

**Investigation of Agency and Mental Wellbeing: The Case of
International Students in the Context of Finnish Higher
Education**

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ABSTRACT

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The Agency of higher education students has been extensively discussed in the context of learning (Baxter, 2019; Zeiser, Scholz, & Cirks, 2018). Meanwhile, the mental wellbeing of the international students and the constraints towards maintenance of it have been studied mostly in English-speaking countries (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). This thesis investigates and analyzes how agency is exercised by international students. Further, constraints and supporters of their mental wellbeing in the context of Finnish higher education are examined in a new context. Observations and experiences of the author together with the secondary link that was found in literature between agency and mental wellbeing were the main rationale to look at these concepts within the framework of this research.

The data was gathered through seven qualitative semi-structured individual interviews from international students. The analysis of the data was done with the utilization of deductive content analysis. The findings showed various problems like, creation of a new social circle and cultural assimilation hinder the mental wellbeing of students; as opposed to factors like having a sense of belonging or well-functioning university support systems that scaffold mental wellbeing. Moreover, exercise of agency was manifested in activities like being proactive or self-reflective. It was concluded that universities should take up an active role to promote their students' agency in order to enable them and consider ways to sustain a balanced mental wellbeing for them. In conclusion, more attention, acknowledgement and consideration are required to handle mental wellbeing and agency of international students.

Keywords: Agency, Mental Wellbeing, International Students, Finland

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1 INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that people's mobility has changed the layout of the world. Consequently, internationalization is becoming relevant and timely for a considerable number of countries. Students are no exception in this matter. Every year the number of students who seek to continue their education in a country different from their homeland is increasing (Javed, Zainab, Zakai, & Malik, 2019). Therefore, universities can be categorized as the institutions which are in the frontier of internationalization. These higher education institutes have always been considered progressive and ready-to-respond to the needs of constantly changing human societies. Hence, universities are responsible and accountable for the wellbeing of their most foremost members who are students. It is obvious that new technological advantages together with better economic situations made mobility for people more accessible than ever. According to Alharbi and Smith (2018), by the end of 2020 there will be approximately more than 8 million international students all over the world. International students' wellbeing has been researched for a long time in the context of English-speaking countries since the number of international students is considerably higher in these countries. However, in countries like Finland, this idea can be considered rather new and the number of international students is significantly lower than in English-speaking countries (Chen, & Barnett, 2000; OECD, 2019). Meanwhile, the number of international students in Finland is constantly growing. For instance, between the years 2006 to 2016 the amount of non-Finnish students increased from 10,066 to 21,061, according to the figures from the Finnish National Agency for Education (2016) on student mobility.

There has been a significant amount of studies claiming that international students are at risk of facing numerous issues that can potentially be harmful to their mental wellbeing (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2003; Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). Hence, in order to the hindering factors and the factors that

support the mental wellbeing of international students should be audited. In addition, the discussion of how students discern this idea of agency and how they exercise it are included in this thesis. In addition, the notion of agency has been discussed in a variety of contexts. When it comes to scientific research in education, the agency of students is often linked with better learning and academic performance (Baxter, 2019). In this study, the main focus is on how agency is exercised in the first place. The first idea to simultaneously discuss the concepts of mental wellbeing and agency a thesis emerged when the author found a pattern among his personal experiences. He found himself in a more balanced state regarding mental wellbeing when he got to take initiative and exercise his agency. This later was broadened by observing similar patterns among his peers. He sensed that whenever a fellow student was proactive, he/she felt better in general. This curiosity led him in investigation of these concepts and their possible connections in the academic literature. A secondary link was found even though there were extremely limited resources explicitly deliberate any connections or correlations between agency and mental wellbeing in the context of education. The secondary link is as follows.

There are factors that support and hinder the mental wellbeing of international students. Agency has been proven to be quite effective in limiting the negative repercussions of some of the commonly-experienced problems, like discrimination and creation of a new social circle, that hinder mental wellbeing (Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Paloniemi, Herranen, & Eteläpelto, 2017; Calikoglu, 2018). For instance, one of the experiences that negatively affect mental wellbeing is discrimination (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). According to Wall, Tran and Soejatminah (2017), discrimination was found to be among the issues that were resolved to a great extent by exercise of agency. This is an instance how agency plays a role in maintenance of mental wellbeing. This study endeavoured to discover the ways agency is exercised and what supports or hinders international students' wellbeing. Furthermore, this research was an attempt to fill the current absence in academic literature to make explicit investigation of international

students' mental wellbeing and their agency in a context of a non-English speaking country, Finland.

2 MENTAL WELLBEING

2.1 Definition of Mental Wellbeing

In recent years, the issue of mental wellbeing has become topical and interesting making it a subject that is researched on through different lenses and with distinct approaches. Wellbeing is a universal concept that has multilayers and can be referred to in different contexts with distinct applications. This vast concept provides varied aspects like physical, social and emotional wellbeing (Kern, Waters, Adler & White, 2015). In order to make it relevant and meaningful to this specific study only mental or psychological wellbeing are discussed, especially in the context of education and for international students. Defining this specific type of wellbeing is not an easy task since it is sometimes reduced to just the idea of happiness and unclarity of this concept brings problems when the issues related to it are targeted to be tackled (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). It must be taken into account that there is no consensus about the definition of the concept of mental wellbeing but in the following paragraphs a couple of approaches towards understanding of this concept is discussed. These approaches are accompanied by an explanation on how they relate to one another.

Psychological wellbeing and mental wellbeing are identical concepts and have been stated within the framework of positive psychology (Demirbaş-Çelik, 2018). Throughout the whole text of this study psychological wellbeing and mental wellbeing are used interchangeably. It should be taken into account that mental wellbeing should not be confused with positive mental health. Mental wellbeing refers to a more encompassing concept, a wider spectrum, that includes positive mental health as only one of the respects of it. On one hand, positive mental health is a ground for the existence of a balanced mental wellbeing (Demirbaş-Çelik, 2018). On the other hand, in the definition of mental wellbeing, negative feelings and emotions are also of

importance especially in the context of overcoming a loss and going through stages of grief; thus, healthy expression of negative feelings and consideration of them are included in the concept of mental wellbeing (Williams, 2000). However, according to Alharbi and Smith (2018), when it comes to education in simple terms, if one student has more positive feelings and emotions than negative ones, he or she has a balanced psychological wellbeing; therefore, in this sense, the mental wellbeing is about the balance of different, both positive and negative, emotions rather than a sole emphasis on positive ones. At last, there are scientific grounds on the fact there is no significant difference between the mental wellbeing of both genders which was one of the main reasons this aspect has no connotations in this study (Akram, 2019).

In order to better understand the concept of psychological wellbeing, it should be broken down to different sets. Social aspects and Individual aspects are the two main categories which must be noted in the discussion of mental wellbeing, (Knifton, & Quinn, 2013). In consideration of the social features, the societal status of the person plays a key role. These features consist of the social engagement of a person, his interactions with society, his participation in social activities and his social status like career, occupation, education etc. The social respects can also be labeled as hedonistic approaches towards mental wellbeing, even though there are dissimilarities between social and hedonistic approaches. Yet, because a majority of the social respects are extrinsic and the central emphasis of hedonistic approach is on extrinsic factors, the similarity of them becomes alive and eminent (Rogach, Ryabova, & Frolova, 2017). The other instance or more tangible components of social respect for mental wellbeing is one's personal relations and their quality which includes both formal and informal relations with the people around a person; hence, the better, more developed and deeper the relations are, the higher mental wellbeing is restored (Rautiainen, & Tohmo, 2018). The social characteristics of mental wellbeing can be summarized in the connectedness of the person to others, the quality of his relations and his social profile in terms of status.

Rogach et al., (2017) refer to another approach to mental wellbeing to define this concept as the eudemonistic approach which focuses on personal and intrinsic items. Moreover, the individual features of mental wellbeing have more stress on the person himself and the current circumstances he is going through (Rautiainen, & Tohmo, 2018). The living conditions, financial standing, sense of belonging, thoughts and especially the emotions can all be found among fundamentals of the individual side of the concept of mental wellbeing and can provide a basic understanding of what these intrinsic features deal with (Rautiainen, & Tohmo, 2018). Knifton and Quinn (2013) also discuss the prominence of the possibility for one to unlock his full potential in order to be able to keep the balance of the emotions and finally achieve stable mental wellbeing. They claim when a person believes what he is involved with is not rewarding and fulfilling, sustenance of mental wellbeing becomes a great challenge. As a result, one must find meaning in the activities he has at hand in order to feel satisfied. Csikszentmihalyi (2004) goes beyond this idea because in his view keeping a balanced mental wellbeing is more complex than recognizing one's potential and reacting to it. In his opinion, the achieved feeling of contentment and happiness are the most indispensable which make them integral in this particular concept. However it must be underlined that personal respect of mental wellbeing cannot be inspected and defined in a vacuum because they are in interaction with the social aspects. In summary, all the above-mentioned points have to do with the person and his individuality more than anything, even though they all share social facets (Rogach et al., 2017).

As a sum of both wider respects, hedonistic and eudemonistic or social and personal or extrinsic and intrinsic, of mental wellbeing, it can be concluded that mental wellbeing "often combines a focus on satisfaction with life, overall happiness and good psychological functioning" (Knifton, & Quinn, 2013). Further, both social and individual sides of mental wellbeing have three central characteristics in common. They deliberate, firstly life satisfaction which has different levels and can be found on both sides of mental wellbeing. This idea has to do with a sense of fulfilment. Secondly

self-belief which is especially of worth in societal context because society and the surrounding of a person have a lot of impacts on the creation and strength of it. Finally coping skills which are the toolbox of each and every individual that is acquired in interaction with society and self to overcome the problems one's face (Clark, & Teravainen-Goff, 2018).

2.2 Mental Wellbeing of International Students

A basic understanding of what international students are meant is needed to further continue. A person who studies for at least a course or a period of time in a country other than their homeland where the culture, language and religion are often different, is called international student (Huang, 2008). In this study, international students refers to students who are not from Finland and study either a bachelor's or master's degree or Ph.D. programs. Even though the experiences of international students vary, the common stressors and barriers they face share considerable similarities (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). Mental wellbeing of international students is significant because problems related to it are not limited to mental disorders and can have physical consequences like digestive or sleep disorders (Kettunen, Vuorimaa, & Vasankari, 2015). It is obvious that the repercussions of such mental issues that lead to physical ones are abominable since it can not disrupt their studies but also put their overall health at risk. International students are considered as a vulnerable group since there are countless factors that jeopardize their mental wellbeing and these factors have been reported to be widely experienced (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). Needless to mention, they possess far less support in comparison to local students since their family and friends, that are core pillars of a one's support web, are not around in the extent of their local counterparts (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2003). Most of the hindering factors to the mental wellbeing of international students are interconnected and cannot be easily separated from others. For instance, acculturative stress which is defined as "a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation" (Berry, 2006, p.

294), is one of the most challenging factors that cause negative feelings and pressure that are experienced by international students. Acculturative stress has the capacity to grow into other issues which further illuminates the complexity of the barriers international students face since one can be the ground to the others and this loop continues unless interference occurs (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Yeh, & Inose, 2003).

