience a certain degree of uncertainty when navigating institutional discourses, the previous narratives and entries have shown that status might play a role in creating and sustaining these uncertainties. The upcoming chapters will reveal how status can be mobilised by students themselves to justify the need for special or further support. The same status will be employed differently by institutional discourses or university actors to establish a deficient preconception.

5.3.2 Silence and Embarrassment to Voice Opinions

The same factors that make students labelled international encounter moments of anxiety, uncertainty, and self-doubt equally yield a state of silence where these students are reluctant to voice their opinions. The impact of the generative mechanisms that underpin students' trajectories exceeds dictating a specific status quo, as the mechanisms exert an influence even on students' perceptions of themselves in comparison to others. This section continues probing into the overwhelming and unexpected trajectories encountered by students labelled international. The purpose of the following sub-headings is to reveal the narratives of silence, self-attributed deficiency, and absence of criticality.

5.3.2.1 Silence: I always stay at the back

The narratives of silence reiterated by participants served to unveil an under-researched state of being. The latter is underpinned by reasons that contest the prevalent reductive discourses which associate international students' silence with incompetence, cultural norms, and failure to integrate. Instead, students' narratives portray how they resort to silence due to an array of factors including externally imposed realities and reflections about how they might be perceived by others. These narratives allow us to perceive silence as a choice resorted to by students both willingly to contest a reductionist portrayal of the international other, or unwillingly by internalizing certain imposed realities. In the following extract, Rachel shares reflections about others' reluctance to engage in discussions with her.

> Rachel: I have always kind of been in situations where there's other international students. For instance, the volleyball team is quite international because volleyball is not very popular in the UK so like at least half the volleyball society is international. Students from like Europe or Asia or Middle East, are kind of like, very open. It is different with home students though. I think until I start talking, then they treat me a bit differently, if that makes sense. I think people are hesitant to engage with me until they realise if I'll be able to speak with them or like engage with them at the level, they want to engage

with like in classes … One of my friends, her classes, I think, 99% are Chinese students, and she feels a bit frustrated because they will not talk to her, and she feels like it's difficult to talk to them. And I think she only has like one other British student in her class and the teacher always only talks to them because they would be the only ones that answer. So, I think it is a bit difficult as an international student, like surely, they are able to communicate, but maybe they're nervous that they won't be able to communicate in the way they want to especially about complicated ideas like that. It is not like daily stuff.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)</div>

Silence can emerge due to a reciprocal subscription to a set of preconceptions about the self and the other. In this case, Rachel's narrative encompasses several layers of complexity that are worth unpacking. She makes a reference to home students' reluctance to engage with her as they presume that she would not be competent enough to engage in a discussion at a certain level. It is not until Rachel decides to talk that others interact with her. While one can easily point fingers at home students' reliance on preconceptions, delving into the mechanisms that yield this situation can unveil the politics that shape similar events.

The systematic categorization of home and international students via governmental and institutional policies/discourses come to the fore in this respect. The mechanisms deployed to sustain this categorization involve dedicated accommodation for international students which makes it hard for them to socialize with home students; arrangement of study groups based on status; The provision of differential support and training whereby the resources accessible to home students differ from those of international students, with a usual preconception that international students require more support, etc. Such mechanisms along with other ones can shape the preconceptions that cohorts of students hold about themselves and others: International students may feel deficient, incompetent, and reluctant to participate in class; while home students may perceive international students as incompetent to engage in complex discussions or unwilling to socialize. In

other words, differentialist differences turn into realities due to the abundance of mechanisms that engender this state of being.

As the previously mentioned mechanisms gain momentum, their implementation within the institution may result in students' reluctance to engage, socialize, or voice opinions. In the following extract, Alice shares her frustration with this imposed reality.

> Alice: I believe that it's a bit unfair. Because I've had encounters with some British students, and I don't think there is that superiority they claim to have in terms of research or intellect. Maybe they'd advantages because of having the resources we didn't have in Algeria ... but that doesn't make the Algerian intellect or the intelligence less than that of the British ... because there are other skills that we can gain, we have the critical ability of doing things. That's something that can be developed through, I don't know, within the society, from the society, from your parents, from your peers, from internet, so you don't really have to read loads of books to have that skill.
>
> R: Okay, and did that in a way like when when you were told at that particular time? Did you feel inferior in particular and did that affect your research career and what you want to do in the future?
>
>
> Alice: Yes. So basically, it just made me feel like I don't have any opportunity here to actually belong, and that's the most important thing. So basically, I remember whenever there is, during my first year, whenever there is a research conference or something I always stay at the back. I do not engage in the conversation because I had that fear that people find out. I do not belong. I'm stupid. I know nothing. So that prohibited me from actually taking part in conversations, which is a bit unfair ... yeah.
>
> (Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)

In the previous extract, Alice narrates her experience with a recruitment agent who organized a pre-sessional training for an Algerian cohort of

postgraduate researchers in the UK. While this narrative falls within this chapter sub-title and the upcoming one (Section 5.3.2.2) what is relevant here is the implications that resulted from Alice's encounter. Due to the image drawn by the recruitment agent upon arrival to the UK, which emphasized the reductionist difference between home and international students, and even dictated how students should behave as we will see later, Alice resorted to self-marginalization and silence as she affiliated with the preconceptions imposed by the recruitment agent. Exploring narratives of silence and embarrassment to voice opinions lays the ground for probing into the narratives of self-deficiency that emerge throughout the actual experience.

5.3.2.2 Self-Attributed Deficiencies: Maybe I am not that good enough

This section builds on the previous one and further explores a similar type of narratives albeit from a slightly different perspective. The scope of self-attributed deficiencies comprises narratives where participants perceive themselves as incompetent or unable to be on par with their home counterparts or other students. As we have seen in the previous examples, Alice's narrative portrayed the implicit factors underpinning her disengagement with seminars and conferences, which stemmed mainly from a set of influential preconceptions that characterised her state of being. In the following extract, Lina eloquently narrates her struggle to voice concerns which eventually leads her to abstain from asking questions during research events.

> Lina: The very first period because I didn't have much information. I, I used to be scared even to ask for help. Although I know there are people in our school kind of really happy to provide help but just taking that first step and go to them, asking for help or just sending an email, felt something of a big deal.
>
> R: Why did you feel this way?
>
> Lina: […] I used to think a lot, just before sending an email. Maybe because of the feeling that I'm a person that I'm kind of an international student that I would feel I would feel like home students

know this. So, I'm an international student. If I asked a question, I will be regarded as kind of, you know, she doesn't know that much. I'll be like, kind of judged.

R: Did you have that feeling?

Lina: Maybe being judged by not knowing. Yeah, especially when kind of I used to attend lots of kind of seminars and everything. I would have questions, but I would struggle to just voice that question out or thoughts or I would have been like self-conscious, just to talk … to you know, to say it out loud.

R: You kind of related that to being international.

Lina: Yes. Yeah. Being international being like, not knowing that much compared to, to here because I, I assumed that my background was very limited. So, I had a master's degree, but really, in my master's degree, we didn't really study in depth about the about the topic. So, I felt like my knowledge is limited and if I ask the question will be kind of perceived as a very, you know, this is common sense, this is really stupid. You know.

R: So, you established the comparison between the home student and the international.

Lina: I noticed like I used to go to kind of seminars, and I noticed the way the home students present themselves that they kind of express their opinions. It's really much like they're really outgoing and well spoken, well spoken. They know how to construct their opinions. I would say like, maybe language was a barrier at first for me, but I don't think so. No, it was just a matter of thinking.

(Interview: 'Lina' February 2020)

Lina's narrative highlights moments of reluctance to raise concerns, self-doubt, fear of judgement, and a recurring comparison between home and international students. Both Lina and Alice expressed their self-consciousness in respect to asking questions during seminars. Interestingly, they both established a link between being international and incompetence.

This is not surprising as we will see from the upcoming sections/chapters that international students are constantly reminded of their alleged lack of knowledge. Having said that, the narratives equally depict moments of critical reflection. In the extract from the previous section, Alice seems to question the alleged superiority associated with being home student. While acknowledging the shortage and inaccessibility of resources in her home country, she refers to other means and contexts where criticality can be nurtured. Lina's narrative does not comprise a detailed reflection about her stance. Nonetheless, her final expression (I would say like, maybe language was a barrier at first for me, but I don't think so. No, it was just a matter of thinking.) illustrates a shift in the way she perceives herself in comparison to home students.

Another manifestation of self-attributed deficiency is shared by Huyam who narrates a similar struggle with self-doubt and difficulty with self-expression though for different reasons.

> Huyam: During the induction day I was so overwhelmed, I was so stressed and nervous because … there were people from all around the world, people coming from China, Brazil, Argentina, Turkey, Pakistan, it was like people from all different backgrounds and I was like Oh my god maybe I am not that good enough, look at all these people, maybe I, I started questioning whether I have the materials that qualify me to be here and then I saw my supervisor and the stress got doubled because I felt that I am still in the frame a primary student, you know that feeling that you are a pupil, and then you see your teacher and you have to be so ... It is more about feeling overwhelmed … I felt there is a huge barrier between me and my supervisor, like my supervisor was so high and I was so low, and I need too much time and effort just to reach a bit of her level. It was more about that, that's what got me stressed … Just something else I think it is important to say is that during my supervisory meetings I was so afraid to tell my supervisors I did not understand something, because I remember during my first meeting my supervisor she was

telling me we are going to start doing this and I believe since you are a PhD candidate you are familiar with that and the thing is that I was not, so I felt that my supervisor had expectations towards me and I had to meet her expectations so I kept telling her yeah I understand but once I go out I was like what was that, I haven't understood a thing, and that made me make more efforts … first I need to do effort to understand what she was saying or what she was talking about not that I didn't understand the language or something but the content of what she was saying ... For instance sometimes she mentions concepts and stuff that I was not familiar with so I needed to do my own research about what she was saying and then start doing what I was given as tasks, but then I remember after the fourth or fifth meeting, I felt more overwhelmed, and I had this idea that if I keep doing this or keep following this pattern of working with my supervisors I am not going to do anything.

(Interview: 'Huyam' January 2020)

In the previous extract Huyam shares moments of self-doubt during her induction event and in her initial encounters with her supervisors. What is prominent in these instances is the contrast she established in terms of her level in comparison to other students who come from different countries, and to her supervisors. Unlike Alice's and Lina's extracts, Huyam's narrative does not establish the reasons underpinning her self-doubt and reluctance to inform her supervisors about her inability to understand what they say. Later in the narrative, as will be demonstrated in other sections, Huyam shares her supervisor's repetitive reminders that she is international and therefore needs to do more effort to be on par with home students. This prevented her from expressing her inability to understand her supervisor, as she attributed this to a lack of competence. The next section will approach the narrative of criticality which was highlighted by two Saudi postgraduate researchers.

5.3.2.3 Criticality: I felt at the beginning that I cannot criticise

While the sense of self-deficiency can emerge due to several reasons amongst which are the mobilisation of the international label and the

imposed realities by different institutional discourses and stakeholders, a perceived lack of criticality can be equally significant in sustaining feelings of incompetence. The following narratives are shared by Claire and Sara who describe what appears to be an absence of criticality in their home country.

Claire: So those feelings, the anxiety, the fear, it wasn't very much communicated to me, in how I would have preferred for it to be. So, I think it was strange how I had expected PhD to be compared to how it actually was ... Well, first of all, when it comes, for example, to criticality ... This concept was pretty much very foreign to me. I've heard about it before, but I've never consciously applied it in my research.

> R: Could you tell me more about this?

> Claire: Well, first of all, the way our education systems work in Saudi Arabia and in many countries in the Middle East is that they don't encourage criticality. Now, this has changed recently, they started to adapt it the curriculum, but this is very new. But for me, when I had been in the education system, and the undergrad and post grad, we weren't very conscious about criticality. We were told that we would use different sources, but the actual term of criticality was still unclear to me. I didn't know what it meant. And when I came here I would, I would even discuss this with staff and with PGRs in the seminars. And they would share some kind of insights about what that meant. So, my understanding of criticality evolved as I went along my research, of course, I had to do a lot of reading and to understand what it was, and at the same time I had to write in order to make sure I'm applying it, you know. So yes, the feedback I got from my supervisors really helped because I kind of understood what they meant by being critical, you know. So that's like one of the things that I have struggled with in terms of doing research appropriately.

> (Interview: 'Claire' January 2020)

In the previous extract Claire discusses the concept of criticality and pinpoints to its absence in Saudi Arabian and Middle Eastern educational contexts. She argues that prior to embarking on a degree abroad, she was

not familiar with the concept and its implementation. I elaborated on these ideas during the second interview where we probed further into the idea of criticality.

> Claire: A lot of people agree that we're not really encouraged to critique many things in our culture. Mostly we don't question we just accept, and we follow what we're being told to do. So that's in terms of education in terms of, like, you know, social aspects as well. So, it's just the way we've been brought up and the way we've been educated?

> R: Yeah. And how do you think about it? Like, do you largely like agree with this?

> Claire: I knew there were restrictions, but I just kind of accepted it. You know, most of the time, you know, I was like, okay, just the way it is, you know, you can't change anything, you do what you can, but there's some things that are there just like you know, a red line you can't cross. So, I just knew, and I accepted it. But when you come to the outside to the real world, and you see the way things are, it kind of makes you sad because, I mean, they are supporting us to study to go abroad and to get our degrees, but they don't, they don't prepare us for this. So, it caused a shock for us, as you know, scholars, you know, so that kind of makes the experience even more difficult if you understand what I'm saying, because there's not only the pressure of being away from your country and undergoing a research degree, but there's also some kind of skills that you weren't trained to do, you weren't trained to have. So, on top of all the things that I have to learn, I have to add something on top of that, which is to be able to question every single thing that I read every article. And when you're doing that, at a later stage, it just kind of puts everything behind, you know, it just slows your progress.

> (Interview: 'Claire' September 2020)

Criticality may appear to be a strange concept in certain educational contexts. In many circumstances, the ability to criticise and question is

hindered by the rigid socio-cultural, political, and religious systems whose scope of influence stretches beyond the confines of the society and dictates the state of being even within lecture theatres. While delving into this narrative may lead us away from the purpose of this section, I still believe that the following reflective notes are worth including.

In this entry I intend to establish a link between three different events in an attempt to build on Claire's narrative by referring to other contexts and experiences.

- There are commonalities between Claire's educational context and the Algerian context where I undertook my BA and MA degrees. Both contexts seem to discourage criticality and heavily rely on religious discourses to restrict one's ability to think beyond the prescribed scope. An array of factors that comprise resources' inaccessibility, rigid culturism, religious influences, and harmful repercussions yield a state of intellectual hibernation as one's freedom of expression is constantly endangered. Such context restricts one's agency since criticality becomes a cardinal sin. At the time of writing this entry, an Algerian scholar was [jailed for questioning the legitimacy of certain Islamic fundamental laws](). A fellow academic (and a former teacher of mine) took the debate to social media where she condemned such authoritarian act. Her post resulted in differing views being shared by other academics. Two academics (who also taught me at BA level) seemed to champion the decision, with one of them arguing that the jailed person should receive an even harsher punishment, and the other claiming that such way of thinking (being critical towards the religious discourse) is a manifestation of ignorance.
- But how does such event relate to the international student experience? The links are intricate, complex, and probably flawed. First, the previous events are not illustrative of a society's status quo. I do not intend to essentialize the whole community under a single reality. By narrating such events I strive to highlight the complexity of criticality along with the mechanisms underpinning its manifestation/absence. These mechanisms

are deeply embedded within Algerian academia, and therefore can influence individuals' perceptions and sense of agency. This in turn dictates a particular state of being where criticality is largely discarded due to the aforementioned factors. Subsequently, individuals' transition to other educational contexts serves to unveil this struggle with expressing criticality. The latter can be framed or interpreted by stakeholders (such as university staff, supervisors, fellow students, etc.) as incompetence. However, what is not expressed is not necessarily absent, as the same events can manifest differently within British higher education contexts.

- The current commercialization of British higher education by means of neo-liberal policies that render education to a state of commodity poses an array of concerns in respect to stakeholders' ability to voice their concerns without repercussions. Over the last years there have been several incidents where institutions either implicitly or explicitly attempted to [silence academics](#) who publicly voice their frustrations. There is a growing tendency to establish and circulate tailored code of conduct policies that can supress freedom of expression.

- While the link between the three events mentioned above may not be clear as the scope and contexts in question are scattered, what aligns with Claire's narrative is the interplay between structures (national, religious, social, or even institutional) and agency. Amidst this interplay, criticality may seem non-existent, and the respective individuals may be perceived as incompetent or unable to question everything. However, delving into the underpinnings that largely condition the manifestation of criticality reveals another layer of reality.

Claire's views about criticality in Saudi Arabia are echoed once more in the interview I had with Sara. This emerged when I asked her about what differentiates home students from international students.

Sara: I think the knowledge of the educational system itself, so the difference is very clear in those modules I took with others who are from UK or like Europe. They are very familiar with how things work how assignments are, but I was like very lost I don't know how to do

this I'm not really good in writing research papers or essay papers … I don't know where to start, what to do, how to write, how to think critically. even critical thinking was like … I'm not used to critical thinking like, when you read a paper, I felt at the beginning that I cannot criticise. I'm not used to that; I'm not trained to that we are not usually allowed and we don't have this in our culture like criticizing is not something part of what we have learned. It's always like mostly you accept what you have. You're like, this is what you have. You just read it and that's the truth. You don't question, you don't criticise. Then when you come here it is like, okay, everything is open to criticism, criticism. Everything you should question everything you should ask. Is it convincing or not? So that was very different. For me, it was very hard for the locals it was really like it was ... It was the norm and like it's familiar ... this is what they do all the time ... they criticise everything.

R: So, you said there is no criticality in your culture

Sara: Yeah, I feel like this is how our society is, like, you accept what people tell you, what the government what the older people tell you. This is how we are raised. Like, it's always like, we don't question things.

R: And do you identify yourself with that?

Sara: I used to be, but not anymore because of this critical thinking. So, because of this critical thinking I now knew that I can ask why ... Why are you doing this? Like, even for example for hijab ... I'm not veiled but some of my friends who are wearing hijab they are like, showing some of their hair and I am always asking them like, why are you wearing it ... So, I always tell them like you have to ask, you have to really think what is the answer? It doesn't really? Like it's not a really good answer, then you should not do that thing. So, for example, the answer was like, I don't know why I'm doing this. So if you're not, if you're not, if you don't know why are you doing this then don't do it.

Sara's comments about critical thinking share several commonalities with Claire's narrative. Although they both come from Saudi Arabia, Sara and Claire never had a chance to meet in the UK. Plus, their references to criticality emerged at different points in the interview rather than in response to a particular question. Still, they managed to produce a similar narrative regarding criticality in Saudi Arabia. Sara's extracts underscore a transition from a state where she considers what she reads as truth, and where she is not allowed to criticise or question things, to a state of constant questioning thanks to her increased awareness of criticality.

5.3.3 Section Discussion

This section delved into some of the overwhelming and unexpected trajectories endured by international postgraduate researchers. In doing so I explored narratives of anxiety, uncertainty, silence, self-deficiency, and criticality. While these hurdles are an integral part of a postgraduate researcher's journey, their manifestation within the international student experience can be illustrative of an array of underexplored mechanisms. The purpose here was to unveil the mechanisms underpinning these states of being. Overall, the narratives shared by participants revealed several concerning experiences, and an intricate chain of influences that partially shape the actual experience.

The narratives of anxiety and uncertainty portrayed moments of despair and depression. The promoted experience does not shed light on the events shared by participants for obvious reasons. Elizabeth's health struggles and her events with her supervisor cannot fall within the 'marketable' category. This in turn undermines and discourages any attempt by the students to voice their concerns. Even if the latter is initiated, the abundance of generic representational bodies, that allegedly cater for students' health and well-being, would serve to conceal the particularities of the narrated events and attempt to disseminate a one-email-fits-all type of discourse.

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Resorting to silence may seem the only repercussion-free solution there is amidst an environment shaped by an array of preconceptions that prevent any attempt to transcend the politically correct Cultural Celebrationism, and rather opts to halt moments of spontaneous integration that can occur in accommodation halls, seminar rooms, and culturism-free events and initiatives. The international and the home markers should and must remain as uncrossable as possible to sustain the current unequal realities that proliferate higher education. The chain of stakeholders backing differential treatments is intricate and unnavigable, from governmental and educational discourses reifying the international category, to recruitment agents, university staff, or even supervisors associating the international label with incompetence.

The reductionist mechanisms and discourses at play can also yield feelings of self-deficiency as we have observed throughout the section. This can lay the ground for silence as international students become increasingly self-conscious and embarrassed to voice opinions. This can also occur due to the hurdles that students may encounter in their transition between different cultural environments, as they find themselves amidst an array of realities that offer different lenses vis-à-vis one's interaction with structures and degree of agency. The narratives of criticality by two Saudi postgraduate researchers are illustrative of this struggle. What is significant in these instances is how such events are perceived and tackled by stakeholders. 'Is Claire and Sara's struggle with criticality mobilised to sustain a deficient image about the international other?' can be a very tempting question to ask, and one that might inform the sections to come.

While the set of realities unveiled within the narratives contradict the promotional realities disseminated by institutional bodies, we should not mistake my critical exploration of the actual international student experience to be all-encompassing and illustrative of all the realities underpinning the experience. My emphasis to unveil reductionist discourses is purposeful and serves as a counter discourse to the mass-promoted reality. However, it does not imply that the experience is void of joy, satisfaction, success, and

non-reductionist encounters between international postgraduate researchers and other stakeholders (fellow PGRs regardless of status, university staff, supervisors, etc.).

5.4 Supervisors and their Impact on the 'International' Student Experience

The sub-sections that fall within this part of the chapter will shed light on some of the narratives that portray IPGR's experiences with their supervisors. Supervisors are among the most significant and influential stakeholders within PGRs' trajectories. Their impact on students' research and academic choices varies significantly. While some supervisors opt for a flexible approach where their role is to guide researchers, suggest readings, comment on their progress, etc., other supervisors may opt for a more authoritative role where they dictate, instead of suggesting, how the research should unfold. However, we should not mistake supervisors' impact to be as binary as aforementioned. In fact, such experiences entail an array of complex approaches where the same supervisor can be both flexible and authoritative depending on several factors, amongst which is students' progress.

My intention within this section is to reveal another layer of generative mechanisms that impact the experience. The emergent narratives highlight two major issues: some supervisors' tendency to impose deficient preconceptions; and a rare, but alarming, emergence of individual neo-liberal practices. This would allow for delving into an underexplored set of mechanisms that partake in shaping the experience. Within the standard institutional context of this study, the university where the research is held assigns two supervisors to work with a postgraduate researcher. The role of the second supervisor can be either equal to that of the first supervisor or less, depending on the arrangements agreed upon by the supervisory team.

5.4.1 Supervisors and Students' Trajectories

The impact that supervisors exert on students' university choices is significant. As it will be shown in the following extracts, several students referred to their supervisors as one of the main reasons underpinning their university choice. These narratives are included to demonstrate that while students are deeply implicated in the current neo-liberal career requirements that prioritise rankings and league tables, they are still able to make decisions that are not necessarily informed by such discourses. However, this does not imply that students' stances are not contradictory. The next chapter will unveil how the same students associate degree value with rankings and league tables. This is not to condemn students' affiliations but rather to highlight the intricate interplay between agency and students' structural subscriptions. Such subscriptions are increasingly becoming imposed as explained in the following reflection entry which emerged from informal chats with the same participants prior to and after data collection.

> As a prospective jobseeker, I find myself in a precarious structural dilemma that entails a constant navigation of neo-liberal discourses. Is it ethically acceptable to associate myself with the very institutions that I tend to discredit for prioritising the bottom line over the actual wellbeing of students? Isn't it conflictual to criticise rankings and league tables and subsequently rely on the same metrics to justify my employability? These are questions that currently occupy my thoughts. The fears I have in respect to my career prospects and job security reverberate throughout the narratives of several participants in this research and beyond. My initial insights might lead me to condemn several individuals for their naïve affiliations with a commodified and commercialised student experience. However, recognising the intricate structures that render such affiliations 'imposed' allows me to look beyond individuals' surface subscriptions. Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted how an array of generative mechanisms can dictate the reality that IPGRs are subjected to. The same is relevant here as the structural composition of the McDonaldised university yields a contradictory state of being where agents are torn between 'what they aspire to do', and 'what is conditioned by the structures they endure'.

When asked about the reasons that motivated her to choose [University Name], Rachel referred to her supervisors as one of the main reasons that impacted her decision:

> Rachel: Well, one of the main drives was I didn't want to go back to a small city or small town again, because Durham and Winchester were quite small. And like mainly it was because of [Supervisor Name] and [Supervisor Name]. That was like the main motivation of looking into the university in the first place.
>
> (Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)

The same motives were also reiterated by Alice, Amira, and Sara who all agreed that supervisors played a major role in their university choice decisions:

> Alice: I chose [University Name] because first and foremost the supervisor I contacted had a specific knowledge about Algeria. He is Algerian. And I thought that instead of going with a supervisor who doesn't know much about the Algerian situation, the linguistic situation, I would rather have someone who actually knows the situation there so that's why I chose [University Name].
>
> (Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)

> Amira: I was looking for a supervisor like someone who shared the same interest. Okay, I was in [University Name] and I was able to carry on my PhD there, but I couldn't find a supervisor that I can work with but when I came here it was only about the supervisor.
>
> (Interview: 'Amira' January 2020)

While Sara's motives align with the previous three respondents, she also mentioned research impact rankings as one of the criteria emphasized by her employer:

> Sara: It's because of the supervisor … I was looking for someone who has the same background so that he can understand what I'm talking about exactly.

R: So that's the only criteria you took into consideration.

Sara: Yes, it's not the university, it's the supervisor. Also, there were like criteria from my employer because I'm like, I want a scholarship. So, it must have like, the research impact between some numbers. So, like the [University Name] fits into those criteria. My main, my main reason is the supervisor, but the university as well must be one of the ones with the research impact.

(Interview: 'Sara' February 2020)

Sara's university choice appears to be influenced by individual decision-making which manifests in her desire to work with a particular team of supervisors. However, the spectrum of available university choices is predetermined by her employer's perceptions of research impact. The emphasis on research impact in this narrative alludes to an array of contemplations worth considering. First, it aligns with the aforementioned reflection entry that tackles the ethical struggles that prospective jobseekers (and in this case grant/scholarship-seekers) have to undergo in order to be maintained by a particular entity/institution. Here, Sara's agency is expressed only within a prescribed number of choices. The selected university's research impact must fall within a certain range for the scholarship to be granted. Second, this narrative approaches the interplay between institutional league table metrics, and employers/sending bodies from an entirely different angle. The question that comes to the fore in this regard probes into the mechanisms that consolidate the current reliance on league tables: Are these metrics established for universities to quantify their institutional performance, distinguish themselves, and drive recruitment? Or are they shaped and imposed by corporate demands where influential neo-liberal bodies dictate what constitutes value in the current higher education system? Such questions fall beyond the scope of this research, but they are worth considering especially as league tables will be duly discussed in the following chapter.

5.4.2 Supervisors and Students' Experiences

5.4.2.1 Exploitation, Trust, and Single Stories

When dealing with the anxieties encountered by IPGRs during their degree (Section 5.3.1.1), I referred to Elizabeth's struggle with her supervisor. The latter was described by Elizabeth as 'one of the problems' that directly impacted her degree and exacerbated her feeling of depression. In addition to the narratives that were already tackled, the following extracts illuminate Elizabeth's relationship with her supervisor even further:

> R: Can you remember any other incidents with your supervisor when you felt stressed or frustrated?
>
> Elizabeth: It is never about study. Study is always good. It's always about like ... how to say I don't know if this is fair like going to the conference. Usually, the supervisor would recommend going to conferences, but I didn't go to any conference ... He asks the other students to go many times and I didn't get one chance ... but every time I have to do a lot of work for the conference, the paperwork ... every time ... they all got a chance, but I didn't ... and he said you didn't finish your PhD yet and ... so I didn't see you making progress, but other students were in the first year, why they could go. But yeah, something like that ... I can honestly tell you some of the students live in his house ... he invited me to live in his house and pay his rent ... I didn't want to live with my supervisor and other PhD students, I wanted to have my own life.
>
> R: So, you think that other students were more privileged because they were living in his house?
>
> Elizabeth: Yes, that might be the first reason and the second one is ... maybe I didn't do well in my PhD when my family was having hard time ... I didn't make much progress.
>
> (Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

In this extract, Elizabeth refers to two main incidents that signal certain facets of the relationship between her and her supervisor. The first one

relates to her inability to attend or present in conferences. For a prospective lecturer/researcher like Elizabeth, being able to contribute to her areas of interest or attend relevant academic events is crucial for her career post-graduation. However, this does not seem to be considered by her supervisor who, according to her, mainly assigned her a lot of paperwork while granting other PGRs the chance to participate in conferences. The degree of control that this supervisor has over his supervisees is questionable. Not only he decides who attends relevant events and conferences, he equally invites PhD students to live as tenants in his house.

It is not clear whether Elizabeth's decision to not rent a room from her supervisor affected his views towards her and the treatment she received. However, Elizabeth seems to agree with the idea that 'tenant supervisees' were more privileged than 'non-tenant supervisees'. Such behaviour may entail a unique event where one supervisor's control over the experiences endured by their students transcends the academic context where they act as supervisors. In this instance, Elizabeth's supervisor is also trying to dictate her trajectory beyond the research context by trying to negotiate a tenancy with her, and subsequently privileging other PGRs over her when she refused to be a 'tenant supervisee'. I referred to this perplexing narrative as a 'unique event' since this endured experience is not reiterated by other participants. This narrative will be highlighted in the discussion chapter as a gradual, yet alarming, manifestation of individual neo-liberal practices within HEIs.

Elizabeth's experience also showcases a lack of mutual trust with her supervisor. Throughout her degree, Elizabeth was repeatedly urged to change her area of interest and career prospects as her supervisor claimed that her personality does not fit within academia.

> Elizabeth: He accepted me as a PhD student only because I did well in his class. The first year he even said after graduation I think you should go to a company instead of doing research because your personality and your research abilities are not research style you know, and I was like that's too early to see it. He even tried to

convince me to change my subject to teaching Chinese as a second language because that's easier ... He said just choose easier topic, why would you choose cultural translation, it's more difficult, why do you choose a difficult subject. Actually, he tried to convince me for six times ... every time I wouldn't submit to him, he would say I told you to find easier topic, now you see you can't write anything … but after four years when I submitted my final thesis to him ... he called me at 10 pm and he was very happy saying your thesis is amazing, I am so proud of you. So, I think he changed his attitude, and my other PhD friends told me every time my supervisor met other students, he would say my thesis is amazing, he was really proud.

(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

While it is important to acknowledge supervisors' willingness to assist students both within and beyond the spectrum of milestones they pursue throughout their degrees, such guidance may be abused by some individuals. A recurring judgemental tone can be sensed in the extract above as Elisabeth's supervisor repeatedly questioned and even tried to entirely change her research area. He also assumed that her personality and abilities do not fit within academia and therefore she should consider other professional career paths after graduation (like working in a company). This was contested by Elizabeth who refused to change her research area, and subsequently accomplished and defended her thesis successfully. These narrative extracts indicate an underexplored area of research vis-à-vis the experiences endured by postgraduate researchers. The previous sections unveiled the detrimental impact of governmental and institutional generative mechanisms on the actual student experience. This section helps to establish that even immediate stakeholders such as supervisors can pose another layer of mechanisms that IPGRs need to cautiously navigate throughout their degree. Elizabeth's unfortunate experiences cannot be naively tackled by changing her supervisor, as such process is influenced by the politics that implicitly govern relationships within her school.

R: Did you consider changing the supervisor?

