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A Narrative Study into The Buddy Programme at AAU and The Social and Academic Integration of Free Movers

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Resume

Purpose: This thesis aimed to investigate how the well-being of international students, more specifically free movers, is handled at AAU in relation to the institution's ability to accommodate internationalization. Our focus was on free movers who were part of the Buddy Programme, which is responsible for integrating international students.

Theory and method: In order to answer our research question, we conducted a narrative analysis to get a first-hand perspective from our three free mover informants. We focused on small stories and positioning theory to identify our informants' own identity construction and positioning which e.g., included their creation and maintenance of "sameness" and "difference" in their storytelling concerning their enrollment at the university. In relation, we focused on language and English as a lingua franca, resonating with elements from positioning theory. Ultimately, the theory gave us the tools to conclude from a summary of many stories which underlying narratives influenced and constituted our informants' positioning and their social constructions of the academic and social environment at AAU.

Results: In our analysis, we examined how our informants had experienced or observed negative well-being at AAU, both in relation to the Buddy Programme, but also from factors beyond the programme. We used positioning theory to identify how our informants positioned themselves and others in relation to other participants in their storytelling, reinforcing certain social identities, where the free movers mainly portrayed themselves as victims and in turn Danish students, Danish buddies, and AAU as a whole as the cause of the problem. We also used positioning theory to investigate our informants' tellability, use of language and communication from a more textual level to substantiate our analysis, discovering how linguistic features were used to position and distance themselves to create sameness and difference between participants in their storytelling.

Conclusion: In our thesis, again, by looking at elements from positioning theory, we were able to conclude, based on a broader cultural and societal context, how our informants arguably were positioned in relation to discourses in the context of the international environment at AAU and HEIs around the world. We were able to discover a local institutional master narrative at AAU; a

perception of internationalization being handled well, and that AAU is a place where their ambition to promote oneself as an exemplary and significant international player is maintained i.e., an institutional master narrative that aligns with worldwide HEIs. We also identified a counter narrative among the international community through our informants' storytelling, challenging the local institutional narrative of AAU. Our informants' counter narrative aligns with stories and narratives from international students in the world and past studies.

1. Introduction

Aalborg University is a Danish university with high aspirations in relation to international recognition – especially within certain study boards – and it is apparent that there is an interest in being able to present itself as a significantly internationalized HEI (Higher Education Institution) (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). According to Rumbley et. al *"Excellence at a world-class level has become an objective for higher education institutions and systems across the globe. Organized efforts to achieve international recognition for quality higher education can be seen on all continents."* (Rumbley 2012, 14). For instance, according to the highly recognized university MIT in a report from 2018, Aalborg University is currently the fourth best place to study engineering programmes (MIT 2018) and is among the top two percent of the world's 17,000 universities with a current 267th place and a global score of 59.8 at the ranking list (US News 2023). Over the years, these rankings and the prestige that follows have been essential in attracting researchers and students and partnering up with attractive universities. The ranking lists *"...compare and rate the universities based on various indicators. Indicators and methods may vary, but include e.g., scientific publication, reputation, number of Nobel prizes, and internationalization."* (AAU Ranking n.d.). Still, despite a recent global pandemic and political regulations in Denmark that aim to reduce the enrollments on international programmes, the number of international students studying a full master's degree or a semester at AAU is still considerably high with an inflow of approximately 130 free movers[1] and approximately 200 exchange students[2] each year according to Master Admission and The International Office at AAU (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023).

However, the preparation and support of international students at AAU are complicating the status quo. Administrative cuts are one thing, but organizational structure and communication, division of labor and cultural understanding are another. This is something we have studied previously in regard to AAU; also being our source of inspiration for this thesis. A previous study presented evidence that a group of free movers from India, belonging to a specific program, felt unfulfilled and let down by the university. A specific problem was that they did not feel they were

[1] Free movers are international students who come by themselves and study a full degree without being affiliated with another university. Free movers pay tuition fees if they come from outside the EU.
[2] Exchange students are international students who are affiliated with another university – often partner universities – and study a semester or two at AAU.

receiving the necessary support from AAU, which reflects in the fact that it is quite common among free movers to seek help from various third-party organizations completely separated from AAU (Bertovic 2023).

Overall, AAU has different organizational structures in place to accommodate free movers. The administrative offices handle the practical matters in order for free movers to live in Denmark and more specifically Aalborg, while the study board prepares them academically, and the university has guidance services in place to assist the students' problems; 'when the damage is done'. Then, there is the Buddy Programme; a unique proactive student to student initiative to integrate free movers before issues occur. The programme is a way for free movers to receive help from other students on a more comparable level in an environment where hierarchical levels are erased, and a more personal and informal tone can be expressed for better social and academic integration. However, we know from our preliminary research that international students – specifically free movers as they often come with completely different cultures – can be difficult to communicate with (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). The Buddy Programme is indeed where cultural differences emerge, which can further complicate the assistance provided to the free movers we intended to interview. Thus, the organizational structure regarding the enrollment of free movers is in place, and the Buddy Programme is an essential part of the organizational structure to assist and meet the students, so why do free movers still struggle?

2. Research question

Considering AAU's seemingly well-functioning Buddy Programme, why do free movers still experience problems adapting to the study environment?

3. Background chapter

Before diving into the research of the Buddy Programme at Aalborg University, it is relevant to present background knowledge about internationalization and international student recruitment in higher education as well as detailed information about the organizational structure of AAU

regarding the recruitment of free movers. As presented in the introduction, the attractiveness and prestige of a modern-day university indeed comes down to being a product of internationalization, which then in turn affects the recruitment of international students.

Internationalization and international student recruitment in higher education

Internationalization is a term used in several private and public organizations, however, Internationalization in the context of higher education refers to the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching, recruitment, and self-service missions of higher educational institutions (HEI) (Knight 1997, 29). Internationalization is often justified in the mission to create a more diverse, globally engaged, academically prosperous and culturally competent campus community that is better equipped to address the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world. This development reflects the approach that HEI's accommodate in order to receive global prestige in the way that they *"...are embracing the notion that their missions and strategic development must incorporate a perspective beyond the local and even the national horizon."* (Rumbley 2012, 14). Thus, internationalization plays a vital role in how modern day HEI's operate from an organizational point of view – specifically regarding the recruitment of international students. International student recruitment is a dynamic process, which has been subject to constantly developing and changing trends over the years. Today, most universities with aspirations of climbing the academic ranking list of status and prestige intend to implement some international elements into their selection of curricula, which then paves the way for internationalization (De Wit 2019, 12).

However, one cannot discuss the elements of internationalization without accounting for globalization as the two phenomena are somewhat interconnected. As Jane Knight, one of the most acknowledged theorists within this field, states: *"Internationalization is transforming the world of higher education and globalization is changing the world of internationalization"* (Knight 2007, 134). It means the increasing international student mobility (James-MacEachern 2018, 248); the commercialization of higher education (Wang 2013, 295; Reisberg 2013, 128); the competitiveness for academic prestige and "*[…] the fact that reputation clearly influences the mobility of students."* (Maldonado-Maldonado 2013, 141); the trend of offering academic programs through e-learning (Altbach 2007, 291) and the development of policies in relation to

the recruitment of international students, academic institutions collaborating, and establishment of branch campuses abroad (Altbach 2002, 6) etc. is all a reflection of internationalization, which, by extension, is to be considered a reflection of globalization. According to Philip Altbach, in the context of higher education, globalization refers to new and changing trends that occur within the field; trends which often have cross-national implications (Altbach 2002, 6). More specifically, it includes the use of English as the lingua franca for scientific communication, the growing international labor market for scholars and scientists, the growth of communications firms and of multinational and technology publishing the increasing use of information technology (IT) (Altbach 2007, 291) etc.

Returning to the context of recruitment of students within higher education, taking the above-mentioned dynamics into account, it is fair to argue that internationalized HEI's, such as AAU, have to adapt to these changing trends in order to handle international recruitment properly. In relation, according to Jane Knight, it is worth noting that the suffix 'isation' denotes internationalization as a *process* usually implying change (Knight 2013, 77), which further emphasizes the continuous change and unique development within the field of higher education, resonating with Jiangyuan Zhou statement that *"[...] internationalization is a process rather than an end product"* (Zhou 2016, 2). A *"[...] process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension in the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education."* (Peterson 2014, 115). Understanding this through the point of view at AAU, this *process* would correspond to AAU's selection of programmes in English, international administration offices, foreign professors teaching at the campuses, and partnerships with universities in and outside of Europe. Furthermore, it concerns the mobility of international students, who in most cases are from all over the world. How does a university like AAU prepare themselves to receive them in step with the *process*? According to the International Office at AAU: *"Some HEIs concentrate their recruitment in certain parts of the world, opening the possibility of tailoring the integration initiatives towards those cultural traits, however, we do not have the resources to do that at AAU"* (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). This further indicates that there is a cultural understanding aspect, which ideally should be attended to in the current process and development of internationalization. However, it is not only the cultural aspect that plays a crucial role. That is because internationalization is also interconnected with language and identity (Altbach 2007,

291). Culture, identity, and language are negotiated in everyday conversation with different outcomes due to different cultures meeting. Thus, concerning international students interacting with national students, it becomes even more interesting to uncover the negotiation of these elements being a part of this *process*. As Altbach mentions the use of English as the lingua franca for scientific communication and the growing international labor market for scholars and scientists (Ibid), it further implies that the language barrier is of increasing interest in relation to how well one manages to master the language and formulate oneself in a professional and academic environment, just like the need for adapting to the differences in the international labor market is of importance if one plans to stay in the host country after graduation.

As a result of the above-mentioned process, Institutional leaders frequently and somewhat myopically view the inward flow of foreign students as a proxy for internationalization (Peterson 2014, 107), but according to Peterson it is quite common that not enough resources are being devoted to recruiting international students (Ibid, 106). By strategic planning and realistic budgeting, universities can maximize the outcome of recruitment and impact on international students and ensure that academic and social quality is a priority *"[...] rather than such benchmarks as the quantity of international students, remains the focus of such activities."* (Peterson 2014, 113).

Lastly, regarding the notion of commercialization. This trend is highly relevant for our thesis as we deal with free movers who – if they are coming from outside the European Union – have to pay tuition fees. Free movers from other European countries have their expenses covered. The current reality is that higher education is increasingly commercialized according to researchers and there is a tendency to view international student recruitment as a revenue stream because of increased internationalization, which is contrary to the notion that Higher Education has shifted from being *"[...] a public service to one that is largely bought and sold as a private commodity"* (Williams 2016, 131). The influence that internationalization has on today's academic arena is further explained by Zhou in which he states that *"[…] the profitable outcome of internationalization has moved from the fringe of institutional interest to the very core of higher education."* (Zhou 2016, 1) His research claims that internationalization has become increasingly embedded in the day-to-day operations for many HEI's with many institutions relying deeply on e.g., the economic benefits.

This further resonates with the following statement from Rumbley et. al.: *"While the profit motive has always been an unmistakable part of the internationalization landscape, it seems to be growing in size and scope."* (Rumbley et. al. 2012, 22). Thus, as financial aspects are of increasing importance to receive the best education for international students, commercialization is a reality and according to Vavrus, competitiveness comes as a result (Vavrus 2015, 8). In addition to prestige and higher rankings, this further explains why HEI's remain competitive and ambitious. As one's prestige and ranking increases, the value of one's product increases as well, resulting in e.g., higher tuition fees, which in turn explains commercialization. Of course, not every university seeks to drive revenue from education (i.e., public organizations) as many countries have limitations for how much the universities can require in tuition fees according to the International Office at AAU. For instance, at AAU the tuition fee for free movers outside the EU is somewhat the same financial amount that would be funded by the government if it was a Danish student (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). However, this trending development can indeed change the perception of education as a public service, emphasized in a statement from Altbach stressing that *"[...] current thinking sees international higher education as a commodity to be freely traded and sees higher education as a private good, not a public responsibility."* (Altbach 2007, 291). Basically, the statement prompts that the global perception of higher education institutions is now increasingly aligned with a commercial product with powerful economic references promoting the view that commercial forces have a legitimate place in higher education. As a result, the concern is that while some institutions view international students as "valuable resources for internationalization", others see them simply as "cash cows'' that "fill empty seats and help balance budgets." (Peterson 2014, 107). This perception may or may not apply for the free movers we intend to interview at AAU and may or may not have an influence on their satisfaction and attitude towards the Buddy Programme.

Organizational structure regarding international student recruitment at AAU

The interviews and research we have done before deciding on focusing on the Buddy Programme in this thesis have given us organizational insight into the processes and organizational structure regarding recruitment and handling of international students. Basically, the following four organs are the ones that international students communicate with concerning their progress and well-

being doing their education at AAU: 1. Master Admission and/or The International Office; 2. The specific study board; 3. The Buddy Programme; and as a last resort 4. AAU Student Guidance and/or The University Chaplains (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023).

The initial communication between AAU and international students can either take place through Master Admission or The International Office. Master Admission only deals with free movers, but solely when it comes to tuition bills, residence permit, residential contracts etc. For everything else, they refer to the students' respective study boards. The International Office deals with exchange students and is in contact with AAU's partner universities around the world. They are also responsible for organizing events, issuing relevant information about the academic approach at AAU (PBL) and generally "nurturing" exchange students during their stay. A representative from The International Office states the following: *"I think that the International Office is nurturing their students a bit more because we have several partners to which we feel obligated. We must ensure that they think we are doing well and that we are helpful to their students, so that we can maintain the partnership. So, there is a mutual obligation towards each other, and the same does not account for free movers as they come by themselves."* (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). Lastly, The International Office is also responsible for the Buddy Programme; an initiative where Danish students help international students adapt to the environment at AAU. In addition to the communication with international students, which is very divided, Master Admission and The International Office do however collaborate on an arrival session, which can be attended online or physically a week before the first day, and a welcome week program for both free movers and exchange students starting the day of arrival (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023).

When the international students are released to their specific study board, it varies which local offers and actors are available according to the study board chairman of Cross-Cultural Studies. Some programs have e.g., several coordinators. Furthermore, these internal and local structures have the greatest influence on free movers in which the chairman states that they are equated with the Danish students, who in most cases have got used to the academic approach at the university from their bachelor's degree. She states that *"...they have the same study conditions and it's pretty much learning by doing at this point"* (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). Yet again, just

like the differences in the communicative approach for The International Office to exchange students and Master Admission to free movers respectively, the exchange students are experiencing a more "nurturing" system at the more local structures as well. According to the chairman, they have a completely separate offer with coordinators and other AAU-employees who are solely at their disposal if they have academic difficulties etc. These coordinators simply have more time for the individual (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). Consequently, according to our interviews, it seems that more resources are allocated to exchange students compared to free movers, which resonates with the information that free movers in particular struggle.

If any student, international or not, struggles socially, feels homesick etc. the most common thing to do is to refer the student to either The AAU Student Guidance or The University Chaplains. According to an employee at AAU Student Guidance, they only deal with social problems to which they will try to help by listening to the students and/or refer to any social events around campus or in the city. According to their own statement, they are a department that sets in when there is an issue (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). So, they are not proactive in their approach to help free movers, exchange students or Danish students. The same goes for the University Chaplains who are employed by The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark and affiliated to Budolfi parish (the cathedral) in Aalborg. One can use them for issues like: *"grief and loss, loneliness, problems with your study, lack of self-esteem, stress, identity-crisis, problematic relations to parents, relationships, faith/doubt"* (AAU Chaplains n.d.).

Beyond the communication that international students experience with the abovementioned departments, AAU also has a more informal initiative called the Buddy Programme, which is being offered to all international students before arriving. The initiative is only available at the Aalborg campus, but not in the campuses at Esbjerg and Copenhagen (AAU Buddy Network n.d.). According to Master Admission and The International Office, the Buddy Programme is a way for the international students to receive help from Danish AAU-students who can help *"[...] give them a good start to their studies at Aalborg University.*" (AAU Buddy Network n.d) according to the job description. The Buddy Programme consists of volunteer students from all kinds of study boards, which means that a Danish or international student studying engineering can be a buddy for a free mover studying tourism. Furthermore, there is no differentiation in what is expected of the

buddies regardless of what their assigned international students' study. Usually, one buddy is assigned three to five international students, and the buddies are managed by two Buddy coordinators, who are also students, but paid. The two Buddy coordinators are then managed by an administration officer in The International Office, which is responsible for ensuring the quality of the initiative (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023).

4. Literature review

In the following chapter, we account for prior research on international student recruitment, general and fundamental theories dealing with the topic, prior case studies specifically concerning other Buddy Programmes as well as research concerning cohesion, group formation and identity construction and how language contributes to HEIs approach to international students' well-being.

Prior research on international student recruitment and retention

The socio-economic benefits and well-being of international students has been of increasing interest for decades and that is also partly due to internationalization explained in the background chapter. A thing that researchers note is that it should always be a priority to consider one's involvement with recruiting international students, not only from a reputation perspective of the HEIs, but also in relation to retaining the students in the host country and benefiting from the societal contribution they will bring to the economy and labor market. For instance, In the mid 90's, Australia generated a big fee income from foreign students: A fee income of $US430 million (Baker et. al 1996, 48), but this is solely from the tuition fee. In relation to what international students bring to society after graduation, *"[...] according to a decades-long study conducted by Denmark think tank DEA, international students contributed a net total of 165.6 million Danish krone ($23.8 million) to the economy – thus eliminating the misconception of them being a drain on public resources* (Hughes 2019).

So, Internationalization has shaped the academic landscape where some universities are well organized in terms of enrolling international students, however, one would perhaps expect that

the recruitment and handling of international students' well-being and the commitment to set them up for academic success is somewhat different in the approach at various HEIs, but that is not the case. According to researchers into international recruitment in HEIs *"[...] the practice of international recruitment remains remarkably similar amongst various case institutions"* (James-MacEachern 2018, 1). This means that the approach to effectively attract, handle, and retain international students has become streamlined and standardized and according to researchers, this is partly due to internationalization as it is quite common that not enough resources are being allocated towards recruiting international students (Peterson 2014, 106), also described in the background chapter. This does not necessarily mean that the problems are the same in all HEIs, but it may mean that, in general, there is a problem with integrating international students based on the needs required at the respective universities.

Consequently, there is an increased focus on the importance of tending to international students' well-being in hopes of retaining them and the interconnectedness between academic success and social success is something to dwell on according to researchers. There is a broad understanding that the two are interrelated. According to Per Nilsson, "*[...] recent research has shown that social life outside academic studies have a strong influence on academic integration"* (Nilsson 2019, 36). Furthermore, according to the research from Rienties et. al., *"[...] the degree of academic success of international students is multi-faceted. International students with a western ethnic background perform well on both academic and social integration [...]. In contrast, international students with a non-Western background are less integrated compared to other international students."* (Rienties et. al. 2011, 686). This is since specifically Asian students come from vastly different academic cultures from those of the Western and Scandinavian culture, which is based on power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, individualism vs. collectivism, short and long-orientation among other cultural dimensions, while there is also a distant relationship between professors and students in Asian cultures (Habib, Johannesen & Øgrim 2012, p. 197). For instance, in terms of individualism vs. collectivism, students from certain academic cultures are known for being more individual when it comes to studying, and group work is not something familiar to them (Schwartz 1994, 3). Also, in regard to masculinity vs. femininity, certain academic cultures are characterized by the gap between men's and women's values and roles, which is realized in the conception of either dominant masculine traits, such as competitiveness and assertiveness, or dominant

feminine traits, such care and modesty, being the ones prevailing in society (Traquandi 2016, 3). In relation to individualism vs. collectivism, a study concerning Japanese classrooms reports show that the country's high-power distance and the collectivist culture of Japan reflects the desire for not allowing students to work independently, but preferably in groups (Abdulaziz 2017, 156). The difference in what some students are used to often equals trouble in adapting to new academic cultures (Habib, Johannesen & Øgrim 2012, 197).

Studies such as these emphasize that well organized onboarding systems are of increasing importance in relation to learning and adjusting to the study culture and how the academic approach unfolds at a specific HEI. For instance, at AAU, they practice PBL (Problem Based Learning) as their academic mantra and approach (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023). Thus, this consideration resonates poorly with the abovementioned notion from James-MacEachern (2018) that HEIs are generally enrolling international students with a very standardized approach (James-MacEachern 2018, 1).

Tinto's Model of Retention

Considering other studies on international students' well-being at HEIs around the world, Vincent Tinto's Model of Retention (1975) is a theoretical system that many researchers still use to explain the complexities involved in enrolling international students who come with a lifetime of prior experiences and HEIs' ultimate task in retaining them both in regard to not dropping out, but also in terms of assisting them socially and academically throughout their studies (Cabrera et. al. 1993; Kerby 2015; Burke 2019). According to Tinto, the issue of student retention among international students began in the early 70's and it was seen as the reflection of individual attributes, skills, and motivation. Students who did not manage to be retained in the host country were perceived as being *"less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that graduation was believed to bestow"* (Tinto 2006, 2).

Then the view of retention began to shift towards the environment, in particular how well the institution manages to take part in retaining the international students (Tinto 2006, 2). Tinto was the first to advocate for this shift and his model made explicit connections between the environment; being the academic and social systems of the institutions and the individuals who shaped those systems. *"Central to this model was the concept of integration and the patterns of*

interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year." (Tinto 2006, 3). Thus, Tinto's notion of integration is strongly dependent on international students' degree of academic integration and social integration with members of the institution (other domestic and foreign students alongside the administration members and professors). Academic integration and social integration are what create the basis for his model alongside other external factors such as cultural upbringing, family attributes (e.g., mother's education); individual attributes (e.g., one's IQ); prior qualifications (e.g., quality of high school or college degree) (Draper 2008). Academic integration is established in what is now a widely accepted notion that the actions of the faculty, especially in the classroom, are key to institutional efforts to enhance student retention. (Tinto 2006, 5). It involves metrics such as grade performance, enjoyment of subjects, identification with academic norms and values, identification with one's role as a student etc. Social integration, in contrast, concerns the ability to make friends (both international and domestic), involvement in activities within and outside campus, personal contact with academics and professors through small talk, participation in class and in general generating awareness about yourself etc. (Draper 2008).

The U-curve

Researchers also mention 'the U-curve' when discussing the integration of international students. The U-curve, originally advanced by Lysgaard (1955), is a graphic four stage description of the cultural shock model for change that reflects the experiences of international travelers who intentionally place themselves into cross-cultural settings (Birrell 2008, 31). Further, it is a cross-cultural adaptation theory which explains the process of adapting to a new culture and the patterns of adjustment over time (Ward et. al. 1998, 278). The model proposes that there is a multistage wave response of adjustment and satisfaction in response to acculturation (Reid 2013, 49), and it expresses different phases during a stay abroad such as 'honeymoon', 'culture shock', 'adjustment' and 'mastery', which may vary in names among researchers, although they describe the same characteristics of the stages. The stages or phases are relevant as *"[...] transitioning from one's home country to a university abroad is a significant life event, and students studying abroad may undergo a cultural and psychological adjustment to a new country"* (Nilsson 2019, 36). The

name of the curve describes how adjustment is a process that over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve: *"Adjustment is felt to be easy and successful to begin with; then follows a crisis in which one feels less well-adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community*" (Ward et. al. 1998, 278). More contemporary research, however, challenges the U-curve since it, by some researchers, is considered weak, inconclusive, and too generalizing. For instance, not everyone begins their time of study with full optimism. Some students are unhappy, depressed, and anxious from the very beginning. In contrast, some students never become depressed or anxious and they enjoy the experience and adjust to the culture right away (Furnham 2019, 1846). Due to internationalization of education, the blurring of national boundaries and drive to explore other cultures, some researchers even argue for a shift in attention towards reverse culture shock in form a re-entry U-curve, being what happens when a student returns home. Research stresses that the issue nowadays is the other way around since returning students feel alienated, lonely, depressed, and confused (Furnham 2019, 1847).

However, some researchers still believe that the theory is useful in its basic essence, the first step of the adjustment process in the U-curve is described by some researchers as a "honeymoon phase". The stage reflects the *"enthusiasm and fascination with a new cultural environment"* (Ward et. al. 1998, 278) and it may last a few days to six months, depending on e.g., activities, events etc. which can delay the next stressful phase and extend the initially euphoric period (Ward et. al. 1998, 278). After the honeymoon phase, depending on the extent of it, the culture shock occurs in the following six to 18 months (Lawson 2019, 23). This stage is characterized by "*[...] a period of crisis, distress, hostility and withdrawal"* (Ward et. al 1998, 278). Researchers describe this phase as a phase of break since one needs to move through this stage in order to eventually achieve satisfactory adjustment and it is mainly connected to missing their families, food, mother tongue, climate etc. (Reid 2013, 50). However, as a more recent study finds, the culture shock phase can come in many forms and have more or less influence on one's adjustment. For instance, as it has become more normal to travel, apply for exchange programs etc., more young people therefore have a broader view of the world, resonating with the following notion *"[...] the more time one travels abroad, the less culture shock for one"* (Chien 2016, 45). Furthermore, globalization and information dissemination through the mass media and internet may also

alleviate the distance between people of different cultures and make international students' adjustment different from the U-curve hypothesis (Chien 2016, 46). As a result of this development, more contemporary researchers argue that it is not so obvious anymore that everyone goes through a phase of culture shock per se. In any case, it is worth considering that not everyone experiences the phase equally difficult. However, in order to overcome the culture shock, one needs to adjust to the environment. The adjustment phase is considered a transition phase before being fully adjusted (Ward et. al. 1998, 278) and at this stage, when one is ready, one is experiencing a period of coping and learning from the new culture (Markovizky 2008, 784). Other theorists also differ between academic adjustment and social adjustment to describe this stage. Academic adjustment *"[...] refers to the degree of a student's success in coping with various educational demands such as motivation, application, performance and satisfaction with the academic environment"* (Rienties et. al. 2011, 687), whereas social adjustment refers to *"[...] how well students deal with the interpersonal-societal demands of a study, such as making friends, being part of social activities or being able to work in groups"* (Rienties et. al. 2011, 687). At this stage, one's motivation for adjustment is good because of readiness to adapt and learn from the new culture in order to integrate (Lawson 2019, 23). The final step is called the mastery phase, which is a stage where individuals function effectively in the new culture (Nilsson 2019, 36; Lawson 2019, 23).

Prior research on Buddy Programmes

In addition to general studies on international student recruitment and retention, additional research has been conducted on buddy programmes. For instance, research into buddy programmes' effectiveness from a foreign language perspective has been conducted, such as in a study concerning how students with Japanese as their primary language can support non-Japanese students from New Zealand to improve their Japanese language skills (Yamamoto 2020). Other researchers have investigated buddy programmes' effectiveness in being preventive in relation to social exclusion and division among students (Obaeko Iwara 2019; Tzani-Pepelas 2019). In addition, some researchers have also investigated how buddy programmes can improve the conditions for international students. For instance, Per Nilsson (2019) and George Zhou (2014), who each made a thorough investigation of respectively Umeå University in Sweden and an

anonymous university in Canada by interviewing the actual international students for a firsthand perspective. Another similar case study is from Ana Naidoo et. al. (2021) who investigated the Buddy Programme at The University of Pretoria in South Africa by interviewing the actual buddies.