Alharbi and Smith (2018) found that this student group also faces difficulties related to English language proficiency. These issues are also foundations for further problems with for example, self-confidence in the context of mental wellbeing. Besides, the difficulties regarding language are highlighted in lack of classroom participation, social engagement and problematic creation of a new group of friends. English language proficiency is also negatively correlated with depression and anxiety (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004). According to the findings of Alharbi and Smith (2018), experiences of depression and anxiety are not exceptional among international students. There are numerous reasons that explain this state, for example, adjusting to a new setting. In the process of adjustment, the background of students plays an important role since when students from western cultures and countries move to an English-speaking country as international students, they are less likely to face discrimination because their culture is closer to the culture of the host society (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). Conclusively, when a student comes from a country that has more similarities with the characteristics of the host country, he benefits from a less complicated passage of adjustment (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). In this context, the students with more familiarity to the weather condition or food due to experience of living in or connectedness of their culture and country to the host country have considerably smoother and shorter procedure of adapting to the new setting, leaving them more time and energy to focus on their studies which result in higher chances of maintaining mental wellbeing (Hechanova-Alampay, 2003).

Research shows that international students are likely to face discrimination in

different forms (Chavajay, & Skowronek, 2018). For instance, it is believed by some international students in Finland that they are discriminated against when it comes to fair and equal distribution of academic and university jobs meaning the local students end up getting most of the positions (Calikoglu, 2018). When international students feel unaccepted by the host society by facing discrimination of any kind for example, they face a psychological conflict which threatens their wellbeing. This situation is not only destructive to their wellbeing but also it can even be a damage to their self-esteem (Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008). In addition, creating a new social circle is yet another formidable task they have to overcome. As explained earlier, having a social circle is mandatory in terms of maintaining mental wellbeing but international students lose their social circle to a great extent when they move away from home. Not possessing a social circle or a group of friends in the beginning is the base for a number of problems, for example, the majority of international students have experienced loneliness, especially in the beginning of their studies (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). Loneliness in specific is proven to be among the factors that are disturbing to the mental wellbeing of international students (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). Previously studies show that problems like discrimination, lack of supervision, homesickness, loneliness, difficulties to build a new social circle have also been experienced extensively by international students in Finland making it even more related to discuss these issues in this specific context (Calikoglu, 2018).

Another point that must not go unnoticed in the deliberation of the concept of mental wellbeing in the context of education and especially international students, is the support systems of universities. These systems which include a wide range of services to provide international students with relevant support like having access to certified therapists in order to minimize the effects of these issues to their mental wellbeing are paramount (Cho, & Yu, 2015). In summary, numerous factors hinder the wellbeing of international students and most of them cannot be eschewed. This fact shows that their mental wellbeing is in danger and special attention and care are

required to foster their mental wellbeing. Even though most studies focus on negative aspects that hinder the mental wellbeing of international students, there are study-backed facts that international students generally enjoy higher quality student and academic life compared to their local counterparts (Alharbi, & Smith, 2019).

3 AGENCY

3.1 Definition of Agency

Agency as a term might seem a bit vague and unclear. It owns diverse meanings in different contexts and backgrounds. To define and conceptualize the notion of agency it should be taken into account that not many academic articles provide a concrete definition for agency. However, Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi (2013) provide a holistic understanding of the agency. In their article seven features of agency are defined with respect to subject-centered socio-cultural lenses. This is especially important as most of the studies that are done on agency within the subjects of education and psychology focus on individual features and tend to ignore the social side of the notion of agency. First, second and third features suggest that agency means impacting and making decisions, agency can shape identity and agency is performed to achieve a goal that is highly aroused by inspirations and drives. The last four characteristics propose that previous experiences and capabilities are means of agency.

This definition and the seven features that are presented by Eteläpelto et al. (2013) are a framework when reflecting on one's agency. It is also helpful to argue the importance of this concept because this article provides well-constructed reasoning using a wide range of studies. Moreover, individual and social effects with respect to agency are not linked but they co-influence each other. It is also foremost to know that agency, just like identity, is not a permanent status and it is rather continuously constructed and changed. Ultimately, the concept of a professional agency is vital for

enhancing life and agency is not a permanent status and it is rather continuously constructed and fluid (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In addition to better understanding the idea of agency, Nikolaidis (2018) suggests explanation by approaching it with elaboration on a couple of notions. The first one is about the position of the agent as the doer or the subject of the operation. It was believed that agency takes place when one is the operator and the doer of the action. Meanwhile the criticism on this notion is that the human interactions are more convoluted than simply finding the performer of the action. It must be taken into account that the actual agent might only encourage or provide a suitable situation for others to undertake that action. It means practicing and exercising an action through someone else should be noted in this discussion as well (Nikolaidis, 2018).

The other notion in this context that builds the basis for explaining the idea of agency is intentionality of the agent. Nikolaidis (2018) claims that acting or doing in essence are not sufficient for suspecting the existence of agency. Agency is only there when performance of an action is accompanied by willfulness. However in the explanation of intentionality there are two factors that must be reviewed thoroughly. The first factor that needs to be reminded is whether the action that was done by the agent was in his favor with regards to his benefits and interests. The next factor is the position of the agent and his thoughts about the action and its results meaning even if he considers the action to be in line with his desires, agency can be labeled (Nikolaidis, 2018). Agency is considered as a tool to improve and effect a variety of subjects. For example, a direct link between professional agency and better performance is proven (Vähäsantanen et al. 2017). The effects of professional agency are not just limited to enhanced performance. The prominent role of professional agency in educational leadership and, in specific, shared leadership leads to higher achievements (Hökkä, Rautiainen, Silander, & Eteläpelto, 2018).

In conclusion the concept of agency is mainly an explanation of an intentional action that is performed in order to change a variable in the surrounding of a person

(Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, & Robinson, 2015). This action can be performed by the agent himself or by manipulation of others by the agent when he considers the action to be in his favor (Nikolaidis, 2018). In addition the idea of agency is not about existence or non-existence of it in a person, in fact it is a discussion of mindful exercise of it when needed in order to make the most of what is available (Charteris, & Smardon, 2018). Seppälä (2015) discusses that a single definition of the concept of agency cannot be as comprehensive and rather than doing so a comprehension should be achieved by including several approaches. To conclude in this chapter, the understanding of agency which can further open up this discussion within the framework of this thesis, is the capability of activeness in social context with consideration of cultural complications (Ahearn, 2001).

3.2 Agency in Educational Context

To take the concept of agency one step forward and make it more relevant to this thesis, the literature which referred to agency in educational context is reviewed as follows. The first point in this discussion is that one of the most important bases of agency in the field of education is motivation; therefore, it must be noted that when agency is discussed, the idea of motives and possession of motivation follows (Willcocks, 2017). In the educational context, agency is generally a multifaceted concept that acknowledges the importance of students' decision-making skills; further, the decisions should be aligned with one's benefits which enables the students to take control of their own life and wellbeing (Baxter, 2019). Student agency is also referred to as the ability to manage one's learning meaning that students take ownership of their learning. This process has significant effects on academic achievement as students take an active role in seeking and internalizing new knowledge; hence, better learning outcomes are achieved with the exercise of agency (Zeiser, Scholz, & Cirks, 2018).

Alongside with taking actions and one's set of values, the way one reacts to different dimensions of his life such as culture, society and economy fall into the

definition of agency which draws a clear picture how one can influence his surrounding rather than being solely influenced by it when agency is executed. Despite the emphasis on the individual traits, agency is a rather socially constructed concept (DeJaeghere, & Josić, 2016). Moreover, it is a socio-cognitive process that not only reacts to external events but also discusses self-quest of proactiveness, self-organization, self-regulation and self-reflection, it means that agency is a fluid concept which takes place in interaction of personal and social aspects (McLaughlin, 2018). Further, The concept of agency in this framework includes “personal, situational and social parameters” that determine actions in this context (Yakışık, Fişne, & Ekşi, 2019, p. 1318). Moreover, the concept of agency in the educational context “refers to what a student *thinks* and *does* in a particular context at a particular time, and is, therefore, fluid, dynamic and subjectively experienced, rather than a fixed state of mind or an innate orientation to learning” (Willcocks, 2017, p. 47).

In review of the concept of agency in the context of education the fact that agency has connectedness to power and its relations must not go missing (Wedin, & Aho, 2019). In addition, Dargusch and Charteris (2018) claim that exercise of agency and capacity of students with regards to taking agentic actions in general can be encouraged and enhanced by providing the students with adequate opportunities to participate and take initiative to act on their learning activities. This is achieved by providing an open atmosphere where students are the center of the education (Dargusch, & Charteris, 2018). The importance of students’ agency is very well manifested in Tsenc and Newton’s study (2001) where they found that befriending with other students and reaching out for support are among the vital coping strategies of international students when it comes to managing their stress and as a result maintaining a balanced mental wellbeing. Agency clearly encapsulates these two aforementioned traits because it has proactiveness in its essence together with the capability of better defining one’s personal relations (McLaughlin, 2018; Vähäsantanen et al. 2017). This naturally lays out the prominence of the concept of exercise of agency in this thesis which is discussed in

light of further academic texts in the following chapter.

3.3 The Interactions of Agency and Mental Wellbeing: The Secondary Link

It must be noted that there are not a lot of studies supporting a connection between agency and mental wellbeing. This section was written by connecting findings of different studies to further open up why these concepts were decided to be investigated in one place. It was the author's sense of questioning that led him to draw this conclusion. This should be taken into account that his understanding of these studies presented a secondary link between agency and mental wellbeing in a way that exercise of agency showed the potential to be effective in limiting the effects of hindering factors and strengthening the enablers of mental wellbeing of international students. On this note, one of the main inspirations to investigate agency and the mental wellbeing was that various studies showed that exercise of agency could propose solutions to the problems that hinder the mental wellbeing of international students.

For example, encountering discrimination and difficulties to find local friends have direct negative effects on mental wellbeing (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). These issues convey a feeling of isolation, loneliness and in some cases end up in a state of depression which brings a whole lot of problems for international students. Meanwhile practice of agency challenges discrimination that has been experienced by international students by utilizing a support web of friends and acquaintances to provide international students with enough information on local rules and laws to upset the constraints they faced regarding the racial discrimination (Wall et al., 2017). This is an example of how exercise of agency could play an integral in sustenance of a balanced mental wellbeing by limiting the negative results of a hindering factor that might seem unavoidable at the first glance.

It must be taken into account that having a well-functioning social circle or a group of friends is, as a matter of fact, one of the most common coping mechanisms

when it comes to handling the issues international students are more likely to encounter (Tsenc, & Newton, 2001). In addition, creation of a new social circle is considered challenging for international students (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018), however, it has been shown that participants in an identity coaching program reported that enhanced status regarding agency assisted them to better define their social relations, interactions and necessary limitations for these relations (Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). In spite of not having a direct link between these two studies, it can be concluded that when one can better define his personal relations, he can find creation of a new social circle more convenient. This, indeed, is the claimed secondary link. It does have further implications because when one can create his social circle mindfully, he has a number of ways to benefit from it. For instance, getting help in academic matters like university assignment, adjusting to the host society smoothly by the help of local friends. As a result a reduction in the experience of stress regarding cultural assimilation is eminent (Calikoglu, 2018; Alharbi, & Smith, 2018; Tsenc, & Newton, 2001). In this context, Pyhältö and Keskinen (2012) found that the existence of agency leads to higher participation in academic settings. Further, the exercise of agency opens doors to international students to become more socially active which can not only come in handy for befriending with new people but also boost their personality by enhancing their self-esteem level (DeJaeghere, & Josić, 2016). These instances together with the findings of Pyhältö and Keskinen (2012), that claim exercise of agency is directly linked to betterment of mental wellbeing, draw a clear picture of how the exercise of agency can have a secondary connection in enhancing the mental wellbeing of international students and if not resolving, providing solutions to the commonly experienced problems that put mental wellbeing of international students in danger.

