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Identity in a Global Era

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS IN LUND**

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Abstract

This thesis presents findings from a study about the challenges international master's degree students have to undergo when they decide to study at Lund University, a university situated in the South of Sweden. The study involved interviews of 7 international students from different national backgrounds. Emerging from the analysis is the perception that respondents have to face several identity challenges after their arrival in Sweden and the strategies to cope with these challenges differ from case to case. The research illustrated that there is a general tendency to rely on their national identity in order to identify themselves. The research disclosed that the difficulties the respondents faced manifested itself in the form of several academic related features. These features include adapting to the grading system, getting used to the teaching system and to talk in front of the class. These features had an impact on the students' self-esteem and several strategies resulted of how these students cope with identity challenges. The respondents in this research agreed that the University offers help with the adaptation process but that it takes time before getting an appointment, thus it is requested to get immediate support when needed. What is more, students were searching for strong social networks to cope with the feeling of anxiety and ontological insecurity. In this regard, some of the students formed co-national networks where they could have people with the same background around them. Suggestions on how to adjust the support programmes offered by Lund University to the students' need are given.

Keywords: globalization, international sojourn students, identity, identity challenges, strategies to cope with identity challenges



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1 Introduction

Globalization and its facility of the mobilization of knowledge, goods and people have given faster and cheaper possibilities to travel. This movement has enabled people from different identities and nationalities to encounter each other, with universities being one of these arenas of interaction of different identities and nationalities.

According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, the flow of tertiary-level students studying abroad has increased remarkably. Whereas there were 2 million tertiary-level students studying abroad in the year 2000, the number of students studying abroad in 2010 was 3.6 million, which means an increase of 78% (UIS, 2014). The total number of mobile students hosted in Sweden in 2010 was 31,534. Sweden is a popular country in which to complete a master's degree, having a high English proficiency and a good education level. The wish to study abroad is stimulated by globalization and the changes in political and economic systems. At the same time, the "social imaginaries" of individuals also play a role concerning their "subjective awareness of global opportunities" (Rizvi, 2009: 269). Students value the experience of cultural exchange because they expect to expand their social networks and to increase their job opportunities by doing a master's programme abroad.

Lund University receives a large amount of international students every year. In the autumn term of 2013, 4265 students began their studies in international master's programmes with 1429 of these students being international students, constituting 33.5% of the students who started an international master's programme¹ (Lund University, 2014).

While most of the studies related to this topic highlight the positive effects of studying abroad and employers expect more and more international experience from young professionals, these students are confronted with a new environment where their life circumstances change. This can lead to adjustment difficulties and the identity of international sojourn² students can be challenged.

This thesis consists of seven chapters. The first chapter consists of the introduction and a presentation of the research topic elaborating the aim and rationale of the study, concluding with the presentation of the examined research questions. The second chapter outlines the theoretical framework that will guide and frame the subsequent analysis. The third chapter provides an overview of previous studies carried out in this field. The fourth chapter presents

¹ An international master's programme is a programme which is taught in English so that international students are not required to speak Swedish in order to enrol in these programmes.

² For the explanation of the term "sojourn" I rely on Ward, Bochner & Furnhams (2001) understanding of the term as a "temporary stay in a new place" for a short period of time (Ward, Bochner & Frunhams, 2001: 142).



the methodological framework of the research offering a detailed description of the research design, and data collection methods that were employed in the research. In the fifth chapter the results of the research are presented and explored. The sixth chapter offers a discussion of the results, and provides answers to the research questions. I conclude with the seventh chapter which summarizes the findings, and gives advice for future research.

The purpose of the study is to provide a voice to one particular group of sojourners, namely the international students who came to Sweden to complete a master's degree at Lund University. This is achieved by listening to and analyzing the subjective experiences and perceptions they undergo during the adaptation process. By giving them the possibility to express themselves, these students get the opportunity to mention the difficulties that may arise during the adaptation process and come up with their own ideas and thoughts about how to improve their situation. The study helps to gain insight into the identity challenges of international students coming from different cultural backgrounds and to spot the strategies they use to cope with identity problems.

Since I was born and raised in Bolivia until the age of 11 and then moved to Germany, I know and understand some of the cultural challenges students undergo when they are encountered with a new environment. Being an international sojourner myself who is completing a master's degree in Sweden gives me the opportunity to gain access to privileged information which might be difficult to get as a foreign researcher without previous knowledge.

Research questions

The research questions which I will attempt to answer with this thesis are the following:

- What are the challenges that sojourner students face when they decide to complete a master's degree at Lund University?
- How are identities of sojourner master's students challenged during the period they study abroad?
- What strategies do they apply in order to cope with identity problems?
- What are the needs of international master's students in Lund and what can the university do in order to facilitate the adaptation process?

This can lead to identifying the identity needs of international students which can be helpful for student advisors at Lund University to create support programs that are shaped to the specific needs of international students.



2 Theoretical Framework

This master's thesis aims to spot the common identity challenges of international students coming from different cultural backgrounds and the strategies they use to cope with identity challenges. Thus the concept of globalization, its effects in our daily life and the identity construction need to be understood because they are central to my analysis. Starting with theories of globalization and its consequences and implications on mobility and identity, I will proceed with the construction of identity from a sociological perspective. To do so I will mainly draw upon the understanding of identity from a symbolic interactionist perspective and the concept of social identity according to Jenkins (2008).

2.1 Globalization

The term globalization has gained lots of attention and popularity in recent years. In spite of the expansion of the term, the process of globalization cannot be considered a new phenomenon; a growing interconnectedness was noticeable even before the term "globalization" came up. We can argue however, that there have been some changes in this interconnectedness in terms of "scale, speed and cognition" (Kinnvall, 2004: 742). Interconnectedness is a process of interaction between people, companies and states coming from different regions and countries all over the world. Despite the fact that the process of globalization was initially thought to take place merely in the economic sector, it turned out to be a multidimensional process affecting as well culture, environment, political systems and migration flows. People from different geographical areas, nationalities and identities have the possibility to encounter each other giving us the feeling of being part of a multicultural world where distance seems to become less important than it has been earlier.

Technological development and the spread of new forms of communication technologies are to be responsible for a "compression of time and space" (ibid). Catarina Kinnvall (2004) argues that a "deterritorialization of time and space" (ibid) is taking place. The communication networks connecting people all over the world have become faster and denser enabling us to keep in touch with family and friends easier. Even while being abroad from our country of origin, communication technologies enable us to maintain transworld-relations. Due to the fact that we are constantly being informed of what is happening in remote places, we are no longer only aware of the local processes happening in our close environment but also about ongoing global processes. As Held describes it, the impacts of events in other areas are being perceived stronger (Held, 2000). This is a "multi-dimensional" process, affecting the economic, political and cultural realms of social relations (ibid: 15).



Furthermore we can observe how both social and economic relations are being stretched across space. Held talks about an “increasing interpenetration” which means “the extent to which apparently distant cultures and societies come face to face with each other at the local level, creating increased diversity” (ibid:16). These stretched social relations across space are observable in the case of international sojourn students, which will be outlined in the following section.

2.2 Student mobility

Movement is a typical feature of the contemporary process of globalization. Globalization, technological development and changes in policies have an impact on mobility and cross-border migration, not only in economic terms such as global trade, capital flows or local shifting of companies but also in terms of movement of people.

People travel for the purpose of tourism, business affairs, in order to find better job opportunities or they can be forced to leave their country due to ongoing conflicts or natural disasters such as it is the case with refugees. Another group of people moving is formed by international sojourn students. The educational sector has experienced a process of transformation which “aims to integrate international and intercultural dimension in the mission and the substantive functions of higher education institutions” (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013: 48). In terms of the students’ mobility we can observe greater possibilities to study abroad, which has led to an internationalization of higher education. Universities offer educational programs at the bachelor, master’s and doctoral level which are taught in English in order to attract international students. It is not only institutions but also national agendas which promote and aim to facilitate students’ mobility by offering academic student exchange programs such as the Erasmus program of the European Union or other types of scholarships. According to Barragán Codina & Leal López (2013), the internationalization of higher education can be seen as “a response to the challenges and needs that globalization brings” (ibid: 49). Both universities and students feel pressured to compete in the global arena.

