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Experiences of East African Students in Norway: Development of a Process Model

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ABSTRACT

Norway has large unrealized potential for recruiting students from Africa. In order to increase student mobilisation and integration, it is important to know the potential challenges students from underrepresented continents are likely to face in an environment with severe sociocultural differences. This study examined experiences of 7 international students from East Africa studying in a larger city in Norway. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, and grounded theory was applied. Analyses of the data resulted in the development of a process model, illustrating three main phases international students went through. The initial phase shows the financial, social, and emotional challenges that students faced. In the transitional phase, they found social support from students in similar situations, whereas in the settling phase they tended to mobilize individual and social resources for coping. The results are discussed in light of previous research and concluded with recommendations for higher education institutions.

Keywords: challenges, coping, East Africa, international students, Norway, process model

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INTRODUCTION

Migration and education are interrelated as many people move abroad for study purposes. Therefore, education is a contributory factor to the increase in the number of people moving across national borders globally (Tani, 2017). As of 2017, international students were estimated to amount to around 5,000,000 worldwide compared to 2,000,000 in 2000. More than half of these international students were from Nigeria, China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, enrolled in institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States of America, France, Germany, and the Russian Federation (UNESCO, 2019). Factors in the increase of global international student migration include technological advancements that have eased access to information on study opportunities, increase in the population undertaking higher education, and general increase in cross-border mobility (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019). Even though international students account for only 21% of the total global migration of 272,000,000 as of 2019 (International Organisation for Migration, 2019), they contribute to economic growth, scientific research, cultural diversity, and building international relationships in the host countries (Institute of International Education, 2020).

The Norwegian Government perceives internationalisation to be an important initiative to enhance the quality and relevance of higher education (Holme et al., 2019; Ministry of Education, 2020). It has been an important government expectation for decades, that higher education institutions increase their focus on internationalisation (Ministry of Education, 2020). In Spring 2018, the total number of international students in Norway was estimated to be 13,773, which can be attributed to the Norwegian deliberate policy of internationalisation of higher education, including public funding for both Norwegian and international students to attain higher education, tuition-free public higher education institutions, equal treatment for both international and Norwegian students, student loans, and scholarships (Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, 2020d). There is, however, a vast potential to increase further the number of international students in the country. Most of the international students in Norway come from Europe and Asia, including Sweden, Germany, China, and Nepal (Holme et al., 2019; Wiers-Jenssen, 2003), with fewer students from the African continent. Reported numbers from year 2000 until 2018 show that students from Europe studying in Norway has increased dramatically during that period of time, whereas the number of students from Africa have been consistently low (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019). The number of East African students in Norway is especially low. In 2017 for example, only 188 students from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania studied in Norway (UNESCO, 2020). In order to make Norway a more attractive study destination for students from other continents besides Europe, it is important to explore the subjective experiences of current international students from such areas.

Despite positive educational, social, and economic contributions in the host countries, we know from international research that students abroad face challenges in their new environments (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Ruddock & Turner, 2007). Such challenges include language barriers, racial discrimination, psychological frustrations, and academic problems (Banjong, 2015; Iwara et al., 2017; Kaya, 2020; Lee, 2017). They also experience financial frustrations, which become worse when they live in an expensive country like Norway (NUMBEO, 2020). International students have to adapt and adjust to maximize life opportunities in the new host communities (Chen & Chen, 2009), and the more different the new context is, the more likely the students are to encounter difficulties during the adaptation process.

Most studies on international students have been carried out in the United States of America, the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, and South Africa with Chinese, Korean, and Filipino student populations (Almurideef, 2016; Iwara et al., 2017; Kaya, 2020; Lee, 2017). Additionally, studies carried out on African international students abroad have to a small degree targeted East Africa students (Holme et al., 2019; Lee & Opio, 2011). East African countries are more communally oriented, interdependent, and highly populated compared to an individualistic, independent, and less populated country like Norway (Hofstede Insights, 2020b). These cultural and contextual differences are likely to expose students to cultural shock and social challenges that can pose difficulties during their intergration process within the host countries.