A respect of the exercise of agency in the context of education is a constant reflection on oneself to be able to look into the roots of the problems, evaluate them and deal with them (McLaughlin, 2018). Self-reflection lays out a platform to run a similar operation on what seems to be working in order to repeat and maximize its

effectiveness on the next attempt (McLaughlin, 2018). This skill is much needed by the international students because their other sources of support and ports of receiving feedback are limited (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2003). The ability to reflect on oneself is indeed an exigent tool which facilitates the process of reaching out for support by knowing the kind of support that is needed. Furthermore, the idea of proactiveness, as the name is very much self-explanatory, refers to taking initiative and control (McLaughlin, 201; Baxter, 2019). This idea is taken to the next level in the context of this study meaning that proactiveness is when one decides to influence his surroundings as opposed to being solely influenced by it. The nature of this concept makes one solution-oriented. The idea of agency is about standing up and doing something in the midst of a fast and ever-changing world in front of you (Baxter, 2019). Proactiveness in the context of international students can be central in solving issues with regards to academic participation that is often limited because of the language barrier for example (Constantine et al., 2004). These instances of exercise of agency illustrates the interactions of it with a majority of the issues that are hindering the mental wellbeing of international students.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Research Aim

This study is in pursuit of finding out how agency is understood and exercised. Next it is committed to investigate what has negative repercussions and what has scaffolding influence on mental wellbeing of international students in the context of Finnish higher education. It is hoped that the findings of this research could convince universities to reevaluate their support systems and better define them especially in finding more ways to empower international students' agency. The main rationale for this insistence is that support systems of universities play a key role in the mental wellbeing of international students. For instance, Cho and Yu (2015) realized that support systems of universities are effective in both reducing stress and enhancing students' school-life satisfaction. Additionally, the results will be able to assist the universities to be more inclusive of international students and also provide them with agency coaching workshops, programs and even courses that not only help them cope with their challenges and therefore boost their wellbeing, but also support them in their process of integration into the local community. Consequently, such programs can scaffold international students' wellbeing cost-efficiently, regardless of all the problems they face as it has been explained above. The findings of this thesis also provides a platform for universities to get a deeper understanding of different adversities international students encounter in Finland. This can assist the universities to get a better understanding of the needs and requirements of international students by having scientific evidence on their mental wellbeing..

This study is aimed to find investigate agency and mental wellbeing of international students This thesis will be dedicated to finding out the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the hindering and supporting factors for the mental wellbeing of international students in Finland?
2. How do international students exercise their agency?

4.2 Participants of the Study

In the context of higher education in Finland, it should be taken into account that there are two paths that international students can pursue their studies in Finnish tertiary education, universities, and universities of applied sciences. There are 13 universities in Finland and 22 universities of applied sciences. In summary, what separates these two types of higher education institutes is their orientation. Universities of applied sciences are focused on vocational education and often have deeper ties with companies and workplaces which offer education on bachelor's and master's degree levels, whereas universities have a scientific approach and are more research-based which make education from bachelor's degree all the way up to doctoral studies available. There are controversies on the quality of education available at these different university types and on which is more held valid and prestigious. The claims with regards to these discussions are, required to be critically scrutinized, beyond the aspiration of this paper. The author refers to both types of tertiary education in Finland as 'universities' throughout this thesis since there was no meaningful distinction found and all other divergences are believed to be irrelevant to the subject of this study.

Table 1 Insights to participants' profile.

| Participants | Duration of stay | University type | University degree |
|--------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| P1 | 9 years | Both | Bachelor's and Master's |
| P2 | 5 years | Both | Bachelor's and Master's |
| P3 | 3 months | University | Master's |
| P4 | 14 months | University | Master's |

| | | | |
|----|-----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| P5 | 2.5 years | University | Master's |
| P6 | 5 years | University of Applied Sciences | Bachelor's |
| P7 | 6 years | Both | Bachelor's and Master's |

The main reason for having participants at different stages of their studies is to see if their status in this context changes over the course of time, especially because the literature suggests that agency for example is a fluid concept (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). The participants study a variety of subjects at both universities and universities of applied sciences. This will assist this current study to investigate possible dissimilarities or similarities between students of universities of applied sciences and universities or different subjects. The position of the interviewer/researcher in the interviews was especially important because he is a member of the target group of this study. Hence, the friendship model that was developed by Rubin & Rubin (2005) was taken as the researcher's stance. Therefore, there is no denying the fact that the researcher was to a limited extent involved in his standpoint (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). With acknowledging this point, the possible biases were tried to be identified and remedied to get as close as probable to deliberate naïveté. The researcher constantly tried to stay as neutral as possible with being open to new perspectives and free of presumptions (Kvale, 1996) to maintain fairness during the data collection phase. The interviewer did his best not to tunnel vision of the participants by projecting his understanding of the concepts.

4.3 Data Collection

To find out the answers to the questions of this research, qualitative interviews were chosen for collecting the data. The main reason for this decision is the fact that utilization of this method can provide a holistic view of this whole matter with the access to the opinions, ideas, experiences and emotions (Brinkmann, & Kvale, 2015). Interviews can serve the purpose of this study since it is an attempt to find out more

about participants' challenges and understandings of concepts of mental wellbeing and agency. Moreover, individual interviews provide the needed in-depth data, given the complication of the concepts in question of this paper. Individual interviews were conducted to facilitate the possibility for the participants who might want to share challenges and difficulties especially in the context of mental wellbeing.

Regarding the structure of the interviews, a middle ground between structured and unstructured interviews was selected because unstructured interviews are often demanding and require a skillful researcher. On the other hand, structured interviews could limit the participants to freely share noteworthy data and the researcher to access more information when needed. Semi-structured interviews make enough room for the interviewer to come up with a follow-up question whenever an opportunity exposes itself (Tracy, 2019). However, there was a literature-based list of questions (See Table 2) that assist the researcher to avoid unnecessary deviations. Every single question of the interview was designed based on the reviewed literature on the main two concepts of this paper which are agency and mental wellbeing. In addition, another interview type that was utilized was respondent because all of the participants have the same roll and share more or less similar status; In addition, this study attempts to find out opinions of every single one of them without ranking participants or prioritizing one or some of them (Tracy, 2019).

Table 2 List of interview questions and their origins in theories and literatures

| Concept | Questions | Reference | Theory |
|-----------|--|--|----------------------------|
| Wellbeing | How did you feel when you started your studies? •How do you feel now? If the feeling is different? why? | (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015) | Emotional circumstances |
| Wellbeing | What are the challenges you have faced? What are the nice experiences you have had? | (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018) | Prone to face challenges |
| Wellbeing | Do you feel you are accepted in Finnish society? | (Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008) | Acceptance by host society |
| Wellbeing | Do you have a sense of belonging to the university? To Finland? To any other group? | (Poyrazli, et al, 2004; | Assimilation and |

| | | | |
|------------------|--|---|--|
| | | Yeh, & Inose, 2003) | sense of belonging |
| Wellbeing | Have you experienced ...? 1. Anxiety 2. Depression 3. Loneliness 4. Discrimination | 1. (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018) 2. (Calikoglu, 2018) 3. (Chavajay, & Skowronek, 2018) | 1. Anxiety and depression are common 2. Loneliness is common 3. Discrimination is common |
| Wellbeing | Have the university support system, friends, university staff, lecturers assisted you? How? | (Cho, & Yu, 2015) | Reducing stress and enhancing satisfaction |
| Agency | Have you been able to reach out for help when needed? How? | (McLaughlin, 2018) | Proactiveness |
| Agency | Have you been able to articulate your concerns? Do you usually find it easy to find out the reason behind your feelings? | (McLaughlin, 2018) | Self-reflection |
| Agency | Have you been able to mention your challenges to anyone? | (McLaughlin, 2018) | Proactiveness |
| Agency | Do you think you have a say in group activities? | (DeJaeghere, & Josić, 2016) | Reacting to society |
| Agency | Have you been able to change something at your university? | (Baxter, 2019; Tsenc, & Newton, 2001) | Taking control |
| Agency | In which situations did you solve your problem on your own? | (Baxter, 2019) | Taking control of one's own wellbeing |
| Agency | Do you find it easy to take part in classroom discussions? •How about the beginning? | (Zeiser, Scholz, & Cirks, 2018) • (Eteläpelto et al. 2013) | Activity in learning / Classroom activity •Fluid concept that changes over time |
| Agency | How did you make new friends? | (McLaughlin, 2018) | Proactiveness |

The sources of data for this study are a combination of a convenience sample and a snowball sample. Since there was a shortage in time and funds for this research, the researcher heavily relied on his personal contacts to get enough participants. Moreover, it was asked from the participants to recommend other participants to achieve the maximum diversity in every possible way despite the scarcity of resources. However,

according to Tracy (2019), each of these samples have their own downsides that need to be taken into account when selected. The convenience sample can come short in explanation of complexity in abstract concepts and it might not seem as rigorous. To be able to have participants with a variety of backgrounds and more varied a mini snowball sample was chosen as explained.

Nevertheless, because people are likely to recommend friends and acquaintances who are like-minded with them, a snowball sample can easily create a bias as a consequence of identical data. To minimize this risk, no more than one recommended participant from each original participant was selected. In order to provide more accurate and trustworthy data and the result by having a miscellaneous sample researcher, it was tried to have participants from both genders, four males and three females but it should be reminded that the interviewer did not ask the participants to identify their gender since he did not find any rationales for it therefore the genders are the assumption of the author, with a variety of backgrounds, studying different fields at various stages of their studies in dissimilar cities and universities in Finland. There were seven individual interviews with international students from six different countries who were either studying their bachelor's or master's degree program. Therefore, there were participants from five different universities in four different cities in Finland, studying first, second, third or the fourth year of their studies and have been living in Finland from three months up to over nine years. The average duration of these seven interviews was approximately 40 minutes.

4.4 Qualitative Content Analysis

As for the analysis of the data, qualitative content analysis method which is “a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action” (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 108), was chosen. The main rationale behind

this selection was mainly because of the cogency and relevance of this particular method to the requirements of this study (Krippendorff, 2004). Qualitative content analysis provides adequate flexibility to accommodate the possibility to link the data and the existing academic literature which is one of the main targets of this paper (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). With elaborated utilization of qualitative content analysis, the author was equipped with tools to approach the concepts in the research problems using the collected data (Schreier, 2014).

4.4.1 Analysis

As soon as the data was collected in October 2019, the analysis process began. First, every interview was transcribed carefully and the audio recorded files were put into textual data in word files. The data provided 126 pages of text with font size 12 and 1.5 lines spacing. Meanwhile, all the names were deleted and pseudonyms were assigned. To maximize the protection participants' privacy, identifiers or anything that could be connected to a specific person was removed from the data. It was also taken into account that the names of the cities or the universities were kept in secrecy so they were either deleted or given pseudonyms. The next step in the process of analysis was the preparation of and familiarization with the data. The data was listened to and read on numerous occasions to circle initial results (Tracy, 2019). In addition, the author started to contemplate various options for selecting the unit of analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). During this phase that the researcher studied and reflected upon the data, he also took note of the primary findings and constantly reviewed them (Thomson, & Hall, 2016). At this stage he already started to think about the next steps of the analysis process and evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of different qualitative content analysis approaches.

After consideration and through involvement with the collected data, deductive content analysis was chosen mainly because the investigated concepts of this thesis have been extensively researched on but this specific study looks at them in a new

context which is Finnish higher education. The other reason was because the questions of the interview were created based on the reviewed academic texts. Consequently, they already gathered a practical framework for the analysis of the data using the existing theories. The researcher decided to utilize this framework and take advantage of it as a resource. The deductive content analysis approach might not be as frequently utilized as an inductive approach but involves creating the categories and codes based on the existing literature (Zhang, & Wildemuth, 2009). Deductive approach can also be referred to as directed content analysis which not only assists the researcher to navigate more accurately towards the realization of the answers to the research problems but also “it can provide predictions about the variables of interest or about the relationships among variables, thus helping to determine the initial coding scheme or relationships between codes” (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). As Elo & Kyngäs (2008) discuss the approach of the data analysis process should be based on the requirements of the research and to serve the researcher with sufficient instruments to find out the answers to the research questions. As has been mentioned, deductive content analysis was evaluated to be the most efficient for this paper.

