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# International students' identities in a globalized world: Narratives from Vietnam

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## Abstract

Based on the findings of in-depth interviews with Vietnamese tertiary (higher education) students studying in Australia, this article explores how international students construct their identities drawing on their social networks. It provides insights into how international students encounter and traverse cultural differences to define new perspectives of identity that would enable them to perform specific roles and enhance their heritage identity. This article invites international education providers to embrace cultural diversity by recognizing social and cultural influences as determining factors in students' learning and being, and to effect curriculum and pedagogy that allow opportunities for international students to develop self-knowledge, openness and citizenship.

## Keywords

Cultural difference, identities, international education, social networks, Vietnamese international students

## Introduction

Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to the practice of domination – denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations to the world. (Freire, 1972: 62)

International tertiary education has long been preoccupied with economic competition in the transnational education markets (Kell and Vogl, 2012). In Australia, the UK, New Zealand and the USA, the value of international education is emphasized as a growing source of revenue for their universities (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2005). The commercialization of higher education as an export is a recent development in Australian higher education marked by aggressive marketing by Australian universities (Kell and Vogl, 2012). In 2004, higher education accounted for almost 70 per cent of a total A\$3.4 billion earned in fees from international education by Australian institutions. Tuition fees from overseas students contribute on average 15 per cent of Australian

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universities' operating revenue (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008). It is not surprising then that the dominant practices in international education remain focused on student recruitment and student mobility.

In the market-driven landscape of international education, international students are often assumed to be global citizens with tastes, senses and values that would fit into a global Western capitalist economy. However, the status of international students is layered with political, economic, culture, social and personal complexities (Marginson, 2011). Their identities are constructed by historical experiences, and personal and social circumstances, which are enriched and complicated by the cross-border contemporary social life. The networks of their social relationships are tied to their ethnic origin and experiences in their homeland that foster a kind of 'difference' when students are placed in new sociocultural groups in the host countries (Vertovec, 1999). At the same time, these differences foster new meanings that propel students to change their behaviours in order to adjust to the demands of living and learning in a new environment. The way that students perceive their world governs how they represent themselves in that world, which consciously and non-consciously shapes their identities (Stryker and Burke, 2000: 285). Some researchers identify cultural differences as risk factors to international students' security (Marginson et al., 2010), while others have recognized cultural barriers as anxiety that international students face in their navigation of daily lives, which may position them disadvantageously at universities in host countries (Kell and Vogl, 2012: 133). There is little research that considers how students negotiate their differences to create new meanings that are relevant to their values and needs. The significant original contribution of this article is in providing insights into how international students encounter and traverse cultural differences to define new perspectives of identity that would enable them to perform specific roles and enhance their heritage identity. Such insights invite international education providers to discern practices that provide opportunities for international students to develop self-reflection, openness, agency and global citizenship.

After introducing and defining two important terms, the next section of this article surveys a range of literature and research about the theoretical framework of identity as reliant on social and cultural exchange in the context of international students in host countries. Then the findings of a case study of international Vietnamese tertiary students studying in Australia are discussed to provide insights into students' perceptions of their social position, and how these perceptions guide their everyday practices and construct their identities. The last section offers suggestions for universities offering international education to consider sociocultural exchange and its inherent relationship to identity as determining factors that shape international students' engagement and participation in learning, and calls for perspective and research direction of international education to move along the constructive path of developing students as agents with capability to act in accordance with their sociocultural values and visions.

**Two definitions.** Following Stuart Hall (1996), this article argues that *identities* are shaped by historical experiences and culture: the process is one of 'becoming' rather than 'being'. 'Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation' says Hall (1996: 4). Moreover, these representations drive specific strategies that people use in everyday practices and are based on people's positions in society. Such strategies are enacted as people respond to a sense of societal position, and of what it is that differentiates them, as a person, from others (Hall, 1996).

The notion of *culture* used here also deserves explanation. Hofstede (1991) argued that culture clearly has a defining impact on an individual's make up, meaning that there would be access to differences in the sojourning experiences from many different perspectives. Citing Hall, Barker (2000: 8) suggests that culture concerns 'the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations,

languages and customs of any specific society'. These practices, 'everyday practices' according to Certeau (1988: xi), are our very ways of operating but are frequently considered 'as merely the obscure background of social activity'. Underpinned by Hall's (1996) theory of identity, this article explores the ways in which Vietnamese tertiary students construct their identities while studying in Australia, as an ongoing negotiation between individuals and their social networks taking into account their personal and social experiences.

