

Opportunities for developing intercultural competence during COVID-19: A case study of international students in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a two-year ethnographic research study that critically examined the lived multilingual and multicultural experiences of two international students in search of heightened intercultural awareness and enhanced levels of intercultural competence during the pandemic. Drawing on a constructivist view of intercultural competence, this study comprehends the ways in which students use their ‘action-oriented’ capacity to cope successfully with new, unknown, unfamiliar, and unpredictable challenges and situations in the host culture. Informed by a narrative inquiry approach, data were gathered through participants’ oral narratives at approximately eight-week intervals over the course of 2020 and 2021. Analysis of the ethnographic data revealed while students appreciated and fully exploited the limited opportunities for intercultural communication and connectedness presented to them, a higher level of self-awareness, a greater understanding of cultural distance, a desire for cultural affinity and mutuality led them to exploring alternative avenues for becoming interculturally competent citizens.

Keywords: COVID-19, intercultural awareness, intercultural competence, international students, multicultural experiences

Global mobility, cross-border migration, global shifts in geopolitics and economic power have changed the speed and scale of changes to the social, cultural and linguistic landscape of globalised societies. In Australia, the international student population has significantly grown in the last two decades from around 61,000 in 1999 to almost 500,000 in 2019. Indeed, this has made a substantial contribution to the country’s revenue by bringing over \$25 billion dollars to the Australian economy. Over 2020 and 2021, because of the COVID-19 pandemic through its various strains, transnational student mobility and cross-border migration came to a halt. According to Hurley (2020), during the pandemic, applications for international student visas for students in

overseas countries dropped by 90% compared to applications received in 2019. This translates to approximately 200,000 fewer international students enrolled in Australian institutions.

Besides the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector, Australia faced unprecedented levels of mental health amongst not only its local citizens but also communities of migrants, temporary residents and international students. It has been acknowledged that university students were identified as a very high risk population (Dood et al., 2021) with heightened emotional and psychological stress, financial hardships, lack of access to government welfare systems, high levels of anxiety and distress (Weng et al., 2021). The level of vulnerability of international students has been significantly exacerbated by being precluded from all federal pandemic assistance schemes such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper (Weng et al., 2021).

Added to these challenges are those that relate to social and cultural adjustments to the new environment. These include, for instance, processes of adaptation to social and cultural norms and patterns in society (Egekvist et al., 2016). International students are expected, and often required, to unidirectionally embrace the social and cultural features of the dominant group in society. Ma's (2018) 'asymmetry framework' in international education posits that international universities tend to have a natural expectation that it is the sole responsibility of the (international) student to adjust, acculturate and assimilate into mainstream society.

Based on the above complex landscape of international education and international students, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. To what extent have international students' limited instances for intercultural connections and encounters created an opportunity to enhance their intercultural competence?
2. What coping strategies and mechanisms are employed by international students to become interculturally competent during times of a global pandemic that poses limitations on social and cultural interactions?

International students in Australia: benefits and challenges

The term 'internationalization of education' lies at the center of globalized public policy discourse. Over the years, much discussion, research, and debate have taken place around the implications of globalization and the spread of information and communication technologies for (higher) education. Higher education has a long-standing tradition of internationalism (Lomer, 2017). Although cross-border flows of people have almost always existed, global mobility has significantly increased due to the global ramifications of globalization and adoption of neo-liberal policies (Peters, 2012).

International higher education providers have an enhanced capacity to attract large numbers of international students, who bring significant economic profits to local and global economies (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). In Australia, for example, international education has contributed over \$25 million dollars to the Australian economy (Hurley, 2020). Besides the economic profits, international students make a substantial contribution to the social, cultural and linguistic texture of Australian society, which enhances what is already a hugely diverse nation.