Considering the specific buddy programme at Umeå University, Nilsson describes how the buddy programme functions and provides data on how well it resonates with the expectations and development of the international students. In this research, two survey questions were of particular relevance; the ability to make friends from the host country and the ability to handle social activities and organized events (Nilsson 2019, 38). The case study concluded that many advantages were found in the buddy programme, such as in regard to connecting with other international students, but an important expectation for international students also involved connecting with peers from the host country and learning more about the culture. However, as the finding showed that these expectations are met within the BP through well-organized social activities, the "flip side" is that *"[...] some international students tend to stay with the programme and thereby miss opportunities to mix with national students outside the Buddy Programme."* (Nilsson 2019, 41). This does not resonate with the notion from Draper (2008) earlier in this chapter, in which he claims that making friends from the host country is an important factor and indicator of integration. In fact, it has been one of the purposes of the buddy programme at Umeå University (Nilsson 2019, 39). These native contacts from the host country are the ones international students will have to communicate with in a future workplace if they are not to return to their home country, *"[...] however, addressing the students' well-being in relation to making friends from the host country has proven to be difficult for most HEIs"* (Nilsson 2019, 42). Other theorists also comment on this notion. For instance, Sullivan states *"[...] that host national contacts are important professional, academic, and career supports, while home country contacts maintain a connection to the home culture."* (Sullivan 2015, 3). This resonates with George Zhou, as he also emphasizes the importance and beneficial integration possibilities that come from connecting with domestic students as it can be a major factor in decreasing loneliness, saying: *"However, bringing international and local students together remains one of the main challenges for HEIs."* (Resch and Amorim 2021, 59). According to Zhou, he agrees that it is not an easy task. In his research, many participants said that they had a relationship with domestic students, *"[...] but in most cases, they only worked with them on class projects. When hanging out for leisure, they*

went with friends from their home country or other international students" (Zhou 2014, 10). Again, this resonates back to Nilsson since the most common thing among international students is to stay connected with international students under similar circumstances, such as international students within the buddy programme.

Additionally, Ana Naidoo's case study, concerning the Buddy Programme at The University of Pretoria, also investigated the unique challenges that first year international students encounter, resonating with the U-curve theory since it also notes that a critical time comes after the introduction period or 'honeymoon phase' (Reid 2013, 49). According to the study, initiatives up until 2018 mostly concerned academic integration by e.g., offering students advisors (Naidoo et. al. 2021, 48). However, the problem was that not enough attention was given to the international students' social integration: *"[...] there was a need for a more inclusive programme to focus on the social integration of the first-year student.".* However, unlike the buddy programme at Umeå University, the initiative at The University of Pretoria was not focusing on organizing events for international students. The buddies functioned more like friends as well as more experienced students to talk to, who could then alert administrations if social problems arose: *"Big buddies are the first to discover student challenges and they can alert professional staff"* (Naidoo et. al. 2021, 56). Thus, the approach at this university is not to leave the buddies with the sole responsibility to attend to international students' well-being.

However, social integration is indeed not the issue at all universities. Following Zhou, the problem is often reversed as he observes a tendency among HEIs to be better at preparing international students socially compared to academically. In his study, informants thought that the university *"[...] provided mostly support related to their social life and they hoped that assistance would also be available regarding their academic life"* (Zhou 2014, 11). In accordance with Tinto's integration theory (1975), the variation of problems and complexities involved in integration of international students emphasize that there has to be a balance between offering academic support and social support in order to reach satisfactory integration possibilities. International students' well-being depends on both factors and Zhou's study found that social support can only lead to integration if academic support happens simultaneously (Zhou 2014, 14), which is supported by Naidoo who emphasizes *"...that both academic and social support are required to enable a student to succeed."* (Naidoo et. al. 2021, 49)

The us and them issue

Considering the knowledge we have acquired about the seemingly well-functioning buddy programmes, we know that the initiative overall, if it is successful, manages to form a socially rewarding community for international students. However, research found that the buddy programmes are limited in terms of integrating internationals with domestic students, something that seems to be an essential expectation among international students, and if that objective can be reached, chances of increased integration will follow (Nilsson 2019, 41; Zhou 2014, 10; Sullivan 2015, 3; Tinto 2006, 3). Many researchers who study the divide and exclusion of students mention the 'us' and 'them' dynamics as well as in-grouping and out-grouping between international students and domestic students, often leading international students to be subject to various stigma (Chinyamurindi 2018, 215). For instance, in a Canadian report, it is mentioned that the exclusion of Asian students is quite common among HEIs (Housemand et. al 2014, 379). Other researchers describe the exclusion and the 'us' and 'them' dynamics as a form of 'othering' (Biscombe 2017, 1; Yao 2018, 1), usually in the form of domestic students distancing themselves from international students. In fact, international students have in some cases experienced racism as a result of the division between students, as found in a study on Chinese international students in the U.S.: *"This study indicates the challenge of interpersonal relationships because of othering and neo-racist behavior from other students."* (Yao 2018, 16). The study stresses the importance of paying attention to this issue and the possible defect interpersonal relationship which enrollment of international students entails since the study encourages institution to *"[...] take all these factors into consideration when developing strategic policies and practices to better support international students within the campus environment, particularly during the critical first few year"* (Yao 2018, 16).

This resonates with the following notion in Obaeko Iwara's case study about division, and what the buddy programme does to approach the issue at the University of Venda: *"[...] despite the university's mission to promote intercultural competences, ethnic integration, mutual appreciation, and peaceful coexistence, students find it difficult to integrate, socialize and relate with those of different cultural backgrounds. This specifically was due to inherent tribal behaviors"* (Obaeko Iwara 2019, 59). Tribal behaviors of domestic students seem to complicate international students'

adaptation to new cultures and the academic environment. As a solution for the 'us' and 'them' issue, which is most common between international and domestic students, he proposes the following: *"It is important to introduce mechanisms for facilitating and managing diversity through educators. It could be suggested that 'Buddy Programme' will play an active educator role."* (Obaeko Iwara 2019, 67). According to Iwara, it should be the educators and professors who make efforts in reducing the 'us and them'-gap between domestic and international students.

However, the interrelationship between 'us' and 'them' dynamics also comes down to language. In the research from Lou et. al., they focus on how integration can depend on one's language competencies. The research investigates how language competencies of international students are associated with domestic student social support, which will bring psychological well-being. Lou et. al. state that *"[...] international students may experience anxiety and isolation because of language barriers. [...] language proficiency is believed to be a significant factor of social well-being."* (Lou et. al. 2019, 957). The research found that there is a negative correlation between perceived language competencies and social support from domestic students (Lou et. al. 2019, 957), meaning that one's language skills influenced whether domestic students wanted to participate in social interactions with one. This ultimately led to exclusion, both socially and academically and it resonates with Zhou in the following: *"Studies have documented that international students face more challenges on campus than domestic students [...] limited English language proficiency impacts many aspects of their lives, including making friends, understanding the course materials, finding group work partners, etc."* (Zhou 2014, 3).

English as a lingua franca

In relation to the 'us' and 'them' issue, another thing that can help explain the division between students is English as a lingua franca within the academic arena. A study found that lingua franca English, that is, English practiced by non-native speakers, is also judged by characteristic pronunciation, specialized vocabulary, idiomatic phraseology, and the whole mastery of the language; all being full of conventions and markers of in-group membership formation (Seidlhofer 2001, 136). However, what Seidlhofer criticizes is the respect and understanding of different proficiency in using lingua franca English. He uses an example of criticism towards Danish politicians practicing lingua franca English in a foreign political context and being misunderstood:

"What is the significance of senior Danish politicians, who use English with moderate proficiency, inevitably creating false and unintended impressions when talking impromptu to the 'world' press?" (Seidlhofer 2001, 136). He explains his frustration in that the general picture reflects a lack of awareness caused by native-speakers tunnel vision and disregard for linguistic and cultural diversity; in this case the unique pronunciation and vocabulary from Danish politicians (Seidlhofer 2001, 136), further implying that Danes' use of lingua franca English likewise determines the identification and classification of e.g., Chinese' or Italians' use of lingua franca English. However, this tendency creates a 'sameness' and 'distancing' according to Seidlhofer and other researchers (Seidlhofer 2001, 153; Olson 2011, 115; Broady 2004, 68). The idea of 'sameness' is used to gather material in classification and to separate what is different (Olson 2011, 115). In language, the principles of 'sameness' and 'difference' and the duality in between create a gap where one can be examined and classified, resonating with Lou et. al. who stresses that there is a negative correlation between perceived language competencies and the social support one can expect from other lingua franca English speakers with higher proficiency and native speakers who naturally master English (Lou et. al. 2019, 957). However, as Seidlhofer mentions, it is not solely a question of mastering English. It is also a question of cultural differences, pronunciation etc. which determines whether one identifies 'sameness' or 'difference' in others.

Relating this to the internationalization of international students and their perceived challenges in terms of language, a study among Danish HEIs found that a number of Danish professors express that they feel an insufficient academic English proficiency when teaching in English and therefore avoid speaking it. Thereby, it limits the learning objectives for international students (Adriansen et. al. 2022, 3). This is a concerning issue for Danish HEIs, especially in regard to climbing the academic ranking list through internationalization and accommodating international students.

5. Method

In this chapter, we will account for our method and research design. Initially, we will account for our philosophy of science. Then, we move on to our design chapter, which is our framework that guides our entire research process, explaining the specific methods and procedures we used to collect and process our data in our thesis. Our method of analysis is part of our theory chapter.

5.1. Philosophy of science

In our thesis, we take the social constructivist approach since we believe that the world is shaped by people's surroundings, upbringing, life experience, and cultural contexts. With this in mind, we are aware that people make different interpretations through their language because of the different social relations and surroundings in their lives. Their different interpretations of the world, based on their individual life experiences and factors, are the center of the negotiations of what can only be treated as a near truth, not sole truth (Egholm 2014, 148). This resonates with another definition of social constructivism, stating that the world can only exist as long as there is a subject i.e., a human being creating phenomena through recognition, which means that the reality that we acknowledge depends on the subject who recognizes and creates a phenomena. Ultimately, the knowledge that we extract from reality becomes dependent and relative to only the creator of the reality, i.e., the subject, which excludes objectivity (Hansen et al. 2021, 26). Another notion is that of Kuhn, who states that science is a social community, created by the social ties that are shared between researchers. These social ties decide how researchers view the world, science and what correct and real science is. Thus, science is perceived as a social construct (Holm 2014, 122).

Like in other philosophies of science, theorists create their own approach and version of a philosophy of science. This also applies for social constructivism, and thus, to illustrate more important theoretical contributions to this field, we deem it relevant to bring in Wittgenstein's concept of the so-called 'language games'. The concept of language games was introduced and needed to explain the meaning of what people say to each other, stressing that language games refer to the countless contexts in which people use language i.e., that each context has its own rules of language use and perception. Thus, what can be said in one specific context is perceived and interpreted in a specific way that differs from the interpretation in other contexts. This means that the context dictates use of language and gives meaning to words and sentences (Holm 2014, 123). According to Wittgenstein, people live through language and everything we do and say is based on the language that we use, and whenever we use it, we make meaning of it by engaging and constantly moving in between language games.

Another contributor to this philosophy of science is the American social constructivist, Kenneth Gergen. Gergen presented four assumptions in social constructivism:

1. There is no relationship between the world and our concepts of it since language does not reflect reality but a social behavior.
2. Our definitions and descriptions of the world are defined by our social relations. Thus, our view of the world is based on a common shared knowledge.
3. We form our future by our perception of the world.
4. Our future well-being is decided by our reflections of our interpretations of the world (Holm 2014, 124).

Another layer to the notion of the importance of language in social constructivism is that language constitutes identity. Whenever we tell a story about ourselves, we draw on public and social factors. For instance, when we are asked to tell something about ourselves, usually, we tell something about where we were born, raised, went to school, how many siblings we have etc. Whenever we speak about these things and in this order, we form our self-understanding based on social conventions that dictate how a narrative or story about oneself is to be constructed (Holm 2014, 128). We define ourselves with the help of language and social conventions. Thus, language constitutes identity. It is the way we use our language that defines who we are and who others are when we speak about them.

Taking this further, it means that identities are created through discourse. Since discourse refers to written or spoken communication, we can conclude that language is constituting the world and identity. It is the discourse construction of objects and human beings that enables us to create our own identity (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999, 55). For instance, the aftermath of 9/11 has stigmatized Middle Eastern people as being terrorists. 9/11 has undeniably generated an extreme Islamophobia in the Western world, which is difficult for muslims to escape from (Alfonseca 2021). The discourse about Middle Eastern people is constantly reproduced and positions them in a certain, negative way that influences them in any given interaction.

This corresponds well with the notion of many discourse psychologists, who state that whenever people speak, they create an identity; an identity which is subject to constant change, paving the

way for the formation of flexible identities. In other words, the identities are eventually the products of different discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999, 115).

It means that identities become social subjects whenever they face a discursive practice that calls for our attention. Thus, an identity is reproduced each time it encounters a new discourse, and, as we stated earlier, social constructivism argues that objects and people are socially constructed (Ibid). Consequently, when we speak in a specific setting and discourse, we constitute our positioning to others, creating an identity that matches the topic and attitudes of other discursive agents; people.

Taking the above into account, it means that our interpretations of the gathered data must at no point be rendered as the final, single truth. Instead, the data must be rendered as selected ways of interpreting something, out of many other ways of interpreting something specific. In other words, society, our surroundings, experiences, and academic background will be the foundation of our specific interpretations, while still remaining true to our data.

Furthermore, the social constructivist approach works well with our theoretical foundation, concerning narratives and positioning. Throughout the history and development of narrative studies but also in psychology, life stories have always been regarded as subjective stories that are created based on social constructions that have impacted the agent (Flick 2014, 331).

To draw a better parallel between narratives and social constructivism, narrative studies share the social-constructionist premise that our access to social reality takes place through language and other symbolic modes (Holmgreen and Strunck 2020, 184). As mentioned, social constructivism departs from the notion that humans see the world from different perceptions and interpretations that are constituted through our social relationships, our language games and meaning-making with each other.

Perspectivating this to Jerome Bruner, he states that narratives constitute life, and life constitutes narratives. This means that life is socially constructed, like reality and experience is constituted through sense-making narratives through the use of language. He argues that whenever a person tells a story about his or her life, it will always be done based on the purpose of reaching a cognitive achievement, instead of making the story a complete recital of the factual events and processes, thus making a life story a cognitive or narrative achievement, which was done based on

recalling memory selectively. In the end, a biographical narrative, for instance, becomes a reconstruction, or mimesis, of one's life and experiences (Flick 2014, 89).
Thus, as researchers, we must always be aware of the fact that whenever people construct stories about their life, it is never an actual recital of life, events, and facts. It is rather a socially constructed story within social and cultural contexts or underlying narratives. Specifically in biographical interviews or whenever a person is telling a story about a specific event or period in life, it always becomes a socially constructed narrative, influenced by the desired outcomes of the story and the desired social identity related to the story. Finally, according to social constructivism, as mentioned earlier, without language, narratives would not exist.

5.2. Design

Moving on to our research design. As stated previously, our interest in this thesis derives from a past study, which found that international students struggle and experience negative well-being at AAU. This means that we have formed our thesis on the basis of empirical investigation, and it guided us into finding a fitting theory to apply to it, i.e., an inductive approach (Hansen et al., 2021, 78).

Qualitative approach

In research, there is quantitative, qualitative approach or a mixed-method approach, combining the two. Quantitative methods deal with numbers, while qualitative methods usually deal with texts such as observations, interviews, and documents (Hansen et. al., 2021, 41; 151). We have chosen to work with interviews.
The advantages of the two approaches are often discussed heavily, but in short, it can be defined as follows. It is always to be taken into account that it depends on what the research and investigation seeks to uncover and answer, but generally, the quantitative approach fits well if a researcher seeks to investigate general hypotheses. In contrast, the qualitative approach is most fitting if seeking to uncover the underlying reasons for specific actions or statements, i.e., people's feelings and emotions (Hansen et. al., 2021, 43). We decided to take the qualitative approach to our research and to work with interviews since we aim to investigate feelings and emotions i.e., the reasonings behind the negative well-being of free movers at Aalborg University, thus

answering the 'what' and 'how' questions. We were not interested in generalizing our data since a general number of opinions is not our focus nor is it relevant in relation to uncovering the root of the problem. We elaborate on the choice of interview later in this chapter.

Limitations of qualitative studies

In terms of limitations, there are crucial factors to be aware of in qualitative research. Qualitative research is time-consuming as it works with textual data. Another limitation is that qualitative research is not statistically representative since the foundation of data is usually smaller than in quantitative studies (Silverman 2022, 25-26). An example is that a qualitative research design can focus on gathering data from opinions, such as conducting interviews, to answer the 'what' and 'how' questions, investigating the reasonings behind statements, facts, and actions.

Another limitation to the qualitative method is that we cannot state anything about other international students or free movers other than our three informants. However, as qualitative researchers, we shall never exclude generalization entirely, and thus we must raise our analytical generalization. This form of generalization focuses on creating arguments and finding results that can be related to past studies and research on the same topic and field. Here, focus is on finding differences and similarities between our findings and past studies or theory, i.e., relating and connecting our results and findings to them. Consequently, analytical generalization is concerned with how well findings can be connected to other findings to increase validity (Hansen et. al. 2021, 114).

If not possible, the validity of the findings is limited. Relating this our thesis again, this would mean that the feelings, emotions, thoughts and reasonings behind free movers', our informants', well-being is to be discovered in past studies or explained by theory. Our literature review as well additional literature illustrates various studies conducted on international students' well-being, and thus, through our analysis, we continuously relate our findings to past studies to build our arguments and raise the validity of our findings. Furthermore, we chose to find informants from both the EU and outside of the EU. This was also a decision related to increasing our validity as much as possible since it broadens our results to a larger geographical area of the world, in spite of only having three informants.

We have three informants. It is unfortunate, but it does not have any serious consequences because we focus on personal narratives and experiences related to the Buddy Programme or other organs causing discomfort among international students, and thus three informants are sufficient (Kvale 1997, 108). Thus, our informants' stories are not to be considered a reflection of a general formation of opinions since that was not our aim. This now brings us to the process of how we collected our data.

5.2.1 Collection of data

In the following, we will account for the process of collecting our data. We explain how we recruited our informants, how we conducted the interviews, which type of interview we used, how we applied an interview guide and how we ensured to raise reliability and validity in our thesis.

Recruitment and conducting interviews

We recruited informants with purposive sampling since our informants were not to represent a larger group but rather because they were specifically relevant to our research and research questions. This is the case for both the recruitment of AAU staff (preliminary informants) and the free movers (primary informants), whereas the latter are part of our official data, while the interviews with AAU personnel were part of our preliminary research. Purposive sampling refers to when researchers purposely target informants who are identified as being the most suitable to generate the desired data. That is people who possess the required characteristics, background, culture, or experiences to be able to provide proper data (Hansen et. al., 2021, 199).

Recruitment of AAU staff

Prior to the three interviews with AAU personnel, we contacted them each by phone to present our case and ask if they were interested in being interviewed. We conducted three interviews with administration offices at AAU to gain knowledge, but also in terms of narrowing our focus onto something very specific, being the Buddy Programme, to uncover what position and responsibility the voluntary initiative bears in relation to the dissatisfaction we have identified among the

organization's international students – especially free movers. The reason why we decided to interview The International Office and Master Admission was due to our lack of organizational understanding and because we knew that the two have the initial contact with incoming international students, from the moment that free movers and exchange students get accepted to the moment where they begin their studies at AAU. These interviews also led us to contact administration staff on a more local level i.e., study board chairman of Cross-Cultural Studies to receive perspectives on a more expert level.

Recruitment of free movers

Prior to the three interviews with free movers, we required that our informants were international students; free movers, and that they were part of the Buddy Programme at AAU, currently or in the past. We also sought to find an informant who works as a buddy, to broaden our perspective on the subject. Finally, we required that they studied a full master's degree or double degree. We fulfilled our objectives, and below, we explain the process.

We contacted various departments at AAU to ask for help about recruiting informants, but due to strict GDPR-rules, they were not allowed to give us names or emails. However, they told us to form an email in which we had to present our thesis, aim, and which informants we sought, which they would then forward to their students via Moodle, making the departments that we contacted, 'gatekeepers'. That is because we contacted them, and because of the GDPR-rules, they were the ones in charge of making sure that we establish contact with potential informants (Hansen et. al. 2021, 206).

We then wrote and sent an email to the departments with the most international students enrolled since we had a document of the distribution of internationals at AAU, one that we received from Master Admission.
We presented our thesis, focus of interest, and our aim. Also, we ensured they would be anonymous and asked them to fill out a form of consent to let us record the interviews (Hansen et. al. 2021, 206). However, no student replied to our email, so we had to improvise. Instead, we tried to reach out to non-profit organs at AAU and luckily, we came across a Danish student. He told us

about an international event at Studenterhuset in Aalborg. This approach to gathering informants is called snowballing (Riis 2005, 64).

We attended the event, and we met three students; one from the Czech Republic, one from China, and one from India. They had all enrolled in AAU to take a full master's degree or double degree, and they had a connection to the Buddy Programme. We exchanged phone numbers and then we managed to make appointments for each interview.

Conducting the interviews with AAU staff

The interview with Master Admission was an online interview due to sickness from our informant, who still wanted to help us. Thus, we conducted the interview online via Zoom. The interview had a duration of 59 minutes.
Our interview with The International Office was conducted at Campus East, at their office. The duration of the interview was 63 minutes.
The informational extractions from these interviews led us to do an interview with the study board chairman of Cross-Cultural Studies at the person's office at Campus East. This interview had a duration of 61 minutes.

Conducting the interviews with free movers

The three student-interviews were carried out at Studenterhuset; a gathering point in Aalborg for international students. Since a lot of internationals meet at the place or at least are very familiar with the place, we assumed it would make our informants feel safe and relaxed there. It must always be a priority to ensure that the physical context is supportive and familiar to effectively conduct interviews (Partington 2001, 33). The territory is important in terms of balancing the asymmetrical relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and we made sure to ask whether they felt more comfortable elsewhere, to which they replied that the proposed location was preferable.

We initiated all interviews with a briefing on our research and where our interest comes from. We made it clear to our informants what the aim of the thesis is, and we also asked them for consent

to record the interviews. We ended each interview with a debriefing, asking our informants whether they had more to add or any questions (Hansen et. al. 2021, 207).
All interviews were recorded by a mobile phone. We decided to record the interviews to make it possible for us to focus on the situation, the informant and being entirely present to control the interview and remember to follow the interview guide and to ask additional questions (Hansen et.al. 2021, 208). The interviews were semi-structured, and they each had a duration of 71, 87, and 57 minutes.

The semi-structured interview

In qualitative research, the most often used interview methods are the single-person interviews and focus group interviews (Hansen et. al. 2021, 180). Qualitative interviews are preferable as they uncover people's world views, reasoning of actions and statements attributed to specific social environments. In other words, this is popularly referred to as the process of meaning-making in people's everyday lives (Hansen et. al. 2021, 181).
Qualitative interviews are conducted if researchers deem it impossible for informants to provide the sought-for answers in a survey (Hansen et. al. 2021, 182). Briefly about focus groups, they are beneficial for generating data about the interactions within a specific group. However, a focus group interview is not beneficial in gathering individual insight and understanding of decisions and emotions as the informants' possible distant relationship between one another can prevent honesty and openness. (Hansen et. al. 2021, 187), and due to this, we did not consider a focus group interview since our aim was to explore individual experiences through narratives and stories.

Single-person interviews are beneficial when seeking to gather data from sole individuals in relation to attitudes, perceptions, world views etc. Here, informants can elaborate in great detail about answers that are, for instance, related to sensitive subjects (Hansen et. al. 2021, 185).
Single-person interviews are 1) structured interviews, 2) semi-structured interviews, and 3) unstructured interviews (Hansen et. al. 2021, 186).
The31 structured interview is preferred when seeking consistent data from as many informants as possible. It does not allow deviations and strictly follows the interview guide, omitting the possibility of additional unforeseen data, which is why we did not consider using it.

The unstructured interview is an unstructured conversation with no prepared themes or questions, preferred if having an explorative study where informants are encouraged to establish their own themes (Hansen et. al. 2021, 186-187) We did not consider using it due to its absence of structure and prepared questions.
The semi-structured interview requires a fully prepared interview guide that allows the researcher to deviate from as *"[...] the concrete interaction with the interviewees may require that you follow the story that the interviewees are most interested in telling. Often it can actually show that by listening to the interviewee and pushing your own prefabricated questions a bit in the background, you still get around the themes and research questions you had prepared to address."* (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2022, 37). The semi-structured interview is preferred when seeking a mix of prepared and unprepared conversation where unforeseen themes can emerge, while the flexibility of semi-structured interviews also allows for additional questions to elaborate on specific answers. The semi-structured interview has some traits from the unstructured interview in that it also has some explorative element to it since it allows informants to tell additional stories about themes that were unprepared (Hansen et. al. 2021, 186), resonating with the following statement: *"The form of a semi-structured interview guide is considered loose and flexible, which allows dialogue during an interview, the opportunity to change the order of the questions and easy movement from question to question"* (Kallio et. al. 2016, 2960).

We deem the semi-structured interview to be the most ideal as we sought to understand the experiences, recollections, and observations from a first-hand perspective; being the free movers', resonating with the following notion on the qualitative approach from Steiner Kvale: *"In qualitative interviews, social scientists investigate varieties of human experience. They attempt to understand the world from the subjects' points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world."* (Kvale 2006, 481).

We also chose the semi-structured interview because it benefits our interest in exploring narratives. That is because it allows us to examine our participants' narratives and the depth and contextual nuances of their stories, i.e., expressed by their feelings, emotions and meaning making. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview provides informants the freedom to construct nuanced narratives and stories when and how they desire, which is not possible in a

structured interview. Also, the semi-structured interview enables the provision of follow-up questions which can further explore the contextual factors that constitute or influence informants' stories. In summary, this interview method provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals construct and convey their stories (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010, 41-42; Kvale 1997, 134)

Furthermore, the semi-structured interview allowed us to prepare the interviews with interview guides in which we prepared research themes, research questions, and interview questions; interview questions that we could deviate from, whenever the informants' answers caught our interest into something new and unexpected, thus providing structure but also the flexibility of acquiring crucial additional data.