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Elizabeth: Yes, I did but still it's a Chinese thing, like in East Asian studies if I change my supervisor, I don't think anyone would want me because tutors have close relationships. If I change it because of this reason, I don't think the school would accept ... and I don't want to even ask them or take the risk because everybody knows my supervisor ... Because this recording is confidential, I can trust you, but I don't know about other school secretaries or someone ... I don't trust them because I know they were really close ... so what if they tell my supervisor ... so what if I just make a consultation and they told my supervisor, if I don't make it and then he finds out, what will happen in the following three years then? Because this is a Chinese way, I think this is a Chinese way to think this way, a bit weird right ... because I ask some of my Chinese friends who have been here for over ten years and they said don't change your supervisor ... they said if the students come here to study, after 4 years they will graduate and leave ... but the tutors will stay here forever, so the university will protect the supervisor.

(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

Elizabeth's concerns can be misinterpreted as resulting from an essentialist perception about Chinese staff working in the area of East Asian studies. However, what needs to be highlighted in the previous extract is her awareness of the politics underpinning the relationships within the school where she is enrolled. Elizabeth does not impose a single story that portrays Chinese supervisors in a particular way, but rather reveals a pre-existing reductionist narrative that supervisors themselves may reproduce within her school. The conditioning mechanisms at play in this narrative involve Elizabeth's own preconceptions, the politics that implicitly circulate at school level which, according to Elizabeth, might put her in trouble due to the closeness of staff members and her concerns that privacy may not be maintained, and her colleagues' advice based on their personal experiences. Elizabeth's intentions do not seem to involve essentialising staff members based on their origins. Instead, she appears to establish a set of

precautionary ideas based on her awareness of the grand narratives at play. In other words, she does not necessarily associate untrustworthiness and lack of privacy to being Chinese, yet she equally signals that such image could exist, and she cannot discern whether stakeholders within her school and research area affiliate with this image or not.

5.4.2.2 Negligence, Restrictions, and Bullying

This section depicts the experiences endured by Huyam with her supervisors. The following narratives are as sensitive as Elizabeth's extracts. Although both participants consented to using their contributions anonymously, it is still very ethically problematic to include them in this research as I believe that both experiences stand for more than a mere student-supervisor misunderstanding. Huyam, a second year IPGR at the time of the interview, researched Saudi Arabian women's identity construction in UK. Her narrated events suggest a recurring tension between her and her main supervisor that affected her mentally and impacted her research progress. The following extracts comprise face to face interview transcripts, a follow-up chat interview via Teams, and small informal chats via Messenger.

Huyam's struggle with her main supervisor started during her upgrade (end of first year). In her methodology, Huyam, backed by her second supervisor, was convinced that a narrative enquiry that deals with a limited number of research participants over a long period of time is the most suitable approach for her thesis. Her main supervisor opposed the idea and imposed a different methodology that favours breadth over depth: Instead of conducting several interviews with a limited number of participants, Huyam's supervisor suggested conducting 30 single interviews with 30 different participants. Initially, both Huyam and her second supervisor resisted this approach, but as her main supervisor's tone shifted from guidance to imposition, Huyam realised that managing her research in her own way is not feasible.

> Huyam: My transfer experience was one of a kind actually. I first had deferral because of some aspects of my methodology but then after

changing it I passed. The thing about my methodology before was entirely okay but my supervisor was not familiar with such approach and made me change it somehow.

Ramzi: What happened exactly with your supervisors at that time?

Huyam: One of them was in favour of that methodology but he was not my main supervisor that's why he couldn't back me up that much. The other one made it clear that I will not pass if I don't change my methodology and that is what happened.

Ramzi: 'made it clear that I will not pass if I don't change my methodology' ... can you elaborate more on this?

Huyam: I remember we had a meeting prior to my transfer she said: "so you are not going to change the methodology" I said: "no I am convinced with it, and I know it is feasible". So, she told me: "you leave me no choice but to write a report that you are not obeying your supervisor's directions" which can be found unfortunately on my university records. I felt so bad that day I even called my friend and cried.

Ramzi: How about your second supervisor, did he have any comment in this regard?

Huyam: After my transfer, he invited me for a coffee and told me that he knows what is going on and that he knows I am being monopolised, but it is what it is, and I just need to go with the flow. I didn't know to be honest back then what to say. That was one of the things that did not meet my expectations.

<div align="center">(Interview: 'Huyam' August-September 2020)</div>

Although supervisors are the closest stakeholders to postgraduate researchers during their degree, there is a clear emphasis on hierarchy and power in the previous narrative extract. Huyam had to go through a period of constant discomfort as her theoretical and methodological subscriptions were not tolerated by her main supervisor. Despite her second supervisor's support, she was not able to accomplish her research in the way she saw

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convenient. This struggle will continue into the second and third years as Huyam maintained regular contact with me and informed me about several incidents with her supervisors, the last of which occurred recently when she was dealing with her analysis chapters. The original narrative comprises very sensitive extracts which I had to remove to comply with confidentiality and safeguarding policies.

> Huyam: One of my research participants is a female Saudi atheist. During the interview she refuted religions and explained her choice of removing the veil when she moved to the UK. My supervisor is an academic and a person. However, whenever she speaks to me, I feel that she is approaching academic matters from a personal perspective. In the case of [Saudi interviewee name], my supervisor judged her based on her own personal religious views. When she corrected my chapter, she referred to [Saudi interviewee name] as someone with "shaking faith" who "needs to seek help". She told me that she seriously needs to seek help and if I can provide her help after my thesis then I should not hesitate.

> (Interview: 'Huyam' May 2021)

During the same chat, Huyam informed me that her supervisor attempted to influence the way she approached analysis by sharing with her a sample chapter of another postgraduate researcher. The chapter tackled religious identity and explained views such as the one shared by [Saudi interviewee name] as anomalies that do not represent the Muslim community. There was not a clear attempt by Huyam's supervisor to coerce her into following the same religious fundamentalist analytical approach, but the event is nonetheless troublesome.

On an earlier occasion, Huyam's supervisor shared a surprising remark about her writing style, which left Huyam very puzzled.

> Huyam: I remember when we had the last meeting in which we discussed my latest work, she had a strange observation. She asked me with an affirming tone whether I am English. I told her that I am not, and surprisingly she guessed that I am French. I am used to such

remarks but in a sarcastic way from my friends as I use the French language more than Arabic but never in such context. So, I told her that I am from Algeria and not France, but I also asked her why such a remark. She said that she could sense the French language in my writing, which I still don't get because I don't recall I have been told such a thing.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Huyam' January 2020)</div>

This event was then followed by a series of similar remarks where Huyam's supervisor constantly commented on her writing, referring to it as 'French' and 'not very academic'. Such remarks along with the upgrade event widened the gap between Huyam's supervisors, as they seemed to approach research differently. This led to a more problematic situation when her second supervisor decided not to attend her meetings with the main supervisor but opted to meet her separately. During this period, Huyam was torn between two supervisors with entirely different views and feedback on her writing. She recently informed me about her second supervisor's stance which is explained below.

> Huyam: He messaged me to say he was mostly bothered seeing me getting bullied there and not being able to do anything because he doesn't have enough authority. He said "it's rather disturbing to see someone claiming to be an academic pioneer refuse to get out of their comfort zone in research, and instead they drag their students into theirs. There is nothing such your English is not academic enough and whoever claims there is needs to get over their colonial thinking. You have to use your words to transmit the idea the way you want." He suggested to have separate informal chats where we discuss things in a friendly, effective way rather than in a tense and rigid setting where even he cannot express himself freely.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Huyam' August 2020)</div>

In addition to undergoing instances of severe restrictions and passive-aggressive behaviours, Huyam's experience was also shaped by moments of negligence. She was suddenly informed that her main supervisor will go

on maternity leave and that she will be assigned a new supervisor. This was preceded by two months of complete irresponsiveness from the part of her main supervisor.

> R: You recently mentioned that your supervisor was replaced by another one, did she talk to you about this sudden change beforehand?

> Huyam: Unfortunately, she did not. I mean I was waiting for two months without receiving anything from her, I sent her emails, messages as she gave me her WhatsApp number, but nothing. I was informed in April that I have been assigned to a new supervisor.

> R: How did this sudden change affect you? How did you feel about it?

> Huyam: I was anxious of going through the entire process over again, explaining my topic, the different changes I've made, my positions, my opinions. But luckily the new supervisor was understanding, and she gave me the time to go through all of that with her. I would have loved to if I was notified by my previous supervisor that she will be going on a leave.

> R: Okay, let's move slowly here. You were assigned new supervisors without any pre-notification or discussion.

> Huyam: Nope. Actually, it was another colleague of mine that told me my supervisor is on a maternity leave.

> R: Interesting. Did she contact you ever again?

> Huyam: She contacted me to congratulate me on celebrations like Eid and Ramadan. But other than that no. I mean her messages were surprising that all I could've responded with was thank you. I would like please to emphasise this: When I emailed her and texted her and she did not respond I thought I have made something wrong, and it did affect my emotional wellbeing that period.

R: That must have been tough. So basically, although she responded afterwards to congratulate you, she didn't even explain why she didn't inform you about the leave.

Huyam: No, she did not

R: How do you feel about that?

Huyam: At the time, I was bothered by that. Especially that another colleague of mine, supervised by her, was aware about this but I was not. But now, I don't give it much thinking.

R: And how do you feel with the new supervisor?

Huyam: Actually, I spent 6 months with the new supervisor but recently I was reassigned my previous main supervisor again because she finished her maternity leave.

(Interview: 'Huyam' May 2021)

A clear hierarchical power relation seems to govern the supervisor-supervisee relationships that shape Huyam's experience and research trajectory. Whereas Huyam's concerning narratives emerged due to entirely different circumstances, she equally feels troubled by her situation as Elizabeth did in the previous section. When approached about the potential to change her supervisor, Huyam reiterated Elizabeth's stance, referring to her supervisor's influential position within the school, and the repercussions this could have on her degree.

R: Why don't you change your supervisor?

Huyam: Because I want to end my thesis as peacefully as I can and knowing that she holds a powerful position in our school, that means she'll interfere in my research in one way or another. I don't think she would overlook the fact she was replaced that easily.

(Interview: 'Huyam' May 2021)

Despite all the issues endured by Huyam in her relationship with her supervisor, she managed to make a noticeable progress and she is on track to submit her thesis on time. However, she no longer feels that her research

is meaningful. Another form of generative mechanisms can be inferred from the following extract: While the majority of trajectories highlight a complex interplay between one's passion for research and their endeavours to cope with the requirements of the current neoliberal market economy, some trajectories can be entirely dictated and shaped by other stakeholders' abuse of power. In this instance, Huyam's research is rendered meaningless in her view which made her prioritise degree-attainment.

> Huyam: My thesis is still mine but if we want to be more on the psychological side, I kind of lost my passion since the transfer. I mean I didn't get to do what I really wanted to so now I'm just trying to get the degree. It's meaningless but obligatory.

> (Interview: 'Huyam' May 2021)

5.4.2.3 Soft Experiences and Positive Encounters

The narrated incidents in the previous two sections unveiled an underexplored set of experiences endured by students in general and IPGRs in particular. Several extracts probed into the supervisor-supervisee roles and revealed an array of politics that can impact such relationships. This motivated me to consider supervisors as one of the generative mechanisms that can shape the experience in unanticipated ways, sometimes leading to moments that highlight how stakeholders can abuse their powers and reinforce the hierarchical relationships underpinning higher education. However, while my aim is to tackle the mechanisms that attempt to frame the experience by means of reductionist and deficient discourses, this section serves as a disclaimer that not all experiences are as negative, and not all misunderstandings are necessarily as detrimental as the ones explored above.

In the following extract, Claire shares her experience with her main supervisor and her decision to change supervisors for legitimate reasons that affected her progress. What is noticeable from this narrative is the absence of the politics of fear that surrounded Elizabeth's and Huyam's experiences, and which prevented them from expressing their desire to change their supervisors.

Claire: For me, in my first year of my PhD, I had a different supervisor than I had now. I actually went into the process of changing supervisors for several reasons. First of all, my topic changed. In my first year, it evolved drastically, and it ended up with a methodology that was very different from my main supervisor's area of expertise. So, I had what I had, I had started out with a mixed method approach, and I resorted to a purely qualitative approach. So, it was kind of difficult for my main supervisor to understand and to support me in the way that I had needed. So, I had requested changing supervisors for that reason. And it was a valid reason, in addition to the fact that I had developed anxiety issues with her as a result of her delayed responses to me. So, I would wait days to get any kind of response from her. She wasn't as attentive to me as I wanted to. And in my first year, I had very few meetings with her. She was always away, she was sick, she was not very much available. So, I had listed these reasons for my request to change supervisors. So, when I went into my second year after my transfer, I had a new supervisor.

(Interview: 'Claire' January 2020)

Claire's narrative lists misunderstanding issues that emerged when she decided to change her research direction in addition to recurring moments of irresponsiveness from the part of her supervisor. These events made her realise that her supervisor's approach along with their area of expertise are no longer convenient for the advancement of her research. Although such change implied that Claire's research interests no longer align with those of her main supervisor, it did not result in a hostile situation such as the one experienced by Huyam in the previous sub-section. Instead, Claire seemed to navigate this stressful process smoothly without any attempt from her supervisor to restrict her decisions. Agency is also manifested in the next extract as Claire describes how she initiated the discussion with her main supervisor.

Claire: I didn't feel like she was understanding, or she was in the same line of thought as I was, especially because she had come from

a different background. For example, she was in the area of psychology and inclusive education while my research was focused more on language education. Although my second supervisor was in my area of research, my primary supervisor wasn't. So, there was this issue with a different methodology approach and different would you call it pedagogical content knowledge as well in terms of area of expertise. So, I was struggling a bit to convince her of my readings because she wasn't familiar with my area. And the thing is what I wished for her to do was that she would from the very beginning, suggest to me that this might not be heading in the direction that you would want. So might be better to consider a different supervisor than myself. I had wished that she would suggest that. But I hinted to her several times that are you happy with the supervision? Do you feel like this area of research is comfortable for you? But maybe I should have made it more clear to her, because I felt like she still didn't get my message or what I was trying to say. What I was actually trying to say is that if you're not happy supervising me, please say so. You know, but she couldn't come to that. And so, it's that matter of confrontation that I felt like was pretty much of an issue for, for me and for her. But eventually, somebody had to say something, you know, I'm glad I did. I'm so glad that I did, because it made a huge difference in my progression as a researcher.

(Interview: 'Claire' January 2020)

As we explore further narratives that tackle IPGRs' experiences with their supervisors, it is clear that not all supervisors hold the same rigid approach encountered by Elizabeth and Huyam. For instance, both Lina and Alice went through different experiences that comprise moments of either immediate and complete autonomy (Lina's narrative) or a gradual grip over one's research (Alice's narrative). This again serves to emphasize the fact that supervision is not subject to a single set of realities and processes that all supervisors adhere to. In the following narrative, Lina shares her

expectations about her supervisors' approach and the struggle to be completely autonomous at the outset of her research trajectory.

> Lina: I was expecting that the supervisors would be guiding me like telling me what to do basically, you need to do this, this this this ... because you know, first you are over ambitious. You want to explore many things and your research is very general and you need to narrow it down and you expect your supervisors to kind of take a forward approach to narrow it to help you to narrow your research down saying you need to do this because we as researchers, you have too much going on in your head. So maybe the supervisor if he was really good enough, he would like to know what's going on your mind and help you like, you know, you are thinking this and this and this, but you really want to focus on only this because the other two or three points are kind of general and you're not you won't be able to cover them within three-year projects. So, I was expecting this kind of forward approach. But as I went through my journey, I realised this is not the approach that most of supervisors take ... supervisors want you to develop the autonomy and responsibility and accountability in taking actions because they don't want to decide for you, because if they decide for you, you might not be motivated enough to work on that thing. So, they let you be free. But that freedom comes with a cost. Having too much freedom either you will find your way finally or you end up being lost. But I really appreciate that I have a really good supervisor that he kind of uplifts me whenever I send him something he kind of encourages me. And I think this is important as well because it builds your confidence, and it builds your kind of your voice and your touch that you bring through your work. So, if someone for example, he kind of criticises and said, no, don't do this, do this. Instead of focus only on this, you feel like you're not really doing your own research. But you know that it should be a balance in all the things. And even supervisors, they learn with you.

> (Interview: 'Lina' February 2020)

Lina's view about supervision is very illuminating in that it points to the potential issues that can arise when PGRs take full responsibility of their research from the very beginning. Instead, she argues that guidance is necessary in the initial stages of one's degree, especially that PGRs' projects usually start as a broad set of ideas, which require supervisors' assistance in narrowing the scope and focus of the research. She equally discards the authoritarian tone that involves supervisors dictating, rather than suggesting, how research should be carried out. Such tone, according to her, can result in making "you feel like you're not really doing your own research". This concurs with Huyam's loss of passion as she was not able to conduct her research in the way she wanted.

I conclude this sub-section with Alice's short narrative about her experience with her supervisor. Alice has seen her degree of independence as a researcher increase gradually as she progressed in her research. She argues that she needed this supervision approach especially that this is her first time as a researcher who needs to do an extended amount of research and writing. For her, intense and regular supervisory meetings in the first year were crucial for her to become almost entirely responsible for her research in the following years. This helped her to improve her writing and research skills, while maintaining a healthy supervisor-supervisee relationship.

> R: How do you describe your relationship with your supervisor?

> Alice: He's nice. It's, it's up and down. My supervisor is a perfectionist, for instance, like he does not, he always finds a fallacy or something in research he always keeps scrutinising. So that's something that sometimes I'm like, fed up with it. But at the same time, that helped me progress ... my writing completely bloomed and sometimes when he's there for me like sometimes he provides some ideas, fresh ideas. The bad thing is like he's a perfectionist to the point where he pushes you to like to a limit that you can't really handle.

> R: How about your autonomy as a researcher doing PhD?

Alice: I think that first year, I was very directed. Why are you doing this ... show me what you're doing ... like there were always supervisions but second and third years become less ... I'm very independent. Basically, I'm not even having supervision meetings ... this year I only had two. So yeah, I feel like 3rd year become more me.

R: Yes, and in the first year, were you directed because you wanted that or because the supervisors imposed that?

Alice: It's not imposition really. It's just, I needed that. And I wanted that, to be honest but at the same time even my supervisor realised that I needed that guidance, especially for me, I am not used to writing. When I did my undergrad, I didn't write a thesis. It's not part of my undergrad program. So, I did it for the first time when I was doing my master. That was my first time writing a thesis. And we're not used to write essays all the time at university back home. So, he realised that I don't have that expertise, just writing and writing and writing. That's why he thought that I needed that.

(Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)

Alice's and Lina's interview questions were heavily influenced by my interview with Huyam in January 2020. Prior to that, my position as a researcher and my personal experiences as an IPGR did not involve instances that would make me approach supervisors' impact from such a perspective. As can be remarked from the questions I used to address Alice, there is a clear endeavour to investigate any potential events that could concur with Huyam's experience. Fortunately, these narratives and other similar ones served to accentuate the fact that the experiences endured by Huyam and Elizabeth do not necessarily represent other IPGRs' realities. The extent to which such narratives are representative is hard to infer. However, while the need for further research in this regard should be encouraged, we should not ignore the alarming narratives duly analysed in the previous two sub-sections.

5.4.3 Section Discussion

Although supervisors and their impact on IPGRs' research trajectories are not factors that prevail within the highly commodified student experience advocated by HEIs, their influence on the actual student experience is undoubtedly significant as witnessed in participants' narrated events. This presence serves to place supervisors' impact as one of the generative mechanisms that can shape the experience. Throughout the previous sub-sections, we explored a plethora of supervisory approaches, each of which comprised a set of beliefs and behaviours that govern the supervisor-supervisee relationships. The latter involved an extremely rigid approach that restricted researchers' agency and reduced their role to a state of complete subordination as their supervisors dictated rather than guided the research process. It equally included a healthier attitude where supervisors' roles either favoured a complete laisser-faire approach or opted for a gradual transition from complete dependence to autonomy. The actual yielded IPGRs' positions were equally varied, but also shaped by an array of uncertainties that characterise IPGRs' trajectories in general (as seen in section 5.3.1.2) along with the politics underpinning their relationships with their supervisors.

Several extracts within Elizabeth's and Huyam's narrated experiences signal a significant interplay of grand narratives as their supervisors rely on several social and political structures (such as the student-tutor power relationship in China, and the over-reliance on the hierarchical religious discourse in Muslim communities) to influence the supervisor-supervisee relationship. This can be observed through Elizabeth's supervisor's recurring attempts to change her research area, and via Huyam's supervisor's dependence on Islamic laws as a means to judge others' behaviours and eventually to influence Huyam's analysis approach. The degree of agency that emerged in response to these situations allowed us to delve into the politics that influence these relationships. For instance, Huyam's attempt to insist on her methodological approach fuelled the tensions between her and her main supervisor, which eventually led to a deferral on her upgrade and a negative

report in her university records. Subsequently, this event deterred any manifestation of agency as Huyam feared for her degree progression due to the politics that influence IPGRs' trajectories at school and faculty levels.

While Elizabeth was able to resist her supervisor's recurring attempts to redirect her research interests, the set of events that unfolded afterwards were beyond the spectrum of her agency. Elizabeth's resistance along with her refusal to be a tenant-supervisee were perceived by her main supervisor from a specific essentialist lens that proliferates namely within Chinese HE, and which imposes a subordinate supervisee type of relationship. As Huyam's narratives indicated, Elizabeth's incidents highlight how the actual student experience is subject to an array of structures that transcend the educational context to encompass essentialist discourses of nation and religion. However, this analysis should not be mistaken for an attempt to frame all Muslim supervisors or all Chinese supervisors within the confines of a single story. Instead, it serves to unveil a set of demeaning structures that can be rendered powerful when particular stakeholders make use of them to restrict both their worldviews, and their supervisee's trajectories. What goes unnoticed in such instances is that within this increasingly internationalised HE environment, an array of restrictive grand narratives function beyond their original environment. This is exacerbated by the fact that once these restrictive structures are executed by certain stakeholders, they tend not to be tackled, which serves to add another layer of framing to the already over-commodified student experience.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter unpacked three manifestations of the actual student experience: IPGR's struggle with borders and policies, the overwhelming and unexpected trajectories they endured throughout their degree, and their relationships with their supervisors. It comprised a rich collection of narratives that illuminated students' experiences and justified the need to approach the international label and the student experience critically. Among the early observations are the array of generative mechanisms that

continuously attempt to predetermine the student experience and define the roles and entitlements of international students in UK. These involve differential laws and policies that leave IPGRs at a disadvantage compared to home students. The same policies serve to consolidate an obligatory uniqueness to the international label. The latter is normalised by default which makes it difficult for HE stakeholders and students themselves to realise the politics that sustain the label. This systematic framing is reinforced even further thanks to HEIs promoted realities which, in most situations, do not portray the actual experiences endured by students. This critical exploration will continue in the following chapter as we unpack other facets of the actual student experience.

Chapter 6
Intercultural Encounters and Perceptions

6.1 Introduction

A notable point that characterised most IPGRs' narratives is the tendency to link parts of the student experience to a set of intercultural events. This involved discussions about their initial encounters with a 'host' country which in turn yielded an 'us' versus 'them' set of accounts. Several IPGRs resorted to what I describe as 'grand narratives' in order to explain their views vis-à-vis their established home/host dichotomies. These in turn paved the way for a more nuanced discussion that unveiled an array of single stories that were either reproduced by the participants or mobilised by others to frame them within a particular discourse. The same narratives also captured moments of compromised agency, especially where rigid structures were very powerful to question. Throughout this chapter I aim to highlight the different manifestations of grand narratives and single stories, the 'impossibility' to question certain structures, IPGRs' recurring attempts to contest the rigid discourses they navigate on the go, and the threads of experience that transcend the restrictive nature of grand narratives.

6.2 Expectations, Encounters, and Preconceptions

The present status quo that structures the mobility of individuals involves navigating an array of expectations about one's destination along with establishing several preconceptions that usually exaggerate the differences between home and host environments. Such expectations and preconceptions resurface within any form of physical mobility (especially the ones that involve crossing preestablished national borders) and they can be exaggerated even further partly due to the social and political structures that underpin the encountered/soon-to-be-encountered difference. For instance, the mechanisms at play within an 'east/west' transition can be fuelled by a 'west as steward' discourse. In such instance, IPGRs that move from an

area deemed to be part of an imagined 'east' or 'south' may subscribe to a narrative of deficiency, which in turn impacts their perceptions of themselves and others by yielding a form of 'inferiority complex'. Other IPGRs may be able to transcend this deficit narrative to eventually identify with alternative problematic discourses such as Said's reaction to 'Orientalism'[9]. In this case IPGRs are more likely to transcend the deficit framework but they may end up subscribing to a rigid 'orient/occident counter discourse which could strengthen the status quo by reducing their interactions to a state of 'us' versus 'them', and eventually discouraging any attempt to transcend these highly politicised structures.

The manifestations of such struggles appear within IPGRs' narratives about their personal trajectories and intercultural experiences. Extracts within this section and chapter revolve around IPGRs' expectations, encounters, and impressions at different stages within their trajectories. Such accounts may serve to signal the essentialist discourses at play, and even unveil the intricate processes through which IPGRs manage to navigate these discourses. Participants' responses to the set of questions that probed into their perceptions about moving to the UK to pursue their degrees yielded a rich and varied set of responses. The latter comprised concerns about the difficulty of maintaining certain religious practices, established east/west comparisons, and accounts that cover the pace of life in Algeria, China, Saudi Arabia, and the UK. The first extract in this section deals with Lina's concern about the possibility to uphold her religious practices.

> R: Before coming to the UK, did you have any prior concerns, questions, or expectations?

> Lina: My main concern was whether I will be able to cope with life here, and the fact of living in a non-Muslim country, not having a community. It was kind of a concern whether I will be feeling homesick. Feeling homesick will occur in any stage of your life, but I

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[9] Said's ideas can be mobilised to reinforce the problematic East/West binary blocks.

have this concern. I was also concerned whether wearing the hijab would be a problem for me. But when I arrived, especially in Leeds, I felt it's so diverse. Even in the university, which is something I'm really proud of, you can find a prayer room in each corner of the university. The Islamic Society was also kind of really something that I was proud to find. So, I was concerned that I will be kind of, I won't find a community, but actually I did find my community here.

(Interview: 'Lina' February 2020)

The religious discourse is very prominent in Lina's narrative as it characterises her understanding of community and the concerns that arise due to not living in a Muslim country. This episode within Lina's trajectory demonstrates how grand religious narratives transcend national boundaries to dictate a form of familiar communities overseas. While the manifestation of the Islamic religious discourses within the structural composition of UK communities (In the form of tolerance towards Muslim practices, prayer rooms and Islamic societies within campuses, etc.) is appreciated by Lina, it equally limits the scope of what she perceives to be a form of 'diversity'. Although the latter is presented as ensuring a certain degree of tolerance towards the other (whoever that might be), it equally is establishing that very 'other' as necessarily different based on the structural affiliations they uphold and/or come from. Therefore, diversity is reduced to a process of tolerating a preestablished body of practices, which in turn ignores one's ability to question, negotiate, redefine, or even transcend these practices.

Huyam, who also comes from the same country as Lina, approached the same set of questions differently. In her response to the expectations that she had prior to travelling to the UK and her views afterwards, Huyam managed to provide a body of reflections that comprised a preconceived east/west set of dichotomies, expectations versus the realities she endured, and her inability to cope with a community that shared the same national, ethnic, and religious background. These events are gradually unpacked in the following extracts.

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Huyam: Once I got the scholarship the first thing that came to my mind was that I am going to Europe, it was more of the European world that I am going to be facing there, my expectations were more about it is going to be a developed country… Everything will be easier than it is in my home country, things will be done in order to be more precise, there will be no such disorder if you want, there will be no … how to put it, basically it was more about going to a country where things will be easier, where things will be smoother than they are in my home country … You can get access to anything you want, you will be free than you already are in your home country, so these are the expectations I was having.

R: Can you elaborate on the last point about freedom?

Huyam: It has more to do with the society itself so coming from my society, my entourage, I have always felt that my freedom is relatively restricted, I was not allowed to do certain things, I was not allowed to ... let's stick to certain things, and when I came to the UK I was more autonomous and this made me feel I was more free to do stuff, let's say the time I should be home, back home ... I had timing, I shouldn't be outside let's say after 6, but here because I am living on my own, I have to take care of everything on my own. I have the freedom to go home even after midnight because I am autonomous and sometimes, I face things that make me go home after midnight or stuff like that. If this happens to me back home, I will be questioned, I will be put into a lot of questions why you did that, why till this time, so I think that was somehow different here.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Huyam' January 2020)</div>

The previous extract deals with Huyam's constructed image about a European world. The latter is described by referring to development, ease, order, and freedom. Such narrative appears to construct an image that juxtaposes an allegedly disordered and restrictive east to a developed and ordered west. While this analogy can sustain the erroneously amplified 'west as steward' discourse, it equally comprises an array of endured realities that

paved the way for Huyam to make such claim. For instance, she makes a relevant point about the status of technological advancement in the UK and Algeria:

> Huyam: So when it comes to technology I'm just going to speak about my experience in the university. The fact that they do have Wi-Fi all over the university is something that we don't have back in our universities, this is something which I find really good. Access to the library is so easy compared to our libraries back home, even in stores, self-service, I found that really good and we don't have this back home, I mean I am speaking about my town, my entourage where I live. Probably maybe they do have it in the capital or in different cities I don't know. With people, I think that what I expected was true, people are so kind, people are so punctual, they are nice, I just want to say something about the people, I was not expecting to be treated in a bad way or in a racist way, maybe it is somehow weird but I really didn't have this expectation that I will find some racist people that they would judge me because I am a Muslim or an Arab or I wasn't really counting on finding people like that, and it is true I didn't come across any person who was that racist to me. Punctuality, they are so punctual, let's say the majority of them.

(Interview: 'Huyam' January 2020)

These points serve to reveal the intricate images that IPGRs from a perceived east or south tend to navigate on-the-go. Within these narrative accounts, some points may appear to hold an essentialist claim that reduces a large community to a set of traits (e.g., British people are kind, punctual, and nice.). It is a challenging task to attempt to untangle the underpinnings of these claims, as they might be facilitated by a set of preconceptions that Huyam encountered at some point during her trajectory. The easiest path that is usually undertaken by some researchers would either adopt such narratives as representative of a homogeneous and shared cultural reality (another manifestation of cultural celebrationism) or disregard them by condemning individuals via an essentialist slur. Instead of merely adopting or

criticising Huyam's view about western punctuality, one should rather probe into the mechanisms that facilitated the construction of this image. As will be highlighted in the upcoming sections, the same participant expressed moments where she felt essentialised and discriminated against within the same environment that she described as not-racist, which in turn affirms the flawed nature of the single stories that one encounters on-the-go.

Another point to consider in Huyam's narrative is her reference to the increased level of autonomy and freedom that comes with moving overseas. Such view can be analysed in conjunction with Lina's need to maintain a religious sense of community. While Huyam's stance incriminates the restrictive structures within her entourage which for long had a toll on her freedom, Lina seems to be comfortable with the religious structures that shape her affiliations and understanding of a community. These differing views are very revealing since they allow to uncover a more intricate layer of affiliations that enables us to look beyond the false homogeneity which manifests in the form of grand narratives about one's nation, ethnicity, and religion. This is documented in Huyam's experience of living with students that allegedly share the same set of grand narratives.

> Huyam: The experience also made me learn that even if you live or you surround yourself by people from the same background you are coming from doesn't mean you will be comfortable. During my first experience I lived with people from the same ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds and I was expecting that that would help me because I have some common points with them so that would be somehow something of good, but it was not ... So, let's say the outcome of that experience is that not always what is similar is good, so this was about my first experience.

> (Interview: 'Huyam' August 2020)

To probe into the east/west analogy even further, Huyam's constructed image about technological advancement in the west is equally highlighted by Sara, albeit from an entirely different perspective. In her response to the question that dealt with her initial impressions about the UK, Sara

complained about the slow pace of life and the overly dull procedures she had to go through to obtain a bank account and rent a flat. This was surprising for her as she used to believe that life is faster and smoother in Europe compared to Saudi Arabia.