As international students settle into their new environment, several challenges, barriers, and complications are presented to them. International students tend to be racialized on the basis of their language proficiency, accent, race, skin color, cultural and religious background (Veliz & Veliz-Campos, 2021; Weng et al., 2021). Much research that focuses on understanding the challenges during the transitional period of an overseas study experience has concluded that limited language proficiency has a direct and adverse influence on their social and academic life on campus (Park et al., 2021). Moreover, due to the lack of confidence in their English proficiency skills, international students are reluctant to participate in social or academic activities and are often left feeling looked down upon by others (Dooley, 2010; Park, 2016). In her study, Park (2016) reported that international students generally sense that they are judged as having low intelligence and competence

levels which leads them to taking rather passive roles in communication and interactions, most often resulting in just keeping silent.

International students' challenges go beyond linguistic barriers. A significant challenge concerns the creation and establishment of social networks in the host country. When students leave their home countries, they also leave their support networks and social connections, which have to be built up from scratch in the host country. Cena et al. (2021) point out that these social, family, and cultural disconnections "can be very stressful for international students, and to provide a healthy social environment, universities should support social connections within the university" (p. 815). Cross-cultural adjustments, including the development of friendships and social networks, are never an easy task for international students, which generally result in what Cena et al. (2021) call 'acculturative stress'. In order to mitigate such stress, international students generally opt for connections and friendships with co-nationals, which helps foster their sense of belonging (McFaul, 2016), but jeopardises their social connectedness in the host country. Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) surveyed 86 international students at a Hawaiian university who were measured on their social connectedness, homesickness, contentment, and life satisfaction. The data revealed that those students with more co-national connections scored significantly lower for social connectedness and overall satisfaction whilst pursuing their studies at university. This highlights the significance of putting support systems in place for international students to make cross-cultural connections with students from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds.

The nature of challenges that students face was exacerbated by the disruptive and catastrophic consequences of the COVID-19 global pandemic. These "disturbed established patterns of operations in the international education sector" (Qi & Ma, 2021) interfered with international students' capacity and ability to adjust to new social and cultural environments and to manage potential risks. Students, due to their status of temporary visa holders, faced enormous financial hardship, unemployment, unprecedented levels of mental health issues, homesickness, and significant barriers to connecting with the wider community. In a survey administered to over 700 students from all over the world on the impact of COVID-19, Moscaritolo et al. (2022) found that some of the significant challenges faced by international students concerned 'fear and uncertainty' and 'COVID-19 discrimination', among others. The latter was a considerable stressor given that depending on students' nationality, students felt that levels of discrimination could manifest in not only verbal and psychological abuse but physical attacks.

Intercultural competence

Before delving into the intercultural competence, it is worth noting, by way of elaborating on the arguments put forth in the previous section, that the view adopted in the present study aligns with Ma's (2018) call for a paradigm shift in international education. Ma (2018) questions and challenges dominant discourses that legitimize well-established divides such as 'local and international' which not only accentuate notions of 'otherness' and 'foreignness', but also require that 'the other', 'the foreign' or 'the international' individual is the one who must adapt, adjust, and integrate into the host environment. Sadly, this is the lens through which social and cultural adaptation processes have been looked at for many years, which is a rather simplistic, narrow, and inefficient way of developing a thorough understanding of what is needed from and expected of all parties involved in social and cultural adaptation processes.

Motivated by rapid and constant cross-border mobility, changes in the linguistic, social and cultural contours of our societies, intercultural competence has become central to our thinking and doing in an increasingly diverse world. Several frameworks, definitions and perspectives on intercultural competence have been offered with various other interrelated concepts such as intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication. A myriad of other related terms have been used to capture the general sense of being culturally competent such as global competence, global citizenship, international competence, intercultural sensitivity, amongst others (Deardorff & Araratsnam-Smith, 2017).

A central question that arises in studies on intercultural competence is to do with the universality or culture-specificity of the term. Rathje (2008) addresses intercultural competence from both perspectives and argues that “a culture-specific understanding of intercultural competence would therefore do little to promote the validity of the concept itself” (p. 258), thus suggesting a ‘generalized’ understanding of intercultural competence. Drawing on the work of Wierlacher (2003), Rathje (2008) points out that a generic definition of intercultural competence should capture the development, promotion and facilitation of new systems that allow for the orientation and navigation of environments, encounters and interactions with people of different cultures.