Therefore, this study examined the experiences of East African international students studying in Norway and propose a process model for integration. The study aims at providing information that can contribute to improving the wellbeing and integration of international students (particularly ones

from East Africa) in Norway, and enhance the likelihood of attracting more international students in the future.

Research question: What are the experiences of East African international students in Norway?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Holme et al. (2019), Norwegian higher education institutions (HEIs) define international students as all "foreign students, which includes all students of non-Norwegian citizenship" (p. 14). Additionally, Statistics Norway (2020) provides statistics of foreign degree-seeking students that have enrolled in Norwegian higher education. These students must have moved to Norway within the last five years and completed their secondary training elsewhere (Holme et al., 2019). Therefore, in Norway, international students are persons that moved to Norway for study purposes, who are not Norwegian citizens, have completed their secondary education elsewhere, and must have moved to Norway within the last five years.

Generally, with the increase of international students' global mobility, several studies have documented challenges that these students encounter in host countries (Gichura, 2010; Lee, 2017). Some studies rank language barriers highest among challenges that international students face in the host countries (Domville-Roach, 2007; Iwara et al., 2017). Language barriers can contribute to further academic and social challenges (Banjong, 2015; Kaya, 2020). Sherry et al., (2010) specifically emphasized that international students are more challenged with the spoken language than the written ones in their host communities because language speech requires more than language classes. Consequently, the language difficulties contributes to limited socialization among international students (Gichura, 2010; Kaya, 2020).

Researchers have emphasised that international students are faced with limited financial resources while in host countries (Holme et al., 2019; Gichura, 2010). Lee (2017) reported that self-funding international students are prone to face more financial difficulties due to unstable financial support, forcing them to search for part-time jobs. As a result, the time for immersion into the host community culture and interaction with friends is reduced, making some students lonely. Gao (2008) elaborated that these financial difficulties occur because international students are expected to pay higher tuition fees than domestic students within the United States, and additionally, exchange rates affect the amount of school fees that international students have to pay, making the fees high. For instance, about 58% of the international students at the University of Toledo in the United States reported facing financial challenges and unaffordable health insurance (Sherry et al., 2010). Norwegian public higher education institutions do not require school fees, but since Norway is a country with a high cost of living, it is likely that international students still face financial challenges.

Several studies have reported feelings of isolation, loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008), and homesickness at a personal level among international students (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Sümer et al., 2008), which are more significant among first-time international students (Lee, 2017). A combination of lack of familiar friends, the disconnect from families in their home countries, and lack of familiar language for social interaction account for the loneliness among international students in the host community (Sherry et al., 2010).

An Australian study on international students emphasizes the importance of choice of methods for data collection in order to gain the genuine experiences of the respondents (Arkoudis et al., 2019). Their findings indicated that international students tended to rate their overall satisfaction as high on questionnaires, whereas deeper analyses based on focus groups revealed experiences of lack of social integration and belongingness. Another study on international students conducted in Australia (Sawir et al., 2008) identified cultural loneliness as a third kind of loneliness in addition to personal and social loneliness. International students experienced cultural loneliness due to the absence of preferred cultural and linguistic environment and affected students despite adequate personal-and social support.

Similarly, Kenyan and Tanzanian students in United Kingdom (UK) and Sweden respectively reported sociocultural adaptation and practical challenges upon arrival in their respective host countries. The Kenyan students were concerned about integrating into the UK culture and felt lonely, isolated, and homesick, while Tanzanian students faced additional racial discrimination and transnational difficulties (Gichura, 2010; Mählck, 2018).

Differences in sociocultural context are thus likely to affect the experience and coping of international students. Below, we elaborate on some of the main differences between Norway and the

three East African countries from which our respondents originate. Cultural orientation being subjective and part of a person's life can either facilitate or frustrate international student's efforts to cope with and integrate into their host countries (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009).

Contextual Socio-Cultural Differences: Norway Versus East African Countries

Norway is located in Northern Europe, with a total population of 5,000,000 people. Bokmal and Nynorsk Norwegian are the official languages in Norway, although Sami, Finnish, and English are spoken as well (Christensen et al., 2020; Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, 2020a; NUMBEO, 2020; Statistics Norway, 2020). Norwegian weather consists of both winter and summer ranking from an average of -7 to 25º Celsius, respectively (Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, 2020b). Norway is a developed egalitarian welfare state with values of equal rights and trust in government (Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, 2020c), making it more attractive for international students. Norway is classified as having an individualistic culture with high level of independence among persons, in which people tend to respect each other's personal spaces and views (Hofstede Insights, 2020b; Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009; Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, 2020b;).