In order to organize the data in a systematic way, the analysis process proceeded with the search for examples from the data of, preformed codes, and themes. It is noteworthy to bear in mind that in this research the main two themes were taken from the main two concepts, namely agency and mental wellbeing, because in this way it was more convenient to navigate and find more relevant codes with the exploitation of the reviewed literature (Zhang, & Wildemuth, 2009). Unlike the process of creating categories based on textual data in a way that one takes a portion of data as a meaning unit and continue condensing the unit until a code is formed and then organizing the codes under a bigger umbrella as a category (Graneheim, & Lundman, 2004), instead of the categories for this study, codes were formed based on the literature. This was done by reviewing how the main two concepts of this thesis were defined by the reviewed theories. Then defining points were identified and taken as the preformed codes.

However, the examples from the data that were used for this research followed pretty much the same pattern as the way Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017) suggest for codes. The examples from the data were meaning units that emerged from the data and the actual answers of the participants. However, one step of what Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017) proposed was not taken into account: condensation of the meaning units. The author decided not to take that step since it was perceived it had no clear added value to this specific study. In addition, the researcher also decided to include meaning units that represent the lack or absence of instances of each preformed code in the analysis process since they are as foremost as the presence of examples of theories (see Table 3). In Table 3 the examples of the data that are presented are from different interviews and the idea of having them together is just to give the reader an idea of the general principles that were followed during the analysis procedure.

In summary, the categorization matrix that Elo and Kyngäs (2008) suggested for the deductive or directed analysis was taken into account as for the general guideline of the analysis part of this research. When the codes are based and drawn from the previous studies and each part of the data that corresponds to a certain code is noted under it is considered as an example of a categorization matrix (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The themes, the codes and the examples from the data were studied in order to reach certainty of their effectiveness and ability to cover all the data. This assessment left the researcher with some reflections. After revision and assessment of the system that was created, the researcher realized the preformed codes were unable to include all parts of the data which were analyzed (Zhang, & Wildemuth, 2009). Therefore, the researcher decided to follow the patterns of inductive analysis and created two new categories that were not necessarily directly related to only one of the themes of this research but still worthwhile to be reported and considered. These categories were Academic Freedom and University Support System. Then the parts of the data that were not taken as instances of the codes formed their own codes using similar principles as inductive content analysis in a qualitative study in order to cover all parts of the data and not

leave anything behind and unattended (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Table 3 An example of data analysis

| Theme | Preformed codes | Example from the data |
|-----------|---|---|
| Agency | Proactiveness (McLaughlin, 2018) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Not asking a lot of questions in classroom b. Expression of feelings and emotions |
| | Fluid concept (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Better and stronger relationships after four years b. Feeling more in control after a semester |
| | Reacting to society (DeJaeghere, & Josić, 2016) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Participation in a lot of university-based social gatherings b. Speaking out when there is a problem |
| | Friends as a coping mechanism (Tsenc, & Newton, 2001) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Friends often helped with the academic issues b. Friends were helpful in including him/her into more social activities |
| Wellbeing | Sense of belonging (Poyrazli, et al, 2004; Yeh, & Inose, 2003) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A strong sense of belonging to the community of countrymates during BA b. Feeling attached to classmates |
| | Challenges, nice experiences (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Struggles with the new academic system b. Cold weather and long dark days |
| | Acceptance by the host society (Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Not having any connections to the society out of the university b. Not having any negative experiences with this regard |

4.4.2 Trustworthiness and Limitations

As for the discussion of the trustworthiness of the analysis process of this research, the researcher first referred to the evaluation criteria developed by Lincoln & Guba (1985)

in order to assess this paper. The four core criteria were credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. The guidelines and descriptions that were presented by Elo & Kyngäs (2008) were also used to better navigate through these steps. One of the methods to found credibility is to be involved with the topics and subjects of the research (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). The other characteristic of credible research is the ability of the categories to cover all the collected data (Elo, & Kyngäs, 2008). In the case of this current paper, the researcher has arguably spent a vast amount of time on the field and been engaged with this matter extensively since he is a part of the community in question of this paper. Even though this research is not claiming to be transferable, especially because the contextual consideration and cultural appropriation are vital for both concepts of this paper, the researcher attempted to keep the description of each part of this paper as elaborated as possible to be able to reach an acceptable level of transferability (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985).

Additionally, Lincoln & Guba (1985) explained the steps of the establishment of dependability and confirmability with regards to being reviewed by other researchers who did not participate in any stages of this research. In order to tackle this issue, a number of the author's peers were involved in reviewing details of the mechanics of the analysis in a variety of occasions but with extreme caution to protect participants' anonymity and secrecy. Dependability is a multilayered idea that "refers to the stability of data over time and under different conditions" (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014, p. 4). To be able to respond to this point the researcher did his best to have a suitable sample to include most possible conditions and time periods. Having gone through the above-mentioned measures for trustworthiness left the author with some reflection. It was realized that some of the techniques are not appropriate nor applicable in the context of this research with consideration of the author's position and status. As Tracy (2019, p. 228) believes "such criteria are not "discovered" but *constructed*" (p. 228). Therefore, as opposed to claiming this paper is objective, the author decides to make it clear to the reader that he was not even going for objectivity

which is a controversial concept and can easily be challenged. In this matter, reliability was also critically evaluated by the author since going for a qualitative study of human interactions and experiences, if not completely, is next to impossible to repeat (Tracy, 2019). Therefore, rather than trying to justify how this study is reliable, the author decided to provide the readers with adequate details of the different stages of this research.

There are several limitations to this study. To begin with the limitations, once again the position of the author must be taken into account. The author shared the same status with the participants of this thesis which emphasizes that this study does not, did not want to, claim to be objective. It was next to impossible to write this thesis without a reflection on the experiences of the author no matter how hard it was tried for. The biases, pre-formed judgments, assumptions and ideas of the researcher did influence this thesis as a whole even though they were limited extensively. The author also knew some of the participants personally which could affect the data collection and analysis phases. Moreover, the number of the participants could have been much more. The concepts of this study were sensitive for some of the participants which made parts of the interview really difficult for them and the interviewer and might have affected how much of their lived experiences they shared.

The design of this study introduced some limitations to the transferability of the findings of this thesis. As it has been repeatedly suggested, utilization of mixed methods was probably the best choice to answer the aspirations of this thesis (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018). However, due to the several scarcities in resources which were mentioned in this study, it was not feasible to take adequate measures in order to conduct a comprehensive study which gives a holistic view of the main concepts of this thesis.

4.4.3 Ethical Reflection

There were some limitations that were brought to the researcher's attention when

deductive analysis was chosen. The most important problem that the researcher must take note of when selecting deductive or directed approach of qualitative content analysis, is the tendency to only include, or more focus on, parts of the data that confirm the presumptions of the researcher which had been set by the reviewed academic literature (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005). To remedy this bias, the researcher spent a considerable amount of time studying the data in order to extract more codes. It was tried not to only settle with the codes and categories that emerged from the literature. The next issue with this approach is the fact that when the questions of the interviews are heavily based on literature, interviewees might get some prompts or signals about what they are expected to talk about (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005). This risk has the potential to call the ethics of the research project into question. Therefore, the questions of the interviews in the data collection phase were designed as neutral as the ability of the author allowed. During the interviews and when asking the questions, the researcher intentionally tried to keep the tone and intonations neutral as well. The next item that Hsieh & Shannon (2005) discuss as the limitation of the directed approach is the lack of emphasis on the context. They claim that in this approach the researchers rely on the theory more than consideration of the context. However, what makes this paper relative is its focus on the new context.

With the awareness of the importance of the author's responsibility and accountability on the ethical considerations, the researcher was extra cautious to ensure that the participants are respected, protected and away from all sorts of harms. In this context Tracy's (2012) guidelines on procedural ethics and situational ethics were taken into account. The researcher contacted the participants individually in order to connect with them on a personal level so that later on the process of gaining mutual understanding and trust would be facilitated. The participants were explained briefly the overview of the research and got introduced to the researcher as well. After that the themes of the questions that they would be asked during the interview were discussed to provide them with enough insight. Next the participants were sent the consent form

(see Appendix 1) and a thorough privacy notice in line with European Union GDPR framework well in advance to have enough time to go through them thoroughly to make an informed decision on if they want to participate in this research project or not. In addition, as it was mentioned earlier all the possible identifiers or pieces of information that could easily be connected to a specific person were deleted immediately. The privacy of the participants was the top priority of the researcher therefore it was handled carefully for example, the collected data after removal of the identifiers is saved in password-protected files. As it was explained to and agreed with the participants, the collected data was completely deleted and destroyed upon completion of this research.

The participants were interacted with respect and dignity throughout the research process of this study. By this, it is meant that the participants were treated as human beings rather than the research subjects by consideration of their principles and standpoints (Tracy, 2012). The other noteworthy ethical consideration which is central and essential to any academic research is the position of the researcher and his possible biases (Tracy, 2012). This was comprehensively thought through and the researcher decided to take a few steps to be able to respond to it. First, these possible biases were identified and acknowledged. Then the ones which were clear were tried to be understood and realized in order to be capable of coming up with appropriate solutions. Once this was done, the researcher avoided them as much as possible in a variety of ways such as creating neutral interview questions or taking several measurements for the trustworthiness of the research. Finally, the ones which were considered inevitable were elaborately reported and explained to the reader of this paper. In order to guarantee the privacy and anonymity of the students who participated in this project, the participants are regarded as P without any gender pronouns and assigned numbers, however, any other identifiers are removed or replaced by an alphabetic letter. The numbers assigned to each participant has nothing to do with the order of their participation in this research project. It is important to note

that almost all of the points in the findings are interconnected. Therefore, it was challenging, in essence, to separate them and write about every single one.

5 RESULTS

During this section the findings of this paper are presented. The results of the analysis which are complemented by the exact quotes of the participants offer insights to the main concepts in the discussion of this thesis. In addition, the findings are categorized into different headings that represent the core concepts of this study to propose answers to the problems that have been established. Generally, the headings and subheadings used in this section are for better navigating through the findings rather than the clear-cut distinction between each point.

5.1 Wellbeing: Hindering and Supporting Factors

As opposed to the academic literature included in this paper, the author decided to present the findings in the theme of mental wellbeing with the concrete reasons mentioned by the participants. The tendency of the reviewed texts was to mention issues such as anxiety, acculturative stress, discrimination, loneliness and etc. However, in this paper the findings refer to what is being these issues and focuses on what caused them. Meanwhile, the tools and circumstances where positive feelings and experiences emerged from the told stories by the international students in the interviews, are recounted to facilitate navigation through this paper and better understand what has the actual capability to scaffold the mental wellbeing of international students studying at Finnish universities.

5.1.1 Double-edged Sword Factors

The participants mentioned some factors that both positively and negatively influenced

their mental wellbeing. They are as follows.

Sense of Belonging

The participants had a hard time computing whether they have developed a sense of belonging to the country of Finland or not. Especially, the participants who had not stayed for a long time could not see themselves as if they belonged to Finland. Furthermore, the complication broadens when students who had stayed in Finland for years still did not feel this sense, for instance, there were participants who had stayed in Finland for a long time but at the moment of the interview were struggling with the sense of belonging to Finland. Yet, there were a few participants who directly linked a strong sense of belonging to Finland because of the young age they moved to Finland and the length of their stay.