2.3 Identity

As previously mentioned, we can observe that globalization has not only affected economic and political spheres, but has also led to social changes and personal changes. Thus it is important to take a look at the socio-psychological consequences of globalization, especially the implications these social and personal changes have on identity. In the following I will give a brief introduction to identity. After defining the self I will explain the



concept of identity from a sociological symbolic interactionist perspective drawing mainly upon Richard Jenkins' concept of social identity (Jenkins, 2008). Jenkins' approach is based on the idea that social actions taken by individuals are embedded in a social context and that identity is understood as a fluid social construction which is changeable.

Sociological approaches to self and identity assume a reciprocal relationship between the self and society (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 2003). This reciprocal relationship entails on the one side that the self influences society through the actions taken by individuals when they form "groups, organizations, networks and institutions" (ibid: 1). On the other side, society constantly influences the self through shared values, norms and language which enable individuals to participate in social interaction and reflect upon themselves as an object. According to Stryker, the self is always embedded and acting in a social context surrounded by other selves and can never be released from its social context (Stryker, 2003). This interaction with the surrounding allows individuals to verify their notions of their "self". Catarina Kinnvall & Paul Nessbit-Larking (2011) argue that the self emerges out of a dialogical process of interaction between the self and the other. In this dialogical process we observe how other people react to our actions and adjust our behaviour to the societal norms. This is a normal process we undergo as acting according to the norms of society helps us to avoid attracting not desired attention. As a result, both the self and the others are being shaped.

The self can assume different identities in the social structure. Stryker (2003) defines identity as a "positional designation" which is internalized and varies depending on the roles we have to play in society. The roles we assume are defined in the context of our reference groups (Charon, 2009). In our reference groups we interact with members of the "in-group" and outsiders. The opinion of the group on our self is important and determines our behaviour. We assume different selves in our daily life, such as being a daughter, a runner, a student, a neighbour, a friend, etc. These selves are changeable depending on with whom we are interacting and can often overlap with each other (ibid).

Identities are the meanings we have of being a group member or a person and they are "always related to a corresponding counter-identity" (Stets & Burke, 2000: 8). According to Jenkins (2008) identity can be understood as the capacity to know "who's who (...) and what's what" (Jenkins, 2008: 5). Identity is formed by the process of identification where the self is categorized as an occupant of a role which can be understood as the core of identity. Each role we assume is linked to meanings and expectations that determine our behaviour. As Stets &



Burke (2000) state: “one’s identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles” (ibid: 226). Identification is important because it helps us to situate ourselves within society.

Jenkins distinguishes between “individual identification” and “collective identification” (Jenkins, 2008: 102). Individual identification is embodied in the process of differentiation between individuals. Even though individual identity is something embodied, the collective plays an important role in the process of constituting the individual identity. Individual identity is being shaped in our daily interaction with others through labelling procedures in which we differentiate ourselves from other individuals (ibid). Collective identity is characterized by the commonalities between individuals and can be understood as the similarity a “plurality of individuals” share (ibid: 103). These commonalities are the basis for group formation. The essence of the group is something difficult to grasp because they “cannot behave or act, and do not have a definite, bounded material existence in time and space” (ibid: 10). Jenkins states that we all belong to groups and for a group to exist a “minimal reality of a group” is needed. This “minimal reality of groups” implies that the members of a group have to be aware of its existence and their belonging to it (ibid: 12). Groups are built through the process of categorization, in which we categorize other people and at the same time self-identify ourselves. When we categorize others to out-groups we automatically identify ourselves with a certain in-group. The process of forming a group based on similarities implies differentiation to others through boundaries; boundaries being necessary to differentiate between members belonging to the group and those “others” who are excluded. This process of “inclusion entails exclusion” where commonalities and differences are closely linked together along this “shared boundary” (ibid: 102), and is a multi-dimensional and ongoing process taking place at both the individual and collective levels (ibid).

Identity can be understood as the way in which both individuals and collectives differentiate in their relations with others, with Jenkins stating that “similarities and differences are the dynamic principles of identification” (ibid: 18). Individual identity which is embodied in the selfhood only gains importance if it stands in relation to the society and other individuals (ibid). The “self” is socially constructed through the process of socialisation and interaction with others, with this process taking place from our early childhood and



continuing as an ongoing process which is never completed. Identity is always shaped through our surroundings and can never be seen as a unilateral process (ibid).

Identity crises arise when people are confused about their identity and cannot situate themselves, having the feeling of not being able to know who they are (ibid). Jenkins emphasizes the importance of the need of “repertoires of identification” to be able “to relate to each other meaningfully or consistently” (ibid: 27). He goes further, stating that “without identity there could simply be no human world” (ibid). Jenkins’ understanding of the human world is the field where the individual and the collective meet and interact: this can be understood as the society.

Stuart Hall (1996) understands the process of identity production in a similar way as Jenkins does, seeing it as a process which is constantly taking place and can never achieve a completed status. Being in our familiar surroundings, we tend to take things for granted; cultural behaviour, values and norms are barely scrutinized. This can change through dramatic changes in our lives such as changes we experience in our work, families, in association with migration or class and status mobility. Globalization and increased mobility can especially cause the feeling of uncertainty when we are faced with a new surrounding where different norms, values and language are valid. In the following section I will expand on the effects of globalization and mobility on the individuals’ perception of identity.

2.4 In search for ontological security

The increased movement of people is not solely linked to positive perceptions about globalization such as better job opportunities and education; globalization can also have destabilizing effects for individuals. Mobility as such can be perceived as a complex process individuals have to undertake when they are faced with a new environment where the feeling of being vulnerable and existential anxiety can arise. The new environment can differ in culture, language and in terms of the values and norms from the well-known structures that are normally responsible for giving us a sense of stability. Sojourn students are faced with an environment that differs from their well-known surrounding in their country of origin and thus they can experience a situation where they are unable to situate themselves while studying abroad. These changes can be experienced as stressors and as a loss of stability. The students have to negotiate who they are, being constantly faced with challenges to their identities. A re-definition of the own identity is needed in order to situate the self in the new environment and within the majority society. This process of re-situating the self is needed in order to cope with feelings of ontological insecurity and anxiety.



Ontological security is, according to Giddens (1991), the fundamental sense of safety people experience in the world. To have the feeling of ontological security comprises having answers to the questions related to the “self-identity” and a certain level of trust in other people. Trust is needed to have a “sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety” (Giddens, 1991: 38). In order to experience such a feeling of ontological security, stability both in social and material concerns is required. Familiar networks can offer a surrounding of trust and thus serve as a “defensive carapace” or “protective cocoon” (Kinnvall, 2004). Giddens claims that “all individuals develop a framework of ontological security of some sort, based on routines of various forms” (ibid: 44). Rituals and routines can be understood as mechanisms to cope with anxiety. Giddens states that “maintaining (...) habits and routines is a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties”, as it is the discipline of routines that help us to create a sense of “being” and ontological security (Giddens, 1991: 39).

Increased mobility as a response to global changes is often characterized by a “sense of powerlessness and dependence” (Kinnvall, 2004: 747) and is able to create a feeling of ontological insecurity due to the lack of consistency in social and material concerns. A feeling of anxiety can arise due to language difficulties, cultural differences and the misrecognition of the self from the majority society.

Identity constructions which provide answers to the need of identification are defined by Catarina Kinnvall (2004) as “identity signifiers”. Identity signifiers are needed in times of insecure structural conditions. Nationalism and religion “supply powerful stories and beliefs” and are one of those identity signifiers which have the “ability to convey a picture of security, stability and simple answers” when the self-identity is threatened and a re-identification is needed (Kinnvall, 2004: 742). Nationalism and religion as identity signifiers mean that national identity and religion respectively are being used as guidance to define the own identity. This is perceived as “one stable identity that answers to the need for securitized subjectivity” (ibid: 758).

Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking (2011) identified three identity strategies which are practices that help people to define themselves and their social groups as distinct to the others. Retreatism as an identity strategy is mostly used from first generation immigrants who wish to avoid any sort of commitment. This identity strategy is chosen by individuals who do not want to be noticed by others. An individual belonging to the minority society is able to both retreat into the minority society as an escape from the majority society or into the majority society as an escape from the minority society (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011). To choose



retreatism as an identity strategy can be linked to experiences of isolation, fear or displacement (ibid). An essentialist identity strategy is given when securitization of issues is used as a response to exclusion. Diaspora communities and co-national networks function as an escape valve, offering a familiar place to reaffirm the self-identity which can help to reduce the feeling of insecurity and anxiety. The identity strategy of engagement requires a disposition to open the self to the “other” and engage with the majority society. Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking (2011) describe this strategy as the “attempt to deal with differences through bargaining, openness towards other, collaboration, and dialogue” (ibid: 160). Individuals who choose this identity strategy are willing to engage with the majority society instead of isolating themselves in their minority groups.

2.5 The need to belong

Baumeister & Leary (1995) highlighted the significance of the need to belong which arises from the need to “form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995: 497). Interaction with other individuals helps to create a bond with each other and a sense of belongingness arises. Baumeister & Leary (1995) argued that the need to belong is a “fundamental human motivation” (ibid) and thus individuals are naturally driven to establish stable, frequent and long lasting interpersonal relationships with other individuals. Deprivation and negative effects on the well-being can arise if the sense of belongingness is missing (ibid). They further claim that social deprivation can lead to stress and that the feeling of emotional loneliness can arise which can result in health problems (ibid). People strive to have a certain amount of close social bonds, and once this minimum quantity and quality of social contacts is achieved, the motivation to enter new relationships diminishes (ibid). To be able to satisfy this need to belong, affection is needed. Individuals must perceive the relationship to other individuals as positive and they must have the feeling that the other is concerned about her/his wellbeing (ibid). Bonds are more than merely affiliations: individuals have to engage actively in the relationship.

As mentioned before, the identity of sojourn students has been affected by the interconnectedness of the world. Questions like “who am I” are not easy to answer as we are being influenced by many different streams. Mobility and technological development makes us face outside influences with various lifestyles. We assume multiple identities which no longer stick to one single nation or culture. Arjun Appadurai argues that there is no longer one single culture that shapes our identity, and that place no longer seems central to our identity construction (Appadurai, 1996). Collective social identity is being fragmented and no longer



gives us the code of identity it used to give in the past (Hall, 1997). Nevertheless, as Friedman states, space is still a situational marker of identity (Friedman, 1998). Kinnvall (2004) reinforces Friedman's argument by claiming that nationality can function as an identity signifier. The national culture provides the individual with a common history and gives a sense of belonging which is important when people are facing ontological insecurity and anxiety.

2.6 National versus cosmopolitan identity

In Scholte's words, identity is the process of "being, belonging and becoming" (Scholte, 2005: 224). National identity or nationalism can thus be understood as the "circumstance where people construct their being, becoming and belonging first and foremost in terms of national affiliation" (ibid). Individuals who rely on their national identity use it as a guideline which gives them advice on how to behave and react when they are faced with a new and unknown environment, giving them a sense of belonging.

Arjun Appadurai defines the modern nation-state as "a quintessential cultural product, a product of cultural imagination" (Appadurai, 1993: 414). National identities are constituted by symbols, traditions and rituals of patriotism. The idea of national identity arises in many cases for the first time after moving abroad as it is the case in the interviewed persons of this study. Challenges and negotiations create the idea of a national identity as something fluid which can shift within different contexts; as national boundaries are being disrupted, so is the national identity being challenged through the intensified globalization.

Some scholars argue that globalization has increased the opportunities to develop non-territorial identities (Scholte, 2005). Non-territorial identities can be understood as identities that are not attached to a single territorial space but rather influenced by different territorial spheres. An increase of cosmopolitanism has been noticeable which is defined by Hannerz (1996) as openness towards people, places and different cultural experiences and a "willingness to engage with the other" (Hannerz, 1996:103). A cosmopolitan identity is one that transcends nation-states (Cohen & Nussbaum, 1996). According to Ulrich Beck (2002) a process of "cosmopolitanization" is taking place which means that global issues are becoming more and more part of our daily local experiences and the "moral life-worlds of people" (Beck, 2002: 17). The consciousness and identities are being transformed and as Beck says is the national perspective "a monologic imagination, which excludes the otherness of other" (ibid: 18). Whereas cosmopolitanism is defined as following: "*The cosmopolitan perspective*



is an alternative imagination, an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other” (ibid: 18).

Beck defines rooted cosmopolitanism as “cosmopolitan forms of life and identities (...) that are ethically and culturally simultaneously global and local” (ibid: 36). He further states that the difference between merely local and cosmopolitans is that they see their place as an open place to the world and its influences (ibid). Sojourn migration does not only give the sense of opportunities but also of vulnerability. This can be seen as the dual character of the ongoing globalization process.



3 Previous research

Brown & Brown (2013) conducted a qualitative study about “The international student sojourn, identity conflict and threats to well-being” in the UK. Five international students who were studying in the south of England were interviewed in order to identify challenges to their national self-image. The study suggests that the culture of origin is important for both the private and personal sense of self, and stresses the importance of counsellor educators to understand the emotional and behavioural difficulties international sojourn students encounter while studying abroad (Brown & Brown, 2013). Challenges to the cultural identity during the time spent studying abroad can be perceived negatively and create confusion challenging both cultural identification and membership with the country of origin, which can have effects on the students’ self esteem (ibid). Brown & Brown made a call for further cross-cultural research concerning international students, a call to which this study will respond by investigating how being an international sojourn student can challenge the students’ identity.

Dolby & Rizvi (2008) have looked at the impact of mobility on identity formation and argue that nowadays the identity of a large number of young women and men is being developed in the context of global mobility. They see themselves neither as tourists nor immigrants and occupy a new cultural space. It is no longer necessary to move, because even remaining in the same place it is possible to be affected by the mobility of others. Dolby & Rizvi (2008) differentiate between 3 groups among this group of young people who are geographically mobile. The first group entails people with dual nationality, which gives them the facility to move between two countries. The second group entails people who are forced to move due to political repression in their home-country or because of their parents searching for better job opportunities. The third group is formed by young people moving for educational purposes. By moving they build new networks and their identity is being challenged. This third group is the target group of my study.

Dolby (2004) further examined how American students encounter their identity while studying in Australia. She argues that students encounter their national identity more actively during the period they study abroad and begin to question the own identity. She further finds out that not only the American students construct the national identity, but also that other people are actively involved in this process.

These studies are interesting and valuable for my study and can be used as a reference point. Nevertheless, the context of my study differs from the context of the before mentioned studies, so that they can only be useful to a certain degree.



Even though there are numerous studies which analyzed the fluidity of identity of transnational sojourners, not much attention has been paid on identity challenges of students who decide to study abroad. Thus it is interesting to look at the difficulties that might arise during their studies abroad and see which strategies students apply to cope with identity challenges. This study starts from the same assumption as the previous presented studies that identity is something fluid and a constantly negotiable process, but as mentioned before, the setting and the context of the interviewed students differentiates.



4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

A qualitative approach was considered to be the most suitable approach to be able to explore the problems international students may encounter while studying abroad. This approach gives the possibility to understand complex social issues and allowed to get access to the participant's experiences, perceptions and thoughts of their identity in a global setting. In order to study perceptions, an understanding of the participants' attitudes, values, belief, opinions and experiences are needed, therefore face-to-face interviews were able to create a feeling of trust and confidence between me as the researcher and the interviewed person (May, 2011).

Regarding my ontological and epistemological position as a researcher, I tried to approach the case from a social constructivist perspective. The standpoint from a social constructivist perspective is that there are diverse approaches of reality and that knowledge arises from an inter-subjective context (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). In terms of epistemological stance, I took an interpretivist perspective in order to grasp the participants understanding and construction of reality regarding the points in question, keeping always in mind that their point of view is a subjective one.

This qualitative study was carried out on international students enrolled in an international master's degree programme at Lund University. The study will identify the strategies these international students use in order to cope with identity challenges. The results might be useful as feedback to the staff at Lund University who is in charge of international students by offering insight into the students' point of view on the support offered by the University staff and at the same time see what is still lacking or could be improved.