In comparison, countries like Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania in East Africa are considered developing countries (United Nations, 2019). These countries are collectivist in nature, meaning that they tend to reinforce citizens' interdependence, common loyalty, morality, group approval of actions, and selflessness among people (Hofstede Insights, 2020a; Rarick et al., 2013). This can be evidenced by the high value these countries attach to kinship care and extended families, among other aspects (Kabatanya & Vagli, 2021). All three countries have large populations ranging from 45 million people (Uganda), 54 million (Kenya), to 60 million (Tanzania) (World Population Review, 2020b; World Population Review, 2020a). English is the official language of Uganda, and is also widely used in Kenya and Tanzania, although each of these countries also have other languages such as Kiswahili, which is the official language of Kenya and Tanzania (Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The weather consists of rainy and sunny seasons, with temperatures ranging from approximately 16–30º Celsius on average (Uganda Tourism Board, 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

Grounded theory is a systematic methodology for discovering theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Whereas traditional scientific research models tend to start with the development of hypotheses deriving from an existing theoretical framework, a study based on grounded theory is likely to start with a question (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). As mentioned above, there is limited research on East African students in Norway, and there are few students from this region in Norway and in Scandinavia as a whole. Consequentially, there is lack of knowledge on the impact of the large social cultural differences and potential cultural loneliness. Bearing this in mind and adding findings from previous research on international students where different choice of methods yielded largely diverging results (Arkoudis et al., 2019), grounded theory was considered most appropriate for this study.

In this study, the process included the following: 1) open coding, where collected data was carefully reviewed, and concepts and categories developed. Relationships among categories were then established (Kim & Okazaki, 2014); 2) axial coding involving assembling the categories formed from the open coding into a diagram. The researcher identified the central themes in the data, examining conditions that influenced the situation, the resulting actions and their consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018); and 3) selective coding involving theoretical integration where all the concepts and categories were revised, comparisons drawn, and finally, a model developed for understanding the data collected (Kim & Okazaki, 2014). The reflexivity aspect of constructivist grounded theory was used because of its acknowledgement of the researcher's contribution and position within the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design allowed participants' viewpoints to be represented and interpreted through development of a process model for sociocultural and emotional adjustment.

The roles of an insider as an international student and outsider as a researcher were used professionally (Kanuha, 2000). Author 1 positioned herself more as a researcher to get insightful and objective information from participants. However, her insider role provided familiarity with the participants, thereby facilitating connection with them. Author 1 was determined to listen carefully,

respect participants' views, and allow interviewees enough time to express their opinions. She asked follow-up questions for any unclear information and refrained from interfering with participants' interpretations of their experiences.

Participants Selection

Seven participants (3 Ugandans, 2 Kenyans, and 2 Tanzanians) studying at a university in one of the larger cities in Norway were selected purposively through snowball sampling. East African students in Norway are few and therefore hard to locate (Neuman, 2006). Participants were purposively selected because of their knowledge about studying and living abroad, plus their availability and willingness to engage in the research (Bryman, 2012; Etikan et al., 2016; Suen et al., 2014). Three criteria were used to select participants: 1) participants had to be Ugandan, Kenyan, or Tanzanian international students currently studying and living in Norway; 2) they had to have lived in Norway for more than four months; and 3) they had to be between 25 and 45 years of age. We made the age criterion wide to increase the likelihood of getting more respondents. None of the respondents, nevertheless, exceeded the age of 31 years.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participants	Age	Gender	Level of education	Country of origin	Period of stay in Norway
Participant 1	26	Male	Masters	Uganda	7 months
Participant 2	31	Female	Masters	Kenya	7 months
Participant 3	26	Male	Masters	Tanzania	1 year & 7 months
Participant 4	25	Female	Masters	Uganda	5 months
Participant 5	31	Male	Masters	Tanzania	8 months
Participant 6	26	Male	Masters	Uganda	5 months
Participant 7	25	Female	Masters	Kenya	1 year

Data Collection

After approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), Author 1 contacted various participants both physically before the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), and through phone calls and email during lockdown. Written informed consent was given by all participants.

Individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from participants. The interviews were supported by an interview guide with open-ended questions (Bryman, 2012; Coughlan et al., 2016) related to feelings associated with living in Norway, challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms. Twenty interviews were conducted with participants: seven primary face-to-face interviews, seven follow-up interviews for clarity of participants' views, and six final follow-up interviews for consistency were done through WhatsApp video calls because of COVID-19. The interviews took place in English within a period of one month. The primary interviews lasted around one hour per participant. Later follow-up interviews were conducted after transcription and realisation that there was missing information, and these follow-up interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes per participant.

Author 1 recorded and took notes during the interview sessions with consent from the participants to ensure that no information was missed during the interviews and transcriptions. The four interview probes, including elaboration and continuation, attention, clarification, and evidence (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) were used to encourage participants to stay meaningfully engaged during the interviews. The transcriptions of the primary interviews were done immediately after the interview session to allow for prompt follow-up.

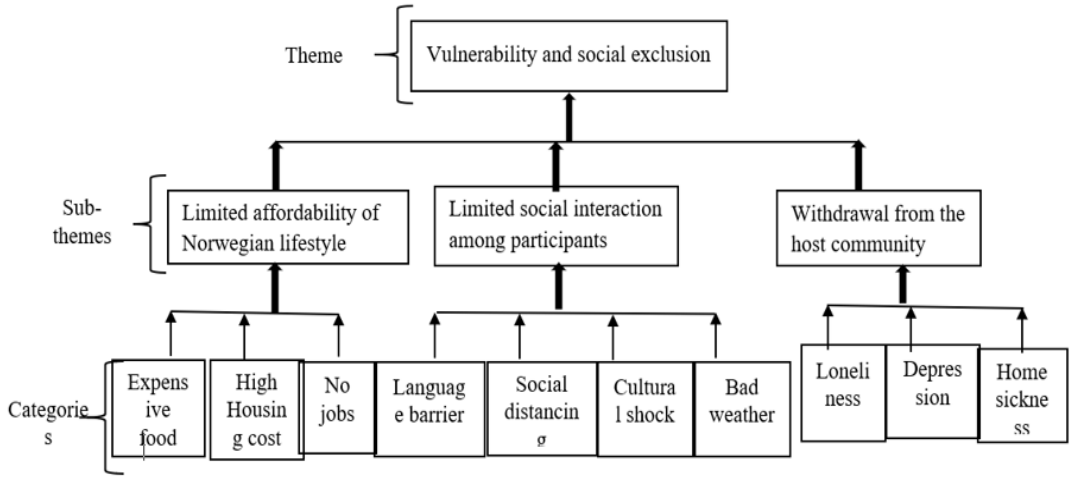
Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic data analysis method and the steps of grounded theory were used for data analysis. Thematic data analysis involved the identification, examination, and presentation of themes from participants' collected perspectives. This method was selected for its flexibility and ease in identifying patterns within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While identifying themes, Ryan and Bernard (2003) recommended looking for repetitions, indigenous expressions, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, and linguistic connectors in the data (Bryman, 2012).

Initially, collected participants' data was reviewed and coded first manually and later transferred to Nvivo for organisation. Codes are here referred to as the most basic element of the raw data that was assessed in a meaningful way in relation to the topic of study (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). Sub-categories were developed as well. At this stage, similarities and differences in participants' views were also established to create meaningful analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This stage corresponded to open coding under grounded theory.

Secondly, various categories emerged and formed subthemes and central themes. This corresponds to axial coding under grounded theory. Diagrams were used to assist in understanding different themes, and coded extracts were reviewed as well in relation to the themes to determine the validity of the themes in relation to the data. A storyline beneath the themes was established for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). See Figure 1 below illustrating how the theme vulnerabilities and social exclusion were developed.

Figure 1: Example of How Themes and Sub-Themes Were Developed from Initial Categories



Finally, a process model was developed by compiling all the developed themes to provide meaning to the experiences of the participants while they lived in Norway. This corresponds to selective coding where data is theoretically presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At this stage, a process model for sociocultural and emotional adjustments among participants was created.