The big limitation of qualitative interviews, however, is attributed to the fact that they cannot provide reliability that is 'sufficient enough' like quantitative research can, and because the researcher is most often present, among the researched subjects, when collecting data, minimizing the neutrality of the creation of data, according to quantitative researchers (Hansen et. al. 2021, 183).
Single-person interviews have some limitations that we are aware of. Some of them are that it provides the risk of interviewer bias. It can occur if researchers have substantial knowledge on the specific topic that influences researchers' interpretations and world views, limiting their objectivity. Also, informants' answers can be influenced by this, providing false answers that fit the world view of the researcher. Additionally, informants can provide answers that fit societal norms rather than the identity of the given person which decreases the validity of the data. Further, conducting interviews can be time-consuming due to the process of gathering knowledge and data, while the process of data, such as transcription and analysis requires detailed work (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010, 37). Arguably, the flexibility of the semi-structured interview can also become a limitation if informants deviate too much from the research area. We are aware that interviews prevent quantifiability, however, as stated before, we focus on personal narratives and experiences. Thus, our data is not to be considered a quantifiable formation of opinions.

Interview guide

Dwelling on the traits of the interview guide, it *"[...] is defined as a list of questions, which directs conversation towards the research topic during the interview"* (Kallio et. al. 2016, 2960), suggesting a linear and rigorous approach to interviewing, but a semi-structured interview, as we have chosen, is more a verbal interchange where the interviewer attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions (research questions and interview questions), semi-structured interviews unfold in a more conversational manner, offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important (Longhurst 2003, 103).
However, we do not discredit the importance in preparing and asking the right questions and rely on an interview guide to create the right setting, and according to research, it is an advantage for the interviewer in these sorts of interviews to outline beforehand *what* one intends to investigate before deciding on *how* one intends to proceed from there (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2022, 37). Therefore, it was also important to initiate our interviews by informing our informants of our objectives and gently asking them simple and open questions on who they are, where they come from etc.

Furthermore, it is important to separate the research questions from the interview questions because the interview questions are more concrete, direct, and provide specific answers. Research questions are underlying questions and are formed to explain specific phenomena and processes (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010, 40).

As seen in our interview guides the questions are somewhat alike. The themes are the same, but our research questions and interviews questions have some minor deviations since we found some questions more relevant for some of our informants, since one of our informants is a buddy while the others were not. Also, we gained more knowledge after each interview, which meant that we found it relevant to add extra questions or replace some questions with others. However, this did not change the outcome of our findings but merely created a stronger setting for our interviews. It was important for us, in order to answer our research question properly, to prepare our interview guide with clear objectives and themes that were desired to be covered. We used the themes to form an overview of which research areas our study operates in, being, first of all, the Buddy Programme. However, we also created more open themes, allowing our informants to

find reasons for negative well-being beyond the Buddy Programme. We had this in mind when we formed the research questions and interview questions, thus allowing us to deviate from the interview guide as long as we considered it beneficial to the overall research question of our thesis, meaning that we made use of follow-up and interpretive questions to better understand the reasoning behind our informants' stories. In appendix 4,5, and 6, it is visible that our interview guides were made from prefabricated questions.

Regarding our interviews with AAU staff as part of our preliminary research, we did not create a list of prefabricated questions cf. an interview guide. We simply prepared open questions to gather as much information on the subject to expand our own understanding. We only formed interview guides prior to interviewing the students.

Reliability and transparency

Among many quantitative researchers, qualitative studies are critiqued for their lack of reliability compared to measurable studies (Silverman 2022, 449).
Measurable data, such as statistics, are not flexible or to be misunderstood, which raises the reliability of such studies (Hansen et. al. 2021, 103).
Reliability is often assessed in relation to whether the study can be reproduced by others with the aim of achieving the same or similar results, but this does not apply for qualitative studies, where the results depend on the researcher's role during the interview situation and the researcher's interpretations. The degree of reliability is critiqued because the researcher is the one who is in charge of conveying the data that is interpreted to the reader. Thus, many quantitative researchers deem this factor as minimizing the reliability (Silverman 2022, 449). Therefore, the most important criteria for reliability in qualitative studies is to be transparent (Tanggaard & Brinkmann 2010, 491). We have achieved transparency by being transparent and explicit about the formation of our interview guides, recruitment of our informants, transcription of our recordings, and interview situations.

Recording, transcription, and coding

In our thesis, to raise the reliability, we recorded all six interviews with a mobile phone. We tested the recorder beforehand to ensure it worked properly (Kvale 1997, 163).

Then, we transcribed the recordings of only the student interviews since the administration interviews are only part of our background chapter and not our official data.
We transcribed the three student interviews as accurately as possible, i.e., in a verbatim manner to avoid misunderstanding and to avoid omitting important statements or stories that are all crucial in the entire context. Then, we reviewed each recording to make sure that we followed our interview guide and asked the planned questions; an approach that contributes to increased reliability (Silverman 2022, 450).
Furthermore, we also reviewed each of our transcripts to make sure that we have brought every data correctly into the transcripts. We ensured that we both transcribed the recordings to avoid different language, interpretations, and techniques, benefitting our reliability, in accordance with Kvale (Kvale 1997, 170-171).
We intended to focus on all the factors that could raise the reliability in our research, and thus we both coded the transcripts. We intended to code the interviews with the same coding technique to make our data consistent as possible and without errors (Silverman 2022, 451).

Conducting the interview

Another factor that we deem crucial for our reliability, was that we both conducted interviews. Sometimes, when there is a group of researchers, only one of them conducts the interviews, and this can sometimes decrease the reliability because the interviews and transcripts can be too biased, only based on one researcher's meaning-making. Thus, we found it necessary that we both conducted the interviews, and also to gather as accurate data as possible. During the interviews, one of us functioned as an assistant interviewer who made sure that we followed our guide. It also enabled additional interpretation, which enabled us to ask additional open questions, which provided more nuanced answers.
We both had experience of conducting interviews and this experience benefitted us in the interview situations. Also, it meant that we were respectful, sensitive, reflecting, and better at interpreting our informants' answers and stories (Hansen et. al. 2021, 204-205).

Interview guide

We also used our prepared interview guide, which was our compass. It made sure that we kept the right path by asking the correct questions to gather the relevant data to answer our research

question. Earlier, we elaborated on the creation of our interview guide to make it transparent. As mentioned, replicability is important in research, but it is not possible in qualitative studies. Therefore, gathering accurate data is important and being as transparent as possible about our approach and actions can enable future researchers to conduct an almost identical research that can reach the same results (Tanggaard & Brinkmann 2010, 491-493).

In the process of analyzing the data, we achieved coherence, i.e., internal consistency and connection between our research question, philosophy of science, choice of theory and method of analysis. We remained true to our theoretical approach in the way we produced knowledge about the informants' experiences and self-understanding, and the knowledge acquired does not have an inherent essence, resonating with the fact that we are social constructivist. This ensured transparency, cohesion, and reliability (Tanggaard & Brinkmann 2010, 491-493).

Validity

Validity concerns the credibility of data and interpretation of it. Further, it also concerns the degree to which data, interpretations and arguments can be supported by e.g., theory and studies and whether researchers are objective or not (Silverman 2022, 433). We acknowledge that validity, like reliability, is largely debated and discussed among quantitative researchers who argue that unmeasurable data cannot be valid. The counter arguments from qualitative researchers are then that even measurable data is left to interpretation as people do not always understand measurable data or seek explanations for the given data, ultimately switching the quantitative research into qualitative research for later investigation (Silverman 2022, 434).

We have already explained analytic generalization, which concerns external validity. Now, we will account for the internal validity of our research. When speaking of internal validity, there is the aspect of communicative validity. This refers to when a researcher has conducted interviews but intends to verify the data to make them as accurate and correct as possible. This can be done with the help of a second interview, for instance (Flick 2014, 372). However, due to time limitation in relation to our deadline, and the fact that our respondents were also busy, we were not able to conduct a second, shorter interview to verify the data provided in the first interviews. We are

aware of the impact of this; thus, we have our own 'checklist' of factors, below, that are relevant for the internal validity.

Interview guide

Interview guides are important since they should always be followed as much as possible unless the interview is unstructured (read section about semi-structured interviews). When we formed our interview guide, we carefully formed our interview questions, research themes and questions that we sought specific answers for to answer our overall research question. But this arguably becomes irrelevant if our informants are not capable of answering our questions. That is why we took the purposive sampling strategy in recruiting our informants., as mentioned earlier. We carefully evaluated our questions and we ensured that our informants fulfilled the aforementioned criteria, as mentioned in the section 'recruitment of informants'.
As mentioned earlier, we responded with follow-up and interpretive questions to better understand the reasoning behind our informants' stories, and to ensure that we understood their answers correctly, thereby decreasing the risk of misunderstandings and incorrect data, which then increases the validity of the data (Tanggaard & Brinkmann 2010, 42).
Thus, we argue that this approach has increased the validity of the data since our informants fulfilled the criteria to be able to provide us with the right answers and data.

Language

Since our informants are foreign students, we were aware that a language barrier could emerge during the interviews. As Brinkmann & Tanggaard argue, language is perhaps the most important factor of them all because people possess different forms of expressions and accents that researchers must be strictly aware of to avoid misunderstandings (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010, 33-34). Having this in mind, it was important for us to gain language familiarity before the interviews were carried out. We established language familiarity by texting back and forth with our informants during the process of finding a date and location. Then, since our student informants are from the Czech Republic, China, and India, respectively, we knew that specific, unfamiliar accents could bring lots of misunderstandings. Though, we were under the impression that our informants' level of English was quite sufficient.

The face-to-face-situation

The interview situation itself is also crucial. Some researchers conduct interviews via e-mails or telephone, however, those situations can stress the informant because of missing answer options or due to strict time limitation (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010, 36). Thus, a face-to-face interview is often preferred, both from the perspective of the researcher and potential informants since informants can feel that there are better conditions for having a relaxed setting, where stress is less present, and the informant can elaborate more on specific questions (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010, 36). Thus, we only considered conducting our interviews face-to-face. However, we were aware of possible disadvantages since our informants sat in front of us, two students, in our final year, who have detailed knowledge on the field, which could have influenced their responses, resonating with some of the limitations of interviews that we discussed earlier. The interview situation, despite being relaxed and informal, can still ignite nervousness if we, as researchers, are viewed as some authoritarian experts, associated with AAU. Thus, we were aware of the risk surrounding the perhaps asymmetrical relationship between us and our informants, which is important when conducting interviews (Tanggaard & Brinkmann 2010, 492; Kvale 1997, 129-132).

Furthermore, we chose the location to be Aalborg's 'Studenterhuset'; an international gathering point. That is because we intended to make the setting as relaxing and informal as possible for our informants, who could have potentially been nervous about the location, had it been on campus with a more formal setting. Additionally, there were other people at Studenterhuset, which we also thought would bring more comfort. We also intended to establish a relationship with our informants to erase the formality or 'fear of speaking to a researcher'. We rendered these factors important for the setting itself as we argue that this helped our informants be safer, which allowed them to be more open about their stories (Partington 2001, 33). We did never experience signs of uncomfortability from our informants, and they seemed open and happy. That may also be related to the fact that we did a briefing before the interviews, ultimately making things more transparent to them.

The balance of presence and absence

Something often discussed is how much the researcher should be present or absent in an interview. We argue that it is a question of what the specific interview type is and what the aim is.

When conducting semi-structured interviews, it is important that researchers do not involve themselves too much and instead let informants construct their own answers and stories. That is because high involvement can make respondents provide false answers. False answers occur when a respondent has constructed a story or subjective fact that is influenced by the researcher's worldview of the given topic. If informants feel that researchers put words into their mouths, they provide biased answers which do not reflect their perception of the world and their identity, ultimately decreasing the internal validity (Flick 2014, 372, 374).
Having this in mind, we sought to prevent ourselves from interrupting them and putting words into their mouths, and we intended to listen as much as possible to enable our informants to speak their mind and answer our questions. Meanwhile, we wanted to prevent being passive during the interviews as some people find it provoking to only listen and not speak. But that differs from person to person, and it also entails knowing the audience and having the experience of conducting interviews (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2010, 33). Arguably, this made our respondents able to provide us with hopefully valid data, leading to a desired increase of internal validity and reliability in our thesis.

Also very important and related to both reliability and validity is our method of analysis, also called analysis strategy. Later, in our theory section, we account for how we intended to apply our chosen theory in our analysis.

5.2.2 Data processing

In relation to our approach and method of processing our data, we decided to first separate each of the three interviews with the students, i.e., the free movers. We did that to avoid overlappings between the interviews to make our data clearer and to create a beneficial overview, both for the sake of our theoretical approach and analysis of the data and for the readers of this thesis. Then, it is important to note that interviews are most often coded unless other methods are more beneficial for the approach and analysis of the data. Coding of qualitative data refers to the process of categorizing and condensing the gathered empirical qualitative data (Hansen et. al. 2021, 212).

We decided to have an approach that both combines coding, to some degree, while also understanding and interpreting each interview as a whole to identify the analysis themes that emerged during the interviews. We argue this decreases the risk of omitting important data by only extracting specific paragraphs out of a bigger context. However, it does not mean that we analyzed large sequences of 50-100 lines. Instead, we briefly introduce the context of the analysis themes and extracts identified. This is solely with the purpose of being explicit about the context that we create to not let the reader question or doubt whether the categories we have established are in fact relevant. Thus, to be as explicit as possible and to validate our data as much as possible, we first accounted for how the given analysis themes were identified, and then we explained what the informants were asked. By doing so, we provided contextual information for better understanding.
We argue that by combining coding of themes while also providing contextual information, we keep our data available and transparent to the reader as much as possible to make it function as a base for our interpretations and analysis.

Also, we found it necessary to identify themes because of the need of providing a good structure and overview of the data, ultimately enabling us to create parallels from one interview to another. In the end, we were able to create consistency and cohesion between some themes and codes, while there were themes that did not emerge in other interviews. We argue that a disadvantage of not categorizing the data into themes is that it minimizes the opportunity to have a good structure. Instead, it would result in various overlaps between the interviews and misunderstandings, requiring an enormous focus from the reader to understand the different perspectives. In contrast, if we solely did a thematic coding and analysis, we would have risked omitting important contexts for further understanding of our data.
Consequently, having this mixed approach, we argue that we keep a good balance between the two poles, retaining both contexts (flexible approach to the data) and a good structure (thematic approach).

6. Theory

We will now account for our theoretical approach and method of analysis used in our investigation of stories and narratives, which specifically helps us investigate rich and detailed data of the micro-level stories and contextualize the data within a broader social and cultural context i.e., macro-level narratives.

Narrating meaning through big stories and small stories

Narratives are created whenever a person links specific events in a specific sequence in a manner that is important for the story, the speaker, and the audience. The selected events and stories that are told are usually beneficial to the speaker (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2017, 235). In contrast to science and quantitative studies, narratives and stories from the qualitative research method are accepted as a discursive analysis tool for creating meaning and in an organizational perspective *"...not simply as mere diversions from the real stuff of working*, [studying] *and managing"* (Fina 2019*,* 275). In narrative analysis, the character(s) in the data, e.g., interviews, create a particular image of themselves, others or a situation through discourse that fits with the social setting. David Boje was the first to argue that an organization could be perceived as one collective storytelling system contributing to development in which stories are a key part of members' sense making and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memories with the organizational intention to increase performance (Fina 2019, 278).
This dual relationship describes a composition of organizational sense-making that sheds light on discourses that appear on one hand familiar and tangible (individual memories) and on the other hand elevated and ideological (institutional memories), resonating with the concepts and duality between small stories and big stories (master narratives) in narrative theory.

Sacks (1992) argues that, as stories take more than one turn to tell, tellers need to find ways of signaling to the interlocutors that an extended sequence is underway. Sacks states that a canonical structure to stories starts with a story preface, which is basically a speaker initiating a conversation to which a recipient requests or consents to hear more. First then can a story be told (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 387). The canonical structure continues to shape the stories themselves in that stories from a historical perspective have been perceived and accepted from a linear and

stringent way of practicing storytelling, which is constituted by stories having a clear start, middle and end structure (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 381).

Big stories

Big stories, or master narratives, seem to have two different interpretations. One interpretation claims that the existence of master narratives delineate how narrators are positioning themselves within their story (Bamberg 2004, 359). This means that the hegemonic big story restrains narrators to take certain positions that are inappropriate within a certain social setting. For instance, in the social context of a national meeting for a social democratic party, there is arguably an underlying master narrative. It would not be acceptable to position oneself in line with a liberal opposition party since it will collide, challenge, and break the harmony within the master narrative. Big stories are therefore quite implicit as they draw on more comprehensive perspectives in social interactions, extending the term 'master narrative' to all sorts of legitimation strategies for the preservation of status quo with regards to power relations and difference in general (Bamberg 2005, 287 in Hyvärinen 2007, 2). The other interpretation of master narratives argues in a much broader sense that speakers are principally subjected to grand recits and metanarratives from which there seems to be no escape (Bamberg 2004, 359). The interpretation suggests that speakers are constantly exposed to these dominant master narratives, or big stories, and that they can be difficult to escape. In other words, the master narratives that surround us can have a powerful influence on the way we think, act, and communicate, and can shape our sense of identity and belonging.

Thus, big stories are often characterized by being ideological or strategic in their construction and they provide a framework for interpreting social and cultural phenomena. They are often associated with power and control and can be used to legitimize certain social structures and practices. However, big stories are not fixed or undynamic but are subject to ongoing negotiation and contestation, resonating with theory in the field of discourse in that it also sheds light on positions of power and certain dominant discourses/master narratives in society. For instance, the term 'order of discourse' is used to identify and describe a domain of potential cultural hegemony,

where dominant groups fight to assert and preserve certain structures within and between the prevailing discourses (Fairclough 1995, 56 in Jørgensen & Phillips 1999, 84). However, as it is generally accepted that not one singular discourse dominates society, it does not mean that all discourses are equal. Some discourses have more impact in the media, and the same applies for big stories or master narratives. Some narratives draw more attention because of the contemporary and social context in which we live, i.e., racism, gender roles, etc., resonating with Bamberg stating that master narratives of the former kind were e.g., the general cultural expectations of what constitutes a pregnancy (Bamberg 2004, 360)

Counter narratives

The discussion of hegemonic discourses and master narratives brings us to the concept of counter narratives, which are narratives that are countering dominant and hegemonic master narratives and is essentially the flip side of being complicit to those (Bamberg 2004, 351). According to Bamberg, however, the interrelationship between master narratives and counter narratives is more complex than to simply state that it concerns being complicit with existing dominant narratives or whether one is countering them for the sole purpose of changing the power relation. *"In other words, the question has shifted towards how they create a sense of self and identity that maneuvers simultaneously in between being complicit and countering established narratives that give guidance to one's actions but at the same time constrain and delineate one's agency"* (Bamberg 2004, 363). Thus, it is more a question of individuals creating their own sense of self and identity, while also dealing with the influence of dominant narratives and expectations. These dominant narratives can provide guidance for how we act and behave but they can also limit our ability to make our own decisions. In other words, counter narratives should rather be perceived as questioning how individuals navigate between following established narratives and resisting them to create a sense of self that is both authentic and free. Positioning theory is thus of great importance in relation to counter narratives in their proximity to master narratives, which we return to later in this chapter.

An example of a counter narrative could therefore be the Civil Rights Movement in the US, which challenges the hegemonic narrative of white supremacy and segregation. Thus, while big stories

provide a shared framework for interpreting social and cultural phenomena, they may not always accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of individuals. Counter narratives can challenge or subvert dominant narratives, providing a more nuanced and situated perspective on everyday experiences. This brings us to the concept of small stories.

Small stories

Contemporary research challenges the traditional and rigid idea of narratives being constituted with a start, middle, and end structure as well as the perception that a story can first begin when a story preface has been announced to which a receiver requests or accepts to be executed in accordance with the canonical narrative perspective. Traditionally, the meaning-making process is realized by complete and unfragmented stories, also called sequences, given that time has always played an important role in theories of narrative, entailing that we tend to think of stories as sequences of events processed over time (Bridgemann 2007, 53 in Fina 2019, 12). However, researchers have *"...begun to give voice to and argue for the 'worthiness' of stories that are still in the fringes of narrative research and that we call small stories"* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 379). Small stories are short and fragmented passages of discourse and are embedded in the flow of conversational interaction (Fina 2019, 375). Bamberg argues that *"...the small story approach is able to theoretically and methodologically enrich traditional narrative inquiry – not in a peaceful, complementary fashion, but by more radically re-positioning big story approaches as grounded in dialogical/discursive approaches such as small story research"* (Bamberg 2006, 139). Small stories are inchoate and involve less synoptic constructing and configuring than big stories. However, they are still designated as stories, since they have something roughly akin to a beginning-middle-end structure (Fina 2019, 27). Thus, small stories are sort of defuse and spontaneous pieces of discourse that can concern recent or still unfolding events and they can either be in past, present or future tense. Kayi-Aydar also refers to small stories as a chunk of conversation that develops around a certain topic (narrative) among participants (Kayi-Aydar 2019, 8).

This elusive and anti-stringent formula for small stories also leaves room for presuppositions and conjectures, paving the way for so-called anti-narratives.

These kinds of narratives are designed to force us to draw our attention away from the construction of hegemonic narratives. The function of anti-narratives is to problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation for us (Scholes 1980, 211).
Thus, anti-narratives subvert or challenge dominant or mainstream narratives, i.e., big stories. However, unlike counter-narratives, which provide an alternative to dominant narratives, anti-narratives seek to disrupt the idea of a single, dominant narrative.

Returning to small stories, they also differ from each other in the focus area of one's analysis. Small stories can concern small incidents that may or may not have actually happened, provided to back up or elaborate on an argumentative point occurring in an ongoing conversation (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 381). *"In short, placing emphasis on small stories allows for the inclusion in the analysis of a gamut of data more or less connected with the narrative canon."* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 382). With small stories, researchers are interested in identifying how people use fragmented and not sequence-based stories in their interactive engagements to construct a sense of who they are. Focusing on big stories, one is interested in analyzing the stories as representations of world and identities (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 382). Thus, small stories can include personal anecdotes, everyday conversations, and individual experiences that may not fit neatly into larger narratives. For instance, a person might tell a story about a particularly memorable interaction with a stranger on the street or about a meaningful moment with a family member. These stories may not fit into larger narratives about society or culture, but they can still provide valuable insights into individual experiences and perspectives. When we focus on small stories in narrative analysis, we, as researchers, are interested in understanding the individual stories that people tell about their experiences, rather than only the larger, dominant narratives that shape society as a whole. By doing this, we can include a wider range of data in our analysis, as small stories can be more varied and diverse than big, overarching narratives.

Positioning theory

The term "positioning" derives from Foucault's notion of "subject position" (1969) and is the process of using language and communication to locate oneself and others in relation to social

categories and identities (e.g., doctor/patient or mother/child relationship, or oneself being at work/at home) (Fina 2019, 370). Another way to unfold language and communication is with the concept of discourse. Discourse and positioning are tightly connected since a major part of positioning acts are accomplished by linguistic actions. Thus, *"...the meanings, norms, and behaviors that guide one's thoughts and actions are constructed through discourses"* (Kayi-Aydar 2019, 29). Discourse in this context is also perceived as individuals using language to act, behave, and speak as a way embrace positions others will recognize. However, the duality's focus is not solely on language, as theory on discourse also concerns the social practice (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999). Likewise, positioning theory focuses not only on the linguistic features in discourse but also to their social functions (Kayi-Aydar 2019, 30).

Although positioning theory emerged decades ago, in contemporary context, it has become an established concept used to enlighten how identities are deployed and negotiated in narratives (Fina 2019, 369). Davies and Harré (1990) were the first to connect positioning with narratives arguing that subject positioning is constitutive of story lines, which are perceived as the paramount organizational structure of discourses used by people to make sense of their experience (Fina 2019, 372). Their take on how the discursive phenomenon of positioning is possible is visible in the following: *"A person is positioned in this or that social location as a speaker in a discourse when the story-line which is unfolding makes available to them only a certain limited repertoire of possible contributions to that conversation"* (Harré 1991, 57). To simplify, when a person tells a story or participates in a conversation, their position within that social context can influence the content and tone of their storytelling; speakers actively and agentively position themselves in talk and (co)construct and (re)shape their identities (Kayi-Aydar 2019, 17). The quote from Harré is suggesting that a person's position within a conversation is shaped by the discourse possibilities that presents itself in the conversation, i.e., a certain limited repertoire of possible contributions, and the storyline that is unfolding at the moment. In other words, the person's position is constrained by the dominant discourses and social norms that are shaping the conversation.

For example, when person A says to person B “I’m sorry you’re not feeling too well. Can I get you anything?”, person A positions him or herself as the active and helpful member of the duo and positions B as passive and helpless. As person A and B are now discursively constituted, each has an appropriate repertoire of further sayings and doings available to their positions (Harré 1991, 58). However, if these positions are not accepted, a conflict can arise as explained by Davies and Harré (1990). In their analysis of positioning, the story between two participants, Sano and Enfermado, were presented as follows. Sano initiates the conversation by saying “I’m sorry to have dragged you all this way when you’re not well”. This surprised Enfermada who replied “You didn’t drag me, I chose to come'', which in turn confuses Sano who protests that he feels responsible resulting in Enfermada being in distress since she does not wish Sano to feel responsible since it places her in the position of being irresponsible, and by implication, that she is incapable of making decisions about her own well-being (Davies and Harré, 1990, 55 in Davies 2008, 174) Overall, Davies and Harré are highlighting the ways in which social structures and dominant discourses can shape individuals' positions within conversations and how they can influence the narratives they tell.

Considering the elements from pioneering researchers on positioning theory, The Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans 1992) also offers relevant insight into the field of positioning. The theory proposes that the self is not a unified entity, but rather a system of different selves or "I-positions" that interact with each other in a dynamic and dialogical manner, leading to sense-making, personal growth, and development (Hermans 1992, 23). Thus, to simplify, we do not have one single identity but rather multiple identities within ourselves that interact with each other and participate in the meaning-making processes. These different parts of ourselves can have conversations and disagreements, leading to a better understanding of who we are, why we want something, what creates value for us etc. However, in order to make sense of the social cues and differ between one’s different selves or I-positions in various contexts, one interacts with others in the world via a repertoire of ‘internalized voices’. *“…The internalized voices vary from our constructions of the voices of concrete others (parents, teachers, friends etc.) to our own subject positions (“me as a daughter", "me as a student” etc.).”* (Merotoja 2020, 35). These subject positions are of great importance in order to make sense of the narratives from our informants;

being the free movers we have interviewed for this thesis. Their standpoint and positioning ultimately creates and molds their stories which in turn constitutes their narratives and thus their sense-making.

Furthermore, Herman argues that an important part of an individual's development involves positioning, repositioning, and contra-positioning itself to the world of social relationships, which includes learning how to "reverse positions" and "take the perspective of others" (Merotoja 2020, 35). In other words, positioning is an everyday action used by people to construct and negotiate their social identities (their I-positions) and thus their ability to create an image of themselves that fits in a given context as well as their conscience and criteria for cohesion through language and communication, resonating with the following: *"Narratives are also aspects of situated language use, employed by speakers/narrators to position a display of contextualized identities"* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 379). One's position is constructed through discursive practices such as storytelling, including small stories, which in turn constitute the narrative and sense-making.