“I have a sense of belonging because I think I came here at a young age and my adulthood basically started in Finland. ... I always say that Finland has been like a second mother to me. ... I almost always meet really helpful and friendly people.” (P7)

The other respect of sense of belonging was having this feeling to smaller communities like to the university or the class where these students study. The students, all in all, experienced this level of belonging far more positively in comparison to their feeling to the country for example. Despite this level of a sense of belonging, some of the participants still felt a huge gap between what they were used to in their home country mirroring the intricacy of this concept because even in cases that every measurable aspect is taken care of in acceptable shape, the feeling might not just form.

“Then here I do have a very good like I have developed a very good connection with my university now, but does it feel like home? no.” (P3)

On the other hand, most of the participants discussed how they felt they belonged at their university in a way or another. According to the students, this feeling was fostered when they felt they are personally cared for even in non-academic matters. The sense of belonging also developed when students felt they were a significant part of the

university by participating in extracurricular activities. The other determining factor in having a sense of belonging was found to be the social circle.

“ (I have a sense of belonging towards) University since I am a part of a student association, I think that made me feel a part of the university like I had some sort of a place in the university, some significance. I think that mattered. Class? Definitely. I mean, the, the one of the best groups that have been part of, definitely feel very attached to my class, feel a sense of belonging every time I meet my classmates.” (P4)

“I don't feel there's any walls basically between the Finns and me as an international; They tried to be very understanding like we're talking socially wise now then like when we're all around, they try to keep it in English. ... As for others, I'm not part of a lot of communities so like it's the school and the friends and the work. And in the three of them, I felt like I belong.” (P6)

Developing a sense of belonging was not as complex as it seems based on the participants. Whenever the interviewed international students felt they were wanted or a part of a group, no matter how big that group was, they felt they belonged there. This sense was conveyed to them by involving them in basic activities, inclusion in social interactions and mutual respect.

Support Systems of Universities

University support systems are presented due to their significance and repercussions both positively and negatively on the mental wellbeing of international students based on findings of this study. In the discussion of universities support systems, the findings of this current study suggest that they can be the missing factors in connecting the dots of mental wellbeing. However, ramifications of these systems besides their variety at different universities presented different outcomes as findings. It cannot be claimed that all support systems failed or succeeded. They were subjective and every bit and part of these systems had separate chain reactions. Yet, what was apparent since the beginning of the analysis, having a broken system to support international students was far better than not having any systems at all. In search of what actually works at support systems of Finnish universities the unified response from the students was “tutors”. Tutoring

systems slightly differed at each university but apparently most of the universities and universities of applied sciences do perform this activity. This group of newcomers who are looked after by their tutors organically formed a social circle. Keeping in mind the intricacies of the creation of a new social circle for international students, in the beginning, this system was mentioned by the participants to be vital in lifting pressure from their shoulders.

“There were these tutors who I went to a few parties with and then I met people. And then I got to know a few people again.” (P3)

According to the participants, tutors were critical to the procedure of settling in Finland because they were recurrently available for them. They were mentioned by some of the participants as the main source of information on administrative and other everyday life activities like shopping. In addition, next to some orientation activities without advantageous ends, interviewees reported an ample amount of such activities that not only turned out to be productive but also supported their mental wellbeing. For instance, trips that were planned by the universities were mentioned to be one of the best ones. There are a few universities that plan a short trip to the countryside or in some cases to another country in the process of orienting the newcomers. During these trips students easily created a bond among themselves since the atmosphere encouraged them to get to know one another on a deeper level.

“The whole thing in the first week where they just want you to make friends and everything (supported my wellbeing). Yeah, that worked out pretty well, despite me actually thinking down of those activities ... but they were pretty successful. I enjoyed all of them.” (P6)

The other application of orientation activities in the sustenance of mental wellbeing was to show the students how they can reach out for help. It was reported that in successful programs, university authorities made it crystal clear to newcomers that they could be approached no matter what. Moreover, the deliberation of the availability of support systems of universities happened to have multilayers. The students presented a pattern that there were two levels of general support systems, personal support, and academic

support. The support on personal mental wellbeing level mostly provided services with guidance and counseling sections of each university and made university psychologists available for instance. The academic level was the discussion of aid in study-related issues and other relative concerns with this regard. The experiences of participants appeared to contradict one another, drawing a clear picture of the variety and dissimilarities of support systems at every single university. There were ones that reported high satisfaction with either personal or academic level of support and ones who considered these systems inadequate.

The startling factor was when international students considered the support sufficient but communications of this availability were extremely poor making these services hidden especially for the ones in most urgency. There were instances of general satisfaction with how the support systems operate. The main reason for this positive impression was nothing complex. It was simply straightforward and uncomplicated communication of basic services complemented with the availability of university authorities that made the difference.

“Basically, like whenever I had a problem, I tried to reach the professor at the first point, and most of the time I could get the answer by reaching the professor but besides I know that like, there were psychologist to help students whenever they had some difficulties with studying and like, generally life in Finland.” (P7)

“A lot of services (are available) but not reaching people. There's this idea of just having things out there and expecting people to sort of find out about it on their own. So there's not a lot of, like explicit, vocal advertising about anything.” (P4)

There was also a clear paucity of awareness and familiarity of international students and their requirements among some of the university authorities found. This problem was also present in the following ‘Academic Freedom’ section but in the context of support systems, some interviewees provided the fact that international students were often viewed as a homogenous group and their diverse backgrounds were not only unacknowledged but also ignored.

“I felt that there was more support needed that they should care more about the (international) students, like everyone comes from a different background and

they are not accustomed to this system. ... students can have emotional problems, academic problems, all sorts of problems. And when someone is coming over emotional problems, he is always going to lack in his academics or if he is not doing well in the academics, he's going to have some emotional impact as well. So that is what they need to get feedback, like you cannot just start a course.”
(P3)

It should be mentioned that a lack of administrative support created stressful situations for some students. It was reported that there were times and situations in which university authorities assumed international students could naturally work out their problems. For instance P5 found him/herself left alone with administrative tasks because he/she was expected to know how things work without concrete ways of support: *“The thing that is missing a lot is academic help. ... So I mean, administratively and academically, no help at all. But psychological wellbeing? Yes (there are services)”*. Conversely, P2 found his/her university academic support working well without any complaints: *“Regarding the studies, if I have questions about exams or something like that or support, I feel I receive enough.”*. This shows the drastic difference in individuals’ experiences.

The interviewees came up with how they think support systems could be enhanced. One of the ways that was repeated was a call for universities to interfere and play a more active role in the inclusion of international students in extracurricular activities. The suggestion to facilitate the entrance of international students into the usually Finnish-students dominant activities was, P3: *“They should have a participation criterion, like so many Finnish students, so many international students so that they all get to mingle around.”*. The other area for improvement of university support systems was career services. It was believed by the participants that universities should fill the void of connecting companies and businesses to the students. Some participants considered this issue particularly pivotal because they related stress and anxiety with finding job opportunities.

Academic Freedom

The case of academic freedom is special and unique in the context of this thesis. First of

all, academic freedom did not have a position in the original set of interview questions. However, it came up and was mentioned by almost all of the participants in a way or another making it essential to be reported. Some of the interviewees mentioned that it is generally believed that academic freedom is working and functioning therefore it does not need to be changed nor even bent. There were international students who struggled with this system a lot and the ones who could get the most of it. The students pointed out one of the possibilities this system brings which was the flexibility of choosing what they wanted to learn. Of course there were a number of mandatory courses students have to pass in order to graduate but having the opportunity to study entrepreneurship courses while majoring in biology, for example, was a fascinating factor.

“It was stressful but I like to learn ... It was nice that I could take courses in my master's. For example, I took courses with journalism students, management students, and business students. It is just nice and flexible and allows me to learn what I want to learn.” (P1)

There were also participants who mostly perceived this given autonomy as a perfect experience but their main difference with others, who had different opinions, was their educational background. They came from school structures that were working with the same, more or less, mechanics as the Finnish universities. This put them on an advantageous stance because they were ready to make the most of the opportunity of academic freedom by already having a clear mind on how to navigate their studies. In addition, some participants considered academic freedom to have enhanced their creativity by giving them room and control. It was believed this avenue was where learning happened and was maximized but at the expense of extra confusion and ambiguity for some students.

“So I also realized that the ambiguity of the assignments of the tasks lead to a lot of creativity in the final outcomes and a lot of diversity in the final outcomes. ... And that's where I think, the learning for me really happened in almost every course when I got to hear from others, about how they interpreted the task, and the people had different readings.” (P3)

With the acknowledgment of all the great opportunities academic freedom provided

international students with, it was also reported to be a source of anxiety, confusion and in extreme cases demotivation for studies, in the experiences of a few interviewees. The main issue that was reported by the participants was that they did not know how to make sense of the freedom they were given all of a sudden. This made them feel lost and lowered their self-esteem and confidence. Without them knowing how to handle this feature, academic freedom was more a causation of extra problems they had to encounter rather than a positive possibility. To some of the participants academic freedom meant being on their own without receiving any sort of support. Putting all the responsibilities on students and having them accountable for almost all of their academic actions, even from an administrative point of view, without constructive communication was certainly not a type of freedom that enabled these students. It was rather an academic culture shock. The participants who came from a rigid system and were absolutely unprepared for such a structure found themselves among the ones who struggled with academic freedom the most.

“ I would very happily take academic freedom but the thing is, I would like to know how to make the system work and how then how to make the most of it.”
(P5)

“So it was quite intense for me. I felt a lot of burden like having such a system of education because from where I come from, the education system is totally different. Like you have to be a learner. And here you have to be an explorer. Like you have to do it on your own. So it was quite overwhelming for me at first, stressful. The uncertainty is what you face.” (P3)

The other problem with academic freedom was that lack of instructions and support were justified by the excuse that these would limit the freedom of international students. Some of the interviewees had experienced these incidents and no matter how hard they tried, they never got instructions.

“But one of the challenges that I faced was that professors and teachers, they didn't give us all the instruction and all the explanation about a task about an assignment or about like, a course and we had a responsibility to go and search for it and find our way it was it was kind of challenging at first because you spend a lot of time on understanding a subject.” (P7)

“The issue is sometimes lack of support and instructions Yeah. So I think the collective knowledge was much bigger than it would have been, although at the cost of, you know, individual struggle and discomfort and confusion.” (P4)

Additionally, some solutions to the discussed problems of academic freedom were presented by the international students participating in this study. The core to the most methods that were propositioned was simply better communication. University authorities ignored the fact that they had to communicate what academic freedom was, what it stood for and how it could be dealt with. In most cases they failed to observe the diverse backgrounds of international students and limitations of their capabilities to study with this new system. Universities were aiming for the creativity of students but often ended up in stressing them by not providing adequate support .

“I think people who are coming to Finland are from really different cultures, specifically academic culture. So it's truly important to give them enough knowledge and information about this freedom, ... give enough and clear information.” (P7)

Communication of the use of the uncertainty and ambiguity together with what they were aimed to help students achieve was a proposed solution by a few participants. A majority of university authorities presumed these factors as obvious or for whatever reasons did not provide these basic insights, as the participants argued. Based on the findings of this thesis, lack of information and instructions limited other usages of academic freedom like the flexibility of choosing different courses because without enough inputs on a course, an informed decision could not be made. Moreover, consideration of varied backgrounds of international students was another tool towards the betterment of academic freedom for all the students.

“I wish it was explicitly told to us, you know that this is the purpose of the vagueness, at least like an acknowledgment that it is vague. Yeah. Because then, you know, you feel the sort of conflict with your professor that clearly the 30 of us think it's vague, but you don't seem to think it's vague, so what's this about?” (P4)

5.1.2 Hinderling Factors

After carrying out the analysis of the data, the findings showed that on one hand, the factors which negatively impacted the mental wellbeing of international students in Finland were almost similar to ones that have been mentioned in the academic literature that focus on English-speaking countries. On the other hand, there were a considerable number of matters that were not pointed out which underlines the necessity of studies in other contexts.

