

Connections, Identity and Resilience Amongst  
International Students at Victoria University

By

Charlotte Wells

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## **Abstract**

This study used a re-storying methodology to develop narratives of 13 Asian students who came from overseas to study in New Zealand at Victoria University. These narratives considered connections the students made both on and off campus and their reflections on how these connections shaped cultural identity. The research also explored students' experiences of resilience and agency. Their stories revealed strong connections made with other international students but less well formed relationships with domestic students, where ties are superficial despite programmes designed to facilitate these connections. The exception was the stronger connections students developed with domestic minority learners, such as Pasifika and Maori students. Volunteering, rather than paid work or homestays, were contexts that offered community connections. Student narratives suggest that the experience of studying at VUW refreshed home country identity but also encouraged a flexible identity with a growing awareness of cultural diversity, which for some students, constituted a global citizen perspective. While all students reported struggles, they maintained resilience in the face of challenges, using their networks to sustain them, rather than formal support services. They demonstrated agency in making moves to improve their situation and that of prospective students. Micro-aggressions encountered did cause social suffering but students confronted racism, in their own way, trying to enlarge cultural space at university. Leadership opportunities taken, along with the difficult social encounters they navigated, lead to personal change and growth. Implications of these findings, for policy makers and providers of support services, are discussed.

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

In this introductory chapter, background is provided about the importance of international education in New Zealand and an outline of the rationale for the research is provided. The purpose of the research is described and the methodology is outlined with reference to key theoretical perspectives. The thesis structure is outlined and a chapter summary is provided.

### **Background**

Across the world internationalisation of education is an important contributor to globalization and western economies. During 2017, 130,000 international students studied in New Zealand across learning settings (Gerristen, 2017), with 3,400 enrolled at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW)([www.vuw.ac.nz](http://www.vuw.ac.nz)). VUW is active in this sector of the economy, targeting international students through marketing, university twinning programmes, and international leadership ventures. Despite increasing volumes of international students, there is a dominant discourse of cultural dislocation, suggesting students make limited social connections while overseas, resulting in negative experiences (Ramsey, Ramsey & Mason, 2007, Soltani, 2015, Williams & Johnson, 2011). Universities offer programmes that support international students to make stronger connections on and off campus, yet these are often ineffective. However, an alternative view is emerging, which constructs international students as resilient making flexible responses to difficult cultural encounters and prepared to reshape cultural identity to make connections that help them succeed in overseas education (Marginson, 2013). While there is emergent overseas research, which supports this perspective, few New Zealand studies have explored international student flexible cultural identity, connections and resilience.

As a researcher my experience of international education is intertwined with stories of others including; my partner, friends and international students I have worked with. In 2011 I witnessed first hand challenges international students face as I supported a young Indian student studying in a Central North Island institution, isolated from his family and religious community. He faced an unstable living situation with times of homelessness, working overnight in a fast food chain, while struggling to concentrate in class. I recognized his perseverance and resilience and admired his agency in making choices and changes to improve his situation. We shared many of his challenges and eventually we shared our lives, as he became my partner. I witnessed his cultural identity bend and reshape in response to interactions and experiences he had in education, work and the wider community.

This led me to pursue work opportunities in international education, in volunteer and paid roles, both on and off campus. In 2017 I started working in a language school, English Teaching College (ETC), responsible for international student activities, as well as pastoral care, conducting student orientation and helping with homestays. This research project has grown out of my commitment to improve support offered to international students so that it underpins students' own resilience and strengthens their flexible cultural identity.

## **Rationale for the Research**

The growth of international education across western learning contexts has made student experiences a significant area of research interest. Worldwide, the ICEF estimated there were 5 million international student enrolments in 2016 ([www.monitor.icef.com](http://www.monitor.icef.com)). International student fees and student spending make a substantive contribution to the education export industry, which in New Zealand, was valued at \$4.5 billion in 2017 (Gerristen, 2017). International jurisdictions compete for overseas students, not only for their fee contributions, but to access international perspectives they bring to western learning contexts.



While there has been considerable research into international students' experiences in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australian learning contexts, these studies often focus on cultural adjustment. The research uses paradigms, such as, acculturation and cultural fit, dominated by theoretical explanations of student identity, which highlight dislocation and acculturative stress. These studies support the construction of international student experiences as poor and they contribute to a negative majoritarian discourse. Measurement approaches, such as, the International Student Barometer, which rates international student experiences and satisfaction, also contribute to this research base ([www.enz.govt.nz](http://www.enz.govt.nz)). While these quantitative methodologies are strong designs for understanding patterns of student responses overtime and enable international comparisons, they are poor methodologies for providing insights into student sense making and how students reconstruct negative experiences. Students with unmatched friendship expectations, for example, may not construct this negativity as loneliness but view it as an opportunity for self-reliance and growth. Similarly, challenges to cultural values may not dislocate students, but become opportunities to reimagine the self.

New research is becoming informed by theoretical perspectives, which view international education as a purposeful sojourn, where students, with agency, negotiate differing aspirations in a process of self-formation. Interest in the interplay between students' connections and continuity of cultural identity is growing (Tran & Gomes, 2017, Pham & Tran, 2015). In New Zealand a small research base is emerging with new inquiries, such as, Soltani (2015) and Sauer (2017) examining how international students exercise agency, sometimes avoiding integration and making deep friendships with other international students, in order to pursue cosmopolitan identity. While there are some New Zealand studies available, this area of qualitative research needs to be extended, to consider a range of international student perspectives, and to explore their wider community connections. Although encounters of racism are mentioned in some research (Yang, 2008), few studies have considered international students' experience of micro aggressions and sense making

of these challenges. In depth studies are needed to gather students' own reflections on their difficult experiences and elicit the coping skills and positive life changes made by international students. Studies are needed that explore international education as a purposeful sojourn and engage directly with students, about their resilience, agency and identity negotiation.

## **Research Aims**

This research seeks to understand how international students at VUW construct resilience and explores the connections they make. It includes experiences of current and past international students from Asia, who have made connections on and off VUW campuses. In particular, the research considers student views of connectedness and how this influences cultural identity development. The study explores how students overcome challenges, their sense making, and how they construct stories of resilience. It considers issues of identity while studying in this country and coping strategies students use when encountering micro aggressions. Findings from this study are developed as counter-stories, where experiences of strength and resilience help to offset negative discourses, and offer new perspectives for those supporting international students.

The question at the centre of this research is:

- How have international students at VUW made connections within the university and with outside communities and how do these connections impact on cultural identity and resilience?

The research sub-questions are:

- What is the nature of international students' connections?
- How have these connections challenged or modified students' cultural identities?
- What strategies have students used to overcome challenges they encounter in making connections on and off campus?

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

The concept of resilience underlines this exploration of international student experiences (Marginson, 2013). This theory positions international students as purposeful and able to negotiate multiple social contexts, overcoming challenges and reshaping cultural identity during these encounters (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Critical Race Theory is also used in this research to understand how majoritarian education systems disregard race as a factor in learning and use negative discourses to explain systematic educational disadvantage. It explains the role of micro aggressions in education systems and how minority learners, such as international students, meet these challenges. Critical Race Theory constructs students' narratives as counter stories of resilience, which help offset damage centred discourses (Tuck, 2009).

## **Methodology**

This research uses the narrative inquiry methodology of storying to enable the researcher to gain insights into how international students construct their experiences and give meaning to these. Storying has been used successfully with international students (Swanston, 2015) and can provide rich data to supplement survey data, such as that collected in the IBS survey in New Zealand ([www.enz.govt.nz](http://www.enz.govt.nz)).

An initial interview explores how participants made connections during their study sojourn at VUW and how these shaped cultural identity. Participants are asked about their challenges, how they overcame difficulties and the impact of the process on personal identity and growth. Their story is developed by the researcher and then re-shaped by participants in a second collaborative re-storying process. These individual narratives are then analysed as a group in order to identify common experiences across themes of connection, cultural identity and resilience and implications for students, policy makers and university administrators.

## **Utility of the Research**

This research has utility if it is able to contribute to a positive representation of international students, highlighting their resilience and helping to offset predominantly negative discourses about their experiences. International students will be interested in the experiences of others, particularly stories that share resilience, and so strengthen their sense of self. Administrators developing programmes to connect international students to wider communities will be interested in these stories of connection and identity. Policy makers and those responsible for services offered within the International Student Code of Practice may also read these stories to understand how universities can improve support to students. These findings may

provoke discussion amongst those offering traditional support services, such as counselling, and programmes with objectives to increase cultural fit. Immigration Agents can use these stories with future international students, particularly those with cosmopolitan aspirations, to help them better prepare for sojourns.

## **Parameters of the Study**

International students are considered as transient visitors to academic communities, internationally mobile students who have left their home country and moved to another country with the singular objective of studying (UNESCO, 2009).

“International” and “domestic” are both constructs, which describe heterogeneous groups of students with a range of educational experiences and learning goals, along with diverse racial identity, religion and cultural practices. (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001). International students includes those enrolled in off and on-shore programmes, those who have studied in multiple countries and students studying overseas for the first time.

In focus, in this study, are international students who are studying at VUW on study visas. Asian students are selected as the participant group of interest because they are a significant population within the international student body and amongst overseas students at VUW (Gerritsen, 2016). Asian international students have identity and connection experiences that are different to students from the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States, whose home country cultures have much in common with New Zealand. VUW international students, who are studying at offshore campuses, are excluded from the study. Refugee students and those with host country residence from immigrant backgrounds are also excluded because their study is not part of an international sojourn.

Literature is reviewed, as part of this research, from a range of sources, explored through a systematic review of the published qualitative and quantitative research. Publications within fields of education, sociology, cross-cultural psychology, international relations, anthropology and marketing were considered. Searches were conducted across three key databases; Proquest, EBSCO host, and ERIC, along with Victoria University's Te Waharoa. Some material comes from small-scale, post-graduate studies, which use in-depth methodologies; these are accessed through university libraries but are not published in formal academic journals. Many of these researchers have been international students themselves, which makes their insights particularly valuable.

## **Thesis Outline**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two reviews literature on international education in New Zealand, covering the motivation for international students to study abroad and the benefits to those in western learning contexts. Research into international student experiences, is reviewed, describing the challenges encountered and the negative discourse that has been constructed around the difficulties they report. Patterns of international student connections, across domestic and international student networks, are described and amongst wider communities. The impact on study sojourns of cultural identity is discussed and emergent perspectives on flexible identity, student resilience and agency are reviewed.

In Chapter Three, the research methodology is described and the narrative inquiry method of storying is outlined. The process for forming a student narrative is described, through the initial development of a story and re-storying using participant and researcher's collaborative review. The construction of a counter-story is also discussed with reference to Critical Race Theory. The approach used to recruit

participants is described and ethical issues are reviewed. An introduction to each participant is also provided in this Chapter.

Chapter Four presents the findings, outlining themes derived from the narratives, which relate to international student connections. Home country connections are described, along with discussions of relationships students make with domestic students. International student friendships are outlined along with relationships participants make with academic staff. Wider community connections are explained, particularly the role of volunteering in forging off campus alliances.

Chapter Five presents findings across the narratives which relate to cultural identity and resilience. The chapter describes how students' cultural identity interacts with the connections they make with home country students, other international learners and wider communities. The challenges participants faced and their strategies for overcoming these challenges are reviewed. Finally, student agency and leadership are discussed, along with perceptions of personal growth experienced during the study sojourn.

Chapter Six contextualises these findings with research from New Zealand and overseas. It outlines alignment around students' domestic and international student ties, flexible identity, and student resilience and agency. These findings offer contrast to overseas literature around the place of religious networks, academic relationships and home country connections of international students.

In Chapter Seven, the implications of these findings for students, policy makers and university administrators are discussed. Policy considerations are suggested across assessment of student wellbeing, configuration of support services, academic relationships and student leadership. Ways in which these narratives can act as

counter stories, to offset damaged centred negative discourses about international students, are also discussed.



## **Chapter 2 International Education in New Zealand**

This chapter reviews internationalisation of education, including motivation for international students to study abroad and benefits to those in western learning contexts. Research into international student experiences, is reviewed, describing how challenges they encounter have been constructed within a predominant negative discourse which sees international students as vulnerable, academically challenged and culturally dislocated. Emerging perspectives, which position international students as flexible and resilient, are also reviewed highlighting connection and identity formation, along with student agency and resilience.

### **Internationalisation of Education**

Internationalisation of education has been described as a process “in which resources are drawn from the global environment and combined with local talent to produce innovations which help fulfil institutional objectives” (Kingston & Fordland, 2008). It has impact beyond international students, providing all on campus with intercultural dimensions to their learning so that domestic students, teaching staff, and institutional practices are changed in the process (Webb, 2005).

Dual drivers of international education growth are globalisation and internationalism. Globalisation emphasises international students as economic units, highlighting their contribution to revenue from high fees and their cross border participation in global labour markets. Internationalism references the role of international students in bringing intercultural dimensions to curricula, so that all students understand interdependence amongst nations and the importance of intercultural exchanges (Lee & Rice, 2007). As a result of both of these forces, western universities develop international joint degrees, and actively recruit fee-paying students from abroad, along with developing staff and student exchange programmes.

Internationalisation of education has expanded in many developed economies, becoming a key export industry, creating competition for overseas students. Across the world approximately 5 million students studied overseas in 2016, more than double the 2.1 million students who studied in 2000. The ICEF projects this number will grow to 8 million by 2025 ([www.monitor.icef.com](http://www.monitor.icef.com)). In New Zealand, in 2017, more than 130,000 students from 176 countries studied, across universities, schools, polytechnics and private providers (Gerritsen, 2017). Students from Asian backgrounds dominate this group of students with 27% from China, 23% from India, and 8% from Japan in 2015 ([radionewzealand.co.nz](http://radionewzealand.co.nz)). By 2017 it was estimated that international students would spent 4.5 billion dollars on fees and living costs, such that international education is New Zealand's fourth largest export earner (Gerriston, 2017).

### **International Student Code of Practice**

The global market for international students is highly competitive. Most countries, including New Zealand, try to develop a strong brand, based on quality of education (Education New Zealand, 2014). Institutions providing international education have a responsibility to make sure international students' unique needs are well catered for and support is provided. In New Zealand these obligations are enshrined in the International Student Code of Practice ([www.nzqa.govt.nz](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz)). Introduced in 2002 it aims to ensure a high standard for pastoral care for all international students, particularly for students who are under 18 years old. However, while this Code of Practice is a key document for education providers, international students appear ill informed about it (Sawir, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Rawlings-Sanae, 2013).

## **International Students at VUW**

In Wellington, New Zealand Immigration figures indicate that 5643 student visas were approved for international students to study in the city during 2015 (Devlin, 2016). Victoria University has made a particular commitment to recruiting international students, in line with their strategic plan to deepen the university's influence in the Asia Pacific Region ([www.vuw.ac.nz](http://www.vuw.ac.nz)). In 2017 3,400 international students were enrolled at VUW coming from more than 100 countries. Asian students made up the biggest proportion of the university's international student body with VUW Vice Chancellor, Grant Gilford, identifying in 2016, that around 800 of the 3,000 foreign students were Chinese (Gerristen, 2016).

Victoria University targets international students through “a range of international initiatives and connections- many of these through our global programmes and partners” ([www.victoria.ac.nz](http://www.victoria.ac.nz)). International education at Victoria dovetails with strategic plan objectives that emphasises partnerships in the Asia Pacific Region. Primary Strategy One includes “Enabling Asia Pacific Tradition nations as well as enriching national culture, civil society and global citizenship” ([www.victoria.ac.nz](http://www.victoria.ac.nz)). Victoria University has developed the Victoria Plus programme to enable international students to make connections with other students and prospective employers in the not-for-profit sector. The Victoria International Leadership Programme (VILP) also helps students become more globally aware through volunteering ([www.victoria.ac.nz](http://www.victoria.ac.nz)).

The role of pastoral care is critical to New Zealand's successful marketing as an overseas student destination. The Vice Chancellor of VUW reflects this in his commentary, attributing recent strengthening of enrolment numbers to the care New Zealand tertiary institutions take of students “You're seeing the benefits of that very high standard of pastoral care that we now offer across New Zealand's tertiary education sector, where we are regaining the faith of these international markets that,

when they entrust their children with us, we will do a good job with their education and with this care” (Gerritsen, 2016, p.1).

## **Benefits of International Education**

The majority of international students study abroad in order to access high quality education systems viewed as superior to those in home countries and to gain opportunities to practice English. In addition, many international students have immigrant aspirations. Over half of international students surveyed in Canada wished to settle there, hoping that Canadian study would enhance career opportunities (Gallander Wintre, Kandasamy, Chavoshi & Wright, 2015). Motivations of international students have been categorized as push and pull factors. (Cubillo, Sanchez & Cervino, 2006). Push factors originate in the home country, whereas pull factors are host country characteristics perceived as appealing.

Benefits of international education are two-way, advantaging host institutions as well as international students, by providing intercultural experiences for domestic students and staff (Haigh, 2002). Host families and communities are also enhanced by connections with international students, which provide diverse worldviews and cross-cultural encounters. International education provides host institutions with opportunities to make academic links across countries (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012) and when students return home they become “life long ambassadors” for host countries (McPherson, 2016). International students bring an international perspective to classrooms, assisting lecturers to reflect global issues in curricula (Barron, 2006, Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014). Finally, by choosing a particular university an international student enhances the reputation of the university (Pittaway, Ferguson & Breen, 1998).

Internationalisation of education implies that western learning contexts become agile and culturally responsive to the needs of international students, however evidence is

mixed. Academic staff in New Zealand acknowledged they were changed by their interactions with international students (Sawir, 2011) and teachers in the United Kingdom believed international education generated new insights into subject areas and broadened class discussions (Barron, Gourlay & Gannon-Leary, 2010).

However, international education is not without criticism and some staff believe financial interests dominate, characterising this form of learning as a “vital income stream facilitated by low English language entrance thresholds, leading to an ethically questionable situation, in which thousands of full fee students enter universities with barely functional academic literacies” (Barron, et al, 2010). Barron’s (2006) investigation of Australian domestic students found that 25% believed that their education was negatively affected by international students. Critics suggest poor English language proficiency means course content becomes diluted and staff manipulate pass marks to accommodate international students (Tran & Vu, 2016).

## **Experiences of International Students**

A lack of interaction between domestic and international students is documented in the literature. Volet and Ang (1998) in their study of networks of international students in Australia found poor relationships between domestic and international students, particularly amongst those from Asian backgrounds. Arkoudis and Baik (2014) agree that while multicultural student populations provide cross-cultural opportunities, poor interaction means students from different backgrounds study in parallel. Limited social connectedness is reported whereby domestic students avoid maintaining cross cultural encounters, with only sporadic contact being sustained from the second to third year of undergraduate study (Nesdale & Todd, 1993). In Canada Lee and Ratna (2014) found international students from non-English speaking backgrounds, have limited social contact with native speakers of English. Soltani’s (2015) research on international students socialisation in New Zealand also provides

testimony that students who encounter unfamiliar local course content, (including jokes, slang or informal phrases), experience disadvantage, which lowers confidence.

Hendrickson, Rosen and Kelly-Aune (2011) found when international students' expectations of host student friendships were not met, there is discouragement and disappointment. In addition homestays do not appear to offset loneliness, with students also experiencing these as unhappy landscapes. Campbell and Xu (2004) found international students had few opportunities to spend time with homestay parents and experienced isolation. Poor cross-cultural competency amongst homestay parents and domestic students is part of this context. In a small Australian study, international students identified it was easier to connect with domestic students who had travelled abroad, and were more friendly than those who had not been out of Australia (Kell & Vogel, 2008).

### **Racism and Micro-aggressions**

Racism and discrimination are included in negative experiences reported by some international students. Racism is behaviour motivated by prejudice or hostility against race or perceived race (Crown Prosecution Service, 2010). Cho (2016) explains that race is a social construction, which is situated in cultural, historical and social processes. Racism requires that one group deems itself superior and has power to enact this superiority with actions which benefit the superior group while negatively affecting other ethnic groups (Solo-zario & Yosso, 2002).

International students report racism, describing verbal and physical abuse and unconscious racist attitudes by domestic undergraduates (Pittaway, Ferguson & Breen, 1998). Poyrazli and Grahame's (2007) study provides evidence of off-campus discrimination including covert interactions and overt acts, experienced by 440 international students in the United States, the majority of whom were Asian. In New Zealand Chinese international students reported racist encounters in their places of

work (Yang, 2008). Most incidents go unreported to the authorities, which suggests that the extent of racism is underestimated (Brown & Jones, 2011).

Discrimination and experiences of racism have ongoing negative impacts on student physical and mental health, with evidence that students who perceive discrimination experience high stress, depression and low self-efficacy (David, Okazaki, Saw & Mallinckrodt, 2009). Yu (2015) highlights the negative influence of discrimination on cultural identity of Chinese international students, where participants, who perceived discrimination, experienced higher levels of cultural identity conflict than those reporting lower levels of discrimination. Fuller-Rowell, Ong and Phinney (2013) also found that international students who perceived their ethnic membership as devalued, experienced conflicted feelings about heritage identity. Homestays are also platforms for discrimination with Saudi Arabian students in New Zealand uncomfortable in homestays, feeling that families were interested only in board payments and had short-term commitments to caring for them (Egan, 2013).

Not all international students experience discrimination. One study has shown that while Middle Eastern, Asian, African and Latin American background students encountered discrimination in the United States, students from English speaking countries reported minimal negative interactions (Lee & Rice, 2007). This research suggests discrimination relates less to the international sojourn and more to minority learners' cultural experiences and are a result of majority culture students' poor cross cultural awareness and post colonial educational contexts.