Limitations of the Study

The small number of participants limits the generalisation of the model to other international students. The researchers utilised detailed results with participants' stories and trustworthiness criteria (Bryman, 2012; Morrow, 2005) to strengthen the validity of the study.

The insider role of Author 1 as an international student created a challenge for participants assuming that the researcher knew and understood their experiences. Most of them used phrases like "You have experienced this, so you understand." Author 1 was careful about not validating her own experiences as an international student in the current study, but to respect the views of the participant and to seek clarity on ambiguous issues. It is also important to note that the study was conducted partially during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and that this is likely to have influenced the

respondents' answers to some extent. Reported feelings of loneliness and isolation in particular are likely to be enhanced due to the circumstances under which some of the interviews were conducted.

RESULTS

Vulnerability and Social Exclusion

The first theme that emerged during the data analysis related to the challenges the participants experienced while living in Norway. Participants were challenged socially, financially, emotionally, and culturally. Financially, participants were challenged by limited financial resources, expensive goods and services like food and housing, and failure to get part-time jobs, which limited the affordability of what they referred to as the "Norwegian lifestyle." Self-funding participants faced more financial difficulties compared to scholarship students due to lack of part-time jobs, which is attributed to language barriers and lack of networks for references.

> Norway being a very expensive country and I'm not on scholarship, things are really costly. The food buying has been completely limited because of the high prices. So, I just thought that I would get a job and then make through tough financial times, but I have not been able to get a part-time job. This is because I lack the networks, language, and also there is a very low trust for strangers. So, coming out with friends, going out for a meal is impossible unless you really have a lot of money, so the society is limiting things to do because of prices. (Participant 2)

Participants faced social and cultural difficulties that resulted in limited social interaction. One of the issues raised was the language barrier, which posed critical integration challenges to participants in addition to those related to accessibility of services and jobs as narrated by these two participants; "I think it would have been easier to get a job if I spoke Norwegian. We have been looking a lot into service jobs and the first thing is, do you speak Norwegian?" (Participant 7), and "I haven't got a hospital that I can go to because I had to first call and make an appointment. I would call the landline and it was speaking Norwegian, which I was not understanding" (Participant 4).

Participants also experienced social distancing due to preference for personal space among people in Norway. They experienced what they called cultural shock because native Norwegians did not greet or speak to them but rather distanced themselves both in public and indoors as expressed by one of the participants, "People here don't talk too much honestly, they are trying to maintain their personal space, they don't want you to reach out and create a conversation" (Participant 4). Participants had limited social interactions both with fellow students and the broader Norwegian community. They reported that cultural shock was unavoidable due to the cultural differences between Norway and their home countries. Many participants reflected on the communal culture in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania; "I'm used to our communal way of doing things compared to individuality here" (Participant 1).

> I am socially excluded in the things I like to do because of language. Because if you cannot speak the language, then you cannot understand the culture. If you cannot understand the culture, then you are not invited. There is a lot of exclusion, physical exclusion, and emotional exclusion. It was more of like people kept their distance a lot, so it was difficult to integrate with them because they were keeping distance. (Participant 2)

Emotionally, participants reported withdrawal from the Norwegian community because of loneliness, depression, and homesickness. These were explained by the lack of familiar activities, failure to make friends for interaction, and physical distance from home countries. One of the students described how the coronavirus situation has facilitated further loneliness since schools, churches, and other social spaces are locked down; "Because of COVID-19, now we don't have classes and church services so, you have a lot of time alone, and when you are alone there are a lot of negative feelings around you" (Participant 5).

> Yes, I get depressed. There are low moments when you feel down. The depression comes because of a couple of situations; one is being overwhelmed by work at school, and secondly, you come home and realize you are alone, and you do not have people to talk to. (Participant 1)

The experiences shared above show participants' vulnerability to social exclusion from the different activities that would normally facilitate their social integration within Norway. The forces for social exclusion are both personal and communal, implying that participants need to adjust both at the individual and community levels to enhance their wellbeing and integration within the Norwegian community.