Sara: When I first arrived, I didn't expect [city name] to be that traditional, I mean, traditional buildings and you feel like you're in an old movie. Like the university buildings. It's like, I'm not used to this type of ... it feels like we're back to the 19th, 18th century. So yeah, it was different because I felt like it's very old. Things here take so much time, like the formal things. For example, if you want to apply or let's say the bank, you want to open up a bank account, you have to make an appointment and then you go and then they will send you the card. And then after the card, they will send you the PIN. I mean like that was a huge process. You don't need to do this in Saudi Arabia, we just do this online. I open my account and then I go to the machine any time at the day even when the bank is closed and I have my card, that's it. I don't need to meet anyone. Here what is going on? Why do I have to have an appointment and then we will send you the card in the post … in the post. Why can't you do it now at the same moment? It was different then I realised okay, everything here follows like this traditional process so like even like when I wanted to rent a flat you have to go through this process of viewing and then we need to do the check and then it takes like two weeks until you get your flat and then to have the meters and stuff it takes so much time and I tried these things in other countries like in my country, I can do them in my phone, right away, a click and that's it. So, I was like, okay, I have to be very patient in this country everything like, takes so much time and that's how things work here. So, I feel like I entered a relaxed mode here. Things are not moving as fast as in, in Saudi or in the US now. So that I think at the beginning was irritating, but then I'm used to it now. People even get late for the meetings and the classes. One of the teachers like he was late for 30 minutes. So, it's like, it's okay. Here's different … I thought of UK as a like European country. So,

you always feel like all European countries are like, advanced, fast, like technology and stuff, and then you come here and like it's not 1990 it's like 2020 now. And you're still sending your cards in the post.

<div align="right">Interview ('Sara': February 2020)</div>

Several reflections emerge when one's expectations are renegotiated through the newly encountered realities. Sara's insights about the pace of life in the UK and Saudi Arabia is another example that indicates the impossibility to encapsulate the east/west grand narrative. While the latter is fixed, reductionist, and can even be mobilised to demonise individuals and communities, the endured reality, as perceived through the lens of IPGRs, reveals a plethora of counternarratives that serve to contest the dominant view. This becomes even more evident when IPGRs that allegedly come from the same region (the imagined east) approach the same structural mechanisms differently. In the next extract, what can appear at first as an 'us' versus 'them' type of narrative is in fact a display of one's ability to actively question and navigate the common elements within large cultural practices.

> Elizabeth: In China the manners are different from those in the UK ... so if we talk loud in China, it means we are friendly but, in this country, we talk too loud in public is annoying so yeah, I changed in many ways, interacting with people in more polite way, saying sorry and thank you all the time.
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> R: Did you feel obliged doing those things or you were doing them spontaneously?
>
> Elizabeth: I think I am doing it spontaneously because ... if I want to live in this country, I have to do what they do ... and I ... actually I think those manners are right.
>
> R: What do you mean by that?
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> Elizabeth: Like saying sorry and thank you all the time and ... keep yourself in like ... don't talk too loud in public ... just being polite all the

time ... I think when I first came into those problems I felt when people said sorry to me even if I accidentally like stepped on their foot or something ... I think if I did that to other people, they would feel good ... I think those manners are right and nice.

R: When comparing this with China, how do you see things in China?

Elizabeth: Honestly I can't get used to life in China now ... sometimes I think they are really rude ... because China has a large population it's crowded everywhere, if you keep saying sorry and queuing you can't get on the train, you can't do anything, you just queue all the time ... because we always say when Chinese people queue there is no visible line, like people know who should get on the bus or get on the train, but it seems like really crowded, but actually we do know, we have too much population, queuing in line there is no end, but still I felt uncomfortable, because I have been in UK for six years and it changed me a lot.

R: So now you prefer staying in the UK over living in China?

Elizabeth: Yes, even though China has a more convenient way of living now.

R: What do you mean by that?

Elizabeth: You can use Ali pay to pay everything even though you want to buy food from a vendor in the street you just pay by WeChat or Alipay, it's quite convenient. You don't need to bring a card holder or your wallet anymore, and the delivery is very fast, you know China is very big but if you want something you make the order and they deliver it to you next day, but in this country you have to wait for three or four days, and the high speed train, super, now we still have to take two hours to go to London but in China we can make it in one hour. It is super-fast.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)</div>

There are several points to unpack in Elizabeth's extract. These are briefly noted in the following bullet points:

- Elizabeth starts by making a general claim that portrays the west as calm and the east as loud. According to her, being publicly loud in China is a sign of being friendly, whereas it can be annoying or rude in UK. In her narrative, Elizabeth seems to use 'we' and 'they', which usually indicates that one perceives individuals as representative of a large, homogeneous cultural reality.

- The reasons underpinning Elizabeth's decision to align with these purportedly British traits is motivated both by her desire to be part of the imagined 'them' and because she thinks that such practices are right.

- Within the same narrative, Elizabeth appears to juggle between a flawed but powerful grand narrative that reduces Chinese people to a set of predetermined set of behaviours, and a more critical and personal stance that seeks to unveil the mechanisms that underpin these behaviours ('China has a large population it's crowded everywhere, if you keep saying sorry and queuing you can't get on the train, you can't do anything').

- Initial reflections may indicate that Elizabeth approaches cultural realities as defining cocoons that are impossible to transcend. However, this is discarded by the fact that she is able to identify the potential mechanisms that yield the reality she endured in China and UK. Additionally, while loudness is suggested as a potential shared trait within the Chinese community, Elizabeth does not seem to fit within this constructed image. It is through Elizabeth's ability to identify with behaviours from both cultural environments that we can contend that grand narratives can be highly negotiable.

6.2.1 Section Discussion

IPGRs' encounters with cultural realities both within and away from what they perceive to be familiar environments reveals the transient nature of the intercultural. This intercultural transience is actively present within the endured reality but tends to be challenged by influential clashing grand narratives. Therefore, pursuing a degree overseas can be considered as one of the ideal opportunities to investigate how IPGRs construct and make sense of intercultural events. As we have seen from the previous extracts,

IPGRs' narrative accounts are subject to several structural influences. Throughout the analysis, I aimed to distance myself from using essentialism as a default slur. While it is already established that a rigid representation of culture is essentialist since it attempts to impose a predefined reality on individuals who identify with certain elements of that culture, it is equally important to distinguish between the dominant cultural and structural discourse and the ways through which agents mobilise that discourse.

Establishing this thesis renders the manifestation of essentialist cultural representations evident and inevitable. However, it equally acknowledges that such representations are not rigidly fixed and continuously reproduced. Instead, the transient nature of the intercultural allows for individuals to renegotiate the grand narratives on the go. Therefore, IPGRs in this section are not perceived as precultured beings whose intercultural encounters mainly result in getting to know and/or tolerate other precultured beings (who, if following the essentialist thesis, necessarily come from another country). In fact, the tackled narrative accounts are illustrative of the impossibility to encapsulate endured realities. It is only through this heightened sense of awareness of oneself and others that the very understanding of the self (us) and the other (them) is reconsidered. During this process an array of dominant discourses is reflected upon, either through juxtaposing grand narratives, aligning with problematic counternarratives, striving to maintain a comfortable, albeit problematic, sense of community, or discarding grand narratives altogether. The latter is particularly very difficult to materialise and requires one's ability to look beyond the appealing cultural celebrationist discourse.

Having said that, the complexity of the endured reality tends to be undermined or completely ignored by the promoted reality. The latter's core mission lies in maintaining cultural celebrationism. After all, what could be better than a set of neatly structured cultural realities where imagined flag-bearers (i.e., international students and staff) are mobilised to sustain a fake diversity? It is in the interest of HEIs to portray intercultural encounters via a lens that not only maintains, but also reinforces the imagined uncrossable

difference. It is also in its interest to reduce encounters to a clash of allegedly uncrossable grand narratives. Eradicating this imagined difference by shedding light on IPGRs' endured realities would uncover the flawed nature of the HEIs' promoted reality. It would also imply that diversity is no longer quantifiable, which can be detrimental for the 'benchmarkability' of the neoliberal university.

6.3 Grand Narratives as Markers of Essentialist Difference

The focus in the previous section revolved around highlighting IPGRs' struggles while they navigate a plethora of cultural realities. I argued that grand narratives are either imposed on or mobilised by individuals in their constant endeavours to construct an image of oneself and others. This image is subject to recurring alterations due to the ongoing clash between the dominant social and political structures and the transient moments of interculturality that manifest on the go. This allowed me to claim that the reproduction of essentialist views is inevitable, and indeed a vital part of the trajectory towards critical intercultural awareness. This section will build on this thesis by delving even further into IPGRs' cultural realities. It adopts a similar structure, albeit with a slightly shifted focus. The latter covers IPGRs' personal encounters with individuals and structures, with a major emphasis on powerful moments of discomfort.

6.3.1 Assigned, Constructed, and Imposed Belonging

Belonging is one of the very interesting concepts that I recently came across. In many instances, a sense of belonging is allocated by virtue of certain mechanisms. For example, regardless of whether I am able to question this belonging, I was granted a membership within a middle-class Muslim community due to my family's affiliations. Such form of belonging is assigned, and while it does not necessarily reflect my personal stances (my worldviews, beliefs, practices, etc.), it remains influential throughout my trajectory. An assigned form of belonging is largely shaped by the grand narratives that dictate the state of being within a particular community. As we navigate several structures, this assigned form of belonging becomes

subject to a spectrum of realities. This gives rise to a constructed form of belonging. The latter is fuelled by one's degree of agency, and its manifestation is contingent upon one's ability to safely navigate the rigid grand narratives. Constructed belonging is a state where the preestablished structures are dissolved. However, this does not necessarily materialise within one's endured reality. For instance, constructing oneself as in favour of same-sex relationships is tolerated within most western communities but can be life-threatening in my hometown.

Such struggle obscures one's criticality and may even mislead others into perceiving one as deficient. The last form of belonging is one where a sense of community is imposed. This is where powerful grand narratives tend to clash to dictate one's reality. While assigned belonging is dictated by the social and political structures that exist within the confines of a particular country (e.g., I was assigned a middle-class Muslim belonging due to living in Algeria, and to the fact that Algeria was shaped by certain structures), imposed belonging can be dictated by anyone, regardless of whether they are part of 'us' or 'them' (in the rigid sense of the terms). This unconsciously occurs on a daily basis and is largely fuelled by people's internalised grand narratives. For instance, a stranger who starts a conversation with me could frame me as a Muslim French-speaking fundamentalist. Although very powerful and dictating, an imposed belonging usually mirrors how the imposer presumes one to be, rather than how one actually is.

The three forms of belonging are not sequential as they tend to occur concurrently. The following extracts tackle the set of the events that enabled me to come up with these forms of belonging. The following section starts with Elizabeth's reluctance to befriend Muslims, which was largely influenced by uncomfortable encounters with her Muslim colleagues.

6.3.1.1 I found it hard to get along with Muslims

> Elizabeth: I made friendships with everyone. I thought everyone is
> equal, if you come from a different background, it's fine, we just respect
> each other and get to know each other better. But it turns out ...
> sometimes after all these years I found it's really hard to get along with

Muslims. I think because of their religion, because I am atheist ... Are you Muslim?

R: I don't practise.

Elizabeth: It's not like saying they are not good, but I don't want to hear the Quran all the time, because most of my Muslim friends when they talk, they quote from Quran or say something like about Islam all the time ... some of my Muslim friends want to convince me to be Muslim ... I told them many times I am atheist, and I am already 30 ... it's too late to believe these things you know ... this is how I feel, and I didn't mean to be offensive to Muslim friends ... It's like … how to say, I felt a bit pressure when I am with them ... and if I know a friend from Mecca and I got a friend from Iran and I think they are against each other and their religions are in the different branches but I didn't know it when I said to the Iranian girl I know someone from Mecca and he told me about his religion, she felt offended but I didn't know I just wanted to be nice and friendly but only because I didn't know much about the culture of the middle east or the religion so maybe I ... I tried to avoid talking about those topics.

(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

It is not unusual to encounter Muslim individuals who mobilise a grand religious narrative to attract new 'followers.' This is a common behaviour within the communities that practise Islam, and one that is perceived to be very rewarding in a prospective 'afterlife'. Perhaps this extract is one of the most revealing examples of the interplay of the aforementioned forms of belonging. However, it is important to highlight that my unpacking of Elizabeth's experience with Muslim friends is partly influenced by my experience of living in a Muslim community for 24 consecutive years. Therefore, before tackling this extract analytically, it is preferable to summarise my view briefly in the following entry.

Reflecting on my discarded religious identity is one of the very sensitive topics to me. Not long time ago, my perceptions of reality used to be almost entirely

dictated by the Islamic religious discourse. The latter's impact exceeded all the discourses I encountered thus far, especially in terms of power. Living within the confines of an allegedly Muslim community makes it hard, and sometimes impossible, to even question the dictated norms. The powerful practices underpinning this assigned form of belonging involve state-monitored religious teachings in schools, 'compulsory' recurring prayers throughout the day, and a very influential Friday prayer in the mosque, to mention but a few. Among the pivotal messages that one encounters is the construction of a spiritually-astray 'other'. The latter is usually framed as either a non-Muslim, a non-believer, or to a lesser extent, a non-practising-Muslim. The same discourse eventually makes it a good Muslim's mission to convert non-believers. For instance, the following verse from the Quran and the hadith from Muhammad's Sunnah are illustrative of this allegedly valuable endeavour:

- (وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ قَوْلاً مِّمَّن دَعَآ إِلَى الله وَعَمِلَ صَالِحاً وَقَالَ إِنَّنِي مِنَ المسلمين)
  This translates into "And who could be better of speech than he who calls [his fellow-men] unto God, and does what is just and right, and says, "Verily, I am of those who have surrendered themselves to God" (Chapter 41: Fussilat, verse 33).

- " انْفُذْ عَلَى رِسْلِكَ حَتَّى تَنْزِلَ بِسَاحَتِهِمْ، ثُمَّ ادْعُهُمْ إِلَى الإِسْلاَمِ، وَأَخْبِرْهُمْ بِمَا يَجِبُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ حَقّ اللَّهِ فِيهِ، فَوَاللَّهِ لأَنْ يَهْدِيَ اللَّهُ
  بِكَ رَجُلاً وَاحِدًا خَيْرٌ لَكَ مِنْ أَنْ يَكُونَ لَكَ حُمْرُ النَّعَمِ ".
  This translates into "Proceed and do not hurry. When you enter their territory, call them to embrace Islam and inform them of Allah's Rights which they should observe, for by Allah, even if a single man is led on the right path (of Islam) by Allah through you, then that will be better for you than the nice red camels." (Sahih Muslim).

Therefore, I was not surprised when my moderately-Muslim parents hinted at the possibility of converting my non-Muslim partner.

The interplay of the different forms of belonging is clearly revealed through Elizabeth's extract. A powerful religious discourse that was assigned to Elizabeth's friends by virtue of their upbringing seems to influence their constructed realities to the point where they do not only uphold and maintain

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the religious discourse, but even spread it as they perceive it to be the only valid worldview. This is where we can witness a powerful assigned grand narrative at play, as it transcends its influence on one's sense of belonging to yield a form of rigid agency that renders certain Muslims into missionaries. Such state of being does not imply a deficiency or a lack of criticality. Instead, it mainly indicates the powerfulness of the discourses at play. However, this alleged wholeness of the Islamic religious discourse is immediately marred by the longstanding Sunni versus Shiite conflict over certain fundamentals as shown through the reaction of Elizabeth's friend when she was unintentionally subsumed within an Islamic discourse that she did not identify with. This is indicative of the cracks that proponents of any powerful grand narrative strive to conceal.

At first, it was discouraging to see that Elizabeth's narrative seemed to enclose all Muslim realities under a specific set of entrenched behaviours. However, as the discussion unfolded, the same narrative revealed a more critical stance. This can be noted in the following extract.

> R: Do you remember any incidents where you felt uncomfortable around these friends?
>
> Elizabeth: I think the only problem was about food. They can't drink, they can't eat pork so at first, I always forget, and they feel offended ... that's the only problem but still if I decided to make friends with and I already know them well I won't talk about something they don't want to hear so ... but still I felt like it's not that, it's more difficult to get along with them than making friends with atheists.
>
> R: How about atheists?
>
> Elizabeth: You know there are in some cultures like Romanian, they don't respect women ... maybe because of their culture, and they see women as the dirt in the shoes, that's what a male friend told me and I felt not comfortable because in my mind everyone should be treated equally, I didn't do anything, why do they think women are subordinate to men? So that's a bit weird.

R: So, you felt uncomfortable even with people who are not Muslim.

Elizabeth: Yeah. I think it's not about a specific religion or something. I just sometimes don't feel comfortable. I don't have any problems with Muslims. I just think I got friends from Mecca, and they talk about Islam all the time, don't we have other topics to talk about? That's the only problem (laughter).

(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

The previous extract unveils the fact that Elizabeth's critical stance is not exclusively provoked by encounters with Muslim individuals. Her frustration seems to emerge as a reaction to the restrictive grand narratives that she confronts on the go. These encompass the set of practices that her Muslim colleagues attempted to impose on her, and the problematic gender stereotypes that she knew about from her Romanian atheist friend. Elizabeth's rich narrative provided an optimal context to tackle the concept of belonging. The following extracts will probe into this even further by focusing on other IPGRs' narrated events which depict moments or encounters with individuals and structures that made them reflect on their belonging.

6.3.1.2 Sometimes you don't know what you are

A significant starting point would be Alice's questioning of the relevance and fairness of the job application forms and information sheets that she had to complete. Recurring questions of sexuality, religion, and ethnicity were very confusing for Alice, as noted in the following narrative.

Alice: when you apply to work, so even the university they ask for ethnic background, religion, sexuality, which they say that they use for data purposes. But for me, it's like, why do they need that data in the first place? What are they trying to prove? So that's something that always interested me, and sometimes it demotivates me because then I stop a moment and ask should I put my religion? should I put my sexuality?

R: What do you usually do?

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Alice: I just put them randomly … especially with the ethnic background because sometimes you don't know what you are. Sometimes you don't know how you identify. So basically, you just go through that list, and you don't find your ethnic group. I don't think it's fair. I don't think for me, I don't think it's fair that they need that kind of information about me ... Why does it matter?

(Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)

What Alice is trying to decipher is another manifestation of an imposed belonging. The latter is adopted by HEIs and many other governmental and non-governmental institutions and agencies. Alice rightly questions the relevance of such information and the reasons underpinning their usage. What tends to be ignored is the fact that such questions seek to indicate individuals' assigned cultural realities rather than what they actually identify with. This is why similar forms are usually populated with a predefined number of ethnicities, religions, and sexualities. There are several repercussions that can result due to this practice. First, its prescriptive nature is reductionist par excellence, as it allocates a limited and problematic set of ethnicities based on which one must select a label. Second, it is another mechanism adopted by institutions to maintain the neo-essentialist understanding of diversity. Third, while such demographics are usually accompanied with statements that refer to equality and inclusion, individuals' assigned ethnicities, religions, and sexualities can be easily mobilised by certain influential stakeholders to maintain the very inequality and discrimination that HEIs allegedly strive to eradicate.

6.3.1.3 Islam pretty much takes control of the culture

So far, we tackled Elizabeth's experience with Muslim colleagues and Alice's struggle to understand the relevance of certain institutional practices. The following narratives will carry on dealing with the concept of belonging with Claire's reflections about living within a Muslim community and Alex's discussion of cultural roots and the intergenerational struggle.

R: You said you came to the UK with prior beliefs. Can you share them with me?

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Claire: The place where I had come from had a very strong religious influence. It pretty much affects your way of life where you work, how you interact with people.

R: Can you explain?

Claire: Yeah. Well, the society that I was part of, was pretty much dominated by Muslims, and that pretty much comes with a very strong belief in the way Muslims should behave, should act. People could be critical of each other sometimes. But the thing that I kind of appreciated here was the fact of being more accepting of people of different backgrounds. They do say that racism exists in some parts of the world and some more than others, but I really think that it did exist where I was, but people were not very direct about it, and they saw that it did not exist … So, I feel like this kind of dominant belief system that we have based on Islam pretty much takes control of the culture, the socio-cultural aspects of ... education and workplace and all that … I do find some major socio-cultural differences, and I understand why people there are like that now, and why people here are like that. It's not reaching a level in which you would judge, but more of an understanding that okay so you come from that and that way, that's why you would process things, or you would interpret things that way you do.

(Interview: 'Claire' January 2020)

The presence of this narrative is crucial to highlight the multi-perspectival nature of responses vis-à-vis a certain grand narrative. As we have seen in Elizabeth's extract, her Muslim colleagues seemed to be pushing a religious agenda, one that is likely a result of their subscription to the dominant religious discourse. It is through these agents that such narratives gain momentum, as they are carried across national boundaries which extends the scope of their influence. The embodiment and spread of such grand narratives via certain mechanisms and agents may result in perceiving every individual reality to be defined and dictated by the same narrative. However, it is through Claire's expository stance that we can sense the potential

fragility of the dominant discourse. Claire's ability to examine how Islam "takes control of the culture" is very significant because it offers an alternative image about Muslims compared to the one encountered by Elizabeth. Equally, it fortifies this chapter's aim to distinguish between the assigned and constructed realities since the spread of single stories is reliant upon a recurring tendency to mistake the grand narrative to be the only accessible reality. Finally, albeit to a lesser extent, Claire's extract unveils what I perceive to be an interculturality-from-within. The latter is materialised by virtue of individuals' differing views about an allegedly shared and homogeneous cultural reality. It is this multi-perspectivity that showcases the presence of interculturality within what has for long been perceived as a single culture.

6.3.1.4 It's who they are, it's their roots

Approaching one's assigned belonging is always problematic especially when the tension is escalated due to forced mobility and displacement. This is conveyed in Alex's references to intact identities, the enriching new realities that one encounters on the go, and the struggle of raising children away from what he perceives to be their roots. The following narrative is illustrative of the ambivalences that individuals navigate as they go about defining their belonging.

> Alex: I came here, I mean, I came here, not as an as a minor but someone at a very young age, I came here with all the social cultural identities that I acquired from my society. So, I'm still me. It's just a question of understanding how things work here. But it doesn't mean that I change in so many ways. And I think my identity is still my identity. I have still kept my identity intact, if that is what you're trying to get into.
>
> R: Okay, so what do you mean by intact?
>
> Alex: I kept everything intact. We have a family life. We celebrate all religious cultural activities. It's an Eritrean family in the UK. But of course, having family and then you find your children going to school in the UK, which is completely different environment. It's also about

understanding their world and trying to balance their world and the world that you want to create in your family. I also work and I am engaged in the other world, you know, so I also bring my own new insights into the family. So, it's I guess it's a continuous, of course a continuous adaptation of identity. But the fundamental identity is still that I am my own identity.

R: And do you feel there are tensions between what you brought with you, what is your family, your identity with your family and what is outside?

Alex: No, not with me as an adult, not with my wife. Because we have children now, born here, socialized here, growing up here, you know, they have to navigate two slightly different worlds in their own ways. Two worlds that have their own beauties, their own pluses, and minuses. Sometimes it is about understanding how things work for them and about understanding and helping them … not being tough on them for example, just wanting them to live by the kind of identity by the kind of parental guidance that we were used to when we were in our country. It's about understanding their situation. So maybe balancing the two environments I cannot say they are completely diametrically opposite you know of course they have differences, they have unique versions of seeing the world for example, since it's a question of perspective … it is about reconciling those unique worlds. So, I guess there will be a multiple or a dual identity for them as they grow because we also want to have the emotional connection with their roots. But they are here they will be part of the society here as well. So how do you help them? While physically here but also emotionally being attached to both their parents' roots. It is not because we are opposing what is here. It's not because we don't like it here. It's just because well at the end of the day, it's who they are, it's their roots, they cannot deny who they are. They cannot just refuse their identity. So, I guess it's about helping them have the luxury of being multiple people in terms of their language, in terms of

the languages they speak in terms of the culture in terms of the attachments, the emotional connections. So, there's this kind of dual identity and hybridity which is rich in itself because it's also a very valuable contribution to the society.

(Interview: 'Alex' January 2020)

Of all the extracts that I tackled so far; Alex's views proved to be the most intricate to analyse. The ambivalence depicted throughout the narrative is indicative of Alex's struggle to navigate an array of discourses. This struggle is often disregarded in studies that shed light on individuals' intercultural experiences, as statements tend to be approached in a vacuum, away from the mechanisms that underpin the contexts of their occurrence. I should acknowledge that I find it problematic for Alex to assume that he managed to maintain an intact identity, in addition to reducing his children's intercultural realities to a mere process of reconciliation. The latter conveys the existence of two essentially different worlds which subsequently results in living with a dual identity as Alex claims. Nonetheless, one should not overlook Alex's circumstances in Eritrea which obliged him to seek refuge through forced migration. Such incident is sufficient to obscure the critical stance advocated throughout this chapter. It would therefore be naïve to approach Alex's views about roots and belonging in a similar fashion to the previous extracts. Instead, I will highlight two significant remarks that subtly sum up this section.

-    Immediately after assuming to have an intact identity, Alex signalled his engagement with the outer world, and how it results in bringing "new insights into the family [and] a continuous adaptation of identity".

-    Similarly, his established understanding of 'roots' does not seem to inhibit the possibility of "being multiple people" by means of a hybrid identity that could eventually serve to enrich the society.

This ambivalence is one of the major points that this chapter attempts to highlight. Similar moments of discordance vis-à-vis one's sense of belonging are valuable opportunities to witness the interplay of structures and agency. Although this and subsequent extracts by Alex evoke instances of criticality

and agency, it is important to remember that moments of transient interculturality are always inhibited by the long-standing reductionist narratives that condition our perceptions of 'us' and 'them'. As stated in Holliday (2021, p.23), "people who live with cosmopolitan cultural flows do not realise it and explain their lives in terms of stereotypes or exceptions to them", mainly because they find "it convenient to put both theories and people in separate boxes". In other words, the seductive nature of the grand narrative does not only facilitate its recurrence as the default way of thinking, but equally solidifies its existence.

6.3.2 Unpacking IPGRs' Single Stories

The sustained presence of the assigned forms of belonging does not only restrict IPGRs' ability to navigate cultural realities, but also results in the dissemination of single stories about peoples and communities. As noted in Elizabeth's extract and the accompanied reflective entry, the influence of the religious discourse does not only dictate individuals' assigned belonging but can even turn them into missionaries. This is partly fuelled by an established single story that frames all non-Muslims as lost souls that need rescue. I borrow the concept of single stories from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED conference talk about 'The Danger of a Single Story' (2009). Adichie argues that "to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become". Single stories consolidate the current stereotypical images that are disseminated by IPGRs, along with the images constructed about them by other individuals. The intense intercultural environment ensued from IPGRs' mobility provides an optimal opportunity for these single stories to resurface. The focus of this sub-section will therefore attempt to unpack some of the single stories encountered by IPGRs.

6.3.2.1 You the Berbers are used to carrying heavy things

Of all the controversial events tackled so far, Alice's experience with two invigilators proved to be the most shocking. Alice, who regularly invigilates during exams, narrated two incidents where she was subject to blatant

racism, once due to her presumed origins, and another time due to the international label. Both events are shared in the following extract.

> Alice: I experienced racism at university in the invigilation, it happened twice actually, and I just remembered that. One with the lead invigilator, an old person … basically we were invigilating and by the end he was holding the papers, all by himself in addition to a bag … I had a conversation with him before and he knows where I come from. I said can I help you with the papers and he was like no thanks, oh I know you the Berbers are used to carrying heavy things. That was … I was just biting my tongue … You the Berbers are used to carrying heavy things … As if I am a donkey then. I was doing it out of politeness because he is an old person. The second time happened recently. My name is [real name] which is a distinctive Arab name. There was another invigilator who was talking to international students … not international students, they were home students, but she thought they were international … she was urging them to come to the room … but because of the exam I understood why they were stressed. So, they were just looking at her like oblivious … and she came back and told me you know what, most of these students are international, they don't even speak English. One invigilator said: 'are they Chinese?' … she said 'no they look Arab to me, [real name] that's where you come in handy' … She didn't even talk to me she just saw my name … and then when the students came in most or all of them, I could hear the accents, they were speaking English with British accents, and most of them seemed to have Asian background like Indian or Pakistani, but most of them were actually British citizens … She said [real name] that's where you come in handy because they looked Arab, and she didn't even talk to me she was just like 'Hi what's your name', it's [real name] … I was like wow really, really.

> (Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)

Alice's account of the reductionist representations that she was subject to is indicative of the masked precarity that IPGRs have to handle on the go.

Such moments of disillusionment are very revealing, especially when juxtaposed with the puissant discourses that underlie HEIs' promoted reality. The latter excels at co-opting the necessary keywords (such as inclusion, diversity, global citizenship, decolonisation, and most recently compassionate curriculums) that allegedly shape the strategy, the regulations, and the plan of action at play. However, it is only through these appalling events that the endured forms of being come to the fore. It is rare for similar events to lead to a massive call for action. For this reality to gain its well-deserved attention, it needs to navigate its way via a spectrum of institutional fabrics, where it eventually gets polished strategically, and sometimes even exploited to project an equal, diverse, and inclusive university image (In similar fashion to how Pride, MeToo, and BLM movements are actively mobilised by neoliberal institutions). The institutions' structural composition can therefore serve to stifle the impact of Alice's endured events by means of its void co-opted statements.

The first event encountered by Alice highlights the manifestation of single stories within HEIs. The problematic interaction begins with the invigilator's use of a very controversial term, Berbers. The latter is usually mobilised to vilify the earliest known people of the North African region. This is followed by a demeaning statement that left Alice in disbelief of what she just heard. The invigilator's claim that Berbers are used to carrying heavy things mirrors his inexcusable short sightedness. While the origin of this single story is not disclosed, it most likely traces back to a powerful narrative from colonial times. The fact that such imagery is still influencing people's worldviews in an age of alleged globalisation is largely overlooked within the current HE environment. The flawed nature of co-opting is again confirmed as the concepts that characterise HEIs' promoted reality can only suppress, rather than eradicate, the reiteration of racist statements.

The second event is comprised of several reductionist statements. This starts with Alice's reference to the invigilator's attempt to urge a group of students to come to the room. The group's inattentiveness to the invigilator's request is immediately framed as a linguistic deficiency. This statement is

subsequently mobilised by another colleague who links the alleged deficiency to being 'Chinese'. What is striking in this line of statements is the degree to which the link between the international label and deficiency is normalised. Two single stories are constructed within a matter of seconds; one which establishes a problematic link between miscommunication and being international, and the other proclaims an inexplicable connection between an alleged linguistic incompetence and Chinese students. The invigilator's response to her colleague was even more perplexing. Although she did not have any formal contact with Alice, she assumed that she is Arab, and acted on that assumption by suggesting that Alice would be handy in this situation, since the group of students looked Arab to her. Subsuming people under an Arab label is very simplistic and problematic. Alice, who actively questioned and refused the use of ethnic labels (as discussed in section 6.3.1), was once again subjected to a single story that frames her identity under an imagined label.

The following account is extracted from my interview with Stella where she highlighted the continuous struggle to navigate an array of grand narratives that attempt to dictate one's identity in the North African region. This is mainly to clarify Alice's reference to the Berber and Arab labels.

> Stella: I believe that we really have a linguistic and cultural or identity crisis when it comes to that, especially North Africa. You know what it is ... like you grow up as a Berber but you're speaking French and you're not French. You speak in Arabic but you're not an Arab. And, and you're being taught both of these, and you waste so much time in your life, trying to grasp both and then shaping your own identity and then you're always stuck between them. Even in politics. You see it in every aspect in every aspect or, or everyday life. You can even see that we're having those internal conflicts that come up from modifications along our history line. I believe that it's about time to back up our own identity and to like to stand up for it because we've always been controlled after nationalist movements and stuff

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like that, and after revolutions. It's about time to embark our own ships where we need them to be.

Another encounter with a deficient set of single stories is shared by Huyam. The following events run along the same lines of Alice's experience albeit beyond the context of HE. One of the single stories resurfaced when Huyam complained to her estate agency about the state of the flat she rented and the issue with heating.