## Literature review

People are individuals whose norms, attitudes and beliefs are reflective of their social networks. According to Mead (1910), people respond and at the same time adjust to their social groups, in so far as they can mediate and share their meanings with these groups. It is important to recognize the conscious meaning that people share with others, as these meanings become the social unconsciousness that drives their perceptions and actions in society.

We are conscious of our attitudes because they are responsible for the changes in the conduct of other individuals. Successful social conduct brings one into the field within which a consciousness of one's own attitudes helps toward the control of the conduct of others. (Mead, 1910: 403)

The fundamental idea here is that the self is constituted by the consciousness of meaning that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed by the social exchange in which one engages (Mead, 1934). In a highly differentiated contemporary society, people attach different meanings to their understanding of their 'selves' and they take on a variety of roles to enable them to participate in their networks (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Identity thus may be conceived as an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the social context (Hawkins, 2005: 59) and may take various perspectives dependent on the social context (Alexander and Wiley, 1981).

People organize perspectives of identity within their 'selves' in ways that reflect the hierarchy of importance that they attach to these perspectives (Stryker and Burke, 2000: 289). People seek organizations and social relationships that provide opportunities to behave in accordance with the identities hierarchy within the self. Identity is aligned to behaviour, where behaviour reflects the shared meanings between people within social groups. Human agency emerges when people make sense of meanings for themselves by creating new situations in which they can match these self-relevant meanings to those perspectives of their identity (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

The linkage of identity and social context is echoed in Hall's (1996) theory of cultural identity where he argues that identity is a relational process and can never be complete. Rather than assuming that identity is defined by a common origin, common social structures or common historical experiences, Hall (1996) asserts that identity depends on people's recognition of 'difference'. As Hall (1991: 21) puts it: 'Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative'. Identity is an unstable or changing effect of social relations which define perspectives of identity by marking 'differences'. As with Mead's (1910) recognition of the multiple roles that people perform in accordance with their hierarchy of identity perspectives, Hall's (1991) emphasis on a multiplicity of identities marked by differences depends on the articulation of difference in order to create new senses of meanings to those already held in people's hierarchy of identities. Identity then is always situational and contradictory because of the fragmented individual identities within the self which, at the same time, are reliant on different social groups within which people are placed (Grossberg, 1997). For international students living in host countries and studying at foreign universities, the fragmentation of difference is significant

in terms of territorial states and contexts of their ethnic origin and where they reside, their historical experiences and diaspora networks. The particularity of international students lies in the dual or paradoxical nature of their identity (Vertovec, 1999: 8). The multiplicity of their histories, communities and territories emerges in the selves, not as a cultural deficit but as adaptive strength. The multiple identities that they learn to embrace are grounded by experiences in both the home country and host country, and are linked simultaneously to more than one origin of culture (Hall, 1996).

According to Hall (1996), diaspora identities are those that are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. Sojourning students are positioned as social actors rather than as programmed citizens of ethnic class and they attend to their social practices based on their social dispositions in the new world (Harris, 2009). Students operate multiple relationships both at home and in their residing country; thus they take actions, make decisions and develop subjectivities and identities that are embedded in these networks of relationships. Students' learning experiences are shaped and reshaped as their transnational social networks and the dynamics of these social relationships transform over time (Monkman, 1997: 4).

Located in a foreign country, international students experience diverse flows of norms, ideas, language, pedagogy and culture that may contradict their behaviour norms in their country of origin. The meanings that people interpret and create from these different social experiences are internalized and become symbolic meanings that produce new perspectives of identity (Mead, 1934). These meanings are constructed from within, not fixed, not exogenous and are constantly changing according to people and their circumstances (Grimshaw and Sears, 2008).

According to Amin (2002: 191), it is essential to study everyday social contact and encounter, especially those spaces of interdependence and habitual engagement because this is where identity and attitudes are formed and where struggles over place and entitlement are played out. A focus on everyday relationships and practices of international students in their new country sheds light on how students produce, use and challenge the differences in their daily interactions (Amin, 2002). In a changing world, young people's identities continue to be defined through the cultures of daily life including neighbourhood networks, education institutions, family and friends, local labour market and locality. For these international students, everyday life continues to be enacted by situations bound by their home, school and neighbourhood (Harris, 2009: 192).