4.2 Semi-structured interviews

The technique of investigation used to fulfil this purpose was semi-structured interviews. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that it allows the interviewed person to answer questions on their terms but at the same time provide some level of structure (May, 2011). It further gives the interviewer the possibility to ask follow-up questions that might arise during the conversation process. Open-ended questions were used in order to encourage the interviewed persons to decide what they wanted to talk about, allowing the participant to interpret the question individually and giving them the freedom to answer the question in the way they think it suits their interpretation (ibid). The interviewed person got



the possibility to answer the questions in his/her own frame of reference. Thus, this method allows the researcher to get a better understanding of the subject's perspective because the meanings that individuals put to certain events can be understood on the participant's terms (ibid). To have closed questions would have been to limit the possible answers of the participants and in my case this would have been neither suitable nor desirable as it leaves little room for the participants to express their own point of view.

To ensure that the most significant issues were covered, an interview guide was prepared and used at every interview. The interview guide was the same for all of the interviews, though the follow-up questions varied depending on the answers given by the participants. General information such as age, country of origin, study, etc was asked through standardized questions. The interview guide was divided into 5 categories which were all related to the aim of the research. The addressed topics were general information, the students' background, their arrival in Sweden, the academic and private environment in Sweden and questions about identity.

Before conducting the interviews with the full sample of participants, the interview was tested in a pre-research phase. This allowed me to test if interview as a data collection tool would be appropriate for my research aim. Further it allowed me to see if my interpretation of the questions was the same as the participants' understanding of the question and if the sequence of the questions was chosen properly. Once the interview was conducted, the interviewed person gave feedback about the interview. Difficulties experienced while answering the questions helped me to revise the layout of my interview guide taking into account the criticism and problems mentioned by the participant (ibid). Conducting the exploratory interview gave me valuable information which I otherwise would have probably overlooked. After the pre-research phase I proceeded to conduct the interviews with the full sample of participants. Both the pre-interview and interviews given to the full sample were conducted by myself. This enabled me to get a better understanding of the content and the context of each interview (ibid). The interviews were carried out face-to-face and the responses were recorded with the consent of the participants. The duration of the interviews ranged from 48 to 75 minutes depending on the participants mode of expressing themselves.

4.3 Sampling strategy

The sample was compiled using the purposive strategy in order to select the participants. In purposive sampling, the "researchers select(s) individuals who are considered representative because they meet certain criteria of study" (Bui, 2009: 143). For practical



reasons, I decided to focus on social sciences students enrolled in an international master's programme at Lund University. I assumed that social scientist students have dealt with the concept of identity beforehand and thus it is not a new concept for them. The selected students were full-time students enrolled in a master's programme offered by the Graduate School³ or were enrolled in the Lund University Master of Science Programme in International Development and Management (LUMID). All of the interviewed students had started their master studies in the autumn term of 2013 and had different cultural backgrounds, coming from Indonesia, Russia, Canada, Germany, Ghana, Thailand and Brazil. As I had contact with the students before starting the master's thesis, the sampling strategy can be considered straightforward.

In order to have students from different cultural backgrounds, I made a preliminary list of the students that might be interesting to interview and then decided to choose international students from different continents. Being an international student doing a master's degree allowed me to get access to the participants and helped me to connect to them creating a basis of understanding and trust.

4.4 Participants and interviews

The seven participants were aged between 25 and 29. Two of them were female and five were male. All of the participants arrived in August and started their master's studies in the autumn semester of 2013. The names of the participants have been changed in order to fulfil ethical considerations. The following provides a list of the participants and their countries of origin:

Fernanda, Brazil

David, Canada

Sabine, Germany

Joseph, Ghana

Denny, Indonesia

Art, Thailand

Michael, Russia

The interviews were conducted in English. The data collection took place in Lund. Lund is a city located in the southern part of Sweden and is considered a student friendly city especially

³ The Graduate School at the Social Sciences Faculty administrates three joint faculty programmes at the master's level. These programmes are Global Studies, Social Studies of Gender and Development Studies.



for international students. Currently they are still in Lund, studying in their master's programmes.

As the number of participants is very restricted, it is important to emphasize that I do not claim to make generalizations about the identity challenges all international students face. Even so, the number of students is appropriate for this study because I want to get a deep understanding of each case and my main purpose is to find commonalities that these international students might experience which can help to get a better understanding of what can lead to their encountered problems.

4.5 Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, I started with the preliminary data analysis. To be able to treat the raw data I used thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2012). The first step was to transcribe the interviews. In order to get familiarized with the data and be able to code it, I listened several times to the audio tapes and read through the transcripts. This process allowed me to get an overview of the obtained data and to start thinking about possible themes or categories. In the third and last step, data reduction took place where the data was coded. Similar codes formed categories which were analyzed using the theories. An interpretative approach was used to analyze the data, trying to understand the identity challenges international students face when they come to do a master's degree in Lund.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The topic of my study contains a lot of personal information which required contemplating ethical considerations in order to avoid any harm of the participants. Especially in using interviews as a practical tool for my research purpose, I must always be aware that ethical or moral concerns are involved. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) state that "ethical issues go through the entire process of an interview investigation, and potential ethical concerns should be taken into consideration from the very start of an investigation to the final report" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 62). Before conducting the interview, each participant was informed about the aim of the research and the right to withdraw from the project. This is called "informed consent", where the researcher informs about the purpose of the study conducted as well as it means to "obtain the voluntary participation of the people involved, and informing them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time" (ibid: 70). The information given by the participants was handled confidentially and anonymity was assured. Confidentially implies "that private data identifying the participants will not be disclosed"



(ibid: 72). The names used in the findings are pseudonyms used to guarantee the anonymity of the participants.

The ethical principle of beneficence played an important role during my research. According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2009), “the risk of harm other people should be the least possible” (2009: 73). Further should “the sum of potential benefits to a participant and the importance of the knowledge gained (...) outweigh the risk of harm to the participant and thus warrant a decision to carry out the study” (ibid). Therefore, only information gathered from the interviews and with the previous consent of the participants has been used.

4.7 Validity and Limitations

Considering the limited time available to write the thesis, I restricted the research study to Lund University and did not expand it to other universities in Sweden. I further limited the study by choosing to interview only students from the Graduate School at Lund’s University and one student from the LUMID programme.

The limitation of having a special target group in a purposive sample and a small sample size make generalizations impossible. Nevertheless, the results allow for a rich and textured report of how international students encounter challenges to their identity while studying abroad. The participants’ opinions presented in this thesis are mostly subjective and restricted to a specific context and time frame.

However, the presented analysis and quotations of the students’ answers will give interesting insight into the thoughts of international students and the challenges they face while studying in their master’s degree in Lund, and the findings deduced from the interviews will provide valid and reliable results for this research study.



5 Results and analysis

This section of the paper will present the empirical findings thematically from the interviews conducted with seven international students. The countries of origin of the interviewed students were: Brazil (Fernanda), Canada (David), Germany (Sabine), Ghana (Joseph), Indonesia (Denny), Russia (Michael) and Thailand (Art). The chosen themes are: encountering the Swedish society, encountering the Swedish academic system, identity crises and culture shock, strategies to cope with identity crises and culture shock and strategies offered by Lund University. Further, the findings will be analysed using a theoretical lens for each aspect and afterwards the results will be discussed.

5.1 Encountering the Swedish Society

5.1.1 Motivation to study in Sweden

The motivations the respondents had to study in Sweden were quite diverse. Some of the respondents as for instance Sabine (GER) and Denny (ID) mentioned the benefits of the educational system in Sweden and valued the interdisciplinary character of their master's programmes. Other students, for instance David (CAN) who has never been living outside the borders of Canada, was determined to search for an adventure and to experience something new.

Since the implementation of tuition fees for non-European students in 2011, the number of incoming students from outside the European Union has decreased. For students coming outside the European Union the possibility to be granted with a scholarship played a key role in their decision to come and study in Sweden. In this regard Joseph mentioned "*I think it was more the fact that I would get a scholarship. I didn't think about the country that much.*"

5.1.2 Introduction and identification with the country of origin

Concerning the way the students introduce themselves when they encounter a new person, the majority of the respondents mention beside their name their country of origin and the programme in which they are involved. This reinforces Catarina Kinnvall's (2004) assumption that nationality can assume the role as an identity signifier, helping individuals to situate themselves by giving them a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, not only nationality can be considered as an identity signifier, as Michael's case illustrates. Michael is originally from Russia but instead of feeling attached to his home-country he feels a stronger attachment to his home-city of St. Petersburg. His explanation lies in Russia's geographical dimension. Being such a big country the regions can differ strong from each other.