### **The Negative Discourse**

Despite widespread growth of international education the difficulties experienced by students has lead to a negative discourse, which emphasises student adjustment problems, disappointment and academic underachievement. International student

adjustment is viewed as requiring sufficient host country cultural knowledge and language proficiency to attain academic success and wellbeing. International education is constructed as stressful because students' inexperience means they lack awareness of implicit social rules of the host country creating ineffective social exchanges (Chapadeline & Alexitch, 2004). For some researchers within this tradition maintaining home country identity is regarded as barrier to successful integration (Simmonis, 2012).

A dominant theoretical position within this discourse, which is used to explain international student experiences, is acculturation. Acculturation is defined as "changes in values, beliefs and behaviours that result from substantial contact with a second culture" (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). Acculturation theory makes reference to acculturative stress and culture shock, which are negative effects and adaptation problems arising from international student encounters with host cultures. During acculturation any single problem or combination can result in acculturative stress (Bertram, Poulakis, Shaw-Elsasser & Kumar, 2014). Included is displeasure from home communities because of perceived abandonment of culture by international students (Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores & Garcia-Hernandez, 2002).

Cultural fit or cultural distance, are concepts discussed with this perspective, referring to the degree of cultural difference between the student's country of origin and the host country. The implication is a higher degree of cultural identity conflict will occur where there is greater cultural difference and where there is better cultural fit between home and host cultures less acculturative stress will occur (Chapadeline & Alexritch, 2004). Alignment or "cultural fit" results in extended integration through increased social interaction, creating further cultural learning (Ward & Kennedy, 1993).



## **Cultural Identity and International Education**

Cultural identity, then, is key to understanding international student experiences. Reframing challenges to cultural identity as positive experiences, which build student's strength and resilience, underlines new thinking about international education. Culture describes shared, learned patterns of information that a group uses to generate meaning amongst their members (Jansen & Sorenson, 2002). Ethnicity is linked to this, being groups which people identify with, involving cultural affiliations which are self perceived, and where multiple affiliation is possible (Cormack & Harris, 2009). Key to understanding culture and ethnicity is to acknowledge their dynamic and pluralistic nature, "a set of points of personal reference which people rely on to navigate the social world they inhabit, to make sense of social relationships they encounter" (Hale, 2004, pg 473). Included in these reference points are common descent, history and faith. In this way, dimensions of culture are both thick and thin, suggesting they have different density of meaning (Hale, 2004).

Cultural identity is an aspect of wider identity, which is formed and embedded within social contexts. It intersects with personal identity, which is described as those values and beliefs which distinguish one individual from another (Adams & Marshall, 1996) and social or collective identity where values and practices of groups are integrated into the self (Yu, 2015). Cultural identity forms a key part of self-identity, that is based on understanding of membership of a cultural group, which includes the value and emotional meaning attributed to that membership (Tajfel, 1981). Skyrme (2008) describes identity as the way that an individual makes sense of their relationship to the world, how they construct that relationship over time and how they use it to imagine the future.

Cultural identity is reproduced in day-to-day interactions people have with one another, which in turn impacts on connectedness and relationships. In this context identity is viewed as dynamic, negotiated and often a "site of struggle" (Norton &

Toohey, 2002). Bucholtz and Hall (2005) explain, “It is not a matter of choosing one dimension of identity over others, but of considering multiple facets to achieve a more complete understanding of how identity works ” (Buchlotz & Hall, 2005, p. 593). The multifaceted nature of cultural identity has been extensively explored with expanding frameworks and dimensions that are identified across a range of studies. Yu (2015), reviewing this research, identifies four key components of cultural identity being; self-identification, exploration of cultural ideals and practices, emotional commitment and centrality or salience of cultural identity to an individual.

As cultural identity, is inherently contextual, it can be expected to change when a person’s social world changes, which is key to the experience of international students, and their identity formation (Yu, 2015). For international students aspects of their cultural identity can be suspended, discarded or actively resisted (Oikonomidou, 2009), developing in an ongoing way, and belonging to both the future and the past. For international students, dislocation from cultural identity can bring about questioning of self identity, which is an important challenge faced in international learning contexts.

Further, cultural identity exists at a number of levels and this impacts on international student cultural identity development as they encounter western learning systems. Nuqul (2014) describes macro culture as the shared culture of society and micro culture as the smaller cultures, which transmits cultural values within the larger dominant culture. International students have cultural encounters both within their own culture and with micro and macro cultural systems of their new host country. Education environments are micro cultures that transmit dominant macro cultural values through language of instruction, teaching approaches and intercultural connections between teachers and students. Part of an educational micro culture is the convention of power distance, determining how teachers interact with students, manage their classrooms and negotiate the curriculum (Nieto, 2004). The cultural identities of many international students entering host culture are different to those of

the institution, which opens up new possibilities of cultural identity development (Nuqul, 2014).

### **Home Country Connections**

Home country connections have an important role in maintaining and supporting international student cultural identity. International student agency and preference underpins co-national friendships, because these networks reinforce cultural values and provide social support. Vu (2013) reports that Vietnamese international students at a New Zealand university felt best able to connect with students from Asian backgrounds, because they enabled closer communication than Kiwi students. Bertram, Poulakis, Shaw-Elasser and Kumar (2014) also discuss superior encounters that international Chinese students had with fellow Chinese students, reinforcing Chinese identity and provided support. Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett (2010) argue that maintaining ties with family and home culture can help international students to sustain identity continuity. Yu's (2015) study of Chinese international students in New Zealand shows how attachment to cultural identity provides a sense of being grounded and reduces conflicted feelings associated with cultural disorientation.

### **International Student Connections with Domestic Students**

International students' host student friendships are important in adjustment and cultural identity transformation. The number, variety and depth of host student friendships are significant in connectedness and identity formation (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014). Students whose host friendship expectations are met appear to have higher levels of satisfaction and success in their cross-cultural encounters (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014). These friendships can advantage international students by improving language competence, which enables them to better understand host culture and take

on extended interactions (Hendrickson, Rosen & Kelly-Aune, 2011). Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) discuss how host student social interactions contribute to international student cultural identity, assisting with language proficiency, facilitating integration of customs and values of the host country.

However encounters with domestic students are more limited than many international students anticipate. Wang's (2015) study of Chinese postgraduate students at VUW shows that despite students desire for meaningful relationships with domestic students, these were usually superficial engagements. Accordingly, Yao's (2016) study of Chinese students interactions with their American roommates evidenced that participants hoped these friendships would provide them with access to American social groups. However connections were poor, as international students discovered they had little in common with domestic students and were disappointed in how disinterested American students were in Chinese culture.

Although international students can achieve friendly relationships with domestic students, they rate these interactions as superficial and often do not classify domestic students as true friends. International student friendships facilitated by university programmes are particularly problematic. The "Kiwi friends" programme from Massey University, involves domestic students running workshops for international students, as part of their requirements for a cross-cultural paper. These motivations for making connections with international students were found to be less likely to support genuine friendship (Ramsey, Ramsey & Mason, 2007). Soltani's (2015) study of international students engaged at a New Zealand university similarly showed poor levels of connections that were limited to social media exchanges. Vietnamese students in New Zealand also identify a gap between themselves and domestic students, such that they did not consider domestic students to be true friends (Vu, 2013).

Some of the disparities between what international students expect of host contact and what they actually experience relates to the university as a social space where friendships are already established. Existing family and friendship ties, along with other activities, limit the time host students have to commit to new friendships (Hendrickson et al, 2011). McKenzie and Baldassar (2017) found that domestic students considered international friendships as unnecessary and unimagined, believing that similarity and affinity are necessary in forming friendships. Domestic students viewed universities as poor spaces for the development of cross cultural friendships. They explained that clubs and events often segregated students and programmes that explicitly fostered cross-cultural encounters were superficial (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017).

Dunne (2009) focused on beliefs about cultural difference within the Irish student body, finding that host students saw international students as culturally distant. Different values, ideas and behaviours, especially concerning academic motivation, underpinned this separation. International students were perceived as having a strong work ethic and pressure to succeed. Host students felt they lacked these learning goals, prioritising social aspects of university life and felt judged by international students, leading them to avoid contact (Dunne, 2009). Spencer-Rodgers (2001) found international students were stereotyped, as socially and culturally maladjusted, by United States psychology students. International students' friendship ties with co-nationals were interpreted as evidence of distant behaviour on the part of international students.

### **Other International Student Connections**

Unsurprisingly, international connections dominate international student friendship networks and are strong because they are based on common ground. These friendships offer students a way to strengthen cultural identity as well as providing new identity possibilities, including developing a global citizen identity. Schmitt,

Spears and Branscombe (2003) demonstrate that international students perceive differences between themselves and other international students as less important than differences they experience with domestic students. In a New Zealand survey of 224 Asian students 23% of respondents approached other Asian students for help, and were reluctant to make friends outside these networks (Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

International student groups become a landscape for fostering cultural competency through transnational experiences and engagement in cross border discourses. Sobre-Denton (2010) studied the development of cultural identity within an international student support group, finding cultural identity shifts and evolution of an international group culture. Humour helped group members reduce anxiety and mediate intergroup conflict. Cultural stereotypes were used ironically and members described their own positions in the group using racial and ethnic slurs. These interactions did not cause offence because acceptance of diverse cultural identity was key to group functioning. In contrast, similar behaviour from non-group members was viewed as offensive and sometimes resulted in social action by the group. Negotiating relationships with others helped members redefine their own cultural values as they explained their culture to other group members (Sobre-Denton, 2010).

### **Academic Connections**

International students voluntarily become minority learners in western education systems, facing educational disadvantage. Despite meeting required English standards, they can have difficulties expressing ideas in classroom presentations, group work and social settings at university (Volet & Ang, 1998) and outside in host communities (Liu, 2011). International students may struggle to understand class materials and assignments leading to interaction difficulties and a perception that they are withdrawn (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001). Some international students keep silent within classroom settings as a way of showing respect, making them invisible and disempowered in their learning contexts (Hsieh,2007). In New Zealand, Lewis and

Gravett (1999) investigated reasons behind international student positioning in classroom environments. These included language limitations, social and contextual factors, such as, perceived racism, different norms of group communication and affective factors, such as, shyness. Asian international students' were influenced by cultural values, for example, their desire to maintain peace and save face.

Across academic settings teachers describe the challenge of helping overseas students adjust to learning and teaching styles, dealing with language difficulties and adapting teaching materials to accommodate student needs (Sawir, 2011). Failed encounters between students and lecturers emerge as part of international student experiences. In Terui's (2011) study, international students described lecturers not understanding them and making assumptions they were unprepared for class. Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas (2000) surveyed staff who had engaged with international students, finding poor empathy towards student cultures and language. Beoku-Betts (2004) found evidence that some lecturers encouraged African international students to take remedial or easy level classes, leaving them feeling unsupported and the subject of prejudice.

For international students, the process of negotiating new academic communities and becoming socialised into unfamiliar academic discourses, significantly impacts on cultural identity. Pedagogies are culturally dependent and lecturers, curricula and teaching conventions, embody the values of the micro culture of the learning institutions. Research into Asian international student experiences often reference Eastern forms of learning which contrast with Western individualised learning methods. Traditional Eastern beliefs see education as a way to set ethical standards and provide upward mobility. This involves rote learning and memorisation of key texts and requires a high level of teacher respect, emphasising power distance (Kingston & Fordland, 2008). In contrast, western education methods encourage debate, challenging students to think critically, question teachers and be active participants in class. Chinese postgraduate students at VUW described how in China,

all effort is valued even if the results are poor and so were open to disappointment at the lack of recognition for study effort (Wang, 2015).

Cultural identity both shapes and is shaped by classroom interactions. Japanese students in Canada describe identity and culture as significant factors that influence their in-class participation. International student agency is key to this process, when students felt competent, they took active steps to overcome their silence. They managed their participation using a number of techniques, such as, rehearsing class contributions in advance or participating in learning spaces with fewer students (Morita, 2004). Soltani's (2015) case study of international students' language acquisition also evidenced under participation, whereby a Japanese participant deliberately constructed her positioning in the classroom as an observer, explaining that she was engaged with what was going on and this approach was viewed as polite in Japan. However western educators are sometimes critical of this positioning, particularly if this involves keeping silent in class, misinterpreting this as underperformance or disinterest (Tran & Vu, 2016, Barron, 2006).

Relationships that international students make with academic staff, receive mixed reports in the literature. Campbell and Li's (2008) study of Asian students expressed frustration at the lack of support and guidance from lecturers. Participants believed that too many students needed support at the same time and that lecturers were inaccessible and provided poor feedback on assignments (Campbell & Li, 2008). However, other students report open and responsive engagements. Postgraduate students described American teachers as friendly, approachable and open to criticism. They contrasted this to the home culture teachers, who were approached with fear (Yildirim, 2012).

Research into preparation of teaching staff for international education indicates there is poor understanding of cultural diversity and staff experience problems adapting



courses to these learners (Barron et al, 2010). Sawir (2011) questioned Australian academic staff about whether international students had impacted on their teaching practice. Two thirds of academic staff reported that they had made changes to acknowledge international students. But teachers who made adaptations had often lived overseas and their subject matter enabled cross-cultural issues to be included in classroom discussions. Those who made no adjustment, viewed all students as one cohort, thought their subject matter required no adaptation and said they had no training on how to teach international students. Some staff were aware of cultural differences, especially staff from non-English speaking backgrounds, and adjusted their communication styles accordingly (Sawir, 2011).

Differences in learning approaches, problems forming academic relationships and lack of cultural space create discordance for international students, which is critical to shaping identity and enabling personal growth. International students found that new encounters with academic teaching staff provided another platform to develop cultural identity. Yildirim's (2012) study of 50 international students offers evidence that their relationships with academic staff helped them to re-imagine themselves and reconstruct their identity. Students described a struggle with home cultural identity "the influence of your past", which inhibited them from expressing dissenting views (Yildirim, 2012). In New Zealand Asian students also reported satisfaction with their relationships with teachers, enjoying re-positioning themselves within these encounters, with open discussion on an equal basis (Campbell & Li, 2008). This was also confirmed in a study of Chinese students in New Zealand who reconstructed their identity as independent and educated learners based on strong academic relationships (Skyrme, 2008).

## **Community Connections**

Community connections amongst international students also influence identity and wellbeing. Tran and Gomes (2017) describe connectedness as involving a range of

cultural, social, interpersonal aspects as well as intellectual engagement and learning. Cheung and Yue (2013) suggest that social capital derived from interacting with local host communities strengthens international students normative participation within mainstream culture, without which students may feel marginalised.

International students can experience poor integration in wider communities and struggle to occupy non-educational spaces. A body of research suggests international students find it difficult to engage in communities beyond “the small talk” and develop meaningful connections, such that they can contribute to communities (Volet & Ang, 1998). Saudi Arabian students studying in Australia, had peripheral interactions with wider communities, confined to retail interactions and one-off impersonal encounters. Gender role expectations underpinned some of these difficulties, along with language barriers (Groves, 2015). Kusek (2015) also found that international students in Ohio were engaged in fewer community activities than at home, due to cultural discomfort. In Australia, international students struggling to engage with local communities, were left disappointed about their level of off campus activities (Blackmore, Gribble, Rahimi, Farrell, Arber & Devlin, 2014).

International students with community connection objectives often choose homestay accommodation. In Australia, for example, international students elected to stay in a homestay in order to gain access to family life and develop a closer relationship with host communities (Gribble, Rahimi & Blackmore, 2017). International students wanting to make community connections and obtain work experience commonly choose to volunteer off campus. Volunteering allows international students to gain work experience without transgressing work restriction terms of study visas. In New Zealand McGrath and Hooker (2006) found that international students enjoyed volunteering for Kiwi cultural events, such as rugby matches and these informal environments contributed to their connection with the wider community.

In response to evidence that international student and host community contacts needed to be facilitated and expanded (Gresham & Clayton, 2011) universities have developed a range of programmes to encourage volunteering as a means of lifting participation in community contexts. In Australia, for example, the Community Connections programme at the University of Newcastle provides links between the local community and the international student body through volunteering. Evaluation of Community Connections found it to be effective in helping students learn about Australia culture and connect with local people. There was evidence that international student gained confidence in the programme and felt a greater sense of belonging and wellbeing. However, lasting friendships were not developed through the programme and connections were considered weak (Gresham & Clayton, 2011).

Another common social space for international students to make community connections, strengthen identity and gain a sense of belonging, is through religious group participation. In New Zealand, Soltani (2015) found international students joined the Arise church “Lifegroup” for its welcoming environment. The organisation helped build English language confidence and provided cross-cultural encounters in a safe social space. Stevenson’s (2017) research explored the role of religious spaces amongst international PhD students in the United Kingdom, finding students successfully developed social connections off campus amongst religious communities. These encounters positively reconstructed their sense of belonging, social connectedness and strengthened their identity.

Overall there are mixed findings about the role of wider community connections in the developing cultural identity of international students. In some studies cross-cultural community encounters which highlighted cultural difference, strengthened home country cultural identity. Brown and Holloway’s (2008) study of postgraduate South East Asian international students in the South of England suggest that cultural differences meant students resisted making community connections and sought out relationships that consolidated home country identity. Wang’s (2015) study of

Chinese postgraduate students at VUW also found that cultural differences experienced by student participants in the community underlined a sense of loss of home in New Zealand. Students felt their cultural identity was not recognised citing the lack of Chinatown as evidence of poor community acceptance of their cultural identity (Wang, 2015).

However, for other students cultural differences encountered within wider communities develop open-minded positions and new perspectives on identity of others and home cultural identity. International students studying in an American school recognised they became identified with wider American communities, adopting American style interpersonal relationships. They reported growing distance from home cultural identity, speaking first languages with an American accent and no longer understanding home country jokes. Participants described mixing their cultural identities, so they that no longer identified with one culture more than other, finding it easy to be open to individuals from any culture (Nuqul, 2014).

### **A New Discourse on Flexible Cultural Identity**

In the face of difficult cross border encounters, flexible responses which international students develop, has lead to fresh perspectives on international student experiences. Challenging acculturation theory and the negative discourse of international student experiences, is an alternative perspective, which focuses on international student resilience, flexible identity construction and the process of self-formation. International students form self -trajectories between home cultural identity, host country identity and other cosmopolitan options, drawing on multiple identities and negotiating hybrid selves. Informed by post modernist thought, identity is no longer regarded as a unified construct, but one that is inherently unstable (Koehne, 2006) and in constant flux, with identities purposefully mixed and matched (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Similar processes have been reported for diasporic youth (Tupuola, 2007) and for minority youth (Nakhid, 2003).

This new discourse challenges “cultural fit” and the belief that students who are culturally distant from a host country have poorer experiences than others. The focus is no longer on helping international students to rid themselves of home country culture to become autonomous western style learners, but instead, to acquire practices necessary for success without abandoning home country selves (Marginson, 2013). Identity construction within this perspective involves building and reshaping personal views of self as transitions raise new awareness of cultural group membership. Heritage culture becomes more visible in foreign cultural environments, and is influenced by co-national connections, resulting in further cultural identity reconstruction with a more flexible “intercultural identity” emerging (Gudykunst & Young-Yun, 1997).

Research informed by this perspective has explored international student identity formation. Marginson (2013) considered 290 Asian international students in Australia and New Zealand evidencing how competing concerns, such as, religion, class, gender, kinship and national identity, create disequilibrium, as students purposely maintain identification with home and host countries. International students exercised autonomy and were found to reshape expectations in response to encounters. Li and Gasser’s (2005) study of 117 Asian students studying in the United States also explored the relationships between international students’ host context, ethnic identity and self-efficacy. Their research demonstrates that host country identity can co-exist harmoniously with home country culture identity, not interfering with socio cultural adjustment (Li & Gasser, 2005). Yang, Noles and Saumure (2006) also found international students, as a group, did not necessarily represent home cultural values and that flexible cultural identity meant a mixture of culture or values can be expected. Koehne’s (2006) study of international students in Australia describes how they imagined themselves, with multiple discourses that impacted on cultural identity.

There is evidence that many international students deliberately aspire to global mobility and cosmopolitan identities rather than linking solely to home nation cultures (Tran & Gomes, 2017). Others describe that a new self-identity forms which is that of an “international student”, developed through socialising with domestic or other international students (Kashima & Loh, 2006). When some international students share their experiences of identity they describe a “Third Culture Kid” identity, where significant time growing up outside a home culture, builds relationships across a variety of cultures, in a transformative experience (Swanston, 2015).

### **Resilience and Agency of international Students**

There is evidence emerging within this paradigm, that, along with flexible identity, students are resilient, encountering disappointment but enduring and even thriving in the presence of difficulties. Resilience is described as successful adaptation under adverse condition and involves a range of factors, such as, self-efficacy, realistic appraisal of the environment, sense of purpose, empathy, humor and adaptive distancing, along with protective relationships and high expectations (Norman, 2000). Some international students resist negatively internalising difficult experiences and report that studying abroad developed awareness of cultural issues and motivated them to seek out further intercultural experiences (Costello, 2015). Dang and Tran (2017) gathered stories of two Vietnamese PhD students to understand their interaction, connectedness and positioning identity in order to explore belonging. Participants re-storied their difficult experiences to reveal that initial feelings of powerlessness and loneliness were re-positioned in the Australian academic space, to enable them to reshape identity.