Pollock and van Reken (1999) comment that international students identify themselves in terms of 'other'. In the foreign land, they see themselves as people from their home country and when they return home, they see themselves as from overseas. Establishing their identity is complex because of its dependency on the people in their lives who act as validators of their values and emotional attachments. International students may face new and challenging environments where they may have different responses to their sense of belongings and representation of identities. People construct their identities by subjecting themselves to different cultures by participating in various social organizations. Goffman (1990) argued that self-realization is achieved not only through an acceptance of externally imposed norms and values but also through a resistance to these norms and values. This gives rise to the idea of people as operating within the structure-agency dialectic, and understanding international students as social agents who constantly negotiate different cultures.

Living in a new country, international students are disconnected from their family and community, and face associated loss of the solidarity and moral bonding within these relationships. They draw upon cultural knowledge in order to make sense of their world. A number of studies, such as Searle and Ward (1990) and Ward and Kennedy (1993), have found that greater conational ties foster stronger heritage cultural identity. Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Turner (1987) suggested that conational ties provide students with opportunities to recognize their similarities to their

compatriots. For these students, social norms and family traditions serve as guidelines for behaviours within a stable and regular framework. Within that normative framework, individuals construct their own meanings and interpretation of their 'selves'.

Friendships and the value of developing and sustaining satisfactory social relationships are significant factors in the development and maintenance of identities (Pahl and Spencer, 1997). Friendship is a valuable source of support in the face of breakdown of other forms of traditional support. Friendships and informal relationships can act as social glue, binding individuals into their social structure (Jerome, 1984). Bochner et al. (1977) found that international students' friendship patterns were primarily with students and people from their own nationalities, followed by locals including academics, advisors and students, and thirdly with internationals from other countries. Connections with locals and internationals from other countries also give students the opportunity to compare their culture with other cultures and, through awareness of cultural differences, they recognize their cultural uniqueness (Vertovec, 1999).

Research about international students has too often been done in the absence of recognition of the importance of students' social context: it has neither captured the authentic lives of these students, nor recognized their capability for agency and action (Kell and Vogl, 2012). The case study in the next section aims to show how international students, as agents of their histories and biographies, in the context of their social networks traverse and transform 'differences' to functional attributes that allow them to survive, be productive and at the same time maintain their cultural values and well-being.

## Case study

Informed by Hall's (1996) observation on cultural identity in the context of diasporas, this research set out to explore ways in which Vietnamese tertiary students construct and reconstruct their identities while studying overseas, and the ongoing negotiation between them and their social networks. This research focused on how these students perceived their relationships with their universities, primarily lecturers and tutors, local students and local communities, housemates, families and friends and how these networks of social relations impacted their construction and reproduction of their identities as individuals and as members of society.

A case study was developed using in-depth interviews with Vietnamese students studying at Australian universities in the state of New South Wales (NSW). The study allowed the exploration of sociocultural influences upon Vietnamese students taking into account the specificity of their cultural and societal characteristics. Australia is a primary destination for Vietnamese going abroad for education. As at October 2012, there were 10,963 Vietnamese students enrolled in the Australian higher education sector, representing 4.8 per cent of total international enrolment in that sector and placing Vietnam at fourth position as source country in Australian international tertiary education enrolment, behind China, Malaysia and India (Australian Education International, 2012). Besides highlighting the significance of the Vietnamese group to Australia's international educational profile, the case study aims to give insights into international education practices that could actually transfer to any culture.

Participants were invited to participate via advertisements at international student offices of various universities in NSW; postings on social media websites of Vietnamese student organizations; an advertisement in the *Vietnamese Herald* (a Vietnamese newspaper) and referrals from the researcher's personal networks. Six students participated in the interviews. The participants comprised three males and three females, in the age range of 21 to 30 years, who were studying in various disciplines at various universities in NSW. This article does not investigate the effect of age,

gender, length of stay in Australia, universities and disciplines in which students were enrolled, but focuses on their experiences as Vietnamese international students studying in Australia. The aim is to explore how these students construct identities from their daily practices and from their encounter of cultural differences.

The in-depth interview methodology employed was informed by the model of constructing narratives for critical social inquiry: the intention was to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are constructed by the tellers of their experiences – of what they do in their world as well as what their world does to them (Riessman, 2008: 22). The central idea of this framework is that narrated experiences are socially constructed, and there can be many different constructions of events, each of which is true and unique (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The aim of this case study was to uncover some of these different experiences.

Students were asked to reflect on their perceptions of their social positions within their universities and communities, and how these perceptions influenced their behaviour at universities, at home, at work and in other social organizations to which they belonged. Stem questions were asked on certain topics and conversations followed on the flow suggested by the answers. The questions were thus semi-structured and open-ended. The intention was to explore how students make sense of their experiences and their representation of their social and personal circumstances. The interviews were conducted in English and Vietnamese. The Vietnamese transcripts were translated by the first author of this article, who is responsible for the linguistic interpretation of meanings.