Other definitions of intercultural competence have highlighted the need for developing personal and inter-personal skills. Some of these skills include self-awareness and awareness of others, knowledge of different conversational patterns, positive attitudes towards differences, along with personal and behavioral skills that lead to effective communication (Krajewski, 2011). Research (e.g. Byram, 1997) has also suggested the need for developing empathy, flexibility, adaptability, and stress-managing strategies. These personal and inter-personal skills become essential when navigating unknown or unfamiliar social and cultural environments and when participating in new social and cultural experiences and practices.

The communicational aspect of intercultural competence is a central feature of the construct. Krajewski (2011) argues that successful and effective cross-cultural communication and exchange is dependent on knowledge and skills that constitute an essential part of intercultural competence. When engaged in cross-cultural communication encounters, interlocutors must be aware of numerous contextual, social, cultural, conversational, and personal cues that determine the rate of success of the interaction. Drawing on Dardorff’s (2006) model of intercultural competence, one could safely assume that successful and effective communication with people from diverse backgrounds would require respect for others’ cultural values and beliefs, positive attitudes towards difference, openness to listen, observe and evaluate, tolerance for ambiguity, just to name a few.

It has been argued that knowledge, motivations, and actions are the central elements that constitute the make-up of intercultural competence (Lustig & Koester, 2010). Knowledge refers to the information needed about people, the context, norms of appropriateness, social behaviors, and principles of politeness that operate in a specific culture (2010). Motivations, as they point out, include the emotional asset that individuals possess as they anticipate or participate in intercultural encounters. They explain that actions are those realized behaviors, attitudes, and performances towards people from diverse backgrounds which may be deemed appropriate or inappropriate.

One last point worth making relates to the centrality of intercultural competence as a mechanism or avenue for social justice. Although the term ‘social justice’ does not specifically conjure up any educationally or pedagogically sound orientations, we believe the term is appropriate when it comes to recognising the applications and usefulness of intercultural competence in all contexts and situations other than education-related ones. In education, as pointed out earlier, international students tend to be racialized, left out, discriminated and looked down upon on the basis of ethnicity, religion, language or social background (e.g. Dood et al., 2021; Dooley, 2010). One of the main goals of developing and promoting intercultural competence amongst international students, and any other individuals that partake in cross-cultural exchanges, is, we believe, to reduce and mitigate risks that may lead to social and cultural exclusion. International students generally possess feelings of exclusion not only because they are on route to developing full proficiency in the language of the host country but most importantly because the dominant community has not created sufficient opportunities for students to embrace its values, norms, principles, and practices. This links back to the asymmetry framework put forth by Ma (2018) which not only perpetuates power differences in society but continues to empower ‘the host’ and disadvantage ‘the guest’.

The study

This study grew out of interest in the lived experiences of international students' social and cultural adaptation process throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic in the context of a higher education institution in Australia. The first research ideas emerged amidst academic discussions and reflections with colleagues from various Australian universities in April 2020 who shared experiences and best practice as to how to navigate what could be a season of dramatic changes to teaching and learning. Special attention was turned to the challenges of social and cultural adjustment and adaptation of international students in the foreseeable circumstances. An invitation via email was sent to a small group of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students at two Australian universities, to which two students responded with a desire to participate in a two-year ethnographic study.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study that draws on principles of ethnographic research. Although there are no clear-cut definitions of ethnography in education and the social sciences, there is consensus that ethnographic work is largely observation-based which seeks to construct an analytical description of practices, values, and beliefs of one or more groups (Cohen et al., 2018; Reeves et al., 2008). Ethnography has been commended for "its unique approach to social practices through continuous and immediate experience in field work, and its fragmented methodological attention to situations, interactions and experiences" (Wieser & Ortega, 2020, p. 1). Through the lenses of ethnography, the present study critically examines and unpacks the lived experiences, circumstances, and interactions of two international students in Australia who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, were precluded from social and cultural opportunities to become interculturally competent learners. Notwithstanding the limited instances for developing intercultural competence, the article also explored the compensating strategies used by the students to develop an ability to function effectively across cultures.