Denny's statement reflects the same notion:

"Indonesia is a very diverse country because we have more than 400 languages and we also have so many ethnicities. So basically there is no Indonesian identity. But if you are going abroad it is better to use the state as your identity because it will be more recognisable rather than saying that you come from a special ethnic or cultural background".

He further states that being surrounded by countrymen, the way he identifies changes:

"It differs on how I define myself if I am surrounded by other Indonesians... Like for example if I meet Javanese people, I will talk in Javanese language and this will help to create a bond with them because we also have several languages apart from the Indonesian language. It is easier to approach other people if you have the same language. But when I talk with foreigners I would use the nation as the identity to define myself... I would talk only about Indonesia."

5.1.3 Picturing the home country

When asked to give a picture of their home countries, the respondents mainly tended to start giving a positive picture of it. Topics loaded with problems were only mentioned after request. Denny and Joseph's statements illustrate the tendency to start with the positive aspects when introducing the country to someone new. Denny declared:

"First I would talk about the positive things because I want them to visit my country. But if they are really engaged to the things I'm talking about then I also tell them about the problematic things".

Joseph portrays Ghana using a similar starting point. To begin, he talks to *"people about the tourist sites and what makes it a nice country."*

David's case is interesting because he noticed a change in the way he portrays Canada. Whereas he used to talk about problematic issues such as organized crime, gang control in cities and corruption, now after living 8 months in Sweden, the way he describes Canada to others has changed.

"The way I portray it now is nicer than how I portrayed it when I came here. I guess probably because of nostalgic feelings. The way I portray Canada is more nostalgic, in a good light rather than a realist light."

Other respondents were confronted with stereotypes or misconceptions about their home-country when they encountered new people. The way to deal with this kind of situations differed from participant to participant. Sabine from Germany is often confronted with the stereotype of Germans being close-minded and strict. In such situations she prefers to take it with humour and go with the stereotypes rather than to defend herself.

"There are some big stereotypes of Germans being strict and harsh. I rather go with this and make fun of it. I always say: "sure I have to be strict and punctual because I am from Germany".



Fernanda is frequently confronted with misconceptions about Brazil. She related that many people already have preconceptions and thus she is tired of having to give explanations that Brazil is not only about “*football, carnival, violence and jungle*”. From her way of describing such situations, anger is noticeable:

“I’m just so fed up with this...people have these preconceptions. And it is difficult to say that it is not like that”.

5.1.4 Fulfilling the role of an ambassador

International students are often asked to give information about their countries of origin. This can create the feeling to have to fulfil the role as a representative or kind of an ambassador of their countries of origin. When David is asked to explain Canada to others, he feels he has to represent Canada even though he does not consider that his explanations are solidified. When he arrived in Lund he used to emphasize on the problems of Canada when he was asked to explain his country. Now after living some months in Lund he highlights rather the positive side, giving an idyllic picture of Canada.

Denny is cautious to behave correctly in order to give a positive picture of Indonesia.

“I feel being a representative of the country because I think they might perceive my country depending on how I behave. If I am unfriendly people might think that all of the people are unfriendly so I try to be as nice as possible.”

Having to explain and represent one’s own country is not always perceived in a positive light. Michael relates that sometimes he feels pressured to justify for Russia’s political decisions even though he does not support many of them; this makes him feel uncomfortable.

5.1.5 Cultural differences

A frequent notion about cultural differences which came up during the interviews were differences in the way people interact with each other and the way new friendships emerge. Swedish people were perceived as being reserved when they meet someone for the first time.

Among the differences, Joseph identified were cultural differences regarding the family size. According to Joseph, “family” in a Ghanaian society is typically very extensive including a large number of people, from parents, siblings, cousins, to distant family members. The bond between the family members is strong and provides the individuals with a feeling of security. Moving from a society where the social network is tight and supportive to a society where this is not the case, was a big challenge for Joseph.



5.1.6 Swedish language

When the participants were asked about their experiences encountering the Swedish language, several respondents perceived language as a barrier. Swedish language is considered by the respondents to be necessary to engage and interact actively with the Swedish society. Regardless of the fact that almost every Swede speaks English, exclusion due to language is noticeable throughout different situations both in the academic and private setting. Sabine mentioned that in several situations *“information events and events in general are only offered in Swedish”* which makes her feel excluded.

Furthermore some of the respondents answered that finding a job is very difficult without speaking Swedish.

Art described a situation where he felt excluded in the private setting:

“Sometimes I feel like everything is in Swedish.... At the beginning I was serving at a nation⁴ and everything was in Swedish even though they knew that I am not, they were Swedish so they were talking Swedish the whole time.”

Moreover, respondents not only had difficulties with Swedish but also with English. Fernanda mentioned:

“I have difficulties when I have to express myself in front of the class... especially due to the language barriers I thought that I am not able to express myself properly. Something was blocking me and sometimes I have a question that I don't dare to ask.”

Fernanda's experiences show that facing language difficulties can affect a person's self-esteem. Due to the fear of making mistakes she prefers not to ask questions. This underlies the claim Hofstede (1991) made that self-doubt is a feeling that arises often in the first weeks after the arrival to the new environment when sojourners try to make themselves understood. Even Joseph whose mother tongue is English faces language difficulties due to the different accent:

“Sometimes I often don't hear to what people say because they speak faster so that I am not able to grasp what they are trying to put across”.

As Joseph related, this affects his self-esteem because in such situations he does not feel confident enough to ask further questions. This can be explained with the fact that in Ghana teacher-centred-teaching is the usual teaching method. Students are not used to raising questions, thus he prefers to work in smaller seminar groups.

⁴ Student nations are social clubs, where students can meet each other and organize events together.



5.1.7 Social Interaction

The importance of having social networks was highlighted by Baumeister & Leary (1995) in their “need to belong”-theory. All of the respondents were belonging to groups but the composition of these groups differed case-by-case.

In this regard, some of the respondents had mainly a co-national network whereas others had a very mixed social network consisting of friends coming from different cultural backgrounds. It was interesting to see how some respondents differentiated between socializing in the academic environment and during their leisure time.

Denny elaborated:

“In my leisure time I spend it more with my Indonesian friends, we cook together and have meetings or socialising time once within two weeks... In school I mainly socialise with international students.”

To engage in a co-national friendship network with Indonesian friends, gives Denny a space where he can encounter people who share the same values and behaviour. These familiar networks offer Denny a surrounding of trust where he understands other people’s behaviour and is understood by them. Denny illustrated this by using the example of smiling. Coming from Indonesia, smiling is very important for people’s interaction. After living in the Swedish society he noticed that Swedish people do not smile as much as Indonesians. He explained:

“I try to reduce my smiling because people might think that I am weird for smiling all the time but if I meet Indonesian friends then I would smile of course. This is the way we interact with each other. With international students I would look how they react because even smile could be interpreted differently according to your cultural background. So I try to analyse the person that I am meeting and see if they are not very comfortable and friendly then maybe I will try to keep some distance. Maybe they want more private room. If we talk with Indonesian people then it is okay to have a short distance and to touch each other. This could be weird here so I have to adapt”.

This example shows that Denny tries to adjust his behaviour according to the context he is encountering. In order to avoid misinterpretations or other awkward situations, Denny observes first peoples’ behaviour and then decides how to interact with them. The advantage of having a social network consisting mainly of Indonesian friends enables him to share experiences and challenges he faced while encountering the Swedish society.

5.1.8 Discrimination

From the interviewed persons, Joseph is the only person who experienced a situation where he felt discriminated. In comparison to the other interviewed students, Joseph is the only student with a darker skin tone which might lead to attract attention. The situation occurred the day before I interviewed him:



“Yesterday I was going to take the bus and formed in the line behind a Swedish lady. When she saw me she automatically put her bag in front of her. I was just laughing and didn’t say anything. And I think she realised that I was laughing. This happens sometimes when I go to grocery shops. People are quite particular with watching what I am taking out. I feel observed but it doesn’t bother me too much. Probably I have the perception that this could happen at any time so I just decided to ignore it.”

This incident of discrimination had a severe impact on Joseph’s sense of well-being. As a reaction he decided to retreat himself from the majority society in order to avoid such negative experiences. In this case retreatment can be seen as a defence strategy against discrimination.