That is why positioning is dynamic in accordance with the fragmented perspective of stories i.e., small stories. The positions people attribute to themselves and others are impacted by how the story line is developing in the conversation, suggesting that when people take new positions in the middle of social interactions, a new storyline often emerges, resonating with the nature of small stories (Kayi-Aydar 2019, 9).

The principles of positioning pave the way for somewhat rejection or selection of groups of people, attitudes, or statements. This relationship between distancing and cohesion is rooted in a form of positioning that one makes. Researchers call this 'sameness' vs. 'difference' (Broady 2004; Olson 2001; Capps 1996). It is certain that if one associates oneself or others with a certain identity (I-position) in one's stories, one creates a grouping and identification of people used in the meaning-making processes of one's reality and social understanding. It is also referred to as classification and it is a fundamental function in our Western culture to gather things that are the same and separate things that are different. *"We gather things that have one or more elements or facets in common. We build our classifications using these facets that bring things together*

according to some kinds of sameness." (Olson, 2001, 115).

For instance, an observation could be in relation to pregnancy and feminism, both of which also function as master narratives in society. On one hand, taking the side of sameness, there are feminists who maintain that pregnancy should be treated just the same as any other disabling conditions with consideration for the reduced functional abilities at the workplace. However, other feminists observe that for many women becoming a mother is a normal and fulfilling experience and any particular care or special treatment would be justified as degrading (Capps 1996, 66). This example is interesting since it specifies that positioning can occur on many levels. As mentioned, positioning can be expressed by identifying with groups of people or reinforcing certain statements, but one does not exclude the other. The two groups of feminists are both experiencing 'sameness' since they concur and join the master narrative of being a feminist. However, they experience 'difference' since they have different positions in relation to pregnancy. Thus, the sameness-difference debate is nuancedly highlighted in this example, further emphasizing the complexities involved in positions, and that one, from a neutral point of view, in this example, can relate to both feminists groups' acts of positioning.

6.1. Method of analysis

We will now account for how we applied the theory in our analysis. First of all, we were interested in all the above elements as they helped us conceptualize and understand our informants' stories and thus answer our research question. This section is also important in relation to explaining in detail how we approached the data and applied theory, to increase our validity and reliability.

Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) advocate that, as a narrative researcher, one should also find meaning in small stories but not at the expense of big stories. Therefore, we were interested in identifying both in our thesis. We chose to use positioning theory in order to analyze the relationship between master narratives and small stories, since it *"...attempts to make connections between macro-discourses' and micro-levels of interaction"* (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 43). However, it may be difficult to identify how positioning is realized in stories and therefore, we draw on Bamberg and Georgeakopoulos's (2008) levels of analysis on how positioning and identity can be perceived through narration. The levels are interconnected and influence each other,

shaping the way individuals construct and negotiate their social identities through language and communication i.e., discourse. However, we tried to be somewhat systematic in our approach to the three levels. In the majority of our analysis, we included larger stories to provide context for what we analyzed. We were aware that all three levels are not always identifiable in the data we analyzed, thus explaining why we had a flexible approach to them. The positioning levels deals with the following:

1. The first level of positioning: *"How characters are positioned within the story"* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 385).
   This level refers to how characters, including the narrator, are positioned to one another, and identified in stories, meaning how stories create and reinforce certain social identities for the characters based on their actions, traits, or relationship and in space and time (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 385). Thus, how individuals position themselves and others within a specific interaction or conversation (narrative), based on the narrator's identity, beliefs, and values. For instance, a story might define one as a victim, villain, or rescuer.

2. The second level of positioning: *"How the speaker/narrator positions himself (and is positioned) within the interactive situation"* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 385).
   This level of positioning refers to the speaker's or narrator's 'tellability' and how that person positions oneself within the narrative and conversation of interaction. This includes the use of language and communication to present how he or she wishes to be understood (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 387). Simply put, the second level of positioning refers to how individuals position themselves in relation to a broader cultural or social context, such as their gender, their proficiency capabilities, or social class. For instance, a speaker might position oneself as an expert, insignificant or independent and powerless.

3. The third level of positioning: *"How the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regard to dominant discourses or master narratives"* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 385).
   At this level, positioning is realized through one's identity in relation to hegemonic

narratives and discourses that shapes social identities, ultimately establishing *"...a particular kind of person"* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008, 391). The third level of positioning refers to how individuals are positioned by others, based on social norms, stereotypes, and expectations that exist in a given context; in the given master narrative. For example, a speaker might position oneself as a feminist, environmentalist, or homosexual that either complies with the master narrative or is in opposition to the dominant cultural norms and expectations within that social context.

The approach to which narratives are thought to be constituted by stories is something we bring to this analysis in order to make sense of our informants meaning making and answer our research question. To make our analysis nuanced, the three levels of positioning dictate a certain positioning, which helped us create a corpus in identifying how our informants positioned themselves and other actors in the conversation through language and storytelling. Furthermore, it showed us how our informants constructed their identities as international students. We also sought to discover how our informants create 'sameness' and 'difference' through positioning in the social interaction concerning their enrollment at AAU, participation in the Buddy Programme, and in their general perception of reality. Lastly, positioning helped us understand how English language skills or lack thereof plays a role in the construction of social identities.

Cf. level 3, our approach was to identify a master narrative and combine the analyzed small stories to be able to identify a possible consensus among them that aligns with either a hegemonic discourse or challenging stories from other internationals in the world; a consensus constituting a counter narrative. We could not draw on any certainties from our informants' statements but compared to each other, and combined with additional research, it gave us an indication of how a common narrative could exist or perhaps identify an influential narrative among the grouping of international students that might be influenced by ideological and strategic power factor in the conversation, which allowed us to discuss the power relation dynamics and status quo within the social interaction (Bamberg 2005, 287 in Hyvärinen 2007, 2). Therefore, a master narrative is not to be confused with our analysis themes, which do not necessarily constitute a master narrative. However, we searched for the overarching elements in the storytelling of our informants to make

a conclusion based on positioning level three. Considering master narratives, we had in mind that they can be difficult to escape from and thus delineates how our informants are able to position and express themselves (Bamberg 2004, 359). By identifying the big stories, we received an understanding of what imminently appears to be the obvious, appropriate, and socially or politically acceptable thing for the individual informant to say in their storytelling. If no alignment was apparent when concluding on our informants' statements, cf. a big story, we would deem it as a counter narrative since it is the flip side of being complicit according to Bamberg (Bamberg 2004, 351). If we identified a vast majority of presuppositions and conjectures, it would be a sign of anti-narrating, which people use to force and draw the audience's attention away from the construction of a hegemonic narrative (Scholes 1980, 211).

Identifying big stories, cf. level 3, is an element of our analysis that is part of our conclusion since we sought to combine small stories to constitute an indication of a narrative. Kvale states that applying narrative analysis as a method, interview data comes with the requirement of creating one cohesive narrative out of the many stories and events during the interview (Kvale 1997, 191). Our focus was also on small stories themselves, which do not aim to identify narratives from a start, middle and end structure (Bridgemann 2007, 53 in Fina 2019, 12). We were interested in the fragmented stories as we believed it could help us understand how internationals, specifically free movers, experience negative well-being. In our analysis, we acknowledged the non-linear and unstructured, believing that this is where the meaning-making takes place.
As stated, Kayi-Aydar also refers to small stories as a chunk of conversation that develops around a certain topic among participants (Kayi-Aydar 2019, 8). This also explains why we were not interested in leaving out the big story perspective in our analysis and decided to draw on the three levels of positioning.

By analyzing the small stories, we mainly drew on positioning level one and two. By analyzing how our informants positioned themselves within the conversation, we were able to examine how our informants place themselves in the complex reality of being a free mover, cf. level 1. We were able to discover how they constructed their own identity but also how they constructed other characters' identities in their stories. Furthermore, by analyzing how our informants positioned themselves, we were able to analyze the data from a more linguistic perspective in their

positioning of how they want to be understood through their tellability, cf. level 2. This level concentrates on how the speaker wants to be understood through language in a wider context. In other words, how the person has a perception of identity that causes him or her to act and formulate oneself in a certain way. Therefore, on this level, we focused on linguistic traits to determine their tellability e.g., how our informants create stories by drawing on other texts or discourses, whether they use any metaphors, pronouns or special technical terms that portray them in a certain way.

This does not mean that we intended to draw on concrete linguistic categories in the field of discourse as an integrated part of our theoretical frame but by analyzing text closely, we drew on elements that can be associated with discourse theory. Additionally, from researchers in the field of narrative analysis, we see that they also use linguistic features to substantiate arguments without drawing on concrete linguistic analysis methods. They use these discursive elements to the extent necessary (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008; Kayi-Aydar 2019; Bamberg 2004). We are explicit about this as we solely intended to draw on some terms from this field when analyzing narratives and stories.

7. Presentation of informants

Now, before initiating our analysis, we will present some details about our informants and shortly provide a summary of our findings of their individual small stories. Our informants' names have been made anonymous, so these are not their real names.

First informant: Luka

Luka is 23 years old. He is from the Czech Republic. In 2022, he received a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Prague. In September, he arrived in Aalborg and started studying for his master's degree in mechanical engineering at AAU. He became a part of the Buddy Programme from the beginning of his enrollment and now he is a part of a five-person buddy group. In general, Luka puts a lot of focus onto the fact that there is a divide between Danish and international students, that the communication often is disorganized just like social

cues in class. Throughout the interview, Luka mainly attributes the negative experiences to external factors outside of the Buddy Programme but still within the organization of AAU.

Second informant: Lang

Lang is 26 years old, and she is from China. She is a past student at Aalborg University. She has been in Denmark since 2019. She took a double degree in International Relations from Beijing University and Aalborg University. Throughout the interview, Lang speaks about her studies at Aalborg University, where she touches upon the new environment that it was for her. She highlights how she was generally bored while studying in Aalborg, coming from a city with 25 million inhabitants. She highlights how most of the activities in her course concerns heavy drinking, and while she is not a party-person, she preferred shopping and going out more peacefully. Furthermore, Lang continuously compares Denmark to China, socially and academically. She also highlights how AAU did not help her enough.

Third informant: Zahir

Zahir is 24 years old, and he is from Mumbai, India. He came to Denmark in 2021, and he studies Mechanical Engineering. He received a bachelor's degree in Mumbai. Prior to coming to Aalborg, Zahir did not have any experience of traveling, working, or studying abroad. Before arriving in Aalborg, he had already gotten a buddy from the Buddy Programme. His buddy took great care of him, and he thrived in his buddy group. This led him to become a buddy himself in the fall semester in 2022, and now he is the buddy of 10 international students. However, even though Zahir is a great supporter of the programme, he does have comments on how it could improve, or rather how the Danish buddies improve their commitment. He is also commenting on AAU's ability to adapt to internationalization to which he thinks that international students are subject to a system that primarily favors Danish. In his stories, Zahir draws a lot on what is familiar to him, being his upbringing in India, and that influences his storytelling as well.

8. Analysis

In the following, we will analyze our three informants: Luka, Lang, and Zahir.

8.1 Luka

We will now initiate the analysis of our first informant Luka.

Remarks on communication and study intro

In relation to the first theme, which concerns Luka's remarks on communication and the study intro, he describes his initial phase at AAU and how he perceived especially the beginning as being disorganized in terms of dialog, the information about the Buddy Programme and lack of help from AAU at this critical time. He explains how it was stressful for him since he had just finished his bachelor's exam in the Czech Republic and had to head for Aalborg immediately. Adding more stressful factors to this, he explains how he had many questions to be answered by AAU, however, he experienced a slow communication process between himself and administration offices at AAU, saying they were slow at answering his mails. There are three stories in this theme.

One of the first things that we asked Luka was about the welcome week at AAU, which the buddies are a part of, and how he felt that was handled. He explained that he was one of the students who arrived too late to experience that because of his finals in Prague.

Story 1:

> *"So it was quite rough at the beginning. [...] I didn't have like a set up before starting. I think I had registered for the CPR number and all of this stuff for the administration stuff. But the process was so slow"* (Appendix 1, 3).

Inferred from above, Luka positions himself as a victim by using the word "rough" and by explaining that he did not have the best "set up" in relation to having a difficult time in the beginning. The chaotic process had nothing to do with him not being mentally and physically prepared for his time at AAU, but still he expected a faster readiness of change at AAU, arguably blaming and positioning himself against since AAU are the cause of distress, thus attributing agency to AAU, while minimizing his own agency, cf. level 1. In terms of level 2 and linguistic features, he states that *"I didn't have like a set up"*. A set up is a metaphor to usually describe that the setting is not satisfying. For instance, in a workplace context, if one does not have a sufficient

computer, desk and general working conditions, the "set up" is not sufficient. A set up arguably also refers to practical things related to his academic foundation i.e., accommodation, CPR-number, information on where to find books etc., and not social things, indicating that is what the Buddy Programme helps with, further emphasizing that he is talking about the institution, i.e., AAU. The reason why the "set up" seems to be important to him and his motivation arguably has to do with the argument of academic integration and social integration going hand in hand according to researchers (Nilsson 2019; Rienties et. al. 2011; Tinto 2006), explained earlier in our thesis. Thus, focusing on his tellability, it indicates he attributes the responsibility and blame to AAU administrations, instead of his buddy, by positioning himself as helpless and victimized in this regard of setting himself up for a good academic start, and we argue that this story is quite important for him and the sense of identity he creates for himself, the Buddy Programme and AAU administration afterwards in the conversation.

The ones who did help him to settle in were his classmates – more specifically, his international classmates – who he seems to position as the rescuers of his problems. His above story could also be interpreted as an indication that he needed more help than AAU were aware of and that a generic approach to internationals is not always successful, as seen in past studies. HEIs tend to approach the international students in the exact same way as the domestic students and hold the same standards for both groups. Thereby, there was a lack of focus on specific difficulties among internationals and their special needs compared to domestic students, arguing a generic approach only complicates things and does not reflect an HEI who focuses on internationalization at home[3] (Ward 2001). Also, when students are subject to a standardized approach that ignores specific needs, they often develop stress, homesickness, depressions, anxiety etc. (Andrade 2006, 138).

Story 2:

> *"I didn't reach out to AAU after experiencing the late responses. I think the most helpful were the people that went through the same thing as we did. So, the internationals that*

[3] **Internationalization at home:** Implementation of a more intercultural and international dimension in research, extracurricular activities, research, teaching and learning process, social relationships between domestic and international students, and implementation of culturally diverse activities and campus life (Knight 2012, 23).

also came here for the first time and then helped me with what I should do and where." (Appendix 1, 3).

By referring to "the people who went through the same things", he is arguably referring to his international classmates. His frustration is centered on the late responses as he was arguably in a hurry in the beginning, and he expected more from the university as they knew that he arrived late. He arguably finds a sense of belonging with his fellow international students, indicating, according to theory (Broady 2004; Olson 2001; Capps 1996 Lou et. al. 2019; Biscombe 2017; Yao 2018; Chinyamurindi 2018), a form of sameness and cohesion among them, thus in turn distancing himself from the administrative offices at AAU – and giving indications of difference and an out-group. He seems to attribute blame and agency to AAU, who arguably was supposed to take responsibility in preparing him properly before starting his studies even though he arrived late, cf. level 1. This also resonates with our literature review in that the us and them issue involves labeling and stereotyping (Chinyamurindi 2018, 215), which his storytelling arguably reveals in his statement of the inner bodies of the organization being unhelpful and incapable of adapting to students' needs, which again resonates with Ward's 2001-study, revealing that the difference in the two student groups' needs develops an in- and out-group environment (Ward 2001).
Looking at how he uses the above stories about his study intro, we identify a contrastive story that arguably go against a constructed institutional self-presenting image of AAU on a more strategic level; a self-presented image that we infer from our initial interviews with the International Office and Master Admission at AAU (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023), and AAU's website where the university appeals to prospective international students (AAU, n.d). From the interviews with the International Office and Master Admission, and by looking at AAU's website, it seems that there is an institutional consensus concerning that AAU perceives that the university has all the tools, conditions, and methods in place for ensuring that international students get a good start and study time, and that the university is very welcoming and provides different help services (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023; AAU n.d). However, Luka's two above stories contrast this notion and image within AAU.
From his two stories, it indicates that international students are somewhat left to themselves or fellow international students when they need help – also in the initial period. His stories could

reflect a problem, which Jane Knight discusses in relation to internationalization of HEIs at home; that HEIs have moved from the original idea of internationalization, encouraging cultural exchange and awareness, sharing knowledge and values. Now, most HEIs' efforts in internationalizing reflect a cultural homogenization due to political objectives, which diminishes cultural awareness, sensitivity, and exchange (Knight 2012, 29). Also, Luka says that he found help in other international students, not in the domestic Danish students, which arguably points back at AAU for not encouraging more intercultural encounters or cultural awareness between domestic and international students, which can establish social relationships, successful cross-cultural group work and eliminate in-group bias, which in turn reinforces an HEIs proof of internationalization efforts (Harrison & Peacock 2019, 897). Arguably, what Jane Knight and Harrison & Peacock state could possibly be a reflection of the above stories that Luka provided, concerning his initial start at AAU and the lack of help. Thus, Luka's above two stories arguably contrast AAU's self-presented image.

However, it is important to stress that the contrastive storytelling from above is reflected by how he perceives AAU's approach to him, and thus, we must assume that his self-identity as a helpless victim is positioned by that perception, resonating with the notion of narrative theory and social constructivism that people always speak and view the world on behalf of the social constructions that surround each individual.

After discussing the communication process and help in the beginning in general, which Luka considered as being slow and insufficient, we later spoke more concretely about the Buddy Programme and how it was in the initial phase. In general, Luka is a supporter of the programme and appreciates the social aspect of the programme. That is expressed throughout appendix 1, but one interesting point of critique is seen the following:

Story 3:

> *"I would say I have no idea if it's still happening, but I think, and I have also heard from a lot of people also, that like there are quite a lot of activities at the beginning of the semester in like incorporating the new students and like, yeah, you just came to Denmark and like there's a party every week. And like, there's also like an event and right now like it's super*

> *dry and nothing is happening actually. So, I would say like it's mostly at the beginning, that is like there is a focus on you and right now it's getting, it's getting like faded away and it becomes a little lonely for some people. I understand that. You are like always on at the beginning."* (Appendix 1, 15)

In the above story, which concerns the initial intro programme at AAU, we see that Luka is not positioning his identity as someone wronged since he distances himself from the consequence of becoming lonely as a result of the compressed program and sudden stop. Although in terms of positioning level 1, he is creating characters and social identities, and the ones who are victims are international students seen in "the new students", referring to new international students including himself, who are suddenly feeling a sense of loneliness because "like there's a party every week" and now there is a "dry" period and "nothing is actually happening". Whether nothing is actually happening we cannot know, but the expression and the metaphor "dry" can arguably be a transference of meaning of the before and after image. However, a culprit for the situation is not explicitly conveyed. It may be the structuring of events and parties by the Buddy Programme itself, thus the coordinators[4], however, arguably, he does mention the buddies indirectly as the reason for his struggles in that he stresses: "So, I would say like it's mostly at the beginning, that is like there is a focus on you". The ones that "focus" on him in relation to social events is not the AAU administration, it is not the coordinators, it is the actual buddies. It is the buddies who focus on the new international student in order to integrate them, and we argue that he refers to them as it is the buddies who are those he is in contact with the most and almost solely. However, in his meaning-making process, he is arguably using his words carefully by not pointing at any concrete agent i.e., he is not mentioning the buddies explicitly. However, in terms of tellability in positioning level 2, he is quite explicit about the issue itself by using metaphors and also the word "actually" after "nothing is happening" to express his unfiltered opinion and to increase his trustability. He is not pointing fingers directly and that is arguably an implicit move. This, alongside the fact that he also stands a victim, but is unaffected in that he creates a

[4] The Buddy coordinators arrange larger social events for all groups (once or twice a month). The actual buddies arrange smaller and more intimate events sometimes several times a week for their own buddy group (Krogsgaard & Bertovic 2023)

difference between him and other students' feelings in that it “becomes a little lonely for some peoples”, not himself, apparently, can be understood by considering his close affiliation with the Buddy Programme and how the programme is presented to him.
Arguably, when you are a free mover and have a buddy, you are told about all the positives. That is from the buddies, the buddy coordinators as well as AAU as an organization, which affects his perception and meaning-making. Thus, one could argue that AAU constructs the Buddy Programme as a vital component in maintaining the well-being of international students. In step with this level, the phrase “and I have also heard from a lot of people” tells us that his statement is arguably influenced by contrastive notions and stories from other students, further explaining his caution. Since he has heard it from a lot of people tells us that he is positioned by others, by another social norm and dominant discourse influencing his I-position.

It can be argued that Luka would not admit that he also felt that way, thus through positioning level 2 using language and communication to narrate the feeling of loneliness through the identities of others instead of his own. On the other hand, it can also be that he is just unaffected himself. The fact of the matter does not really change that his observation of a sudden downturn in his peers’ moods relates to how the Buddy Programme structure their events with “quite a lot of activities at the beginning of the semester”, and the reality of how it operates resonates well or poorly, depending on how you look at it, with the ‘culture shock’ phenomenon in the U-curve.

Adjustment is felt to be easy in the beginning, then follows a crisis, and then one begins to feel better again (Ward et. al. 1998, 278) resonating with his reply “A low period I would say” (Appendix 1, 15) when asked about his experience when the events stopped. The sudden “dry” period fits well with the traditional onset of the culture shock, which raises the question: What would happen if the Buddy Programme had a schedule of events that was spread out? It can be argued that the Buddy Programme can better assist the students a little later when there is a risk of them being in distress, but there is arguably also the risk of simply postponing the culture shock. Either way, from the statement of Luka, it is plausible that the sudden drought is currently encouraging and stimulating the culture shock.

Division and lack of internationalization at AAU

The second theme, which concerns the lack of internationalization, focuses on AAUs capabilities in handling free movers. Luka turns the discussion away from the Buddy Programme and describes now how he feels unfairly treated by his professors who, in his mind, favor the Danish students. However, he emphasizes that he cannot speak on behalf of other programmes. He also touches upon the difficulties in communicating with his fellow students as a result of how his study board is structured and operates, ultimately creating a divide. In the following, there are five stories.

Story 1:

> *"Yeah, I think so. Buddies can only do so much, right? But it also depends what type of Buddy you have, right? If you have a Buddy which is like not really connecting with you and like it can happen like you can have like a random person that you're not really connected with. Yeah, but I think from the student perspective. How to study on AAU or how to write? How are even the exams taken? That's something totally new for a lot of people, because even the basic idea of having an oral exam, at some universities, like in the Czech Republic, they don't even have oral exams. So, this is the first time we're having oral exams. So, we are just like totally new. And AAU have no idea how it's going to look. And I would say it is quite important to remember that. In the end, I also think that people will thrive better and participate more in events"* (Appendix 1, 5).

From the above, we see a story from Luka which concerns that AAU, in his reality, has the agency and responsibility of ensuring the academic adjustment for international students, while decreasing the amount of responsibility and agency the Buddy Programme can have in the academic integration process, cf. level 1. However, he does mention that international students can experience struggle if they come across a buddy with whom a student does not connect with. Maybe he says that because he has witnessed such an instance, or it is plainly a thought of a possible instance that could occur. Interestingly, what he says can actually be corroborated by a survey from the European University Foundation and Erasmus Student Network on buddy programmes throughout Europe, among 125,000 respondents, which showed that many international students get a buddy who is not dedicated to his or her role and does not spend

enough time with their international students, often leaving the students behind (Lesk & Montaldo 2018, 19).

We infer that Luka constructs his self-identity as a somewhat victimized student because he indicates that he comes from an entirely different academic culture in the Czech Republic, which is arguably the social context that influences his story and positioning, cf. level 1. He indicates that it was important for him to know more about the practices at AAU, how to study, write, take exams, while oral exams were entirely alien to him prior to coming to AAU, implicitly saying that this was something AAU probably neglected, thus attributing blame onto AAU for this.
In relation to his tellability and positioning in level 2, we argue that he perhaps wanted to convey to us that the responsibility is on the Buddy Programme and that AAU must also be an acting agent in making sure how international students arrive and adjust to the new environment. He even explicitly says that AAU has no idea about how all the mentioned practicalities, rules, and norms at AAU will be met by international students. His story reflects what we have discussed earlier in relation to internationalization. Jane Knight stresses the importance of having institutional cultural knowledge and awareness towards international students (Jane Knight 2012, 29), while Colleen Ward explained how HEIs are often not aware of the difficulties that international students encounter upon coming to an entirely different academic environment than what they come from (Ward 2001). Also, the fact that he mentions the oral exams, in the detail that he does, could indicate that he does not have an entirely comfortable attitude to that. As a study shows, students who are unfamiliar with oral exams can develop extreme stress, which is ignited by the thought of having this exam form (Fitzgerald 2016). In Luka's case, when he says "the basic idea of having an oral exam", it could indicate that the mere thought of it, to him, could possibly reflect negative emotional feelings.
Luka indicates perhaps that AAU needs to be more aware of international students' needs as they are arguably unique compared to those of the domestic students, and that they need more orientation, not only in the beginning but also later. The fact is that too many HEIs have a standardized approach to each international student they take in, which then leads to decreased chances of reaching the academic objectives, making things more difficult for students (James-MacEachern 2018, 1). It has also been found that one-week academic introduction weeks,

somewhat similar to that of AAU's intro week, are deemed insufficient for many international students, as the amount of information is possibly too large compared to the time period being only one week, while an academic orientation is deemed very important, implementing additional orientations and curricular processes through which students gain insight into studying at a specific HEI (Naidoo et al. 2021). The mentioned sources indicate the importance of providing a good academic orientation, while rejecting a standardized approach to international students that does not reflect their actual needs of help and assistance and navigation. Furthermore, Luka says that if AAU provided the mentioned things, it would, according to his sense-making, automatically increase the social integration, stated in the following: "In the end, I also think that people will thrive better and participate more in events", resonating with Tinto's notion of integration to which he states that academic integration fosters social integration and vice versa (Draper 2008), reflecting precisely what Luka says at the end of the above story.

Luka then continues his storytelling below, what is a continuation of the above story, and still related to our follow-up question of whether he thinks students struggle because of something else than the Buddy Programme:

Story 2:

> *"For instance, I know from my Danish classmates. They are allowed to do the oral exams in Danish or at least some Danish words if they choke? How about that? I do not make sense. We read an English programme and everybody should be rated by their English skills as well. It's not like I can do my presentation in Czech. I have to use my English and the same should apply for my Danish classmates. And I know a lot of people struggle because of that fact. That international students feel they have a disadvantage***"** (Appendix 1, 8).

The above story is about unequal treatment between international and domestic students. Beyond Luka's reality of unprofessionalism and the contradiction to how a programme in English should operate in step with internationalization, one should not neglect the first sentence "For instance, I know from my Danish classmates". This may seem irrelevant or even as an enlightening courtesy, however, we argue that his social identity of being equal to his fellow Danish students is

damaged, but to it hear from a Danish student him/or herself arguably further prevents the likelihood of a balanced relationship between the students, creating a type of sameness (the ones that are treated differently from the consensus of speaking Danish and English in class) and difference (the ones that are treated according to the consensus of speaking Danish and English in class) among students. Ultimately, the story from his Danish classmate arguably establishes a feeling of inferiority and that the majority has more influence and an advantageous relationship with the professors compared to the minority in the classroom expressed in "How about that?", "they have a disadvantage" and "It's not like I can do my presentation in Czech."