“Sense making” coping is a significant part of this process and has been found to offset negative experiences, as has a concept of “meaning in life” (Pan, 2011). While sense making and self-formation are processes all students share, for international students changes are more substantive, with rapid learning and negotiation of plural

identities in compressed time periods. It is a complex and reflective process, with the international student as doer, reflector and evaluator (Marginson, 2013). Stanley (2014) explains that crossing cultural borders makes opportunities for self-insight and reflection, which can lead to developing student agency and resilience.

International students act with agency to shape connections they make and manage self-expectations. Skyrme (2008) explains that agency is a quality, which allows a person to act within their environment to further their own cause. Agency does not fully belong to an individual but is often co-constructed or re-negotiated with those around the individual and the wider community. Studies have demonstrated that international students act with agency during their sojourns, choosing positions in classrooms that align with their values (Soltani, 2015). However Koehne (2006) suggests international student agency is complex and can exist alongside storylines of helplessness and loss of confidence.

In Marginson's (2013) study of 290 Asian international students across Australia and New Zealand, many tolerated loneliness well and only a minority said this persisted after six months. The research highlighted students' sense of freedom and self-determination, during this time, which off-set periods of unhappiness. In the United States, Chinese international students reported a positive perception of their education. Despite unfamiliarity, participants enjoyed the interactive learning format and were pleased with their daily interactions, even when these were difficult. Participants did report disconnection and felt as if they didn't fully belong, but this did not create negative perceptions (Bertram et al, 2014). A large study of 400 Chinese students studying abroad also demonstrated adjustment and resilience, as they made sense of challenges and acculturative stress through narratives of self-formation (Pan, 2011). Similar positive encounters amongst Chinese students in Singapore are reported, based on appreciation of the opportunity of overseas study, which generated resistance to stress (McClure, 2007). In Australia, a diverse group of international students, actively resisted negative discourses about themselves and

coped with the discordance between what they imagined for their education and the reality of their encounters (Koehne, 2006).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory extends the discussion of student agency and resilience to consider how their experiences constitute counter stories to negative educational discourses. Critical Race Theory, which usually considers the stories of identity and resilience amongst minority learners, can be broadened to include international student experiences. Master narratives, which are identified with this perspective, are majoritarian generated deficit discourses, which underpin western education (Harris, 2016). Because these discourses do not question systems of power and privilege they act to sustain these inequalities. Master narratives are based on power and silence (Solozaro & Yosso, 2002) and distort the experiences of international students by not explicitly addressing race and power issues that underpin some of their experiences. Acculturation and cultural fit are part of this majoritarian discourse, which emphasise international students cultural deficits and down play issues of racial advantage and privilege embedded in western educational institutions.

Critical Race Theory acknowledges that racism, which is transacted through micro aggressions, is a normal, non-aberrant feature of western postcolonial institutions, such as education, and so can be difficult to identify. Micro aggressions are defined as cumulative and incessant everyday actions of individuals, groups and institutional policies that have negative consequences for some racial groups (Harris, 2016). Social suffering results from micro aggressions, where, because the exercise of power-over others appears legitimate, the hurt produced becomes detached from the socio economic relations which generate it (Frost & Hoggett, 2008). Critical Race Theory emphasises developing testimony from students affected by micro aggressions to surface these experiences, making them visible, in order to change them (Hubain, Allen, Harris & Linder, 2016).



Koehne (2006) contributes to this literature by arguing that international education is underpinned by a dominant view of western education as superior, communicated to international students within a post colonial discourse. International students integrate new ways of being through their struggle with this dominant discourse, identifying storylines of strength and agency, which co-exists, with those of loss of confidence. They take up uncomfortable positions in the new context, with evidence of resistance to western expertise and desire for integration of “other” knowledge into curricula and learning processes (Koehne, 2006). Houshmand, Spanierman, Tafarodi & Zarate (2014) analysed testimony from a number of Asian international students in Canada, identifying experiences of racial micro aggressions and coping strategies for dealing with these encounters. Strategies included engaging with their own cultural groups, withdrawing from certain academic activities and strengthening connections with other international students.

This chapter has reviewed internationalisation of education in New Zealand and the rise of an international education export market in this country. It briefly described motivations for international students’ study sojourns and the benefits to western learning institutions. Despite growth in international education, international students, across learning contexts, struggle to make the ties they anticipate with domestic students and experience difficulties forging connections with wider communities. Academic relationships and class participation also present challenges to many of these students who came from very different learning contexts. These difficult encounters have underpinned a generally negative discourse about international student experiences. However new research is emerging, which suggests international students manage challenging encounters with resilience and cope with difficult times through sense making and narratives of personal growth. Agency is evident amongst these students who deliberately position themselves in classrooms and community encounters, to withstand majoritarian discourses and micro aggressions.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

This chapter describes the purpose, methodology and design of this research. The process for creating a participant narrative is outlined, through the initial development of a story and the re-storying of this narrative, through the participant and researcher's collaborative review. The construction of a counter-story is also discussed with reference to Critical Race Theory. The approach used to recruit participants is described and ethical issues are reviewed. An introduction to each participant is included as the conclusion of the Chapter.

### **Purpose of the Research**

This research aims to explore, in-depth, the experiences of current and past international students from Asia, who have made connections with others on and off VUW campus. It seeks to gather their stories of identity formation and connectedness while on international sojourns at the university. In particular, the study seeks to understand students' sense making and reflections on challenges they faced and gather their stories of resilience. The study will use these narratives to better understand how international students manage issues of cultural identity and connection and coping strategies they use when encountering problems, such as, micro aggressions.

The question at the centre of this research is:

- How have international students at VUW made connections within the university and with wider communities and how do these connections impact on cultural identity and resilience?

The research sub-questions are:

- What is the nature of international student connections?
- How do these connections challenge or modify students' cultural identities?
- What strategies have students used to overcome challenges they encounter in making connections?

### **Storying Methodology**

This research uses a narrative inquiry method of storying to explore student perspectives. Storying is based on the belief that, as humans, we give meaning to our life and understand its complexity, through our use of story (Trahar, 2009). Narratives are constructed across dimensions of space, place, interaction and time, so stories weave together aspects of the past, present and future in a process of reflection, understanding and sometimes transformation (Costello, 2015). Because individuals are positioned, through a network of stories, which shift within space and time, stories are always incomplete and the process of storying is discontinuous (Coetzee, 2011, Stanley, 2014). Knowledge, which is constructed through this process, is characterised by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings. Sense making is at the heart of developing stories, which become vehicles for reflections on reality and in the telling, stories can reshape human experiences. Research, which takes student narratives, can provide insight into the way student encounters shape cultural identity and honour their lived experiences.

Storying as a methodology helps to off-set negative discourses about international students and bring into focus what is working, identifying agency and personal growth. It enables international students to produce stories of resistance and success in cross border environments, and describe how challenges reshape cultural identity, acting as counter stories to damage centred perspectives. These stories can generate a wider concept of educational outcomes for international students and broaden measures of educational success to include connectedness, identify development, self-reflection and agency. Storying has been used successfully in wider educational research, particularly for New Zealand minority learners, such as, with Maori learners (Mahuika, Berryman & Bishop, 2011) and Pasifika students (Chu, Abella & Paurini, 2013). Storying can provide a basis for rethinking how we evaluate learning communities, which have aims of being life enhancing, not a source of negative, life limiting experience (Cherkowski & Walker, 2014).

Narrative inquiry has been used successfully to obtain experiences of international students across a range of settings. Stanley (2014) explains crossing cultural borders is a time of vulnerability and reflection, which offer opportunities for self-insight, through storying. Costello (2015) uses narratives to access international student perspectives on constraints on developing intercultural competence, due to lack of integration and language issues. Swanston (2015) also uses narrative inquiry with South African international students to collect stories of cultural homelessness and home-culture encounters on re-entry. She re-storied participants' narratives, enabling her to pay close attention to descriptions of context and critical events in participants' lives. Dang and Tran (2017) gathered stories of two Vietnamese PhD students which revealed how initial feelings of powerlessness and loneliness were re-positioned in the Australian academic space, to enable them to reshape identity.

In New Zealand Vu (2013) used narrative inquiry to obtain stories of the experiences of Vietnamese international students in a tertiary education setting. The researcher drew on these narratives to understand the importance of identity positions

participants occupied, those they aspired to occupy and those that were resisted. Soltani (2015)'s research on language acquisition of international students in New Zealand, introduced the participants by offering in depth stories of identity and imaged spaces, alongside observations made in the classroom.

### **Collaborative Re-Storying**

This research uses a re-storying approach whereby the researcher and participant enter a collaborate process to build a story together. A sequence of interviews and exchanges are developed to support participants' reflections and to enable re-stroying and revision over a period of time. Collaborative re-storying involves participants viewing text of an in-depth interview and engaging with re-interpretation of this with the researcher. When participants reflect again on findings, it provides them with an opportunity to revise thoughts and express themselves differently. Findings, which emerge from these iterative interactions, are stronger and address the limitations of a single written account. Collaborative re-storying is not a linear process and may involve diversions while arguments are probed, positions challenged and the assumptions of participants, including the researcher, are explored (Bishop, 2003).

Re-storying, as a methodology, is respectful, it shares power with participants and establishes a changed relationship to that which exists traditionally between a researcher and participant, as insights emerge from their relationships. Bishop (2003) explains that this process facilitates participatory connectedness, reducing traditional separation in the research process and promoting engagement of all parties. It is messy and complex, with the researcher striving to be mindful of experiences shared between the parties and where differences lie (Trahar, 2009).

## **Counter Storying**

The narratives, when they are formed, have the potential to act as counter stories. While counter-storying has not been widely applied to international students it holds potential for opposing dominant negative discourses and for promulgating stories of resilience and resistance. By developing testimony from international students affected by micro aggressions, storying can surface structural and cultural aspects of education, which maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom (Hubain et al, 2016). Narratives are able to showcase the complex, and persistent nature of racism for minority learners, such as international students, and challenge privileged majoritarian views (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). In both telling stories and reading stories of others, international students can explore ways to confront beliefs of the dominant group. Their stories can be positioned as counter-stories to negative damaged centre discourses about their experiences. Members of majority culture institutions, such as universities, who are open to these stories, can use them to enrich their view of reality, and transform it (Rolon-Dow. 2011).

## **The Research Design**

My research design involved an initial interview, which explored how participants made connections during their study sojourn at VUW and how they constructed cultural identity in this process. Students had a chance to tell their story through a storying interview supported by open-ended questions, and a thematic guide. Participants provided stories of challenge, how they overcame difficulties and the impact of these experiences on cultural identity and personal growth. Using transcripts of their taped conversations, I shaped this text into an initial story. The stories were then re-read and analysed to identify key themes and ideas emerging from the interview.

I then reviewed individual story texts with participants in a re-storying process. This involved a subsequent conversation, between the participant and myself, to reconsider the first story. During re-storying, participants reflected again on their time in New Zealand, adding more information and amending interpretation of their story. While two participants re-storied promptly after the first interviews, others, due to their exam pressure, waited until a few months after the first interview, to provide reflections. Some participants on international sojourns conducted re-storying discussions via Skype and others re-storied on their return to New Zealand.

I collectively analysed the individual narratives as a group in order to identify common experiences across participants. A coding framework was used to isolate themes of connectedness, identity and resilience, derived from a review of concepts in the literature. The coding process involved highlighting segments of the story text, which were assigned codes, and progressing identifying overlaps in text, collapsing codes into themes, as described by Creswell (2012). Implications for students, policy makers and university administrators were also identified in the thematic analysis of these stories.

Flexibility was provided to participants around the setting for interviews with multiple informal locations used. These informal environments reinforced the storytelling aspect of the research but required careful management to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Interviews were around an hour and a half in duration. I commenced the interview with discussion of home country and study programmes. Exploration of challenges and cultural identity were developed later in the interview, so that participants were comfortable with the process when deeper issues were discussed. Student stories did not follow a set structure, but reflected their priorities, memories and sense making. Interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone and transcribed these after they were completed.

## **Recruitment of Study Participants**

Participants included in this study were international students studying at VUW on study visas. Asian students were selected as the participant group of interest because, as described in Chapter Two, they are a significant population within the international student body at VUW and in New Zealand. VUW international students who were studying at offshore campuses through twinning programmes were excluded from the study, as were refugee students and students with host country residence from immigrant backgrounds, as their study is not part of an international sojourn. Because identity is an evolving concept, which changes over time, past students have valuable reflections on their experiences as an international student, which are as strong and as insightful current students. For these reasons current and recent past students were both included in this research.

Transnational communities in VUW are small and difficult to connect with, therefore a snowball sampling technique was used. Snowball sampling is suited to situations where the researcher is not a member of the community from which participants are recruited. Within the technique, sampling continues after the study begins, by asking early participants to contact and recommend the research to other potential participants (Creswell, 2012). After the first group of students were interviewed, I explored their networks with them, to further identify students who were then approached to participate in the research.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The storying methodology used in this research design raises a number of ethical issues. Ethics, in relation to social research, are defined as a “set of responsibilities in human relationships, that cover dignity, privacy and well being of participants” (Wang and Geale 2014 p 197). Ethical considerations are significant when storying



with international students because of the personal nature of material, which is shared by participants and the depth of the relationship between participant and researcher. Care is needed, as testimony is drawn from students, who are living in unfamiliar environments, often without support and who may be vulnerable. Cross-cultural issues can also threaten the research relationship, where power and distance between the student participants and the researcher can be difficult to overcome. Overall, because of storying complexity not all ethical issues can be anticipated in advance and must be attended to as the work progresses.

All students interviewed were assigned a pseudonym in the construction of their story and all identifying details were changed. Care was taken to ensure that other individuals mentioned in the story, such as, friends or university staff, were not identifiable. I also altered the names of places, such as university hostels, suburbs and previous tertiary institutions. As VUW has a large proportion of international students participants true home country were retained, as this was not expected to compromise identity. Electronic data were stored in a password-protected file and the Dictaphone used in the research was locked away in my home. In addition, all hard copies of transcripts and coding documents were secured at home. Communications about meetings with participants were conducted through the university e-mail, text and other private forms of messaging.

The re-storying process enabled participants to attend to matters of privacy and confidently. I checked in with participants at the end of the narrative and during the process of re-storying about the need to protect identity of those referred to in the story. Participants took the opportunity to omit details they felt uncomfortable with, revising and adding information that they felt was important to the secure the privacy of their story.

An information sheet was used to inform participants about the purpose of the research and the interview process. This document served as an informed consent form, which sought participant agreement to be part of the research. This consent included permission to develop these stories and use them as part of the research, including permission to publish and present them at a university postgraduate event. I took care to ensure that participants read the information sheet while I was present so as to clarify any unfamiliar phrases or words and answer questions about the research process. A copy of the research information sheet is attached in the Appendix.

### **Introducing the Participants**

Thirteen Asian, past and present international students, at VUW, participated in this research. These students came from a range of study programmes, across pre degree, undergraduate and postgraduate levels and across a range of faculties. Most participants engaged in volunteer work while studying in New Zealand and many had undertaken part-time paid work. Students lived in a range of accommodation, such as homestays, university hostels, boarding houses, flats and family arranged accommodation. For many students this was not their first sojourn and so their narratives were hybrid, reflecting experiences of other sojourns and offering combined experiences between current and past study journeys.

**Than** - *“I don’t need to adapt but I need to negotiate and compromise so that’s why I am fine with any culture”.*

Than’s first pre-degree study sojourn provided strong engagement with classroom teachers and other international students. She returned home to Myanmar to work for a year before embarking on a second journey, for postgraduate study. Than recognised differences between friendships she forged with international students, based on common experiences of cultural displacement, and more superficial connections she

## The participants

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Study Major	Length of time in New Zealand
Than	Myanmar	Development Studies	Three years across two sojourns
Xianghua	Chinese	Maths and Science	One and a half years
Sonia	Malaysian Indian	Anthropology	Two and a half years
Sarah	Indonesian	Commerce and Languages	Two years
Yunyi	Chinese	Media Design	One and a half years
Novita	Indonesian	Biomedical Sciences	Three years across two sojourns
Diya	Chinese	Pacific Studies and Anthropology	Three years across two sojourns
Chi	Vietnam	Media and Education	Two and a half years
Arisa	Malaysian Chinese	Education and English Literature	Three years across two sojourns
Putri	Indonesian	Commerce/Accounting	One and a half years
Jianyu	Chinese	Commerce/ Accounting	Two and a half years
Tuyet	Vietnamese	Commerce	Two years
Lyn	Singaporean	Linguistics and Education	Two years

made with domestic students. After overcoming the challenge of “homelessness” Than looks back at this period of hardship as broadening her experience. Than returns to Myanmar on study completion, where she expects to expand vocational opportunities as a result of her study in New Zealand.

**Arisa-** *“I decided to put myself out there to show that I can succeed”.*

Arissa came to New Zealand from Malaysia to study, first completing a pre-degree programme. Opting to continue to speak in English shaped her campus connections, as she formed friendships with students from Japan and Korea who also spoke English. Arissa acknowledged difficulties in her early homestay, with insecurities across a range of domains. She overcame these challenges through adaptation and reframed negative experiences as personal growth. Arissa focused on developing positive cross-cultural interactions through mentoring Pasifika and Maori students on campus and volunteering. Now halfway through her undergraduate degree Arissa is clear she will take as many opportunities as possible to deepen and increase cross cultural encounters.

**Xianghua-** *“I feel comfortable to accept different kinds of people and thoughts”.*

Xianghua, a young 19-year-old student, left China part way through her final high school year, to begin the Pathways course in New Zealand. Living in a hostel provided opportunities for her to make connections with a diverse group of international students. Xianghua still hopes to deepen her connections with domestic students and with communities through volunteering while completing her studies. Xianghua is adamant that she will return to China upon graduating to complete post-graduate studies there.

**Diya-** *“My Pasifika classmates don’t mind about where you are from or what language you speak”*

Diya, a 25-year-old student from China, began her studies in Auckland. There she lived in a homestay encountering and overcoming cultural challenges. A move to Wellington provided an opportunity to try hostel life, living with other students from China. Diya explored connections cross borders with students from other Asian

countries. In particular she developed friendships amongst Pasifika students who she found were skilful in cross-cultural exchanges. These connections remain strong for Diya, which she believes, are underpinned by shared ancestry between Asia and the Pacific.

**Putri-** *“I am worried international students will experience the same thing and I don’t want that”.*

Obtaining a scholarship for VUW Putri commenced postgraduate study in February 2016. A short stay in a university hall enabled her to make strong friendships with other international students after which she moved into a suburban flat. Putri developed connections through a range of campus activities and programmes, particularly with the Indonesian Student Association, where she coordinated a large group of culturally diverse volunteers to assist in Indonesia week. Putri’s story reflects a desire to ensure that newly arrived international students are more comfortable in classroom environments than she had been when first arriving in New Zealand.

**Sonia-** *“When I was hospitalised all my friends were there for me. They didn’t just give me physical support they also gave me emotional support”.*

Arriving in New Zealand, to complete an undergraduate degree in Anthropology, Sonia chose to stay at a hostel that provided a platform for making multicultural friends. Her friendship group, made up of both domestic and international students, became like family and assisted Sonia during a challenging time of hospitalisation. Sonia credits her multicultural friendship groups with reinforcing her Malaysian Indian culture but at the same time enabling her to develop a flexible identity that

incorporates New Zealand values. Sonia wants to pursue postgraduate studies here, welcoming newcomers to Wellington as her own home.

**Novita-** *“Having faith is important that’s what kept me going and helped me to stay afloat”*

Taking an opportunity to study at VUW and arriving in Wellington, Novita quickly obtained support from her Indonesian church. Novita’s trust in God provided her with the confidence and motivation to volunteer. Moving between Indonesian and English church communities Novita’s blended identity connected her across both cultures. Flating in a multicultural boarding house Novita’s Indonesian identity was strengthened, promoting her culture to this multicultural group of international student friends. During her time in New Zealand Novita faced academic challenges with her course, student visa problems and racial micro aggressions at work, but remained resilient through these times, supported by strong faith and cultural identity.

**Chi-** *“We are doing our best to make international students feel like there are people that care about them, representing them in every way possible”*

Arriving in Wellington alone, Chi connected quickly with a range of international students at her hostel. Having spent most of her time with Vietnamese students during her first year, she moved to expand her cross-cultural networks by joining a number of campus-based activities. Volunteering as a buddy for newly arrived international students prompted her to reflect on the challenges international students face. Chi joined the International Students Association, which presented opportunities to make changes on campus to benefit international students. Chi’s role in helping international students provided her with a sense of belonging and identity, prompting her to look for work in the international education industry.

**Sarah-** *‘If you want to be friends with someone just keep talking to find common interests’.*

As part of a university organised twinning programme in Indonesia, Sarah came to study in New Zealand with a wider group of students. VUW provided the opportunity for her to make personal connections with lecturers, who offered the help she needed to feel confident in her study. Enrolling in courses in Maori and Japanese, Sarah gained wider cross-cultural understanding. Connecting early on with the Indonesian community on campus provided a way to establish networks with the wider Indonesian community, including members of the High Commission. Studying at Victoria changed aspects of her identity and she felt New Zealand was somewhere she could call home, accepting and rejecting parts of New Zealand culture in order to live happily in this country.

**Yunyi-** *‘I was shy before but when you become student leader you have a duty, so even if I want to just stay in my room you have your duty, you are going to finish it’*

Yunyi, a media design student, was encouraged to come to VUW to experience the well-established film industry in Wellington. The support she received from staff in her pre-degree programme and the leadership opportunities she gained there, helped her negotiate cross-cultural situations and organise opportunities for students to socialise outside of their busy schedule. Living in a close-knit hostel community Yunyi navigated friendships with both domestic and international students. She recognized that she re-shaped aspects of her identity to become more flexible and participate in events that were initially unfamiliar. By actively controlling social commitments she managed to be comfortable living in the hostel, remaining for another year.