The study adopted a narrative approach to thematic analysis that focused exclusively on the content of the narratives produced. Each narrative is kept intact by establishing emerging themes from the case rather than from the categories across cases (Riessman, 2008: 58). Each interview was analysed holistically and individually, drawing on what was told, rather than the context of questions and language used. The authors took the view that narratives represent a process of people in conversation with themselves at that point in time, and it is their ways of making sense of their perceptions and experiences of lives. The findings are discussed in this article as the authors' *etic* account of the students' narratives. The quotations cited are excerpts from these narratives, giving anonymized students' names to protect their identity, with the course studies and their university.

## Findings

### *Self-development*

The most recognizable personal changes for Vietnamese students were increase in self-reliance and independent decision making in everyday situations. Students believed they changed to accommodate themselves to new living arrangements and conditions where they had to be responsible for themselves rather than relying on their parents. For instance:

I learn how to live independently by myself even though I am still very Eastern. Things changed day by day when I was studying and living away from home. I have to do everything on my own. (Binh, male, marketing)

Some found challenges in the Western teaching and learning styles and in different ways of obtaining information in their learning programmes. Their responses showed that they relied upon their own personal resources and hard work to cultivate the required academic knowledge and to get



accustomed to the prevailing pedagogy. They embraced new and positive attributes to allow them to learn and work effectively while maintaining their own cultural interests:

I study a lot by myself in Australia. I read academic journals. It's quite good because we don't have that style of learning in Vietnam. (Khoa, male, international business)

For these students, personal change encompassed acquiring basic living skills, and from that they developed awareness and empathy for those in their social networks:

I can cook more. I can look after myself more. I think more for others around me because I realize how my family has looked after me and the work involved in looking after me. (Tuan, male, information technology)

It is known that participation in community organizations has an effect on cultural identity (Sabatini, 2009). The Vietnamese students in this study who were involved in such activities saw themselves as becoming acculturated with Western values and identity insofar as these changes enabled them to achieve their learning goals and part time employment:

I wondered why it is that when they (Australians) go to work they perform better than us. They are accustomed to problem solving. I became more aware of the need to act quickly to solve a problem right there and then. (Thu, female, nuclear science)

When I first came here, I was always afraid to ask then I realized asking is good. Vietnamese people are always shy and not getting out there. I was really shy and just go to school and study, not communicating much. Now I am more open to people. I am more social, maybe stronger than before. So if people do wrong things to me I am going to tell them and not keep to myself like before. (Huong, female, finance)

### *Social exchange and the marking of differences*

In line with Gu et al. (2010), the findings of this study indicate that through social interactions with students from other cultures, Vietnamese students identified differences with their own cultural traits and behaviours that facilitated their changed attitudes:

I think each country has different background with different viewpoints. I know many Thai, Japanese and Korean people. Thai people believe that you should be open and integrate with people around you. That is how they develop manners and etiquettes. There are other things, which are very different to Vietnam like relationships and personalities. In Vietnam there is no acceptance of gay and lesbians and no one dares to speak up about that. People don't want to talk about it. But Thai people can talk about it and be comfortable about it. I feel that they live with truth and reality. I changed my viewpoints about these issues and how to think about them.

I changed my opinion about how to educate my children in the future. I want my children to have the kind of education in Australia. I can see that (enforcing Vietnamese culture on children who have had exposure to Australian education) is not a mistake but rather it's a cultural barrier between parents and children of Vietnamese families living in Australia. I think if I have family here in Australia then I must change. We must be the first generation that can change that cultural gap. There are other limitations that create gaps between parents and children. But maybe for international students like us, we can see that and we can and we should change our actions so it can be different. (Thu)

The findings suggest that Vietnamese students did not identify with their Australian universities. They perceived a vast divide between local students and international students. Contrary to Bochner



et al.'s (1997) findings that international students interacted more with local students than with international students from other countries, students in this study felt more aligned with international students and found it difficult to integrate with Australian students. Vietnamese students perceived themselves as outsiders, as 'others' in the country that they were living in and in the university where they were studying. This echoed other researches (Fail et al., 2004; Matthews and Sidhu, 2005; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008; Brown, 2009):

When we break up into groups, there is always one group of Asians and one of Western students. Maybe they feel more comfortable to work with same culture. I don't know why but local students don't really get friendly with international students. (Huong)