Language barrier

This issue came up in a variety of forms. The term 'language barrier' might be generic since without knowing in what context and in interactions with which stakeholders we are referring to it, prominence of it will be glossed over. This barrier turned out to be really crucial because it led to situations where students felt ignored or unimportant. This was especially important because some of the participants believed they were isolated, therefore could not actively participate in social events in the fear of not being able to interact. In general, the participants of this study were mindful of this issue and all of them tried to minimize its effects on their social and academic lives. Yet, in some cases like the above-mentioned ones, no matter how effortlessly they struggled, this issue created a gap between them and the rest of the society. This did not translate to having problems that undermine the everyday life of international students in Finland according to the participants because all of the participants were on the same page that they could get by in their daily errands with just using English language. There were also interviewees who felt discrimination and dividedness because of the language barrier in severe cases.

"I felt discrimination in the extracurricular activities, because mainly they are in Finnish. They were very reluctant to take you into the extracurricular activities ..., which actually, I think mainly bonds the students with the university and the students around. So that was what I was trying to explore but then I couldn't explore because it was too much Finnish-dominant." (P3)

The language barrier was shown to be among the main obstacles international students

must tackle in Finland. This matter disrupted the process of cultural assimilation, integration to the society and creation of a new social circle especially among the locals based on the gathered data in this thesis. These were followed by other domains of its negative influences on international students wellbeing like causing feelings associated with loneliness, limitation of their social activities and in extreme cases discrimination.

Assimilation

According to the findings of this study, when participants arrived at their destination, they faced numerous challenges. Assimilation among these challenges, had the potential to set the students up for a rocky start. There were two sides to the coin of assimilation in the discussion of international students. The first, and probably foremost, side was adjusting to the new academic setting and culture. The next one was the cultural and social assimilation of the students into the host country. The participants reported that there were countless happenings all at the same time and it was not so difficult to lose track of the activities ending up in a feeling of despair. This matter is especially relevant to adjusting to the academic culture of the new university. This confusion was attempted by almost all the universities to be filled with the orientation programs. Many of them were perceived by the participants to be successful, as presented in the previous section. Failure along the way of this subject was the reason which was mentioned by participants to produce mental wellbeing-threatening complications like anxiety. The process of assimilation to a new university was extremely important since when it failed it ended up in a situation where there were participants who considered going back to their home country. Additionally, failure in the social steps of assimilation had consequences such as loneliness according to the shared stories by the participants. Based on the experience of the participants, inability to identify oneself as a part of the host society was naturally followed by the feeling of being left out. The process of assimilation in both avenues was a challenge in its essence. But the participants experienced less stressful circumstances when they received sufficient support.

“Adjusting to the new country, the new study patterns, the new university and new people, it was a lot for me. It was like a peak of anxiety for me.” (P3)

“The main challenge was to try to accommodate myself to the Finnish study system and especially to other Finnish students. ... I faced students that were not participative. And the fact that everyone in the class was not participative was like pushing the level of the class down. And also that combined with the quality of the teaching made me think a couple of times, like, have I done the right choice.” (P5)

Communication

The other hindering factor that was found was communication. The problem with communication was a bit convoluted and a bit difficult to approach. The participants of this paper talked about the shortcomings of communication on different levels. One was the interaction pattern between the international students and the university teachers. The fact that the teachers failed to respond to students' inquiries put international students in a situation where they got involved with feelings like uncertainty, confusion and stress. The participants added that this state held them back from reaching out for more help and guidance which was excruciating especially because they were the ones needing this support most as a beginner in a new academic environment and a new country .

“All the teachers are so busy and they never answer any emails. So, if I want to ask something or get some support, I would need to ask them right in the class. So that is one of the challenges to get in touch with them. If I have problems usually, that is not my way to go.” (P2)

The other noteworthy trouble of communication was not advertising the already-existing services of the university. There were a number of participants who did not have any ideas about the support systems in place at their universities. The university did not communicate these services and support programs to the target groups based on a unified response by the participants for the causation of this issue. Further, some of the interviewees considered that when communication did not take place effectively it questioned the trust between the students and the university staff,

making it impossible for them to open up and reach out for assistance. In this matter, the complication of student to student interactions were also paramount considering intercultural clashes and disputes. To conclude the factors regarding communication, it should be noted that deficits in this matter had negative implications on the mental wellbeing of international students in Finland. According to the most of participants these issues were common but simply resolvable in the majority of cases.

Career and Job Opportunities

The international students also mentioned a problem that was not explicitly attended to in the reviewed academic texts which had to do with the next professional step after graduating from their universities. This issue came up so many times, even though the interviewer did not actively ask any questions with this regard. A majority of the interviewed students drifted out of the questions and expressed their struggles and worries for finding appropriate job positions in Finland. The importance was echoed when it became apparent that this fear and worrisome affected their current studies. In some cases because of this matter they had lost interest and motivation in their studies.

Based on the experiences gathered in the interviews, international students only realized this tremendous distress when moving towards the end of their studies. This issue was among the most frequently mentioned ones by the students, even in cases in which the interviewee was generally content with everything and barely reported any challenges, for example P6 said: *“The only thing that has been bothering me is the opportunities for work.”* Some participants said that the stress regarding finding suitable job opportunities developed into anxiety which was, needless to mention, harmful to their mental wellbeing. As it was concluded by the participants this issue grew into bigger problems like lowering their self-esteem.

“I have experienced anxiety at different levels and the most severe one was last year ... basically and the reason behind that was I was reaching the end of my studies ... What am I going to do as the next step? So, am I going to find a job? ...

Really full of uncertainties like in my mind." (P7)

Weather

As a more or less obvious note, the weather was detected to have a negative influence on the mental wellbeing of this particular group. This was mentioned by a handful of the participants and it had an exceptional prominence since it is somewhat inimitable and reserved for the few countries sharing the same weather conditions with Finland. Dark days and long winters were making the studies problematic and according to some of them "stressing" or even "depressing". The recurring long days with no sunshine combined with low temperatures were held responsible for feeling blue and depressed by some of the participants of this thesis. Moreover, the Finnish winter was found to have further negative repercussions on international students' social engagement and activities. Some of the participants felt extra difficulties engaging in social activities because of this issue.

"So that was challenging, I mean having to just go out in the cold and it gets dark so early in the day. Yeah, it was I was conscious that yeah, it's different. ... I just did not like the difference. It was quite challenging. I didn't get so much social activity like in my home country during the winter." (P1)

Creation of a New Social Circle

The participants of this research said a few remarks in the difficulties of creating a new social circle around. The main shock for some of the participants unfolded itself when they found themselves in a situation where all of a sudden they had no friends. This issue made it clear to the newly-arrived students that the situation was distinct from what they had been used to. The other side of this problem was resounded when there were groups of friends that already knew each other or had something in common like their home country. This was beneficial for the group members but effortful to break through for another person who did not enjoy the similar features. There were a few participants who referred to this issue both in positive and negative ways. When a student was in a cohort of students who had more than one of these majority groups, it

became nearly impossible to make close friendships.

“I’m used to having lots of people that speak the same language, family friends. Here is different. Not as many international students and the setting is different. You cannot just go out of the house because it is really cold. You know. So the difference was just a lot.” (P1)

“I think that our program, there were like few groups that they were dominant, for example, we had, like a really big group from country X and a really big group from country Y. They made a group of friends together, and it was really difficult to get into those groups. And the first barrier was the language. And like, for example, there was no one from my country so, I was kind of alone.” (P7)

Considering all the benefits of having a group of friends, the absence of it was a great loss especially in the context of mental wellbeing for the international students. The participants did connect the dots of loneliness with not having this social circle. In extreme cases, this led to rethinking the whole decision of coming to Finland to study, P1: “I did feel lonely. I considered going back to my home country.”. Moreover, the process of founding a new social circle was complicated when it came to selecting the new friends. Participants underlined that when they as degree students bonded with exchange students the issue arose because after a short period of time, one or maximum two semesters, the exchange students left Finland. The participants found it exigent to restart the whole process of finding new friends. This back and forth circumstance became so exhausting that at some point some of them felt burnt out.

“I felt lonely many times and like, the friends that I had, and I really liked them. Most of them were exchange students. So basically, they just left Finland after six months or a year. So we couldn't have a long term friendship. I've never had a real group of friends that I could gather with them like on a regular basis or go out together, no have never had such a thing.” (P7)

Discrimination

Almost none of the participants had experienced circumstances that could have been labeled discriminatory. Notwithstanding, there were a few incidents that were mentioned by the participants, surprisingly not as the answer to the question with

regard to discrimination, but at some point in the interview which were decided to be documented in the finding section of this thesis separately under this category. P1 had been racially abused and discriminated against by his/her teacher alongside his/her classmates who come from the same country as P1.

“There was this guy who sort of he looked down on, there were three (people from my country) in our class, three (people from my country) from a class 10. During my bachelor's he sort of looked down on us. And we just formed a support group with each other for the course of this guy. He really left us behind in class.” (P1)

The other instance was when P4, who was an official and elected part of the student association at his/her university, was actively excluded in decision-making sessions and meetings at his university. This incident can easily be confused with the issue regarding ‘Language Barrier’. Yet, it was decided to report it in this specific part because language was simply taken as the excuse for this misbehavior and exclusion of this participant.

“The student union is predominantly, you know, Finnish and most of the subcommittees are Finnish, ... University benchmarking meetings that I was a part of... there were two Finnish meetings and there was one in English. And even in that meeting, like most people happen to be Finnish, and the speaker was a little uncomfortable. So like five minutes into the meeting, they were like, no, actually, I want to just speak in Finnish. And the two of you who don't know Finnish can meet me afterward, to sort of ask me any questions.” (P4)

5.1.3 Supporting Factors

In this section the factors are reported that scaffolded the mental wellbeing of international students in their opinion. All the factors and nice experiences associated with them are brought here but there is a point that needs to be remembered in mind when studying this part of the thesis. Quite similar to the previous section the subheadings are not full distinction between each item. They are rather organizers since these factors are dependent and co-influencer to one another.

Sense of Being Accepted

The importance of a sense of belonging and its implications positively and negatively on the mental wellbeing of international students have been scrutinized based on the findings of this paper but the sense of being accepted should not go unmentioned since it goes hand-in-hand with the concept of sense of belonging. The feeling of being accepted was experienced and mentioned by some of the interviewees. Some of the students experienced a feeling of being welcomed even though there were cases in contrast. It was noted that the feeling of being accepted should not be taken as identical to a sense of belonging because some international students experienced being accepted but this feeling did not convert into developing a sense of belonging. In this context, there was a thought-provoking case which was the fact that a participant felt accepted because of his/her looks that allowed him/her to blend into the Finnish society. Nonetheless, participants emphasized that no matter how or on what level this feeling emerged or was experienced, having this feeling did have a positive stamp on the psychological wellbeing of this particular group.