5.2 Encountering the Swedish Academic System

5.2.1 Grading system

Regarding the grading system, the frequent notion arose that the grading system is difficult to grasp. Sabine stated: *“The grading system is quite confusing because even the institution does not know how it works, it has been newly implemented.”*

Especially participants who come from societies where grades play an important role had difficulties to adapt to the Swedish grading system and accept “bad” grades.

Denny described this as following:

“In Indonesia grades are almost everything, you are judged on your grades. When I got my first “C” on the first course it was like hell for me... I couldn’t sleep for three days because of my grade. When I talk to other students they told me that it is okay to say that I got a “C”. But when I talk to my Indonesian friends, then I am quite shy to say that I got a “C””.

Art compared the importance of grades in Sweden to the importance they have in Thailand and pointed out: *“in Thailand that means much more because it determines to which university you can go, it determines what job you can get.”*

The fear of having bad grades came up during various interviews. Art explained the reasons for this fear as following:

“Grades don’t mean so much and of course in Swedish society this does not mean that much but as most of the international students don’t stay in Sweden that can be a problem.”

5.3 Identity Crises and Culture Shock

As has been defined earlier, identity crises emerge when people are confused about their own identity, being unable to situate themselves in their environment. International students are obliged to negotiate who they are but facing an identity crisis they are unable to know who they are. This can create a feeling of ontological insecurity where the feeling of vulnerability and anxiety can arise.



Sojourners are prone to face identity crises because they have to face a new environment where the well-known structures no longer exist. In this case the sojourn students need to re-situate themselves in a surrounding where cultural terms, language, values and norms of behaviour can be completely different. Being in an unfamiliar surrounding it is common to start to scrutinize cultural behaviour, norms and values.

An identity crisis can come along with culture shock. Culture gives us an understanding of what behaviour is appropriate in which situation (Jang, 2010). Culture is usually able to provide a sense of identity and belonging, allowing us to interpret the behaviour of people surrounding us. Sojourn students are faced with a new and unknown environment, where the cultural norms can differ; this can lead to the experience of culture shock. Culture shock can be understood as the feeling of anxiety that arises when familiar signs and symbols of social interaction are substituted by unknown cues (Brown & Halloway, 2008). Brown & Halloway (2008) further argue that most sojourners experience a certain degree of culture shock (ibid). This was the case among the respondents. Almost every respondent mentioned having undergone, up to a certain extent, through the process of culture shock.

Sojourn students are constantly being asked to re-situate themselves in the new surroundings. These changes in the environment can be perceived as stressors, challenging the students and leading to a loss of stability. Fernanda experienced culture shock three weeks after her arrival in Lund. She gave an emotionally charged description of the way she felt when she experienced culture shock:

“I had the first panic attack in the third week being here. I was completely lost and didn’t know what to do. It was during the night, 3 o’clock in the morning and I was completely desperate. I could sleep again at 7 o’clock but I woke up at 9 having the same feeling. I thought I would sleep and then the feeling would disappear but when I woke up I was completely lost. I felt that my heart was beating so fast and do you know the feeling when you are in the place and you feel that the place is not real? This was something that I had never experienced before it was very scary for me.”

Before moving to Sweden, Fernanda has always lived with her family in the same city in Brazil. She did not have any previous experiences studying abroad before embarking her journey to study abroad. Coming from a collectivist culture and being used to live with her family, she was not used to assume responsibility to manage daily life. After moving to Lund she realized what it entails to live alone:

“I have never had to stay alone before so it was the first time I had to take care of food, clothing, money and school. There was a lot of responsibility which I didn’t expect that I have to deal with.”



Not only students without previous studies abroad can be affected from culture shock as the case of Art shows. Art participated previously in a 1-year exchange study programme in Denmark while he was studying at high school. Thus, he expected to be prepared for culture shock without having any difficulties with the adaptation process. Such a previous experience did not, however, completely offset the shock of encountering the new Swedish environment. This experience of culture shock occurred once *“the honeymoon-phase where you perceive everything as positive was over.”*

5.4 Strategies to cope with Identity Crises and Culture Shock

In situations where ontological insecurity is faced, individuals try to get a sense of safety. One of these strategies that are able to give security is religion. According to Kinnvall (2004) religion can give a sense of security and stability by giving answers to identity needs. Religion functions as a guideline to define the own identity. The Christian religion plays an important role and determines Joseph’s daily life. By being able to go every Sunday to church, Joseph created a framework of security around him. The people he got to know in church during the weekly services are now part of his social network. As he describes, the church offers a space to have events and parties together. The members help each other out and give each other a strong sense of support and group identity.

Buddhist religion plays an important role in Thai society. Art believes that Buddhism is important and shapes his way of thinking, even though he would not define himself as being a Buddhist. In Thailand he did not go to Buddhist temples on a regularly basis but being in Sweden he discovered that the temple can fulfil more than only its religious function:

“It is quite interesting because last week I actually went to a Buddhist temple. Not because I wanted to go to the temple but because the Thai temple in Sweden has a different function of building a community of Thai people. I was helping out for some preparation for the Thai New Year which is coming soon. It was kind of funny because in Thailand I would never go to the temple but it was nice. I think it has this different function more than just the religious function.”

Relying on what Art states, the Thai temple is experienced more as a place to get to know people from the same country rather than as a place only aimed to fulfil its religious purposes. Building networks with people from the same cultural background seem to assume the function of giving a strong support and a space where problems can be discussed, laughed at together and get distracted from other problems. This can happen in formal institutions such as a church or a temple or informally by meeting friends. Denny related that he met on a regularly basis with his Indonesian friends when he was facing difficulties.



“When I felt more melancholic I met my Indonesian friends more often. During wintertime we met once a week to cook together and make jokes together and smile. That released the stress.”

Denny highlighted the importance of having friends with whom he can interact directly.

“I saw my family face-to-face thanks to technology but it is still an artificial relationship. Here I have a real relationship with Indonesian friends.”

Joseph related as well that it is very important for him to have friends from his home country. When he faced difficulties he relied first on his Ghanaian friends in Lund to search for advice. To talk about problems with his friends back home was more difficult:

“I wouldn’t tell my friends back home about sad situations because I don’t want them to get worried. Also because there is the belief that I am in a better place so I shouldn’t complain. Maybe you would feel more comfortable to talk with someone back home but you cannot.”

Apart from the contact Joseph has to his Ghanaian friends in church, he tries to stay on his own. *“In this environment I don’t feel quite comfortable so I prefer to be indoors.”*

Joseph’s behaviour of isolation would fit into both the identity strategies of retreatism and essentialism. It can be considered retreatism because Joseph mentioned that he tries to avoid any sort of commitment and tries to attract as less attention as possible. On the other side his behaviour can as well fit within the identity strategy of essentialism where the individuals get the impression of being excluded from the majority society and thus search for places where they can have familiar surroundings. As the self needs to be re-situated in order to cope with feelings of ontological insecurity, it is very important to create a bond with people to whom a basis of trust exists. Both the church and his Ghanaian friends offer such well-known and familiar surroundings where Joseph can feel comfortable. They work as a support net on which Joseph is able to rely on. His statement reinforces this: *“With my friends from Ghana I have the feeling that I can be more myself.”*

When Fernanda faced difficulties, the first person she contacted was a Brazilian friend, hoping to be understood by her:

“I told her this is happening to me, but I didn’t have the feeling that she was really worried...This made me feel worse because you are in a place where you don’t know anyone, in a different culture and if you think about someone that could help you, you think first about someone from your country”

Much needed assistance from the countrymen was not given when Fernanda first arrived in Sweden. Instead she searched elsewhere for help and found an Iranian friend who could help her:



“She didn’t understand what was happening to me but she was by my side all the time... I slept at her room for four days. I just couldn’t stay in my room because whenever I entered it, the same feeling started again. It was all the time, something out of control. I couldn’t stay alone.”

Fernanda also searched for help from the Student Health Centre but her experience was not positive due to several reasons. Even though the nurses were very helpful, it took a long time before getting an appointment with a psychologist. As she felt desperate, the nurse gave her advice of how to calm down and told her to search for help at the hospital. Fernanda mentioned that this was difficult and a big challenge for her since she was new in the city and experiencing such a situation for the first time.