**Jianyu** *“I see myself as diverse and people accept me and are open to my own ideas and certainly I should deliver the same message to other people”.*

Jianyu actively chose to pursue his study in Wellington, instead of Auckland, as he wanted to be in an area with a smaller Chinese population. Jianyu was an active student around campus, joining conversation classes and cross-cultural workshops. In these settings he learnt more about New Zealand culture, as well as establishing cross-cultural connections during a language sharing activity in Wellington city. After forming strong relationships with his lecturers and gaining confidence, Jianyu became a proactive member of the class, evaluating the course and providing feedback to the Dean about how the curriculum could be enlarged to better reflect the New Zealand environment.

**Tuyet-** *“Kiwi culture has opened my mind and given me a new value of being independent”*

Arriving in Wellington as part of a twinning programme, Tuyet came to New Zealand with Vietnamese support networks already in place. Joining cross-cultural activities she made various international student connections as well as a close Kiwi friend. Tuyet’s supportive Vietnamese flatmates were key to her story and helped her gain the confidence needed to contest her landlord over an unexpected bill. Her Vietnamese friends along with a supportive tutor assisted her to find success in class. Despite resisting some aspects of Kiwi life, Tuyet’s time in New Zealand gave her confidence and independence, opening her mind to new possibilities. During Tuyet’s final months in New Zealand she took leadership in her twinning programme, using her own challenges as examples, when introducing life in New Zealand to other international students.



**Lyn-** *“For me it is about getting work experience, trying new experiences and learning from it”*

Having family who already called New Zealand home, it was easy for Lyn to make the decision to study in New Zealand. She became an active student early on, making the most of orientation activities and connecting with domestic students through the Campus Coaches programme. Through volunteering, Lyn’s community connections expanded during her second year, both on and off campus. Lyn also pursued work in the hospitality industry in order to connect with New Zealanders. With a flexible identity, grounded in her own country of Singapore, Lyn was able to take on and reject aspects of both Singaporean and Kiwi culture. Lyn’s overseas sojourn provided her with the confidence to imagine a future self, running international events in Japan and helping other English language learners.

## **Chapter 4 Findings: International Student Connections**

The chapter describes student narratives of studying in New Zealand, the connections they made, and how these connections were constructed and reconstructed as students moved between New Zealand and home country contexts. Home country connections, domestic student relationships, international student friendships, academic and community connections are all explored, including ties forged through volunteering, paid work, religious group participation and facilitated connections.

### **Home Country Connections**

While in New Zealand students reported home country connections affirmed and strengthened their cultural identity and for some, these ties were key to feeling comfortable in this country. Home country identities remained strong while studying at VUW, reinforced through family ties, maintained by contacting family through social media, by family members visiting New Zealand and students spending semester breaks at home. Some students viewed family connections as their key support, prepared to wait until visits back home to receive this help. Arissa, who had initially sought help from Student Health services, did not sustain her engagement with them, turning instead to her family “*Last year when I went back for a holiday I had the time to talk in depth to my parents*”. In contrast other students hid difficulties from families, so as not to trouble them, even with serious problems. Than, an international student from Myanmar, whose story includes a period of homelessness, explained she did not seek support from her parents fearing they would become worried.

Alongside family, independent living situations in flats provided this group of students with a source of home country connections. Jianyu met other Chinese students from VUW while living in a central city apartment, owned by a Wellington Chinese business person. Tuyet, an international student from Vietnam, also strengthened ties with other Vietnamese students while living in a flatting situation with them.

Home country connections were prioritised by some students, who constructed in advance of their arrival, networks of home country individuals already living in Wellington. These networks helped on arrival, with accommodation and offers of food to ease the unfamiliarity of entry. Xianghua, an international student from China was supported by a Chinese friend already living in New Zealand and together they found accommodation in a hall for international students. Tuyet, an international student from Vietnam recounted a similar experience, choosing a flat with Vietnamese girlfriends from the same twinning programme as her, reducing their central city rental by sharing a bedroom.

Home country connections provided comfort in the new surroundings, making an unfamiliar landscape seem no longer strange. Xianghua recalled arriving in her new accommodation on the day of a traditional Chinese festival “*We need to eat Tang Yuan (Chinese dessert made out of glutinous flour), I met another student who was Chinese and he made that for me*”. This small gesture enabled Xianghua to feel immediately that life in New Zealand was “*Just like at home*”. Chi, a Vietnamese student also described her first experience on arrival at Pohutakawa House “*My RA was coincidentally from Vietnam as well so it was like a familiar feeling*”. Novita, an international student from Indonesia also highlighted the importance of connections she had established before arriving in Wellington, which helped her feel comfortable in the early days “*It’s a nice welcome and to have someone showing you places when you don’t have anyone that you know*”.

Participant narratives included home country connections, which evolved into deep friendships creating small home country communities with members who socialised and enacted cultural traditions together. Tuyet and her Vietnamese flatmates celebrated festivals together and attended Halls Of Residence to join celebrations with the wider Vietnamese community. These home country connections served a wider purpose beyond strengthening cultural identity, providing accommodation and entry into the New Zealand job market. Sarah, explained that her Indonesian community provided an opportunity to seek advice from long-term migrants, *“I am job hunting so I am asking them about what I need to get the work visa and the working culture in New Zealand”*. Tuyet’s friendship with her Vietnamese flatmate, Hien, introduced her to volunteering opportunities at VUW, as well as connecting her to a Kiwi student who became a close friend. These new home country ties reinvigorated memories of home. Sonia recalled delight in connecting with a home country student from Malaysia, discovering common connections back home *“I discovered that she was from the same neighbourhood as me but we had never met until we were at Victoria, although we had many mutual friends“*

However, already established home country student networks proved difficult for new students to infiltrate and having common home country identity did not guarantee friendships for all participants. When entering a programme with other Chinese students Diya found it hard to make friends as these students, placed through the university-twinning programme, had made social connections while studying in China, which persisted into their study sojourn in New Zealand *“They had already made their own friends in China so it was hard to get into the group but I just focused on my study at this time”*. Chi, from Vietnam, also explained that she found other Vietnamese students were already in close friendship groups *“They were from a joint programme so there was like 10 of them together and then there was me, it was hard sometimes”*.

Not all participants valued home country cultural connections and were willing to trade away opportunities for cultural identity and support from these networks, to achieve more global aspirations. For these students home country connections were viewed as restrictive and limited their experience of cultural diversity. Jianyu explains *“I wanted to go somewhere with less Chinese people living there, in Australia there are too many and in Auckland, as you can see there are too many Chinese, that’s why I chose Wellington and New Zealand”*. Diya, despite choosing to study in Auckland, realised that she was not seeking to be with a large Chinese student community. She chose to move to Wellington for her undergraduate degree to gain wider cross-cultural experiences. *“In Auckland there were so many Chinese, so many Asians”*.

### **International Student Connections**

New international student connections featured strongly in the stories of these participants, with students reporting they made successful connections, early on, with other students from Asian countries. Participants described the strength of connections with other sojourners, forged across cultural divides, united by common experiences of leaving home country-cultures and entering a new cultural landscape. International student connections were established through homestays and Halls of Residence. When Diya was living in Auckland, despite finding her homestay generally disappointing, it was a platform for making strong connections with other Asian students based on common ground *“Sometimes when we have finished our food and the household work we get the chance to talk about what happened in class”*. Putri found herself very comfortable living in Pohutukawa House and was able to easily connect with other international students living there *“When I arrived at Pohutukawa I found some international students who feel like we have that similar experience of our new life and the important thing is that I didn’t feel alone”*. Tuyet used international orientation to meet other international students and found shared experiences made it easy for her to connect with them *“I felt like they wanted to make friends with me and we could share similar experiences”*.

Some participants made international connections principally with other Asian students. Xianghua's story describes making Asian friends in the Pathways programme, because of connections already established by working together in class "*I make more friends from Asian countries because we have the same class and we have to do the same project*". Arissa, Than and Yunyi, also in pre-degree programmes, commented on the ease of making friendships with other international students due to common experiences. As Yunyi explains "*Making friends in the Pathways programme was kind of easy for me, we do have a lot of students from Asian countries and we also have a lot of students from the same country as me (China) so we can easily be friends*". Others reached beyond Asian networks to connect with wider cultures. Chi reached out to make a cross-border Pasifika friendship through her hostel, explaining the connection was based on the shared experience of studying abroad "*I met another first year student who was from Tonga and she was new as well so we just became friends it was nice*".

Shared experiences of studying under visa restrictions with timeframes which limited socialising made it easier for participants to relate to other international students. Xianghua shared how she made friends with a Vietnamese international student reflecting on their common preference to volunteer rather than undertake paid work "*Because the assignments are too much*". In particular international students shared a view of the importance of study, and a commitment to academic success was cited as underpinning alignment between international students.

### **International Students take Care of Each Other**

In their narratives, students testified that international student connections blossomed into significant friendships and support networks. International student connections were often prioritised in preference to domestic student friendships because of

cultural comfort offered by students from countries close to home, and their readiness to provide the right kind of support.

While international friendships were quickly forged they were nevertheless highly responsive, especially during crises or significant events. Chi recalls how an international student friend celebrated her birthday, soon after they met *“I arrived in New Zealand two days after my birthday so yeah it was stressful. I met this girl ... she was from the USA and we were quite close she invited me over and she bought cake we celebrated it there”*. Sonia explained that her multicultural group of friends supported her during a period of hospitalization *“They were there for me when I came in and still there when I came out”*. Tuyet’s Vietnamese flatmates also helped out when she was faced an extensive bill from her landlord for accidentally triggering a smoke alarm. Tuyet’s friend Hoa assisted her with communication and advocacy *“I asked Hoa for help because Hoa’s English is better than mine and she supported me so much”*.

International student connections provided opportunities to expand off campus networks. Diya, through a Vietnamese international student in her homestay, was introduced to volunteering. Jianyu described going with another international student to the World of Languages event at the Fiesta bar, where multiple languages were showcased. International students connections were also sustained by a love of travel and provided companionship to reach out into New Zealand communities. Sarah felt her friendship with international students gave her the opportunity to *“explore New Zealand”* explaining *“I can’t really do that with domestic students they want to go to Bali while we want to explore New Zealand”*.

Participants explained international connections helped to provide wider cultural awareness and highlight gaps in cultural understanding, by providing new experience of other cultures. They highlighted for Diya, how little she knew about other cultures.

Through a Pasifika connection, she found a way to learn about Pasifika culture, but feels she is still learning about their traditions *“I can’t say that I know a lot about Pacific culture I just touch a bit on the surface”*.

For some international student connections were reported as enduring. Describing a friendship Chi, from Vietnam, made with a student from Singapore, she says, *“We are friends up until now and we are pretty close”* despite the difficulties of staying connected when studying at different campuses. Tuyet, an international student from Vietnam also reports being in contact with an international student from Myanmar, two years after they first met, *“We still talk online on Facebook especially during special occasions”*. Sonia recalled traveling with another international student to visit the home of a domestic student friend. This multicultural student group provided long-term friendships *“It is still the same group till now we have just added more people over the years. We have got a friend from Canada, a friend from Taiwan...a Filipino mixed Kiwi as well, so from a lot of places”*.

For others international connections were hard to maintain in the face of overseas travel and relocation. Novita volunteered for the international buddy programme and got the opportunity to be matched with Huan, a Chinese international student. She tried to keep in contact with Huan but this proved to be challenging *“it’s a bit hard to keep up with her when she went to Japan because they don’t use Facebook as well”*. While cross-cultural connections were clearly significant to this group of students, they recognised these ties did not necessarily lead to enduring friendship, as Chi explains, *“It is hard to make long lasting relationships”*.

International student connections were not unproblematic. Students recalled negotiating these friendships across cultural barriers, acknowledging cultural differences in values, languages and timeframes. International student connections were not always positive, at times they provided challenges and were perceived by



some as a barrier to academic success. Sarah describes completing a group assignment with an international student from China where she had to edit their work *“I once had a group project with another international student from China and she can’t really speak English or write in English so it was hard”*. Friendships with international students from different cultural backgrounds presented difficulties. Arissa remembered an incident that caused offence to her Japanese friend Yumi and ended their friendship. She recalled the failed encounter but identified there was shared responsibility for the friendship difficulty. Mutual problems within the intercultural space were significant and the friendship broke permanently because of *“Cultural misunderstandings”*.

### **Domestic Student Connections**

Student narratives suggested that while international student connections could leverage off common experiences, domestic connections were much harder to forge and maintain. Few experiences united domestic and international students and differences in social expectations and academic goals disrupted connections these international students tried to make with host country students.

Many participants described a separation from domestic students during class and found that challenging encounters left them uncomfortable. Tuyet was disappointed at not having the cross-cultural interactions she had been anticipating, struggling to understand *“How western people spoke English”*. She elected to socialise with Vietnamese friends in order to feel comfortable. Diya observed negative attitudes and micro aggressions in New Zealand towards international students during a mainstream anthropology class. She believed that because international students looked different, domestic students kept their distance. In lectures on cultural anthropology and sociology she often sat alone. *“I always had to sit alone. No one came to sit beside me until there are no other spaces then they can choose this seat beside me”*. While she could manage these feelings during lectures this isolation in group discussion was

“*very uncomfortable*”. When the lecturer asked her to talk to the person next to her she had to struggle and “*look around for those who were there*”.

Some participants observed that domestic students were busy people with already established networks, as Jianyu stated they “*have their own life arranged*” and without sufficient interest in making new connections, he felt they deliberately limited their interaction with international students. Arissa also believed domestic students social groups had already been formed and it was challenging to take the conversation to the next level “*It is hard to ask them if they want to hang out afterwards because they have got their own friends whom they already made in high school*”. Putri, an international student from Indonesia, encountered this dynamic in a postgraduate course, with the majority of domestic students having little free time to participate in social activities “*They are full time workers and they work for the ministries even on Sundays they still have meetings so I am not really enjoying that situation*”.

Some viewed domestic students as closed off and unwilling to interact with them unless they were perceived as westernized. Putri believed that domestic students view international students as withdrawn and disinterested in getting to know newcomers. She observed that New Zealanders who were unwilling to provide cultural space to international students, expected international students to fully adapt to New Zealand culture “*New Zealanders tend to withdraw themselves from others it seems like oh I want to see how you adapt with our culture first*”.

### **Poor Quality of Domestic Student Connections**

When domestic student connections were successfully made, participants mostly rated these friendships as superficial and inconsistent. Tuyet’s memory of making a connection with domestic students during group assignments was that it was positive when they shared common ground over developing the presentation but interactions were superficial and conversation was confined to the assignment. Than’s story also

featured weak connections with domestic students, limited to on-campus sites “*A few times we would get some coffee and chat but we are not really close*”.

Sarah identified that different values underpinned the gap, “*They don’t carry as much responsibility as Asian students who have expectations from their parents. They are free to do whatever they want*”. Sarah told the story of a domestic student friend, “*Last year my friend from New Zealand told me that she was going to drop out of Uni to go to America to teach skiing*”. She wondered why the girl’s parents had allowed this to happen, explaining this would have never happened in Indonesia. Participants reported limiting their contact with domestic students, because of this lack of common goals, different experiences and values. As Putri explains “*I am more interested to talk to students with the same experiences. Because we are new people and I wanted to mingle with them*”.

Some students contrasted domestic student socialising with home culture practices, actively resisting the drinking culture. Sarah explained that she was not comfortable or financially able, to attend regular drinking events in Katrina McCloud Hall, “*We didn’t really hang out that often, all they do is drinking I’m okay if it is once in a while but not every week, drinking can be expensive here and I don’t really have that much money*”. Lyn also found that “*The partying and drinking culture gets really annoying sometimes especially as I stay near the student halls they are all drunk and screaming and shouting*”. Some students were uncomfortable socialising in places where alcohol was served because of cultural values. In Vietnam, as Tuyet explains socialising is conducted over coffee whereas “*many Kiwi students go to the bar and club and this is uncomfortable for me so it is difficult to join in*”. These acts of resistance to domestic student social engagements reinforced home country cultural identity and practices.

Other participants reported that they could not keep up with the social expectations of domestic students, encountering high social demands to gain access to and maintain membership of domestic student friendship groups. Fearing that they may lose their

place in a social group or cause offence by refusal, participants were reluctant to turn down engagements. Yunyi, in Heather Holland Hall, found *“It could be awkward if my friends have these events but I have some assignment to do I would say oh sorry I have to do my study and they are okay that’s fine and if I do this again they would ask me are you not going to play (socialise) with us”*.

Not all domestic student connections were disappointing. A few student stories featured positive and close friendships, which were deep and lasting. Sonia described a memorable cultural exchange with her close Kiwi friend *“ In the first year I went to my best friends Amber’s place she’s from Pukuatua Valley and I went to her hometown and stayed with her family”*. She appreciated the hospitality from Amber’s family and was pleasantly surprised at *“just how much they accepted me and treated me as a part of their family. I really felt like this is like my second home”*. Tuyet also reported making a close friend with a Kiwi student who was originally friends with her flat mate Hien. Their friendship proved to be successful with her friend coming to the airport to farewell her and keeping in contact two years later.

A notable exception to the difficulties making domestic student connections was described in narratives that referred to friendships with minority learners in New Zealand. Domestic students who were minority learners appeared to offer a better level of friendship to international students. Diya made strong connections with domestic students from Pasifika backgrounds in a Pasifika culture class. The only Chinese student in the class, Diya experienced warmth and acceptance from *“really outgoing”* Pasifika classmates *“they don’t mind about where you are from or what language you speak”*. Diya’s Pasifika classmates greeted her before class, they would sit in class together and share experiences, creating times she describes as *“really happy and funny”*, Arissa also reported close connections with Maori and Pasifika domestic students, forged through a mentoring programme *“They are more open minded and accepting and look past the differences between our cultures”*.

## Academic Connections

Student stories provided positive reports of connections made with academic staff at the university. In pre degree and post degree programmes, close relationships were formed with teaching staff, enabling students to get the support they needed in their learning. However, in large mainstream undergraduate programmes relationships took longer to establish. Here students recalled being disconnected with their learning, struggling with subjects and having insufficient support from academic staff. When Sonia started her Anthropology classes she was surprised at the large numbers *“Classes were about 300 people and people had to sit on the stairs because there wasn't any space”*. Undergraduate students reported it took longer to develop a relationship with lecturers, due to larger class size but that strong connections could be made. Chi explains that when she forged a relationship with her undergraduate lecturer, Caleb, he became an inspiration and motivated her to take the subject further *“He really inspired me and I was able to relate to a lot of the course and I just decided that's what I want to do”*. Tuyet also formed a close relationship with her commercial law tutor who supported her throughout a challenging subject *“He gave me the chance to review the course with him and was the reason why I did well in the course”*.

Informality of western university systems was something participants negotiated in order to make connections with academic staff. Students reported cultural adjustment difficulties while learning how to relate to lecturers in an informal way. Jianyu described that at first he struggled *“I didn't know how to interact with the lecturer. I am not proactive enough to raise my questions”*. Poor confidence and concern about English silenced some of these students, but only for a period. Recovery and adjustment was described, following periods of disconnectedness. Jianyu remembered *“Struggling to get used to it for the first two weeks but then it's all good”*, developing relationships he paralleled to friendship *“They already know us and we know them. We became like friends. We can talk easily and become more confident and comfortable”*. Sonia also recalled discomfort when she first learnt she had to call

teaching staff by their first names *“At first I was super uncomfortable calling them by their first name when I did not know them, I felt like I was being rude but that’s just the norm here (New Zealand) so I got used to it”*.

These stories featured self-assessment by students about their need for academic adjustment and support on entry, which resulted in many enrolling in pre-degree programmes. Students were prepared to add a further year to their study programme to receive the extra support in language development and help in adjusting to new learning environments. The classroom style format of the pre-degree programme, was highlighted by students, as important, a format familiar from high school experiences. Retaining the same classmates across a stable timetable allowed Yunyi to feel comfortable and make and sustain friendships *“The Pathways programme was like a high school system I am not talking about the class and the level of study but the system makes me feel more comfortable”*.

Student stories provided testimony of strong connections made with teachers in these smaller pre-degree and postgraduate study programmes. As Yunyi explained in the Pathways programme *“All of the teachers were very nice and they helped me a lot especially the teacher in academic writing, they did a lot because I wasn’t very good at writing”*. In these programmes second language learning issues were surfaced rather than hidden or ignored. Yunyi continues, *“They were patient and they understand that we (international students) are doing our second language studies so they repeat things”*. Home country cultural reference points guided students in their relationship with teachers these programmes. Than wanted to ensure that politeness was shown to her ELP teachers, something that she learnt from the education system in Myanmar *“I will always ask for the request and ask for the meeting. They are happy to open the door and give feedback and so it is useful for me”*.

Teachers in pre-degree programmes were remembered as sources of support offering cross-cultural advice during times of need. When Diya experienced cross-cultural misunderstandings, while living in a homestay, she confided in her pre-degree programme teacher. Becoming upset when her homestay parent responded to a discussion about a Chinese massacre as “*interesting*”, Diya’s teacher reassured her that the word in New Zealand can be used to indicate inattention rather than disregard for the lives of those lost in the massacre.

Close relationships with teaching staff were described by some students as enduring beyond course completion. As Jianyu explained his close relationship with a commerce lecturer enabled him to go back to ask questions about courses. He viewed these exchanges as also benefiting academic staff, citing mutuality in these academic relationships. Jianyu explained that this close relationship was positive for the lecturer “*I think the lecturer also enjoyed this kind of feedback*”.