Although continuously constructing his position in the classroom as being part of a minority that is unfairly treated, he is probably well aware of the divide. Luka indicates a feeling of acceptance towards Danes receiving special treatment since he categorizes the students into international students and Danish students, and probably it is a reflection of the fact that international students tend to be hierarchically lower than domestic students, as Colleen Ward posits (Ward 2001). This does not mean that he complies with the situation because his expressive language and tellability, considering positioning level 2, tells otherwise, however his wording acknowledges the divide from those two words; "international" and "Danish". It can be argued that his phrasing tries to disrupt his perceived divide. Therefore, we argue that Luka is using elements of anti-narrating as it forces the audience to draw their attention away from the status quo (Scholes 1980, 211). Especially phrases like "How about that?" and "I do not make sense" indicates frustration, arguably reflecting negative well-being. However, the fact that Danish students tell Luka how their programme operates can also have the effect of him categorizing them in the same group as himself, cf. positioning level 1, out of trust and gratitude for the transparency and cohesion, creating an identity that harmonizes with the Danish students. His storytelling, however, indicates otherwise: *"There is definitely a pattern in Danish people that like to always stick together, like with their own group and it's quite hard to integrate for free movers."* (Appendix 1, 19). From the small story above, he is quite explicit about the fact that it is difficult to socialize with domestic students. As Mittelmeier et. al. stress in their study, it is very important and decisive that international students establish a social relationship, which can provide a better academic and social environment at HEIs. They stress that domestic students must be encouraged by HEIs to gain more cultural awareness, knowledge and engage in intercultural interactions to be able to

accept and include students from minority groups such as the international students (Mittelmeier et al., 2017, 150).

In addition to group formation, Luka also explains how the process of picking projects functions on his programme and that he thinks internationals are being treated unfairly in that regard as well. He would prefer if the professors made the group composition more diverse, however, we argue that his implications for unfair treatment are not necessarily related to the formation of groups, separating Danes from internationals and the claimed consequences that come from that, but has to do with a feeling of powerlessness, inferiority, and exclusion. We support our argument by analyzing the following small story:

Story 3:

> *"Yeah, on the projects, we had a project at the beginning like I just got here and on the first day, we were choosing our projects for the semester. Firstly, you have no idea what the projects are like. You probably have a like a basic idea of what the project approach is, but not like a deep idea of how you should write it or how you should even like contact the people. But you should choose the project then. Then there is a problem that, like everyone, all of the Danish people chose some projects, and they took like probably the best ones because they already know who the supervisor is, how they are behaving and what is the company even. And for us. We are internationals and we got into a group of only internationals without any Danish people."* (Appendix 1, 19)

It can be argued that Luka has a desire to be more connected with the Danes. There is an implicit attitude that a collaboration with Danes would be beneficial academically, as Luka and the other internationals do not have "...like a deep idea of how you should write it or how you should even like contact the people." referring to how the projects are being written. He positions himself in a way that his identity resonates with being a victim and thus, it would arguably be reasonable to consider the Danish students as the guilty characters, according to Luka's positioning and creation of social identities concerning the characters cf. positioning level 1. It arguably also means that the Danes are the ones positioning him as a victimized person. However, Luka is arguably also aware

of them being the solution. His choice of words indicates that Danes are immediately superior academically in his social construction: For instance, in “they took like probably the best ones”. We argue that the word "probably" has a central meaning in this passage of text, as it tells us that he does not actually know that the Danes took the best cases. This is perhaps something he assumes, and it indicates to us that he arguably does not, as such, have an argument for what would be unfair in forming groups with only Danes. We argue that it is the emotion of feeling different that is relevant for his meaning-making. As analyzed previously, we know that Luka has been told by Danish students that they can do the oral exams in Danish, and in his storytelling we argue that from what the Danish students said to him concerning oral exams, for one reason or another, it did not increase his sense of community with the Danish students in his positioning, as he perhaps thinks that domestic students have more advantages than international students, and that there is an inequality between the two groups of students, since the Danish students were allowed to take exams in Danish and on top of that, it was not the professors who told him about this; it was Danish students who told Luka about it, arguably conveying to Luka that the student-teacher relationship is so close that it favors the domestic students. This indicates that Luka frames the student-teacher relationship as being the reason for the inequality. The inequality and favoring of domestic students can be corroborated by a Finnish study, which interviewed various international students from around the world, uncovering the large gap between the domestic and international students; a gap created by an unequal treatment of the two groups, resulting in severe mental conditions among international students (Calikoglu 2018).

So, we must assume that it is the exclusion that gives birth to the conjectures he has, and it resonates with the fact that the story has a contrary function for the purpose of disrupting something he may perceive is a norm at AAU, being that it is acceptable to speak in both Danish and English: A possible norm at AAU, which can also be reflected in the Finnish study that showed the severely low level of English spoken in class by professors and domestic students, arguably showing this is a wider societal problem than at AAU (Calikoglu 2018). However, to make sense of this tendency, the group formation resonates with prior literature on Buddy Programmes in that *“[...] bringing international and local students together remains one of the main challenges for many HEIs.”* (Resch and Amorim 2021, 59). However, from our literature review, Zhou pointed at the time outside the HEI – when hanging out for leisure either by themselves or through the

Buddy Programme. Here, in his case study, he found that it was hard to create somewhat of a relationship that was not artificial and *"[...] in most cases, they only worked with them on class projects."*. Apparently, this is not even the case for Luka and his fellow international students, which we argue is an indicator of a serious divide between those who are different and those who are the same, stressing the us and them issue or "othering" (Biscombe 2017, 1; Yao 2018, 1).

Returning to Luka's story, by taking a closer look at the following sentence "We are internationals and we got into a group of only internationals without any Danish people", his use of the pronoun "we" arguably indicates that his positioning in opposition to this story is influenced by others, which stems with the traits of positioning level 3. We argue that the pronoun reveals a united front and opinion formation and that these problems could be something international students are in agreement about. Thus, this indicates, even though Luka does not refer to an external and societal context about the division, that the societal discourses about polarization between domestic and international students somewhat underlie his story in how he positions himself interactionally.

Furthermore, his reality of the divided environment arguably has a part to play in his meaning making process, which would explain why he quickly, in his arguments, accuses the Danes of being both better at writing a project, better in contacting the people one needs, that they get the best cases, that they probably already know the companies and that they know their supervisor better and how he or she is "behaving". Especially his comment on the advantage of knowing how the professors behave is worth dwelling on. We argue that Luka's storytelling about Danes knowing their supervisors better and how they behave, as well as implicating it as an unfair advantage created by the professors or the system, must be seen in the light of a more general frustration almost tangential to paranoia.

In addition, the role of the professors in Luka's storytelling does not harmonize with research from Obaeko Iwara in that he states the following: *"It is important to introduce mechanisms for facilitating and managing diversity through educators. It could be suggested that 'Buddy Programme' will play an active educator role."* (Obaeko Iwara 2019, 67). According to him, it is the task of the professors to reduce the us and them gap, which contradicts how Luka is constructing his reality through his positioning. The statement arguably also explains why free movers may feel more connected to the Buddy Programme as their "educator".

Returning to story 2, according to Luka, everything seems to be simply unfair. And everything is seemingly an advantage for Danes. And we argue that it is this feeling that underlies his storytelling that bears a challenging feature, more than it is a real consideration that a better project is dependent on a more diverse group formation. The exclusion of internationals only seems to make things worse in that it maintains the status quo of the consensus among internationals or even intensifies it. That is because Luka's storytelling indicates that it is not the internationals who do not want to be in group with Danes. It is the Danes who do not want to form groups with internationals, thereby attributing the responsibility onto them, while he portrays his own perceived motivation and personal skills to us. In the end, it arguably further complicates the relationship between Danish students and international students creating difference and, in this case, also more sameness among the free mover community in that they arguably join forces and create cohesion around their perception of reality. We argue that this divide can have consequences for their well-being even though these free movers on this specific programme stand united and are part of an international community.

The above story seems to be contradictory to the effectiveness of the Buddy Programme, which could, as time goes by, shift into becoming a common challenging discourse among international students; one that would convey the fact that the social and academic integration must never only rely on the Buddy Programme, and if so, we argue it will complicate integration, resonating with what we know from literature that the prerequisites for the best possible integration are found, among other things, in the person's ability to integrate with national students (Nilsson 2019, 41) or host national contacts as Sullivan puts it (Sullivan 2015, 3).

This integration criterion is not accelerated by the fact that there is a strange relationship with language and English being an institutional language on this particular program. Luka has already positioned himself strongly against how oral exams in his reality can be executed in Danish, if one perhaps struggles with finding the words. Language plays a huge part in what creates sameness and difference, however, ultimately, as all the students on his programme study an English spoken programme, this should never be an issue. Looking at the following extracts, Luka reveals how language affects his well-being in a story about how English is not practiced in class despite it is a course in English:

Story 4:

> *"Yeah, I feel like they talk directly to the Danish students sometimes. Like sometimes you feel disconnected from the class. Because like, you are international, and you have no idea what they're talking about. So, sometimes it's weird that you feel like you're an outsider and you're just, like, not really like in moment. It is a frustrating feeling. Especially since they are supposed to speak English. Also, like I mentioned earlier, what I don't get is for example on the exams. Sometimes they can speak in Danish, and it's definitely easier for them to speak in their native language and actually like, describe something. But we had to describe it in English, and we still had the same rating. I don't think that's like quite fair. But I guess that is normal"* (Appendix 1, 21).

In the above story, it is worth noting that he is quite explicit in the second part of it, starting at "Also, like I mentioned earlier", when he yet again changes the conversation back to an earlier topic, being the oral exams that Danish students can do in their native language according to Luka. Therefore, the characters are positioned the same as in story 1 cf. positioning level 1 in this story of conversation in that Luka identifies himself and his fellow international students as being the victims while he attributes responsibility and blame to AAU i.e., the implicit non-mentioned character, once more, while one could argue that the Danish students are also somewhat responsible in this story. Since he positions himself as a victim, there must be another character in the story, which has positioned him as a victim in this instance; arguably AAU. That is because the entire above story concerns how professors in his course allow the communication to switch between Danish and English, when in reality, it should be entirely in English since the programmes' official language is English (AAU Mechanical Engineering n.d).

In the second part of the story, he is indeed not hiding his frustration, resonating with his stories thus far in this theme, having traits of contrasts and feelings of expectations that have clashed with reality. We see that when he uses presuppositions and conjectures, which according to theory often resonates with anti-narrating (Scholes 1980, 211), in, for instance, "it's definitely easier for them to speak in their native language", one could argue that it makes sense as one is

arguably more nuanced in their native language, however, we argue that it is still a conjecture in that he implies it improves Danish students' chances of receiving a good grade. It may be that the professors make assessments based on several things. If the Danish students have prepared themselves better for their exam, they may be graded higher, but as they resort to Danish, if they "choke" from the words of a previous statement from Luka in story 1, it may have a negative impact as well. He arguably doesn't know how the professors rate, so we consider it to be a presumption. But we infer from this some references to inequality again as he says that they are graded equally despite that Danes are provided more help and easier conditions, arguably clashing with what he had expected, resonating with studies that show inequality at HEIs around the world. Again, the Finnish study is a perfect example of it, uncovering how domestic students have better conditions and that domestic students are always favored over internationals (Calikoglu 2018).

Returning to the story in the first four lines, we find instances when he reinforces his own identity as a victim, conveying emotional feelings to us (level 2). That is when he says "I feel like", "sometimes you feel disconnected", "it's weird that you feel like you're an outsider" and "It is a frustrating feeling". He uses the word "feel" four times, referring to his own feelings, arguably portraying him even further as a victim. These indications could point towards the potential of Luka developing stress, depression, anxiety, as can be seen in various studies, confirming the reality and significance of the issue and the consequences from it (Nguyen et al., 2019). This could perhaps be what he intends to indicate to us, either as a warning about other international students because he has witnessed it, or because his emotional state of mind reflected the potential outcomes.

We argue that the underlying context and societal discourse to his story is that international students can be subdued to neglect from HEIs, cf. positioning level 3, even though he does not explicitly draw on specific discourses about it. But his story surely reflects a wider societal issue among HEIs. Despite that he seems to be frustrated and wronged, he indicates that he is somewhat complying with the status quo, i.e., an acceptance towards Danes receiving special treatment. At the end of the story, he says "But I guess that is normal here", indicating some kind of acceptance and compliance with the circumstances, and that he is perhaps just expected to adapt to it instead of creating a conflict. Since he thinks that it is plainly normal at AAU, it could reflect the possibility that other internationals have told him about similar experiences, which

would then constitute his positioning, or his statement can reflect that he perhaps thinks that he is expected to comply with it because he perhaps perceives himself as only a guest, and that Denmark and AAU perceive international students plainly as guests who are expected to return to their country when they graduate, something that the previously-mentioned Finnish study also uncovered (Calikoglu 2018). Some international students at the Finnish HEI positioned themselves as being submissive people with no voice or rights because they encountered interactions with personnel, such as administrations and professors who made it clear that they perceive international students as guest, expecting them to leave once they graduate, ultimately making the students position themselves accordingly, which then resulted in negative mental conditions for some students (Calikoglu, 2018). Luka's case can quite possibly be a reflection of the findings from the Finnish study; however, we do not know. The reason for his apparent compliance could also be due to the interview situation. That is because he was interviewed by us, two domestic students, in their 10th semester, and perhaps his sense-making of us could have been portraying us as some authority and experts who are connected to AAU, which could then have limited his willingness to be entirely truthful about his feelings and identity; an interview-related risk factor that we discussed earlier in our method chapter.

On top of this, related to the issue itself, i.e., English not being entirely practiced as lingua franca in class, we now draw on research on English as a lingua franca and internationalization. Luka states that he feels disconnected from class, that he feels like an outsider and that he is not really in the moment. Difference and classification are established in his social identity creating a sameness between the other characters, i.e., the Danish students and the professors at AAU. Language can create this classification in that the basic thing of understanding one another through a designed code of words is an element or facet that can create commonness that brings things together explained in our theory chapter (Olson, 2001, 115). So, when Luka points at the following: *"There is definitely a pattern in Danish people that like to always stick together"* (Appendix 1, 19), we argue it could be because of the perceived language barrier and trend among Danes avoiding speaking English.

Then, staying in the same context of language, we asked Luka whether he thought it was difficult to communicate with Danes or with his buddy, from an international student's perspective, to

which he answers:

Story 5:

> *No, not at all. I would say like a lot of Danish people actually know quite good English. But I think that is also why they make groups of only Danes. Because it is easier. In regard to my buddy, nobody cares about the English. As long as you can be understood. But I know that there is a language barrier for some people [...] We see that to events and those automatically get lonelier. I see that. And for the buddies, it is so hard for them to interact with them as well.* (Appendix 1, 21)

The above story from Luka is about his perception of the possible language barrier between international and domestic students in the Buddy Programme.
By speaking in Danish, one creates a form of identity as someone who masters that specific language, creating sameness for those who master it as well. When talking about a common language, a lingua franca, the opposite to that is a language that creates difference. In Luka's reality, it can be argued that it indicates that he thinks the Danish language is an element of sameness among professors and the Danish students, while it is a difference between free movers, professors as well as the Danish students. Looking at the above story, Luka says that nobody in the Buddy Programme seems to care whether one is good or bad in English, yet it is difficult for those who struggle with English. However, in his wording "It is hard for them to interact with them as well", referring to the buddies to which he sympathizes with. Arguably, the same feeling of exclusion happens when he feels left out in class, because Danish students turn to their native language, but in the context of the Buddy Programme, it is not a point of critique as it is not due to lack of English language skills, which he arguably finds necessary to master in order to have any hopes of integrating. Arguably what happens is that there is not an alignment in what Luka expected – and arguably not from anyone who is part of the central bodies of AAU as an institution, we must assume, aspires to be this internationalized institution explained in the introduction. We know that increased internationalization involves embracing a common language, most often English as a lingua franca, for scientific communication, as explained in our

background chapter (Altbach 2007, 291), and we must assume that Luka and his fellow international students expect that AAU can maintain some sort of professionalism in that regard.

So, the root of this polarization is arguably also reflected, among other things, in the English language, or lack thereof, and the failure to maintain it can be due to insufficient academic English proficiency when teaching in English according to a recent study conducted among Danish HEIs by Adriansen et. al., which uncovered that Danish professors perceived their own English-skills as being too low, thus complicating the learning objectives for students (Adriansen et. al. 2022, 3). It can also be due to the fact that free movers' English-skills are judged because of their pronunciations, specialized vocabulary and idiomatic phraseology and the whole mastery of the language, ultimately, if the level is to low or if a dialog is restricted by some of the factor above, forming an in-group membership formation (Seidlhofer 2001, 136), as can also be seen in a UK-study that uncovered various problems related to language, especially when domestic students struggle understanding internationals because they attribute low-level English to international students, which then complicates group work or even withholds domestic students from working with international students in groups (Harrison & Peacock 2019, 888-891). One could also argue that the professors talk directly to the Danish students, because he or she has observed that the English level is higher among free movers, and to make sure that the message is understood among everyone, the Danish students then receive the contextual information in their native language e.g., to create the same starting point prior to working on a home assignment. However, if this is the case, this does not seem to change Luka's perception of reality, which is that Danes receive special treatment and what happens, even if it is for the innocent purpose of elaborating on things in Danish, is that the academic language is suddenly not a common good anymore – it is for the privileged, who can master both English and Danish, arguably creating a culture of metadiscourse in class that prohibits free movers to feel engaged and connected to the lectures and members of the classroom.

The overall hierarchy and polarization within the international community

Now to the third theme concerning polarization, which we also discussed in connection with the previous theme about division. From the above, we argue that Luka's stories indicate a division

between domestic and international students, while they also indicate unequal treatment. In this chapter he argues that it is hard to integrate and socialize with Danes, but he still strives to be incorporated into that unity, which he sees as an entry point for his future career opportunities. However, he also distances himself from exchange students. In turn, they arguably also distance themselves from the free mover community. In the analysis of this theme, it appears how significant stories dominate and influence Luka's hierarchic perception of students, his meaning making and identity construction of characters within the conversation. In relation, he also put it into the context of language.

In Luka's storytelling he also positions himself humbly in regard to the Danish students. In a more academic context in the previous theme, we saw him depicting the difference between Danes and internationals arguably as a means to illustrate the unfairness in not being treated the same way. However, from the five stories below, we argue that he is positioning Danish buddies and students as a gateway to integration; not as an opponent or obstacle that prevents an internationalized culture from flourishing:

Story 1:

> *"[...] from what I have experienced and what I've read before, it is even quite hard to get into the groups of Danish people [...] So, I think that the best idea was for me, if I wanted to speak to Danish people I should apply for a Buddy, because usually they are from Denmark. [...] so that was the easiest way for me to get to know like some Danish people. And you can actually integrate into the social life better. [...]"* (Appendix 1, 8)

Looking at positioning level 1, we arguably see that the characters are presented in a completely different way, considering how Luka positions himself. He explains that his decision in having a buddy is based on the programmes' ability to introduce him. That way he can "integrate into the social life better", ultimately stating that if one has Danish connections, one has a better chance of socially integrating. From positioning level 2, wording like "easiest", "best idea" and "better" tells the audience from a communication perspective how he wants to be understood, which we argue is a someone who is aware of the influence Danish people have on his possibilities of integrating the society.

Story 2:

> *"[...] A problem with their Buddy is that he's not Danish. He cannot speak like Danish. And he's also from Asia. He's not like quite used to the Denmark environment. So, they have not really met that many Danish people compared to my group [...]"* (Appendix 1, 11)

For this story, when looking at positioning level 1, the characters are the same. Luka is a character who is open and appreciative to receive help. The Danes are the ones that he considers most capable of helping, thus attributing responsibility to them, and positioning them as active agents. However, there is one more character, an international buddy. In fact, he is emphasizing that it is an Asian buddy, who he perceives as not capable of helping internationals integrate, by looking at his positioning, resonating with Housemand in that his report mentions that the exclusion of Asian students is quite common among HEIs (Housemand et. al 2014, 379). Considering positioning level 2, "A problem with", "He's not", "He cannot", "They have not" are all phrases that have a negative connotation, expressing his positioning toward international buddies, thus attributing less power and responsibility to them, while he arguably also perceives them as being perhaps passive agents in the context of fulfilling their roles as buddies. Furthermore, the phrase "he's also from Asia" arguably indicates that, in Luka's sense-making, it only makes it even more difficult for international students to receive help compared to if the buddy is Danish or simply a buddy from a non-Asian country. In his meaning-making process, we argue that he does not find Asian people capable of helping others integrate, despite the fact that they have studied at AAU for one year in order to become buddies.
Then, Luka was asked whether his own buddy had established a connection to other Danes, to which he replies:

Story 3:

> *"Yeah. The other group. He mostly knows international people. For me it was different [...] She knows a lot of Danish people here who are willing to connect with me. [...] and I know other international students are jealous of that."* (Appendix 1, 12)

Resonating with all the above, this above story from Luka arguably also indicates that it is highly attractive to have a Danish buddy as they are somewhat better in integrating free movers, and

Luka expresses that he has an advantage over other internationals and that they are "jealous". Considering the three stories above, we argue that he agrees with the notion of Danish buddies increasing free movers' chances of integration, which is somewhat paradoxical in relation to some more opposite things he said under the academic auspices accounted for in the previous theme.

All the above is interesting in relation to the following, because according to Luka, the international community is perhaps not that united as one might think. Thus far, Luka seems to have used the term international students in a very broad sense, referring to all the international students at AAU, however, when he positions himself in relation to exchange students, he is arguably very dismissive of the attachment they have to each other, as can be seen in below, where he is asked whether he thinks exchange students are equal to him and other free movers:

Story 4:

> *"[...] They're here for a different reason. Like, because they're here only for one semester, so they don't really care if they actually like the programme or the culture. So, they can just stick to the one group of five people or something and they'll be fine for one semester and they will just go home."* (Appendix 1, 14)

When then asked him whether it would affect him and the free movers in general, to which he states the following:

Story 5:

> *"[...] it is better to separate us. As a free mover, you're coming from like. With a different perspective to things, like with different perspectives of like studying here, because like the exchange students are just here for one semester and just going to move out, but the free movers are here for like to stay, maybe even work after that. So, I think like they're more participating and involved in the Buddy Programme."* (Appendix 1, 14)

From story four and five, we see that Luka distinguishes himself as a free mover from the exchange students. One should think that the international community is open and embracing as they, according to Luka's positioning, arguably stand against unreasonable forces that threaten their integration opportunities and well-being at AAU, both in an academic and social context. In terms of the first level of positioning, concerning how characters are positioned within the story, we argue that Luka alongside the other free movers are positioned as someone who take their

future seriously and have a completely different approach to their stay and association with the Buddy Programme, arguably seen in story 5: “but the free movers are here for like to stay, maybe even work after that. So, I think like they're more participating and involved in the Buddy Programme.” We argue that Luka sees the Buddy Programme as some kind of education in itself and an important offset for his future career and success. In relation, he positions the Buddy Programme as something he sort of has to live up to just as much as the other way around in that the programme is there for him to integrate but arguably also for him to manifest an offset for his future career, seen in the way he describes how free movers come with “different perspectives” and are “here for like to stay, maybe even work after that ”by being more participating. Luka indicates that he does not think exchange students engage sufficiently in the programme since he says that “they don't really care if they actually like the programme or the culture”, stated in story 4, ultimately positioning them as someone who do not care and does not have something on the line in regards to their future because they will just be “fine for one semester and they will just go home.”

Considering the linguistic features of his arguments, we argue it is worth dwelling on the word “culture”. It indicates that he associates the Buddy Programme with Danish culture, or with the possibility of getting to know the culture better in order to get more integrated, arguably resonating with his stories about Danish buddies increasing free movers’ chances for integration in that they connect them to relevant people, i.e., Danish people. We argue that the Buddy Programme, in Luka’s meaning making process, is perceived as some kind of application portal where there is competition for the approval of the Danish buddies who give them the best opportunities for integration and networking, which we infer from the way he uses the word “jealous”, in the third story, in his implication of how there is a battle for the “good” buddies, being the Danish buddies, who can do more for them. Exchange students prevent that, according to Luka’s sense-making of them, because they do not engage with the culture that the buddies would otherwise introduce them to, arguably disturbing the reconciliation of expectations for the group dynamic free movers like Luka expects. Therefore, Luka arguably creates a divide inside the international community.

Considering the second level of positioning, we argue that Luka wants to be understood as someone more considerate than exchange students, arguably to gain recognition from Danes and

not least Danish buddies. We argue it is expressed in the following from story 5: “As a free mover, you're coming from like. With a different perspective to things, like with different perspectives of like studying here”. We argue that a “different perspective” in his storytelling means the approach and mission to their entire stay in Denmark, which he says most free movers have a long-term plan with as they are “here for like to stay,”. In Luka’s meaning making, free movers arguably have different goals and expectations, which he arguably considers the major difference. In fact, he uses the word “different” three times in both stories, which we argue emphasizes how explicit he is in establishing sameness and difference between exchange students, resonating with Obaeko Iwara in that *“[...] students find it difficult to integrate, socialize and relate with those of different cultural backgrounds* (Obaeko Iwara 2019, 59). Returning to how Luka uses the word “culture” in story 4, the word can now be perceived in a different light. We argue that the distancing to people with a different cultural background from Obaeko Iwara’s statement permeates to the distancing to people who do not want to integrate a different cultural background from Luka's statements. Both the statement from our literature review chapter and the ones from our interview with Luka draw on culture as the source of difference, ultimately, in Luka’s story, arguably indicating that he is complying with the social construction that Danish people increase the possibilities of integration, creating a hierarchy in the following order 1. Danish people; 2. Free movers; 3. Exchange students, ultimately, intensifying the power struggle and difference within the international community.

Summary

We see that Luka in his positioning is drawing the attention away from the Buddy Programme when asked about his well-being and he does not seem to attribute direct blame to the Buddy Programme for his negative experiences. Instead, there are indications that he attributes the blame and responsibility to AAU in various stories. Luka did not receive the necessary help from the local organs but rather got it from his international classmates.

Luka also seemed frustrated about the divide and inequality he experienced on campus, specifically related to the perceived neglect of English in class and Danes being allowed to take exams in Danish, despite the course language being English. This arguably must have contradicted what he expected. It seems he feels that the Danish students have an advantage and establishes

an 'us and them' culture in an academic context, while he seemingly makes sense of Danes as being superior to international students. However, Luka indicates a sense of acceptance of the fact that they speak in Danish both in class and on oral exams; a sign of compliance, which reflects the Western ideology that internationals must do the must adjustment.