Coping with Challenges

At community level, international networks like students' associations, church groups, other international students, and host families were supportive in overcoming loneliness, depression, and limited social interaction, offering a sense of belonging, and practical support to participants.

> The Pan-African Student Association is an African community; we come together to talk about different things, discuss and play games. This community really understand, and experience similar challenges like me. The gatherings of the church give you a different vibe that by the time you begin the new week, you're really energized. On Fridays, we have had football matches with some church members, which helped me deal with fears and depression. (Participant 1)

> I have lived with a host family that has given me a home setting. It has been supportive; they gave me a cheaper rent. The house has two cats which I play with. I do normal things we do at home like taking out garbage, and it has helped me get out of depression. (Participant 2)

Supportive friends were a source of emotional, financial, social, and practical support among participants. These friends engaged in different activities like rotational weekend programs and shared activities like hiking, cooking, dancing, and playing games, which kept participants engaged, motivated, and provided them a sense of belonging. Participant 1 narrates, "And with my friends, sometimes we go dancing, which helps with emotional stress. We play FIFA and watch matches together. The weekend program with friends helps us to have a very busy schedule to avoid being lonely".

Host study institutions were supportive through institutional programs and services in terms of information, library resources, and other practical support like holding language classes at a subsidised price to facilitate the students' integration. This helped participants to cope with the language barrier and academic difficulties through the utilization of institutional resources. Participant 4 narrates, "Our university coordinators held mandatory counselling meetings with us on an individual basis to share with them what was bothering us, and they helped".

> The language classes have been helpful. I know you can't master the language in two months. Though, with learning the language, at least when you go to the supermarkets, you can read things and understand what you're going to buy without having to consult people. (Participant 1)

Individually, participants reported using their personal resources to facilitate their coping processes through engaging in sports and gym sessions, being open-minded, avoiding overspending, cooking their own food, enjoying music and dancing, and engaging in hobby activities like face painting and teaching themselves basic Norwegian. These activities supported their coping with emotional, financial, and social challenges while in Norway. Participant 4 narrates, "I love singing, I love sports; I play football, volleyball and I love going to the gym. So, these activities have helped me to do away with the negative feelings that would trigger stress and depression."

> I really adjusted to only basics, I eat very basic food, I don't travel, I do not buy clothes. I actually have done so well that I have lived on a smaller budget. I cook all my meals at home. (Participant 2)

> If you're open-minded, then it is easy to cope. I tried to teach myself just a few things in Norwegian just to invite a Norwegian to have a short conversation with me. Maybe I want to ask the person their name, then I can ask in Norwegian like 'Hva heter du?' and from that point I could manage to have a longer conversation. (Participant 3)

Individual Transformation

This theme relates to what participants transformed into after living in Norway for a period of time. On a positive note, participants became independent and better able to exercise self-control, which supported their coping process, "You have to try your level best to be independent in practice. So, I control myself instead of asking for everything, I try to do things by myself." (Participant 3) On the negative side, some participants reported becoming less social and less confident while in Norway, "I used to be a very bold girl and confident but when I came here and it was evident that no one really wants to talk, it really messed with my confidence." (Participant 7)

> I have changed from how I used to do things at home to how things are done here. I also find that when I enter the bus, I just sit alone because that is how it is done here. I stopped being social because it is what is done here. I am transforming to society here. (Participant 2)

Presentation of a Process Model for the Sociocultural and Emotional Adjustment of International Students

While analysing the data, it became apparent that our respondents went through different chronological phases when adjusting to the new situation as international students in Norway. The timing for entering, or gradually shifting to phase two and three naturally varied between the different individuals, and the phases overlapped somewhat. Based on the findings from this study, we propose a process model for sociocultural and emotional adjustment.

Initial Phase: Encountering Difficulties

This started from the time participants landed in Norway. The international students in our study encountered several difficulties, however; significant negative emotional effects were felt within one to two months after moving to Norway, with mild effects from six months and beyond. Participants encountered financial, emotional, cultural, and social challenges that limited their social integration into the Norwegian community. As a result, there was risk of social isolation.