> Huyam: When I moved in, I had some serious issues with the house for which I have sent a serious toned email to the agency. Among the problems I had was turning on the heating and I have told them that it would have been better if one of the agents had accompanied me to show me how things work like in my previous tenancy. On the replying email received, the agent told me something which I found offensive. She told me that these things are super clear to be run unless I am not English, and things where I come from work differently. I mean she could've just apologised for the inconvenience, and that's it. She didn't have to be that RUDE in her response.
>
> R: Reflecting on what you encountered with the agency, how did you feel? And why do you think they responded that way?
>
> Huyam: I won't lie, that left me speechless for a while as the last thing I was expecting was such response. I honestly believe that the agent who responded does not reflect the entire agency as I have dealt with other members like the one who did the viewing with me or the one who gave me the keys. So, I would say that agent has some issues or don't know how to accommodate the customers and their matters but again when I think of the statement of back home things are different, I feel a bit angry as there is this denotation that somehow things are not as advanced as in the UK.

Among the overlooked dangers of the essentialist conceptualisations of others and/or single stories is what can be called the counter narrative that emerges in response to a particular event. As explained earlier, while Edward Said's take on Orientalism is valuable for highlighting the reductionist image that tends to be imposed on the east, it equally demonises the west as a whole, which results in a more problematic status quo. Huyam's reaction to the incident is valuable in this regard as it did not overinterpret the agent's response or deem it representative of the perceptions of the wider circle. The single story at play in this extract seems to establish a questionable link between one's presumed cultural affiliations and their ability to handle technical difficulties or understand how certain devices function. Therefore, being English entails a necessary knowledge of how a particular heating system works. This naivety is the product of the influence of grand narratives that sustain this deficit framework.

The second event in Huyam's narrative revolves around a casual conversation she had with her landlord during a visit to fix her curtains. This is described in the following extract.

> Huyam: I have moved recently to a new place run by an agency for a landlord, with whom I had direct contact. The day he came to fix the door's curtain, we had a little chat. He told me that the agency told him I am not an English person, but my English is so good for someone who is not English. He asked me where I am from, and I told from Algeria; his response was interesting. He said: "Oh; L'Algerie Francaise" and I told him not since 1962. He laughed and said that this was all he knows as it is what they had taught him back in school when he was learning French.

(Microsoft Teams Written Interview: 'Huyam' August 2020)

The entitlements that come with the native-speakerism embedded within the grand narratives that certain individuals from the estate agency might align with normalises the process of evaluating Huyam's English. Encountered mainly in ELT contexts, native-speakerism can also be observed in casual conversations, especially when the parties involved are perceived to come

from native and non-native backgrounds. Having said that, to keep up with the topic of this sub-section, I will rather focus on the second part of the extract. The landlord's reaction to Huyam's response about where she comes from unveils a very demeaning grand narrative at play. 'L'Algerie Francaise' is the single story that the landlord held about Algeria. The spontaneity with which he uttered the expression is indicative of the sustained influence that the school teachings that shaped his upbringing still exert on his worldviews.

6.3.2.2 There are three kinds of people in this world: Men, Women, and female PhD

In addition to what can be considered as racial stereotypes, IPGRs are also subject to several gender stereotypes. In the following extracts, Elizabeth shares several gender narratives she encountered in China. These ensued mainly through casual conversations with her family and friends. However, Elizabeth also draws attention to the issue of gender in the wider Chinese community, and particularly in reference to harassment in the workplace. Elizabeth's experience is then followed by Amira's reflections about what she perceives to be a difficulty for women researchers to work with women supervisors. Throughout this sub-section I will try to bring the issue of gender to the fore by unearthing some of the gender single stories that IPGRs either encounter or construct. Some of the tackled events may not appear to relate exclusively to IPGRs or the HE environment. However, their impact can be mapped onto IPGRs' experiences. For instance, Elizabeth's recurring encounter with a single story that constructs the ideal woman as one who marries before reaching 25 years old is an event that occurs beyond the context of higher education, but it still has a toll on her trajectory.

> Elizabeth: In China people think and will say something like 'oh my God you got such a high degree' so just marry, get husband, and have kids, that's perfect. I say why that is perfect, why perfect life has only one way to be lived. And I don't like hearing something like that, I don't think it's fair. My province is the most reserved place in the world ... Confucius the Chinese philosopher was born in my

hometown, so people are really reserved. They are like how to say, even my grandma felt like I am wasting too much money on study, wasting money, and before I did PhD everyone even my dad was like why you are doing PhD you are a girl, your age is really important. If you don't marry before 25 then nobody would find you attractive or something, you are getting old and blah blah blah. My dad said after PhD you will be 30, I said if I don't do PhD, I won't be 30 then, is that your logic [Laugher] … I love it here because nobody is judging you. Because in China every time I go back all my relatives, friends or people I know for two days they were asking do you have a boyfriend, when are you getting married, why aren't you getting married and why you are doing PhD, after PhD you will be 30, if you graduate, when you graduate everyone is married before 25, who will marry you? I really don't like it, I like people to have their privacy and keep their distance, respect each other without judging.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)</div>

The single story underpinning Elizabeth's experience with her family and friends in China frames marriage as the default and most ideal resort for a woman. Any event that deviates from this sacralised milestone is immediately condemned and discouraged by Elizabeth's inner circle. Such misogynistic practices, where women's pursuits are undermined if they do not conform to a preestablished set of gender roles, are illustrative of the actual restrictive realities that inhibit social action and mobility. My personal trajectory and upbringing are ripe with similar events where close family members were denied the ability to 'construct' their reality. It is due to such endured events that my research does not sit at ease with a social constructivist stance. The latter advocates a privileged state of being, and a luxury that seems almost inexistent in certain communities. Claiming such stance would give a false hope that assigned realities are always fluid and easily negotiable. It is through these moments that one can recognise the intricacy of the status quo. What Elizabeth's family and friends discourage, condemn, or criticise, is met with more violent measures in other families

and/or communities. Only then one can acknowledge the potential uncrossability of certain grand narratives.

As Elizabeth rightly claims, these gendered single stories can be traced back to the influence of the Confucius grand narrative, which does not only impact Elizabeth's inner circle but also the wider community as shown in the following extract.

> Elizabeth: If a Chinese girl is working in a company, a high possibility that when she meets guys during dinners at company they will talk sexually to her, and I don't like that either. In this country [i.e., UK], even if you are working together, you have some company activities, you just keep distance. I don't want to know anyone's life unless we become friends. These things are important to me because I never treat people like 'that's a man's thing to do, that's a Muslim thing to do, that's a woman's thing to do', it's not like that.

> (Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

Another layer of restrictive structures is unveiled in the previous two extracts. These endured events are overlooked by the void statements that characterise the promoted reality. Reducing intercultural understanding to a simplified process of acknowledging national differences obscures the ongoing struggle that IPGRs undergo to claim a certain degree of agency. Elizabeth's narrative sits in-between a misogynist discourse that actively strives to dictate her role, and a reductionist multicultural discourse that naively perceives her to be representative of the very grand narrative she despises. The subsequent extract tackles the single stories that tend to resurface within the Chinese context whenever a woman decides to pursue a PhD degree. The representation of the female PhD candidate is exoticized by an array of statements that render her incompatible with the common understanding of a woman.

> Elizabeth: In China, people say there are three kinds of people in this world, man woman and female PhD. They see Female PhD as monsters, they always have stereotypes like PhD girls are really stubborn, reserved, wear glasses, no makeup, don't know how to

dress up and don't go to parties, not easy to talk to, they are too serious with research, and they are trying to correct your ideas and things like that ... I met that many times in China. Every time I went back to China, when I was waiting at the airport and some stranger comes and chats with me and he is like 'oh you are doing PhD, why didn't you get married' and then say, 'you know', they feel like they know me ... 'female PhD they are stubborn, reserved' blah blah blah and I was like ... I don't listen to them. If someone wants to judge me, he needs to know me first, right? Without knowing me and saying those stereotypes, that's really rude.

(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

The last part of this sub-section tackles Amira's controversial statement about working with female supervisors. This is a very significant extract as it signals the fact that not all single stories emerge merely due to the influence of grand narratives. Within what can be perceived as a small culture of postgraduate researchers, it was still possible for a single story to gain momentum. While the scope of influence of Amira's view about working with women is not as encompassing as the single stories that were encountered by Alice and Elizabeth, its spread beyond the small culture within which it emerged is dependent on the extent to which Amira and her colleagues reiterate the single story. As stated by Adichie in the aforementioned TED conference talk, "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story".

Amira: I don't know if you ever heard of this like woman working with a woman it's really tiring sometimes. Like it's easier to work with a man than with a woman. This is what I feel, and this is what most of the girls feel sometimes. So, at the beginning I wanted to work with another supervisor, but he was busy, and he told me like, there's no other person who was interested in your topic except for one supervisor. So, I worked with her but honestly if I have been given the chance to change her, I would have changed her, but I had no option. I always feel like women make it difficult for other women. That's the

common thing I don't know. I always feel whenever I have something to do and it's not working, I go to men, and they accomplish it but when you go to a woman it doesn't work. Maybe because women follow the system literally from A to Z that's why they make things difficult and sometimes the system doesn't tell you what to do so they keep turning around but with men I feel it's more efficient.

(Interview: 'Amira' January 2020)

The emergence and spread of single stories within any environment do not merely rely on the influence of grand narratives. It is through agents that such stories extend beyond their original context. Equally though, one should not assume that the appearance of this stereotype is exclusively conditioned by the supervisory experiences endured by Amira and her colleagues. The scope of mechanisms underpinning this single story is partially revealed in the extract as Amira expands the spectrum of issues beyond supervision when she states that "whenever I have something to do and it's not working, I go to men" and "with men I feel it's more efficient". This is where the afore-constructed image about female supervisors appears to be fed by a bigger generalisation about women. I held another interview with Amira after seven months which allowed me to revisit the issue of working with women once more.

R: How about now, do you still have the same thinking?

Amira: Sometimes I do. Sometimes I don't. But in general, I don't. I don't think that is ... that is my ... in general I don't feel that me being a woman and her being a woman has an effect, I don't know, because I dealt with her a lot, so I found out she is not that type, not all women are like that.

(Interview: 'Amira' August 2020)

What can be noticed from this account is the absence of the affirmed tone that accompanied the previous extract. This indicates how Amira's single story, and potentially the bigger narrative about women, is being negotiated on the go. However, not all single stories are as negotiable as this one. As

noted from Alice's and Elizabeth's experiences, some single stories are backed by long-standing narratives that sustain their existence. Therefore, while Amira's views about working with women have slightly changed, the discourse that frames men as more efficient than women within the Saudi context is not as navigable due to the spectrum of societal norms and religious practices that warrant its continuance.

6.3.3 Section Discussion

This section provided an opportunity to probe into IPGRs' endured intercultural experiences. It revealed the intricate fabrics underpinning several cultural realities, and the interplay between culturist grand narratives and individuals' potential to navigate established views, practices, and behaviours. The inevitable encounter with clashing grand narratives of nation, religion, ethnicity, etc., raises several questions vis-à-vis one's belonging. The latter is continuously being assigned, constructed, and imposed by virtue of a plethora of mechanisms. Such view is sufficient to trace interculturality both in-between what can be considered large cultures, and from within the very large culture. Therefore, and owing to the tackled narratives, it is possible to discard the alleged difference between culture and interculturality, since the composition of individuals' belonging is not merely dictated by the grand narratives underpinning a dominant culture, but also shaped continuously via individuals' agency.

The narratives tackled in sub-section 6.3 portrayed an array of overlooked events that are either ignored due to their incompatibility with the promoted reality or analysed via a culturist stance (or agenda) that maintains their imagined uncrossability. The struggle within the confines of the east/west binary proved to be one of the most prominent topics in this chapter. A systematised set of reductionist views about a necessarily different 'other' appeared to sustain IPGRs' struggle with cultural affiliations. These manifested in the form of behaviours, beliefs, and practices that are either assigned or imposed, and a controversial body of single stories that disseminates a partial, and mostly negative, view about peoples and communities. The span of such views extended beyond the context of HE

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and the IPGR experience. This is mainly due to the impossibility to limit the scope of mechanisms that impact students' trajectories, and the need to probe into the actual experience beyond the boundaries of HEIs' promoted reality. Such stance proved to be vital to uncover a seldom discussed set of constructed forms of being and belonging. It is through Elizabeth's frustration with Muslim missionaries, and the demonisation of female researchers in China, Alice's struggle with ethnic labels and blatant racism, Huyam's encounter with deficient narratives, and Claire's critical take on the dominance of Islam, that we can understand the intricacy of the endured intercultural and student experiences.

Meanwhile, a powerful multicultural discourse is actively mobilised by HEIs to maintain a superficial neo-essentialist understanding of diversity. Within such a problematic stance, Elizabeth, Alice, Huyam, and Claire are representative of the very cultural norms that they actively question. Therefore, by dismissing the potential for cultural and/or intercultural mutability, IPGRs' agency, which manifests in the form of questioning, navigating, rejecting, or transcending grand narratives, is also discarded. While such institutional practice inhibits any potential for relevant social action, it equally thrusts a strategically-selected set of concepts, amongst which is the global citizenship buzzword. The latter acts as a conveyor of the HEIs' neo-essentialist conceptualisation of diversity, as it translates intercultural encounters into a set of skills that one can internalise for the mere goal of tolerating a necessarily different other.

6.4 Contesting Grand Narratives

The previous extracts' focal point uncovered the restrictive nature of grand narratives and how they tend to be negotiated. Several moments of agency came to the fore and served to debunk the long-standing deficit frameworks that perceive IPGRs to be deficient, uncritical, and representative of a grand narrative that allegedly shapes their perceptions of themselves and others. Elizabeth's willingness to transcend a narrative that disempowered and discouraged female researchers, Alice's stance against reductionist labels,

and Claire's ability to exhibit interculturality from within are all illustrative of the agency that IPGRs exercise on the go. Amidst an environment where social action is actively challenged and inhibited by a spectrum of both innocent and strategically-deployed mechanisms, it is significant to highlight these moments of agency. The latter is increasingly perceived as a cardinal sin within HEIs and beyond, and its repercussions are well-witnessed (e.g., redundancies within the UKHE sector due to staff members being vocal about their view vis-à-vis casualisation and working conditions).

The following sub-sections will briefly touch on further manifestations of agency, where IPGRs contested or questioned several obtruded realities. While the emphasis of the previous sections centred on the projection of grand narratives at play, this section will focus on IPGRs' reactions to similar narratives. This will serve to slightly unveil the mechanisms that condition the emergence of social action and equally highlight other reductionist narratives. I conclude this section with an attempt to investigate an overlooked display of agency within the confines of a powerful grand narrative. The upcoming narratives comprise Alice's refusal to align with the views shared by her mentors, Amira's reaction to the discourses that frame Saudi Arabia as a 'backward' country, and Huyam's stance against endured gender entitlements.

6.4.1 Don't make any eye contact with British people

One of the most problematic events that intensify within the HE context is the representation of an imagined other via culturist juxtapositions. The mobility of students is actively shaped by a rigid understanding of intercultural communication whereby relevant stakeholders feel entitled to share their personal experiences with peoples and communities. The controversy underpinning this practice arises when individuals portray single events to be representative of a bigger reality and a wider context. This is one of the major dilemmas within the field of intercultural communication, since such platitudinous behaviour serves as a mechanism that intensifies the alleged uncrossability of large cultures. This practice is sustained by, and in turn equally sustains, a structural functionalist paradigm that "falsely fixes

the boundaries between groups in an absolute and artificial way" (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990, p.9). Additionally, this so-called cultural fixity facilitates the proliferation of 'interculturalists' and intercultural training programmes. The latter is fed by a long standing reliance on reductionist cultural dimensions (e.g., the work of Hofstede and Trompenaars is illustrative of the workings of cultural dimensions), along with an ongoing dependence on culturist views. Alice's experience with Algerian mentors denotes one of the facets of the challenges that inhibit any genuine attempt to redefine the underpinnings of intercultural communication.

> Alice: During the pre-sessional course, we had some Algerian mentors who went like 'do not interact with British people they are this and this'. One of the mentors kept comparing us with British students ... they're Algerian so they keep just comparing, you know, British students are at this level. So, you need to ... you need to up your game.

> R: What do you think was the reason behind these statements?

> Alice: I absolutely have no idea maybe someone has had a racist encounter with some, some British person and then that person kept the narrative going and going and included the whole population. I don't know if you heard that before 'Don't make any eye contact with British people' when we were coming to this country 'don't make eye contact. If you see a child don't even talk to them'. It was like they made it as if we're going into ... it was it's not it's not the case at all. It's like when you walk in the streets, a lot of people smile all the time. If you go to small cities or small towns, like York, you find people saying good morning to you. How are you? They don't even know you. So, it was completely different from what they made us imagine.

> (Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)

Before digging into this extract and the social action witnessed through Alice's behaviour afterwards, it is important to provide a brief description of the context in question. Alice, along with a bigger cohort of Algerian students, undertook a 6 month pre-sessional programme in a UK HEI prior to embarking on their PhD degrees. During their stay, all students were purposefully placed by the university in specific accommodation buildings that are exclusively inhabited by Algerians. In campus, the pre-sessional course groups comprised only Algerian students. This systematised encapsulation of students based on their nationality is exacerbated with regular visits from Algerian mentors, and sometimes academics, who seemed to act like intercultural experts and on many occasions warned against interacting with locals. Such treatment instilled a sense of deficiency and equally impacted the cohorts' perceptions about otherness.

Alice's encounter with the mentors along with the measures undertaken by the university to systematically separate Algerians from other students are adequate to inhibit individuals' social action. In many instances, IPGRs might adopt the cocoon imposed by similar culturist practices and statements, and resort to alienation since the imposed reality establishes large cultures as uncrossable. Alternatively, such mechanisms might compromise the depth of conversations that students hold with individuals they perceive to be essentially different. In the following extract, Alice's behaviour is a manifestation of genuine social action, as she contests these restrictive narratives to establish her own views about British people.

> R: What did you do to go beyond these stereotypes?
>
> Alice: I have befriended some British and I realised there are people like me, and we have sometimes some, some things, some superstitions that are similar to the Algerian society, and I was like, hang on a second, they are not, these are not aliens. These are not extra-terrestrial creatures. They are just People like me. And I believe that going online into some British political groups, I just read what people say … English people say or British people in general. I read

their opinions about matters, and I was like, they're not that, you know, they're humans, they are normal.

The ability to look beyond the confines of culturalism is one of the significant points observed in Alice's narrative. The alienation of an imagined other, which occurs via several processes such as the demonisation or exoticisation of peoples or practices by means of what Alice describes as superstitions, serves to constrain individuals' agency. However, in spite of the powerful structures at play, which establish national difference to be the default status quo, Alice was still able to transcend the culturist representations about herself and others. This was not achieved via a multicultural lens that would have reduced her view about the other to a process of celebrating a necessary difference. Instead, Alice seems to locate the self within the other and vice versa by normalising the set of practices that local people engage with. It is through these moments of social action that one can foresee the possibility to indispose the influence of grand narratives.

6.4.2 Some people think that Saudi Arabia is a backward country

In addition to individuals' engagement with cultural environments to negotiate established culturist realities, agency can also appear through one's reactions to statements that tend to impose a deficit framework vis-à-vis peoples and communities. In so doing, the mechanisms at play can sometimes go unchallenged as individuals may internalise the deficit reality imposed on them. For instance, the problematic link between a sense of deficiency and the international label can be endorsed by IPGRs themselves to justify an alleged inferiority or disadvantage when compared to home students. Following this stance Alice's encounters with the invigilators (section 6.3.2.1) that imposed a demeaning narrative on her, assigned her a label, and established a controversial image about international students could all go unnoticed if she perceived international students as essentially inferior compared to home students. In the following extract Amira challenges the views that belittle her and the country she came from.

Amira: Yeah, I think Yeah. Because I remember, like, the first assignment that I did, like I was doing a course in forensic linguistics. I know that I did well in the assignment, and I went to the office of the module leader, and I was talking to him. The first question he asked me is where you're from and I said from Saudi Arabia. Then he said, 'okay, let me explain to you how it works here in the UK'. He was talking about the education system and went on explaining how it works. But it was funny to me because he was Italian. That's one time when I felt he was kind of looking down at me. I felt like he was looking down at me. Some people think that Saudi Arabia is a backward country which is crazy, because you know like, our life sometimes, like not sometimes I could say 90% is much better than their lives. So, it's just ridiculous. Sometimes it doesn't make sense to me.

(Interview: 'Amira' January 2020)

The event described by Amira is significant for understanding the ambivalence underpinning UKHE discourses. The representation of the international student within this context tends to impose a potential lack in their ability to navigate discourses that members of staff who can also be considered international (following the same terminology used by HE institutions) seem to navigate easily. This entitles a member of staff, who happens to be a non-home-individual when considering the rigid understanding of nationality, to assume that certain international students are unable to understand the workings of the higher education system in UK. Amira equally points to the idea that her nationality was also mobilised as means to construct this image about her, as the module leader initiated the conversation by inquiring about where she came from. While there is not enough context to elaborate on this claim, the event raises the issue of the discrepancies that can impact the experiences of international students. 'Are American or Canadian international students subsumed within the same deficit framework that a Saudi Arabian international student would be subjected to?'. This event is sufficient to argue that while the individuals

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encompassed within the workings of this label are undergoing a systematic otherization, certain IPGRs might be more privileged and immune from deficient discourses than others. The inability to recruit participants that either identify with or come from a country deemed part of 'the west' is one of the limitations of this thesis.

6.4.3 You are not a man!

IPGRs' moments of social action are evident even beyond the context of HE. The array of controversial realities that international students navigate on the go range from large institutional narratives that attempt to dictate their state of being to small events that manifest via encounters with family and friends. The following extract deals with Huyam's discomfort with the social structures and family views that inhibit her agency. This event builds on Huyam's previous discussion about the restrictions she encountered within her society (section 6.2).

> Huyam: The society, my society focuses a lot on how people judge you and how people see you, so if you do something which according to them is abnormal they will be judging you negatively and their judgement is somehow important for your self-approval, and that thing was somehow affecting all society even my family so I know even if I stay outside, for instance during my second year of MA I used to work as a teacher and I used to work in the evenings from 6-8 so basically I went home after 8 o'clock and my parents were okay with that because they had this justification that she is working so she is allowed to go home that late, but let's say I just stayed until 8 o'clock just because I wanted to, then my parents will not accept that because they will believe I was doing something wrong why would they believe so because it is common that if a girl is outside that late it means that she was doing something wrong. Even if you were not doing anything, just by doing that I mean staying late so they will assume that you were doing something wrong … I would believe that it is the effect of society which has been implicitly planted into them,

they still have this idea that a woman is not supposed to be that late, especially when she is alone.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Huyam' January 2020)</div>

As denoted earlier, grand narratives can inhibit social action and yield a state of rigid agency, where individuals not only adhere to the narrative's dictated reality, but also impose it on others. The impact of this phenomenon is well-witnessed through the view that Huyam's family seems to uphold. In this respect, individuals' ability to stay out late (agency) is inhibited by the social structures that associate 'doing something wrong' with staying out late (structure). The latter remains inoperative until it is executed by certain individuals to obstruct Huyam's social action (rigid agency). As noted by the end of the extract, these restrictive measures are applicable mainly for women which, again, raises the issue of gender roles that was tackled in an earlier event (section 6.3.2.2). Huyam's ability to contest this view is unveiled in the upcoming extract where she narrates an encounter with her father.

> Huyam: People judgment plays a significant role in whether you will be socially approved or not and it takes a lot of courage and self-autonomy to disregard this.

> R: Did you manage to disregard certain social structures that you didn't agree with?

> Huyam: Somehow yes, I did. They were mostly personal but this experience of being away from my home society made me question them even further.

> Ramzi: Okay can you walk me through what you questioned?

> Huyam: I will give you an example that I have used before. Back home, we have this idea that some things are only for boys and others are only for girls, and one of them is staying out late. When I moved here, my father had kept reminding me not to stay late under the pretext of 'you are not a man!', and I was keeping up with him not to bother him, but now I told him directly to either convince me with why you keep insisting on this or stop bringing this every time we

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speak. And now, he knows that I can stay as late as I want because I decided to do so.

R: Interesting, what was his response?

Huyam: 'My god, now people should be afraid of you, you have changed a lot' (not in a way of I am proud of you but rather I am afraid of you).

<p align="center">(Microsoft Teams Written Interview: 'Huyam' August 2020)</p>

Huyam's opportunity to leave her parents' home and live on her own is one of the major reasons underpinning her social action. The latter involved discarding the dominant belief that entitles only men to stay out late. Although this manifestation of agency occurred while embarking on her degree in a UK HEI, it would be naïve to overlook the fact that Huyam's frustrations with such practice emerged while she was living with her parents. The structural composition of the Algerian society makes it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve financial and social independence. This in turn affects the degree to which agency is exercised, especially when a stance that discards the dominant narrative might render individuals vulnerable, homeless, or even worse. Agency, therefore, tends to be unexercised, or exercised implicitly to avoid any potential repercussions. Such analysis is sufficient to uncover the ingenuousness underlying the statements that perceive the imagined east as 'collectivist'. What the proponents of such claim fail to notice is the presence of a variety of contradicting stances within the fabric of an allegedly collectivist society, hence disguising (either purposefully or innocently) the social action in action.

6.4.4 Section Discussion

This section investigated three manifestations of agency expressed by IPGRs in reaction to an array of reductionist narratives that othered them due to their nationality, student status, and gender. The variety of events is indicative of the wide spectrum of narratives that students navigate throughout their trajectories. The social action witnessed through the narrative accounts shared by Alice, Amira, and Huyam is rarely conveyed in

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studies that tackle individuals' intercultural experiences. This is mainly due to the ongoing tendency to subsume creative action within a large, unrepresentative narrative that conceals the intricacy of endured experiences. Following such stance would have rendered these events an exception to a dominant narrative that allegedly dictates the status quo.

Alice's encounter with reductionist discourses that strived to engrain a sense of international student deficiency is illustrative of the mechanisms that sustain the otherization of non-home students by means of culturist statements and generalisations. The impact of such narratives is exacerbated via a systematised separation of home and international students through separate accommodations, special entry requirements, and a body of marketing materials that establish an essentialist boundary among student communities. The combination of these measures inhibits any attempt at genuine social action and equally boosts a parallel neo-essentialist and neo-liberal paradigm that serves to assetize* intercultural encounters. Within such paradigm, a genuine quest to transcend a set of restrictive structures (as seen in Alice's narrative) is less valuable than a superficial encounter between 'representatives' of different national cultures. Such paradigm equally obscures the uneven entitlements within the fabric of the international label itself. As tackled in Amira's incident with the module leader, the deficit framework that strives to dictate the state of being that certain IPGRs uphold is not equally influential across nationalities. This renders certain international individuals more privileged than others, and therefore adds a novel layer of power differentials within the workings of the label.

The deficit framework assigned to the international label is partially dependent upon the continuity of the collectivist grand narrative. The latter subsumes communities within an allegedly all-encompassing dimension, which in turn neglects the intricate social action that individuals undertake to negotiate the dominance of this narrative. In so doing, IPGRs who come from an area deemed to be part of an imagined east are perceived to be collectivist, family-oriented, and unable to act independently or

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autonomously. Such view is discarded in Huyam's narrative which showcases the workings of agency from within. While the materialisation of Huyam's social action took place during her degree in the UK, her questioning of the uneven gender entitlements occurred during her time in Algeria. Consequently, there are three points to highlight in this regard. First, the collectivist image imposed through the international label does not convey the intricacy of individuals' endured realities. Second, creative social action is present within the confines of the rigid social and political structures. Third, the manifestation of this social action is facilitated via social mobility and financial independence.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter helped to uncover the intercultural facets of international students' experiences. It demonstrated the intricacy of intercultural encounters beyond the superficial views that reduce IPGRs to a state of precultured beings. The latter is actively mobilised to sustain the cultural celebrationist stance that serves to ensure the continuity of the neo-essentialist understanding of diversity within HE. Investigating IPGRs complex trajectories was sufficient to establish an array of significant remarks. Encounters with grand narratives reveal the mechanisms that impact students' sense of belonging. In this regard, the interplay of assigned, constructed, and imposed forms of belonging is adequate to trace interculturality from within and to affirm IPGRs' potential to transcend rigid cultural boundaries, hence discrediting the long-standing multicultural stance that rests on the immutability of cultural affiliations. This potential for social action is further unpacked in the last section where IPGRs contested three powerful grand narratives. The findings unveiled a manifestation of implicit forms of agency from within, and a potential uneven set of realities enclosed within the international label.

Chapter 7
League Tables, Labels, and the Neoliberal University

7.1 Introduction

In addition to the impact of borders and policies, supervisors, preconceptions, grand narratives, and single stories, IPGRs' experiences are also shaped by the influence of league tables and metrics, neo-liberal practices, and their perceptions about the international status granted by the label. The first section in this chapter aims to highlight the significance allocated to metrics and league tables by IPGRs and their sponsors. This includes stances that embrace university rankings as concrete indicators of value, and critical observations that signal their flawed and overrated nature. The second section tackles IPGRs' perceptions about the international label. In so doing, it uncovers an array of narratives that tackle the differential treatment that individuals subsumed within the label endure, the elevated tuition fees compared to home students, and the common university discourses that perceive international students as cash cows. The major goal of this chapter is to introduce another layer of generative mechanisms that can exert an influence over IPGRs and their experiences.

7.2 The Prevalence of Metrics and League Tables

The continuity of the current promoted realities that impact students' experiences is partly sustained by the prevalence of metrics and league tables. Benchmark providers such as Top Universities, Complete University Guide, and THE World University Rankings, can serve as the backbone that justifies HEIs claims and fuels their promotional rhetoric. This reciprocal correlation relies on the mutual subscription to a set of metrics. The latter allegedly comprise student satisfaction, research quality, entry standards, facilities spend, graduate prospects, international outlook, industry income, in addition to other indicators and sub-metrics. These presumed standards are very controversial since their meanings and purposes are obscure, and

mainly serve to disseminate a partial reality about the status quo of HEIs. For instance, while facilities spend is an indicator that covers institutional investments to improve the state of their physical or digital infrastructures, it does not investigate the relevance or the potential benefit of such spend. Therefore, "a parking lot which was communicated as 'investing in the student experience'" (Collins, 2018, p.171) is as influential as a dedicated PGR study space for benchmark purposes. Along similar lines, the frameworks underpinning such metrics tend to discard several problematic indicators such as staff redundancies or pay gaps, resulting in a partial, or unrepresentative metrification. Despite these discrepancies, the influence that league tables exert on IPGRs' choices and destinations is significant as shown in the following sub-sections.

7.2.1 Institutional Rankings and IPGRs' Destinations

When asked about the reasons underpinning their university choice, most participants referred to rankings as one of the major elements influencing their decisions. The rationale for resorting to league tables comprised a variety of factors such as a desire to be affiliated with a reputable and highly ranked institution, an obligation to cope with sponsors' requirements, an aspiration to make oneself more employable by virtue of their institutional affiliation, and a quest to locate relevant school-specific rankings and metrics. In the following extract, Alice refers to the Russell Group as the major reason for her university choice.

> R: Is there anything that pushed you towards [University Name] in particular?
>
> Alice: I noticed that it's a Russell Group university. Also, it was ranked on the 14th position.
>
> R: Did that influence your decision?
>
> Alice: Oh, yeah, definitely. It's a Russell Group University. Everyone keeps talking about you know, if you graduate from this university, you get more chances more opportunities after this. So yeah, I think

it's, it's ... well, at the beginning, I thought it was a bit scary, it's a Russell Group university but then I went for it.

R: Why did it feel a bit scary?

Alice: Because it appears that the higher standards universities have, meaning that the research will be accelerated, and you can term it as an impostor syndrome. I thought maybe I do not belong. I don't know.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Alice' February 2020)</div>

Alice's destination choice is heavily influenced by the fact that the institution is part of the Russell Group. The latter appears to hold a unique reputation that is presumed to facilitate one's career prospects and opportunities. However, while this standard is mobilised by Alice to justify her university choice, it is equally used as means for self-othering. The deficit view at play in this extract is manifested via Alice's hesitation to pursue her degree at a Russell Group university. This is followed by a genuine concern vis-à-vis the likelihood of belonging to an allegedly research-intense institution. This reluctance to enrol within a highly ranked university was also reiterated by Claire who decided to go for a Russell Group university but avoided enrolling in a top 10 institution.