The interactive nature of student and lecture engagements and staff responsiveness to emails, were contrasted with learning exchanges in Asia. Chi describes initiating a meeting with her education lecturer, Caleb, in order to get advice about her academic pathway “*I actually had my own appointment to see him where I just asked for advice about which courses I should take and he was very helpful*”. Sarah’s positive experience of the teaching staff in New Zealand made her appreciate the western education system which she contrasted favourably to education in Indonesia “*They are very helpful, they reply to e-mails fast and I really appreciate this because in Indonesia the lecturers do not have time, they are much more interactive here*”.

Not all academic relationships were positive, but where students experienced learning difficulties or poor engagement in learning they saw it as a problem they could solve. Students who struggled with academic relationships made changes to courses to improve their learning experiences and connections. Chi explained that initially she

was disinterested in a subject she was studying, which she attributed to a poor academic relationship “*In my international relations course I didn’t like the tutor that much*”. She did not perform as well as she had expected leading her to feel disappointed with her grades “*I was disappointed with how I performed. It was because I wasn’t into the subject as much as I wanted which was like a lack of motivation*”. Making a subject change resulted in improved academic performance, so much that Chi was featured as a top student on the Dean’s list.

## **Making Campus Community Connections**

Students shared stories that were outward looking and contained accounts of off-campus connections, amongst a range of communities. Volunteering was the primary platform, which facilitated students’ reach beyond the university, providing students with cross-cultural encounters and work experience when visas restricted paid work opportunities. Xianghua explained that community connections, enabled through volunteering, provided her with flexibility to shape hours according to her study programmes, in a way not possible with paid work. Lyn favourably compared the opportunity to make community connections by volunteering in New Zealand to Singapore “*In Singapore opportunities for volunteering aren’t as evident, a lot of them are overseas missions which require 1-2 months of commitment unfortunately we don’t have short term volunteering*”. Lyn found volunteering beneficial for her future “*It is really, for me, about getting the work experience, trying new experiences and learning the way things are done*”.

Volunteering was commonly accessed through leadership programmes at VUW. Putri enjoyed participating in the Leadership Programme (VILP) prioritizing seminars and speaker events. “*I participated in all of the experiential activities*”. Lyn also took on a leadership role on campus and became an ambassador for the VILP Programme, helping during orientation and assisting with seminars. Lyn felt volunteering presented an opportunity for gaining new interests and skills “*I have never been*



*interested in international politics but being a VILP ambassador helped me gain an interest in that area*". Being an ambassador gave Lyn the chance to reshape the programme, considering how to make VILP orientation more interesting for students. Jianyu volunteered in the New Zealand Mayor Conference where he interacted with guests and translated for them. He also was involved with an E Commerce company, helping them with their marketing strategy in China. He viewed this networking as very important *"It is hard, it puts you in an uncomfortable situation but you get to know people and get a chance to show yourself and the confidence I gained is beneficial in the long term"*.

Not all students used volunteering to outreach into communities, others volunteered on campus, to make connections with other international students, and help less equipped international students settle into New Zealand. Novita valued the responsibility for supporting international student buddies, attending group events and ensuring buddies were well looked after *"I don't want to leave my buddies alone"*. Chi also saw benefit in the international buddy programme *"I liked the concept of it and it's great if you are new to have a buddy who knows everything"*.

Community volunteering engagements off-campus, however, were sometimes short lived and not all volunteer roles were well organised. Poor management of events frustrated and disappointed some students. Sarah was an active student who volunteered in a number of community events, including the Beach Run. Lack of supervision of the event and being underutilized left her disappointed *"There was a pretty messy organisation because they didn't have the timeline for the volunteers"*. Volunteers were poorly prepared for the event and *"they didn't provide any rundown to the volunteers so we didn't know what we should do"* and she felt she had wasted her time *"I spent around 5 hours there but I only did 2 hours of work"*. At times volunteer tasks were more menial than international students anticipated with few opportunities to make connections. Volunteering at a hospital, Lyn was making beds and ensuring cupboards were stocked, providing limited community connections *"I*

*am mostly working alone I can talk to the patients but at times their families are there so it gets awkward”.*

## **Paid Work**

Students’ objectives for studying aboard include the goal of making connections to improve labour market participation. Paid work opportunities were valued by these participants and their narratives indicated workplaces were sites of cultural difference, prompting new cultural identity reflection.

Paid work situations were sites of cross-cultural encounters, often where misunderstandings and cultural learning occurred. Sarah told the story of working at an Indonesian food truck in Wellington catering to a number of different markets around the city. She recalled the difficulty of accommodating Veganism within an Asian food context “*We sometimes get mixed up between the vegetarian and vegan... it’s not that common to have vegan people in Indonesia*”. Workplaces with Asian and New Zealand cultural intersections were remembered as sites of cultural exchange. While restaurants in New Zealand often referenced Asian culture, traditions values and customs were not necessarily observed. Diya’s experience working in a Hong Kong restaurant in Auckland was challenging, finding that customers made assumptions about her Chinese culture. “*People tend to put groups together and assume that they are the same*”. Diya found New Zealand customers were abrupt and unlike China, did not take time to socialise over food, telling her to deliver food quickly. Jianyu who worked in a hotel reception agreed there were cross- cultural difficulties but explained he anticipated these as part of a paid work landscape “*It is not a playground*”. Novita, who previously worked as a check out operator in a supermarket also faced challenging encounters with both staff members and customers but endured this willingly “*You can’t really say that you will not face any challenges while doing something like this*”.

Despite the majority of participants wishing to lift labour market participation the roles they undertook were not usually connected to studies and both paid and unpaid work was restricted to hospitality, retail, event and environmental work. Despite this, workplaces were remembered by students as offering opportunities to gain independence and become self-reliant. In Sonia's first year of study she had a job as a waitress in a Malaysian restaurant, recalling this as an experience that fostered her independence *"It was my first job I hadn't worked in Malaysia. I wanted to do it to get some extra money instead of depending on my parents"*.

### **Religious Connections**

There was some evidence in the stories of participants that religious communities provided off campus connections but this did not feature in all narratives. Novita and Sonia described religious participation as a means to make wider connections and grow leadership. Connections were made through religious networks with other international students, religious and cultural communities. For Novita her Indonesian Christian church strengthened her cultural identity giving her a sense of belonging and family in New Zealand *"it's a close group and we tend to help each other, the mothers and the aunts are warm and welcoming like you are a part of us and we will take care of you"*

Leadership roles developed out of these religious networks. Novita explains that, within the context of her Indonesian church, she quickly became a volunteer *"We have different groups in the church....so I helped out with the teenage ones"* Novita was also active in a religious group on campus that offered social activities for international students. A highlight was a weekly event called Current Affairs Catch Up where international students watched news coverage in small groups and discussed events with Kiwi volunteers.

For Novita, participating in a religious community was structured around her spiritual beliefs, which provided support during her international sojourn and reinforced her identity as a Christian “*When I first come to a place it is my principal thing that I would seek a church that I can grow in and I could see more in God*”. Novita sought out community connections with the Christian faith, eventually attending the Sunrise church, which is a large off campus church designed for young people. Here she found a sense of community “*it’s a good church, they bring you together and have someone to share life with you it’s a good place*”. Spiritual support and developing a personal relationship with God kept Novita going through challenging times, helping her find success in New Zealand “*God is the one that I go to when I am facing problems. He knows everything that could happen and he will direct me to the right path that’s what I believe*”.

Religion was also a way for participants to make connections with home country communities in Wellington and enabled students to enact home country cultural identity. Sonia’s religious background is Hindu and she connected with the Hindu community in Wellington “*I discovered a temple here in Parkland and I go every time I am free it takes about 10 bucks to and from the bus it’s quite expensive so I can’t go very often but when I am free I go or when it is a special occasion like a festival*”. Sonia describes connections made at the temple “*it is another part of my identity so it is important that I connect with that aspect*”. Religion was also a reference point for Than who described going to the temple in her narrative, as a means of maintaining home county identity, and ensure offence was not given by missing religious observance.

## **Recreational and Sporting Connections**

Participating in sport and New Zealand cultural events was highlighted in some narratives as a way to strengthen community ties and try out host country identity. Jianyu explained a highlight of his time in New Zealand was seeing an All Whites (NZ football team) game and a Lorde (NZ recording artist) concert on the same day. He reflected how his behaviour was reshaped by this experience, adapting to the crowd. During the game he quickly adopted a team allegiance “*You need to support someone to become excited*”, cheering on New Zealand he “*became much crazier than I normally would, I was shouting let’s get physical, let’s get nasty and people in front of me were like what ?; yeah it was fun*”. Diya attended a traditional Maori concert for Matariki and with a new Kiwi Chinese classmate and an international student. This experience opened her eyes to Maori culture as well as expanding her friendship networks “*It is interesting when you meet someone you can get introduced to their friends and make friends with them*”.

## **Accommodation as a Platform for Making Community Connections**

For this group of students homestays did not provide a strong platform for widening community connections. For Than, her homestay family involved the care of a 10-year-old child, which restricted the degree to which the family could go on outings. For Arissa, her homestay was located in a hilly suburb of Kauri, far away from town and with no transport available in the evenings community engagements were difficult to attend, because of safety concerns. Novita, who lived the same hilly suburb as Arissa, also commented that this location restricted community participation, as she could not attend bible classes with the Sunrise church “*The transport is a bit hard when you are living up the hill*”. Diya faced similar issues in Auckland, with transport problems getting from her homestay in Kingdon, a beach side suburb, to the university and Auckland city. Unlike China where public transport was readily available in Auckland she was anxious about New Zealand public

transport “*If I missed the bus I would have to wait another hour*”. The homestay location also limited Diya’s opportunities for voluntary work.

International students were concerned about the motivation and quality of homestay connections. Than discussed living in a homestay, which hosted students but were not paid for this work, which she felt provided her with genuine connections compared to homestay parents who received monetary gain. Similarly Novita was not hosted as a formal homestay student but boarded with a family. Both students reported deep connections with host families and joined in family events. Than valued participation in everyday home life based on doing whatever the family did. Her family created cultural space for her by stopping cooking pork, because she did not eat this meat.

Flatting and independent living provided a better platform for students to make community connections. A number of participants lived in shared houses or flatting situations and found this expanded their social connections and provided opportunities to learn about different lives. Novita, after leaving her boarding situation, lived in a flat connecting with people from a diverse range of countries “*Sometimes it is really fun as you have a whole lot of people you can share your stories with and have conversations with*”. Putri explained how living in a flat with domestic and international students helped her gain confidence speaking English “*I am always trying after six months I don't say that my English (is) getting perfect but I start to understand*” Jianyu’s flat during his final year gave him the opportunity to make connections with Kiwi students, “*They are very typical guys they are crazy about sport and we were able to connect with sport and politics*”. These flatmates valued him saying he “*brought a good dynamic to the flat*”, and after the flat was disbanded they still met up.

Halls of Residence were also identified as a good base for making connections. Residential Advisors provided a warm welcome for these students, as Sonia describes,

*“The welcome was pretty good because I got to meet my RA and he was really nice and he helped me move in my stuff”*. Halls enabled students to make connections with other international students, with friendships developing through hall based routines or activities. Sonia explains *“Most of the friends I made were in the hall because you have communal dining and stuff like that so you sit with each other”* and so the hall successfully created a sense of belonging *“Kowhai House was a pretty small hall everyone kind of knew each other and always looked out for each other”*.

One aspect of living in Halls of Residence that proved to be disappointing for some participants was making connections with domestic students. Segregation of domestic and international students in Pohutukawa House surprised Jianyu *“they tend to put domestic students on the first floor and international students somewhere else”*. Putri, also found the Hall a poor way to connect with domestic students *“I don’t want to stay in a hall because I want to mingle with domestics and I got a chance flatting with diverse people one of them from New Zealand”*. But Putri found the process of being accepted into a flat a lot harder than she had anticipated because of being an international student *“It is quite difficult for international students to get accommodation here with Kiwis. I applied for 20 places and only one answered me”*.

## **Facilitated Student Connections**

Students participated in a range of programmes and events that were offered to facilitate student connections. However, these narratives highlighted the importance of building genuine friendships rather than linking with domestic student volunteers through programmes. The international buddy programme, which matches international students with domestic students, disappointed participants, as friendships made were rated superficial and short-lived. For Jianyu his buddy’s behaviour left him confused *“My buddy didn’t show up at all. We got in touch through g-mail and WeChat and then she blocked me on WeChat and didn’t reply to my e-mail”*. Chi also found the experience of the international buddy programme mixed, *“It’s a bit*

*awkward because you're forced to make conversation and sometimes it doesn't flow I think it kind of depends on who you are paired up with". Chi described short meetings with her buddies at the university and going for "bubble tea" but they struggled to sustain meaningful conversation. Jianyu felt that Kiwi students volunteering in the programme often overcommit and have no real need for new genuine friendships "Most of the Kiwis have got their own life and being part of the buddy programme is just a part of that, beyond that they have got their own life... the buddies just fade away".*

Cultural differences underpinned some of the problems with facilitated connections. Chi contrasted relationships she developed with two buddies, acknowledging it was easier for her to connect with a co-national buddy from China than with her Malaysian buddy who had different religious beliefs "*She's more open whereas with the Malaysian one it's hard, I mean we still made conversation but it just didn't go that deep". Lyn also joined the international buddy programme but the interaction with her buddy was short lived "We only met up a couple of times". Lyn was disappointed to find that her buddy was another international student "She actually only came to New Zealand only six months before I did. There are a lot of international students in the programme compared to the number of Kiwis"*

Conversation class, a VUW programme which connects international students with domestic students, also featured in many students' narratives and was valued as a means of extending networks, although friendships were not well supported. Jianyu's valued the facilitated conversations "*I found it really helpful doing the activities, to sit down, talk to people, share my own experience and listen to other peoples stories it's really nice". Putri also joined the Conversation Programme but felt the connections she made remained classroom based "When we finish, we go back to our daily activities, we share our information based on the question but outside the conversation at VUW, we don't have any activities together". Putri's experience of these programmes lead her to consider changes the university could make to further*



facilitate domestic student and international student connections “*For international students I think that the university needs to think about how to connect them with domestic students*” Putri suggests conversation class could be extended further and have assigned language partners who volunteer to meet international students one on one and extend this into homestays.

Most participants attended the mandatory international student orientation run by Victoria International. Some participants had a positive view of orientation with Novita explaining it gave her another opportunity to make connections with other international students “*I met a lot of people during the orientation*” and Tuyet was satisfied with the information sessions. While Tuyet got opportunities to meet other international students, she had expected to make Kiwi friends there and so was disappointed. Participants again identified that while connections were made during orientation, friendships were short lived because students were studying different subjects, on different campuses. For others, the format of orientation was insufficient to sustain the development of significant friendships. Chi believed orientation was too focused on information sharing and not on making connections “*I didn’t have that much chance to talk to people during the orientation*”. Lyn described a disappointing contrast to orientation back home “*In Singapore you will be put into groups and do games and self introductions and in VUW there is no real opportunity to talk*”.

## **Chapter 5 Findings: International Student Identity and Resilience**

This chapter presents findings across the narratives, which relate to cultural identity and resilience, in particular, how students cultural identity interacts with the connections they make with home country students, with other international learners and wider communities. Challenges participants faced and their strategies for overcoming these difficulties, such as micro-aggressions, are discussed, along with student agency and perceptions of personal growth experienced during study sojourns.

### **Maintaining Home Country Identity**

Student stories commonly referenced efforts to maintain home country identity. Throughout their sojourn, staying close to home country cultural groups provided support during cross-cultural encounters and challenges. Family connections were key to students' maintaining and strengthening home country identity, along with new friendships made with other home country students. Participation in on and off campus home country communities, religious networks and cultural events also reinforced students' home country identity.

Home country identity was particularly significant on arrival where it provided an anchor in the new cultural landscape. Arrival was made easier for Xianghua, when a home culture member from Victoria International picked her up from the airport. It was a relief for Xianghua to have this person help her transact accommodation in English *“Fortunately the person is a Chinese I had to contact the head of my accommodation and I am not so fluent with my speaking and (they) helped me”*.

These students' stories suggested that home country cultural identity did not diminish during the sojourn but was strengthened. Novita explained her Indonesian culture was

enlarged while living in New Zealand “*When I was back in Indonesia I didn’t feel strong nationalism. It is like when you are out of your country and constantly trying to find the good things in your country and introduce them properly*”. Arissa explained while living in New Zealand her Malaysian culture become reinforced, and the experience helped her understand her Malaysian culture better. Sonia too described how the new landscape prompted her to reconnect with cultural representations and traditions, “*My Malaysian identity and in particular my identity as an Indian has become stronger. You know when you are away from home and then you realise that’s what you are missing out on, you feel like watching Indian movies and listening to Indian songs*”.

Connections with other home country students provided a platform to enact cultural identity through language and participation in cultural activities. Novita’s Indonesian identity was underpinned through friendships she made with flatmates from Indonesia, who were “*active in the community*” and who connected her to many events. Diya’s Chinese identity was also strengthened through her Chinese peer group in Auckland, who supported her, giving her the chance to “*Use my mother language*”. She acknowledges that this meant her English language ability, did not develop as much as she would have liked, but obtaining cultural space was an important trade-off. Tuyet’s Vietnamese identity was also strengthened through close friendships made with home country flatmates who cooked traditional Vietnamese food and celebrating Vietnamese festivals, consolidating ties back to Vietnam.

Cultural identity was created through honouring cultural obligations while living in host communities. Than maintained her Myanmar cultural identity throughout her sojourn, by continuing to meet cultural obligations while in New Zealand, visiting temples in Wellington as a cultural obligation in order not to give offence, “*Sometimes things are unavoidable you know, for example, welcoming, farewelling we should participate right? Otherwise it’s going to be rude*”. For Sarah, home country identity was maintained by joining the Indonesian Student Association which

strengthened her home country cultural identity through chances to participate in cultural performances “*they asked me to join the dance group*”. On and beyond campus, the network provided Sarah with opportunities to be with Indonesian community members including embassy staff “*I mostly did performances which went beyond VUW and was for the diplomatic community*”.

Home cultural identity was surfaced during international students encounters, which offered new comparison and cultural vantage points. Sarah explained that she had more opportunity to enact home country culture in New Zealand than in Indonesia “*I feel very connected with Indonesia here compared to how I was back in Indonesia. I can do lots of cultural stuff here like the dance but in Indonesia it’s not common to do those performances unless it is on Independence Day*”. Sarah took the opportunity to share Indonesian culture with NZ students in the Hall of Residence, such as teaching students basic Indonesia language.

There was testimony in student narratives that home country identity, was a strong reference point for “sense making” in cross border encounters and was evident in the many cultural comparisons made by students. Arissa used her own cultural references to understand homestay interactions. She attributed dominance of her homestay father to his sole income earner status, which she compared to Malaysia, where income earning is shared between couples, creating more spousal equality. Diya’s discussion of her homestay in Auckland suggested it did not create cultural space, but was a place where language and cultural difference were highlighted. Ambivalence in English language between “no” and “yes” responses were surfaced in the homestay, which she contrasted to communication in Chinese. Diya also encountered cultural insensitivity around domestic tasks. In her culture, clothes were washed separately dividing laundry items, such as, underwear and t-shirts. Diya was uncomfortable with her homestay parents “*mixing together*” different laundry items, such as, tea towels and underwear, but instead of remaining unhappy about this, she selected to do her own washing.

## Flexible Identity

While home country identity was strengthened and even refreshed on study sojourns, it did not constrain cross-cultural encounters or inhibit a flexible identity from emerging. International student connections were the predominant platform for developing a more cosmopolitan identity. Through forgoing and maintaining friendships with other international students, cultural identity was reshaped, and re-negotiated. For some students a global citizen identity developed that existed in parallel with other cultural affiliations. Flexible identity was demonstrated through prioritising English language, communication, behavioural adaptations and personal development.

Selecting language as a mode of communication was an expression of flexible cultural identity for students who choose English to transact connections rather than home country languages. In the Pathways programme Arissa rejected the common cultural space of a Chinese-speaking peer group and chose to construct intercultural friendships with Korean and Japanese students. This transnational student group transacted their cross border friendships in English, which became their common platform for connection. Arissa acknowledged this compromised her relationships with Chinese students “*I wasn’t really that popular with Chinese students because I spoke English a lot*”. Lyn describes similar behaviour, choosing not to use Singaporean English (Singlish), instead speaking formal English with a westernised accent which distinguished her from other Singaporean students “*Singapore is famous for Singlish but I don’t really use Singlish as much*”.

Participants’ flexible identity was reflected in the choices they made about events and groups they joined. Sonia’s deliberate attempt to develop social connections with students of different countries meant that she resisted home country connections

within the Malaysian Student Association. Sonia feared she would end up socialising with only Malaysian students *“I kind of stayed away because I felt like they always stuck to themselves I did not want to get pulled into the group and not be able to come out”*.

Students described cross- border encounters as personal growth opportunities, where they were prepared to risk interactions they may have avoided at home. Novita explains *“There was one time where I was waiting at the bus stop and there was this other man waiting for the bus. Because it was taking so long we decided to have a conversation with one another”*. Novita explained it was unusual for someone to start a conversation with her like this in Indonesia but described why she kept the conversation going even though it was risky *“I wasn’t so hesitant I think they must have a different mindset and a different culture in New Zealand, it (learning about different cultures) is part of the reason why I came to New Zealand I was quite shocked at first but I wasn’t really intimidated”*.