When I lived in the dorm, I lived with 2 Saudi Arabian, 3 Swedish. We didn't talk much about such things. Sometimes they talked, but it's not as intimate as talking to Vietnamese friends. It is because of cultural differences. I respect their culture, and they respect mine. But going deeper into their lives, their sadness or happiness is not possible. I still can talk with them more than with Australian students. (Khoa)

Students viewed lecturers and tutors as providers of information about curriculum and assessment tasks rather than mentors or career advisors, which endorsed their traditional perspective of relationship between academics and students in Vietnam. This is coherent with Brown and Holloway's (2008) findings where sojourners were found to be strategic in what they learn, employing enough attributes to achieve their objectives, without necessarily understanding and accepting the new culture:

I only ask professors about subject content, not career because I can ask my parents or the people that I know who are working with my parents in Vietnam. I think some professors are racist and don't like us Asians much. (Khoa)

Vietnamese students acknowledged how different social norms in Australia may affect their traditional values, and in particular their reverence for educational achievement. They were motivated to integrate with Australian students because they perceived it as valuable to do so, but they faced the challenge of cultural difference and language barrier and, in the path of overcoming these difficulties, they became more aware of their heritage cultural identity and cultivation. As Brown (2009) argued, international students must also adapt to new and sometimes threatening behaviours and cope with academic pedagogies on a number of personal, social and emotional levels:

I think you have to change your mind when you come here. In Vietnam, you live with your family so there is nothing to worry. I see life is very good here but many things can make you lose your ways. I want to focus on my study because life here sometimes can affect your study, so you need to focus more. I worry that I may lose focus. (Tuan)

In line with Sussman (2002), the findings suggest that as students lived, learned and worked in Australia, they sought to maintain their Vietnamese identity rather than transforming it. They recognized their cultural uniqueness and social interests in reference with those of other cultures, and their actions were driven by their own cultural needs:

It doesn't matter where I go, I still have black hair and yellow skin. Not all Australians like me nor are they all racist. It depends on the person. I have been educated in an environment (Vietnam) that is not natural. I always wonder about choosing to return to Vietnam or living here. Because what I like is the social environment in Vietnam. It's more fun there and I am the same as everyone, not like here when I go out I

am the only Asian person. Maybe I can live in Australia but I may be lonely, missing my home, cannot integrate so coming back to Vietnam is still good. (Thu)

For these students, establishing a locus of self as diasporas in the host country is likely to require a different order of change in competencies and thoughts (Brown, 2009).

I am always a Vietnamese. I have been created as a Vietnamese so my views are based on Vietnamese foundation therefore my perspectives will always be Vietnamese. I am similar compared to other international students. But with Australians it's different. (Tuan)

## Discussion and the way forward

The findings suggest that students in this study identified strongly with their Vietnamese identity, through the recognition of their unique cultural traits as they encountered different cultural practices. As Sussman (2002) argued, heritage cultural identity is often not salient while the person resides in his/her home but becomes more significant once in the foreign cultural environment. Consistent with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) argument, the findings of this study suggest that conational ties provide students with opportunities to recognize similarities with their compatriots. Students in this study felt more aligned with international students and found it difficult to integrate with Australian students. Interacting with both co-nationals and internationals from other countries, however, gave students the opportunity to compare their own cultural attributes with others, leading them to recognize their cultural uniqueness. Thus it appears that both co-national ties and international ties constructively shape their perception of Vietnamese identity.

Despite feeling 'different' to local students, Vietnamese students in this study were able to acquire and embrace aspects of Australian attributes that allowed them to achieve their academic goals. This suggests that for these students, socio-cultural adjustment was utilitarian and social relationships with Australian people served to achieve specific goals which carried relevant meanings for them. Students felt that they 'fit in' despite feeling as 'others', because for them the ability to accommodate the practicalities of daily life in Australia was a salient perspective of their identity. Fail et al. (2004: 233) termed this 'constructive marginality', where international students experience a multiple sense of belonging in different places and develop an ability to adjust and fit in according to their needs. This resonates with Kettle's (2005) findings, which suggest that Thai students negotiated their academic identities and acted as an active agent to participate in academic activities.

Gu et al. (2010: 19) argued that the nature of each individual's motivations and experiences can be a major factor in constructing their identities. They desire to integrate with local students but the main goal for Vietnamese students was to acquire overseas education. To fulfil that role, they drew upon personal and community resources only to accommodate living practicalities and fulfil their academic objectives; they remained close to their Vietnamese networks, however, to maintain their cultural needs and well-being.