> Claire: Well, first of all, in order to get the scholarship, the funding, the body that is funding my scholarship needs to approve the university that I'm going to. So, it's got to be one of the top 200. [University Name] was one of them. I googled it, and they were talking about the Russell Group University. That means, you know, it's very focused on research, and it's really good in terms of, you know, enabling researchers to develop their research skills.
>
> R: Would you have gone for the ranking even if it was not required by your sponsor?
>
> Claire: Being a very motivated and perfectionist person, I might have chosen one of the best universities. But I did hear that the top universities are very difficult. So, I was a bit scared to go to the very top ones, for example, like UCL. I mean, they told me that these really

good universities would give you a hard time. So, I kind of went back and thought about it. Although at the very beginning, I wanted to choose a higher ranked university than [University Name], I wanted to choose a better one. So, it wasn't my first priority really. But having spoken with some people, they told me don't go for a very difficult University. I did, by the way get acceptance at UCL, which is one of the top 10 in the UK and worldwide.

R: How did you go about searching the university ranking, what did you take into consideration?

Claire: Well, I did put in like, those websites that show the QS ranking and I put in the name of the field that I wanted, which was education, and I saw the list of universities.

(Interview: 'Claire' January 2020)

While Claire appreciates that [University Name] is part of the Russell Group, this membership is less concerning to her compared to Alice. However, Claire still shares a certain degree of caution regarding the highest ranked HEIs and the difficulties that she might encounter if she decides to go with a top 10 university such as UCL. What is equally relevant to note from the previous two extracts is the taken-for-granted link between university rankings and value. The redundancy of the indicators that underlie the metrics is overlooked by Alice and Claire. Having said that, the extracts still highlight a significant level of awareness that could have resulted from learning to cope with the status quo. For instance, Alice's reference to the importance of rankings stems from her knowledge of the current requirements of the neo-liberal economy which sacralises these metrics and endorses them as a major indicator of value, skill, and reputation. This awareness is unpacked further by Stella who discusses the importance of rankings and employability.

Stella: I had my MA and then I had to finish my PhD, but I didn't want to continue in the original university. I wanted a university that had better ranking, especially when it comes to linguistics and the availability of subjects in Arabic and the department because when

you're looking for a PhD, you're not just looking at the university ranking overall, you're rather looking at the school you're targeting specifically. So, the one in [City Name] was the sixth in the UK when it comes to Arabic and linguistics, and I was like this is pretty good. Also, I found a supervisor who was working on something that's closely related to mine.

R: So how did you go about checking those rankings?

Stella: Basically, I first went for the international rankings. I forgot the specific names for them. The one that gets released each year in June, there's one that's international and a national that is specific to the UK that goes by department, and that's the one that almost made the decision for me. I was going to opt for either [University Name] or I found really like highly regarded supervisor in my field from Anglia Ruskin University, but then when I looked up the overall work for the Department, specifically, the one in [City Name] made it tough for me because you need something that's recognised internationally, and then something that kind of puts you forward nationally as well. I even looked at the employability rates and how that community is going because you're not only there for the certificate, but you also want a community that's going to support you.

(Interview: 'Stella' August 2020)

Stella's narrative account is illustrative of the complexities that shape IPGRs' university choice. The need to stand out by means of enrolling in highly ranked universities with high employability prospects is both an aim and an obligation. It is an aim because institutional affiliations have for long played a significant role in dictating different forms of cultural capital. Equally, it is an obligation since individuals are obliged to navigate and accommodate the prerequisites that render them employable. This explains Stella's decision to go with [University Name] over Anglia Ruskin in spite of finding a suitable supervisor there. The inevitable influence of league tables and their association with reputation and quality are also confirmed in Rachel's extract.

Rachel: I guess the reputation of the university as an institution was a big driving factor.

R: What do you mean by reputation?

Rachel: Like, it's quite high ranked in the league tables, and people know that. If I told my parents they would know immediately, like, they've heard of it at least, the other universities I don't think they've heard of as much and it's a big city so they know they can kind of place it or can say where it is.

(Interview: 'Rachel' August 2020)

This brief exploration of the factors underpinning IPGRs' university choice revealed a clear reliance on rankings and metrics as means to decide about one's destination. Arguments underpinning this stance comprised views that established a link between league tables, career prospects, value, and reputation. Other standpoints emphasized the need to opt for highly ranked HEIs to align with the current market requirements. These requirements are equally advocated by IPGRs' sponsors who, as in the case of Claire, seem to possess the upper hand in deciding about the range of institutions to choose from. However, are metrics and league tables necessarily representative of the potential endured experiences? The following sub-section briefly tackles IPGRs' views about these indicators, and partially deals with the afore-raised question.

7.2.2 Overrated and Irrelevant Metrics

The desire to cope with market requirements entails submitting to a set of metrics and ranking systems to decide about one's destination. While such process implies endorsing one of the major drivers of the promoted reality, it does not necessarily indicate IPGRs' naivety or inability to untangle the problematic nature of metrics. An extended conversation with three IPGRs who resorted to rankings as means to decide about their university choice reveals an array of alternative narratives. The latter encompasses Huyam's reference to the overrated nature of rankings, Lina's stance on the obscurity underpinning the factors through which universities are ranked, and Stella's

detailed account about the difference between the marketed and endured realities she encountered in two universities. This section is crucial as it highlights IPGRs' awareness of the influence of metrics within a neo-liberal economy. It therefore revises the image of IPGRs from 'naïve subscribers to a quantified experience' to 'active navigators of powerful realities.'

The following extract highlights Huyam's shifting position about the importance of rankings. The latter was one of the major aspects that influenced her destination. Huyam's preliminary encounters with university metrics suggested a taken-for-granted stance that established rankings as crucial factors in her quest to enrol in the 'best' university possible. This appeared in her alignment with the promoted reality she came across on the university website.

> Huyam: To be honest, the ranking was not a common criterion of selection that I usually opt for but as it was a higher educational level, that [University Name] is among the first ones made it important. I looked at it as 'if I am going to go with this then the best or nothing' (at least the best of the options I had). I remember that I got the idea of ranking when I was browsing the university website as I was reading about my supervisors' profiles and the idea that [University Name] is among the best ones just stuck in my head.

> (Microsoft Teams Written Interview: 'Huyam' August 2020)

However, follow up questions that investigated Huyam's attitude towards rankings revealed an entirely different narrative. The latter undermines the alleged importance of league tables and signals the observed discrepancies that unfold gradually as she navigates this experience.

> R: And how about now, how do you perceive university rankings?

> Huyam: Personally, I wouldn't care less about ranking now and if I am to redo it again, I would accept the offer depending on the circumstances back then and ranking would not be one of the criteria of choosing.

> R: What is the reason behind not caring about rankings anymore?

Huyam: Because when I have discussed supervision approaches with my friends from different universities, I realised that it is not about the university as much as it is about the staff working for it. As personally, what matters for me in the university is my supervisors. I am not saying that mine are not good but all I'm trying to transmit here is that rankings are overrated.

R: Why do you think that rankings are overrated?

Huyam: Because generally they reflect the overall of students' achievements, quality of university facilities, and knowledge delivered, but little they say about how students are actually treated to get those achievements or how the tutors are using those facilities to deliver knowledge. Rankings may reflect other schools maybe, but not my school and therefore I would say that rankings are not really that important.

(Microsoft Teams Written Interview: 'Huyam' August 2020)

The previous extract unveils the discrepancy between the promoted and endured realities even further by indicating that rankings denote what HEIs offer rather than how facilities are mobilised or how stakeholders are involved. Indeed, while a high 'staff per student' ratio may stand as a positive metric, it does not necessarily predict how students are being treated. Huyam's endured reality is indicative of the potential irrelevance of the metrics disseminated via ranking systems and league tables. This obscurity is also highlighted in Lina's extract below.

R: Why do you think that these rankings are important?

Lina: I don't personally think that the ranking is important. But before going to [City Name], someone was in charge of our programme. So, they were explaining how we approach and find a proper university. So, they would give us like the websites for university rank, ranking systems and then they were saying that you need to go on that website and choose like, the best well known universities and try from there to click on the university and go to the profile and see if you can

find your subject area. This is the way that led me to, to speak about the university rankings. But I personally don't think that ranking is important, because if you see the way universities are ranked, each ranking has its own standards. It's not clear how universities are ranked. So, there's lots of kind of uncertainty about on what basis these universities have been measured.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Lina' August 2020)</div>

Lina rightly questions the criteria used by renowned league tables to rank HEIs. A brief exploration of the aforementioned metric providers is sufficient to note the intricacy of the methodologies followed to establish these tables. What might appear a rigorously student-and-staff-informed ranking system is rather a void table that, for example, scores HEIs' 'international outlook' based the total number of international students recruited. The controversy that surrounds the relevance of these metrics is unpacked further in the following reflective entry.

> A recent [article](#) published by Leeds University and College Union (UCU) highlighted the dismissal of a member of staff "on the basis of not doing enough research". While such incident may not necessarily fit within the aim of this section, it provides valuable insights to raise legitimate concerns on the role of metrics and tables. Are HEIs subordinate to the indicators set by metric providers or vice versa? It appears that the influence of league tables transcends the simple role of quantifying universities' performance. It also dictates the set of indicators that institutions must adopt to maintain their visibility. Therefore, redundancies are not informed by staff members' negligence or underperformance, but rather decided by whether one's scholarship is notable enough to satisfy the predetermined indicators.

The previous extracts and reflective entry are sufficient to consider league tables as one of the mechanisms that both shape and sustain the promoted reality disseminated by HEIs. As noted by several IPGRs, these quantification tools exert a remarkable influence on students' choices and destinations. Not only that, but it also appears that league tables' indicators

are actively endorsed by HEIs to shape their promoted reality, and the overall strategy adopted by the university which, in many instances, could result in controversial redundancies and structural reconstructions. This section concludes with Stella's critical stance regarding the difference between her expectations, which were mainly fuelled by exposure to an unrepresentative promoted reality, and what she endured during her first days at [University Name]. She subsequently refers to the complex and redundant set of metrics that mask IPGRs' endured realities.

R: Do you think that university rankings are reliable?

Stella: No, they're not especially from my experience from [University Name] and [University Name], when I think about it, for instance, there is something that's like being advertised in [University Name] as we are ranked as gold when it comes to campus, blah, blah, blah. When you see it, you think of something like for someone who is a foreigner who does not know, the basis of these rankings, he would think like this is satisfactory, I'm going to settle off for this and I'm opting for it in the way it's like sold to you the way it's marketed to you. It's almost like telemarketing. It's not really like an objective ranking. You know if it involves how many publications they did, the people in there do not really ratify the quality of research, even satisfaction, student satisfaction. How do we call them, the student satisfaction statistics? You need like to read pages of details to find out what they are about. For example, in [University Name] they had gold one because they had so many trees in their campus. It is good for the environment, but it does not affect me as an international student.

R: They had many what?

Stella: A specific number of trees, they are classified as gold for having so many trees on their campus. The campus is in almost a park. So yeah, they got it for that. Or part of the satisfaction rate was about the food experience in the campus. They had the Chinese food bar for like three nights a week. I would have to read through real like

literally pages of reading to go to these specifics, but when you read the headlines, it's quite misleading.

<div align="right">(Interview: 'Stella' August 2020)</div>

7.2.3 Section Discussion

The claims disseminated via HEIs' promoted reality are sustained through a large body of influential league tables and metrics. Since these metrics are significant factors underpinning IPGRs' destination choices, it is in the interest of HEIs to conform to the set of indicators and ranking methodologies dictated by these providers. However, as witnessed through participants' narratives, neither HEIs' promoted reality nor league tables capture the endured realities revealed throughout this thesis. Although further research is crucial to understand the working of metrics in higher education, there are two alarming remarks that should be highlighted in this brief analysis.

First, league tables are actively dictating students' destinations with complex and sometimes irrelevant indicators that project a misleading image when set against what students endure. For instance, in spite of Stella's decision to enrol in a university that ranks among the top institutions in regard to facilities spend, Stella's endured reality reveals the same university's inability to provide dedicated study spaces for postgraduate researchers. Second, this controversial divergence between the promoted and endured realities is increasingly dictating the status quo of UK HEIs. In this vein, HEIs appear to be subordinate to how value and performance are quantified by league indicators, resulting in institutional decisions that do not necessarily reflect the needs or aspirations of relevant stakeholders (mainly academic staff and students).

Despite league tables' inability to capture the intricacy of students' endured experiences, IPGRs are still inclined to make use of them when deciding about their institutional affiliations. This is due to the influence that such metrics exert on sponsors and employers. As noted in this section extracts, IPGRs are aware of the mechanisms that condition their employability, and

since rankings are influential factors in terms of career prospects, IPGRs resort to navigating and adopting these metrics at face value so as to conform to market requirements.

7.3 Investigating the International Label: Students' Views

A series of narratives that reflect on the meaning of the word 'international' is shared by IPGRs in the following sub-sections. Throughout the course of interviews, participants expressed differing views and attitudes towards their international status. Standpoints spanned from ideas that considered the international label as a neutral distinctive marker that separates citizens and non-citizens, to reflections that challenged the deficit positioning that the label insinuates. IPGRs equally reflected on the elevated fees that accompany the international status, with some participants perceiving the gap in tuition fees between home and international status to be unjustifiable. The university where this data collection was undertaken charges home PhD students a fixed annual fee of £4600, and international students a variable annual fee that ranges between £20250 and £36250 depending on the pursued PhD degree. Therefore, international students are obliged to pay a fee that is 4.40-7.88 times higher than home student fees.

7.3.1 The International as a Cash Cow

Tuition fees are one of the major mechanisms that sustain the presence of the international label. As noted earlier, the label is underpinned by a deficit framework that reduces students to representatives of a national culture, allocates a discourse that portrays students as incompetent and uncritical, and deploys an array of administrative and systematic hurdles that hinder mobility, integration, and intensify students' alienation. Such deeply-engrained measures subsequently serve to normalise the need for international students to pay a different tuition fee, one that does not only cover the cost of their studies, but also subsidises home students' tuition. In this respect, many IPGRs perceived the international label as one of the means that render them cash cows, whose access to a UK university is

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granted only due to the financial value they bring. This is reiterated by several participants, starting with Stella in the following extract.

> R: So, in general what came to your mind when I said international student?
>
> Stella: A foreigner who pays to get the degree. It is like saying 'take my money and give me a certificate'. But internationally speaking, when it comes to the value of the certificate you get from UK, it is plummeting. Even my Chinese friend was telling me in China they're starting to treat Chinese students who come to UK as less reliable, and they're trying to like attract university teachers to come to China.
>
> (Interview: 'Stella' August 2020)

Commenting on the associations she makes with the international label; Stella immediately establishes a link between paying a sum of money and obtaining a university degree. She elaborates by claiming that the value associated with such degree is depreciating. The same idea is reiterated once more in Rachel's extract, where she considers the financial aspects as one of the main factors underpinning the international label.

> Rachel: I am not sure why it exists, partially due to the financial kind of aspects because they do know that these people are willing to pay this amount of money to gain access to education in the UK, because even if they do go back to their countries, like in Asia, degrees from the west are quite valued, highly valued. Actually, except for one exception, India, because my two friends did complain, they felt like it was quite useless to do their MA in UK. They went back to their same jobs I think, and they felt quite cheated.
>
> R: Reflecting on this, how do you perceive being an international student?
>
> Rachel: It feels a bit like they are using us a little bit like they are using us to gain something for themselves, but also, we are not gaining as much, if that makes any sense. So, we are always at a

disadvantage in that situation no matter what we do. A little bit depressing.

Rachel shares a similar experience to that of Stella vis-a-vis the plummeting value of a UK university degree. She equally argues that she is being profiteered from by HEIs while not receiving much in return. This, by default, keeps her at a disadvantage. Both Rachel's and Stella's extracts capture the impact of the financial obligations that international students need to abide by. These obligations are unanimously perceived to be exaggerated as will be shown throughout this section, but are nevertheless influential and hard, if not impossible, to question due to the reductionist state of being imposed through the international label. Sustaining this differential financial exploitation is also dependent upon UK HEIs' promised value, which can manifest in the form of better employability prospects as noted by Stella and Rachel. However, this promised value seems to be declining. Reflecting on the tuition fees that international students have to pay, Alice shares a similar view.

Alice: I do not think it is fair. To be honest, I really do not think it is fair. Because it is just not fair. When you see someone so basically, again, you are paying for that certificate. That's what you are doing because they know that those coming from a third world country would do whatever it takes to have the certificate. It does not matter how the process, or the journey is like, it is just a journey at the end. We all are aiming for that certificate. Do I think it is fair? It is not fair. I do not think it is fair. But again, we are here.

Alice's extract showcases the shared sense of awareness that IPGRs have about the workings of the neoliberal university. This is one of the common and recurring instances where international students are torn between 'living with' the neoliberal agenda that exploits them in every way possible for the ultimate aim of attaining an allegedly valuable certificate, and 'challenging' the differential rhetoric that enforces a problematic category that does not

only dictate a high tuition fee, but also imposes a distinctive state of being. Nonetheless, questions still arise about the rationale underpinning this exaggerated uncapped fee, as pointed in Claire's extract.

> Claire: I think it adds up that the international students are providing a good source of income to higher education. I think this is something that they would always consider and keep as a main target. You know, they are targeting international students, they are good for the economy. It is good for the university. So yeah, we are bringing in a lot of money. I don't understand why the fees are this high. I have thought about it a lot and I still don't know why. Why are they trying to make it harder for us to come but they still want us to? I don't know. I don't know.

(Interview: 'Claire' September 2020)

Claire's last statement 'why are they trying to make it harder for us to come but they still want us to?' summarises the perplexing financial and institutional realities endured by IPGRs. This imposed experience is made up of contradicting statements and processes that pretend to accentuate the value of mobility, celebrate diversity, and pledge to cater for inclusivity and equality. On the other hand, the same experience imposes differential measures that isolate international students and deploy an array of structural and bureaucratic mechanisms to constrain, or even prevent, the same mobility that HEIs claim to support. Consequently, IPGRs' mobility is always conditional and restricted. This slightly mimics the 'Separate but equal' doctrine adopted by the United States to institutionalise racial segregation in the late 19th century, as explained in the following analogy.

I always associate the experiences endured by international students with the 'separate but equal' doctrine adopted as part of the Jim Crow laws era in the United States. In a nutshell, 'separate but equal' legalised racial segregation in regard to access to facilities and services, and institutionalised colour-based separation while pledging to maintain equal access. The latter was not upheld and resulted in a wide gap between the facilities and services used by white people, and the ones used by non-white

people. For instance, "Pompano white schools collectively had one teacher for every 25 students, while the Pompano Colored School had one teacher for every 54 students" (Hobby, 2012). While the events and their intensity differ compared to the situation back then, I still regard the distinctive measures, which tend to be mostly restrictive, that international students endure to be sustained by a similar rationale to the 'separate but equal' doctrine. It only takes one to substitute 'white' by 'home' and non-white by 'international' to visualise the restrictions that compromise students' trajectories.

Similar viewpoints to those shared by Stella, Rachel, Alice, and Claire are also reiterated by other IPGRs. In the following extract, Amira condemns the exaggerated tuition fee gap between home and international students and argues that such difference is unjustifiable since both groups receive the same treatment.

> Amira: It is unfair, honestly, because they take a lot. It is not just like £1000 or £2000, sometimes it is triple. I feel like it is unfair because we are doing the same programme. We are having the same treatment in terms of education not in terms of like socially or anything, so why do you take from A more than you take from B? just because of nationality. It is business, education has become business now. On top of that they are giving special treatment for European countries; will they give the same treatment for African countries? I do not think so.

> (Interview: 'Amira' February 2020)

Amira's frustration is driven by what she perceives to be an unfair gap between home and international tuition fees. She repeatedly questions the grounds upon which such gap is established, especially that both groups of students are undertaking the same degree, without any special educational support or treatment dedicated to those who pay more. If we are to adopt a student-as-a-consumer approach where HEIs' degrees are presented in the form of a service or a commodity, why is the same service/commodity costing a customer more than another? The present status of UK HEIs is

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predicated on selective neoliberal policies where institutions are actively commodifying educational degrees, but equally imposing a puzzling hierarchy that yields a state of favouritism. This is exacerbated via the promotional rhetoric that paints the same institutions as pioneers of equality, diversity, and inclusivity.

7.3.2 Questioning the International Label

IPGRs' insights around the connotations of the international label surpassed a mere discussion about tuition fees. For several students, the label raised several concerns, indicated a problematic state of being, and comprised an array of insinuations. In this sub-section, I intend to shed light on the associations that IPGRs make in relation to being, or having to be, an international student. What is certain from the upcoming extracts is the fact that the label is more restrictive than representative, more imposed than adopted, and serving a reductionist rather than a student-informed agenda. The obscurity surrounding the international label is well-portrayed in the following extract by Rachel.

> Rachel: I feel like it's a very confusing label because when they say international, usually they group me with like, the first like, a lot of internationals it's like their first time living away from home or they tend to group me with a lot of the Chinese students who don't really, aren't very open to others, open to meeting other people, they usually have like that group already. And whenever I go to international events, for instance, they have these groups already, like, they tend to socialise in their national groups, and I feel a bit out of place in that sense.

> (Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)

The initial impressions shared by Rachel designate her confusion when the label is employed to imply being subsumed within a group of students who are experiencing mobility for the first time, or when she is perceived to be part of groups that comprise mainly Chinese students. She then claims that these Chinese students are neither open to others, nor willing to socialise

beyond their national groups. Although Rachel is cognisant of the problematic usages of the international label which impose a rigid form of belonging that does not capture the intricate trajectories of international students, she subsequently draws on the same problematic usages when referring to Chinese students. Such generalisation is inadvertently refuted later in the interview when she describes her Chinese friend's dissatisfaction with the same issue.

> Rachel: I lived with a Chinese student in [neighbourhood name] and she says like, it's quite frustrating because she wants to hang out with other like different kinds of people, but they tend to always discount her or like they, push her away because her English isn't super strong, but since she was living with me, one Canadian and one Australian girl, and an Indian guy, we only spoke English to her. She felt quite happy about that, because she wanted to improve her English. But now she's living with two other Chinese students, and she only speaks Chinese now and she's quite frustrated about that.

> (Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)

The preconceptions that Rachel holds about Chinese students are sustained by the same dominant discourse that others her into a category that she finds superficial. In spite of dealing with the same delusive representations, she does not seem to take note of her Chinese flatmate's frustrations with the reductionist discourses and mechanisms that actively strive to assign a problematic essence to the way Chinese students are expected to behave. This is illustrative of the influences that such image exerts on the preconceptions that IPGRs hold about themselves and others. The latter is a problematic state of being where agents are either othering themselves and/or others based on the prevalent preconceptions they encounter on the go. Consequently, IPGRs may reinforce as much as they dispute the discourses that essentialise their experiences. In the following extract, Rachel elaborates even further on her understanding of being international by highlighting the disconcerting assumptions that accompany the label.

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Rachel: I think I still definitely belong in the international label. But when I say I am international, like I'm an international student, there's always perceptions of like, especially at [university name], usually people will always immediately think like, oh, international students, which means they are rich, they are spoiled, they don't speak English, or they, they will only hang out with other international students. That's at least the perception that I have got from other internationals.

(Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)

As denoted by Rachel, there is an array of perceptions that accompany the international label, amongst which is the belief that all international students are wealthy and incompetent English language speakers who socialise exclusively with other international students. Such image is sufficient to obstruct any attempt for home and international students to transcend the dominant status quo that renders their realities incompatible and inherently different. The view that international students are wealthy but linguistically impaired is juxtaposed by the view that home students are indebted native speakers. Such platitudinous statement is eventually mobilised as the essence upon which home and international students cannot socialise or share a common sense of belonging. In the following extract, Claire elaborates on this further by questioning the relevance of the international label.

Claire: I don't like it very much. Does it mean that I am foreign? does it mean that I'm here temporarily? Does it mean that I don't really belong? How do you interpret that kind of label? I mean, it's good to be around different people. It's good to have diversity. But why can't I just be like, student? Why do I have to make that kind of distinction or discrimination between home students or international students? I know it's technicality, but maybe the way it's addressed in formal or informal situations that kind of makes it a bit stigmatising sometimes. So, in terms of having us build a sense of belonging, I don't think it's that helpful, you know, using that kind of word.

(Interview: 'Claire' September 2020)

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Claire's questions rightly uncover the positioning that being international implies. According to her, the label is utilised to foreignize a group of students and impose a form of restrictive mobility whereby one's belonging is temporary. She subsequently highlights the stigmatising discrimination that she encounters in situations where the label is mobilised. Such distinctive status marker is not convenient within a context where students and stakeholders are striving to establish a meaningful sense of belonging. Claire's critical stance towards the mobilisation of the international label is further vocalised as she condemns the rigid understanding of diversity that is sustained by the international and home categories. This standpoint concurs with the findings highlighted in previous chapters which uncovered the presence of interculturality-from-within and contested a neo-essentialist understanding of diversity.

Feeling international regardless of status is one of the most unprecedented findings that I encountered in this research. In the following extracts, Alex narrates parts of his experience as an asylum-seeker in the UK. Despite paying home status tuition fees, Alex argues that the international label transcends its predetermined administrative purposes as it entails a state of being that even students who are not deemed to be international by HEIs can identify with.

> Alex: By virtue of my immigration status, I am not labelled as an international student, because I am resident here and my status is home based now. But the labels go beyond this simple category or simple labels. The labels to me are more of the feelings, more of the symbolic meaning of an international, and this feeling comes from my experience into society as well. How you feel in the university is also affected by how you feel elsewhere like the work environment, for example, your social life, social activities, and then the people you meet, the system you deal with, and the bureaucracies you come across for example. So, yes, I don't see myself as a home student. Physically, I am a home based student. But I'm still feeling like an international student.

R: What fuels this?

Alex: It goes back to our discussions about Brexit as a process of othering, so I can't see myself as part of the 'us'. There's a phrase in migration studies called inclusive exclusion. So, someone might be physically and legally included but the systems, this mundane, trivial day to day life make you feel you're excluded. So, if you were to do your masters for example, if I were to do my masters and apply for the same job with someone who has done the same masters would we have the same possibilities, would we have the same likelihood of getting the job? It's very difficult to quantify, but there are many instances where you feel not actually ... is someone really part of the 'us'? No. (Interview: 'Alex' January 2020)

The previous extract is illustrative of the impact that the international label exerts beyond its administrative contexts. Alex's international status is self-attributed, despite being classified as a home-tuition-paying student. This voluntary identification is based on Alex's inability to perceive himself as part of the 'us'. For him, this feeling is caused by the experiences he endures on the go, both within and beyond the educational environment. This sense of exclusion is partly influenced by Brexit. The latter, as Alex explains, insinuates a form of othering that prevents him from perceiving himself as part of 'us'. In the following extract, Alex elaborates further on the symbolic meaning of Brexit.

Alex: If we want to refer to Brexit for example, what would the symbolic meaning of it be to someone who comes to the UK as a refugee? What does it tell you about your status, your place and belongingness into society? Because it was a rejection, I can see that it was a rejection in so many ways of people who are not categorised as the 'us'. It was an indication of the 'them' versus the 'us'. It vocalised those dark sentiments which were implicit and made them explicit. The people became brutal in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. People started to say go back to your country.

(Interview: 'Alex' January 2020)

This brief exploration of the associations that IPGRs establish vis-à-vis the international label unveiled an array of critical stances that contested the discoursal construction of the 'international student' statement as a neutral administrative marker. Instead, the alternative narratives redefined the label as a powerful political tool that encapsulates a diverse body of students within a rigid neo-essentialist reality, which eventually dictates a necessarily different, and mostly unprivileged, sense of belonging. In the following section, IPGRs narrate instances of othering and differential treatment fuelled by the international label.

7.3.3 International Students and Differential Treatment

Most international students find themselves in a perplexing situation due to the contradicting discourses they navigate on the go. Such discourses disseminate a reality that is exclusionary while upholding inclusive slogans, reductionist while advancing diversity, and creating privilege gaps due to the unequal access to opportunities while preaching to be equal. Within the confines of these binary forms of being, international students are expected to develop a sense of belonging despite actively enduring exclusionary measures (e.g., laws and policies that restrict mobility, work, and equal access). They are also anticipated to bring in diverse forms of being regardless of the rigid and neo-essentialist understanding of diversity they encounter at several instances within and beyond the institutional context. And finally, they are expected, and sometimes obliged, to perceive this situation as equal regardless of the unequal access to opportunities and the exorbitant fees they must pay. Such conflictual realities subsequently yield an array of standpoints by international students, as will be highlighted in the upcoming paragraphs. In the following extract, Elizabeth reflects on the international student label and the differential treatment that she received at [university name].

> Elizabeth: I think it's a neutral word because ... apart from paying double tuition fees and we have language problems, we are treated the same way in school, we go to classes, seminars, do exams, same way with other British students. It's not like you are British you can

graduate successfully I am international I can't. It's about how hard you work; it depends on myself. I also think they treat us differently, apart from tuition fees and things like that. I think it's in a good way because they have consultation through international student office. I think this is positive. They organise different events like [event name] to help international students make friends and get to know the culture and you know in the student union you can join any society there is no restriction. When I get along with British people, they were very nice to me, they don't see me as a Chinese or something, they just see me as someone who is funny who they can get along with and make friends with. Maybe I was lucky that I was treated very nicely and that's why I want to stay in this country forever.

(Interview: 'Elizabeth' January 2020)

The first narrative shared in this sub-section portrays Elizabeth's stance regarding the international label along with the treatment she received as an international student. Unlike the previous extracts that denote the imposed feeling of alienation that IPGRs associate with the label, in addition to the politics and the restrictive measures that the status entails, Elizabeth highlights two equally important facets where she was treated both equally and differently. The former is manifested in the form of equal access to classes, exams, and societies, while the latter appears via the differential support that international students receive at the international office. Perhaps one of the major differences between Elizabeth's extract and other reflections about the international student status is depicted in the following extract as Elizabeth normalises the imposed alienation contested by other IPGRs.

R: How do you perceive this label?

Elizabeth: They are right because I came from abroad. I pay triple or double tuition fee. I know in this country education is a product for international students. I think I got really good education here, so I don't have problems here. I don't have British nationality, I am international. I am okay with this label. Because in China when we

see foreigners, we say oh they are foreigners, it's the same thing you know, how do I say, I am me myself and the other is the other.

Elizabeth perceives the differential status to be justified. However, although she recognises the fact that education is a commodity, she does not show any concern with the fact that the price tag allocated to this product is dependent upon one's nationality. She then establishes an understanding of alienation or otherness on account of one's national origins. This narrative account is essential to initiate a discussion vis-à-vis the treatment received by IPGRs. In this regard, it is important to raise the following question: If education is indeed a product, should students who pay more receive a better treatment? The upcoming extracts aim to tackle this issue. In the following narrative, Sara shares insights from a student-as-consumer approach.

Sara: I always feel that the university is investing and at the end they want money, and they want to return money. So being labelled as an international means you are a golden egg for more income. I was shocked when I saw the tuition, the difference between the UK citizens and like the international and I was like, oh my god, it's not the double maybe triple. So, I feel like they should label us as international and they should give us more resources and like, treat us in a privileged way. Because we pay, we paid a lot. So, if you think about it, like if we are two customers, UK and international, I am paying triple so I should receive more. But I don't feel like we are getting more … I keep comparing what I pay and what the locals pay, and at the end, we get the same thing. So, if in a simple calculation, you think about it, you don't really get what you pay for. They're paying less and they get the same thing, the same attention, sometimes more, because of the European context.

Sara's endorsement of the student-as-consumer stance is accompanied with the claim that international students should be prioritised in terms of

resource provision and privileges. She rightly adds that this is not the case since home students have access to the same resources and receive the same attention and opportunities if not more (as we have explored in the borders and policies section, home students are more privileged prior, during, and even after their degrees). This idea concurs with Lina's frustration with the limited opportunities available for international students.