International student friendships fostered flexible identity when groups participated in one another’s cultural events. There was an understanding amongst international students that show-casing home culture identity was part of these cross border encounters. As Sonia explains cultural exhibitionism was expected and understood amongst the group, and she was comfortable promoting her Malaysian Indian culture amongst her friends *“I feel like I push my culture upon my friends but they enjoy it”*.

Students described adopting fresh identity positions offered by new connections, groups and social contexts. Novita recalled a memorable trip with her homestay “parents” which involved her taking on a “family member” role *“there is a family package and they counted me as the third or second daughter saying to me you are part of our family”*. There was no sense in this story that this compromised Novita’s feeling towards her biological family or her Indonesian cultural self. Their gesture

was interpreted as offering belonging “*I was surprised at being treated as part of their family I was like wow it makes you feel so welcomed*”.

Cross-cultural encounters were actively sought by this group of students who saw them as key to a successful sojourn. A number of participants developed flexible cultural identities by selecting cross cultural spaces where home culture did not dominate. Jianyu deliberately chose New Zealand and Wellington, because he believed he would encounter fewer Chinese students there. Diya also left Auckland and moved to Wellington in order to have wider cross-cultural experiences “*In Auckland there were so many Chinese, so many Asians*”. Than emphasised the role of understanding diversity in order to succeed academically and socially in her pre degree programme “*I made up my mind just try to understand other cultures*”. Before coming to New Zealand Tuyet described herself as a “*shy person*” but after studying here “*Kiwi culture has opened my mind*”.

Some participants aspired to adopt dual New Zealand and home country identities. Jianyu felt encouraged to identify as a New Zealander after reading an article from Radio New Zealand about an Asian girl who grew up in New Zealand. He described the effect this article had on him “*It is basically talking about if you think that you are a New Zealander than you are a New Zealander and I agree with her and I feel connected in New Zealand*”.

Students reshaped home country identity in order to become successful in a western university environment, particularly promoted by interactions which required individual reflections and responses to be constructed. Students described challenges western pedagogies presented to them, in contrast to previous learning experiences. They especially struggled with subjects where there were no correct answers only viewpoints, as Yunyi explains, “*As a design student we do not have a specific answer*”.

*for things. People have different options about one simple picture or poster I find it really hard to know which way I should go for”.*

This ambiguity required students to construct more individual responses than they were used to and this was part of forming a more independent learner than they initially imagined. Novita explained that the New Zealand educational system allowed her to develop critical thinking, giving her the chance to become a proactive learner. *In Indonesia we are mostly spoon-fed but here (New Zealand) they want you to think critically and they give you the information and then you have to analyse that information”.* Novita also recalls adapting to this learning style *“It took me quite some time to think this is okay, this is what learning is like in New Zealand I had to adapt to this and be active in group discussions”.* Sonia remembers an icebreaker session challenging her to define herself *“You say your name and where you come from and something interesting about you and I’m like there is nothing interesting about me”.* In a cross-cultural communication programme which Than described as *“a confronting space, which forces communication”* role-plays first made her uncomfortable but she recognised these helped her become independent.

Wider community connections were also platforms for cross border encounters which contribute to new cultural identities. Novita originally sought out a New Zealand church to attend *“I wanted to try a New Zealand church not just close to the Indonesian community”.* She enjoyed attending the Sunrise church recognising that the extrovert nature of the church community was different to Indonesia *“there is a lot of energy in there”.* Community events also provided platforms for students to perform new identities. Jianyu remembers taking on a new identity as a Kiwi supporter at the All White’s game *“ I went crazy, I was shouting ... yeah it’s really fun”.* Sonia describes attending events where alcohol was consumed, constructing these experiences as new found freedom, enjoying the independent space offered by the host culture *“I have more freedom as I am not living with my parents anymore.... here (in New Zealand) I could come back at 4:00am and no one would care”*



For other students home culture celebrations were bent and reshaped to incorporate aspects of the host culture, creating hybrid cultural spaces. Jianyu describes choosing to celebrate a traditional Chinese day called 11/11, which occurs on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, by participating in two Kiwi activities, a sports event and a concert. While attending the Lorde concert Jianyu was surprised by the way Kiwis behaved in the concert *“I thought that it would be like a concert (in China) where we sit on seats but everybody just stood up and shouted throughout the whole concert I was so surprised”*. Jianyu joined in, participating with the dancing and singing and celebrating 11/11 in a very *“non- traditional”* way.

With breaks in study, interrupted by overseas travel, student narratives featured periods of discontinuity, which impacted on identity. Participants reflected on their status during these periods of transition, as Yunyi says *“I am kind of in between”*. These were periods where aspects of flexible identity were tried out in home culture contexts, demonstrating to those back home a new cultural flexibility. Sonia tells the story of visiting her Kiwi friend’s house where she observed the convention of thanking a parent for cooking dinner, contrasting this to Malaysia where cooking was viewed as normal family activity and effort was not acknowledged. Sonia took this aspect of Kiwi culture back to her family in Malaysia *“When I went back to Malaysia I started saying thank you to my mum and she was taken aback and asked why are you saying thank you I have been doing this for years”*.

## **Developing a Global Worldview**

Some student narratives featured storylines of repositioning as a global citizen, an international student with new cultural awareness and hybrid identity. Yunyi explains that she no longer views herself as someone who upholds traditional Chinese values and prefers to think of herself as an individual belonging to no particular culture, *“I*

*am not traditionally that Chinese person so I don't have much feeling about the traditional stuff I will just be myself*". Yunyi emphasised the importance of combining cultures *"If you have got a culture that is part of your personality I don't want to make things so separate I want to combine things together"*.

Through their sojourn some students developed a new position on the margins of their home culture, which incorporated the gaze of an outsider. Their stories reflected new cultural awareness and an ability to see how home country identity may appear to others. Yunyi describes that she now sees aspects of Chinese culture from the perspective of others, providing new insights. She reflected about the use of umbrellas in China, which she now knows New Zealanders would find strange *"We use umbrellas even on sunny days, this would be unusual to New Zealanders"*. Then sums up the value of these cross-cultural encounters to developing new cultural intelligence *"I need to negotiate I need to compromise, so that's why I am fine with any culture"*. Some international students' flexible identity had partially developed in their home countries prior to their sojourn but were reinforced in New Zealand. Lyn felt as if she had already adapted to western culture in Singapore *'My family is pretty westernised and so sometimes a lot of my friends say to me, are you really Singaporean?'*

This intercultural flexible identity and global citizenship lead to new possibilities and imagined spaces for participants that involved helping others. Arissa's cross cultural confidence developed through mentoring other students, such that she now contemplates studying TESOL to support other international students. Chi was also motivated to help youth back in Vietnam *"I think in Vietnam a lot of young people are struggling themselves with identity it would be good if they knew that there are people that actually care about them and listen to what they have to say and provide them with the mental support that they need"*. Chi wishes that she could teach youth back home about these things *"That's what I think about when I think of Vietnam but yeah it's a long shot"*.

## Resilience and Reframing Negative Experiences

All students in the study reported challenges and adjustment difficulties. Even the more experienced students faced unexpected adjustment problems, explaining that their second international sojourn was more challenging than the first. Xianghua described visiting China between the end of her pre-degree programme, and the start of her Undergraduate programme. Coming back to New Zealand her second entry was more difficult, with the novelty gone and the study programme more challenging, *“The second time I came here I felt like I miss China more”*. Xianghua had just finished celebrating the spring festival with her family in China upon re-entry to New Zealand, which made her feel homesick. Arissa also had a severe period of homesickness during her second study sojourn to New Zealand, finding it a challenge to *“get used to being alone”* and she questioned why she decided to study aboard.

There was evidence in student narratives that they were familiar with negative discourses of student experiences before they arrived and so anticipated challenges and times of unhappiness. Some students had been trained by staff members in home universities to expect culture shock upon entering or re-entering New Zealand. So pervasive was this discussion that some participants felt it strange they were not experiencing culture shock. Than who was socialised into this negative discourse remembers *“In Myanmar people said like you might have like culture shock. I didn’t have any feeling of that”*.

Most students’ narratives did reference periods of loneliness and unhappiness. Yunyi shared the challenge of having felt depressed for a period of time in New Zealand that resulted in her avoiding social contact, particularly, with domestic students *“I felt low for a period and was stressed about my study, it made me antisocial staying in my room all day and not even going to the canteen”*. Her isolation was related to difficulties making connections, she felt ignored in social groups and found that she opened up to the other students more that they did to her. Yunyi got through this

challenging time, emerging as a stronger person “*I am feeling much better now*”, resilient enough to stay on at Heather Holland Hall for another year, even though this had been a site of difficulty for her.

Students reframed their negative experiences as challenges and used them to underline their achievements when they succeeded. Than saw the difficulties of obtaining selection for the Masters programme as confirmation of her quality as a student. Impressed by Victoria University’s tough selection processes, her sense making underscored personal achievement in gaining entry “*I would say the university is good that they are not taking who-ever*”. The requirement to return to Myanmar for work, she also constructed positively, as providing job security in a tough market and she was pleased that she didn’t have to compete for work in New Zealand

This group of international students endured serious, unexpected difficulties and their stories provided examples of how negative experiences were reframed as opportunities for self-development. Even situations where students’ well being was threatened, such as, experiencing homelessness or being hospitalised, were recounted as times of strength and personal growth. The biggest challenge, Sonia faced in New Zealand, was when she was hospitalised during her second year of study because she was seriously ill. The timing of this was particularly unfavourable “*I was hospitalised on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday which was traumatising*”. Sonia constructed this experience positively, highlighting the peer support she received “*When I was hospitalised my friends were there for me*”. This friendship group occupied the hospital to “*keep her company*”, as she explains, “*they didn’t just give me physical support they gave me emotional support. It was a very testing time for me*”.

Arissa’s story involved reconstructing her difficult homestay experiences, where her “host father” exhibited threatening behaviour. He asserted his authority in the

homestay, was possessive and often shouted, leaving Arissa feeling threatened, but she felt it “*was not my domain*” to take action. The homestay also provided substandard accommodation “*The room that they gave me used to be a basement. There was one time water leaked out of the socket and flooded the room and there were mice, I wondered how am I still alive*”. Insecurity was further reinforced when, at one point, when the power went out and her homestay parents suggested she moved to a friend’s house. But Arissa chose to stay and adapt to these circumstances making positive connections with her homestay mother, who she described as “*really good and kind*”. When asked to remain in the homestay while the family went on holiday, Arissa interpreted this as evidence of her reliability, constructing this negative situation positively “*I was very happy they trusted me, it was fun to live in the house alone for sometime*”. Arissa acknowledged it was her decision to endure the difficulties of her homestay and she does not feel any anger or disappointment “*Looking back at it I just laugh and it is part of my story*”.

Students demonstrated strength of purpose and resilience in managing these difficult situations. Unexpected incidents which featured in their stories could have been tripping points for trajectories of despair, but were recalled with emotional detachment. Chi told the story of incurring a heavy fine at Auckland airport on arrival in New Zealand, but she took this in her stride “*I got fined for not declaring apples it was \$400 that’s a lot*”, reconstructing the incident positively, “*It’s your first time of being away from home and then such an incident happened but I was also excited for what’s to come*”. Early arrival setbacks, such as missed connections, were recalled with humour and offered as evidence that difficulties could be surmounted and solutions found.

Students’ stories featured reflections on tough times which highlighted success in the face of difficulties. Overcoming challenges underpinned self-assessment of new-found strength, personal development and growth. Concluding his story of the misery of flat hunting during a pressured examination period Jianyu stated “*I was doing four*

*papers during summer I got tests from Monday to Thursday and I had to leave my flat three days later all that pressure it was terrible*". Jianyu explained that through this difficult time, he still achieved and was proud of this period *"I got an A plus when I got four papers and a flatting issue so this was one of the main highlights"*. Novita arriving from Indonesia by herself, recounts this as a time of bravery and independence, *"Thinking back now I do not know how brave I was to get the courage to actually fly all the way from Indonesia to here it's so far, doing it alone,"*. Earning her friends' respect added to her confidence *"They were like you're so daring, you're so brave"*. Novita remembers the time as characterised by excitement, not fear or discomfort *"I didn't think it was scary back then I was excited because going to a new place is like a whole new adventure"*.

## **Occupying Spaces at University**

Student stories demonstrated resilience in the way they adapted to the university landscape, occupying spaces that suited the new social situations they faced. Sonia explained that she felt comfortable across the whole campus and that she did not need to stay away from any particular area. Arissa and Diya however felt especially comfortable in areas occupied by domestic students who were minority learners, for example, Pasifika students. Social environments, which these students created, were more open cultural spaces and Arissa felt comfortable with the cultural intelligence of these students *"They are very open minded and accepting of other cultures"*. Other students shaped their occupation to manage solidarity states or times when they had few friends. Xianghua avoided the shame of being alone, which was obvious in social spaces, such as cafes, by occupying the VUW library because it was a space where being alone was not problematized. Xianghua explains that in the library environment *"You do not feel like you're alone because everyone is studying alone"*.

Inhabiting the university library also gave participants the chance to study during times other facilities were closed. Tuyet was comfortable going to the campus library

to study as it was nearby her house and it provided a platform to meet friends and develop group presentations. For Than the university literally became home when she chose to live, undetected, on campus for a period of time during an accommodation crisis. Confident about the university space, she stayed up at night to avoid security, and managed to live on the campus for the few days between leaving her accommodation and leaving the country.

### **Use of Formal Support Services**

Despite recounting a range of negative experiences there was little reference in students' stories to formal services being helpful in these situations. These students were not users of support services, even those providing crisis responses, such as, counselling or accommodation services. Arissa reported a superficial engagement with the student counselling service because she found that their focus on teaching breathing techniques, rather than discussing her homesickness in depth, was unhelpful "*I only had one session with them and they taught me breathing exercises*". She explains that it was the support she got from her family that kept her going during difficult times in New Zealand. Than chose to spend a period of "homelessness", between ending one living situation and returning home rather than use emergency accommodation services.

Self-reliance featured in participants' stories as they described being selective about whom they chose to share personal problems with, often keeping their struggles away from family members. Xianghua, Than and Tuyet deliberately concealed difficulties from their parents in order not to raise anxiety, with Xianghua turning to her friends rather than family members back in China "*I don't want to tell them I have problems*". Participants learnt that they needed to take care of themselves because that is what the situation demanded and there was no one else to do this. Sonia explains the new responsibility she now feels for supporting herself "*I have got more*

*responsibility, you have to take care of yourself because no one is going to be doing that other than you”.*

## **Agency**

Along with resilience, student narratives featured moments where students acted with agency to make changes in situations they were unhappy with. This involved decision making about how to deal with issues presented in academic settings, in homestays, work and social contexts. This group of students reflected on how they managed serious issues, which were significantly impacting on their wellbeing, such as homelessness, using their own resources and networks.

Student narratives described agency dealing with compromised situations that reflected poor cultural space at university. Students did not allow cross-cultural misunderstandings to pass unnoticed, choosing their moment to offer advice to those who may have caused offence. Diya responded assertively to insensitivity displayed within her homestay. She recalled describing a Massacre in China to her homestay mother and was taken aback by the lack of cultural understanding shown *“My homestay mother was eating her yogurt and she said to me that’s interesting”* This poor response offended Diya, who was perplexed such an event could be thought of as interesting *“I was not happy about that”*. Diya did not stay silent but challenged her homestay mother responding back to the insensitivity saying, *“This is not interesting”*.

Far from being passive in a new western learning context, students enacted their right to make course changes when they encountered difficulties or were not getting the learning support they needed. Chi demonstrated agency, making a change in her subject choice to become better engaged in learning, *“I changed to media and education and that was like a turning point”*. Students provided stories of active



participation in decision-making, offering feedback to senior academic staff about the need for course improvements. Jianyu was concerned about inadequate course content in a commerce paper, and suggested to the Dean a need to enrich the syllabus with specific content relating to New Zealand. He also provided feedback in a work readiness programme he attended, raising awareness of students who become *“Mentally stressed out”* while job hunting. Jianyu suggested the programme provides strategies for students coping with rejection when job-hunting *“When you are job hunting you get declined sometimes, it is frustrating and nobody told us (about that)”*.

Tuyet shared her story of a tough moment in New Zealand when she accidentally triggered a fire alarm *“My flatmate Hoa immediately called 111 to explain what happened, it was confirmed that we didn’t have to pay anything”*. This did not appear to be the case as Tuyet explains, *“Our landlord then provided the bill for the false alarm which charged \$1,150 and said we were responsible”*. Tuyet reported feeling overwhelmed and confused but sought advice from a Kiwi friend who suggested contacting the tenancy tribunal. With the help of Hoa, and her Kiwi friend, she wrote a letter to the landlord who agreed to waive the bill. Tuyet’s experience of challenging the landlord over an unjustified charge strengthened her sense of self and grew her confidence about dealing with stressful situations in New Zealand.

### **Micro-aggressions**

Students’ agency was particularly demonstrated in their stories of dealing with cultural insensitivity and lack of cultural space. Student stories provided evidence of micro-aggressions, segregation of international and domestic students and homogenisation of international students in undergraduate faculties. Surprisingly the micro-aggressions participants highlighted, were in spaces where they anticipated they would be respected, such as, in the university and workplaces.

Some international students directly challenged negative assumptions held about them by others, such as, academic staff, domestic students or homestay parents. Putri, confronted a group of domestic students, who were perpetuating negative stereotypes about international students “*When we had a meeting with the new Dean domestic students told him they don’t have any deep connection with international students because they keep silent in the class*”. Uncomfortable with domestic students holding such a negative view of international students, Putri was motivated to educate them so they would better understand why an international student may choose to stay silent. Congruent with her cultural values, she did not publically confront the students but waited until the group had broken for morning tea and explained the issue privately “*I told them that’s not because we want to keep silent because when we discuss something we digest information before we answer we cannot like suddenly say oh I disagree...I can’t just say this is bad, this is good*”. In this way Putri constructed international students’ silence as evidence of thoughtfulness and consideration in keeping with their own prioritises of acceptable behaviour while studying aboard.

Some students experienced micro aggressions in wider community settings. These were constructed as some of the most negative experiences students had while living in New Zealand. Novita described working at a supermarket, where she faced racist micro aggressions from a customer, something that she hadn’t experienced before in New Zealand “*I was working in the express checkout and I asked a customer to repeat his request but he mumbled and I could not get what he was saying. I asked him another time, he suddenly told me can you speak English at all, so I got very hurt from that and I just stood there*”. While this incident caused Novita social suffering, she did not take responsibility or blame herself and she was clear that the customer was responsible for this negative encounter “*I felt that it was his fault, I was angry and had lots of mixed feelings at that time*”.

In areas where participants had expected to find inclusion and openness towards international students they faced unanticipated micro aggressions. Arissa noticed

racism at an orientation session in the undergraduate programme. The topic of globalisation provided an unintended space for students to make discriminatory comments about Asian people “*The presenter asked what globalisation means and the guy sitting next me said the Auckland property market is getting dominated by Chinese, this was his example of globalisation*”. This made Arissa feel both uncomfortable and unwelcome in New Zealand, and demonstrated a poor understanding of globalisation.

Diya observed wider micro-aggressions towards Pasifika and Maori people while staying in Auckland. Diya’s former landlord commented that he chose to buy a house in Kingdom, a beachside suburb of Auckland, because the area did not have many Maori and Pasifika people living there. Diya noticed her landlord’s negative discourses about Maori and Pasifika families, stereotyping them as benefit dependent. She chose to explore this discourse in class discussions during her Pacific Studies course. She and her other classmates considered how to make New Zealanders more open minded and less racist “*I wish that all New Zealanders could be like the Pacific Island people who are so open minded*”.

Micro-aggression in class also prompted action. In a writing exercise using idiosyncratic New Zealand words, it was hard for international students to detect spelling mistakes in the exercise. Arissa asked for support in learning how to spell slang words correctly but her tutor refused to assist, thereby disadvantaging international students in the course. Experiences like this prompted her to provide feedback, using an assignment to develop a proposal about how international students were excluded from course content and how the curriculum could become more internationally focused.

## Leadership

Study sojourns were reconstructed in these narratives as spaces where leadership opportunities were presented and were taken up. Students' stories featured using experiences of struggle and challenges to reach out to others, to ensure their sojourn experiences were better. Advocating for international students was critical to a leadership role taken by Chi who wanted to stand up for the rights of international students and advocate for those still finding their voice *"it is great we are standing up for them in every way possible whether it's for the scholarship fees or academic aspects or about their entertainment"*.

University courses and programmes provide a range of leadership opportunities for these students. Than's initial sojourn in 2014, in a pre-degree English language course, positioned her to take on a leadership role. Yunyi was also elected to become a student leader during her time in the Pathways programme, running small group discussions to seek student feedback and promoting activities. This role shaped her life *"It helped me be a better person"*, giving her confidence and nurtured in her a sense of responsibility for pastoral care of other international students *"I was shy before, as soon as you have a job of being a student leader you have that duty so even if sometimes you think I should just stay in my room you have your duty"*." Arissa who also became a student leader early on during her international sojourn, in the Pathways programme, negotiated across cultures to provide support to students in the programme.

Mentoring, particularly other minority students, was another way this group of students embodied leadership. Arissa became a mentor for domestic Maori and Pasifika students in the Rangatahi programme. This role required her to explore cross-cultural connections as well as provide effective academic support. Arissa's story referenced these leadership experiences and explained they provided her with valuable cross-cultural experiences. Diya also took leadership in mentoring Pasifika

students who she felt connected with on a deep level, because of a shared ancestral heritage.