Ultimately, the small stories from Luka seem to align with past studies and surveys that examined international students. A variety of the issues that Luka experienced seem to be similar to what other international students have experienced in the world and thus, it seems there is a shared number of positions that students have in the context of studying abroad.

8.2 Lang

We will now initiate the analysis of our second informant Lang.

Family influence and remarks on EU legislations

We have this theme because we find that a lot of the arguments, stories, and things that Lang says during the interview are strongly determined by her culture and family. In relation to that, we find that perhaps a lot of the negative experiences or her meaning making of specific negative events could be due to her tight connection to Chinese culture.

The first occurrence of this theme is in the below story when Lang was asked whether her family was part of the decision-making of going abroad:

Story 1:

> *"They want me to be and stay here. Because I come from Shanghai, and many of my family members are abroad. So, my parents want me to do the same as my other family. And I'm Asian, you know, they're very strict about my studies, so they think if I can get two degrees then that'll be very good."* (Appendix 2, 2)

We find that Lang in this story positions herself as a submissive person with almost no autonomy when related to education, work, and success. It indicates that her family is in control of her, and thus we must assume that her family has full agency in this story and thus the ones who make her position herself as a submissive. She limits her autonomy in a way that it implies that her parents

have desires that she must please, cf. level 1 since she identifies as a submissive daughter, while constructing her parents' identities as authoritarian people who are to be obeyed, based on her sense-making of herself, her parents, and her role in Chinese society. Furthermore, she also says "they want", "they think", and "my parents want". This indicates that whatever she has done in the past, now, and will do in the future will be based on what her parents' desires are, detaching any form of autonomy from herself, while attributing power to her parents, through her meaning-making of them.

Moreover, she says "I'm Asian, you know", elaborating that her parents are strict about her studies, and the more degrees she can get, the better for her parents, not herself. This also shows us how she wants us to understand her. It indicates that she wants to convey to us that while she may be perceived as a submissive person in China, she is also conveying the culture that she comes from. Maybe, she is trying to tell us, that this is plainly how it is, and that it is all about respecting the elders, especially one's parents in Chinese culture. Arguably, she makes it, to some degree clear to us, that this is who Lang is, arguably identifying with the culturally embedded identity that she has and is perhaps supposed to, being a Chinese. Therefore, Chinese culture, the underlying ideological context in this story, is arguably a co-determiner, with her parents, in how Lang is positioned in China, and as such, Chinese culture and her parents could be perceived as the influencing authority whose goals, actions, views of the world impact Lang's way of life, arguably making them the antagonists in this story and context, while Lang is the protagonist who is impacted by it.

As mentioned, we identify a larger societal ideology in China as the underlying context, related to parents' roles and power. This can be confirmed in a Chinese study. The researchers found that wealthy parents have less power, while less wealthy parents have more power over their children (Bodycott & Lai, 2012), arguably confirming the presence of powerful and authoritarian parents in Chinese culture and why she attributes so much power to her parents.

Lang's storytelling indicates that it seems normal for her that parents have desires which children must please, which is also confirmed by Bodycutt & Lai (2012). They highlight that adolescents discussed that their parents' authoritarian decision-making was only in their interests and nothing to question, which could explain why Lang is constructing her self-identity as one who complies

with it. The socially constructed ideology is arguably confirmed by herself when she is asked to elaborate on what she meant by saying "*I'm Asian*': "*[...] Well, you know, being Asian means that your parents decide a lot of things for you, they can decide education, marriage, economy, you know."* (Appendix 2, 2) This indicates that Lang could be living under the influence of a Chinese ideology that attributes full agency to parents in China, while it overly attributes almost no agency to children.

She is arguably acknowledging that being Asian has a significant impact on her life and that her parents play an important role in making decisions for her. By doing so, she is positioning herself as someone who is influenced by her cultural background and upbringing. If she has almost no agency related to decisions like these and seemingly holds tight to her cultural values too, could that be something that dictates her life in Denmark to such a degree that it influences her meaning-making of Danish culture in a negative way? Ching et al. found that Chinese international students have considerably more difficulties adjusting to a new culture than Chinese immigrant students have. That is because a majority of the Chinese international students are expected, by their families, to return to China once they graduate, and thus the expectancy and limited time period of studying abroad automatically dictates them to maintain their own culture as much as possible, while it distances them from the host-country culture. This can be referred to as the 'separation' strategy in acculturation; a term that we borrow from Berry's theory and model of Acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2010). In contrast, Chinese first-generation students, who have moved to a new country and culture with their parents, have more freedom to adapt as much as possible to the new culture (Ching et al., 2017, 474-476). This study could confirm the possibility of Lang being influenced by the same circumstances.

In our literature review, we discussed two studies which showed that some of the important things related to a student's integration is gaining and maintaining host national contacts, while also maintaining home country contacts is important to maintain a connection to one's home culture (Sullivan 2015, 3). The latter is apparent to us throughout the interview, but also above. She seems connected to her culture and therefore, if there is an imbalance in the aspect of having host country networks and maintaining own culture, especially if the latter is the most predominant one, it may have complicated her integration.

Our previous theme concerned how Lang compares her academic and social life in Denmark to that in China, which further depicted a person who is very connected to her own culture and uses comparison to implicitly indicate that she is either proud or is perhaps forced to identify with her home culture and that it is different from the Danish culture that she arguably does not identify with, or wants to but is forced not to by a strict connection to her cultural upbringing.

The next story is from the context of when we told Lang that Danish students receive SU[5], and then she is asked how big of a difference it makes for her to pay tuition to study in Denmark, to which she replied:

Story 2:

> *"I'm very jealous of that because I heard that EU students, they can get some SU, but we didn't get anything, and we must pay extra money to get into any programme here and that's very expensive. I got some scholarship from my university so, but that's not a lot, so I think, to study here as an Asian, it's quite expensive because we must pay a lot, and we don't get paid for anything."* (Appendix 2, 4)

The above story concerns a financial aspect where Lang speaks about how EU-students receive SU, while she does not. In this story, Lang arguably positions herself as a victim of the SU-rules in Denmark, and thus, she attributes agency and responsibility to the governmental people in Denmark, while she strips agency from herself as she is acted upon by the rules, cf. level 1. The Danish SU-rules which dictate that non-EU students are not eligible of receiving SU is arguably the underlying social context which she does not seem to identify with, cf. level 3, since the rules probably clash with what she expected. Thus, the governmental decision-makers have positioned Lang as someone who is not eligible to receive SU, which then gives reason for her to position herself as a victim.

Then, Lang gives another story within the story (embedded narration), above, concerning the fact that it is difficult for Asian students to study abroad, because she then explains how it is expensive to be an Asian student in Denmark and that she received an insufficient scholarship from her home university. Thus, she highlights that Asians struggle, and by doing so, she positions herself as

[5] The Danish state educational support

a struggling and victimized Asian student due to the underlying ideological context, which is the financial policymaking in Denmark.

Moreover, she compares herself to EU-students, saying that she has heard that they can receive SU, almost attributing a spoiled-like identity to every EU-student when she says “because I heard that EU students, they can get some SU”, while she reinforces a victim-like identity of herself in this story, as she says “we didn't get anything, and we must pay extra money to get into any programme here”, cf. level 1. Lang’s earlier statement concerning that it is expensive for Asians to study in Denmark, and the statement about being obliged to pay extra for programmes in Denmark can be corroborated in a book about the internationalization of HEIs in Europe. Here, it is apparent that Denmark and Spain were the only two countries in Europe who charged non-EU students more than EU-students in tuition fees (Wulz & Rainer 2015, 48). Meanwhile, AAU had stopped granting non-EU students with scholarships for almost 10 years, before reinstating the scholarships, granting approximately 10 students a yearly, effective from January 2023 (Bertovic 2023). This would confirm Lang’s sense-making of Denmark being a specifically expensive country to study abroad in for Asians.

Going back to when she said “Asian students” in the story above, she could perhaps be referring to other non-EU students in general, possibly making a distinction between the type of student she is (non-EU) and EU-students. If this is the case, then this could indicate that there is some perceived polarization between EU-students and non-EU students, especially if she uses the pronoun ‘we’ to refer to Asian students and non-EU students. This could perhaps indicate that she implies and positions Asians and every other non-EU student as the same (obliged to pay tuition) while EU-students are the different and positions them as the same, the benefiters of a rule (not obliged to pay tuition). This would resonate with researchers' notion of sameness vs difference, indicating that there is an ‘us and them’ element in this story (Olson 2011, 115).

Also related to positioning level 2, her tellability in this story indicates that she identifies herself as part of an out-group of non-EU students, while the in-group is the group of EU-students. Since she uses the word ‘jealous’ in this context, it means that she envies something that others have due to the rules in Denmark and arguably the rules have polarized these two groups of students, wherein

she is, ideologically in the out-group, and the EU-students are in the in-group. In terms of level 2, we argue she wanted to be understood as an unfairly treated student who is frustrated by the unequal rules, expressing envy and saying, "*we don't get paid for anything*". i.e., indicating that herself and her non-European peers, in this context, are in the out-group of non-EU students, and thus, we must assume that Lang attributes blame onto the Danish rule-makers, who can be perceived as the antagonists, the source of conflict in this story, positioning Lang as a victim of the rules, making Lang a protagonist; the receiver, struggler, and victim of conflict.

The feeling of being an outsider could be a reason for a negative well-being because studies often show that if international students feel that they do not belong to a given institution, or if they lose their self-esteem, it can provoke negative feelings such as anxiety, stress, depression etc. (Quinton et al. 2019). Another study found that one of the biggest criteria for studying abroad for Chinese students, is the increase of self-esteem, which could be relevant for Lang (Zhu & Gao 2022, 115), while the importance of a sufficient financial support can be decisive, as seen an American study, where Chinese students developed financially-related stress, with some of them dropping out of their studies due to an insufficient financial support from the HEI and government (Yan & Berliner 2009).

The next story is also about the financial aspect where Lang states that EU-students receive financial support after graduating, while she does not.

Story 3:

> *"You can always get money from the government here, right? Like my European friends, they chose to stay here after they graduated for another two years without doing anything because they can get the money from the Danish Government or they are helped finding a job. But I can't get anything from the government. Where can I get money from?"*
> (Appendix 2, 25)

It indicates to us that Lang may feel some inequality, once more, since she compares herself to the EU-students again, this time not in an academic context but in the context of graduating and finding a job. She says that her fellow EU-students decided to stay in Denmark because they get support from the government while she does not receive any support. She seems to position

herself as a victim of the Danish Government, which she thus attributes blame to, since the Government is the source of conflict for her, i.e., the antagonist in this story, while she is again the protagonist, cf. level 1. It indicates that Lang, in her sense-making, could feel that Denmark is perhaps marginalizing international students, and she may have wanted to show us that she feels unequally treated, cf. level 2.

This is not directly related to the academic context, but if non-European students, while they study, learn about these Danish rules, it could perhaps be a factor that provokes negative well-being and feelings of misplacement in a society, which, perhaps in Lang's mind and perhaps other internationals', seems to neglect everybody else than Danes and Europeans; something an article from 2017 reflects. An Egyptian student felt so rejected by Danish students, Danes in society, and specifically Danish companies that he developed a severe depression which led him to suicidal thoughts. Being rejected by companies due to his nationality was rendered the biggest issue (Kalia 2017). This shows how money and work can influence their cognitive state of mind. Could the Egyptian student and Lang's experience be a reflection of a label that Denmark has among internationalization scholars and their research? Denmark is known for viewing international students as 'welfare tourists'[6] (Beelen & Jones 2015, 54); a negative ideology that could be a contributing factor in policymaking which complicates things further for internationals. The above could indicate, from Lang's focalization, that Europeans and Danes share sameness in that the two identity groups can both receive financial support, while non-Europeans share a difference in not being eligible for support; a positioning of the two poles at the hands of the Danish Government, who has full agency and who she holds accountable for the problem.

The importance of employment for Lang is apparent when she asks us how she can earn money, indicating to us that she desires some financial support or to find a job to be able to support herself, which could also potentially increase her self-esteem. Finding a good job with a good salary is among the most important factors that drive Chinese students to go abroad, and when they succeed in doing so, their self-esteem and well-being is increased (Zhu & Gao 2022, 115). And interestingly, this is not only important for the students themselves but also to their parents.

[6] 'Welfare tourists': International students who study in Denmark to take advantage of the welfare system, such as gaining economic benefits while studying and receiving a good salary while working before ultimately returning home (Beelen & Jones 2015, 54)

Chinese focus on prestige, money, and success as they are perceived determiners of social status and wealth, and therefore, this arguably must influence students who are abroad (Liao & Wang 2017). It may create a pressure for Lang, not only in relation to being able to support her accommodation and living costs in Denmark, but maybe also pressure from her family, expecting she finds a good job with a good salary because findings show that middle-class and working-class families in China expect their children to support them when they get old (Waldmeir 2013).

Lack of help and communication within AAU

This theme emerged from the stories that concerned what Lang perceived as being lack of help and neglect from AAU. This is a theme that we regard as being very important in relation to our research question, which is why we put a lot of work into investigating it. There are six stories in this theme, and we argue that the underlying societal context in the entire theme is the Asian and Danish academic cultural differences.

The first indication of Lang's perceived lack of help is depicted in the story below, when Lang is asked whether she felt she was uniquely treated or in a generic way. As mentioned in the literature review, scholars argue that meaningful internationalization is about treating international students as uniquely as possible because if they are treated as domestic students, generally and standardized, we argue that is where a lot of problems emerge because every foreigner needs guidance and help that differs from the needs of domestic students (Ward; 2001; Jane Knight 2012, 29; Peterson 2014, 106; James-MacEachern 2018, 1).

Story 1:

> *"I think I was treated generally. I did not feel special. I did not feel that they did something extra for me or my fellow international student mates. We were left to ourselves. I was surprised by this. I thought maybe there were some staff that specifically works with and makes sure that we get help, they should. I remember some Danish students telling me not to worry because it was normal about AAU, but, like, it's easy for them to say. I thought 'you can't be serious'. This would not happen in Beijing University.*" (Appendix 2, 5).

This above story indicates a problem within AAU, in relation to guidance and help. This is arguably contrastive to some of the things that AAU communicates when appealing and attracting international students, that is, being welcoming, helpful and having the Buddy Programme as a source of help (AAU, n.d). This entire story arguably depicts an explicit frustration from Lang and feelings of possible neglect. Her meaning-making of the experience of studying at AAU and experience of lack of help from AAU points that the university neglects international students, which we argue is a specific contrastive story to AAU's storytelling about how life is as a student at AAU. Lang positions herself as a victim with low agency at the hands of AAU, the antagonist with full agency who is to blame for the conflict, in her sense-making, cf. level 1.

Her contrastive story in this specific context is arguably further emphasized by the fact that she mentions that Danish students told her it is normal at AAU and that she should not worry. The fact that she decided to share this information with us, and taking into account what she says immediately after, "I thought 'you can't be serious", indicates that she may perceived AAU, in this sense, as being amateur and lacking professionalism, especially saying that it would not happen in China, thus conveying the academic cultural difference to us, cf. level 2. The Chinese academic system had positioned her differently prior; a position that now clashed with the way AAU positioned her.

As we stated before, at first, she constructs the self-identity of a victim in this story, but as the story unfolds, she arguably reshapes her identity, now reflecting a person who does not appreciate being tossed around; also something we infer that she wanted to show us, cf. level 2, resonating with that speakers can reshape their identity if the conversation enables it as it unfolds (Kayi-Aydar 2019, 17). That would resonate with what we discussed earlier about the importance of feeling a sense of belongingness to the university since studying abroad is prestigious for Chinese students, especially getting a double degree is associated with prestige (Knight 2012, 27). Therefore, one could argue that if she feels neglect at the hands of AAU, it could probably decrease that sense and desire of belongingness and prestige, which could then lead to struggles instead.

Further related to positioning level 2, Lang says, "I think I was treated generally" and "I did not feel special". The first phrase may indicate that she felt what is a world-wide problem in HEIs in terms

of internationalization; almost every HEI treats international students with a standardized approach that only makes things worse for internationals (James-MacEachern 2018, 1; Andrade 2006, 138). Also related to level 2 and how she intends to be understood by her audience, the fact that she did not feel special, indicates to us that she may have had a desire of being treated uniquely and in a way that reflects the Chinese socially constructed ideology of what it means to study abroad; prestige and success (Zhu & Gao 2022, 115), which is possibly the underlying societal context in Lang's mind, giving rise to her reaction and sense-making of the situation at AAU, and probably, it had established some expectations that were never met here.

Going back to positioning level 1, we stated before that she positions herself as a victim. As for other international students, she refers to them as "my fellow international student mates" and "we". Especially, by using the pronoun "we", she identifies arguably as being part of that social identity group, and, by doing so, we find that she may attribute the same identity to them, categorizing them as victims too, inferred when she says, "and makes sure that we get help", also indicating that the issues go beyond herself.

In terms of Danish students, we find that she perhaps speaks to a perceived division between Danish and international students when she uses "Danish" to refer to the domestic Danish students. It may reflect a notion within Lang's sense-making that Danish students are a separate social group; the in-group of AAU, who does not find this issue as being as problematic as she does, while the out-group would be herself and other internationals. This arguably indicates a division of 'us' and 'them', especially when she says "But, like, it's easy for them to say", indicating that she may think it is easier for Danes to navigate and get help than it is for her. This could indicate that she perceives that Danes and AAU share 'sameness' in that Danes are domestic students, speak the national language, and share an informal student-teacher relationship which always guarantees help, while the 'difference' emerges in that she is an international student, differs in language, and comes from an authoritarian academic culture where it is difficult to ask questions (Habib, Johannesen & Øgrim 2012, 197; Consultingcheck 2022). Perhaps, her culture could have influenced her sense-making in a way that it became a hurdle for her whenever she sought information. Perhaps a given interaction between herself and a professor could have seemed disrespectful and unprofessional to her, when, in reality, the professor thought he or she

was helping her. This resonates with social constructivism, in how people interact and see the world differently depending on where they come from and their cultural upbringing.

In terms of AAU, we stated that she indicated attribution of blame towards AAU and feelings of neglect and unprofessionalism. Lang's position and experience would not be a sole instance, because studies show that it is common for international students to experience a feeling of being overlooked and a feeling of neglect due to lack of help and seriousness about specific needs, especially when a large cultural difference is present. This then often ends with students being diagnosed with mental conditions because of the development of stress and depression, among many other conditions (Nguyen et. al. 2019; Ward 2001; Calikoglu 2018; Ching et al. 2017).

The entire story ends with Lang saying that it would not happen in the Beijing University, which we argue is a reinforcement of her perception and sense-making of AAU, while it is also a strong and impactful comparison of AAU and Beijing University, indicating to us that she does not identify with the academic system in Denmark, cf. level 2.

An Australian professor found just how collectivist Asian cultures are, especially the Chinese. The professor investigated Chinese student life, and found that Chinese students eat, sleep, socialize, study and work together, and if one student has problems, the whole class of students is expected to help the given student. There is no such thing as an individual problem (Lehmann 2020). The magnitude of the difference between where Lang comes from and what she came to at AAU is apparent. This would arguably confirm why Lang's perception of AAU and the Danish students could reflect a feeling of neglect and lack of belongingness to the academic community; a cognitive condition that could quite possibly be a reason for struggle and negative well-being among many internationals at AAU, especially Asian students.

Lang's storytelling about her time at AAU continued to portray a difficulty in navigating and getting the help that she needed. When Lang says: "*There are some rules or systems that I don't know about [...]"* (Appendix 2, 13), we think that she may refer to general rules related to academic practices, criteria and various platforms used by AAU to communicate through. Thus, this indicates that she was perhaps lost. A bit later, she is then asked how she would specifically prefer help from AAU, to which she replied:

Story 2:

> *"Maybe they can send us some e-mail explaining everything because I remember when my Chinese university started, I got many brochures that explain everything very detailed. And all the freshmen get that. I think that helps a lot. And also, I think everything, it's very well explained from WeChat. There's something like a website, but it's all in WeChat and I think that AAU can do something like that, not just sending emails. Very well organized."* (Appendix 2, 13).

Above, we see a story about how she used to communicate with her university in China and how she preferred that AAU communicated with students. The storytelling also has a contrastive nature to it since it opposes AAU's storytelling and self-presented institutional image about how the university meets its international students and makes the environment adaptable for everybody (Krogsgaard and Bertovic, 2023; AAU n.d). We argue that AAU's perceived reality does not reflect the reality or expectations of Lang's focalization due to her stories related to AAU's presence, i.e., professors' and administrations' provision of help.

Lang constructs her self-identity as an individual who is connected to her home country university and academic culture while showing distance from AAU and perhaps the Danish academic culture, which she possibly does not identify with in this story. That is because she recommends that AAU could have done like her university in Beijing did, automatically indicating the difference that she comes from and identifies with arguably, cf. level 1.

We find that Lang has improved her tellability, and her recommendation seems stronger despite the fact that she uses vague words and phrases such as "maybe" and "I think". But what is interesting and resonating with level 2, is that her recommendation is based on her culturally embedded identity, which draws specifically on the university in Beijing and the general practices in China, which she compares AAU to many times during the interview. We argue that she conveys an identity who still identifies strongly with her Chinese values and the university in Beijing because she arguably praises her own home-country university for their work and methods of helping their own students, which would resonate with what we mentioned earlier about how student life is in China and how help is always in reach from both the university and fellow students (Lehmann 2020). Thus, taking the first and second story into account, Beijing University had positioned her as a seemingly privileged student with everything at disposal, while AAU

seemingly, in her reality, positioned her as a weak student, deprived of prestige and privileges that she had been used to before.

Also related to her tellability, Lang uses the adverb "just" when she says, "*not just sending emails*", modifying the following two-word phrase "sending emails". The entire phrase refers to the fact that AAU only communicates by emails. The word "just" in this context, which means the same as 'only', has some negativity to it. In this context, we find that Lang uses the word "just" to convey a feeling of neglect, once again. That is possibly because Lang, in her mind, is perhaps convinced that people within AAU think it is easy to communicate with everybody by emails, in a generic way and by using one generic platform to reach every student, while it is the opposite, in her mind, perhaps. Thus, when she says "just", we argue that she attributes negativity in the word, referring to AAU's sloppy way of communicating.

Furthermore, in relation to other characters, there is another character in this story, i.e., the university in Beijing. Lang constructs an identity of the university as being the "good character", while AAU is the opposite, in her sense-making. Her construction of AAU as being the negative character in this story is arguably visible during the entire story, but we see it explicitly when she says, "not just sending emails", attributing negativity to AAU; in her sense-making, the possible reason for the conflict around her.

Her construction of Beijing University being the positive character is arguably visible from the moment she starts speaking about the Chinese university, explaining how they did things and how AAU should make use of their methods, praising their use of the social media platform WeChat[7]. Perhaps Lang wanted to indicate that AAU's use of emails for communication purposes limited her academic performance, making it difficult for her to reach important information regarding her course and exams, perhaps leading to demotivation and disengagement.

Perhaps she says that AAU should implement WeChat because she feels that it would perhaps have made teaching, learning, getting help etc. a lot easier for her, also perhaps implying that the issue of emails was stressful for her. That would resonate with something that she told us earlier

[7] WeChat: The largest Chinese social media platform - used for multiple purposes, including education. (Lehmann 2020)

in the interview when we asked her whether the information load was high or low, to which she replied:

Story 3:

> *"Way too many emails, and that's very annoying because in China we don't use emails, only maybe in companies when you're working, but we don't use that. We've got all the information from WeChat. There's no corresponding. But with this, I feel like there is a big mess around me all over the computer and mobile phone because of these emails."* (Appendix 2, 7)

Above, she explains how she felt about the emails from AAU. Apparently, it seemed like a stress factor that quite possibly could contribute to a negative well-being in that it seems that she felt it was difficult to navigate and sort the information out. The possibility of emails being a stress factor is confirmed in a study among Chinese students in the UK. The study found that the HEI implemented the use of WeChat to meet their Chinese student's needs and cultural habits, ultimately decreasing the stress factors of receiving information by email, while it significantly improved the Chinese students' motivation and engagement levels. It also improved their chances of reaching their learning objectives, leading to an increased sense of belongingness, which in turn decreased anxiety, stress, and the feeling of being in the out-group (Cowley et. al. 2017). The study confirms the possibility that Lang hinted that her academic and social adaptation would have been eased significantly, had WeChat been used at AAU.

Going further into the interview, we find this next story from the interview, which illustrates the issue of getting help:

Story 4:

> *"And actually, during my whole study here, during that one year, I don't think the school helped me about anything. It was difficult to get help, and I had to figure out the examination. How to hand in these things, how to finish myself. I had to figure out myself or I got all the information from my classmates."* (Appendix 2, 11)

In the above story, we find that Lang constructs her self-identity as being a victim, once again; a victim of AAU's way of handling international students, which apparently made her time as

student much more difficult because of all the problems it gave birth to, according to her sense-making, thus decreasing her agency. We see the entire story as yet another contrast to AAU's institutional image. In this context, she attributes a rescuer-like identity to her classmates, to whom she also attributes agency since they were in a position that enabled them to act and help her, while she indicates attribution of blame towards AAU as the antagonist who caused yet another problem for her, cf. level 1.

We infer that Lang wanted to be understood as a student who had the desire, goals and motivation of succeeding, but was held back by AAU, specifically when she says, "I don't think the school helped me about anything.". Saying this, she arguably wanted to convey to us that she wants to be treated professionally since she left her family for Denmark and paid a lot of money, cf. level 2.

We then asked her to elaborate on the story above. Then she told us that she received an address where she could find various courses to enroll herself in, however, she still needed help. Then we asked her whether she referred to Moodle, to which she replied:

Story 5:

> *"Yes, I don't know what that was. They never helped me navigate. I still can't figure Moodle out. I got that address from my classmates, not the school or their e-mail. And then there's some websites that I should use to hand in my papers. The teachers told me to get help from my classmates. So, I got that address from my classmates as well. Maybe I'm not familiar with the website system because in China we just send an e-mail with a paper as an attachment to our teachers, or just send them on WeChat."* (Appendix 2, 11)

Above, we see another story about the lack of help that AAU provided her. This time, it concerned specifically the exams and how to hand them in. Yet again, she did not receive the help that she felt she needed, and she explains how professors told her to consult her classmates. According to the U-curve, there are four phases which students go through; honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery (Reid 2013, 49). Arguably, during the above stories that give indications of Lang's perception and meaning making of AAU as being neglective, Lang could be in a state of culture shock since she compares what she experienced at AAU with how things were in China; a

comparison that we see as an indicator of the difference between what she experienced in Beijing and Aalborg.

Also interesting is that she says, “as well” to emphasize that her classmates helped her again, and in this context, we find that it has the connotations of “of course they helped me again”. Her phrase arguably attributes agency and a rescuer-like position to her classmates and we argue that it automatically attributes negativity to AAU once again. That is because we interpret “as well” as an indication of how her situation was countless times; not getting help from AAU and always left to herself or her classmates.