> Lina: We are given the same resources, the same kind of space where to study, we attend the same lectures. So, from kind of a student experience perspective, I think it's the same, but I've noticed when it comes to kind of jobs, it's more dedicated for those who are, home and European because they expect an international student to have the degree and go back to their country. So, I've noticed within the [university job opportunities website], for example, and within the events that they do, all the time, it's mainly dedicated for home students, not for international students. So, in that sense, you feel that we're not really treated in the same way. I think it's not fair because we are all students and we had the same experience as a home student to develop the same knowledge, the same skills. We had the same thing, and we brought a lot of money to the country. So, we would expect to have an equal opportunity when it comes to jobs or the choice whether we stay here or to go back, not just to assume that all international students will go back.

> (Interview: 'Lina' August 2020)

As stated above, there is an ongoing discomfort regarding the nature of the treatment that IPGRs expect. A view that subscribes to the student-as-consumer approach advanced by HEIs is sufficient to spot an array of contradictions. First, a degree as a product offered by educational bodies is priced differently on account of one's national origins. This yields another form of privilege gap among home and international students. Second, adopting this price difference can only be justified if the educational body is providing dedicated support or resources to justify the elevated tuition. In this vein, HEIs' discourses appear to rely on the reification of the international

category as a marker of an inherently different state of being, one that allegedly requires further support compared to the state of being of home students. However, this conceptualisation of the international as deficient does not translate into a set of dedicated initiatives to tackle this alleged 'deficiency'. Therefore, the label is imposed to sustain a differential state of being which facilitates the exploitation of international students financially. Such contradiction is once more confirmed by another IPGR.

> Rachel: I think it's a bit unfair because we're not receiving any kind of different treatment. we're treated the same as the domestic students, maybe even some aren't feeling like they're getting as much support or they're feeling left behind.

> (Interview: 'Rachel' February 2020)

Rachel's brief extract aligns with the afore-mentioned narratives as it questions the relevance of the elevated tuition fees that international students must pay, especially that such difference does not bring her or other students any special benefits. The same differential treatment is regarded as a form of discrimination by Claire, as noted in the following extract.

> Claire: I'm wondering if I'm paying so much, my funding sponsors are paying double the amount of what's being paid here by the home students, then why am I not getting a better treatment, or better support or better supervision? So, it kind of made me reach the understanding that there is a kind of discrimination in terms of how PGRs are treated, which is very sad. At the same time, it's made me work even harder to prove to my supervisors to my community that I am just as good as other PGRs. Because of how I'm perceived as an international student funded by somebody who's outside of the university, it had made me work, maybe even double the work that other PGRs would work in order to prove to myself and to them that no, I'm just as good as the other PGRs.

> (Interview: 'Claire' January 2020)

As noted earlier, the mobilisation of the international label as a marker of an inherent difference and/or deficiency is sufficient to justify the differential treatment endured by IPGRs. The same discourses can also serve to sustain alienation, as students labelled international attempt to counter the reductionist state of being imposed on them. For Claire, such status-fuelled differentiation motivated her to work hard to counter the deficient narratives. This section concludes with Alex's extract where he highlights the workings of the international label and the set of obligations and entitlements that result from that.

> Alex: Labels are always political. And they always come for a reason. And the reason would be probably about deciding who deserves the rights and entitlements, who deserves the protection of the state, for example. So, it is about distinction between the citizen and non-citizen. If you just come to the UK, having your passport, the state will not be able to distinguish between the citizen and the non-citizen. So as a non-citizen, you will be labelled as an international student, and it automatically tells you that there are certain rights that you are not entitled to because you are a non-citizen. And the state will have prerogative rights and the power to exercise any kind of arbitrary decision. For example, if anything happens in the state, they might deport you. If you are given the status of the citizen, then the state will not be able to deport you because you are a citizen. So, you can be deported without any legal scrutiny because you are the other, you are not a citizen, you are deportable.

> (Interview: 'Alex' January 2020)

The distinction highlighted by Alex pinpoints one of the gaps that HEIs fail to account for when promoting equality, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging. The endured realities described by IPGRs throughout this sub-section is a testimony to the intricate contradictions underlying the terrains they navigate on the go. Students labelled international are obliged to endorse a problematic student-as-consumer approach that commodifies educational degrees and experiences. Meanwhile, they are expected to tolerate an

elevated tuition fee that does not grant them any special treatment or resources although one of the purported reasons underpinning this huge gap is the claim that international students require more support. This is yet another layer of mechanisms that fortify the long-standing sense of alienation induced by the wide spectrum of policies that dictate the formation of ingroups and outgroups.

7.3.4 Section discussion

Throughout this section, several IPGRs reflected on the connotations they associate with the international label and the ways through which they perceive the label to function within and beyond their personal trajectories. Considering the noticeable difference between home and international tuition fees, almost all IPGRs argued that such gap is exorbitant and exaggerated. Such instances are adequate to uncover the workings of the label beyond the allegedly neutral administrative categories that distinguish students coming from abroad. The international label is an imposed state of being that legitimises a differential form of treatment. As we have explored further, the same state of being is maintained via a discourse of deficiency and incompetence, where the international is a non-citizen, non-native, and non-critical individual who is portrayed as someone with distinctive needs that require special forms of support and resource provision.

However, as observed through IPGRs' narratives, this imposed differentiation is not accompanied by a dedicated support network. For instance, if the otherization of the international label rests on the claim that such students are not capable English language speakers, questions arise regarding the availability of dedicated support channels that could be utilised by international students to improve their proficiency. The endured realities portrayed through the narratives showcase the paradoxical statements disseminated by HEIs. The same international postgraduate researcher can be subject to a plethora of discourses that render them incompetent but assign them a 'casual' teaching role, impose a sense of alienation on them via the international label but expect them to adopt the equal, inclusive, and diverse slogans at face value. It is through uncovering these contradictory

states of being that one can fathom out their bewildering influences on IPGRs' trajectories.

This quandary in turn yields a variety of standpoints. In this respect, IPGRs either reproduce the very neo-liberal discourses that emphasise the commercialisation of educational degrees and student experiences or contest their rationale by highlighting and condemning the differential measures that render them alienated. Some IPGRs, as noted in the previous sub-section, may even adopt the discourses that perceive them to be part of an essentially different and foreign outgroup upon which the very differential measures and elevated fees are justified. This is where the 'us' 'them' abstract categories are reified, as alleged difference on account of national origin is tolerated by the 'other'.

7.4 Conclusion

This final analysis chapter revolved around two major themes: The prominence of league tables, and the significations that many participants associate with the international label. What is important to note in this regard is the uncontested realisation that university rankings are fuelled by misleading indicators that do not necessarily cover areas of relevance to international students. The vagueness and complexity of such indicators allows HEIs to project an alternative reality, one that does not align with what students encounter throughout their trajectory. International students' awareness is clearly articulated by several participants who juxtaposed what is promoted with what they endured. However, they equally realise that in spite of the numerous flaws that underpin these league tables, students are obliged to rely on them, especially if they plan to secure a decent job. The chapter then proceeded to consider students' views vis-à-vis the international label. A frequent discomfort with the underpinnings and connotations of the label was reported by several students, with extracts that tackle the financial prerequisites associated with being international, and the recurring sense of foreignness, alienation, and differential treatment resulting from that.

Chapter 8
Final Discussion and Concluding Remarks

8.1 Introduction

This research has tackled a plethora of experiences endured by students labelled international. In so doing, it uncovered and scrutinised several mechanisms that dictate and sustain the deficit frameworks underpinning students' realities, with a major focus on their intercultural trajectories, their perceptions of themselves and others, their navigation of rigid structures, and their critical stance vis-à-vis the problematic realm of labels imposed on them. The following sub-sections discuss the findings reported in the previous three analysis chapters, and tackle the following questions:

1. What mechanisms impact the trajectories and experiences of students labelled international?
2. What implications do these mechanisms exert on students' experiences, choices, and realities?
3. How do students labelled international perceive and construct their intercultural and student experiences?
4. What perceptions do students hold about the international label?
5. Why is labelling students problematic?

In answering these five questions I intend to outline what I perceive to be an important research-based contribution to the literature that deals with interculturality, students' experiences, and the internationalisation of UK HE. In spite of its alleged dependence on critical and non-reductionist paradigms, current research and scholarship within and beyond the aforementioned areas take the international label at face value. This does not only solidify the label but equally prevents researchers and academics from recognising its problematic nature. The result is research that portrays students labelled international as individuals with distinctive needs, values, behaviours, etc., which subsequently yields a puzzling homogeneous reality that, as I will

argue later in this chapter, facilitates the deficit frameworks deployed within the fabric of the neoliberal university.

8.2 The Mechanisms Underpinning IPGRs' Trajectories

Throughout the research, I repeatedly draw on Bhaskar's view of generative mechanisms as "nothing more of a way of acting of a thing (Bhaskar, 2008, p.51). In other words, mechanisms stand for the elements that may cause or contribute to the realities endured by individuals. The emphasis on 'may' in the previous sentence is crucial, as the potential causalities inferred from the working of these mechanisms "may be possessed unexercised and exercised unrealised, just as they may of course be realised unperceived (or undetected) by people" (Bhaskar, 1998, p.11). This implies the impossibility to predict and explain the exact realities endured by students labelled international since the mechanisms that shape their trajectories are always manifested and experienced differently. This argument is important as it distances this research from the simplistic objective of reducing reality to a set of predetermined causalities.

What is significant to note from these generative mechanisms is the fact that they are exclusively attributed to and imposed on students labelled international, resulting in what I perceive to be a homogenised, but not necessarily homogeneous, group of individuals. It is homogenised because of the structural forces that impose the same set of mechanisms on individuals labelled 'international'. It is not necessarily homogeneous as these individuals' trajectories signal a plethora of standpoints that approach and navigate these mechanisms differently. Throughout this chapter, I argue that the constant homogenisation of students labelled international by means of these mechanisms is crucial for sustaining the neoliberal ambitions advanced through the UK's internationalisation agenda.

The mechanisms impacting the trajectories of students labelled international span a wide range of contexts, starting from the ways the 'international' label itself is mobilised. As a broad and widely-uncontested label, the international designates a group of students with distinctive characteristics that allegedly

deny them the possibility to be grouped with home students, which in turn serves to instil a state of otherness that not only dictates students' perceptions of themselves and others, but also exerts a significant influence over the discourses, policies, and perceptions upheld by other university actors. The presence of numerous mechanisms that sustain the existence of this label, as will be highlighted in the upcoming paragraphs, has led to its reification. This can be observed through the very use of the label by students labelled international along with other actors to refer to a seldom problematised group of students.

In addition to an array of mechanisms, the continuously-uncontested influence of the international label can be warranted by the complicity of the very individuals who are identified as or identify as international. Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence can be very helpful in unpacking the workings of this phenomena. This is defined as "violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.167, their italics). The influence of symbolic violence can be witnessed within the realm of "everyday classification, labels, meanings, and categorisations" (Swartz, 2013, p.39) that yield in-groups and out-groups, citizens and non-citizens, and, in this specific context, home and international students.

Bourdieu claims that this complicity is manifested through agents' tendency to "contribute to producing the efficacy of that which determines them" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, pp.167-168). In this regard, Thapar-Björkert et al. (2016, p.148) add that symbolic violence is a "product of when those who are dominated stop questioning existing power relations, as they perceive the world and the state of affairs in a social activity as natural, a given and unchangeable". Although I agree with the basic argument of agents' complicity, as this is clearly portrayed via one of the IPGRs' narratives where the participant constructs the label as 'neutral' and adds that "they are right because I came from abroad. I pay triple or double tuition fee. I know in this country education is a product for international students" (Extract from Elizabeth's narrative when asked about the international label), this idea

does not account for two significant factors: First, that complicity could be strategic, allowing agents to exploit this state of imposed deficiency (e.g., when the international label is adopted to advocate for 'special' treatment) and second, that the mechanisms underpinning such complicity are sometimes purposefully unproblematised by agents (since international students come from countries where in-groups and out-groups are formed on the go, which makes them perceive othering during their study abroad to be natural and justified).

The differential realities endured due to being affiliated with the international label are sustained via an array of mechanisms that are deployed to ensure the continuous presence of the label, maintain a state of otherness on accounts of one's nationality, and eventually advance the neoliberal status quo where international students arguably serve as the backbone of UK HEIs. The mechanisms are not only exploitative, but also act as restrictive barriers that constantly hinder students' agency. In the following paragraphs, I outline these mechanisms and their influence on IPGRs' trajectories. This, however, should not be regarded as an exhaustive list of mechanisms, and the interplay that I perceive to be taking place between these mechanisms and the realities endured by IPGRs is always fallible. Having said that, the focus shifts from merely attempting to establish a correlation to unveiling how IPGRs' being is restricted and the repercussions resulting from that.

IPGRs' initial encounter with one of these mechanisms occurs while crossing the UK border. The very first remarks highlighted in this context relate to the dedicated security lanes that differentiate UK/EU passports and all other passports. The dedicated lanes involve different sets of policies, security checks, and procedures that should be accomplished prior to crossing the border. For UK/EU citizens (and other selected nationalities that can be considered as part of the so-called global north), this involves passing through electronic security gates that require scanning one's passport. For all other passports, though, the process is more complicated, as it involves interacting with a border force agent, who rigorously checks one's passport and residence permit/visa along with a fingerprint check. This is usually

followed by several questions that probe into one's purpose of visit, their course and accommodation details, and other personal questions. This encounter is explored in detail in the first section of chapter 5 where participants felt like they were "stuffed on the side", "a prisoner", "more likely to do criminal stuff", "afraid" to be denied entry, and unentitled to be a member of the local group.

Such systematic differentiation engenders a feeling of otherness. The latter eventually sustains the long standing essentialism underpinning how individuals construct in-groups and out-groups. For the majority of students labelled international, this alienating experience imposes a reality where the same borders act both as bridges and barriers (O'Dowd, 2002, pp.19-24), which in turn dictates who is 'us' and 'them' (Holliday, 2021; Chen et al., 2022; Dervin and Jacobsson, 2022; Hall, 1992). This status-fuelled differentiation is exacerbated when individuals deemed part of 'them' are demonised by means of rigid deficit frameworks and long-standing preconceptions that proliferate several institutional fabrics within higher education institutions and beyond.

Along with these patronising border-crossing experiences, students labelled international are exposed to other puzzling quandaries such as the need to fit under one of the ethnic and religious labels. The latter imposes a predetermined set of ethnic (Arab, Asian, Black, Mixed, etc.), and religious (Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, etc.) affiliations that students have to identify with during visa application procedures, university registration, GP and police registration, and even when applying for jobs. Such imposed affiliations are problematic since they mobilise fixed and homogeneous identity markers that fail to account for the complex forms of belonging resulting from individuals' active negotiation of these markers. As a student labelled international, these imposed affiliations are inevitable, and serve as mechanisms that impede the manifestations of agency that transcend these pre-determined labels.

Police registration was also highlighted as one of the most demeaning experiences encountered by students. This is a process that applies to a

selected number of nationalities, and involves a first time registration at the local police station, followed by regular visits in case of any change of circumstances (moving to a new address, travelling abroad, getting married, etc.). The fact that only certain nationalities, most of which are considered to be part of the so-called global south, are subject to this procedure is indicative of another layer of alienation. This procedure serves to unveil the covert discrimination fuelled by the demonised images underpinning such policies. What is important to note thus far is the realisation that the terrains navigated by students labelled international are full of hurdles and constraints that eventually maintain the privilege gap between home and international students, and subsequently, those who are part of 'us' and 'them'.

Another significant mechanism underpinning the restricted realities endured by students labelled international is what can be broadly summarised as preconceptions about oneself and others. This comprises students' views about living in the UK and UK higher education, grand narratives of nation, religion, ethnicity, etc., and the preconceptions that other relevant parties and individuals hold about students labelled international (this includes supervisors, university staff, landlords, friends, etc.). The working of these elements is by no means measurable, as the impact of one's preconceptions about oneself and others is complex, unpredictable, and continuously affirmed/contested. Most narratives that tackle the workings of this mechanism are duly unpacked in the sixth chapter.

Metrics and league tables could also be considered as major mechanisms underpinning the realities endured by students. The quantification of higher education institutions by means of problematic indicators sustains the current neoliberal agenda underpinning the strategies of educational institutions in the UK and other major study destinations. The realities endured by students labelled international exert no influence on the working of these metrics. In fact, as much as international students are actively homogenised, they are equally neo-liberalised, or in other words, obliged to

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adopt and navigate the current neoliberal agenda so as to fulfil market requirements.

As noted earlier, this list is not exhaustive and is not intended to be. In addition to these substantial factors, the realities endured by students labelled international are also influenced by what can be described as mechanisms stemming from some already-established mechanisms. For instance, the persistent reliance on the international label as a distinctive marker of an alleged difference guarantees the continuity of uncapped and exorbitant tuition fees. The latter would not be sufficiently justified if the international is not actively alienated and essentialised. Another example is the narratives of silence, self-attributed deficiencies, and criticality which are covered in the fifth chapter. These stem from the deficit frameworks that perceive the west as steward, superior, and on a mission "to 'help' the world think and learn" (Holliday, 2021, p.100). Similar discourses instil feelings of deficiency and lack of criticality, leading some students to resort to silence as a means to conceal this supposed incompetence.

To understand the implications resulting from these mechanisms, one must visualise the potential manifested realities that students navigate on the go. For this homogenised group of students, being entails accepting a label that defines their rights and entitlements on an a priori basis, establishes who they are in comparison to others, and deploys a set of regulations, policies, and restrictive measures that maintain the differential status quo. The international student is subject to an array of restrictive policies that surface even before setting foot in the UK. This existence is subsequently monitored rigorously by means of an inequitable set of rules that exacerbate one's feeling of alienation. Every tackled mechanism thus far seems to emphasise difference on account of one's status. Such differentiation is once more consolidated via a long-standing body of grand narratives and deficit frameworks. Portraying the international other as deficient is justifying status-based-segregation even further, and ensuring the continuous financial exploitation imposed on this group of students.

8.3 Alienating State of Belonging

As demonstrated in the previous section, a plethora of generative mechanisms serve to shape the realities endured by students labelled international. Regardless of whether such restrictive factors are deployed strategically to maintain the differential measures imposed on this homogenised group, what is significant to highlight is the conditional form of belonging that these students encounter on the go. It is conditional as it maintains the imagined uncrossable boundaries that are often in play whenever international students are mentioned. The mechanisms create an imagined difference, one that not only homogenises and alienises the international other, but also renders their very sense of belonging alienating. This practice concurs with the idea of 'exclusionary inclusion' that several governments implement with asylum seekers. In this regard, asylum seekers are "construed as persons outside our idea of 'community' and shared values, as persons who are defined into legal systems by their status as outsiders rather than as potential citizens" (Kneebone, 2004, 2005).

Exclusionary inclusion measures are underpinned by a structural functionalist understanding of community, where imagined shared values and principles are considered to be the norm sustaining the homogeneity of the society, which, by default, excludes individuals who were not originally born and raised in that community. In the context of international students, such rigid understanding is not only implemented to reify a state of difference, as it is also mobilised to justify a distinctive body of rules and structures that hinder the manifestation of equitable forms of belonging and dictate one's entitlements and privileges. International students' belonging is therefore portrayed as a process of integrating a necessarily different other into a homogeneous whole, with the prerequisite that such integration maintains the privilege gap that distinguishes home and international students.

In addition to restricting international students' agency, such standpoint is equally limiting the forms of being of ingroup 'members' themselves, since both 'imagined' groups are established on account of some attributed

essence. Unfortunately, current research is still subscribing to this approach, with a plethora of studies that investigate students' experiences, intercultural trajectories, and sense of belonging making use of problematic grand narratives of individualism and collectivism to encapsulate international students' experiences. For example, Rivas et al.'s investigation of international students' sense of belonging in a US university (2019, pp.687-703) employed the reductionist individualism/collectivism binary as one of the variables that explain students' adaptability and willingness to adjust to new environments. The binary was subsequently used to justify students' views by establishing an interplay between one's nationality, culture, and expected behaviours, eventually leading the researchers to call for "multicultural trainings" as one of the initiatives to "foster a culture of inclusiveness and learning" (p.698).

Rivas et al.'s stance is not uncommon. In fact, most research that explores international students' experiences resorts to simplistic cultural references to understand individuals' attitudes and behaviours. For example, Yao (2015, p.9) claims that "a collective sense of belonging is a more appropriate measure for international students from collectivist societies". The prescriptive frameworks underpinning similar research is sufficient to conceal the very moments of inter/cultural mutability experienced by my participants, let alone the significant experiences that have nothing to do with a superficial understanding of culture. There is an active tendency to 'culturize' and 'exoticize' experiences whenever the international is mentioned. What can be considered an 'encounter with a new environment' in the case of 'local' or 'home' students is necessarily an 'encounter with a new cultural environment' for international students. Being is thereby exclusively reduced to a process of 'using' one's 'culture of origin', rather than how that presumed culture is constructed, to interpret behavioural patterns and tendencies. What Rivas et al failed to notice is their constant homogenisation of American students too, which results from associating difference with being international, hence ignoring that "all of us are multiple things, taking part in multiple discourses of culture for different reasons at different times" (Holliday, 2021, p.72).

The current multicultural forms of culturespeak, especially in contexts where international students' experiences are explored, do not recognise that "whatever is most enduring is not necessarily also at any one time most central to people's cultural preoccupations, and to their sense of who they are" (Hannerz, 1999, p.402). The prevalence of long-standing grand narratives is inevitable. As shown in the sixth chapter, students' intercultural trajectories involve constant encounters with and reproductions of essentialist statements. However, such ongoing tendency to affirm or contest established grand narratives is by no means illustrative of a distinctive and shared form of being. This is where the multicultural standpoints fail to distinguish between the dominant cultural discourses and the ways through which agents mobilise such discourses. The claim I reiterated throughout this thesis is that multicultural stances, where a presumable homogeneous culture is uncrossable but can still be celebrated, is serving the needs of both interculturalists and the neoliberal university.

It is in the interest of the neoliberal university to promote the image of the international student as a precultured being, whose cultural affiliations and identity markers are exclusively predetermined by where they come from. Such rhetoric, along with the previously discussed mechanisms, are sufficient to normalise the difference associated with being international. This powerful rhetoric is subsequently capitalised on by educational institutions and several other bodies to treat international students as cash cows, individuals in need of 'quality' education, and students who are sufficiently different for the university to claim 'diversity'. So, at this stage, one may rightly ask the following questions: Am I labelled international because I am different? Or am I different because I am labelled international? The use of the label in the previous questions does not merely refer to the status marker, but also implies the set of mechanisms that accompany the state of being international. In order to answer the aforementioned questions, I will start by referring to the following quote:

> The typical cultural strategy of dominant actors and institutions is not
> so much to establish uniformity as it is to organize difference. They

are constantly engaged in efforts not only to normalize or homogenize but also to hierarchize, encapsulate, exclude, criminalize, hegemonize, or marginalize practices and populations that diverge from the sanctioned ideal. By such means, authoritative actors attempt, with varying degrees of success, to impose a certain coherence onto the field of cultural practice. Indeed, one of the major reasons for dissident anthropologists' discomfort with the concept of culture is that it is so often employed in all of these ways by various powerful institutional actors – sometimes, alas, with the help of anthropologists.   (Sewell JR, 2005, p.172)

The state of alienation that students labelled international endure on the go is a manifestation of what can be considered an organised difference. The latter is established and maintained thanks to the array of mechanisms that, combined, carve a reality that is distinct to what can be perceived as the norm. Following this rationale renders me 'different' due to being subsumed within a strategically-deployed label, one that 'organises' my difference, and may eventually hierarchise, encapsulate, exclude, criminalise, hegemonize, or marginalise my experiences. To oppose this rationale, powerful institutional discourses tend to conceal under a counternarrative that justifies one's international status on account of certain factors that allegedly render them 'different' (such as national, religious, ethnic, and racial affiliations, etc.). Regardless of the influence that such markers exert on individuals' sense of belonging, identity, beliefs, and affiliations, their usage via institutional discourses is devoid of any potential for social action, which naively disregards the malleability of these markers in practice.

The influence of this organised difference extends beyond the realm of endured realities, as it also penetrates the realm of buzzwords, such as the trending trio of equality, diversity, and inclusivity. The policies that promote these buzzwords equally adopt the same regime of alienation and differentiation on account of rigid cultural markers. Difference is once more organised by means of an imposed coherence, and by extension, equality, diversity, and inclusivity are also impacted. To elaborate on this idea, I will

refer to a problematic, yet popular, multicultural metaphor that subsumes an array of theories often employed in research that deals with the integration, assimilation, and acculturation of individuals and groups: The salad bowl. This metaphor is another facet of the same essentialist coin, and arguably serves more harm than justice. The salad bowl, as the name implies, "maintains the unique identities of individuals that would otherwise be lost to assimilation" (Berray, 2019, p.142). In other words, it stands for the set of theories, and arguably the body of doctrines, that 'recognise' the presence and parity of several ethnic, racial, cultural, etc., groups.

Extending this metaphor to the context of UK higher education, it is easy to visualise how current university campuses are perceived as a big salad bowl, where representatives of 'different' nationalities meet to celebrate their 'distinct' cultures. The metaphor is indeed the dominant doctrine underpinning the institutional portrayals of international students. Within the fabric of this conceptualisation, equality, diversity, and inclusivity are easily commodifiable. Instead of a status quo that acknowledges the multiplicity of individuals' realities beyond the confines of labels, affiliations, and the mechanisms that warrant their subsistence, the institutional rhetoric would rather stick with labelling and relabelling, embracing, and sometimes creating, enclosed systems at face value, and eventually profiteering from a superficial understanding of equality, diversity, and inclusion, while discarding the mechanisms that actively keep the individuals subsumed within these imagined categories at a disadvantage.

8.4 Culture as Belonging

So far in this chapter, it was established that students labelled international are subject to an array of mechanisms that not only limit the scope of their being and define them on an a priori basis, but also impose a sense of alienated belonging, one where the label-holder can never be subsumed within the 'us' category, consequently portraying presumed boundaries as rigid and uncrossable. Perhaps the concept of culture is one of the most influential contributors to this dilemma, since the differential frameworks

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underpinning the current institutional rhetoric mobilise one's culture as means to determine inherent differences, rendering the self and the other into a state of "robots programmed with 'cultural' rules" (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p.158).

There have been calls in the last few decades to ditch the concept of culture, with recent softer stances that attempt to define what culture is not (e.g., see Phillips, 2007). Although culture as a set of "pre-existing things, waiting to be explained, has become increasingly implausible" (Philips, 2007, p.45), its manifestation within contexts where international students are mentioned is inevitable, due to the long-standing impact of grand narratives. Claiming that essentialist representations of individuals and communities will cease to exist if we part ways with culture is, arguably, a naïve assumption. For instance, the restrictive mechanisms that impact the realities endured by students labelled international will not disappear if institutional policies decide to ditch the label. In contrast, the label, as much as the culture concept, are crucial for us to conceptualise and expose the powerful discourses, policies, and mechanisms that sustain their existence. Indeed, "the problem will not go away just because a rather small group of academics decides to banish a word from their own vocabulary" (Hannerz, 1999, p.396). Also, discarding the conceptualisation that perceives culture as a set of pre-existing things is discarding an actual, embodied, and problematic form of being. This is illustrated through students' narratives in the sixth chapter, where cultural references comprised both critical and essentialist stances.

Therefore, what I intend to discuss in this section is what I perceive to be an alternative conceptualisation of culture, one which builds on and contests a plethora of theories, frameworks, and modalities that attempt to conceptualise culture and intercultural encounters. These include critical stances such as Dervin's 'Solid, Liquid, and Janusian' interculturality approach (2011, pp.37-52), Holliday's Grammar of Culture (2019), Cultural Blocks and Threads (2016, pp.318-331), along with the idea of Small Cultures (1999, pp.237-264), and Agar's idea of Rich Points and Cultures as

Translation (2006, pp.1-16). In addition to these stances, I also draw on what I believe to be a problematic framing of culture and interculturality via models that either solely rely on a reductionist methodology, a rigid understanding of culture, or a framing of culture and interculturality as a set of competencies or development stages that, if mastered or undertaken, would allow individuals to become culturally-competent. Some illustrative modalities and theories comprise Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993), Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997), Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Model (2006; 2011; Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff, 2022), and even Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). These selections are far from random, as they broadly stand for three theoretical positions to the study of culture and interculturality. Equally, they are often employed as means to explore individuals' experiences in contexts of education and international mobility.

My stance perceives one's cultural affiliations as a constant interplay of three forms of belonging: assigned, imposed, and constructed belonging. The three forms were initially conceptualised during data analysis, as I struggled to locate a framework that could capture the intricacy of participants' narratives away from the positivist inclination to tackle intricate trajectories via a reductionist and deficit-laden lens, or the postmodern tendency to epistemise* endured realities. In fact, I would even argue that while the theories that can be broadly subsumed within a positivist paradigm are openly reductionist, postmodern stances can also reproduce similar forms of reductionism, albeit covertly. Positivist stances' prescriptivism renders one's being completely encapsulated, hence justifying the researcher's ability to predict behaviours and attitudes on an a priori basis. On the other hand, postmodern stances often discard any form of structural primacy on an a priori basis, hence rendering one's being a matter of social construction. In other words, the former standpoint sacralises what the latter stance ignores. My understanding of culture as a process of constant belonging recognises the inevitability of essentialism, which I perceive to be a major constituent of

one's sense of being. After all, the embodiment of structural hurdles via borders, policies, and discourses cannot simply be discarded.

Hence, this conceptualisation of culture as belonging does not only emphasise individuals' socially-constructed realities, but equally highlights how one's being is often predetermined by a powerful set of established structures that act both within and beyond the scope of one's agency. For example, assigned belonging entails an array of values, beliefs, worldviews, and affiliations that one is associated with since birth. This could include a particular religious identity, a social class, a dietary requirement, a set of preconceptions about 'us' and 'them', etc. This form of belonging is initially assigned, and can even predate one's existence (e.g., I was probably perceived to be a Muslim before I was born). Its influence can persist regardless of how one constructs themselves to be (e.g., Even if I decide to discard my religious markers, they can still be used to define my being). It can also be adopted as part of one's constructed belonging (e.g., When I perceive myself to be a Muslim and use that as one of my identity markers). Constructed belonging, on the other hand, implies the forms of being that one establishes through agency. The latter, in this context, stands for the ability to negotiate established realities. Constructed forms of belonging do not necessarily challenge, contest, or discard the assigned affiliations by default. In fact, such affiliations can be actively reproduced as much as they can be deconstructed. This is where both creative forms of social action and strategic affiliations via self-othering or self-essentialising are prominent.

Finally, imposed belonging refers to the omnipotent mechanisms that dictate the status quo beyond the scope of one's agency. This form of belonging actively mobilises elements from one's assigned belonging (e.g., nationality, religion, ethnicity, geographical location, etc.) to impose a state of difference on account of an attributed essence. One's being is subsequently enmeshed within an enclosed system of values, beliefs, and behaviours, which equally discards how such system is being negotiated and/or constructed. Although such form of belonging is by no means initiated by individuals, it exerts a major influence on their trajectories, entitlements, and the ways they are

perceived by others. This manifests clearly in contexts of international student mobility where students' being is constrained via a pre-structured reality, one which utilises an array of restrictive mechanisms to limit the scope of students' belonging. The influence of imposed belonging transcends the individual propensity to challenge the dominant doxas underpinning the status quo. This could concretise the encountered realities that students labelled international navigate on the go, resulting in attitudes and behaviours that indicate an affiliation with organised differences, either at face value (e.g., I am indeed international and by default different and deserving of a differential treatment), or strategically (e.g., I will embrace this problematic label just to be able to have a voice).