Participants

The participants were two international students undertaking HDR degrees at two different Australian universities. Both arrived in Australia in 2019, one in November and the other in December respectively. A total of 12 HRD students were invited to participate in this study via email. The nature, scope and duration of the study was explained in the email. After the second email reminder was sent to students, two replied with an interest to partake in the study, one male and one female. The students were then emailed the consent forms, and a preliminary zoom meeting was organised to meet with them and provide details of the study and the phases of data collection. To maintain confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms have been used, Jack and Flora. Jack's home country is China and Flora's is India. Due to studies undertaken in Japan, Jack speaks Japanese as a foreign language, Mandarin, which is his first language, and English which he began learning in high school. Flora indicated that she understands Urdu, speaks Hindi as a first language and considers English as her second language.

Data collection and analysis

The researchers met with the students over zoom at different intervals over the course of two years, 2020 and 2021. Each meeting was recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Given the number of meetings over a two-year period, and, therefore, the amount of qualitative data that would be gleaned from the interviews, preliminary analysis of the data took place as soon as each meeting was recorded. This process allowed the researchers to maintain a vivid recollection of the affective elements of the narratives told by the participants. This preliminary analysis involved coding the data and searching for emerging themes. As we approached the completion of the transcription process, the data was further analysed more rigorously through QSR NVivo.

Five themes emerged from the data:

- (i) Hopes and expectations
- (ii) Support systems
- (iii) Navigating the unknown

- (iv) Battling ‘difference’ through co-national connections
- (v) Intercultural gains

Analysis

Hopes and expectations

Global mobility creates not only opportunities for personal, social, and cultural exchanges but also expectations and aspirations about life in the host country. Nilsson (2015) highlights the importance of learning more about students’ expectations as they act as windows into the real motives, drivers, and motivations behind students’ mobile life. During the first encounter with Jack, he opened up about the high expectations he had prior to coming to Australia:

“I had enormous expectations and high hopes that I would be able to mingle with the Australian community, but COVID came and I was basically deprived of opportunities for cultural connections and for immersing in the Australian culture” (Jack, June 2020)

As the conversation unfolded, Jack spent a significant amount of time reminiscing about “the dreams that had been shattered” because of the COVID-19 crisis. Jack’s expectations to build intercultural relations with the Australian community are evident in his desire to not only connect with the local culture but immerse himself in the community, which is indicative of his positive attitudes towards Australian culture. Flora had similar hopes and expectations about having opportunities to experience “a different way of life” in the country of “her dreams”:

“We all know that PhD studies are or can be solitary activities, but I thought I would be able to meet large groups of scholarly groups in my university and have a different experience from my country, but COVID collapsed everything, which is sad” (Flora, June 2020)

Through the lenses of an ‘experiential’ framework, Fakunle (2020) points out that motivational drivers to undertake studies overseas are generally founded on a strong sense of expectation to experience ‘something different’ from the social and cultural norm in their home country. Flora’s aspirations for a different scholarly experience were sadly overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, this did not preclude her from pursuing other channels or avenues to develop a broader understanding and heightened awareness of the Australian way of life.

“Because I’ve tried not to go out that much recently and hang out with people I know, I’ve been able to expand my network of acquaintances and COVID friends through social media and online platforms where we can share ideas, recipes, music, festivals in our country, and things like that, and try to know more about the Australian lifestyle” (Flora, June 2020)

It is of great interest to observe that despite the social and physical distance constraints imposed by the pandemic, Flora turned to the affordances of digital technologies to not only maintain but strengthen her social relationships and friendships during lockdown. Besides the limited opportunities for physical interaction with people in the community and the self-created avenues for pursuing a larger network of ‘friends’ or ‘acquaintances’ through social media networks, Flora and Jack express profound gratitude to their supervisors and other university departments, who, despite the restrictions in place, made regular contact with them and showed genuine care for students.