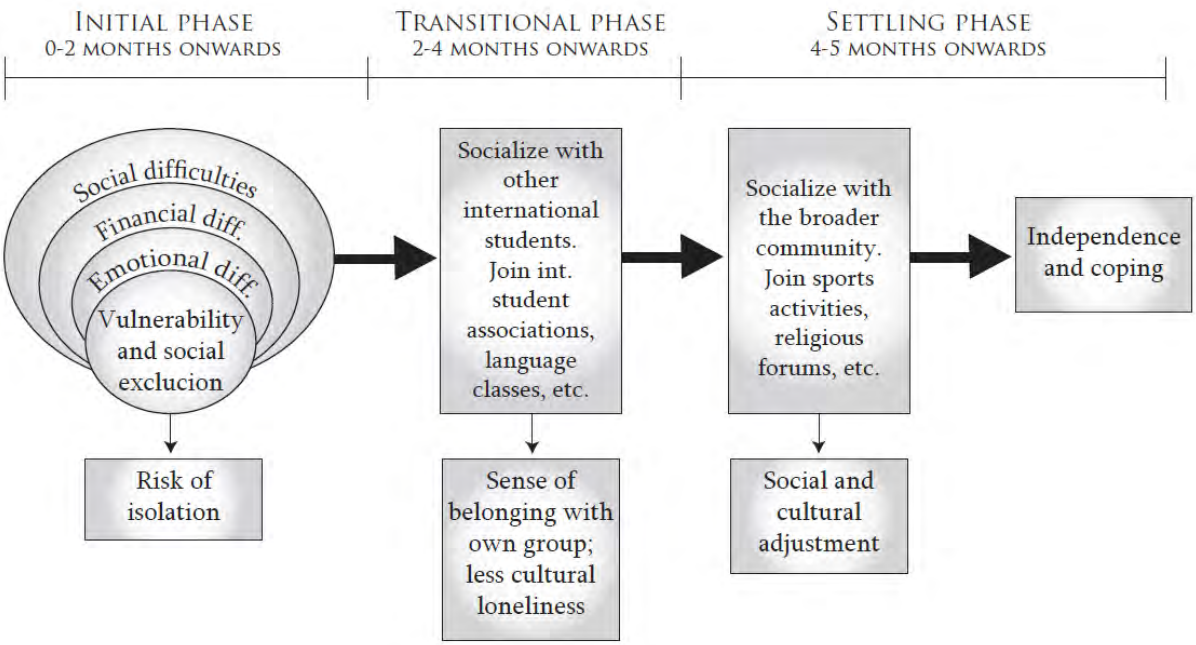
Transitional Phase: Seeking Support from Similar Others

During this phase, participants socialized with their groups of international classmates and other international students who spoke English. They joined international students' associations and enrolled in Norwegian language classes. This helped them find a sense of social belonging among familiar others that shared similar challenges, culture, and language, and as a consequence they experience less cultural loneliness.

Settling Phase: Coping and Independence

The coping process was subjective and realized at different times. Participants reported the start of their coping process between four and five months after arrival in Norway. In the settling phase, our respondents seemed to be less dependent on their limited group of international students, engaging more in sports, religious forums, and other activities in the host community. They had learned a little Norwegian which served as an icebreaker for interaction with natives. In addition, they had adjusted more to the Norwegian way of living; cooking their own food instead of eating out and socializing in their own homes to avoid spending too much money, as well as not expecting to hold small-talks or interactions with strangers.

Figure 2: Process Model for Integration of International Students



DISCUSSION

Financial difficulties limited participants' ability to afford what they called a "Norwegian lifestyle," and this became worse for self-funding participants who didn't get part-time jobs to supplement their income. Participants related the failure to get a part-time job to the lack of Norwegian language skills and small networks of their nationals in Norway. However, according to studies conducted in English-speaking countries such as the United States, international students struggled to find part-time jobs there as well (Sherry et al., 2010) due to lack of references, low confidence, and limited experience (Gautam et al., 2016). Financial difficulties led participants in our study to mostly keep within the networks of international students to avoid overspending. This helped them cope with limited financial resources, but it also prevented them from expanding their networks within Norway, especially in the initial phase of living in Norway.