The study highlights the complex processes in which Vietnamese students engaged in their continuous negotiation with their surrounding networks, self-analysis of their own values and beliefs, self-reflections and self-orientations. They were pragmatic in their choices of networking and were reflective of how interactions with local people brought about their own understanding of their national identity. For these students, their willingness to adapt to the Australian perspectives was simultaneously challenged by the normative resistance to the Western identity, both brought about by their deterministic and decisive social anchoring within the Vietnamese community in

Australia. Therein lies the paradoxical nature of belonging and alienation (Vertovec, 1999). Vietnamese students created their own sojourns out of these fragments and contradictions. In trying to construct and negotiate their self-image, they faced the cross-culture within themselves (Gu et al., 2010: 20). As Hall (1990: 235) argued, 'the diaspora experience is not defined by essence or purity, but by a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through difference'.

Vietnamese students mediated these social and cultural dichotomies by engaging themselves in their own particular set of familial connections in order to retain their ethnic belongings and, at the same time, created new meanings that they could internalize to progress towards a better future for themselves. These students continuously repositioned their viewpoints in light of the viewpoints of others, and improvised ways to take account of their cultural practices while consciously creating self-relevant meanings for differences that they encountered in their new social world. Their construction of identity was an ongoing representation of ever-changing internalized viewpoints (Hall, 1996).

The findings of this case study highlight the overlap between viewing identity based on categorized ethnic groups and as functioning roles in a particular social hierarchy. The construction of identities is always changing, as people take on multiple roles depending on their positions in society and create meanings to accord with different situations (Mead, 1934). Thus it is more pertinent to think about identity as malleable rather than as defined (Hall, 1996).

### *Implications*

If the objective of international education is to foster better cultural understanding, then cultural diversity has to be embraced within curriculum and pedagogy of universities offering international education. International education practices can and should consider sociocultural factors and their inherent relationship to identity as determining factors that shape international students' goals, engagement and participation in learning. The students in this study constructed their identities based on the culture of their origin and as they encountered cultural differences. The global world to them is neither normative nor imperative. They are beings with histories and biographies that are uniquely represented through their perceptions and social exchanges with people in their communities. Understanding the challenges and barriers that construct international students' perception of differences would allow universities to appreciate students' positions, motivations and goals, and set learning objectives that would encourage them to voice and participate in their communities. The recognition of international students' negotiation of differences provides opportunities for universities to establish relationships and social interactions that promote productive behaviours that connect students rather than segregate them.

Vertovec (1999: 28) noted the importance of grasping methodologically the changes among transnational communities by a systematic account of social structures that predispose people to certain practices in light of their own interventions in the process of adapting to their social networks. This article suggests that it is critical for research on international education to delve deeply into the sociocultural factors that influence international students' self-perception and actions in complex social environments. International education practices can then move along the direction of equipping students with relevant knowledge, attitude and capability to deal with such complexity in ways that resonate with their values.

This case study is limited in scope by its small sample size. It serves not as a statistical representation to yield a particular theory but rather as an exploration that provides insight into how international students negotiate and maintain their identities in a foreign country. Each student's

narrative has its own representations as filtered by individual personal histories and biographies. The students in this study behaved in accordance with the meanings that they attributed to their identities, and those that they shared, created and interpreted through the process of social interaction. The article presents the case for viewing international students as social agents who control their cultural environment and establish social networks that meet their sense of belonging, at the same time embracing other cultures insofar as these actions allow them to achieve their learning goals. The findings underscore the need for further research with larger populations and across other cultures.

## Conclusion

Underpinned by Hall's (1996) theory of cultural identity, this article suggests that identities are people's constructions of how they are represented and representations of themselves, which are constituted within patterns of interactions in specific social contexts. Through a case study, it explored how a particular group of international students constructed and reproduced their identities in relation to their lives abroad by allowing them to trace their own sojourns and reflect upon their everyday practices in the host country. In the vacuum of research that allow for voices of international students to be heard, this article provides insights into the complex social world of a group of Vietnamese tertiary students in Australia; their cultural wealth, resilience and deliberation in maintaining their heritage identity. The findings shed light on understanding international students' identities as reliant on social interactions and ever-changing. International education providers are invited to embrace cultural diversity by recognizing the sociocultural influences that stem from students' social networks as determining factors in their learning and being. These sociocultural factors should be considered when revising aspects of curriculum and pedagogy to provide opportunities for international students to develop self-knowledge, openness and citizenship.

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