Support systems

An important element that helped Flora navigate the unknown and uncertain environment in which she, and everyone else, was living during the pandemic was the support received from her supervisors:

“My supervisors have been supportive, and they have been proactive in organising more regular zoom meetings, and group discussions with other research students about their cultures, and even student support services have organised workshops about understanding yourself, understanding others, and several others on racism and discrimination, which is the result of lack of intercultural understanding” (Flora, October 2020)

Supervisors became more intentional about creating purposeful virtual environments for interactions and collaborations with other students who were most likely representative of a wide range of cultural backgrounds. It is of great interest to observe that Flora reports on workshops that were intended to develop self-awareness, a greater understanding of others and opportunities to talk about racism and discrimination, which Flora believes to stem from a lack of intercultural understanding. She further indicated that “if we were more culturally aware, none of us would ever be discriminated”, and her supervisors have ensured that students are equipped with the skills to be globally competent. “I understand that our supervisors, and all academics really want us to be competent for this global world that is very diverse, but it’s difficult in an online space, not impossible though” (Flora).

Despite the genuine care and constant support provided by supervisors, which Jack sincerely appreciates, he reminisces about a sense of attachment and belonging to his social and cultural roots which he feels as he navigates the complexities of ‘foreignness’ in a context where he is attempting to fully integrate:

“The support that we have from our university is great, but it’s not the same as being in your country, with your people, your family, your culture, traditions, food, support, while in here you’re always a foreigner, and outsider, almost like an alien even when universities give you support” (Jack, October 2020)

Although a sense of alienation may be indicative of Jack’s inability to develop cultural competence to succeed in intercultural encounters, it is a clear sign of the complex processes of cultural adaptation through which he navigates his ability to integrate into social and cultural practices in an academic context in Australia. He adds “sometimes, I don’t know if I should laugh, giggle or stay serious when someone says a joke, or when I should speak or if I should speak at all”.

Jack’s high expectations prior to arriving in Australia were noted earlier. His expectations have not vanished. On the contrary, despite his sense of alienation in certain contexts such as zoom meetings, he remains hopeful about learning opportunities to develop a heightened awareness of the rituals, practices and expected behaviours in the Australian context.

“For me, I’ve felt more like an alien when we have zoom meetings, and there’s always someone that likes the camera, and talking, and then you’re Chinese, English is not your first language, your accent is not perfect, sometimes people don’t understand you, so it’s hard to even fit in in this online context, but I am learning the online patterns and the Aussie patterns as well because I want to fit in and meet my expectations. I am still hopeful” (Jack, January 2021)

It has been documented that adjustment challenges are particularly associated with language and cultural barriers faced by international students (Cena, et al., 2021). As observed in the above quote, Frank’s cross-cultural challenges involve not only context-specific ‘patterns’, as he calls them, but also feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence about his English language skills.

Navigating the unknown

As time goes by, it becomes evident that both Flora and Jack have made genuine attempts to find alternative avenues to cope with the absence of social and physical opportunities to socialize and connect with other

students. Despite all restrictions in place, Flora has leveraged the affordances of technology delve into the Australian community and its social practices through online platforms and social media networks:

“In the last few months, I have tried really hard to make connections in my community like finding Facebook community pages where I can learn about events in the community, things people sell, and even just read real English, not artificial language like in newspapers or TV” (Flora, January 2021)

The relentless efforts to connect with the community irrespective of the known limitations have led Flora to seeking opportunities that would provide her with authentic experiences with the language, thus exposing herself to what she calls ‘real English’. A search for instances of authentic language use is also pursued by Jack who has also resorted to different resources to develop an enhanced awareness of some of the distinctive characteristics and practices of the Australian society:

“It’s been difficult for us Chinese because people blame us for the virus, so when I go to essential services like supermarket or the doctors, there’s always one person that gives you ‘that’ look and makes you feel bad and ashamed, and it’s a burden on you. People have said nasty things to me as well. So, it’s harder for us to insert in the community in these times, but I’ve been reading a lot about Australian politics, the benefits they have for people in the pandemic, etc., watching AFL, and doing other things to feel more like home, a lot of Netflix and Aussie TV shows” (Jack, January 2021)

A rather confronting and disturbing observation made by Jack concerns the blame and shame he carries as a result of the racist attitudes and discriminatory remarks towards him as a Chinese student which disempowers him to take initiative when it comes to connecting with the local community and discourages active participation in cross-cultural communication as he further notes that “I feel my voice is not heard in group discussions and when there are people from other cultures, I just feel reluctant to contribute”.