Sabine’s strategy to cope with identity challenges is to engage with the Swedish society by trying to *“adopt the good things”*. Her behaviour reflects her disposition to open up and engage with the majority society instead of isolating in a minority group. She pointed out: *“if there was a German club I would not go”*.

5.5 National Identities versus Cosmopolitan Identity

Many respondents constructed their identity in terms of their national affiliation using it as a guideline which leads their behaviour and gives them a sense of belonging. Assuming a national identity, symbols, traditions and rituals of patriotism play a key role in the way people identify themselves. Many respondents stated that their national identity aroused after being outside the borders of their country of origin. This is nothing remarkable because only when we leave our familiar surrounding and are encountered with a new environment, we are able to compare and to become aware of things we used to take for granted. In this context some of the respondents mentioned as well the desire to return to the home-country.

David’s description illustrates this:

“I am very proud of being a Canadian; this feeling gets stronger the longer I have been away. When I first came here I saw it as my home but I feel that the longer I am here the more I want to go back. Not necessarily long-term because my work will take me to different parts. I didn’t think that I would miss it as much as I do. But I guess when you leave is when you actually become Canadian.”

Joseph related:

“I feel a very strong attachment especially since I came here. I didn’t have that strong attachment when I was there but once I came here I started to understand what it means to be a Ghanaian.”

As Joseph further describes, the bond between the members of his home-community is very strong. He started to appreciate this closed relationship with members of his community after



his arrival in Lund. According to him, this process has affected his perception of identity: *“I think that has made me more aware of my identity.”*

Denny explains his stronger identification with Indonesia because of being outside the home-country:

“you see your country from a more positive light compared to when you are in your country. Being in the country I would talk more about the corruption, radicalisation and how societies is being segregated. Here I would talk mainly about how beautiful Indonesia is. I would also talk about bad things but the proportion is more giving a positive image of your country when you are abroad.”

Art also mentioned a stronger attachment to Thailand, having the impression that being outside his home country the cultural identity is more defined. According to Stuart Hall (1997), retreatism into a nationalist state of mind can be seen as a strategy where people re-identify with their own culture in order to resist exclusion and marginalization in the new environment.

Other respondents mentioned having rather a cosmopolitan identity and identified themselves less with their country of origin. As Hannerz (1996) defined it, cosmopolitanism can be characterized as the willingness to engage with others. Seeing it from the perspective of identity strategies then, we can classify cosmopolitanism in the context of the strategy of engagement.

Three out of the seven interviewed identified themselves as having a cosmopolitan identity. This cosmopolitan identity is reflected in Sabine’s description of her behaviour:

“I am really adaptive, if I find something good about another culture I try to adapt this... I don’t really go back to say that I am German.”

To the question how she identifies herself Sabine answered:

“definitely being a European citizen. It’s not that much about the citizenship but about the European identity. Even though, it is difficult to have a purely European identity because you are shaped from your country. Maybe you just perceive it.”

Sabine identifies herself less with Germany because as she states:

“the fact to be in an international class made me identify less with the German identity because you have friends from all over the world.”

Even though David mentioned to have experienced a stronger attachment to Canada after coming to Sweden, he also identifies himself as being a global citizen.

“I am here and to have a lot of international friends and experiences also helps me to identify myself even beyond Canada. The whole idea of being a global citizen, I identify myself more as having a connection globally and my experiences are more globally.”



This identification of being a global citizen is due to the fact that David has both the Canadian and the Swiss citizenship. *“As I also have the Swiss passport I feel more as a global citizen because I have to associate myself as being from two different countries.”* Nevertheless, David feels a stronger attachment to his Canadian identity because he has never been to Switzerland before. When asked about his understanding of being a global citizen David answered:

“I guess it is the mindset...the mindset is facilitated by the fact that I have two passports. It is not only an idea, it is an actual fact that you belong to two different places and two different regions. It helps to build up your interest and defines how much you care about what is going on in your country.”

As mentioned before, the process of group-building entails both inclusion and exclusion. Michael feels excluded by the fact of not being a European citizen.

“Sometimes I’m a little bit sad that Europeans have much more possibilities. Not being a European citizen gives me fewer opportunities to do an internship. My scholarship only covers my program and if I want to take another program I cannot do that.”

In order to keep themselves informed about what is going on in their countries of origin, the students follow on a regularly basis the news through podcasts, news websites or by talking with family and friends. Sabine does not intend to go back to Germany after she finishes her master’s programme. Thus she follows more international politics instead of the German politics. Whereas Joseph, who feels much attached to his national identity, is always up to date of what is going on in his country.

5.6 Strategies offered by Lund University

Lund University is very concerned about making the adaptation process of its international students as smooth as possible. To do so, they contact international students previous to their arrival giving some advises of what they have to expect from their studies in Sweden. Once the students arrive, students get the possibility to attend to a lecture about cultural awareness during the introduction week. In this lecture students get information about culture shock and how to deal with it. The university staff also makes the students aware of the possibility to visit the Student Health Centre at Lund University and ask for help. The student Health Centre offers help in situations of stress, anxiety, depression or other academic difficulties.

The interviewed students appreciate the efforts Lund University makes previous to their arrival in Lund. Fernanda pointed out:

“The university system is very good because once I was accepted they contacted us and were worried about how we would do here. So they told me that other Brazilians were approved and I got their contact details. I think University tries very hard to integrate you somehow with people of your own country. They make the contact for us. After this



they organised a party for only international students from Brazil studying in Lund. It is good to know other Brazilians.”

To create these connections to other people from the same country helps international students to get the feeling of having a net of support even before starting their studies in Lund.

Sabine “*was surprised that there is a lot of help offered.*” She further stated:

“Even before we arrived we got a lot of information telling us about how it is to study in Sweden but it is another experience to study here.”

Even though help is offered by Lund University, the support programmes could be improved and shaped to the needs of the students. Students face difficulties with the fact that an appointment is needed in order to be able to see a doctor at the Student Health Centre. The waiting time to get an appointment varies but it can take up to weeks. There is no such thing as an emergency doctor, which might be useful because the problems students face arise unexpectedly, so that it is difficult to arrange an appointment pre-emptively.

Fernanda reflected on the period when she was experiencing culture shock and went to the Student Health Centre to ask for help:

“The people at the Student Health Centre just told me: “fill in the form and we will contact you in three weeks maybe”. I was lost without having support. She (the nurse) gave me the direction of the hospital and told me which bus to take but I was completely new in Lund. So I went to the reception desk of the Graduate School and tried to contact the University staff. They told me that I needed an appointment but I was crying because I was so desperate. They saw me and then helped me. They contacted the chaplain. He told me that there are a lot of students that have the same problem but some of them don’t have the courage to approach him and search for help. So the situation can get worse if you carry it around. I was in crisis asking for help in the student health centre and they wanted me to fill a form so what is the purpose?”

Art appreciates as well the help offered by University but has his concerns about the time it takes to get an appointment:

“University has a lot of support for students especially for international students, the student health centre and the information about cultural shock. At the same time the students’ health centre takes weeks to get an appointment. They cannot really react quickly. And specially to have an online course doesn’t help because you need contact to people and social life, so I went home.

Art decided to return to Thailand during the time he was taking the online course. This helped him to get some distance from the culture shock he was experiencing in Lund.

David mentioned:

“The University could do things more accessible. There are no student counsellors with whom you could talk when you are facing problems. It feels like there is not an immediate resource, you have to go through a lot of steps to access to something that might help you. “



6 Discussion

By employing the theoretical approach as a guiding principle, my attempt was to use the perspective of these international students as a way to generate a deeper insight into their perceptions and challenges during the adaptation process into the new environment. Hence, the task was to explore how international students that are doing their master's degree at Lund University perceive this adaptation process, what difficulties they face and which challenges the adaptation process has for their identity. This resulted in the emergence of themes that might serve to widen our understanding of the issue at hand.

The analysis illuminated that once sojourn students arrive in a new environment they encounter several challenges. Student mobility has given those students a greater possibility to get to know people from culturally different backgrounds. Being in the new environment these students are obliged to negotiate who they are and what lifestyle choices to make as familiar and well-known structures are swept away. In this process of encountering the self and of re-identification, some aspects of their lives are subject to deconstruction because the new environment does not offer the facility and known structures to keep these aspects such as job, sports activity, etc. alive.