The international student community on campus offered leadership opportunities that aimed to strengthen international student resilience and inclusion. Chi took on a leadership role in the V-ISA club (an international student support group on campus) which involved organising social events for international students and advocacy. She wished to use her difficult experiences of feeling isolated in New Zealand to help make changes so that future international students did not experience these feelings *“International students sometimes feel left out that’s what I felt sometimes. We are doing our best to make sure that they feel like there are people that care about them and that they are not alone”*.

Novita attended an on-campus connections programme for international students, rapidly moving to take on a leadership role. She began by organising informal off campus events where her international student friends could attend together, ensuring they could travel home safely as a group. After that she gained the confidence to run events for a wider group of international students, such as trips to the Glow Worm caves and to cultural festivals. Her motivation in these leadership roles was to give international students a sense of family and belonging in New Zealand and to use her experience as an international student to help others *“I want them to become a part of us. I know how it feels to be alone when you are first here you have no one”*.

Another participant who assisted newcomers to New Zealand was Lyn, volunteering with adult second language students. The satisfaction which Lyn felt when students succeeded was what she enjoyed the most *“It is beneficial because you are helping them with learning English and feel their excitement when they can understand something and do it well”*. She felt she was making a difference in students’ lives *“When I help them learn English they are able to get jobs it is nice doing that”*. This experience promoted Lyn to have an imagined future space supporting ESOL

learners, planning to undertake another international sojourn in the JET programme in Japan as an international coordinator.

## **Personal Growth and Change**

Study sojourns created new social landscapes and provided many students with opportunities for personal reflection and change. Yunyi used the social encounters and observations she made of other students in her Hall of Residence, to reshape her personal style. She explained that these friends encouraged her to become a more social person which didn't come naturally to her "*I was trying to become social last year I am not an outgoing person I don't talk much, the people who live in the Hall are outgoing and join events*". Xianghua also felt pleased to watch her self-confidence develop which made her feel as if she grew as a person here "*After studying in New Zealand I learnt to think beyond my 18 years and to face challenges like exams not avoid them like I did in the past*".

Before coming to New Zealand Tuyet described herself as a "*shy person*" but gained independence here "*I have a new value of being independent which has helped me a lot. I have learnt to control my mind and live my life independently*". Tuyet reflected that she was now a more "*open person and I am now strong minded about my opinions*". Chi's story also included how her confidence grew dramatically after coming to New Zealand. Looking back on her time here Chi felt as if she has developed as a person, obtaining a flexible and open-minded identity "*I am more open to differences because Asian culture is traditional in some ways now I am maturing in my way of thinking. I am in a great place and reaching towards my goals*" Yunyi also found that VUW expanded her worldview "*I learnt a lot of things and made friends with people from different cultures and I have learned something which I haven't known before*". Yunyi now acknowledges that there are multiple ways of looking at the same thing and being at Victoria has helped her understand this perspective "*Because all the things they have a double side.*"

Student narratives suggest that the experience of studying at VUW refreshed home country identity but also encouraged a flexible identity to emerge that included novel behaviours and practices. This more fluid identity involved awareness of cultural diversity and a new open mindedness, which for some students constituted a global citizen identity. While all students reported struggles, they maintained resilience in the face of challenges, using their networks to sustain themselves, rather than formal support services. They demonstrated agency in making moves to improve their situations and that of prospective students. Micro aggressions encountered did cause social suffering but students confronted racism, in their own way, trying to enlarge cultural space at university. Leadership opportunities taken, along with the difficult social encounters they navigated, lead to personal change and growth.

## **Chapter 6 Discussion**

Experiences recounted in participant narratives describe matters of connection, identity and resilience, which are referenced in overseas literature and discussion. This chapter considers how the experience of students aligns with previous findings and in other places contrasts with research results. Areas of alignment concern difficulties making connections with domestic students, the comparative strength of ties with other international students and connections made through volunteering. Stories provide contrast to previous research around the nature of academic relationships, the place of religious networks and the role of home county student connections. In particular, these narratives contribute to emergent research on international student identity, resilience and agency. Most significantly they identify the international sojourn as a platform for making connections, which develop intercultural awareness, and flexible cultural identity, that exists in parallel to refreshed home county identity. It adds to a counter story which contests the dominant negative discourse of culturally dislocated and vulnerable international students who are disappointed by their experiences overseas.

### **Making Connections**

In line with overseas research (Kashima & Loh, 2014), these international students developed ties with a mix of domestic students, resident co-nationals and other international students. These networks have been shown to support help seeking, as well as affirming cultural identity and providing a place to discuss personal problems (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002).



## **Domestic Student Connections**

The stories of these students featured a range of experiences in making connections with domestic students and the limitations these friendships presented. Their recollections involved a gap or distance between international students and domestic students, evidence of what Vu (2013) describes as a “yo-yo relationship”. Students recalled superficial connections with domestic students, which is well evidenced overseas by Tarry (2011). Williams and Johnson (2011) suggests this is a two-way dislocation with both international and domestic students rating their contact as low and their friendships as not close. Participants in this study also felt some responsibility for maintaining a distance with domestic students because of value clashes.

Differing social expectations about willingness to devote time to socialising underpinned distance between these participants and domestic students. They were concerned about social demands and the time required to maintain membership of domestic student friendship networks. Participants identified poor alignment of study goals as part of the problem. International students have paid high fees and incurred personal costs, such as family separation and cultural dislocation, in order to study, so they take poor grades or the need to repeat courses seriously. Family expectations featured in the testimony of these students who worried that poor academic performance would bring family disappointment and shame. These pressures are described in other studies that explore dislocation between international and domestic students (Spencer-Rogers, 2001, Yang, 2008). In addition, these participants found already established domestic student networks, difficult to infiltrate, which is supported in overseas research (Hendrickson et al, 2011).

Although many participants aspired to friendship with domestic students they critically appraised these friendships, rating them as superficial, intermittent and unlikely to endure. These participants suggested that domestic student connections did

not usually blossom into friendships out of class. This kind of evaluation is also supported in the literature with Chinese participants studying at VUW explaining they could seldom make friends with Kiwis due to different cultural backgrounds and language barriers, which became obstacles to developing close friends (Wang, 2015). While they made connections with Kiwi students in class, offering them assistance with subjects, such as maths, these connections were not sustained. Wright and Schartner (2013) also found that friendships did not extend beyond the classroom and did not flourish in informal university settings or outside the university. Vu (2013) explains that while giving and getting help is a way to initiate connections between domestic and international students, it does not sustain friendship. Wang and Hannes (2013) also found connections made during extracurricular activities, such as sports, had the same limitations.

Students in this study suggested domestic students may not imagine international student friendships. Exploring Australian domestic students views on making friends with international students, McKenzie and Baldazar (2011) also found domestic students believed there were insufficient commonalities to sustain connections and friendship groups were already formed. Domestic students occupy “a local bubble” which consists of existing friendships with other local students and peers from prior secondary schools (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Friendships are further strained by obligations on international students to travel home during semester breaks to maintain family ties and home country allegiance. Participants in this study regularly travelled home and understood the consequences for connections they were attempting to build with domestic students. Overseas literature references the different levels of family obligations, which exist for international students and the negative impact of this on sustaining connections (Groves, 2015).

## **International Student Connections**

These research findings also align with overseas research about the nature of international student ties with one another. International students have been found to experience a better quality of relationship with other internationals, which are responsive and enduring. Within these stories there was evidence students carefully scrutinized their connections for depth and integrity, electing to make friendships with other international students because of the superior quality of these networks. There was testimony of new international friends helping out with serious issues, such as homelessness and hospitalisation and celebrating significant personal events, such as birthdays. In the United States Schmitt, Spears and Branscombe (2003) agree that international students form significant ties with each other. Vu's (2013) participants also endorsed commonalities with other Asian international students, which enabled them to attend activities together. In Australia, Saudi Arabian international student participants prioritised attending social activities with their own community, feeling that differences in culture, lifestyle and prioritises between them and local Australians were too big to bridge (Groves, 2015).

## **Community Connections through Volunteering**

Making successful connections with wider communities, off campus, is a challenge for international students. In this study volunteering provided an effective platform from which international student participants could engage with wider groups and extended their connections into the community. Although under researched, community connections made through volunteering feature in some reports of experiences of international students (Kell & Vogel, 2008, Gresham & Clayton, 2011). This is in contrast to the relative weakness of homestays as a way to make community connections, as reported in these narratives and overseas (Campbell & Xu, 2004). Participants highlighted barriers to making wider community connections through homestays, due to poor locations and family responsibilities of host parents.

Volunteering provided them a better way to outreach into communities, without needing personal networks to achieve this. It enabled students to act autonomously offering them flexibility in time commitments and choice about which communities to engage with. Volunteering allowed students to terminate work engagements easily, meaning community connections could be increased or decreased, as study commitments required.

VUW has two leadership programmes, which helped these students gain volunteering opportunities and make cross-cultural connections. The Victoria Plus programmes focuses on community volunteering and the Victoria International Leadership programme (VILP) gives international students the opportunity to enhance intercultural connections through local and global networking. These programmes were well utilised by this group of students, who found them easy to access. However, the nature of international student voluntary engagement described in these stories was often temporary and incidental and students felt under-utilised in these roles. In part, this was due to the kind of volunteering opportunities available, which often focused on single, large annual events, such as sports events. International students shared some responsibility for under-engagement in volunteering, as they described picking up and dropping roles in order to meet study timetables. Volunteering programmes which are the main platforms students use to make connections have limited evaluation, although one assessment of a similar initiative overseas suggests it is successful (Gresham & Clayton, 2011).

## **Home Country Connections**

Students' stories provided a complex picture of the place of home country connections in their lives, which, in part contrasts with overseas research. As described in other studies, some participants sought out home country connections in order to maintain cultural obligations and strengthen home country cultural identity. These connections enabled them to speak first languages, observe religious and

cultural traditions and maintain a sense of belonging. Participants attended cultural and religious events, on and off campus, even when pressured by study, because these provided cultural space and allow them to meet obligations. Some participants established home country networks before departing for new horizons and their stories reflected valuable contacts and guidance these networks offered.

Some participants maintained home country friendship networks through their sojourn and remained committed to them as a way to validate cultural identity, which aligns with previous research. In New Zealand Vietnamese student participants found friendship with Vietnamese students, because it conferred cultural safety and provided opportunities to share private problems (Vu, 2013). Prioritisation of home country networks is also evident amongst Saudi Arabian students in Australia who formed groups of home country associates who socialised together (Groves, 2015).

However, in constant to this body of research, other participants in this study did not prioritise home country connections or establish these before they left home. Some actively rejected connecting with home country peers because they wanted experiences of cultural diversity reflected in their networks. Home country connections were not part of their imagined journey, which included cosmopolitan aspirations and so they avoided areas dominated by students from their home country. While this conflicts with some research on international students overseas connections it does fit with Sauer's (2017) findings, which examined language socialisation of German students and provided evidence that co-nationals were perceived as a barrier to making cross-cultural connections. Anderson (2006) reports that international students saw a risk in continuing to socialise with home come country peers not wanting to loose opportunities to make new connections and develop second language skills.

Unlike the positive reports of home country connections, reviewed in overseas research, participants in this study, made it clear that sharing home country identity with other students was not an automatic ticket to friendship. Student groups who had travelled from their home countries to New Zealand together, or who were already living in the country, proved hard to infiltrate. For these students home country cultural identity needed to be enacted elsewhere, for example, by watching movies or cooking traditional food. The power of already established networks is described in respect of barriers between domestic and international students (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017) but this dynamic needs further exploration within co-national groups, studying abroad.

### **Connections with Academic Staff**

In line with overseas research, Asian international students in this study, reported important differences between the Western style learning context of VUW and teaching approaches in home countries. This discordance was identified as a factor in the quality of academic connections made with teachers. Students' narratives described a range of challenges that the western learning context presented them, in particular, informal encounters with lecturers and the expectations that they be active in dialogue in class. These expectations were daunting for those in undergraduate programmes where large class sizes made participation problematic, which are difficulties described in overseas research. (Vu, 2013, Terui, 2011).

In line with overseas research, this study confirms that group work is not enjoyed by international students, who find it a poor vehicle for making connections with domestic students and a difficult learning landscape. Wang's (2015) participants from China also found small discussion based classes challenging, feeling unconfident during tutorials. They adopted positions of observers, which they thought was polite and respectful, and which suited their personal learning style. In Soltani's (2015) study a Japanese international student also preferred to maintain silence in

discussions, observing the class discourse and expressing gestures of agreement. Student participants in this present study described similar positioning in their VUW classrooms and one participant recalled how she educated domestic students about the way international students preferred to participate in class. Students, however, endorsed group work as a means of making good connections with other co-nationals and international students. This is in line with research findings by Soltani (2015) that international students deliberately seek out groups where there are co-nationals who provide comfort, which eases participation.

In contrast to overseas research there was evidence in these stories that international students make close and meaningful relationships with academic staff, which are a source of guidance and support. While there is support from overseas that international students do adapt to western style learning context (Campbell & Li, 2008), the majority of research suggests that academic relationships with staff are weak. While academic relationships can broaden students' horizons and help shape cultural identity, they are often underdeveloped (Yildirim, 2012). Students here preferred the format of VUW pre-degree and postgraduate programmes, which off set issues in larger undergraduate lectures. Student stories provided testimony that small programmes enabled them to make strong connections with teaching staff, effectively communicating their support needs and raising their participation in class.

## **Religious Connections**

Emergent research about support systems for international students has highlighted the importance of participation in religious communities as a way to strengthen identity and make community connections (Soltani, 2015, Stevenson, 2017). In this study while there was some support for the role of religious connections, it did not feature strongly in participants' narratives. Those students, who did make reference to religious connections, attributed diverse meanings to their ties, which included individual spirituality, religious belonging and religious participation as a means to

strengthen home country cultural identity. Similar motivations for religious participation are described by Soltani (2015), who identified church participation as a platform for growing cross-cultural confidence and Stevenson (2017), who highlights religious groups as building international student belonging.

For the majority of students in this study, religious networks did not a feature in their community connections. As described overseas there are other ways students make community connections, through paid work (Gribble, Rahimi & Blackmore, 2017) and volunteering (Blackmore, et al 2014) which link them to a range of secular helping and service groups. Paid work presented challenges to these students, in line with findings from research overseas (Tran & Vu, 2016) and in New Zealand (Yang, 2008), but these students managed these conflicts with resilience and agency.

### **Self Formation and Cultural Identity**

Participants in this study described multiple co-existing identity positions, providing evidence of allegiances to home country identity, new cross cultural affiliations as well as aspirations to a cosmopolitan, global identity. While not all students enacted home country connections, home county cultural identity nevertheless acted as an anchor and valuable reference point for understanding and interpreting cross cultural encounters. Home country cultural identity appears to remain intact, even in the presence of a developing flexibility in identity and an emergent global citizenship. There is agreement in overseas research that home country cultural identity can co-exist with more flexible identity, and that overseas sojourns are landscapes for the development of multiple affiliations (Marginson, 2013, Koehne, 2006).

Home country cultural identity appeared intact amongst these students, even though they did not necessarily interact with home country friends or communities in New Zealand. Home country identity, not sustained through co-nationals contact, was



maintained through family connections, which remained strong. Home country cultural identity acted as a touchstone, proving signposts and reference points when navigating unfamiliar landscapes. Participants used home country values to make sense of encounters with New Zealand family structures, gender roles, lifestyle, customs and manners. Negative experiences with shopping, transport and opening hours were based on unfavourable comparisons to home countries and underpinned barriers to making connections in New Zealand as described by other researchers Wang's (2015).

For some students, home country identity was refreshed and strengthened in New Zealand. The new landscape offered opportunities for cultural identity performances, which did not exist at home. There is some evidence that home country identity becomes more visible when students travel (Sobre-Denton, 2010) but while this dynamic is well established amongst diaspora populations (Ahmed, 1999) it is less explored for international students.

### **Flexible Identity**

These student stories contribute to growing evidence overseas, that study sojourns are a space for cultural identity development, where home country identity is negotiated and reshaped within new cross-cultural encounters. Friendship groups, forged across borders, particularly with other international students, were landscapes offering new vantage points and perspectives. The role of international student peers in developing awareness of other cultures is well described in the research (Anderson, 2009) and was underscored in these students' narratives.

International student friendship, perhaps because of their depth and strength, were platforms for new home cultural reflections. Accessing cross-cultural perspectives was key to developing a new flexible identity based on common experiences of

cultural dislocation. Students provided testimony that reconsideration of home country culture was prompted by cross border exchanges within international student friendship groups and wider communities. This is also described by other researchers who identify how home country culture is performed, reconsidered and even lampooned, in international student friendship groups (Sobre-Denton, 2010). These processes reinforced home country identity but also reshaped it, as participants grew to appreciate cultural diversity, and also home culture.

International students described linking easily with one another and willingly became identified as an “international”. Similar experiences of taking on an international student identity are described by (Koehne, 2006). Cosmopolitan aspirations were part of the testimony of some students, who represented themselves as global citizens, who embrace diversity and are culturally intelligent. Developing an intercultural awareness is well established overseas as an aspiration of international students (Yang, 2014).

## **Resilience**

Most significant in these stories is the testimony of resilience, whereby student participants reframed serious problems and incidents as challenges to be overcome. Times of loneliness and dislocation were acknowledged, but described as part of the journey and while cultural discomfort was anticipated it was considered an opportunity for personal growth. This fits into an emergent perspective in overseas literature, where international students are acknowledged as resilient, constructed as responsible adults acting with agency. Students balance a range of objectives such as status, dignity and friendships to choose from a number of possibilities (Marginson, 2013), prepared to manage difficulties to achieve those goals.

This group of participants recollected incidents and contexts, which carried serious threats to wellbeing and safety, including homelessness and hospitalisation. Students

adapted to these challenges, securing themselves culturally safe spaces or restricting their activities to minimise difficulties. University staff, support services, tutors and mentors did not feature in the list of people these students turned to in these kinds of crises, although there was evidence that they relied on lectures, tutors and services for academic support. This study concurs with a wide body of literature which suggests that international students are not users of formal support services on campus that are targeted to student well being (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Counselling support was rarely discussed and when it was, engagements were short lived. Overseas research with international students also shows a preference for friendship networks, particularly other internationals, and family to obtain emotional support and advice (Harryba, Guilfoyle & Knight, 2012).

## **Agency**

These stories add to growing evidence that students act with agency to make changes to their living situations, their course programmes and friendship networks. These findings are in line with emerging research that counters the predominately negative discourse of disconnected, passive and unhappy international students, culture shocked into silence. New findings suggest students actively seek challenges and will make changes to improve their situation (Marginson, 2013). Leadership opportunities were actively perused by these participants, who recalled their sojourn as a time of personal growth, in line with the findings of other researchers (Koehne, 2006).

In addition these students recalled encounters of racial micro-aggressions, both on and off campus, as times of strength. Students were selective about how they chose to respond to micro-aggressions, maintaining their own cultural norms, they challenged racist students in a way that did not compromise their cultural identity. Literature that relates to micro aggressions on campus is derived from studies about students of colour and indigenous learners. However, this study suggests, that international students experiences of racial micro-aggressions, warrant further exploration. These

findings indicate that there are potential alliances that could be forged between international students and other minority learners, based on common experiences of poor cultural space, and challenges to identity. Participants referenced the wider cultural space offered to them by other minority learner groups, in particular, Maori and Pasifika students, who they connected with through mentoring roles and in class. This form of alliance is not yet explored in the literature, but holds promise for enlarging cultural space in tertiary settings.

## **Chapter 7: Implications of this Study**

This chapter considers common themes identified across student narratives, which have implications for those who are interested in improving the experiences of international students in New Zealand. These findings suggest the importance of facilitating community connections, recognising student resilience and their potential as agents of change. Sharing these stories offers policy makers and marketers a way to offset a predominantly negative discourse about international student experiences overseas. The chapter also reviews the limitations of the research and suggests areas of future research interest.

Research which can present in depth and current student experiences, are well positioned to influence education policies and procedures. The policy process is best constructed as an “Ongoing set of adjustments or mid course corrections” where research provides evidence to guide this iterative cycle (Rist: Denzin & Lincon, 1973, pg 622). Policy makers can use these stories to understand how their policies and practices impact on international students, illustrating tradeoffs that may not be obvious to those designing programmes. While there is no assumption that these findings provide a final answer, they do offer perspectives from those for whom initiatives are intended to benefit. Understanding these viewpoints contributes to responsibilities the university has under the International Student Code of Practice.

### **Wellbeing of International Students**

Findings from this study suggest that international students are involved in living situations and experience incidents, which pose serious threat to their wellbeing. While this is a group of resilient and self-defining students, their narratives were testimony to serious compromises in living conditions that students endured while

also navigating demanding academic programmes. Students faced unhappy homestays, hospitalisation and homelessness, without effective engagement with formal support services and without the benefit of proximate family members. The findings concur with other research that international students do not engage well with formal support services, such as counselling. It indicates that evaluation of current support services is warranted, to obtain student feedback about ways to improve service uptake.

Inappropriate homestays featured in this group of students' experiences, with problems relating to personalities of home stay hosts, remote locations and competing family obligations. This meant these homes were not effective platforms for supporting student well-being or community connections. These findings indicate that university processes for assessing and monitoring homestays may require strengthening. A realistic expectation of homestays is that they facilitate connections between students and the wider community. Vetting homestays for suitability for helping students make connections, including evaluating geographic locations, is needed, along with assessment of cultural competencies of host family members. This type of assessment will better identify strong homestay options and limiting factors.