It would not be unusual to hear an international student express a profound desire to attain higher levels of English language proficiency or even develop a ‘native-like’ accent as a mechanism to feel more integrated and included in the host country. In a study that investigated Chinese international students’ perceptions of their accented English, Veliz and Veliz-Campos (2021) found that students’ perceived inability to acquire a native-like proficiency level or (Australian) accent hindered their capacity to not only participate in academic intercultural interactions but also fit into the wider community. Although Flora acknowledges the need to improve her English, she stresses the significance of being able to develop an awareness of the cultural norms and practices of the Australian society:

“...I’ve also become very familiar with Australian TV shows and movies on Netflix – there are some really good ones! This helps me understand not just their English that I have to keep improving but their thinking, how they behave in some situations, what they do in a party, and things like that, so I ever have to be in a situation, I don’t want to make a mistake because in India it’s very different” (Flora, April 2021)

Battling ‘difference’ through co-national connections

By now, Flora and Jack have already been in Australia for over one and a half year, and yet continue to voice their concerns about how lonely and solitary life can be in Australia which precludes them from finding genuine opportunities to interact with the community and immerse themselves in the various social and cultural layers of the Australian society. It is known that intercultural encounters with people from different parts of the world present students with opportunities for the development of intercultural competence (Egekvist et al., 2016). When those opportunities do not arise, students are likely to experience what Yeh and Inose (2003) ‘acculturative stress’, which is exacerbated by the students’ perceived cultural distance portrayed

through differences in social and cultural practices, ways of communication, daily routines and perceptions about friendship.

“I don’t have any Aussie friends, I don’t even know the people next door, and this is so strange for me. In India, you know everyone, I mean not everyone, but you know your neighbourhood, the people in your community, but here it’s so solitary even not in pandemic, I think, maybe because we are so different, or just have a different lifestyle. I like a lot of things about Australia and the people, they are so relaxed, respectful, treat people fairly, so it’s a good mentality, and I’d like to adopt it, but it’s hard through the online setting, and not having the opportunity for real interactions” (Flora, April 2021)

Despite a sense of isolation in and disconnection with the local culture, Flora has uncovered some common cultural characteristics that make up the Australian identity which are not easily identifiable in a context of limited opportunities for physical, social, and cultural connections. However, the various coping strategies she has employed to compensate for the absence of instances for socialization have led her to being more inquisitive about other aspects of the Australian way of life as she voices “I’d like to know more about where they go, typical food, comedians, sport rules, and things like that”.

McFaul (2016) indicates that international students’ social networks and friendships are highly dependent on and formed by interactions with co-national students with whom minimal cultural adjustments are needed, and a greater sense of identification and belonging is observed. This is observed in Jack’s comment who indicates that he has taken advantage of opportunities out of lockdown to socialise with Chinese friends:

“When we are not in lockdown, I can go to some places but with my Chinese friends, so I try to take every opportunity now, but I think you will know more about the culture if you have local friends. I think it’s hard to make friends with Australians, but I have learnt many things about them and the culture, so I think I would feel ready to put myself in real cultural situations, and I am very keen to take any opportunity to mingle with locals” (Jack, June 2021)

Cognisant of the benefits of maintaining and strengthening interactions with co-nationals, Jack leverages the opportunities to meet up with them but also acknowledges the complications associated with establishing friendships with domestic students. Research has highlighted the benefits of cross-cultural interactions and engagement between international and domestic students which relate to increased participation in university events, greater retention rates and a greater sense of belonging (Trice, 2004).

Intercultural gains

After almost two years of pandemic and relentless periods of lockdown, Jack feels equipped to step into any other challenging situation as he says “I think I could go through other lockdowns and many more pandemics. It’s been very difficult”. However, he also feels that one of the great take-aways of the pandemic has been the ‘cultural resilience’ that he has developed. He reported that “I went through some culture shock at the beginning, and some discrimination, but I have learnt a lot about the Australian culture and other cultures as well that I can adapt more easily”. These (inter)cultural gains have, however, been obtained mainly through face-to-face interactions as well as other virtual platforms which facilitated cross-cultural communication with different people. With restrictions being lifted in late 2021, Jack has seized social opportunities for appropriating the world rather than just Australian ways of doing and thinking.