The workings of these forms of belonging are well-depicted in the sixth chapter, where the detailed narratives shared by students labelled international highlighted an array of events where they constructed their belonging both within and beyond the spectrum of culturist discourses, resulting in narratives that showcase the intricacy of cultural affiliations. What is most important though are the manifestations of imposed belonging that they experienced at different points while pursuing their degrees. This is observed through Elizabeth's encounters with Muslim colleagues who attempted to convert her into Islam, Alice's struggle to fit within one of the pre-established labels during job applications, Claire's stance vis-à-vis the powerful impact of religion within society, Alice's invigilation incidents, Huyam's interaction with her landlord and estate agency, and Elizabeth's and Amira's discussions of gender expectations. Imposed forms of belonging actively restrain the manifestation of constructed forms of belonging. In the context of higher education, this translates into a problematic differentiation between home and international students, a presumption that such difference requires special forms of treatment, a plethora of staff training workshops around cultural agility in dealing with international students, a constraining body of laws and policies that adopt this alleged difference at face value to legalise certain differential measures, etc.

The decision to conceptualise culture as belonging is informed by several reasons. Culture is undoubtedly a very loaded term, and in most situations where the term is mentioned, there is a high chance of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Approaching the term from a standpoint that implies a form of affiliation, and highlights that such affiliation is sometimes established regardless of one's consent is sufficient to show the intricacy of cultural realities and the need to acknowledge cultural affiliations in all their manifestations (both as presumably-enclosed and/or fluid and permeable systems). Additionally, the use of belonging as an alternative is not random. Belonging entails a continuous and concurrent sense of attachment, affinity, or affiliation. The continuous verb form signals the processual nature of this activity. However, the preceding words (assigned, imposed, constructed) are adequate to disturb that straightforward conceptualisation, which is commensurate with the circuitous trajectories and experiences endured by students. The preceding words are also important to set this conceptualisation apart from the denotation of belonging as a concept that presumes a homogenisation of "one's identity, purpose and value in order to be a member … What seems at first glance to be an inclusive and welcoming term contains within it the very opposite' (Maan, 2005, pp.45-46, cited in Gravett and Ajjawi, 2022).

8.5 Strategic Essentialism: Endorsing organised differences

But what if we decide to approach international students as a bounded collective, with inherent and ossifying essences that set them apart from home students. What if we embrace the deficit frameworks that postulate and mobilise an array of deficiencies that tend to be attributed to being international. And finally, what if we endorse this imposed form of belonging, albeit intentionally, and strategically. Such stance has already surfaced as one of the potential approaches that students labelled international undertake on the go. The constituents of the afore-discussed organised difference (such as problematic labels, high tuition fees, a different nationality, a presumably different rigid culture, a presumed linguistic

deficiency and an alleged lack of criticality, etc.) are actively utilised to establish an organised social action, where individuals who find themselves subsumed within a homogenised whole resort to what postcolonial theorists would call a subaltern insurgency. The latter, as Spivak contends, involves a "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (1995, p.214). This political stance was reiterated throughout the thesis by several participants. The following is an extract from Sara's narrative in the seventh chapter:

> *I was shocked when I saw the tuition, the difference between the UK citizens and like the international and I was like, oh my god, it's not the double maybe triple. So, I feel like they should label us as international and they should give us more resources and like, treat us in a privileged way.*

Responding to one of the generative mechanisms underpinning the encountered differential reality influenced Sara's decision to endorse the international label. In similar contexts, the alleged essence upon which individuals' positions are constructed is mobilised intentionally and strategically to create a counternarrative, one that has the potential to make the experiences of these students more visible, despite equally homogenising their being. However, such tendency to essentialise oneself is not as straightforward as it may seem. Strategic essentialism was discarded by Spivak herself, cautiously arguing that she "no longer want[s] to use it" since the "notion just simply became the union ticket for essentialism" regardless of "what is meant by strategy" (Danius et al., 1993, p.35). In spite of Spivak's decision to ditch the notion, its implementation is still relevant, as it serves to distinguish what can be deemed a naïve encapsulation of one's reality via a predetermined set of attributes (essentialism), and a tendency to intentionally align with the deficit discourse either to claim a voice, unveil the mechanisms sustaining the deficit, and/or produce a counternarrative that has the potential to deconstruct and reconstruct one's realities (strategic essentialism).

The notion of strategic essentialism is echoed in feminist studies through the notion of mimesis, where one "assumes the feminine role deliberately" to convert "a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it", hence recovering "the place of [one's] exploitation by discourse, without allowing [oneself] to be simply reduced to it" (Irigaray, 1985). Mapping these notions onto the experiences of international students renders the deliberate affiliation with the deficit frameworks a potential resort to uncover the working of the generative mechanisms that sustain the privilege gap, and potentially mobilise that imposed essence by establishing a strategic homogeneous whole that can ensure a certain level of representation. However, this rebellious stance would equally homogenise the individuals subsumed within the international marker even further. The repercussions of such approach are likely to reinforce and even produce novel layers of organised differences, eventually warranting the premise upon which the neoliberal otherization of international students is taking place.

To summarise this brief section, the strategic essentialisation of international students for political purposes may prove adequate in the short term, as it grants the individuals subsumed within the confines of the label an effective, albeit rigid, form of agency. At the personal level, the strategic mobilisation of one's being is occurring on a daily basis, with a large number of students endorsing a particular essence either to counter a deficit discourse, construct a sense of belonging, or even profiteer from the preconceptions they encounter on the go (e.g., Since the deficit view frames me as uncritical or linguistically deficient, then I will mobilise that discourse to justify the need for special treatment). In the long term though, the persistence of the essentialist markers, either naively or strategically is sufficient to ossify this marker even further, resulting in what can emerge as a problematic grand narrative. Equally, the imposed mechanisms underpinning the international marker itself are not evenly distributed (e.g., only certain international student nationalities are required to undertake a police registration process). Hence by strategically mobilising the label to denote a predefined group, we may end up producing essences within presumed essences.

8.6 The International Student: Cash cows with cash flows

So far in this thesis, we managed to uncover and unpack several mechanisms underpinning the experiences endured by students labelled international. The working of these mechanisms and the ways through which they are mobilised, contested, and even imposed on students were also discussed and illustrated in several chapter sections. In the following paragraphs, I intend to delve into the realm of neoliberal universities, with a particular focus on the way international students are perceived and positioned by institution and faculty. It is no longer surprising, especially if you ask lecturers and academics on zero-hour contracts, to argue that higher education institutions in the UK are increasingly aligned with a "neoliberal rationality [that] challenges the very idea of public good" (Brown, 2011, p.119). Within the confines of this marketized institutional endeavour, universities are drenched with an array of corporate 'values', eventually establishing an academic terrain that perceives "knowledge as commodity, faculty as wage labour, administration as management, student body as consumer public, [and] university as marketplace" (Boyer, 2011, pp.179-180, cited in Smyth, 2017, p.50).

Since academic institutions "morphed into business enterprises obsessed with income, growth and outputs" (Fleming, 2021, p.10), their interest in scouting and recruiting international students increased tremendously. The international student is the ideal consumer, as they are seldom protected by the legislations or policies that regulate the admission of home students. An illustration of this potential for a liability-free exploitation is the uncapped tuition fees that grant educational institutions the upper hand in deciding 'how much a degree costs.' At the time of writing this chapter, admission to a 2022/23 PhD degree costs £4596 for UK students and £20250 for international students at the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies where I am currently enrolled. This does not comprise the VISA application fees, the expenses incurred from English proficiency tests, the Immigration Health Surcharge (currently costing £470 a year), and other additional fees. This is where the strategically-tailored differential discourses come into play.

The imposed alienation endured by students labelled international is mobilised once more to justify the uncapped tuition fees. It is argued that "tuition fees transform students into fickle customers, significantly altering their expectations in the process" (Fleming, 2021, p.156). However, and partly due to the restrictive generative mechanisms at play, it would be misleading to perceive international students as mere consumers.

The view that frames students as "sovereign consumers" (Boyer, 2011, p.180, cited in Smyth, 2017, p.50) within a neoliberal university is largely inattentive to the fact that even students, and especially international ones, are increasingly obliged to cope with a regime where 'playing the game' is the only means through which one can navigate and attend to market requirements. The endeavour "to educate people" (Fleming, 2021, p.22) is substituted by a reality where higher education serves as "a de facto capitalist industry – an 'Edu-Factory'" (p.15). The latter is portrayed as a market-subservient, with a fully-fledged, yet seldom relevant, body of metrics that allegedly track what has come to be known as 'impact' and 'performance'. What is rarely denoted is international students' imposed subservience. Instead of perceiving them as active consumers within a capitalist market, students are equally caught up in this malicious circle. In order to secure a 'decent' job, one has to internalise and navigate the mechanisms underpinning market requirements, scout for institutions that appear to provide the reputation, knowledge, and skills 'package' that appeals most and aligns with whatever is trendy within that market, and endure a differential treatment, a restricted body of policies, and an elevated tuition fee.

> The way international students are treated is indicative of this industrial teaching ethos. They frequently make up a significant proportion of enrolments in many institutions and cash-flow depends on signing up more kids. Consequently, it's been alleged that some universities turn a blind eye to English language standards to get more through the door. Once in the classroom, learning becomes a

> painful and disorientating exercise.

<div align="right">(Fleming, 2021, p.38)</div>

Participants' discomfort with a commodified degree is clearly uttered throughout the thesis. Statements along the lines of "a foreigner who pays to get the degree", "take my money and give me a certificate", "they do know that these people are willing to pay this amount of money to gain access to education in the UK", "they are using us a little bit … to gain something for themselves", "you are paying for that certificate", "they know that those coming from a third world country would do whatever it takes to have the certificate", "we are bringing in a lot of money", "why do you take from A more than you take from B? just because of nationality. It is business, education has become business now", were produced by Stella, Rachel, Alice, Claire, and Amira respectively when asked about the associations they make with being international. These students are not naïve cash cows with cash flows to spare. Equally, they are as much puzzled by these extreme institutional realities where market demands outweigh the long-established teaching ethos, and where access, teaching, and learning, are subject to excessive commodification, to the extent that promoted realities are fully detached from what is endured by students and academics nowadays. Therefore, I agree with Fleming on the claim that "the international student market [is] a bubble that's been threatening to burst for some time" (2021, p.10). In fact, I believe we should burst this bubble ourselves.

The initial impressions shared by participants regarding the financial aspects of being international departed from a standpoint that problematises the commercialisation of educational degrees. Relevant extracts, most of which are unpacked in the seventh chapter, did not take the elevated tuition at face value. After all, most of these students come from countries where tertiary education is free or accessible at a fraction of the price incurred by undertaking a degree in the UK. However, most of these students are caught between the increasing obligation to align with the requirements of the job markets while maintaining a degree of criticality vis-à-vis their daily

navigation of neo-liberalised universities. Equally, such profit-oriented institutional strategy is yet another opportunity to unveil the nullity of the buzzy statements and expressions that advocate global citizenship, inclusivity, equality, diversity, decolonisation, to name but a few. The institutional dependence on these problematic statements, which generically feature internally and externally via a well-selected wording of the university vision and strategy, is nothing but an attempt to maintain relevance by mobilising whatever is up-to-the-minute.

8.7 Research Implications

The research trajectory, the readings I came across, the interviewed individuals, the discussions I had with my supervisors over the last four years, and my own personal trajectory and experiences inform this concluding section. Throughout the course of this PhD degree, several theoretical quandaries and endured experiences impacted my understanding of the realities of students labelled international, the UK higher education system, and the field of intercultural studies. In the following subsections, numerous implications are highlighted in the hope that this in-depth exploration would serve to inform policies and practices within and beyond university campuses. The aim underpinning this section is threefold: First, to highlight the problematic framework underpinning the international label. Second, to call attention to the impact of such a problematic framing of international students on their trajectories. Third, to denote the ways through which such framing is mobilising the notion of culture in ways inattentive to the complex and rich trajectories that these individuals carry beyond the superficial, yet powerful, institutional discourses.

8.7.1 UK Higher Education: The state of institutional internationalisation

The current internationalisation agenda is inattentive to the realities endured by international students. There is a clear divide between what I believe to be a promoted reality and an endured reality. The former is where international students find themselves subsumed by default and puzzled by

the promotional discourses that frame their experiences and trajectories. The latter, in contrast, is where students encounter and navigate a plethora of constraining policies that impose a sense of alienation or otherness, eventually contributing to a state of exploitation, uneven access, and an inability to be or feel on par with home-labelled colleagues. The first step towards implementing meaningful changes within the fabric of UK higher education institutions is to acknowledge this concealed reality, and to part ways with the practices that sustain this uneven status quo. Attending to the mechanisms that generate such endured realities, as narrated by participants in the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters, is sufficient to enable students to claim the current inaccessible forms of agency that are actively hindered by governmental and institutional policies.

This can start with a clearer conceptualisation of the international label, and the ground upon which it is mobilised to denote an imagined, and homogenised, group of individuals. In this respect, it is important to scrutinise the UK's internationalisation agenda, with the objective of understanding what makes a student 'international', and what underpinnings the label is grounded upon. While this endeavour can be deemed naïve since students' narratives within this thesis, and the policy reports briefly tackled in the second chapter, are already indicative of the financial benefits that justify and sustain the label, the aim here is to uncover this reality and to discard the promotional realm of buzzwords that pretend to cater for a sustainable, equal, diverse, and global world where citizenship transcends national boundaries. The endured realities of students labelled international crossing borders, registering with the police, paying quadrupled tuition fees, and dealing with a state of imposed otherness is but a glimpse of the actual status quo underpinning the promotional buzzwords.

Attending to the generative mechanisms that restrict international students' realities is crucial to eliminate the current uneven educational terrain where a sense of systemic alienation is shared by students. That who is labelled international is completely absent from policy documents that tackle student issues and the structure of the UK educational system unless what is being

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discussed is students' financial contribution to the economy. The current tendency to perceive international students as cash cows seeking to purchase a commodified degree is fed by an array of discourses, amongst which is the idea of the 'west as steward'. This is exacerbated via an abundance of metrics that mainly serve to reaffirm this idea, especially for the presumably deficient others who come from the so-called global south. Hence, it will not be surprising if we will soon come across a metric indicator that quantifies something like decolonisation and places a university from the so-called global north on top of the table, owing to its 'pioneering' decolonisation initiatives.

Of all the problematic factors contributing to the current realities endured by students labelled international, the notion of culture is undoubtedly the most significant. The ways culture is used by students and staff and mobilised by institutions via policy and promotional materials signifies a still-prevalent reliance on a Hofstedian conceptualisation, where national cultures can be utilised to predict values, establish diversity, and acknowledge difference only if it resides within the confines of the prescribed national cultures. This cultural celebrationism serves to solidify the international category even further, with the most influential forms of culturespeak on campus and beyond perceiving being international as necessarily being subsumed within an essentially-different national culture. Several rich narrative extracts shared by the participants in the sixth chapter contest this superficial framing, with standpoints that affirm, challenge, and reimagine the homogeneity of cultural realities.

The in-depth exploration of students' intercultural trajectories (most of which is unpacked in the sixth chapter) can provide a solid ground for disturbing the superficial conceptualisation of international students within the internationalisation agenda of the current major 'edu-factories' in the UK and other popular destinations (namely USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). Implementing an understanding of culture as a form of belonging, where one's being is subject to an array of realities and is constructed within as much as beyond the confines of rigid national cultures can prove viable in

eliminating a long-standing, yet problematic, portrayal of international students as national representatives and cultural ambassadors. This is not to abandon the essentialist forms of culturespeak that inevitably and spontaneously resurface whenever international students are mentioned. Instead, it is a legitimate plea to acknowledge the short-sightedness with which we approach and interact with and about international students. In so doing, student mobility endeavours should part ways with deficiency-laden portrayals that are mostly fed by a worrying increase in methodological nationalism.

In the following bullet points, I intend to draw on the findings of this research to sum up some of the major implications and accompanied recommendations that I believe could yield a meaningful change within the institutional fabric.

- A starting point in the endeavour to warrant a more equitable reality for international students is through initiating discussion vis-à-vis what makes a student 'international'. This could be implemented at different institutional levels via workshops and internal research initiatives.

- References to the notion of culture in contexts that involve international students will always be inevitable. Therefore, it is crucial for universities and staff members to transcend the simplistic conceptualisation of culture as a signifier of one's identity and a 'tool' to predict and understand behaviours, or even develop competences. Obscuring cultural affiliations by distinguishing between an ossified narrative and how that narrative is constructed by students is sufficient to add a much-needed complexity to this notion.

- A constraining environment where several mechanisms impose a sense of otherness is actively impacting students' experiences. Buzzwords along the lines of inclusivity and global citizenship create a smokescreen that sometimes conceals the alienating impact of the realities endured by international students. Unfortunately, these othering mechanisms are under-researched. In most situations, academic and administrative staff, along with institutional bodies in charge of policing the recruitment of international

students, are unaware of what students undergo. Therefore, a starting point is to initiate discussions about the hardships encountered by these students.

8.8 Research Limitations

As highlighted by Bourdieu (1992, p.44), "when you are within the preconstructed, reality offers itself to you. The given gives itself, in the form of the notorious data". He proceeds to claim that "data have been left by people who had an interest in letting them trail behind them", subsequently creating givens and non-givens, constructed realities, and hidden realities/secrets. Therefore, "the truth […] of this given […] is in the relation with a whole ensemble of preconstructed objects which does not give itself at all, which is hidden from indigenous perception, and even from learned enquiry" (ibid.). My dependence on the given, which mostly manifests in the form of what the participants deem to be relevant when responding to my prompts during interviews is in itself a limitation. Acknowledging the fact that the trails explored by this research are largely influenced by what participants intend to emphasise through narratives is crucial to account for the potential unexplored or underexplored areas that tend to get ignored or left untouched during the research process. This is slightly compensated for by opting for a broader research scope whereby one can examine the variety of encountered truths. However, as signalled by Bourdieu, this intersubjective endeavour is actively concealing an array of realities that could serve to untangle 'data' even further.

Throughout this research, I encountered several instances where I found myself grappling with the realm of what Macfarlane calls 'phony positionality' or the constant urge for "being explicit about values which the researcher holds and demonstrating a preparedness to self-evaluate how these may have shaped the philosophical assumptions informing research design" (2022, p.143). Phony positionality, which in many instances could create a self-stereotyped researcher identity, is quite problematic since it discards "the risks of insiderism" altogether, eventually turning one's involvement into a necessary "virtue rather than a vice" (p.144). I therefore easily recall

instances where I perceived my positional disclosures not only as a performative prerequisite that could allow me to tick the necessary boxes (or what Hobbs (2007) calls strategic deception), but also as a means to establish what I perceive to be an alleged 'positional authority' by valorising my enmeshment.

Another relevant point tackled by Macfarlane which could be one of the limitations I came across is symbolic citation. This is yet another performative prerequisite that I found myself tackling especially in instances that involve a certain degree of overt theoretical positioning, sometimes by "symbolizing [my] ideological credentials […] through referencing the great and the good in a particular school of thought" (2022, p.149). The inclination to show ideological allegiances is arguably one of the limitations that I had to come to terms with, since my tendency to discard positivism on an a priori basis whenever interculturality is mentioned, along with my repetitive use of terms along the lines of 'essentialism' resurfaced at several points throughout my thesis. This is partially attended to by attempting to achieve a certain degree of theoretical depth, in addition to refraining from citing barely-read-or-understood contributions.

Methodological and data collection limitations are also present in this research. The Covid-19 pandemic coincided with the second phase of data collection, with uncertainties and educational challenges impacting the research progress and my ability to focus. My initial methodological approach involved a visual layer of narrative enquiry. The latter comprised an auto-photography task that requires participants to either take pictures or resort to past pictures that reflect their experiences, intercultural trajectories, and possible manifestations of the international label. Due to the challenges encountered during that period, it was not feasible to fully-accomplish this task, which in turn required altering my methodology and data collection methods sections to reflect this change. A sample of the visuals elements provided by participants can be found in **Appendix I**.

8.9 Concluding Remarks

I always struggle with writing a conclusion as the term implies "the final part of something" (Cambridge Dictionary). Instead of perceiving this concluding section as the place where the research ends, I would rather suggest approaching it as a starting point for driving something meaningful within the higher education context. The alternative analytical lenses along with the rich body of narratives explored in depth throughout this study is a valuable contribution that was not subject to the problematic influences of some research grants that tend to limit the 'what and how' in talking about international students. The major endeavour has always revolved around enabling students labelled international to portray the realities they deem to be representative of their circumstances and experiences. After all, this project was not pursued to appeal to the parties that, for decades, established their careers by striving to find the best mechanisms, strategies, and promotional buzzwords to exploit international students in every way possible.

This research is a plea for change at many levels. Unless we earnestly consider the realities endured by an actively homogenised group of students, and the mechanisms that sustain such uneven and unfair reality, the current discourse will remain problematic. The proliferation of buzzwords that allegedly strive to eradicate injustice, lack of access, and discrimination within internationalised campuses are nothing but void and generic means that paint an image of a responsible and caring university. The powerful mechanisms underpinning students' realities are hardly tackled. Current research-driven policy changes are largely shaped by the institutional strategic vision. The latter is usually rife with a plethora of floating signifiers: a repertoire of terminology that enables institutions to extenuate, and sometimes conceal, the toll of the actual profit-driven agenda. The experiences of students labelled international are but another facet of the ramifications of a sector undergoing a top down commodification at an unprecedented level. At a time where the higher education sector is grappling with casualisations, pay gaps, and restraints on academic freedom

of expression, the economic impact of international students is at a record high, with a net economic contribution of £16.3bn, ten times higher than the costs incurred from hosting these cohorts (According to numbers from the 2015/2016 cohort, as the net impact witnessed a remarkable increase since).

Meanwhile, the discourses that reduce students to a state of national ambassadors, with behaviours and values exclusively conditioned by elements from their national origins, are likely to gain more momentum. This is, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, fuelled by the institutional need for cultural fixity, a variable that serves to sustain the sense of alienation experienced by students. Such strategic neoliberal endeavour is easily traced in mega projects funded by influential bodies like OECD and UNESCO, where void terminologies and generic buzzwords are presumed to drive better conditions. I doubt that this in depth study would appeal to the aforementioned entities, especially when considering the economic consequences that could result from accounting for the realities endured by international students and drafting policy accordingly. My pessimistic self could not but anticipate another wave of institutionally-devised buzzwords that would serve to counter whatever is representative of what international students endure on the go.

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Appendix A: Ethical Approval

The Secretariat
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Tel: 0113 343 4873
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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Ramzi Merabet
School of Languages, Cultures and Societies
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee
University of Leeds

9 December 2019

Dear Ramzi

Title of study	**Exploring the Narratives of Mobility and Interculturality in Different Cultural Environments**
Ethics reference	**FAHC 18-052 amendment November 2019**

I am pleased to inform you that your amendment to the research application listed above has been reviewed by the Chair of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee and I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion as of the date of this letter. The following documentation was considered:

Document	Version	Date
FAHC 18-052 amendment November 2019 Ethical_Review_Form_Ramzi_Merabet.doc	1	21/11/19
FAHC 18-052 amendment November 2019 Amendment_form Ramzi Merabet (2).doc	1	21/11/19
FAHC 18-052 amendment November 2019 Participant_Information_Sheet_Ramzi_ Merabet (2).doc	1	21/11/19
FAHC 18-052 amendment November 2019 Participant_consent_form_Ramzi_ Merabet (2).doc	1	21/11/19
FAHC 18-052 Ethical_Review_Form_Ramzi_Merabet	2	01/02/19
FAHC 18-052 Email_Sample_Ramzi_Merabet	2	01/02/19
FAHC 18-052 Interview_Protocol_Ramzi_Merabet	2	01/02/19
FAHC 18-052 Participant_Information_Sheet_Ramzi_Merabet	2	01/02/19
FAHC 18-052 Participant_consent_form_Ramzi_Merabet	2	01/02/19

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any further amendments to the original research as submitted at date of this approval as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAmendment.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited. There is a checklist listing examples of documents to be kept which is available at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAudits.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk.

Appendix B: Information Sheet

The title of the research project

Exploring the Narratives of Mobility and Interculturality in Different Cultural Environments

This is an information sheet that aims to provide you with a general overview of my current project along with your role as a potential participant. Please read the different points covered in this document carefully before you decide to either not/take part in the study. In case of ambiguity, please do not hesitate to contact me via email or phone (my contact details are mentioned below).

What is the purpose of the project?

This research endeavours to shed light on the narratives that emerge when people travel to different places (mobility). It explores individuals' experiences in different cultural environments and the impact that mobility can have on their perceptions of themselves and others. In this regard, it employs a qualitative research approach by means of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Data collection is expected to last for a period of one year and will involve several episodes. The study sample is envisioned to consist of two groups of participants. The first group is expected to travel for different countries around the world as part of a study abroad programmes. The second group, on the other hand, comprises participants who arrive to the UK from different European countries as exchange students.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen due to the fact that you conform to the main selection criterion: spending a period of time abroad as part of Horizon or Erasmus programmes. This criterion entitles you to become a recruited research participant along with other candidates of the same programmes. The total number of participants is expected to not exceed 40 individuals.

What do I have to do? / what will happen to me if I take part?

Your contribution as a potential participant implies taking part in a longitudinal data collection activity where you will be approached at different stages either through direct face-to-face interviews or through focus groups along with other participants. Research episodes are not expected to exceed four times. However, it is possible to go beyond this number if you express your willingness to add more to the data. By being recruited you agree to take part in the data collection process through being interviewed at your convenience, and to take part in focus groups where you are expected to answer questions and engage in discussions with the other members of the group. The duration of the data collection procedure will not exceed a period of one year. During this year, you will be asked to voluntarily take part in two interviews and two focus groups. The duration of interviews depends on the richness of the emergent data along with your ability to contribute more.

You will be asked questions regarding your experience abroad, your relationship with other people from different cultural environments, and its impact on your perceptions of yourself and others. All questions will be semi-structured, and there will be no options to choose from. You are not obliged to stick to the questions through provide simple short answers, it is preferable to elaborate and add more through linking your ideas to the personal trajectories you have been through.

Unless you find it inconvenient, you will be interviewed within University of Leeds premises. Episodes may take place within the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, or in one of the pre-booked rooms in libraries. In case where you express your inability to be interviewed within university premises, you can get in touch with me to either change the location or rearrange the interview at your convenience.

The aim behind collecting data is twofold: The first episode will endeavour to reveal your perceptions and attitudes regarding the experience of living/studying in a different cultural environment. In so doing, I intend to explore how you perceive yourself and others in the new environment, how did you imagine it to be and why, how do you perceive your relationship with

the other, whether you are completely unable to interact with others or not…etc. The second aim is to keep track of your experience abroad through shedding light on your personal trajectory as a mobile person and the changes that may occur during your stay. This will allow me to figure out the nature of narratives that emerge in intercultural encounters, the role that mobility can play in redefining the self/other relationship, and the potential solution to avoid othering oneself and others.

All what I expect from you is attendance. In case you are unable to attend, or where it becomes impossible to carry on serving as a recruited research participant, please keep me updated so as to either rearrange my data collection schedule or invite another potential participant, if necessary, to take part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
As far as what I know, there will be no risks or disadvantages in taking part in the study due to the fact that it does not comprise any element of discomfort or deception and does not involve participants in risky/dangerous situations.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Benefits include being able to reflect on your experiences and personal trajectories as a traveller. You will be able to share your attitudes and perceptions regarding mobility and interculturality along with the impact of living in several cultural environments. Focus groups would help you reflect on what you have been through, to receive comments and advice, to make friends, and to take part in a small culture that comprises mobile research participants. Your contribution to the realisation of the research will be recognised in the thesis.

Do I have to take part?
Taking part in this study is optional and is to be done on a voluntary basis. There will be no repercussions due to your unwillingness to be recruited. Withdrawal, on the other hand, is tolerated as you are not obliged to take

part in this project. However, withdrawal is impossible at the end of the data collection process. Therefore, you will be reminded of your right to withdraw before the start of every data collection episode.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential? / What will happen to the results of the research project?

Your acceptance to take part in the study will remain confidential. Only other participants in the focus group will be able to know that you are a recruited participant. However, all participants will be addressed to not disclose your personal information outside the research group. Data will be retained for a period of two year following my graduation, and this is mainly due to research and publication purposes (e.g. articles, conference papers…etc.). Anonymisation will take place at an earlier stage of the study, and there will be no official reference to participants by their real names in the reported findings and results. Furthermore, any sort of data that may render you identifiable/vulnerable will not be disclosed. All participants have the right to ask for a copy of the published work where their data is anonymously reported.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

Your contribution to the study during interviews and focus groups will be recorded using audio recorders and smartphones for analyses purposes. It is important to keep in mind that your recordings will be safely stored at my Leeds University cloud drive. It will not, therefore, be shared with any third party, regardless of their intentions. Recordings are then transcribed, and data is to be used anonymously in the form of quotations, both in my PhD project and any future publications.

Withdrawing

As mentioned above, both justified and unjustified withdrawal is tolerated as long as data collection procedures are still going. Once completed, withdrawal or requests to not make use of data will not be accepted. This is mainly due to the fact that it is not feasible to reconduct another data collection procedure for the degree duration is already determined.

Who is organising/ funding the research?

My PhD degree is fully funded by the Algerian government.

Contact for further information

Please feel free to contact me and/or my supervisors for any research-related enquiries.

Postgraduate Researcher: Mr. Ramzi Merabet

Email: mlrme@leeds.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr. Haynes Collins

Email: h.collins@leeds.ac.uk

Co-supervisor: Dr. Alexander Ding

Email: a.ding@leeds.ac.uk

In case you accept to voluntarily take part in this study, you will be given a copy of this information sheet along with a signed copy of the consent form. I would like to thank you for dedicating time to read through this document.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent to take part in "A Narrative Enquiry into 'International' PGRs Intercultural Experiences in UK"	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ letter dated 11/11/2019 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during data collection without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. *Withdrawal requests should be sent to Mr. Ramzi Merabet (mlrme@leeds.ac.uk). In case of withdrawal, all types of data will be discarded by the lead researcher.*	
I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form.	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by auditors from the University of Leeds where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change during the project and, if necessary, afterwards.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	
Signature	
Date*	

Appendix D: Sample of First Contact Email

Dear [Potential Participant Name],

I would like to invite you to take part in my research by attending an interview and focus group in the upcoming months (at your convenience). My research attempts to explore 'International' Postgraduate Researchers' (IPGRs) intercultural trajectories at [University Name] and therefore would like to meet you for a chat where we might engage in discussions about your travel experiences, your experience as a PhD candidate in [City Name], in addition to similar themes that tackle your personal trajectory.

The reason behind contacting you is that you conform to the selection criteria that I am following to approach, contact, and select potential participants. These criteria comprise 'being a postgraduate researcher at University of Leeds', in addition to 'being labelled International by the university'. To the best of my knowledge you are enrolled as an IPGR at the University of Leeds and hence you fit into the selection criteria outlined above. It would be great if you accept to take part in my study as this would enhance its feasibility and would allow me to commit to the time frame set for the completion of my PhD.

My research has been ethically approved by FAHC ethics committee (Ref. FAHC 18-052) in November 2019. I should also assure you, in case you agree to take part in my research, that any information including your credentials, contact details, and responses will be anonymised and stored securely using a highly-secured cloud storage.

Your participation is highly appreciated and will definitely add to my research.

I wonder if it is possible to meet for an interview on the week starting Monday 13 January (any day/time of the week)?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Appendix E: Sample of First Interview Phase Questions

January Interview Guide

Opening Questions

- I would like to know more about your personal trajectory. Can you tell me more about yourself?

- How did you decide to study in the UK and what motivated you to choose [University Name] in particular?

- Did you have any prior concerns/questions/expectations before coming to the UK?

Intercultural Landscape

- Let's go back to your very first days in the UK / [City Name], tell me what happened when you first arrived here and how did you feel about it?

- What did you wish you knew prior to coming to UK?

- Comparing your very first days/months and now, did anything change regarding how you perceive yourself and your environment?

- Could you describe a typical day in your life as a PGR? / Could you walk me through what you did last week?

Intercultural Encounters

- How do you think you are perceived by others?

- Do you prefer having friends from certain nationalities/backgrounds or you do not pay attention to people's origins while socializing/engaging in discussions with others?

- Can you give me an example of an event/incident you remember where you interacted with other people and how did you perceive that?