The experience sojourn students have to undergo involves a journey of self-discovery that can be a painful and conflicting process where many challenges have to be faced. The challenges these international students have to face start with the challenge of picturing their own country to others. The analysis showed that all of the respondents portray their own country in a positive light when they encounter someone new, mentioning negative or problematic aspects only after request. Another challenge international students have to face is the challenge of encountering the Swedish society and the Swedish academic system. Most of the students are used to have a teacher-centred-teaching method applied at their home-university whereas Lund University puts emphasis on having as little hierarchy as possible in order to stimulate the students to think critically and become independent. The adaptation process from a teacher-centred-teaching method to the horizontal system at Lund University turned out to be a challenge to the self-esteem of some of the students as they were not used to raise their voice in class. Discrimination also affected the self-esteem, as experienced by Joseph. It would be desirable if the university could provide courses in how to deal with situations that affect self-esteem and how to get through negative situations without taking them personally. For students who are used to teacher-centred-teaching, it might be useful to provide training in how to talk in front of others. This sort of academic support at the



beginning of the semester could provide these students with the necessary academic skills needed at Lund University and help to offset the stress students undergo due to the academic aspect of the sojourn.

The identities of these international students were constantly being challenged during their studies abroad. Living abroad without having the familiar and well-known structures required the individuals to re-situate themselves. Daily routines and habits which are important to guide the self through the day had to be redefined. Furthermore students had to face the challenge to create new networks of support built on trust, on which the individual is able to rely in situations where anxiety and ontological insecurity arise. As we can draw from the analysis, most of the students whose cultural backgrounds differ a lot to the Swedish culture, try to build up a co-national network. The familiar network does not require individuals to introduce themselves and question basic things. This strategy to cope with identity challenges is considered to be the strategy of essentialism where the individual engages with a minority society in order to avoid difficulties with the majority society. After Joseph's bad experiences with the majority society, he chose to retreat himself, building a safe wall around himself in order to avoid conflict situations and bad experiences.

The need of these international students is to get as much support as possible during the adaptation process. The university could offer spaces where students could meet on a regular basis in order to give these students routines, and where these students can get to know people. Regular social gatherings could be organized in order to give the students a sense of belonging. Lund University already offers a mentor programme to which the students can sign up for, but the mentor sessions are group-based and only meet during the first weeks after the arrival. After this initial phase students have to figure out their own way. It would be nice if each student could get a mentor because this would guarantee a closer relationship where trust could be built up. These mentorships could be offered programme-internal from students doing the second year of their master studies so that newly arrived students get the chance to meet students who already went through this adaptation process and get some subject-specific tips.

According to what the students stated, the help offered by the Student Health Centre at Lund University is good; nevertheless it takes a long period of time to get an appointment. It would be desirable if the Student Health Centre would be prepared to respond to the needs of international students more quickly, especially in the first months of the adaptation process when the need is highest. A possible solution for this problem could be to have drop-in hours



during the week where students can get support without having to previously arrange an appointment.

To conclude, we can say that the respondents overwhelmingly perceived that before starting their sojourn in Sweden they had rather a non-reflected understanding of their own identity and started to reflect upon it only after their arrival in Sweden.



7 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to give a voice to international students who came to Sweden to study for a master's degree at Lund University. By giving them the possibility to speak, these students got the opportunity to mention the difficulties they encountered during the adaptation process, express their needs and come up with ideas on how to improve their situation. The study helps to get an insight into the identity challenges of international students coming from different cultural backgrounds and to spot the strategies they use to cope with identity problems.

The study has used the experiences of seven international postgraduate students in Lund to show how their identities are being challenged while studying abroad. As the study has shown, these challenges and the need to resituate themselves can lead to a temporary feeling of anxiety and ontological insecurity. The main theories I applied in this study were theories of social identity, which helped to understand identity as an ongoing, dialogical process where the individual and the society influence each other. In the process of interaction the individuals categorize themselves as belonging to groups which can give them a sense of security. The identities of these students are constantly being developed and as all of the respondents agreed, only after moving beyond the borders of their countries of origin they started to think about their identity. The interviewed students mentioned that they felt compelled to define themselves which required a re-situation of the self into a new environment. Further, the incorporated experiences during the period studying abroad re-shaped the students identities. We can draw from the data that the international students faced identity challenges which can have impacts on their self-esteem. Students respond in different ways to these challenges, applying different identity strategies. Whereas some of the students retreat in order to avoid having negative experiences, others engage with the new environment.

This study can be helpful for counsellors at the University to understand the adaptation process these international students have to undergo. To get this inside perspective might be useful to create support programmes that are shaped to the students need. The limitations of this study have been limitations concerning context and sample composition which can be addressed in further research. It might be interesting to conduct a similar study in a different university that does not offer their international students support during the adaptation process in order to see how their adaptation process takes place. Further, it would be interesting to conduct a study in a different city or country in order to see if the national context affects the



challenges students encounter. In addition, future studies could target a different category of sojourner. I have looked upon the identity challenges international sojourn students face during their arrival and which identity strategies they apply in order to cope with these challenges. It might be interesting to keep track of these students in order to see how their re-adaptation process takes place once they return to their countries of origin.



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9 Appendix

Identity in a Global Era

A qualitative study among international sojourn students in Lund

Questionnaire Master Thesis:

Personal Data:

Age:

Country of origin:

Country where you lived before coming to Sweden:

Academic background:

Where did you achieve your Bachelor?

Background:

What do your parents/siblings do?

Describe your community. By community I mean.... (definition)

Describe the context where you were raised.

What are your religious beliefs, that of your family, and your community?

What influenced your decision to study in Sweden? What was your motivation?

When did you first hear of Sweden? What did you think/feel about it?

Is it the first time you are studying abroad?

Living in Sweden:

How do you introduce yourself when first meeting someone?

How do you introduce your country here in Sweden?

How do you define your country? Can you describe it to me?

Have you had the experiences that someone does not know about your country or perceive your country in an unexpected way? How do you react in such a situation?

How do you identify with your home-country?

How do you think about being a...(country they come from) in an international context?

Does it change how you define yourself according to different contexts? Could you give me an example and describe it as detailed as possible?

How do you feel in Sweden?

Have you experienced any difficulties being an international student at Lund University? --> visa, housing, language

Describe the cultural differences between the Swedish society and the society of your home country that you have experienced.

Academic environment:

Have you faced any differences or encounters at the Swedish educational system according to the educational system where you achieved your bachelor degree? (grading system, way institution works, way students interact with each other, norms, level of independence expected...)

Could you describe me differences in terms of the expectations that are put on you? (family, yourself)

How have the differences affected your academic experience?

How would you describe the relationship between students and teachers? (hierarchy, how to approach professors)

How are you doing in your studies?

Can you describe me any situation where you felt really good/bad in relation to the academic environment?



Is this situation related to your identity?

Do you have the feeling of being successfully adjusted to the academic system at Lund's University?

How was the adjustment process? Did professors or university staff help you?

In case you don't feel adjusted. Why do you think that you are not adjusted? How do you think could the university help in order to make the adjustment process easier?

With whom do you socialize in university and in your leisure time, i.e. international students from your country, int. Students in general or Swedish students or people from your country that have lived for several years here?

Please tell me more about your friends in Sweden.

What do they know about your country?

Describe changes in your ways of thinking after you came to Sweden.

Do you try to get into contact with people from your own country/region to socialize with? If so, why?

Specific questions about identity:

What changes have you noticed in how you identify yourself?

Do you identify yourself more or less with your home country? Describe in what way.

Tell me how your sense of identity has been affected by spending time in Sweden or general abroad.

Are there situations in which you regard yourself as a 'minority'? Give examples

Did you go back to your country since you came to Sweden? How did you feel? (Family, politics....)

How are you following what is going on in your country? How often? Why?

Describe your lifestyle in Sweden: the food you eat, the places you go for shopping, recreation, the news you read...etc. Compare it to their home country.

Describe uncomfortable experiences you have had in Sweden. What was it like? What did you think then? What influenced your actions?

What do you like the most and what do you not like in Sweden? Differences to home-country

Do you have the feeling that you have to fulfil a role in Sweden? (role expectation as representative of home-country, etc.)