Our respondents reported several aspects that challenged them socially. They experienced limited social interaction with fellow students and the broader Norwegian community due to cultural shock and social distancing that was worsened by the pandemic. The cultural shock was related to what they perceived as an individualistic and independent living style in Norway that differed greatly from the communal culture to which they were accustomed. They also found language barriers to be prominent, but only when outside of their study institution. This is because English was the teaching language at the host institution and international students spent time at campus with other English-speaking students. Several other studies have found language to be one of the greatest challenges faced by international students (Domville-Roach, 2007; Iwara et al., 2017). Language barriers minimize

integration in host countries and escalate academic problems for international students (Banjong, 2015; Kaya, 2020; Lee, 2017; Sherry et al., 2010).

It is noteworthy and worrying that some respondents in the current study said that they became less social to better adapt to Norwegian culture. Some reported that experiencing feelings such as loneliness, depression, and homesickness made them withdraw further from the Norwegian community, creating a negative spiral. Loneliness and depressive thoughts mainly occurred due to lack of familiar activities, language problems, failure to make friends, COVID-19 lockdowns, and physical distance from families at home. It is not uncommon that international students suffer from such challenges, even when there is no global pandemic. Several studies have found that international students felt lonely, isolated, depressed, and homesick while living in host countries (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Sümer et al., 2008), resulting in their withdrawal from the host community (Holme et al., 2019; Gu, 2015; Kim & Okazaki, 2014). This may have severe individual and academic consequences for international students, and it is a risk that educational institutions need to tackle in order to achieve better internationalisation.

It is important to acknowledge that students have resources at the individual level to manage the problems they may face (Lee, 2017). International students' agency and initiative is critical to overcoming difficulties in the host countries (Gu, 2015). Our study revealed that participants mobilized their personal resources to cope with their new living situations. However, according to them, this was more evident when they had been in Norway for a while. In the process of transition from the old to new host environment, international students are likely to get attached to others that experience the same situation as them for social support (Chavajay, 2013; Gu, 2015). Our findings emphasize the risk of cultural loneliness, and how important it is for international students to be able to socialise with peers from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is likely to assume that this need is more prominent with large socio-cultural differences between home and host countries.

International students utilize social networks to maximise coping strategies (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Chavajay, 2013; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Straiton et al., 2017) and share their difficulties with peers in order to remain optimistic (Ellwood, 2011; Lee, 2017). The participants in our study reported receiving support from friends, study institutions, home and host families, and the international communities in Norway. Participants shared how their friends, both in Norway and overseas, played an important role emotionally and practically. It is nevertheless essential that international students have access to institutional resources and services such as student associations, recreational centres, libraries, and cultural and language classes to help minimize academic stress and socialization challenges (Wu et al., 2015).

Although most participants reported positive transformation into independent persons after the initial phase of cultural shock, cultural loneliness and other challenges, it is worth noting that a few of them expressed how they continued feeling less confident and less social all the while studying in Norway.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the experiences of East African international students in Norway. In spite of efforts on the part of the host institution to support international students, participants faced financial, emotional, social, and cultural challenges that had implications for their integration within the broader Norwegian community and their general wellbeing. The most crucial period was one to two months into their stay in Norway. After the initial challenges and cultural shock had subsided, our respondents mobilized individual coping mechanisms and social networks to manage their new lives in a different country. Some participants adapted to what they perceived to be the essence of Norwegian culture by becoming more independent. While this may be positive and beneficial for some, the implied risk is that they become less social, more isolated, and lonely. Host institutions have the important job of ensuring better social integration of international students. We propose the following recommendations.

Although support to facilitate the wellbeing and integration of international students is continuous, according to our study, there is need for extra attention before the students enter the host country and during the initial phase when they encounter the most difficulties. This can be done through 1) pre-arrival preparations and support, like providing more information about the host country and the sociocultural study environment to international students before arrival. This should include information about the common challenges faced by international students and potential coping

mechanisms, as well as available services such as physical and mental health care; 2) matching a native student with international students as soon as they arrive; and 3) initiating more cultural mixing activities to avoid social isolation or segregation of certain international student groups. Such activities could be institutional orientation programs, social gatherings, language practice forums, and culture sharing initiated by the host institution, student associations, and study program coordinators.. Increased use of host families as living arrangements for international students could also facilitate social inclusion and improved language skills.

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