But the above story is an emphasis of how important WeChat is for Lang. Drawing on the UK study from before, it also showed that the Chinese students felt it was significantly easier for them to have exams since they got the opportunity of handing in exams via WeChat instead of doing it via emails or websites, aligning with what Lang explains in the above story. This eased the academic aspect for the Chinese students (Cowley et al., 2017). Also, since Chinese students are used to the high power-distance culture, with the teacher-student relationship being a hierarchical one, Chinese students find it difficult to ask professors questions, which is a large barrier for them (Gao, 2012). Perhaps this is why Lang hints at the usefulness of implementing the platform at AAU. The UK study showed that once WeChat was implemented, students were more confident in asking questions and seeking help via WeChat, and from that point on, they hardly experienced academic or social issues (Cowley et al. 2017).

The last story concerns the unfamiliarity related to the Danish exam forms, which Lang was not used to prior to studying at AAU. We asked her if she experienced difficulties with something specific, to which she replied:

Story 6:

> *“Maybe studies because I didn’t know anything about International relations. Also, I was not used to the examination form of the oral exams, the 48-hour exams, 24-hour exams etc. I didn't sleep for two days just to finish it and to hand in in time. So, I think that's quite difficult for me because in China we do things differently. We usually got the topic of the final paper in the first week and then we've got the whole semester to prepare for it.”* (Appendix 2, 5).

From above, it seems that Lang was frustrated by the exam forms at AAU. She had no prior experience of oral exams or exams lasting several days. It seems that the oral exam form is a common issue for students who have no experience with it (Fitzgerald 2013).

In this story, she arguably constructs a self-identity of a victimized person again, who was subject to academic cultural differences, cf. level 1. Arguably, the underlying narrative and social context is that Asian students struggle in Western higher education systems that differ from Asian systems, leading to integration issues. There is specifically a large difference between Asian educational systems and teaching cultures and the Scandinavian academic systems and teaching cultures, proving this is not only a problem for Lang, but for many other Asian students around the world (Habib, Johannesen & Øgrim 2012, 197; Yan & Berliner 2009).

We infer that she may have wanted to emphasize the scale of the problem and cultural difference to us by saying “I didn't sleep for two days”. We interpret it as a way of emphasizing that it was comprehensive problem for her, thus making us understand her as someone who struggled academically and perhaps needed more guidance, cf. level 2. Despite making herself look weaker, she does however show action and agency by saying it, because it conveys to us that she did not give up, and she did everything she could to make it in time and pass the exams, which can also be viewed as an indication that she wanted to show that she can adapt and comply with AAU’s rules.

Then, she explains how exams are carried out in China, implying that it is more tangible and easier to have an exam in China. Here, we find that the ‘sameness vs difference’ element emerges because when she compares how examinations are carried out in the two countries, she implicitly hints at the divide of ‘us’ and ‘them’: an institutional polarization. We especially see it since she uses the pronoun ‘we’, referring to herself and the Beijing University, indicating that she still entirely identifies with the Chinese culture and academic system, which Yun Gao would confirm in her 2012 study, stating how Chinese students are used to an entirely different academic structure and culture, only doing written exams, not oral exams (Gao 2012).

By summarizing this theme, we argue they are contrastive to the institutional self-presenting image of AAU; that AAU is an international university who welcomes and takes care of and helps international students, inferred from our interviews with the international office and Master

Admission (Krogsgaard and Bertovic, 2023), and AAU's communication and branding of itself on the website (AAU n.d). However, reality does not seem to reflect the institutional image of AAU.

Cultural differences and division at AAU

This theme functions as an umbrella to various other topics that fall under this specific theme. Here, we bring stories that are related to the many cultural differences that Lang encountered both in Danish society and at AAU. This theme also concerns the topic of social life on and off campus and the division between Danes and internationals. In this theme, there are five extracts.

The first story concerns Lang's perceived rejection from Danish female students in her course.

Lang experienced the in-grouping and out-grouping problem, which is a general problem within thousands of HEIs worldwide, specifically present between domestic and international students (Chinyamurindi 2018, 215).

At some point, we asked Lang who she wanted to socialize mostly with; Danes or internationals, to which she replied, "*I wanted both*" (Appendix 2, 15). But earlier, we had asked her about her thoughts of AAU's way of handling mixed nationalities in class. She provided an answer that answered our first question:

Story 1:

> *"There were some Danish girls, but we never talked to them. They will always stick to each other. They are very difficult to talk to. And sometimes when we had to do projects with our classmates, it was always Danish girls together. And then foreign students together. Very separated and AAU did never do anything about this. They never wanted to work with us international students."* (Appendix 2, 12)

The above story is about Lang's social and academic experience with the Danish female students. In the story, we find that Lang, related to positioning level 1, takes an out-grouped identity since she explicitly conveys that she felt out-grouped by the Danish girls, saying they were difficult to talk to and that they never sought contact, nor did they want to work in groups with internationals. By doing so, not only does she portray herself as a victim of their behavior, but she

also portrays their identities as enclosed, and attributes blame to them. This could be an indication of 'passive xenophobia', which refers to when domestic students feel that their academic success and group identity is being threatened by international students. Then, it intensifies when internationals come from collectivist cultures, like the Asian, which differ from Western individual cultures, while 'passive xenophobia' is decreased when the students come from cultures similar to those of the Western cultures (Harrison & Peacock, 2019). This story could indicate that Lang experienced this as the hands of the Danish female students in her course, which arguably only complicated the chances of feeling inclusion, which is a very important factor for international students, especially Asian students since they come from interdependent, collectivist cultures where everybody is supposed to help each other, both in academia, work, and private life (Lehmann, 2020).

Taking Lang's story into account, we assume that she perceives that the Danish girls create a divide between themselves and international students since she says, "it was always Danish girls together", "then it was foreign students together", and "they never wanted to work with us international students". This gives indications that Lang's meaning-making process of the situation was that the Danish girls created a division by not wanting to work with international students, categorizing Lang and other international students in the out-group while the Danish girls are in the in-group.

Thus, this means that Lang, with minimal agency, explicitly puts the blame onto the female Danes, giving them agency and making them the antagonist in this story since their behavior was problematic for Lang. By blaming them, Lang possibly helps herself make meaning of it by indicating that the girls created the division, however, it could also be indicative of Lang's own attitude towards the girls back then. It could also be a reflection of her current meaning-making of them and the exclusion. Perhaps she felt the exclusion very badly, but now, to minimize difficult emotional feelings, maybe she needed to create this distancing from them, by saying "they are very difficult to talk to". We interpret this as a move of putting the blame onto them, by implicitly saying that the female students were the entire problem and that she herself did not have any problem speaking or working with them; an implicit message to us which conveys perhaps some restored active agency. This could perhaps be to create some relief within her cognitive state of mind and praise her own personal skills. Or one could also argue that this is how she wanted to be

understood by us. That is because if she put the entire blame onto the girls, then she would portray herself more positive and better 'than them' in front of us, resonating with positioning level 2.

This in-grouping and out-grouping issue is a worldwide phenomenon within HEIs, and this is specifically a problem among Asian students, who particularly experience exclusion from domestic students, thus making this the underlying societal context (Housemand et. al 2014, 379; Harrison & Peacock, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Some moments later, Lang elaborates more about the Danish girls:

Story 2:

> *"Yeah, I mean, the girls are friendly, and I think every time we talked they were like talking about studies, they were willing to help, but they just wouldn't come up to you and try to be a friend with you. I met some Danish girls at parties. We follow each other on social media, and sometimes we like each other's posts, but I don't think we really know each other, and I don't think we're friends."* (Appendix 2, 15)

In both of the above stories, Lang conveys stories that indicate examples of polarization among international and domestic students at AAU.

Lang's own positioning reflects again an out-grouped victim, who tried to engage in social encounters and interactions with her female classmates but was unable. In this context, it seems that she places agency to the girls, while she places limited agency to herself since her storytelling implies that it was all up to the girls to decide whether they would accept Lang, now that she had been showing interest in them.

But then, in relation to positioning level 2 and her tellability, she says "they just wouldn't come up to you and try to be a friend with you". Here, she uses the word "you", which we interpret as a linguistic marker. That is because we interpret "you" as being a reference to international students at AAU in general. The "you", in this sense, is the same as the Danish generic pronoun 'man', which indicates that Lang is perhaps telling the story on behalf of herself but also other international students. That would resonate with the first story in this theme, when she said, "then it was foreign students together", and "they never wanted to work with us international

students". Thus, saying "you" gives indications of a normative problem at AAU, related to group work and socializing. We interpret her story as an indication that the exclusion was very painful to her, which was perhaps her intention to show us, but she probably also wanted to tell us that the problem goes beyond herself also, referring to internationals in general with the linguistic marker "you", cf. level 2.

During the above stories, Lang criticizes the Danish girls and indicates that they are to blame for the polarization between the two groups of students. However, in the first story, she said "Very separated and AAU did never do anything about this.", attributing the blame and responsibility to AAU since she felt they never tried to solve the problem. She also indicates it would not work out to only mix them together in groups but to also make them socialize better, saying "They are very difficult to talk to.", which indicates a desire for contact from Lang's focalization. Studies show that it is ineffective to mix domestic and international students together before they establish trust and get to know each other's background and skills (Mittelmeier et al., 2017, 150-151). If a social relationship is not developed first, group work will likely not work, and on top of that, domestic students are likely to develop and maintain a strong sense of 'passive xenophobia', as we mentioned earlier (Harrison & Peacock, 2019). Also, Harrison and Peacock argue that if domestic students are not encouraged by their HEI to engage in intercultural encounters, then it decreases the internationalization at home, for the HEI (Harrison & Peacock 2019, 897).

The next story below is about the cultural difference in going out at night:

Story 3:

> *"Before I came here, I didn't know anybody. So, I signed up for the Buddy programme. Maybe first to get to know someone here, then maybe feel safe to be here and then. Also, I think I'm not very familiar with the party culture, and even if I went to bars, it's very different from Chinese bars. We got better music, but people here at bars, they just grab a beer and get drunk as soon as possible. But in China, we just clubbing, clubbing, clubbing, dance, dance, dance all the time, yes. That's not happening Denmark. I was struggling with that as well."* (Appendix 2, 18)

Inferring from above, Lang positions herself as an individual who struggles to adapt to and resists Danish culture, especially the party culture. Related to how she constructs her self-identity

compared to the other characters in this story, she arguably distances herself from the others in this context; Danes who go to bars. Her sense-making of Danes in party contexts is that they "just grab a beer and get drunk as soon as possible". She positions Danes as people who lose their minds and get drunk without the need of personal interaction, implicitly indicating that personal intimacy and interaction is what she values, thereby contrasting her own self-identity to the identity of Danes, cf. level 1.

In relation to positioning level 2, we find that she may intended to portray herself as an observer of two cultural differences. That is because she has experienced both the Chinese and Danish nightlife, with the latter making her portray herself as a misplaced person in the drinking culture in Denmark since she does not identify with it and thereby rejects it, which shows that she attributes agency to herself as a subject who performs the action of rejection. In terms of her tellability, by using the word "just", we argue she distances herself from the behavior of the Danes, since we find that "just" refers to the fact that the only thing that Danes are interested in when partying is to become drunk, thereby avoiding intimacy with friends and dance without being intoxicated. Specifically, this is arguably emphasized later, when she says, "But in China, we just clubbing, clubbing, clubbing, dance, dance, dance [...]". Note that she uses the word "clubbing" instead of 'partying'. By doing this, she reinforces that she wants to be understood as a misplaced person because the meaning of "clubbing" refers to people going to nightclubs to dance (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d), whereas 'partying' refers to people enjoying themselves by going to clubs to drink and dance (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). This functions arguably as a drawing line, describing implicitly by this specific use of language that she does not understand or identify with the notion of going out with friends in Denmark (partying), but she identifies with the notion of going out with friends in China (clubbing). Corroborating this, is Harrison and Peacock's UK-study which revealed that Chinese and other international students, from vastly different cultures, experienced social exclusion due to a heavy student drinking culture in the UK. Domestic students considered international students as being outsiders due to their restrained alcohol habits. The drinking culture was perceived so negatively that many internationals decided not to participate in events related to drinking (Harrison & Peacock 2019, 885). This study is an apparent indication of how a specific drinking culture can lead to exclusion, and this is what we find in Lang's story, with her indications of almost disgust towards the drinking culture in Denmark. The issue of students not

attending events with alcohol is actually reflected earlier in the interview, as can be seen in the sequence below, when we asked her if AAU are the ones arranging the welcome week:

> **Lang**
>
> *"[...] I think the week was something they arranged, but it was not that attractive."*
>
> **Svend**
>
> *"OK, so the buddies arranged the welcome week? And why did you not find it attractive?"*
>
> **Lang**
>
> *"Yes, maybe the school told them to do something with us. It was not so attractive to constantly drink and party, you know. I did not participate in all of the activities."* (Appendix 2, 3)

It is apparent from the above sequence that Lang is yet another international student who felt perhaps forced to decline her participation in some events due to a different partying and drinking culture that she cannot identify with; a factor that can be a crucial determiner in the ignition of feelings of exclusion and negative well-being.

Lang seems trapped between the two cultures. As we stated before, she indicates an observer-like attitude, with signs of a misplaced student. Maybe she feels some cognitive dissonance (Miller et al. 2015), currently living in a country whose social construction and ideology of going out clashes with the Chinese social construction of it; one that she fully identifies with and is influenced and positioned by, which gives reason for her negative sense-making of the Danish ideology of partying, cf. level 3.

The above stories and sequence resonate with other statements from Lang, related to this topic of culture and making friends:

Story 4:

> *"In the end, my friends were only from my class and maybe the people I met from other parties. So, nobody from the Buddy Programme. But we got three foreign students, four foreign students in my buddy group, and the only one guy I'm still talking to was from my class. And the other three people, we never spoke again."* (Appendix 2, 9)

Story 5:

> *"Other than that, I don't know how to make a friend here. I only speak to one Dane from my class, sometimes."* (Appendix 2, 20)

From story four and five, we find that her ability to socialize with the domestic, Danish students was indeed difficult for her. Lang's meaning making of it is explaining how different she is from the party culture in Denmark, and she says that the Danish girls from her class were exclusive towards her and other international students in their class. Consequently, this could have decreased her chances of getting domestic friends, something she desired, c.f. "I wanted both", an earlier statement. However, she did not succeed, according to her. This is problematic because international students often struggle to adapt to the new academic and social cultures, which then hinders a successful integration (Habib, Johannesen & Øgrim 2012, 197; Calikoglu, 2018; Harrison & Peacock, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019). This is what we infer from Lang's stories, and taking this into consideration, we also draw on Tinto's notion of integration, which focuses on social and academic adjustment as being two interlinked elements that improve integration, particularly the ability of making domestic friends is rendered particularly important to improve the well-being (Draper 2008). It is important to note that this does not reflect a lack of willingness to integrate, from Lang's focalization, but perhaps her Chinese social identity is an underlying core element of her that hinders her ability of adjusting to the Danish culture and making friends, specifically since she states that she did not participate in everything because of the cultural difference, in the end only having one Danish friend, no friends from the BP before ultimately stating that she has no clue how to make a friend here. Thus, she attributes blame and weakness to herself, while she also deprives herself of agency related to her ability of making friends, cf. level 1. Blaming oneself for not making friends is an increasing tendency among internationals in the world since HEIs and Western culture expects students to do most of the cultural adjustment instead of encouraging a two-way adjustment process (Smith 2021, 218).

On top of this, Lang did never establish a connection to the Buddy Programme since her buddy disengaged from the duties, as can be seen in the sequence below, when we asked Lang if she enjoyed spending time in her buddy group:

> **Lang**
>
> *In the first week, yes. I only hanged out with my Buddy group for one week.*

Svend

Oh, OK. Can you explain why only one week?

Lang

One Spanish, one German, and then my Buddy is Danish. The Italian is from my class. My buddy was very busy. She was doing all kinds of things, so the contact stopped. (Appendix 2, 10)

The above sequence illustrates that Lang never really connected with the buddy group, and Lang says that her buddy, who is Danish, was busy, ultimately leading to the implosion of the buddy group. It is interesting that Lang frames it like this, because it indicates that Lang's sense-making of her buddy was that the contact stopped because of her buddy's busyness, thus attributing the blame, responsibility, and agency to her buddy, while Lang limits the agency of herself by implying that the contact stopped because of her buddy's actions. At the end of the interview, Lang was asked if she thought that success for internationals depends on having a buddy, to which she replied: "*we can do it without a buddy*" (Appendix 2, 20).

Taking the above sequence and this sentence into consideration, we must assume that it conveys Lang's positioning and sense-making of the programme as being irrelevant or useless due to her experience; an experience and positioning which seems to be shared with other students around the world. The European University Foundation and Erasmus Student Network found, in a survey, that the most crucial issue within the majority of buddy programmes is international students getting a domestic buddy, who does not engage with the internationals and fails to fulfill the expected role and responsibility (Lesk & Montaldo 2018, 19). Another study from the Erasmus Student Network uncovered a low 48 % of internationals who were part of the Buddy Programmes. The majority of the internationals considered the buddy programmes in Europe useless (ESN 2016). Consequently, Lang is yet another non-EU student, who seems to have struggled during her time at AAU, and her stories provide possible reasons for international students' ongoing struggle despite AAU seemingly having a well-functioning Buddy Programme. Lang's experience contrasts everything that we were told by the International Office during our interview (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023), while it also contrasts AAU's website section about the programme (AAU n.d).

Summary

Lang seems connected to her home culture in China. She indicated that she is submissive to her parents when it is related to important decision-making. Often, she compared Danish culture to Chinese culture, while she also emphasized greatly how she comes from a vastly different academic culture; a social and academic culture that clashed with the culture in Denmark. The above stories give indications that she desired a better time at AAU and was motivated but was perhaps too strongly influenced by her cultural and Chinese identity.

During her time as a student at AAU, she experienced difficulty in adapting to the academic and social environment in Aalborg. This seemed to be a mix of both cultural differences playing a crucial role, while her connectedness to China could possibly also have had an effect in it. She gave indications of feeling neglected at the hands of AAU, implying that the university failed to help her, while the communication channel, email, was messy for her, and she took the opportunity to explain about WeChat, and how she wished AAU had used that platform. Additionally, she felt the wrath of recurring polarization between domestic and international students, which is a worldwide phenomenon that often brings negative well-being for internationals. Lang felt the exclusion in class, but she also felt exclusion in relation to partying and the drinking culture on and off campus since the Chinese culture of going out is in big contrast to the Danish. Consequently, Lang was a student who came from Shanghai to Aalborg to take a double degree. She succeeded, however, she experienced troubles along the way; troubles that AAU must be aware of in the future, especially with focus being directed towards Asian countries for future recruitment. Many of the stories that Lang provided us seem to align with findings from studies and surveys on international students. Related to many themes and topics, Lang seems to be part of shared positionings that exist in discourses related to international students abroad.

8.3 Zahir

We will now initiate the analysis of our third informant Zahir.

Lack of internationalized infrastructure at AAU

In this theme, Zahir describes how he perceives the international environment and how improvement could be made in order to facilitate internationals better in correspondence with internationalization.

In the first story from this theme, Zahir replies to a question of how he felt about the environment and atmosphere, and whether he feels it is an international university or not:

Story 1:

> *"It could be more international. Even with what we have right now, we do have a very good international community. We have people coming from various countries, we have people who are integrating, but not much. [...] Like the whole international community, that's not a problem, but the way you can get them in like in terms of how you can be more accommodating towards them could be improved. [...] we are doing Danish and English emails, but maybe, like all the sign boards, it's all Danish. Some administration people don't speak English, uhm, also in the canteens, mostly there are older ladies who don't speak English. [...] I think that could change the mindsets of all the students that are part of AAU. I mean, yes, we do have Google Translate and everything, but we would feel more at home or something. And I don't think that's a lot of work."* (Appendix 3, 14)

In the above first story, we argue that Zahir does not perceive AAU as sufficiently international. He, however, acknowledges that there is a good community of international students at AAU. When he speaks about the international students and the community, he refers to them as "they", while he also says, "we have people coming in". Thus, in this context, in relation to positioning level 1, we find that Zahir takes on an institutional identity in relation to other international students. That is because he says, "*we* have people coming in", "*we* do have that now, *we* are doing Danish and English emails", arguably referring to the Buddy Programme who has students coming in and writing emails in both languages. By using "we", he arguably identifies himself as being part of the Buddy Programme and a buddy, which is part of the institution, thus taking an institutional role and identity, further adding an expert-like identity with agency since he explains the things as someone with abilities of performing actions, which is possibly also how he intends to be understood by us, cf. level 2.

Then, when he elaborates on his first statement above, saying that AAU could be more international, we infer that he positions himself plainly as an international student, now observing AAU from the other social identity group; the international students at AAU, thus identifying as

being part of that group. In this part of the story, he refers to international students by saying “people”, “students”, “we”, which, to us, indicates a sense of belonging to this group, cf. level 1. Also, while we infer that he identifies with the internationals, we argue that this is probably also how he intended to position himself to us, i.e., as an international student with needs and desires, cf. level 2. This is arguably further reinforced when he says, “we do have Google Translate” and “we would feel more at home”, again referring to himself and international students in general, who he automatically speaks on behalf of. Thus, we argue that he creates a shared identity and sameness with them, somewhat generalizing each student’s needs and desires.

In terms of positioning level 3, we argue that the latter part above, where he speaks about the environment and how AAU could improve, is contrastive to what can be read on AAU’s website (AAU, n.d) and what we were told in the interview with the International Office (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023). There seems to be a consensus within the International Office and Master Admission, which is reinforced by AAU’s website; that AAU provides all the conditions to ensure a good well-being and that everybody can feel at home and welcomed.
The reason we find his latter part of the story to be contrastive is because Zahir, from a student’s focalization and his sense-making, thinks that AAU could be more international and accommodating to new international students, improve its staff’s English skills and provide information in English on sign boards instead of Danish. By saying this, he probably attributes agency and responsibility to AAU since the university has power to provide action and change, while he decreases his own agency.

Then, he says “Change the mindset of all the students", which indicates that the mindset of international students could point at feelings of disappointment, neglect or that AAU lacks the ability to provide an international-like environment, thus giving reason for perhaps stress or feelings of being overlooked, as seen in a Japanese study, which found that international students struggled due to neglect from the university and domestic students and felt victimized (Nguyen et al., 2019), similar to Lang’s experience and sense-making, while the study conducted by Bertovic found that Indians and other internationals experienced lack of help and neglect at the hands of AAU and Danish students (Bertovic 2023). Also, a Danish study found that professors, although supposed to teach in English, avoided speaking English because of a perceived insufficiency in their

own academic English skills, thus jeopardizing the learning objectives for international students (Adriansen et. al. 2022, 3). As Altbach stated, for an HEI to internationalize properly, similar to when a company globalizes, English must be the common and fully practiced organizational or institutional language because of a sudden multicultural and diverse group of workers, or, in this case, students (Altbach 2007, 291). With information written in Danish, staff and canteen lacking English-skills, it could possibly decrease a sense of belongingness for internationals and their academic learning. These studies and findings arguably reinforce the possibility that what Zahir says, could be an indication of the fact that the international students have a certain negative mindset and self-positioning that is shared throughout the world; a mindset that opposes not only AAU's institutional image but also the worldwide HEIs' images, which seem very alike.

The next story is from the context of Zahir being asked how he thinks AAU handled having mixed nationalities in a class. Zahir first says there are about 30 students in the course with 8-9 of them being internationals. In Zahir's story world, he did not feel that any of the professors or others from AAU did anything special to ease things, specifically group work. We then asked Zahir how he thinks it should have been done properly instead, to which he replied:

Story 2:

> *"I think they should just mix us randomly. That we would have done in India. But they say they will make changes from this semester. They have a new rule. However, they are not strictly following it [...] And the mix is supposed to be 1 international student, 1 Danish student and one random student. […] But I doubt it will work, just like that. It would in India, I think. [...] you first have to change the culture or mindset of people here to make it work. Danes can not establish trust in the blink of an eye. Trust for them is like God, and if you establish this first, then they can perhaps open themselves more to foreigners. Before that, I doubt it will work out to just mix us together. The motivation should come, like, from both parties, and right now, I have a feeling they don't have it, and how can you blame them? We don't know each other. We have practically just met, you know. The Danes who work in the same groups here, or their tight groups in their everyday life is something they have spent their entire lifetime building. For Danes, it does not just happen by snapping your fingers."* (Appendix 3, 11).

The above story depicts a story about the issue of group work between domestic and international students at AAU. The story can be seen as a reflection of and speaks into a wider underlying societal discourse that concerns the same issue as Zahir recalls; a worldwide issue of making the

group work between domestic and international students work (Harrison & Peacock, 2019; Andrade 2006, 137). Studies show that once it succeeds, both domestic and international students have everything to gain from it, socially and academically (Mittelmeier et al., 2017, 150).

In the above story, we find that Zahir constructs the self-identity of a victimized outsider. That is because he describes Danes as being a closed entity with a difficulty of establishing trust and letting others into their groups. Thus, he positions them as being a closed entity, and while doing so, it indicates that he feels he is in the out-group, making them the antagonists since their behavior gives rise for problems, while he becomes the protagonist as he is the receiver of action cf. positioning level 1.
In relation to positioning level 2, we argue that he intended to both convey his self-identity and the fact that there is a division between international and Danish students, consequently depicting himself and foreigners at AAU as being in the out-group, while the Danish students have their in-groups, which they, following Zahir's story world, find difficult to open for others, indicating that Danes are the ones creating this division. However, he acknowledges that this is plainly part of being Danish, i.e., to be reserved and sticking to a few groups of people who they have a strong establishment of trust toward. In terms of his tellability, he does, however, implicitly blame the Danish students for the group work issues because he says that, for Danes, it all comes down to trust, saying that if they cannot establish trust in foreigners, or even other Danes, then a mixed group will never work out. Thus, he attributes the mental attitude of 'trust' between Danes and internationals as being a crucial determiner in whether group work can be successful or not, putting emphasis on that Danes are the ones who value it much and not the other way around, almost indicating that trust from himself towards Danes is already established.

Then, this small story is also directed at AAU when Zahir speaks about a supposed new rule that AAU activated regarding group work. Zahir then first says that he does not believe that the rule is strictly followed, arguably diminishing the objective of implementing the rule. Then he also says that he doubts it will work in practice, implying that he thinks it would work in India, but not here. This is where Zahir begins speaking about the issues of trust from Danes, which he then ends by saying "how can you blame them?", saying that the international students and Danes do not know each other well enough. From this point on, until the end of the above small story, we argue that

he is implicitly referring to AAU as the real culprit; the antagonist who is to blame for the lack of social relationship between the domestic and international students at AAU. It may seem that Zahir's reality tells him that AAU does not effectively encourage the establishment of a social relationship between the divided groups of students. By this, he gives indications of blaming towards Danish students, but says they are plainly like this due to their culture, while he also blames implicitly AAU for the lack of encouragement of making them socialize better, to ensure that international and domestic students get to know each other because a successfully mixed group does not emerge suddenly, following his mind.