“I do feel accepted. I feel welcomed. I don't feel any sort of animosity or resistance. I don't feel like an outsider. But, even though I don't feel like an outsider, I still also feel at the same time as a temporary guest, who is treated very well with a lot of respect and care.” (P4)

Friends and Family as a Coping Mechanism

According to the participants of this thesis, having a group of friends was the center pillar of maintaining mental wellbeing. All of the students mentioned how important having friends was. Some described the climatic role of their social circles and some emphasized it by mentioning how non-existence of friends harmed their wellbeing. There were a considerable number of ways how friends provided support reported during the interviews. For instance, having friends eased international students' ways to get into more communities in order to find even more friends. P1 explained that

his/her friends not only assisted P1 with academics but also helped him/her settle in and expand his/her social circle:

“Settling in ... international community ... we helped each other ... this party, this get together or this job opportunity and lots of academic stuff. It was just this friend who gave me some materials from the years before and some assignments that were done before to just give me an idea about the course, about what's coming. That was helpful.” (P1)

The participants also pointed out having a group of friends, especially in the context of education, was highly beneficial in terms of academics. Several participants highlighted the role of their friends in assisting them in their studies. Reminding a deadline, helping with an assignment and tutoring for a course came in as great support when international students were juggling between different responsibilities. The other pron of social circles regarding studies was the fact that it widened the strengths among the friends. It was found that organically, friends tended to help one another in areas they were confident and this usually meant the whole group could gain from it as well. In this way, social circles had the capacity to lay off huge burdens of temporary anxiety caused by exams or other study-related issues according to the students. The other echoed the role of friends was how they facilitated the start of settling in a new country. Some participants said they did not face severe challenges in the beginning of moving to Finland because they found themselves in a class where the majority group were their countrymates. This naturally created a support web for them and got these particular groups out of the difficult start. This, however, was not the case for all of the international students. As explained in the previous section, this very issue created some complications for the ones who were not from the same country which was a serious obstacle in the creation of a new social circle.

“It was great because I think the start was quite smooth, I would say because my class had like, more than half of the class was people from ‘my home country’. I felt really like in the community, ... about mental health, it was totally okay. ... I did not really meet any difficulties.” (P2)

5.2 Exercise of Agency

The findings in the sphere of the agency were decided to be concisely narrowed down to be presented because of one central reason. Only the relevant ideas to the second research problem are demonstrated. The other findings tied to this concept were perceived to be beyond the endeavors of this thesis. In the following sections, the ways agency was exercised by the interviewed international students are audited. The line of factors that agency was present for this student group is not much different in distinct contexts, according to findings of this study. However, there were a few unique cases that positioned Finland separately in comparison to other, especially English-speaking, countries. There is no denying the fact that the exercise of agency can be manifested in numerous ways. In this section the methods international students exercised agency are presented. Alternatively, it will be also mentioned how some avenues opened a more complex and serious discussion when the agency was absent or not executed by these participants.

Self-reflection

On one hand, some of the participants reported that they had acquired the skill to reflect upon their feelings and emotions in order to be able to find the roots of them during their studies in Finland. They mentioned in this way they could respond to their emotional situations appropriately. On the other hand, there were some students who struggled with digging deep into their problems and found this issue irritating since they were unable to pin down their obstacles to even reach out for support.

“It's very confusing. Like, for me, when I have anxiety or am really sad and depressed, then it's very difficult for me to find out what the hell's going on, everything is going okay but I'm still feeling sad. So it's very difficult to indicate the reason behind.” (P2)

“I think it's so sort of a midpoint. Sometimes it is really easy (to find the reasons behind the happenings). Sometimes it is not. I stumbled upon like cycles, and I

started thinking about the same thing for days and days. It's not black and white." (P5)

The other idea connected to self-reflection was that international students could learn and progress with it on themselves. According to some of the interviewees, the process of learning this skill was sped up with the help of support structures of the universities. The preponderance of such awareness for international students was apparent when they reached out for support. When international students knew what upset their state of mind, they could better identify the suitable services at their universities in order to approach a solution. Yet, knowing the cause of a feeling or a status did not necessarily end in communicating them to others who were able to provide support. A few participants struggled to go beyond their feelings and find the roots but even when they did succeed in this process they might have not disclosed it.

"It's not an easy thing for me to dig deep and find the cause of the feeling. And honestly, sometimes I know the cause of that feeling but I never want to talk about it. Whenever someone asks me that, what is the reason behind it? I may say another thing." (P7)

Reaching Out for Support

The subject of self-reflection opened up the discussion to another domain of agency which is reaching out for support. The other form of exercise of agency was the ability to open up and reach out for help. When one came to the realization that he cannot overcome a situation on his own, this ability was a way to break through according to the participants. This ability, alongside with other ones related to agency like self-reflection, can be learned, P7: *"I think like maybe I have not learned to basically share my feelings."* It should be noted that there were students who extensively enjoyed and benefited from this ability and could manage their issues a lot easier by reaching out for support. As it seems natural, reaching out for support and opening up were more doable for the participants when done with close family and friends.

"My girlfriend is always there. It's like a 'go-to' for any of our problems. We just dig them out to one another and try to make solutions. Also, parents are a very nice place to get advice from ... it's nice to get logical advice on what could be the

next step.” (P6)

On the other hand, the participants who had hard times opening up and next reaching out for support had difficulties in facing their issues alone. This put an extra burden on their shoulders and in some instances made them link this shortcoming to the feeling of loneliness. The participants walked the interviewer through that there were times when they found it difficult to open up and share their emotions with friends and university staff like teachers but still they received emotional support from their family, for instance, P1 said: *“I got it from my family, strong emotional support. ... like that but otherwise I just think of it on my own.”*. The ability of opening up to another person and reaching out for help was extremely pivotal in the context of international students. The prosperous side of it was found to be its potential to be developed and learned but the other side was the difficulty to trust the new friends in the new context, according to the findings of this thesis.

Proactiveness

International students reported on how being an active participant at the university helped them enhance their status and changed the settings in favor of themselves. The absence of proactively speaking out was translated to being voiceless even in simple group activities. Some of the interviewees did not describe themselves as active participants in neither group work nor classroom. In addition, some found it problematic to negotiate responsibilities that were assigned to them in group/pair work. There were other cases when not being active was reported to be tied to cultural roots and family backgrounds, for example a few students said they were not an active member of classrooms because they had learned to act otherwise in their academic culture. On the contrary, the combination of personality traits such as being outgoing and curious together with a suitable classroom atmosphere facilitated activity and participation for the international students. Teachers’ attitude complimented by personality traits unlocked the potential to be active for some of the participants. Some said how the dynamics of a classroom encouraged them to be so. Other students have

enjoyed such dynamics which gave them the possibility to exercise their agency. These dynamics consist of openness of the classroom, not being afraid to be judged or punished when especially when proposing an opposing idea to the professor and being accepted for who they are.

“One of the best things that I found about this education was like I had interactive courses, where I could express myself, and that was valued more than my marks. That was the best part. You can always be active. You can have your own answers to something you can have wrong answers. Still they will be listening to them. And then there will be an advisor or something comments on that. And that's really motivating for you to speak up always even if wrong.” (P3)

“I think that they (teachers in Finland) were certainly more inviting and they are in the country where I come from, but I think that also my personality in the background where I come from where it's like, you have to go and you have to push things was also like something that will influence (being active).” (P5)

The participants who provided these instances showed the fluidity of the ideas related to agency and simple promotion of them by these practices. Proactiveness was the key for them to release their potential and give them the possibility to communicate their needs, beliefs and criticisms.

Influencing the Surrounding

A sect of proactiveness and an integral part of the exercise of agency is Influencing the surrounding. The idea of influencing the surrounding was asked as if the participants were capable of changing anything at different levels during their studies. The participants had different experiences of it in educational activities. Influencing the surrounding in the context of international students in Finland was exemplified in negotiation with teachers for an alternative way of completion of a course, getting an extension for a deadline and so on so forth. Yet, this capability was not communicated by all of the participants. Some had difficulties in this matter because of their diverse personalities and backgrounds. According to this group of participants, in some cultures and structures this capability is oppressed and even punished as opposed to

being encouraged and supported; therefore it was extremely challenging for some of the students to approach influencing their surroundings, like the case of P7:

“I come from a culture that basically, you have no chance to share an opposing idea regarding your teacher. And when the teacher comes into the class, the first session and he explains the structure, the regulations, the rules, everything you need to follow them. I come from such a culture. This is one reason that maybe I didn't try to change anything.” (P7)

Cultural and political oppression were not the only factors limiting the exercise of agency in the framework of changing something in favor of oneself. The mindset of some of the participants was the only thing holding them back from even trying to change something, even after coming to the terms that something was not working. In addition, instability with administrative issues like residence permits and stressing over risking them, especially for students from countries where they had to get these permits after difficult and complex processes, stopped some participants from trying to exercise their agency to become able to influence their environment. Moreover, other administrative constraints, like structures of some courses or university timetables, also limit the abilities of international students to exercise their agency by taking control of their own matters.

“There were courses that I felt an exam would be better at (than a presentation for completion of a course). So you just go with the flow. That's my personal opinion. I feel if I don't agree with this, then I can take another course. This is what you need to do to pass. You just do it.” (P1)

“My visa and the permission for residing in Finland was based on studies. So, I need to take care of that carefully to basically finish my studies successfully on time. So, that was one of the reasons that I really like to follow the regulations and the guidelines (without questioning them).” (P7)

The other finding is that the right setting could highly stimulate this sense and drive the participants to take part and actively ask for change. The capability of changing something in the surrounding world was scaffolded by others because for example some of the students only tried to alter the method demonstrating their learning in a

course where the teacher encouraged it even in the cases where they could never have imagined doing so in their homeland.

“It's because the professor sort of said that this is what I have in mind. But if you can think of something else, then let me know. So I was sort of invited to make a suggestion. In the previous cases, I guess the idea of designing your own assessment sort of didn't occur to me. ... You can ask for support, but you can't change.” (P4)

A few universities, in general, managed to teach international students how they could become a part of the decision making processes at different levels, by encouraging students to take control to enhance structures at the university. This opened up more room for the students to focus on their studies. This conclusion was deduced from several participants who told the story of how their university actively involved students in decision-making processes and by doing that most of the problems with their studies were solved. Further, these participants associated the feeling of being accepted and development of a sense of belonging when they explained the experience of being involved in decision-making processes.

Reacting to Society

There were a number of instances where participants explained their understanding of how they exercised their agency by reacting to society. This, however, must be taken into account that the prerequisite for reacting to society in an agentic manner is to be active. Yet, a few participants showed lack in this term because in cases of adversities, they chose not to actively react. Then again reasons for this choice were linked to their backgrounds and ways they were used to during their upbringing. In other instances some students described the reason why they shied away from reacting to different happenings in society with explaining how extrinsic factors like the atmosphere, dynamics between different stakeholders and fear of being punished. The other factor that played a role in the absence of reaction to society was demotivation. Some participants said that after numerous attempts to react and not being successful in most of them, they got demotivated to a level that they decided not to take any actions at all.

“I was hesitant to approach someone (at the university) because I didn't know what response I would get or how I would be judged on the issues I had. So I did not approach in a way that was very direct but then here indirectly I could keep my problems up.” (P3)

There were some participants who showed more resilience and despite not getting the desired result, they kept reacting to events and happenings. This group also explained that their family structure together with their previous experiences enabled them to react in such manners. There were also students who took the initiative and became proactive by taking part in social activities and during these participation they did not miss any opportunities to react to their surroundings by trying to make the most of each situation. The other instance of this sect of agency was when participants explained that they instantly speak out when a problem occurs for example in group work. With consideration of similarities between this section and proactiveness, they each have their role in explaining how international students exercised their agency.

The Case of Academic Freedom

The logic of bringing academic freedom under the category of agency was that from the first thought of it, it was driven by the participants of this research. The idea of including and reviewing academic freedom within this study was initiated, defined, explained, scrutinized and developed throughout interviews by the participants with the author's lowest possible input. This journey in essence is the exercise of agency where international students spotted an area of dispute by self-reflection. Next decided to take initiative by reaching out to be heard and proactively discussing it. This was an example of a successful exercise of agency by the international students that happened within the framework of this thesis that could not go unseen. The findings with this regard were presented by positive and negative impressions and repercussions in the previous section, these were complemented by recommendations provided by the interviewees for the betterment of this concept.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Discussion of Findings

The main intention behind writing this thesis was to better understand the experience of international students in Finland in lights of mental wellbeing and agency. The approach was to investigate what brings their wellbeing down and what supports it. The other aim was to see what kind of a role agency plays in this equation. In this part the interpretation of the findings will be accompanied by the reviewed literature to make sense of the findings.