I am very excited because even though it’s been very difficult all this time, now that we are not in lockdown, I have got into a soccer club, and there are a lot of Aussie players and other cultures so it will be a great opportunity to hopefully hang out with them, know more about the world and how different people function in this context as appearances can be deceiving” (Jack, October 2021)

For Jack, being in a soccer club constitutes a social practice that goes beyond the physical and health benefits that can be gleaned from sports, but rather it is a platform for establishing intercultural cooperation and collaboration with people from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, Jack sees this as an opportunity to see beyond himself and understand the complex and multifaceted ways in which people operate in different places and at different times. Gee (2000) states that the kind of person one is recognized as ‘being’ can change from moment to moment as interactions unfold, which makes features and characteristics of individuals rather unstable and dependent on the specific social and cultural practices that take place at a specific place and time.

What I’ve found really good and inclusive is an opportunity to be in a church environment because it helps me connect with myself, connect with other people and share different experiences, and connect with God. People are amazing, the church is multicultural, very diverse and they all make me feel like at home. It’s been great to be in person. (Flora, November 2021)

Although spirituality is not generally seen as a social need, for Flora, the opportunity to attend church physically allows her to fulfill not only a spiritual need to encounter God, but also to build personal, social and cultural connections with others, which allow her to deepen her knowledge and understanding of diverse cultural experiences.

Discussion

The discussion in this section follows the order in which the research questions were formulated earlier.

Research question 1

To what extent have international students’ limited instances for intercultural connections and encounters created an opportunity to enhance their intercultural competence?

The first research question formulated in this study taps into the extent to which international students’ limited instances for intercultural connections and encounters have created an opportunity for enhancing their intercultural competence. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, the data revealed that despite the challenges, barriers, physical, social, and cultural limitations imposed by COVID-19 restrictions, both Flora and Jack were able to not only find but purposely create opportunities that would allow for a deeper understanding of themselves and of the social and cultural dimensions of the host country – Australia.

Firstly, it is worth noting that Flora’s and Jack’s principal motivation to come to Australia was solely educational. Their aspirations to obtain a qualification in an ‘international university’ was something they deemed essential to increasing their employability prospects. According to Fakunle’s (2020) motivational framework, one of the rationales for pursuing overseas studies is educational. Besides the add-on benefits of a study-abroad experience, the overarching goal that Flora and Frank have pursued is that of enhancing their career prospects through an overseas degree. Secondly, Flora and Jack were highly motivated by the different social and cultural experiences they would encounter upon studying at an Australian university. They expressed their willingness “to mingle with local students”, “meet large groups of scholarly students and staff” and “participate in social activities” which would give them an opportunity to develop their cross-cultural understanding and intercultural awareness and competence for a smoother transition into the community. Although the realization of students’ hopes, aspirations and expectations was hampered by the unprecedented impact of the global pandemic, Flora and Jack were able to successfully navigate an unknown territory which imposed personal, social and cultural restrictions on their capacity to become culturally competent learners. Despite the physical constraints on their ability to integrate into the Australian community, Flora and Jack leveraged the affordances of technology and of their social media networks to find alternative avenues that would provide them with an opportunity to connect with other people virtually and, most importantly, to develop an understanding of the Australian cultural values, beliefs and practices.

The limited instances for intercultural connections also meant that Flora's and Jack's desire to establish friendships with local students evaporated. Several studies have confirmed the significance of developing friendships with host students. Kashima and Loh (2006), for instance, argue that friendships and inter-personal relationships with host students significantly benefit international students' academic performance and cultural adaptation. Flora's and Jack's cultural adaptation process has been hurdled by not only the unfeasible reality of not being able to make connections with host students due to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic, but also by a growing sense of alienation and a constant feeling of being looked down upon. Although these feelings and perceptions of alienation and inferiority contributed to perceived levels of racism and discrimination, Flora and Jack maintained a rather positive attitude towards the host community and wished for local friends to be made as they were cognisant of the intercultural benefits that would be gleaned from local connections.