- What type of activities do you regularly engage in as part of socialising/interacting with other?

- How do you perceive your daily life in [City Name] compared to where you lived/studied before?

The 'International' Label

- The university labels you as 'international student', how do you perceive this label?

- What comes to your mind once you hear the expression 'international student'?

- According to you, why do universities make use of such labels?

- What, if anything, differentiates 'international' and 'home' students?

- Does being 'international' affect your socialisation with others?

- How do you perceive the other student labels such as 'Home' and 'EU'?

- What if the 'international student' label did not exist?

Appendix F: Sample of a transcribed Interview (Huyam)

Part 1/4 (0:00"-22:45")

…: Short pause

IS: International Student

R: Ramzi

After introduction and a brief explanation of the research aims and purposes.

R: I would like to know more about your personal trajectory. Can you tell me more about yourself?

Huyam: Alright so my name is [Real Name], I am a second year PhD student at the [School Name]. I am an international student coming from Algeria, I come from a city called [City Name] ... Basically my trajectory in terms of my studies was not really similar to the one in here. I come from a university where the teaching/learning system is completely different from the one in here, and I think that would be the main characteristic of my own study trajectories.

R: What makes it different exactly?

Huyam: It is different in terms of the content of the materials we were taught, the way we were taught, different ways we used to learn. It was different in terms of how the teacher performed and presented their lessons, it was different in terms of the systems, the way of learning within the classroom. It was also different than the one in here, so yeah i think that would be the main characteristic of my studies.

R: And don't you link that to the fact that now you are doing PhD and you're not actually in contact with teachers as much as you used to be when you were a master or bachelor student.

Huyam: I would say there is truth in that, but I came across many students here like undergrad and master students and from what they told me, I think that there is a difference between the way I was taught, and how they are being taught here.

R: So, let's go back to when you first decided about going to the UK and study in the UK, so how did you decide to study in the UK and what motivated you to choose University of Leeds in particular?

Huyam: I came to the UK through a scholarship sponsored by the government, so basically the choice of the UK was provided by the government, being ranked among the top ones you will go to the UK, otherwise you will go to Tunisia or Jordan.

R: So, you had no option to choose Tunisia or Jordan?

Huyam: Yeah because I was ranked among the first ones I was given the UK and when it comes to [University Name] I applied to many universities and I got accepted in three of them but I have chosen to come to Leeds because it was more of a personal choice, I wouldn't link it to the fact that I was keen to be supervised by my particular supervisor or because I love the city or … though it was my first choice but I had some personal reasons that made me choose [University Name].

R: Okay when comparing the other choices you had, you said you had three offers

Huyam: Yeah, I had one from [University Name] and one from [University Name].

R: Okay what made reject those offers?

Huyam: It's kind of funny because my best friend was coming to [City Name] so I came to [City Name] (laughter).

R: So ... do you think that you have any other reasons apart from those personal ones?

Huyam: I think that another choice was the fact that the city was bigger than the two others I was given offers to, and that the ranking of the university itself compared to the other two made me choose the [University Name].

R: So, you took the ranking into consideration while choosing the university.

Huyam: In my choice I would give the matter of ranking 40% of my decision… so it was not really that important but once it was between these other two, I have chosen [University Name].

R: What if you had the choice to go somewhere else, like you said Tunisia and Jordan, so at this point you will still go for the UK?

Huyam: Yeah

R: The second thing, you said that it is imposed, it is something that you got nothing to decide about, but I think you got the chance to refuse to go to the UK to do PhD, by deciding that okay I do not want to do that.

Huyam: Of course I had motivation but I thought the question was more about what did you choose coming to the UK like was ... in a way it was a choice that I have been given or I was given other options and I went for that one, the fact that there were other options but I did not have to choose between the two because I was automatically offered to go to the UK made me choose the UK, but even the possibility to decline that offer was not even considered by me.

R: Why wasn't it considered?

Huyam: Why I haven't considered declining the offer? because it was an offer that I… I think it would be stupid to decline it… I mean pursuing your studies in the UK and which kind of studies you will be doing your PhD and having a degree in the UK is something really, I mean of great importance back home.

R: So, you were emphasising UK, what makes it this important to you?

Huyam: Well, I think that I have always been dreaming of going to the UK and it was more of a chance to do that and having a degree from such country was also important because as far as I see it it's going to open a lot of doors, it's going to bring you a lot of opportunities, so yeah.

R: So, staying within that timeframe when you were considering going to the UK. You got a scholarship, so did you have any prior concerns/questions/expectations before coming to the UK?

Huyam: Once I got the scholarship the first thing that came to my mind was that I am going to Europe, it was more of the European world that I am going to be facing there, my expectations were more about it is going to be a developed country… everything will be easier than it is in my home country, things will be done in order to be more precise, there will be no such disorder if you want, there will be no … how to put it, basically it was more about going to a country where things will be easier, where things will be smoother than they are in my home country.

R: You said things.

Huyam: you can get access to anything you want, you will be free than you already are in your home country, so these are the expectations I was having.

R: Okay so this rings a lot of bells here, you said developed, things are easier, they are ordered and then there is no disorder, what do you mean by order and disorder, with regards to what exactly?

Huyam: With regards to my studies because one of the characteristics of my studies back home is that there were a lot of disorder, in terms of regulations, in terms of how things were done.

R: Can you give me an example here?

Huyam: Yeah, for instance let's take a module, I was learning a module and the way I was taught that module it was more of a random way

R: Okay

Huyam: Okay so even when it comes to exams and scoring it was in disorder because the teacher didn't even know whether he was going to give us an exam, to sit for an exam, or he's going just to take into consideration our work during the year. So some people, I mean some of my colleagues they didn't even know they will be scored on how they perform during the year then they told him no we should have an exam, and others were like no let's just go with how we performed during the year, so I considered that a bit of a disorder, I don't believe that things would happen this way here, so that's what I meant by disorder, and I can give you another example when it comes to retrieving your transcript and the different regulations you have to deal with the administration. They were in huge disorder, I mean I am speaking about my university, I don't compare it to other universities in my home country so I would not assume that everything in my home country is in disorder when it comes to universities, but I am speaking about my own experience. So, I thought that when I go to the UK, I would not face these kind of problems or these kind of disorders, this is what I meant by disorder.

R: Okay, and you said you will be more free

Huyam: It has more to do with the society itself so coming from my society, my entourage, I have always felt that my freedom is relatively restricted, I was not allowed to do certain things, I was not allowed to ... let's stick to 'certain things', and when I came to the UK I was more autonomous and this made me feel I was more free to do stuff, let's say the time I should be

home, back home ... I had timing, I shouldn't be outside let's say after 6, but here because I am living on my own, I have to take care of everything on my own, I have the freedom to go home even after midnight because I am autonomous and sometimes, I face things that make me go home after midnight or stuff like that. If this happens to me back home, I will be questioned, I will be put into a lot of questions why you did that, why till this time, so I think that was somehow different here.

R: Yeah, so there is a degree of agency you are saying here

Huyam: Yeah, you can say so

R: Did you have any other expectations?

Huyam: I was waiting for my mind to be blown, I was expecting to see things that would make me say 'wow', but maybe that was the first day and I remember when I went out of the airport and it was so cloudy, and I was like 'is this the UK', is this the UK that I was always dreaming to visit, but then that feeling of being blown away by the country faded within one week.

R: Okay why?

Huyam: I don't know basically I was like my first experience in the UK was in [University Name] and it was a small town and everything I saw it within one week and I was like okay what's next and somehow what I found in [University Name] I found basically all around the UK, I don't say that I have visited all the UK, I have visited a couple of cities in the UK but I think what I saw wasn't really that big of a deal, I know it is different from where I come from but probably I got used to it so...yeah.

R: So, what you were talking about now is actually what happened once you were here, let's go a little bit back and go to the expression 'waiting for my mind to be blown away' 'waiting for that wow expectation', what actually, what fuelled that, what led to that expectation happening before even going to the UK, what images did you have?

Huyam: Let's say technology, the way people behave. I would say I was expecting people I am not saying that this expectation was wrong, but I had the expectation that people will be so kind, so humble, so punctual, I have this idea then when we say Europe we say punctuality, and this was true. I was expecting ... streets to be so clean, I was expecting really fancy houses, all of these things were among my expectations, some of them, I mean my expectations were met, others I would say, yeah, they were not.

R: Can you elaborate on that?

Huyam: So, when it comes to technology I'm just going to speak about my experience in the university, uh… the fact that they do have Wi-Fi all over the university is something that we don't have back in our universities, this is something which I find really really good. Access to the library is so easy compared to our libraries back home, even in uh… in stores, self-service, I found that really good and we don't have this back home, I mean I am speaking about my town, my entourage where I live. Probably maybe they do have it in the capital or in different cities I don't know. With people, I think that what I expected was true, people are so kind, people are so punctual, they are nice, I just want to say something about the people, I was not expecting to be treated in a bad way or in a racist way, maybe it is somehow weird but I really didn't have this expectation that I will find some racist people that they would judge me because I am a Muslim or an Arab or I wasn't really counting on finding people like that, and it is true I didn't come across any person who was that racist to me. Punctuality, they are so punctual, let's say the majority of them.

R: What do you mean by the majority of them?

Huyam: Sometimes, I am going to give the example of my supervisor (laughing). Usually we set meetings at 2 o'clock, all our meetings are 2 o'clock, but sometimes my supervisor is late with half an hour or something, but even if she's late she apologizes for it, so they respect time.

R: Okay so do you link that to being in UK or to something else?

Huyam: I would link it to the way they were raised. I mean if you were raised within community that really values time, you will grow up valuing that notion of time, but in my case, I grew up in a community where if they don't come on time, it's okay. So, I will probably link it to where they were raised. I don't say just in the UK they are punctual, but I would say probably in Europe.

R: Yeah, can we talk more about your supervisor? She's from UK, right.

Huyam: yeah

R: Is she teaching here?

Huyam: Yeah, she is a teacher here

R: So, she always apologises if she gets a bit late

Huyam: Yeah she apologies but not right away because once I had a meeting with her and she didn't even come but I didn't receive the apology till tomorrow so it was somehow bothering that I waited that long because I waited more than half an hour because I didn't want to be rude, I thought maybe she had something urgent that prevented her from coming so probably I should wait, but I waited like 45 minutes or something then I said okay she's not coming let it go but as I said she apologized the morning saying she had some problems and that's why she didn't make it.

R: And that does not happen in Algeria?

Huyam: They do apologize but not in a serious way.

R: What do you mean?

Huyam: I mean that if someone does not come on time he will make it in a funny way, like okay I came late so it is alright, they don't give it much value.

R: Even if they don't show it to the meeting?

Huyam: Umm, they don't apologise.

Appendix G: Sample of Data Coding and Analysis (NVivo)

Name	Files	References	Created On
Contesting Grand Narratives	4	12	19/01/2022 16:44
Sense of deficiency	0	0	06/08/2020 12:53
Embarassment to voice opinions	4	7	12/08/2020 11:47
Imposed deficient perceptions	5	8	12/08/2020 13:04
University Rankings as source of incompetence	1	1	19/08/2020 12:12
Self-attributed deficiencies	2	2	17/09/2020 19:42
The absence of criticality in home countries and universities	2	4	21/08/2020 16:38
Different Educational Systems	4	7	18/02/2020 15:19
University Perceptions	1	4	06/08/2020 13:41
The international label and established comparisons	0	0	06/08/2020 13:58
Redefining the international as competent individual	2	3	12/08/2020 14:05
The mobilization of international-friendly discourses	4	4	17/08/2020 13:21
The international label as neutral and justified	2	3	17/08/2020 16:35
The mobilization of the international label for metrics	2	2	17/08/2020 16:39
The international student as a cash cow	8	14	17/08/2020 16:42
The international as homeless	1	1	21/08/2020 11:36
Questioning the International Label	5	8	21/08/2020 11:57
Higher tuition but with the same treatment	3	3	21/08/2020 12:22
Differentialist Treatment	5	8	21/08/2020 17:49
The international as necessarily scholarship holder	1	1	28/08/2020 12:23
The international should be more privileged as they pay more	1	1	28/08/2020 13:05
Feeling international regardless of status	1	1	08/09/2020 14:09
Establishing difference (US Them)	4	4	08/03/2022 16:43
The glorification of western degrees	2	4	21/08/2020 12:43
On Tables and Metrics	0	0	03/02/2022 13:07
The mobilizationof complex and redundant Metrics	1	1	03/02/2022 13:09
University ranking as determinant of prestige and quality	3	3	03/02/2022 13:09
University Rankings as Important Factors to University to Choice	7	11	03/02/2022 13:09
Overrated League Tables	2	2	03/02/2022 13:09
The glorification of western degrees	2	4	03/02/2022 13:10
Investigating the International Label	0	0	08/03/2022 16:39
Redefining the international as competent individual	2	3	08/03/2022 16:42
The mobilization of international-friendly discourses	4	4	08/03/2022 16:42
The international label as neutral and justified	2	3	08/03/2022 16:42
The mobilization of the international label for metrics	2	2	08/03/2022 16:42
The international student as a cash cow	8	14	08/03/2022 16:42
The international as homeless	1	1	08/03/2022 16:42
Questioning the International Label	5	8	08/03/2022 16:42

Appendix H: Further Written Literature (Early critical exploration of relevant paradigms in Intercultural Studies)

Ferri argues that "while intercultural communication is theorised from a number of ontological and epistemological positions, the possibility of defining its contents, aims and characteristics […] remains at the centre of attempts to delineate the often-blurred contours of this field" (2018, p.17). Central to this argument is the recurrent attempts to redefine the concept of culture, to substitute it, or even explore ways to conduct research without it. In so doing, leading authors in the field of intercultural studies seem to advocate a paradigm shift towards a resilient conceptualisation of culture in contrast to the traditional understanding which appears to reduce culture to national boundaries and claims its ability to explain and even predict individuals' behaviours based on where they come from. Although there have been plenty attempts to transcend this rigid understanding of culture and interculturality, the old paradigm is still dominating the field with several research output aiming to quantify intercultural competence either through IC models or via comparative studies that link culture to nationality which results in the reproduction of generalized categories and stereotypical images. Building on this, one could easily observe the lack of unity that characterizes intercultural studies/communication in the present day. This is clearly manifested through the different methodological approaches employed by researchers, which juggle between positivist and constructivist paradigms. In this respect, Martin and Nakayama (2010, p.59) argue that "the field has exploded in many different directions that have opened up the very notion of 'intercultural' communication". They further claim that "ten years later, the very problem of conceptualising 'intercultural communication' remains as vibrant and relevant as ever". Although I do not intend to deeply inquire into the conceptualisation of the field, one should be aware of the different issues surrounding it. In the following section, I plan to discuss the different critical frameworks employed in the field of interculturality along with their theoretical and philosophical underpinnings.

In this section, I do not intend to solely provide the critical framework that I perceive to be convenient for the general rationale behind research. I also aspire to highlight the need to contest the different theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of current approaches to interculturality, especially those that stem from or are informed by a positivist approach which, although increasingly criticised, is still prevalent in research. Put forward by Porpora, "sociologists are good at calling on others to recognise their presuppositions … because [they] underlie and shape everything we do" (2015, p.1). In so doing, sociologists often succeed at attaining the major aim of raising individuals' awareness, criticality and reflexivity. However, Porpora contends that "what we (i.e. sociologists) do not do much of is critical reflection on our critical reflection" (p.2). This tendency towards taking paradigms for granted and as mere tools to justify researchers' positionality feeds into what is known as normal science[10]. However, this does not imply the need to entirely discard the power of paradigms as means to explore, understand, or explain a particular research direction, it rather calls for the necessity to initially question the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of such paradigms for the research to be clearly justified. On this subject, the paradigm simply stands for a "consensus … on fundamental reality" (p.3). To reinforce the need for problematising paradigms prior to reflecting on their usage in research, one should give equal importance to conceptual and empirical questions. Porpora (2015, p.21) prioritises conceptual questions for "all empirical questions need to be conceptualised". Linking this to interculturality, instead of assuming a value-free conceptualisation of culture and interculturality, one should first inquire into what these concepts mean. Setting an appropriate background through clearly deciphering the conceptual is a precondition for the realisation of the empirical. This reminds me of my master dissertation where I employed

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[10] It designates "research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice" (Kuhn, 1996, p.10)

triangulation by means of interviews, questionnaires and an experimental design to study the impact of technology-based learning on EFL learners' autonomy. Due to the lack of learning resources (i.e. accessibility to journals and books) I ended up quantifying autonomy and analysing it via self-report Likert scale questionnaires. Although unsurprisingly problematic, I ended up graduating with distinction, with examiners totally convinced with the approach and methods employed. Though probably an essentialist expression, positivism is dominating Algerian higher education. Shortly after my graduation, I had the chance to meet Adrian Holliday, a leading figure in the field of intercultural communication. I literally addressed him seeking feedback regarding my future research project, which was then "a comparison between 'British' culture and 'Algerian' culture". This positivist empiricist research stemmed mainly from my ignorance of notions of epistemology and ontology back then. Hence it is crucial to tackle the conceptual prior to conducting empirical research.

Before digging into positivism and its inconvenience as a research paradigm in the field of intercultural studies, I shall begin with defining what epistemology and ontology mean. In simple terms, ontology concerns one's understanding vis-à-vis the nature of reality. Ritchie et al. (2013, p.4) pinpoint that "social science has been shaped by two overarching ontological positions (…) – realism and idealism". The former advocates the existence of an 'external reality' which is separate from people's perceptions of it, whereas the latter rejects realists' premise that reality is independent, and considers it to be contingent upon the mind, and accessible solely through the meanings that people construct. However, one should be aware of the fact that these ontological positions include several variations. For instance, while naïve realism claims accuracy in observing reality, cautious realism contends that it (i.e. reality) can only be observed approximately. As one of the variants of realism, materialism acknowledges what is tangible and concrete as the sole source of reality and perceives values and experiences as 'features' that do not affect or shape the world. Idealism, on the other hand, has two main variants: subtle idealism, which views the world as a

collection of shared constructions, and relativism, which regards reality as a series of individual constructions. Epistemology deals with how knowledge about the social world is acquired (Ritchie et al., 2013, p.6). While proponents of the inductive or the 'bottom-up' process claim that knowledge is derived from observing the world, proponents of the deductive approach agree that the acquisition of knowledge occurs through a 'top-down' process, where researchers develop hypotheses, and then collect evidence/data to confirm/reject them. According to Ritchie et al. (2013, p.6), referring to qualitative research as inductive is a "misleading simplification". Therefore, they stand against the idea of 'pure' induction/deduction, and subscribe to Blaikie's (2007, cited in Ritchie et al., 2013, pp.6-7) strategies of retroduction[11] and abduction[12]. Other epistemological issues involve the relationship between the researcher and the participants. In this respect, three main positions emerge: objective observation, value-laden observation, and emphatic neutrality. The latter recognizes the impossibility of being objective but advocates reflexivity as a means to achieve a degree of transparency. To build on this, Dervin and Risager (2014, p.4) argue that "it has now become a truism to say that identity is co-constructed by interlocutors, yet very few researchers look at how they themselves, as interlocutors in e.g. interviews, contribute to creating discourses on the self and the other". Qualitative research should be perceived as a process where both researchers and participants are involved, and where the impact is always reciprocal. As a result, data collection should not be reduced to a process of picking "mushrooms in a forest" (ibid., citing Bensa, 2010).

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[11] Retroduction "involves the researcher identifying the structures or mechanisms that may have produced patterns in the data, trying different models for 'fit'" (Ritchie et al., 2013, p.7).

[12] Abduction stands for an approach in qualitative research which rejects a complete inductive reasoning and asserts the necessity of setting assumptions at different stages of data collection based on the emergent findings. Such assumptions help in deciding about the direction of the research but do not necessarily constrain it for they are not pre-determined hypotheses.

In his attempt to describe the manifestations of positivism and postmodernism as the current influential paradigms in the field of interculturality, Holliday (2018) argues that the "modernist or positivist paradigm sets the nation state, or national culture as the 'default signifier' of who we are". The positivist paradigm, which is primarily influenced, if not shaped, by Durkheim's structural-functionalism also claims objectivity and deals with the intercultural in a simplistic, reductionist way. It even holds that what many researchers refer to as 'intercultural communicative competence' is measurable and quantitative. In this respect, the postmodern paradigm "asserts that the positivist claim to objectively described separate cultures is false and naïve" (Holliday, 2018). Focus on essentialist differences and empirical measurement leads positivists and neo-essentialists to forge competency models which, according to them, help individuals navigate other 'national' cultures (Holliday and MacDonald, 2019, p.3; Ferri, 2018, p.8). Hua (2016, p.7) argues that positivism rests on several assumptions which comprise cultural fixity and measurability of values and norms, culture's ability to determine behaviour, generalizability of cultural patterns, and the belief that misunderstandings stem mainly from cultural differences. Perhaps Hofstede's work on the so-called cultural dimensions (1991, 2001, 2003) is one of the best illustrations of positivist thought. Other examples include work published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* which, according to Hua (2016, p.17), is primarily interested in dealing with issues of "acculturation; Intercultural Communication; intergroup perceptions; contact, and interactions; intercultural training; and cultural diversity in education, organizations and society". Porpora contends that positivism is still prevalent in sociology. Despite the fact that many sociologists do not explicitly subscribe to positivism simply because they do not run "statistical regression mindlessly" (2015, p.7), Porpora claims that positivism underpins empiricism and that "most sociologists today remain empiricists in deep ways they do not even realize" (p.8). He (2015, pp.11-28) maintains that the current philosophies (particularly positivism) and counter-philosophies of science (particularly postmodernism and constructivism) appear to overemphasise certain exaggerated ideas with reference to reality

and knowledge. He summarizes this ontological and epistemological conflict in seven myths. The following are two myths that concern the tenets of positivism:

- **"The appropriate posture in scientific social research is value neutrality"** (pp.14-15): One of the most prevalent mistakes in research in social sciences and humanities relates to the persistent call for neutrality, claiming its potential to contribute to objectivity. What is neutral is not necessarily objective. Sometimes neutrality may distort the true image, or, in other words, what actually happened. Porpora asserts that "there is no escape from value-judgement … Sometimes, … it is neutrality that represents bias" (p.15). This idea will be further contested when dealing with researchers' reflexivity in the methodology chapter.

- **"The most important scientific questions are empirical"** (pp.20-23): Although this point has already been covered in the distinction between the conceptual and the empirical, I would like to link it to what I call radical positivism and radical anti-essentialism. By anti-essentialism I refer to the paradigms that reject positivist thought (like postmodernism and constructivism). To begin with, Durkheim's rejection of the role intentions play in the case of suicide led him to both discard individuals' agency and to erase the distinction between suicide and death. This complete disposal of the role of intentions is faced by a complete disposal of the role of social structures by radical anti-essentialism which, instead of acknowledging the reciprocal influence of structure and agency, ends up reproducing a problematic exaggerated counter-discourse that champions relativism.

Advocated by leading opponents of positivism in the domain of interculturality, anti-essentialist paradigms (i.e. postmodernism and social constructivism) appear to play a major role in shaping current theoretical and methodological approaches. These paradigms rest on the assumptions that champion the co-construction of reality (Ritchie et al., 2013), the rejection of a 'solid' conceptualisation of the intercultural (Baumann, 1996, 2000; Dervin,

2011, 2016; Holliday, 1999, 2016, 2019); Individuals' agency and ability to transcend structures (Holliday, 2010; Weber, 1964), and the emergence of critical cosmopolitanism as a contestation to the "west as steward" (Holliday, 2011) discourse and as a tool to reveal the marginal (Delanty et al., 2008; Holliday, 2011; Holliday and MacDonald, 2019). Numerous research under these paradigms strive to unveil the hidden politics underlying the solid self/other binary and the way such dichotomy is mobilised in academia. In so doing, current postmodern scholarly work contests the "one-nation-one-culture-one-language" long-standing approach (Zotzmann, 2017, citing Dasli and Diaz, 2017) either through novel theoretical approaches (see notions of small culture and rich points in section **3.2.2**, blocks and thread in section **3.3.2**, or the grammar of culture in section **3.3.1**) or via methodological approaches that reject posteriori/prescriptivist methods (Holliday and MacDonald, 2019, p.8). On this subject, an important idea with reference to what Holliday and MacDonald (2019, pp.4-5) call postpositivist recidivism should be highlighted. Postmodern recidivist thought, which appears to subscribe to neo-essentialism and multiculturalism, acknowledges the detrimental impact of othering and stereotyping. However, it ends up perceiving the "large cultures … [as] the basic units of investigation because they can be sampled, triangulated and objectively represented by means of presumed researcher neutral interviews and observations" (p.4). This concurs with Dervin's concept of the Janusian, or the "double-faced approach that reduces people to a (national) culture but at the same time claims that they have multiple and complex identities" (Dervin and Risager, 2014, citing Dervin, 2011). Although both Dervin and Holliday argue against postpositivist recidivism, and this is clearly articulated in their works, they still make use of national labels in their research (e.g. Algerian students, Chinese participants, etc.). On this point, I would argue that avoiding national labels, especially in titles, is one of the primary conditions to establish an anti-essentialist approach.

Anti-essentialist paradigms, although praised for their rejection of positivist thought, have also been contested by critical realists (Porpora, 2015;

Zotzmann, 2017). Commenting on the fact that anti-essentialists themselves engage in the process of essentialism, Zotzmann (2017) argues that "it not only seems impossible to speak in truly and essentially anti-essentialist terms but also theoretically undesirable". The impossibility of complete anti-essentialism recognizes the tangible nature of certain cultural realities. This recognition does not necessarily imply fixity (positivism) or exclusivity (postpositivism). Linking this to culture, Kompridis (2005, p.319) maintains that "If cultures really are as fluid, porous, unbounded, and ever-renegotiable as they are made out to be, there would be nothing 'out there' that could correspond to such a concept". Therefore, if essentialists fail at acknowledging "cultural change", anti-essentialists fail at "explaining and understanding cultural continuity" (p.320). Another point to be raised in relation to anti-essentialist thought concerns the social constructivist paradigm's propensity for perceiving structures as social constructions. Although one can easily link this constructed view of reality to the wider aim of discarding hierarchy, othering, racism, etc., it actually "does not make it (cultural reality) any less real for those who find themselves living within the confines of its material manifestation of laws, borders, passports, language tests, prisons, clinics, and classrooms" (Jones 2013, p.238). This concurs with the need to avoid exaggerated use of the term essentialism discussed in section **3.2.3**. Porpora (2015) identifies several drawbacks of exaggerated social constructivism. Among the seven sociological myths listed, the following one concerns social constructivism:

- **"There is not truth. Everything is socially constructed. All is relative"**: This myth is an "overreaction" (p.16) by anti-essentialists to positivists' obsession with objectivity. It even resulted in social constructivists entirely discarding the link of causality. Porpora argues that the lack of epistemological objectivity (knowledge is co-constructed) does not imply ontological subjectivity. In other words, even if we hold a particular social construction of something, this does not imply that it does not exist independently.

Located in-between reductionist positivism and relativist constructivism, the critical realist metatheory maintains a novel recognition of causality along with an acknowledgement of the co-construction of knowledge. Introduced by Bhaskar (1979, 1986), critical realism was then developed by Archer (1995), Sayer (1997) and Porpora (2015), and lately linked to interculturality by Zotzmann (2017). The latter argues that "the decisive difference between a CR and a postmodern perspective is that the former collapses an epistemological question with ontological questions" whereas critical realism advocates that the social world is mind-independent. It thereby champions the co-construction of knowledge yet similarly avoids the relativist trap. Zotzmann (2017) maintains that "it is the actual existence of objects— independent of their identification—that makes our knowledge fallible and hence subject to disagreement and critique". Fallibilism is a central argument underpinning critical realism, it supports the fact that knowledge cannot provide the absolute truth, hence why empirical knowledge is accepted.

After a brief exploration of the current theoretical and philosophical frameworks underpinning research in general and interculturality in particular, the following bullet points, which would serve as a framework for the current research, emerged:

- Culture is processual and relational. One can possess and express several cultural realities depending on several factors such as the influence of structures, power differentials, the context, the language used, etc.
- Social and political structures are powerful discourses that play a major role in shaping one's cultural realities. However, these structures are not fixed entities.
- Structures can exist at many levels, from the local to the national to the international.
- Although influential, the social and political structures do not define and confine individuals' identities and behaviours.
- Individuals are therefore active agents who continuously engage in the process of negotiating and rethinking structures. Hence, the same

structure is perceived differently by different people, and may even be perceived differently by the same person in different contexts and situations.

- Radical positivism reduces individuals to mere products of a particular national structure.

- Radical anti-essentialism may result in a state of relativism as it considers everything to be a social construction.

- Prescriptive methods should be discarded when researching interculturality.

- What is prevalent in reality is neither a social construction nor a fixed structure. Reality therefore cannot by any means be reduced.

- The grammar of culture does not entirely discard the influence of social and political structures. It also acknowledges individuals' agency which makes it convenient for providing an approximate simulation of reality and for exploring individuals' narratives in different cultural domains.

Appendix I: Visual Elements (Amira and Mostafa)
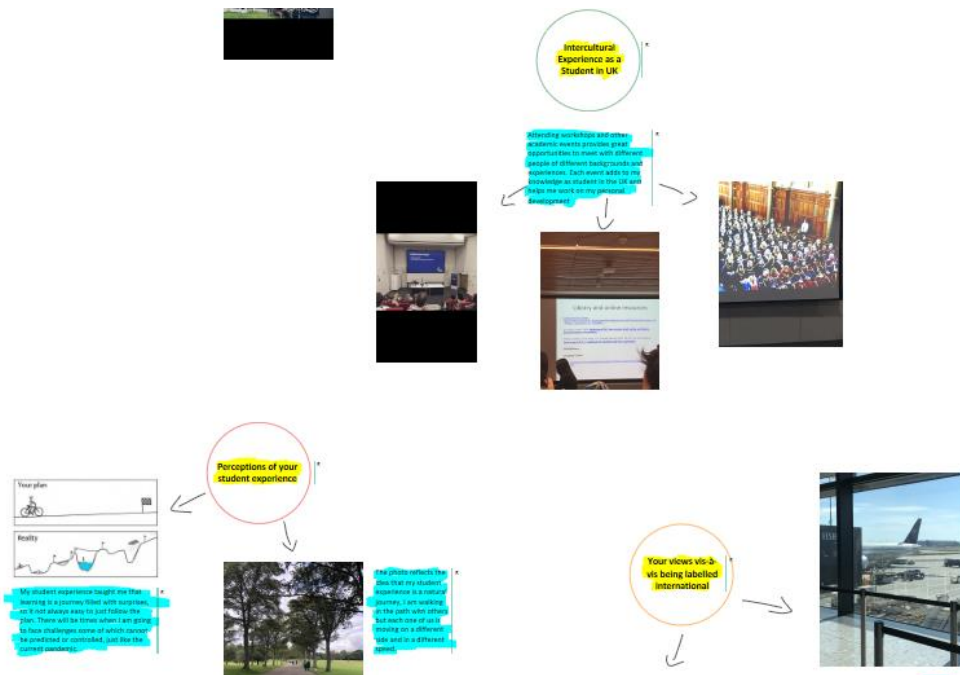
Pictures of the house and in the plane: Due to the pandemic, I and my wife had to move to our home country. We had two reasons for this. First, the visa problem of my wife. My wife, [Name] was staying in the UK with a short term student visa and she received a job offer from Oxford University. To accept it, she had to have a working visa or Tier-4 dependent visa that allows her to work full time in the UK. She applied to the Tier-4 Dependent Visa in the UK, we ended our house contract in [City Name], looked at the suitable houses in Oxford, but later she had a refusal since she had to apply the visa from Turkey, not from the UK. Because her short term visa was ending in 1-2 days and all the flights between Turkey and the UK were being cancelled, we applied for a rescue flight from the Turkish Consulate. So we got to Turkey 2 days after the application. Second reason is the uncertainty of the future and the sense of security. I always had seen the UK as a country only a flight away from Turkey. During the pandemic, the distances got much longer than they were before. So I wanted to be closer to our families.