Mental Wellbeing

The main matter concerning the mental wellbeing of international students is to identify what hinders and what supports it. The findings of this research supported the majority of the already-existing factors for both hindrance and support of mental wellbeing of international students, despite having a significantly different context. However, there were some factors that had not come up in the reviewed literature which can be explained by some of the unique features of Finnish higher education systems like academic freedom. There were a few other factors that were not explicitly revealed by the academic texts but they can be categorized in a wider spectrum of factors. For instance, harsh weather in Finland during the wintertime was mentioned a few times as a hindering factor of international students' mental wellbeing which is quite exclusive for the context of Finland. Nevertheless, the concept of acculturative stress engulfs such troubles in encountering difficulties when accommodating oneself to a new setting (Berry, 2006). In addition, some of the factors like academic freedom, having a sense of belonging and the support systems of the universities were reported to be more complex in the sense that they, or some parts and bits of them, were both supportive and destructive of the mental wellbeing. Most of the problems that were mentioned by

the participants could have been altered by interventions of an external stakeholder like the universities (Cho, & Yu, 2015). For instance, the participants described how successful practices by their universities assisted them create a social circle faster and easier by for example planning a short trip. Their friends helped the international students with countless issues they faced and as a result scaffolded their mental wellbeing (Tsenc, & Newton, 2001). There were other problems that the participants explicitly demanded more help and support by the universities.

Having mentioned these points, it should be reminded that the majority of the problems showed inconsistencies among the participants. This can offer a lens to better understand how the experience of an individual is unique even in cases where a lot of the variables were the same with some other participants. Further, in a review of the hindering and supporting factors no significant patterns were diagnosed in comparison of students of universities and universities of applied sciences. It is important to view this matter as a gateway to question the claimed advantage of universities over applied science ones in the context of Finnish higher education. There were neither any differentiations detected between male and female participants in consideration of their problems, supporters, frequency of them and other factors in the discussion of mental wellbeing. There were not any meaningful distinctions among students who studied different majors and subjects despite the structural differences at their degree programs and respective faculties with regards to mental wellbeing.

However, what stood out was the time each participant stayed in Finland. Generally, the author found a link between better mental wellbeing and longer duration of stay in Finland. This can be explained by the fact that the longer students stay, the higher their chances of getting assimilated, knowing how the systems work, having a social circle, enjoying a more stable situation and even forming a sense of belonging on different levels. Yet, there was one exception to this assumption because a participant who stayed in Finland for a fairly long period of time still reported numerous hindering issues. The vitality of social circles in keeping a balanced mental wellbeing cannot be

stressed enough, even in the context of sense of belonging. The other noteworthy reflection on the findings of mental wellbeing was to find why some support systems are perceived to be much more effective than the others. The tutoring systems, for example, were extensively distinguished as successful by the international students even when not elaborately exercised. One reason that might explain the success of tutoring systems was that tutors share the same status as newcomers and have been through the same process making them able to have a better understanding of newcomers' needs and providing admissible responses to them. This is notably of preponderance since paucity of knowledge on international students' needs prompts dissipation of resources fruitlessly. The important domain which was the main issue of support systems was poor communication based on the participants' input. The problem was that there were numerous heavily-resourced services available for international students but the target group was unaware of their existence. It may seem odd but this issue can easily be resolved all together but lack of knowledge of university authorities and failed communication built an invisible wall between the support and the students who need it.

Agency

The idea of agency and including it in this thesis was to get a better understanding of how it is executed in practice when it comes to international students. The concept of agency became appealing since in the literature it was discussed how it is the key factor in the solution of problems like racism (Wall et al., 2017) and creation of a new social circle (DeJaeghere, & Josić, 2016). These factors were also found in the data of this thesis. Yet, what was more called for by the participants was the role of universities in enhancing and promoting the agency of international students. A lot of the participants expressed their longing for getting some support in learning soft skills like self-reflection, opening up to others and ways to reach out for support. The support systems of the university have been shown to be practically effective in these issues (Cho, & Yu, 2015). The findings of this thesis emphasize on the fluidity of the features

of agency and how it is acquirable (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen et al., 2017).

In this concept, the environment was also central in promoting students' agency because participants reported higher levels of engagement and activeness when it was allowed by the authorities. There was one other reflection on the findings that when some of the serious barriers that international students encounter are not acknowledged and hence taken seriously, these barriers grow into much more complex issues that jeopardize mental wellbeing of international students. Racism and discrimination are not explicitly discussed and even acknowledged in the context of Finnish universities (Calikoglu, 2018). For instance, it was shown in the findings that if the problem of discrimination is not taken seriously, it not only expands but also limits possibilities for international students to exercise their agency by participating in their university politics. There were cases that the voice of some of the participants who were a part of a student association, and the students whom they represented went unheard and ignored due to underestimation and neglect of racism and discrimination at Finnish higher education. By the same token, all of the participants who went through discriminatory experiences felt alienated and excluded. Aftermath of such emotions and feelings is dangerous to the mental wellbeing of international students.

Moreover, the secondary link that was found between exercise of agency and better mental wellbeing could be deduced from the findings of this thesis as well. The participants who exercised their agency more frequently or had higher status regarding agency, reported less problems in total, even though they did not explicitly link them with each other. In this discussion, there were instances where exercise of agency limited the effects of some problems the participants faced. For instance, when participants were proactive, they got more social engagement and therefore did not report feelings of loneliness. The other instance was when students took initiative and tried to change a situation in their favor, they felt less stressed. It should be reminded that these are the interpretations of the author and the participants did not connect these issues together but the general sense of the interview illustrated such patterns.

6.2 Conclusion

As the conclusion, it must be highlighted that there was no considerable difference between the experiences of the participants who studied at different types of universities at least within the framework of this thesis. In addition, neither gender nor age of the participants displayed any significance to differentiate the results. However, what drew the line between some of the participants was their duration of stay in Finland. It was apparent that the longer international students stay in Finland, the better they could cope with the problems and the more they get involved in the context of agency, even though there were students who had stayed in Finland for a long time but showed otherwise, this was the general tendency. Since the beginning of the analysis, and even during the data collection phase, it was found that the students who exercised their agency more often or had higher status with this regard, first face far less problems and next solve their issues much easier. These students enjoyed having a louder voice and as a result adjusted their surrounding in a way that they could maintain a balanced mental wellbeing. In this sense, exercise was, indeed, connected to mental wellbeing and the higher it was the better mental wellbeing followed. This clearly demands universities to take on a more active role and facilitate exercise of agency for international students. Firstly, because they tend to face more difficulties in comparison to their local counterparts (Alharbi, & Smith, 2018), secondly given their various backgrounds their agency might have been already limited because of sociocultural or political reasons.

The other finding that left the author with an important reflection was ideas towards academic freedom. The importance of it is eminent when academic freedom is seen in the light of equality and equity. Based on the data, it is not a difficult task to spot the advantages of academic freedom. It enables and empowers students by putting them first. However, participants argued how academic freedom caused them anxiety, stress and confusion. It showed how norms and patterns of the higher education system

of Finland can easily compromise equity. The universities that claim to be international or inclusive must provide an equal chance for all of its members to access all the facilities and unlock their full potential. This idea was underlined in the discussion of academic freedom for instance, because even when concepts like that, which are good in nature, are not evaluated and criticized in light of the needs and requirements of international students, they turn to obstacles for this particular group. The case of academic freedom is a great entrance to the discussion of reviewing current trends and formats of education at Finnish universities.

It is exigent to evaluate these structures, even the ones that seem to be functioning well. The other example of this inconsiderateness is highlighted in the context of language because the main language of the universities is Finnish and not having the same communication plans in English ends up isolating international students and taking away their chance to find out more about the services. This also raises questions about equality at these universities, therefore must be paid attention to. These perspectives shed light on hidden issues of a concept that are held as impeccable, suggesting that more care, sensitivity and active listening are requirements of accommodation of international students into a new academic culture.

In reviewing discrimination as one of the hindering factors of mental wellbeing, the term 'International Students' does not engulf the depth that is required. There are huge differences even between international students in becoming the potential target of such discrimination. The appearance, the country of origin and even the perceived religion of each international student make them more or less likely to be discriminated against. In addition, the discrimination was practiced by the teachers, fellow classmates or even the system of education. This point reflects the intricacies of the issues related to international students and the need for deeper understanding of such dynamics. Furthermore, the negative experiences that were presented, back up the idea that when the process of assimilation is not smoothened by the university orientation programs or other relative support webs, the issues deepen and even cause further problems. At last,

employment, in general, that is not a unique issue for Finland, was found to be the cause of the considerable amount of stress for international students which requires more attention by the universities. Finally, any type of immigrants, and in this case international students, must build a new social circle. This process was shown to be vital as there are countless benefits for having a fully functioning friend group. Conversely, the absence of a social circle is a foundation for depression.

In conclusion, varied aspects of agency could be linked to experience of international students regarding their wellbeing. This means that the findings of this thesis had a common theme that when agency was promoted and enhanced, wellbeing followed. The vice versa equation could work as well. When students were lacking in their mental wellbeing, the effect could be detected on how the exercise of agency became more troublesome. These conclusions, however, are the reflection of the author on the findings which could be audited more assiduously in further studies.

6.3 Recommendation for Further Studies

This research lays out a solid base for further studies to focus on the direct link between agency and mental wellbeing especially in the context of education. It would be an appealing idea to investigate the interactions of these two concepts thoroughly because there are a number of studies that mention these two or parts of them but there is a clear absence of a coherent study that focuses on this gap. This could be extremely beneficial for any support systems that are meant to accelerate the process of integration of any immigrant group. Further such studies could potentially show another application of exercise of agency which has not been paid enough attention to in the current literature.

To respond to such endeavours, utilization of mixed methods is highly recommended since both sets of data enrich the understanding of the researcher and enable him to be able to find such connections. In doing so, a longitudinal study with a considerable number of participants with appropriate samples during the quantitative data collection phase is needed to provide the researcher to go on with purposeful

sampling in the process of qualitative data gathering. Such a research design could target the absence of literature in both concepts of mental wellbeing, agency and their communications to each other.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Consent Form

University of Jyväskylä

Consent for scientific research

I have been requested to participate in the following study: Agency of International Students and Its Connection to Their Mental Wellbeing in The Context of Finnish Higher Education

I have read the privacy notice (information letter) and have received sufficient information on the study and its implementation. The content of the study has also been explained to me verbally and I have received proper answers to all my questions concerning the study. The clarifications were provided by Faraz Roshanizand, through a verbal explanation and a written privacy notice. I have had sufficient time to consider participating in the study.

I understand that it is voluntary to participate in the study. I have the right to interrupt my participation or cancel my consent at any time and without explanation during the study. Interruption of participation or cancellation of consent for the study have no negative consequences for me.

By signing the consent document, I accept that my information is used for the research described in the privacy notice.

Yes

With my signature, I confirm my participation in the study and permit the matters mentioned above.

Signature

Date

Printed name

Consent received

Signature of the consent recipient

Date

Printed name

The original signed document remains in the archive of the scientist-in-charge and a copy is given to the research subject. The consent is stored as long as the data is in a format that includes identifiers. If the material is anonymised or discarded, there is no longer need to store the consent.