Research question 2

What coping strategies and mechanisms are employed by international students to become interculturally competent during times of a global pandemic that poses limitations on social and cultural interactions?

Although Flora and Jack faced some significant challenges associated with the limited number of opportunities to develop their intercultural awareness and competence through direct participation in events, activities and social practices in the Australian community, they never lost hope, courage or motivation to search for alternative avenues for developing an awareness and understanding of the social and cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices of the Australian community. This demonstrated their earnest pursuit for successfully navigating different cultural backgrounds, establishing cross-cultural inter-personal relations, and most importantly, developing abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately with people from diverse backgrounds.

Technology has, by all means, been a useful mechanism through which most of our daily activities were conducted during the pandemic. People purchased their groceries online, attended teleconsultations with their GPs, participated in social activities online (e.g. online concerts), and most importantly, as far as education is concerned, conducted teaching and learning activities at all levels of our schooling system. Flora and Jack leveraged the benefits and affordances of technology as a useful and effective strategy to deepen their understanding of the social and cultural operations of Australian society. Through community Facebook pages, Australian TV shows and Australian movies on Netflix, Flora and Jack reported an enhanced knowledge and understanding of Australian language, of how people operate in different situations and of the expected behaviours in different contexts. Although this digital mechanism did not replace the knowledge, skills, experiences, and interactions that could have occurred in a face-to-face environment, Flora and Jack indicated that it still proved effective as it provided them with an opportunity to gain new learnings about what intercultural encounters would be like in a real situation. This demonstrates that despite the social and cultural constraints on students' ability to participate in intercultural exchanges, experiences, and interactions in 'real life' situations, they were capable of exercising significant levels of intercultural resilience which they fostered and nurtured indirectly through artificially crafted situations, scenarios and environments that would encounter on social media or TV.

An effective mechanism that allowed students to effectively cope with some of the complications, due to the pandemic, about not being able to have first-hand experience in intercultural environments was the support provided by their institutions. Institutional support for these students in the midst of a global pandemic was essential. Flora and Jack were very appreciative of the personal, social, cultural, and financial support they received from their universities. Their supervisors were especially proactive and intentional in creating meetings and workshops targeted at purposely developing students' cultural competence. Flora and Jack indicated that their supervisors, despite their busy schedules, were committed to assisting them in ways that they could learn more about themselves, their own cultural background, and, more specifically, about that of

others and the diversity that surrounds them. Krajewski (2011) has pointed out that central to developing intercultural competence is the development of personal and inter-personal skills, which includes, among others, self-awareness, and awareness of others. The zoom meetings and workshops organised by supervisors were greatly valued by Flora and Jack since not only would they help students enhance their intercultural competence through purposeful discussions about students' cultural diversity but also strengthen their ability to face up to potential episodes of discrimination. Despite this, it was voiced by Jack that even though supervisors and other departments in their universities such as students' services made reasonable, and rather effective, attempts to create opportunities for multicultural inclusion and intercultural encounters with other students and staff, he could not help feeling inferior, left out and excluded during online workshops and seminars. A similar sentiment was shared by Flora who indicated that feelings of foreignness, otherness and alienation also kept hold of her in these situations and reported that nothing compares to being with co-nationals or being in their home countries.

Conclusion

This study has unpacked the views and experiences of two international students regarding the multilingual and multicultural practices and strategies they employed to develop their intercultural competence and skills during their academic studies at university in an era of COVID-19. Although Flora's and Jack's high expectations about life and the social and cultural experiences they would potentially have in Australia were never fully met, they showed an incredibly profound desire to find alternative ways of knowing more about the Australian way of life that would enable them to become more interculturally prepared and competent to successfully navigate cross-cultural encounters in multicultural and multilingual environments such as Australia. It has become evident that although higher education institutions have made some reasonable attempts to care for the wellbeing of the students and create some opportunities for them to develop certain skill sets that would allow for a smoother transition into intercultural contexts, effective measures are yet to be taken to ensure that equitable spaces for international students to rid themselves of daunting feelings of inferiority, foreignness, otherness and alienation.

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