There is evidence in these stories of compromised student wellbeing, which suggest more vigilance is needed from academic staff in regular contact with these students. Even students, who are on a second study sojourn, enter much larger classrooms than they had encountered in pre-degree study and can feel lost in large undergraduate programmes. Wolowik (2010) urges teachers of international students to notice how international students are in class, to observe whether they are falling asleep, and build empathy and rapport, such that teaches can connect to students in difficulty. VUW could helpfully raise expectations on all academic staff for the pastoral care of international students, requiring them to engage with these students more closely than with others and develop accountabilities for monitoring wellbeing.

## **International Students Networks are a Valuable Resource**

In line with overseas research findings this study endorsed the key role of other international students in supporting wellbeing. Connections these students made with other international students were reported as significant and lasting, providing a sense of belonging. Common experiences of cultural dislocation underpinned these connections, as new friends moved quickly to fill the place of family in marking birthdays and providing support. Their cross border encounters reinforced home cultural identity but also grew new cultural awareness amongst students encouraging them to develop improve their own cultural intelligence.

International student networks therefore are a valuable resource for university administrators wanting to tap into the experiences of international students in order to monitor their wellbeing and make pedagogical improvements. University Halls of Residence, International Student Associations and cultural clubs on campus are all networks through which international student connections can be accessed. Because these students demonstrate agency and leadership they can be expected to be willing to provide feedback about effectiveness of current support services and course programmes.

University administrators in New Zealand are tasked under the International Student Code of Practice to ensure that students are well cared for and their support needs are met. The natural support networks of these students, in particular, international student groups and religious communities, can be used to partner with, to provide enhanced support approaches. This may be more effective than continuing to promote formal services, which are acknowledged overseas as poorly used by international students.

These findings suggest the need for crisis accommodation, which is better tailored, to the needs of international students. Using the strength of international student alliances, these emergency beds could be sourced through the international student body and facilitated by International Student Associations. This is likely to produce a crisis option that will be better used by international students than that offered by homestays or accommodation services.

International students have paid high fees, travelled far to study, and find it hard to make time to socialise and rest. International student networks can provide on campus resources designed to encourage rest and relaxation that are easy to access, such as meditation, movie nights, and free lunches. There is a small amount of research which indicates that some female international students prefer support provided in collective, female only spaces. Anderson's (2009) describes a support group at the University of Otago "Women Across Cultures", which aims to give international female students pastoral care and foster their community connections. Having a similar support group at VUW would allow female international students to have cultural space on campus and enable effective support to be provided.

### **Facilitating Student Connections**

Students in this study were strong users of programmes designed to support their connections on and off campus, and their stories underscore mixed effectiveness of some initiatives. Students attended orientation but were disappointed about the capacity of the programmes to successfully facilitate on-going friendships. They recommend that orientation programmes be more sustained and that programme designers should have building connections as the prime objective of the programme, with information giving and campus orientation, as secondary goals. This would require reformatting orientation so that it is less intense and has a longer duration, with social activities integrated into the format, in order to facilitate lasting connections.



International students are often encouraged to make ties with domestic students, through buddy and mentoring programmes. However these connections, if they are made, often disappoint, as was revealed in these stories. Promoting international students on campus, as ambassadors of global citizenship may raise their visibility and help to strengthen ties with domestic students, particularly those with global aspirations or who seek jobs overseas. There was testimony from these participants that domestic students who had travelled and developed cross-cultural awareness were more willing to form connections with them in order to strengthen their own cultural intelligence. This finding is reflected in overseas interactions where domestic students with travel experiences and aspirations reciprocated international student friendships (Kell & Vogel, 2008). These culturally aware students could be specifically targeted in programmes designed to better integrate international students into university life. Promoting cross-cultural competence of all students across academic programmes would also encourage domestic students to value international student connections. VUW markets itself as an overseas study destination and so developing cross-cultural competency expectations of the whole student body will help the university to become a truly “global space”.

### **Volunteering as a Platform for Making Community Connections**

International students sought off campus connections with wider communities, to add to their cross border encounters and to develop networks to assist them in the job market. However homestays and paid work contacts appeared to be poor platforms to extend their reach into wider communities. This study highlighted the importance of campus programmes to foster voluntary based connections for students both on and off campus. These students accessed activities, such as mentoring, VILP and Victoria Plus, and they also pursued leadership opportunities in class. These all appear to provide an effective way for international students to make community connections in a way that they could regulate within individual study programmes.

Student testimony demonstrated that while they were regular participants of these programmes, they were not passive participants and believed that volunteer organization could be improved. International students are “time poor” and were concerned they were under utilised at events. As volunteers, students did not feel well positioned to make changes in these organisations, but they are accurate observers and effective planners who can provide useful feedback and become involved with NGO groups at the leadership level. The range of volunteering options open to students through campus programmes could make better use of students’ leadership abilities. Volunteer positions students took up tended to be with groups based around recreation, environment or event management and fundraising. However these students, who show resilience, agency and leadership, have the potential to work across much wider areas of interest, particularly groups which aim for social change. The cultural intelligence of these student , demonstrated by their ability to work with Maori and Pasifika learners , suggest they could work with youth at risk or in alternative education landscapes.

### **International Students as Agents of Change on Campus**

Student stories reflected difficult experiences, reframed as challenges and as opportunities for personal growth. There was little support in these narratives for the predominantly negative discourse of disappointed and unhappy students weakened by their encounters with western learning contexts. Students fronted cross-cultural challenges they faced, ensuring they did not blame themselves for social suffering brought about by poor cross-cultural encounters. They recognised that for cross-cultural interactions to be successful, competency was needed on both sides of the exchange. Their resilience was expressed in their agency, as these students responded to negative encounters by actively engaging to make change. These students provided feedback to lecturers about programme improvement, made changes in their

accommodation where this was not working, and ensured that cultural misunderstandings in homestays were addressed.

Students demonstrated strength and ability to challenge micro-aggressions both on and off campus and as such they have the potential to act as agents of change, helping university administrators to improve learning contexts. These students are valuable assets in assisting to enlarge cultural space across majoritarian campuses. The agency, flexible identity and cultural awareness of these students make them ideal ambassadors of diversity-based education. This is a group, who during their study sojourn, develop a global perspective, often identifying as global citizens. University administrators, who wish to connect with this group for social change objectives, could use international student networks and associations to access this active student group.

Cross border alliances between minority learners are increasingly a product of internationalisation of education. Stories of these students suggest they affiliate with other minority culture students, in particular with Pasifika and Maori learners. Their stories reflected connections made with minority learners within mentoring programmes and in academic classes that had offered greater cultural space such as Pacific Studies. Supporting these alliances would help to strengthen cross-cultural action on campus, to ensure that teaching approaches make room for a wide range of cultural perspectives.

Challenging micro-aggressions on campus is a strong part of enlarging cultural space and is a shared objective of international students and minority learners. Support groups, seminars and online social support can provide spaces for growing student leadership in this area. The university does not need to lead this change but should make platforms available where student leadership can direct change. For university administrators wanting to internationalise their campus, international students who

promote cross-cultural awareness, are a valuable resource. However, these students must be resourced to provide this input. Important work opportunities could be created for international students to act in these roles on campus, to assist with developing cross-cultural awareness amongst faculty members, and the wider student body, through training programmes and experiential learning.

Part of making cultural space on campus involves considering learning contexts and how well these support the development of strong student-teacher relationships. The stories of these students provide evidence that strong connections can develop between students and teachers in pre-degree and postgraduate programmes, due to smaller class size, pastoral care objectives and cross cultural competency of staff. These findings suggest that universities should consider smaller class formats and a focus on student well being, as a way to strengthen relationships between international students and teachers. Such formats have been shown to be important for creating cultural space at university for other minority learner groups (Chu, Abella & Paurini, 2013).

### **Sharing Stories will Change a Discourse**

International students, domestic students and teachers are all influenced by a predominant negative discourse about international students, which suggest they face cultural dislocation and disappointment. This group of students reported anticipating unhappiness before they arrived because of such messages received from agents and others. International students have suffered from this damage centred discourse, which promises them adjustment problems, poor cultural connections, isolation and depression. There is little support for this view in the testimony of these international students. Their narratives referenced early difficult experiences not with hopelessness but with pride and self-belief, as struggles were faced and barriers were eventually overcome. Affiliations to home country identity did not cause stress or alienation; instead, students reshaped identity in a process of self-formation. They were prepared

to trade away aspects of home country cultural allegiance to succeed in cross border connections and manage parallel identities, recognising this development of their new self.

Sharing these stories is a way to help re-position international student experiences. “Telling tales” has potential to shape current and future experiences, not only for students themselves, but for others. Stories are powerful ways to make change particularly to restore integrity of people whose experiences have been discredited through damage-centred discourses. There is a strong movement amongst indigenous learners, both overseas (Hubain et al, 2013, Cardinal, 2005) and in New Zealand (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999, Bishop, 2003) to use stories of minority student encounters with western based learning institutions, to change the discourse of damage and failure. The dissemination of these stories through international student networks on campus and the wider university is important. In particular, these stories need to be heard by those working for student wellbeing on campus, and those offering support. International students themselves, who read the success of others, will be strengthened in their own positioning in western learning contexts.

## **Limitations**

Stories have the capacity to provide insight into the meaning, which students attribute to their experiences in overseas sojourns. There are limitations, however, to this methodology and its application in this context. Kidman warns it is important not be tokenistic or privilege experiences of some groups at the expense of others (Kidman, 2014). This study involved a small group of international students who came from diverse Asian backgrounds and their stories cannot represent the multiplicity of overseas student experiences. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique, which meant that male participants were under-represented as female networks dominated. Positioning this small number of individuals as representative of the entire group of international student is unethical. It is important these findings are

accepted for what they are, the voices of a few, however the quality and value of these stories can drive the search to uncover the perspectives of others.

The stories of other parties to the exchanges and encounters described by these international students are absent. In particular, domestic students and their views of connection and friendship with international students are missing, which limits understanding how these interactions succeed and fail. The experiences of tutors and lecturers, seeking to raise student participation in learning are also not included, yet these views are important in any effort to improve international student academic engagement.

To understand the breadth of international student perspectives it is important to include those who are unconfident and damaged by overseas experiences. This study is limited because these students do not usually select into research using storytelling methodologies, as a degree of confidence is required to tell your stories to a stranger. Recruiting students through international student networks may have meant the study reflected those well integrated into university life who had made successful student connections. As such, the study may not well represent those for whom these networks failed or students who purposefully avoided such groups.

Overall, because of its complexity storytelling research is by definition messy and stories are not well constructed in their first iteration. Re-storying helps to offset this weakness, allowing participants to review their first effort at sense making, to address misinterpretation or incorrect emphasis. Although re-storying was part of this study's methodology not all students took up the offer of a second interview. Some had relocated overseas for summer or left New Zealand permanently and it was difficult to ensure they re-shaped their stories. Some stories were well worked through in a second conversation with the researcher but other participants reviewed initial transcripts online and did not wish to amend these. This potentially weakens the

findings, as all stories would have benefitted from a second face- to- face discussion. While it is a participant's right to leave their story as a first telling, it remains unknown whether stronger findings would have emerged from a second story reconstruction.

The process of remembering and retelling is highly complex, and storying is always an unreliable exercise (Polletta, Ching, Chen, Gardner & Motes, 2011). Memory of events and experiences, particularly those not considered important, degrade over time and other painful memories can be suppressed. There was often silence when developing a narrative, suggesting participants were considering withholding experiences and these gaps remained even after re-storying. In addition, storying often involves the stories of others, which further challenges reliability as these experiences are reinterpreted and reconstructed to fit with participants' own story line. These limitations are well acknowledged by other researchers with international students. Vu (2013) explains that it is possible participants may invent aspects of their story or deliberately avoid sharing experiences and there is no way this can be addressed. The stories then stand, as they are, incomplete and open to reinterpretation. As they increasingly sit alongside additional testimonies of others, this will confirm, clarify and challenge perspectives expressed here.

## **Future Research**

Globalisation requires that diversity be better embraced within classrooms and campus contexts, which offer international education. Pedagogies and campus climates need to be fostered which better support international students and encourage majoritarian students to embrace cultural diversity. This requires research designs, which can access multiple perspectives on learning across cultures, working to establish conditions, which foster diversity based education. More research is needed to better understand domestic student and staff experiences in order to reshape campus climate, connections and learning experiences.

Storying is a successful method for obtaining experiences of those disadvantaged by current education systems and uncovering micro aggressions and discourses that underpin learning disparities. More studies are required to supplement the voices here and enlarge the space offered to minority learners to talk of their experiences in the education system.

Allegiances between minority learners hold potential for educational change. This study highlighted possible affiliation between international students and domestic students who were also minority learners. Potentially their interests align over creating smaller classroom sizes, inclusive teaching approaches and curricula that reflects diversity. More research is needed which can explore these shared objectives and find ways minority learners of different backgrounds can come together to work for change both on and off campus.

In New Zealand discussion of cultural shock, dislocation and poor adjustment of international students has been strengthened by recent discourse of poor education products and “back door” immigration entry by uncommitted international learners who wish to obtain work visas, rather than study. Research is needed to understand and share perspectives of these who have recently been victimised by these negative views. Stories from these students are needed to counter the perspective that they are poorly motivated learners. These will help to challenge assumptions about their objectives for learning and re-position themselves as legitimate participants in international education.

The International Student Code of Practice specifies responsibilities, on education providers, for support and care of students. There is a poor evaluation of the services offered to students and evidence that students know little about the Code of Practice. Testimony here adds to overseas research that this group of students do not engage



with support services, preferring the help of family and other overseas students. More research is needed to show how these initiatives can be reshaped to better meet student need. In addition, outreach efforts that aim to connect students to wider communities, particularly volunteering programmes, need to be assessed for their effectiveness.

## **Conclusion**

The stories of this group of Asian international students, recently studying at VUW, reveal strong connections made with other international students and with communities encountered through volunteering. Less well formed are relationships they make with domestic students where ties are superficial and unsustainable, despite programmes designed to facilitate these connections. The exception to this was stronger connections these students develop with domestic minority learners, such as Pasifika and Maori students. Volunteering, rather than paid work or homestays, were contexts that offered community connections and this group of students described actively pursuing these during study sojourns. While volunteering roles were valued, they were not always well organised and some students felt underutilised at times.

Within smaller pre degree and postgraduate classrooms students describe forging close connections with tutors and lecturers and were impressed by the supportive relationships they fostered in these learning contexts. There were difficulties reported in adapting to Western style pedagogies, particular the informality of teacher/student relationships and the requirement for independent and critical thinking. These stories provided evidence that adaptation to these new ways of thinking was possible and contributed to self-formation and personal growth.

The experiences of cross border international student friendships, domestic student connections, academic relationships and community connections provided a range of

cross-cultural experiences that this group describe as influencing their cultural identity. They explained how these experiences reshaped views of their own culture and how they thought of themselves, enabling them to embrace a new flexible identity. Some students adopted a global positioning, thinking of themselves as an “international” rather than solely a home country citizen. This did not mean that home country identity was abandoned; instead it was sustained through family, home country community connections and friendships. Home country identity existed in parallel with emergent identities, surfacing and submerging as students moved between contexts on and off campus and as they travelled between New Zealand and home.

Students recalled many difficulties they faced while studying in this country as challenges, which they had navigated successfully and which contributed to new and stronger selves. While this resilience is well supported in overseas literature, what was surprising in this study was the seriousness of the problems these students encountered which had the potential to threaten wellbeing. Students turned to their newly formed international friendships to obtain effective support, in times of crisis. Students demonstrated resilience not only in overcoming these problems but in undertaking the multiple roles of study, work, volunteering and friendship.

These are stories of agents of change, as this group of students recalled challenging micro-aggressions they encountered and taking opportunities to provide feedback to encourage change. Leadership opportunities which presented themselves were well utilised by this group of students, whose stories reflected their study sojourn as a time of developing self-confidence and leadership. The stories themselves are acts of power and run counter to damage centred research, offsetting a predominantly negative discourse of international student disappointment and vulnerability.

Testimony in these stories suggests that formal support services are not effectively configured to meet student need and may not be monitoring student wellbeing adequately such that further investment in these types of service may not achieve intended objectives. This research indicates that international student networks may better targets for resourcing support to this group of students. Given the agency and resilience of these students, volunteering programmes could be extended to capitalise on the leadership shown by this students. An affinity between these student and minority learners suggests that these students could work cross borders with Maori and Pasifika communities, to progress social change. These allegiances may also provide a base for cross-cultural groups to work together to enlarge cultural space on campus.

A goal of storying in educational spaces, is to give voice to those normally silenced and to contribute to emancipatory outcomes for groups and communities disadvantaged in learning systems. In particular, storying with minority learners aims to secure cultural space for students and teachers and support the development of culturally diverse universities. Tuck (2009) warns of the long term cost to minority learners of thinking of themselves as damaged and suggests researchers focus on their stories of desire to unpack “the complexities, contractions and the self determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 2009, pg 146). While these stories do offset the negative discourse of international students, it is only when they are shared with others, do they become true acts of power.

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## Appendix 1



# Connections and Identity Amongst International Students at Victoria University

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for your interest in this project. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to take part, thank you for considering my request.

### Who am I?

My name is Charlotte Wells and I am student in the Masters of Arts in Education programme at Victoria University of Wellington. This research, my Masters thesis, will be based on the findings of this research project.

### What is the aim of the project?

This project aims to help us understand how an international student's identity may be changed or strengthened during their study journey in New Zealand. International students are being invited to share their own stories about the connections they have made through their classes, volunteer and leadership opportunities at Victoria University. The community connections students have made through attending events and clubs both on and off campus, taking up part-time work (paid or unpaid) and their living situations will be explored. International students will be asked to recall personal stories of cross cultural encounters and how these have shaped identity and reflect on how interactions with others have influenced their identity.

This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (approval number- 24983).



## **How can you help?**

If you agree to take part an interview will be arranged at the Victoria University campus of choice. If you prefer a more private or informal setting, the interview can take place at a café/restaurant of your choice around central Wellington. You will have the opportunity to share stories about your time studying at Victoria University, living in Wellington and the experiences which you have had which has lead you to reflect on your identity. You may choose to share times that have helped you gain a stronger sense of identity or times when your identity has been challenged. You will direct the time that the interview takes but it is expected to last around 1-2 hours depending on your schedule. I will audio record the interview with your permission and write it up later. I will send you a copy of your story as I have recorded it for your consideration. It is really important that I have understood your story well; to do this I will offer you a second interview time to talk about the story, which has been written up, and check that I have understood this properly. This will give you the chance to change or add to your story. You can choose to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason. You can also ask to withdraw certain information or particular details of what you have told me anytime in the study without having to give a specific reason for this. You can withdraw from the study by contacting me at any time before November 2017. If you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

## **What will happen to the information you give?**

This research is confidential. This means that as a researcher I will be aware of your identity but no one else will. All story data will be combined together and your identity will not be revealed in any reports, presentations, or public documentation. However, you should be aware that in small projects others might guess your identity in your community. To minimise the risk of this you are asked not to reveal identifying information about others and all those referred to in stories will be given pseudonyms. If you wish to share social media communications any identifying information, such as names and photos will be removed/disguised. Confidentiality will be preserved throughout the project, however where you disclose something that causes me to have concern about risk of serious harm to yourself and/or others, I may share information in process of seeking advice from my supervisors about the way to provide support suggestions.

Only my supervisors Dr Cherie Chu and Dr Fuapepe Rimoni and myself Charlotte Wells will have access to notes or transcript of the interview. The interview transcripts, summaries and any recordings will be kept securely and destroyed 1 year after the research ends.

## **What will the project produce?**

The information from my research will be used in my Masters of Arts in Education, my Masters dissertation report and a presentation in the PGSA Postgraduate Interactive Forum.

## **If you accept this invitation, what are your rights as a research participant?**

You do not have to accept this invitation if you don't want to. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Choose not to answer any question;
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview
- Withdraw from the study before November 2017
- Ask any questions about the study at any time
- Receive a copy of your interview recording
- Receive a copy of your interview transcript
- Read over and comment on a written summary of your interview(s) and the stories that the researcher has produced
- Be able to read any reports of this research by emailing the researcher to request a copy (a copy of the thesis will be sent to all participants after it is completed).

Your time is valuable! Students who do make the time to participate in the study will be provided with gift, which represents the best of New Zealand culture, for example, Manuka honey or Rotorua Mud products. These gifts are valued at NZ \$30. If you are sharing your story in a café or restaurant the researcher will meet the cost of refreshments during the interview.

If you have any questions or problems, who can you contact?

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact me:

Student:

Name: Charlotte Wells

University email address:  
[wellschar@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:wellschar@vuw.ac.nz)

Supervisors:

Name: Dr Cherie Chu

Role: Senior Lecturer in Pasifika Education

School: Faculty of Education- Victoria  
University of Wellington

Phone:

E-mail: [cherie.chu@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:cherie.chu@vuw.ac.nz)

Name: Dr Fuapepe Rimoni

Role: Lecturer in Pasifika Education.

School: Faculty of Education- Victoria  
University of Wellington

Phone: [04 4639692](tel:044639692)

E-mail: [fuapepe.rimoni@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:fuapepe.rimoni@vuw.ac.nz)

## **Human Ethics Committee information**

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Victoria University HEC Convenor: Associate Professor Susan Corbett. Email [susan.corbett@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:susan.corbett@vuw.ac.nz) or telephone +64-4-463 5480.