Zahir's focalization in this is reflected in a large study that found that it takes more than just mixing international and domestic students together, arguing it requires more layers to it, such as social acquaintance and relationship that can give basis to successful and constructive group work. Researchers argue that the key is to build trust through interaction, which gives domestic and international students the needed opportunity to understand each other's backgrounds and academic skills, arguing it is HEIs' responsibility to encourage it. Also, domestic students in their study developed "passive xenophobia", which reinforced the exclusion of internationals (Mittelmeier et al., 2017, 150-151). Their findings confirm that, what Zahir says, is a common issue in HEIs around the world, and thus it could reflect Zahir's reality, especially his implicit indication that AAU are responsible of making it happen, and the fact that he experiences Danes as being closed and difficult to join their in-groups. The term "passive xenophobia" is interesting because it could be present at AAU as well. "Passive xenophobia" refers to when domestic students perceive threats to their academic success and group identity from the presence of international students in class and on campus (Harrison & Peacock, 2019), leading to a higher level of in-group bias when domestic students, especially in Western cultures with high independency, are mixed with students from collectivist cultures like the African and Asian. On the other hand, the in-group bias is significantly lower when domestic students' classmates are from similar individualist-learning cultures, such as the European cultures (Harrison & Peacock, 2019). The possibility of "passive xenophobia" arguably surfaces as indicated by Zahir, Lang, and the two Indian students that were interviewed by Bertovic (Bertovic, 2023). This is something that AAU must be very aware of to be able to make changes to its environment and improve its efforts in establishing social and academic relationships between the Danish and international students, and especially if

internationals have certain mindsets, as stated earlier by Zahir, that could indicate a sense of disbelief, neglect, rejection etc.

The third story below is another small story from Zahir, which is a continuation of the first story in this theme, which was formed when Zahir was asked whether he felt there is an international-like environment at AAU. The story below answers our question of whether he would then bring AAU to a more internationalized level, to which he replied:

Story 3:

> *"[...] They gotta promote more Danes to actually interact in English, and to sort of do more to create that fundamental understanding of who we are and vice versa. I do see that they are proud of their ranking and all. I hear sooooo much about it in my department, so they put a lot of effort in promoting this and telling us this and that about rankings in Europe and the world, buuut, there is more to it. Like, if a company wins an award, it doesn't make the company the best in the entire world. It doesn't mean that this company can now act like they want to and just be like "well, we don't care about our employees, they must accommodate to us, we don't have to accommodate to them. We can just slam our feet on the table and wait for the money to come in" It doesn't work that way. So, the more AAU does, the better. You gotta prove why you are this good."* (Appendix 3, 15).

What is interesting in the above story is that it has a challenging tone in a way that indicates that Zahir seemingly does not entirely acknowledge the ranking of AAU. Also, according to Zahir's story world, AAU is not doing enough for the international students. In terms of positioning level 1, he takes on a rebellious-like identity, since he challenges the good ranking of AAU in Europe and worldwide. At the same time, we infer from the story that he may attribute some laziness, naivety, and blame to AAU, implying perhaps that staff are naive to think everything is good as long as they have a good ranking.

In relation to positioning level 2, we infer that Zahir perhaps wanted to portray himself as someone who cares and who is not willing to be perceived as yet another element that keeps the wheel spinning at AAU. Interestingly, it can be perceived as a shared positioning and narrative among Indian students and families in the world; they refuse to be treated as a commodity or 'cash cows', as they are often referred to and seen in Western HEIs (Teter 2014, 175; Rea 2016), arguably being the underlying societal discourse and narrative, which Zahir's story reflects and he does not seem to identify with how Western HEIs position Indians, while he seems to identify with

the Indian narrative; refusing to being viewed as a commodity (level 3). Indian students are aware of this 'label' and narrative in the world, and therefore, they demand academic quality, jobs before and after graduation, internship opportunities etc. (Teter 2014, 175). Arguably, Zahir's story could be understood as a demand to AAU, reflecting the Indian narrative.
His story indicates that he lacks a feeling of being taken care of and welcomed in a better way, while it also seems that he may think that AAU is less international than the university thinks itself and perhaps even that AAU's marketing does not reflect reality, as can be seen in another study, which found students feeling that reality did not align with the information given to them during recruitment (Smith 2021, 220). It seems he is tired of hearing about the rankings and is possibly in need of some initiatives and actions from AAU that can make things better for international students.

Furthermore, his sense-making of AAU is arguably reinforced when he gives the example of a company winning an award only to become lazy and cocky towards its employees. Zahir may indicate, by this, his real perception and sense-making of AAU. His sense-making would not be alien to the world, because it is a common issue among worldwide HEIs that university presidents often tend to rely almost only or entirely on a good ranking as part of the internationalization strategy. Knight points out that the concept of internationalization is often misunderstood or abused by HEIs to such a degree that some institutions are satisfied and perceive themselves as being sufficiently internationalized if they have a good world-ranking (Knight, 2012, 30). This could possibly be reflected in AAU's practices and strategies, considering the information that has been provided to us by our informants and a past study (Bertovic 2023).

Comparing Denmark to India

We find it necessary to have a theme that concerns a comparison between Denmark and India, as that also constitutes a major part of his storytelling.
A large period of the interview with Zahir provided stories concerning the difficulty in making Danish friends and working in groups with Danes, and often, Zahir had a tendency to compare and explain how India differs from Denmark, related to culture and people. This theme has four stories.

Story 1:

> *"It is difficult to work with domestic students in groups. And in some countries, professionals don't do anything about it. And that's something that everybody experiences. I don't really think that has to do anything with Danish people and international people or anything. It's simply the fact that we all are students. We look at things through our perspective that this is how I would like to do it, but there's nobody out there who can sort of tell you what to do. In India when you go to a real workplace, you have somebody who leads the groups and projects. So then you realize, OK, maybe there is somebody else who's smarter in the room and they guide you. But we do not have that when we are students here, which is why we have this natural conflicts that arise where everybody thinks that their voice is supposed to be heard and followed. So yeah, that's the most general way of putting it."* (Appendix 3, 11)

In the above story, we see a story from Zahir concerning the difficulty in working in groups with Danish students, while he also says that he believes that it is a worldwide problem among domestic and international students. Instead of critiquing the Danish culture and behavior, he states that it is, to him, very normal, and perhaps something very difficult to change. For Zahir, it comes down to the fact that he, co-internationals, and the Danish students all have one thing in common; they are all students. What Zahir says is something that resonates with a study from 2001, which found that it is common that international students connect with co-international students, while the domestic students stick with co-domestic students (Ward 2001) Thus, Zahir's statement reflects a wider problem, which, according to him, is also reflected at AAU, and to this problem, Zahir positions himself as someone who accepts how things are, not blaming the Danish students nor the international students cf. level 1. According to him, the problem is common in the world, from what he has perhaps heard or read from others. This means that he lets himself be positioned in a way that he thinks he should, i.e., the wider underlying discourse about mixed group work has implicitly forced him to accept the circumstances.

Then he explains how students in groups lack a "leader"; a person who has a voice and can function as an expert who gives advice and makes decisions but says it is not possible because they are students and share the same qualifications. As a result, according to Zahir, conflicts emerge because each student wants to be heard and respected. Meanwhile, he explains that in India, in what he calls "real workplaces", they always have a leader, or moderator who controls

things and prevents problems. Saying this, we argue that Zahir wanted to show a cultural difference, but that it is not a hurdle for him, cf. level 2. Interestingly, he refers to "real workplaces" instead of referring to academic systems because Zahir's perspectivation to Indian practices in workplaces, also applies for HEIs in India. In India, HEIs have an ISA (International Student Association). ISA takes care of accommodations and scholarships, but also provides academic support, such as help in study groups (a speaker/moderator), tutoring etc. (Sanjay 2023). Thus, we must assume that Zahir possibly knows about this, having completed a bachelor's degree in India. Thus, it is likely a reason why he mentioned the Indian practice in workplaces, while it confirms the possibility that his perspectivation is a vague indication that he wished there was a similar practice in Danish HEIs. Perhaps he was implicit about it to avoid conflict and insulting AAU since he was interviewed by us; two students from AAU, which could have led him to take an interactional positioning as a foreigner in the out-group, considering us as experts that he cannot be too critical towards and thus limited his agency.
A study found that Indians prefer to speak indirectly to strangers and authority and that Indians find it inappropriate to tell people what to do (Heit 1987). Indians prefer to be polite and implicit to people who they do not trust, while explicit and direct communication is practiced only among family members (Pier, n.d.). If this applies for Zahir, it could reflect his loyalty to his culture and the socially embedded conventions of having interactions with other people, thus respecting his cultural upbringing and Indian politeness, and showing he identifies with Indian culture, which could be the underlying societal context that positioned him in certain ways in certain settings and topics, during the interview.

Lastly, related to his tellability, when Zahir says "*but we do not have that when we are students here*", we interpret this as if he hints, especially saying 'here' that, due to the cultural difference, the Indian practice, or service, is not possible to implement in Denmark, making Danish culture, also a possible underlying societal context, the responsible element in the story since the culture gives reason for the issues that he speaks about, while he accepts and complies with the context but does not necessarily identify with it cf. level 3.

In the second story below, Zahir replied to the question of whether he has experienced any challenges in relation to integrating into the Danish culture or AAU's environment:

Story 2:

> *"Integrating with Danish culture has always been difficult. I don't have a lot of Danish friends. I have more international friends and that tells the story. One of the reasons would be firstly not being able to make friends that easily. At least not like I can make friends in India or in a more internationally accepting country. Then you also have the language. But I can speak Danish now, like, not speak, but I know Danish because I go to my Danish classes So, whenever I go out, I would always try to speak in Danish to sort of open up more things and enter their comfort zone And they are like, OK, this guy is actually trying. Trying to learn our language and everything."* (Appendix 3, 21)

In the above story, we find that Zahir gives a story about his experience of coming to Aalborg and the integration process. He states that it "*has always been difficult*" to integrate with Danish culture, indicating perhaps that it is a never-ending process, before saying that he does not have many Danish friends but instead more international friends, again resonating with the study that found that internationals most often gather an international network rather than a host-country network (Ward, 2001). After saying that he only has international friends, he says "*and that tells the story*", indicating that he has summed up his integration, implicitly having a tone of blame towards himself. This makes us infer, cf. level 1, that Zahir constructs his self-identity as a mixture of being a victim of Danish culture but also attributing blame and responsibility to himself.

Going back to when he said that he does not have that many Danish friends but almost only international friends, he followed it up by saying "and that tells the story", i.e., the answer to whether it was difficult for him to integrate. We see it as an indication that his sense-making of integration is perhaps solely defined by getting host-country friends.

A study found that Indian students value and view host-country friendships as some of the most important elements of integration. In fact, the questionnaire found that Indian students, after ranking academic quality, good salary, and job security as the most important things, the next thing they rendered as the most important determiner for their integration and well-being, is that the host-country and HEI has a family-friendly, welcoming and accepting environment (Hercog & Van de Laar 2016, 758), confirming the possibility that Zahir's sense-making of integration is socializing with national students and people in general.

Redirecting the focus back to positioning level 1, when he said, "not being able to make friends that easily", we infer that he attributes some blame to his own ability of making friends aboard; a

positioning that seems to be a tendency among international students in the world, often blaming themselves for their lack of host-country friends (Smith 2021, 218). Is this shared tendency and positioning of oneself the result of something impeding on them? Smith stresses that Western cultures traditionally expect international students to do most of the cultural adjustment; an ideology that HEIs then adopt, which automatically positions international students with a heavy burden and responsibility (Smith 2021, 218). Then, when students fail to acquire host-country contacts, they blame themselves because they know that Western cultures have placed the responsibility on them of making friends, and placed blame on them if they fail. Thus, students' sense-making of integrating and getting friends is that it is solely their responsibility, not the other way around. These ideological host-culture pressures and narratives often leads to stress, loneliness, tiredness, and homesickness (Smith 2021, 218); an ideology and narrative that Zahir, in this context, seems to comply with cf. level 3.

But then, also related to positioning level 1, after saying that he is not able to make friends easily, he then proceeds by saying "At least not like I can make friends in India or in a more internationally accepting country, then you also have the language.", comparing the difficulty in making friends in Denmark to India. He even says, 'or in a more internationally accepting country", indicating that Denmark lacks more hospitality and acceptance of internationals. Thus, he seems to generalize the Danish population and culture as being unwelcoming towards international students. While doing so, we argue that he intends to be understood as someone who, in India, normally possesses the skills of making friends and is an outgoing person with active agency, but in Denmark, where he is positioned with less agency and as a protagonist, he struggles to make friends. Thus, he attributes implicit blame and antagonism to Danish culture (level 2). Consequently, his integration and sense-making of Denmark, reflects wider societal contexts; first, the aforementioned global issue concerning internationals' struggles in adapting to Western cultures, and secondly, that specifically Denmark and Scandinavian countries are difficult to integrate into. That is confirmed in various studies; first, Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries are rendered the worst countries in the world related to making host-country networks (Turula 2017). Secondly, a survey from Aarhus University found that 56,1 % of Indians felt it was difficult to make Danish friends and that language was a large barrier for integration (Machura n.d.). Thirdly, an AAU-study found that it was difficult for Indians to get Danish friends and that

they only have international and Indian friends. They emphasized that other Indians and internationals had the same issues (Bertovic 2023). These three studies arguably confirm a wider societal narrative about the fact that it is in fact difficult to integrate in Danish culture and make friends (level 3). Additionally, in Denmark, international students are further positioned and viewed as 'welfare tourists', who take advantage of the system while refusing to integrate, arguably reinforcing a negative ideology and approach to foreigners (Beelen & Jones 2015, 54). This is an issue that can be a possible reason for a negative well-being and struggle among internationals at AAU, despite the initiatives provided and the Buddy Programme.

In the end of the story, Zahir confirms his compliance with the previously mentioned narrative and ideology in Western cultures and HEIs; that international students are expected to do most of the cultural adjustment, stressing that he takes Danish classes in order to gain recognition from Danes and to be accepted in society.

The next story is a story about Zahir's perception of Danes' personalities and Danish culture; a story he uses to compare Denmark to India, once again. Before his story below, Zahir was asked who he socializes with, Danes, internationals, or both, to which he replied *"sadly, it's only internationals"* (Appendix 3, 12). Then, Zahir says that the Buddy Programme is in need of Danish buddies and somewhat blaming Danes for their lack of interest in becoming buddies, saying that the objective of the Buddy Programme is having international students successfully integrate by getting Danish buddies, but that it does not happen, indicating that the key objective of the programme is not reached. Then, we asked Zahir to elaborate on the fact that, in his reality, the only network that the international students get from the programme is an international network.

Story 3:

> *"Well, Danish people are generally a lot more shy, a lot more introverted, and they have friends since their childhood, so they have this inner circle that they have formed since they were kids. And then they have them all their life or something, right? They don't really go out of that tight circle, and to actually get in that tight inner circle is difficult because if you already know somebody, it's easier for you to like to be comfortable with that person. But then somebody who happens to come from a different country, has a different language, has different ways of doing things. That would be a little difficult for the Dane to sort of, you know, get used to.*
> *Another reason is no matter how good Danes are with English, they still have this little insecurity and shyness of speaking in English. They would rather prefer to speak in Danish*

> *because they feel that they are not really good at English, but they are really good. So, the moment they meet an international, this barrier would sort of show.*
> *And I think thirdly, it's a lot more easier for international students to mingle with other internationals because all the internationals are coming with the same background, they don't really know anybody, so they look to make new friends, but the Danes are not really looking to make new friends, they've lived here all their lives right?"* (Appendix 3, 13)

Above, Zahir provides us with some storytelling about his sense-making of the possible reasons for the difficulty in making Danish friends. In Zahir's story world, there are three reasons why it is difficult for internationals to make Danish friends: First, he views Danes as closed and introverted people; secondly, a language barrier because Danes avoid speaking English; third, internationals are in the same place, i.e., they have similar needs, and they need a host-country network.

In terms of positioning level 1, we find that Zahir interactionally positions himself as an outsider who tries to make sense of the cues and dynamics of Danish culture and people as can be seen during the entire story, i.e., how he tries to explain to us how he understands this society.
Zahir addresses two different social identity groups, that is, the international students and the Danish students.
We infer that he may also wanted us to see him as an outsider who understands both groups, cf. level 2. Then, he uses words such as 'shy' and 'insecure' to describe Danes, attributing traits of a condition (introversion) to Danes' general personas and thus he establishes a causative connection between their personas and the issues that he experiences due to their personas, i.e., limiting attribution of blame to them as human beings while increasing blame to their introversion, which indicates acceptance from Zahir. Thus, Danes may seem to be the unintentional antagonists in this sense, in Zahir's story world, while he and his co-internationals are the protagonists as the receivers of their behaviors, actions, and positioning. By constructing his story with this linguistic manner, he arguably redirects the blame, in the previous story, from himself on to the introversion, perhaps to create some relief in his cognitive state of mind and make sense of the issue and his outsider positioning as being a consequence of something unrelated to him i.e., he uses an external attribution to make sense of it, cf. level 1.
When he positions the international students, he describes them as being people with the same needs and background as himself.

Furthermore, his story reflects something aforementioned, that is, domestic students tending to only have co-domestic friends, while it is easier for international students to gain and maintain co-international network (Ward 2001), which arguably confirms and reinforces Zahir's story and meaning making of the status quo. Although he seems accepting towards Danes, he does mention that they have a tight inner circle, which is difficult to break. Perhaps he refers implicitly to the cultural difference between Scandinavian culture, which is perceived as part of the Western culture, and Asian culture. Asian cultures are known for their collectivism and interdependence, while Western culture is more closed and people are independent of each other (Harrison & Peacock 2019); Ching et al. 2017; Smith 2021, 217-219), which could indicate why he specifically mentions that Danes have a tight little circle which they hold tight for the rest of their lives. This is further confirmed in a study that investigated the cultural differences between Asian and American students. It found that Asian students' traits of collectivism and interdependence were on a collision course with the traits of American students' independence and closedness. This impacted students' well-being and further process of integration, which resulted in a large divide between international and domestic students (Quinton et al. 2019). If this cultural difference is also present at AAU, it could be rendered a plausible cause for the struggles among international students.

The above third story corresponds with the fourth story below, where Zahir makes a general comparison of Danish and Indian people. After his third story from above, when then asked him, in relation to the third story, whether he, from his focalization of an international student, thought it could ever change, to which he replied:

Story 4:

> *"Again, like that's very different because in India people are a lot more outgoing. And we are really, really into others, like culture guests are very important to us. You would not be allowed to pay or something like if you know somebody. And if you come to visit, you'll never be allowed to pay those kinds of things. We are very curious about where our guests are coming from. We would always make you feel home and all those kinds of things. We are generally very friendly people . Of course, Danes are as well, but they will not really get into other people's privacy. For them, in their culture, privacy is something very important, so to actually go and randomly speak to somebody is rude. Also, to randomly do short conversations with somebody is also not very normal here. But in India, if you happen to know somebody, you don't really know them that much, and then you see them on the*

> *street or something and then you would talk for 5-10 minutes or something, so that kind of cultural difference makes it a lot more easier for us to have others coming in. So, I am not going to lie, it is easier for me to hang out with other Indians in Aalborg than Danes, haha. But to change all this, you'll have to change the cultural way of doing things, you'll have to encourage people to go out."* (Appendix 3, 13-14).

What we see in the above fourth story is that Zahir quickly begins comparing to and drawing on Indian cultures to answer the question of whether he ever thinks the current status quo in Denmark will ever change. We must assume that he still, despite indicating during the interview that he is motivated to integrate, still arguably identifies strongly with Indian culture, cf. level 3. That is because of his recurring decisions to draw on how things are in India, indicating proudness and that he holds tight some culturally embedded traits from India. Thus, his view of the world is shaped on the basis of his cultural upbringing in India and the Indian values, which, in this story, constitutes his interactional identity as an Indian who identifies with his home culture due to his use of personal pronouns when referring to India, saying 'we', 'us', 'our'. Due to the intertwined relationship between level 1 and level 2, we infer it is also how he wanted to be understood; a proud Indian person, who loves to share his cultural and social cues with us.
We infer that Zahir creates a clear line that separates the Indian and Danish culture with two words; openness (Indians) and closedness (Danes), using 'outgoing' to describe Indian people, who, according to him, show interest in their guests and always make sure their guests feel at home, while he uses 'privacy' to refer to Danes and their needs, attributing a closed and reserved attitude to Danes, which arguably makes them the antagonists again, while he and Indians are protagonists in relation to Danes.

Above, we infer that this distinction arguably becomes a sign of polarization from Zahir, which is practically a cultural discourse, and we find that the polarization is further reinforced because of his tellability, using the aforementioned pronouns to refer to himself and Indians, while using 'they' to refer to Danes. This arguably indicates that, in Zahir's sense-making, he and the Indian population share sameness in their personalities, while Danes are the different ones, with an entirely opposite behavior. This would resonate with researchers' notion of sameness vs difference, indicating that there is an 'us and them' discourse in this story (Broady 2004; Olson 2001; Capps 1996). And arguably, Zahir finds sameness among Indians in Aalborg, while he

encounters differences among Danes since he ends the story by saying that it is easier for him to hang out with Indians than Danes.

This theme concerned the most telling instances when Zahir compared Danish culture to Indian culture. We found that Zahir overall still identifies with Indian culture, holding tight to his cultural upbringing and social surroundings, cf. level 3. A variety of the things that Zahir spoke about, reflect a wider societal ideology, concerning that Indian and other Asian cultures differ from Scandinavian and Western academic and social cultures, with the latter being closed, introverted and independent of others, while Asian cultures are characterized as open, outgoing, and caring.

Disengaging Danish buddies

This next theme is relevant in this interview since Zahir is a buddy within the Buddy Programme. Thus, during the interview, he gave us crucial information about the programme; information that he constructed to us through his story world, and we find the information both thought-provoking, worrying and somewhat mysterious.

The first story in this theme is from the context of Zahir being asked why he chose to become a buddy, to which he replied:

Story 1:

> Story one:
> *"For me it was to help others. I'm very outgoing as you can tell. So, this concept was very new to me, like the whole Buddy Programme, when I heard about it, I was really appreciative about it. I was like, OK, this is really cool. And after having interacted with my buddy and have been through the whole process, I realized OK, this is something I would really like to do as well and the way my buddy treated me, I think that played a really important role in how I also ended up doing it. Because I was like, OK, this is something that every international should get.*
>
> ---
>
> Story two:
> *Sadly, everybody's not getting it, and sadly, we don't have enough buddies on board either. And I think that is due to the fact that the Buddy Programme is supposed to be for Danes to help, but then they look towards international students if there are unfortunately almost no Danish students who want to be buddies. It would benefit them too, at least culturally, I think."* (Appendix 3, 15).

Above, there is an embedded narration, i.e., a story within a story. The first story is about how and why Zahir chose to become a buddy. He explained that the programme helped him a lot and that he is very appreciative of everything it gave him. In terms of positioning level 1, he positions himself as being an outgoing person who wants to help other international students, and while doing so, he embraces a savior-like persona with active agency and responsibility in relation to other international students. We argue that this is arguably also how he intended to be understood by us, cf. level 2, because he may intended to oppose any negative stigma of internationals, such as the stigma 'welfare tourist', proving he wants to give back to society, integrate and help others, which can be interpreted as a sign of compliance with the aforementioned Western narrative and expectation that international students must do the hard work in relation to integration.

In the second story in the above, Zahir introduces another story, this time concerning that the Buddy Programme is seemingly unable to appeal to or invite every international student to join the programme and that it lacks more Danish buddies. In this second story, he positions himself as being a part of the Buddy Programme, inferred from his use of the pronoun 'we', when referring to himself and the Buddy Programme, while his self-positioning also reflects belongingness to the other group as well, that is, the international students, since he uses the word 'sadly', related to the fact that not every international student gets a buddy, in his reality, thereby showing a sense of emotional concern and belongingness to them, cf. level 1.

Then, in terms of positioning level 2, we infer that he may intended to be understood as more than a buddy, perhaps as someone with agency in the Buddy Programme. That is because he says, "*we don't have enough buddies on board*", almost indicating that he may be part of the decision making in acquiring buddies, although he never explicitly said anything about the decision-making process.
Then, it seems that his sense-making of the programmes deficiency in Danish buddies is caused by the fact that the Buddy Programme is forced to hire international students as buddies because it lacks interest among Danish students to become buddies. It could seem that Zahir positions Danish students as the antagonists and villains in this context, attributing blame to them for the

issues. Apparently, Zahir seems convinced that the Buddy Programme was formed for the purpose of Danish students helping international students integrate, however, according to him, he and other international students are doing Danish students' jobs, discrediting the functionality of the programme, while he effectively acquires agency since he performs a perceived positive action for others, while he diminishes Danes' agency.
Furthermore, when he says, "It would benefit them too, at least culturally, I think.", we interpret it as a hint back to when we spoke about Danes' acceptance of foreigners and the cultural differences. Perhaps he referred to the fact that Danes would benefit culturally from becoming buddies as it would perhaps widen their perspective, knowledge and understanding of international students' backgrounds. Perhaps it is an implicit desire that Zahir has, and thinks would make the cross-cultural meeting easier. A survey among 125,000 international students in Europe, found that 54,6 % of domestic and international students perceive a buddy programme as great resource of providing domestic students with intercultural awareness and knowledge; skills that are expected to help internationals integrate (Lesk & Montaldo 2018, 9), thus confirming the possibility that Zahir shares the same positioning and sense-making of buddy programmes.

The entire second story of the above is arguably contrasting the information and statements from the International Office at AAU, i.e., the Head of the Buddy Programme, who told us that almost every incoming international student receives a buddy nowadays and that they have a lot of buddies at their disposal (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023). Taking Zahir's story into account, this becomes a significant problem for AAU on an overall basis because, as we stated earlier, a lot of AAU's approach to international students relies on the Buddy Programme, as we were told by the International Office, but if it is flawed, it could jeopardize the meaning of having the programme running for other purposes than plainly social coziness, without reaching the desired goals of helping internationals integrate.

While the above first story consisted of embedded narrations that concerned the problem of Danes not wanting or showing interest in becoming buddies, the story below now focuses on the work in practice, among Danish buddies. It is from the context of Zahir being asked whether the Buddy Programme only consists of international students, to which he replied:

Story 2:

> *"No, there are Danish buddies. There are quite a lot of them actually, but they don't really come for all the events that are hosted by the Buddy Programme. So, every month, they do an event. So yeah, the Buddy Programme, the coordinator, there are two Buddy coordinators under whom all these different buddies work. So, the buddy coordinators organize events every month, once every month, and everybody is invited for it and is expected to come with their internationals, but most of the times no Danish buddies are seen there."* (Appendix 3, 16)

Being in the role of a buddy, we infer that Zahir seems to position himself as someone who has been wronged by his fellow Danish buddies, who he arguably positions as being the source of the issue and the scapegoats in this story world, cf. level 1. He attributes blame to them because he seems disappointed by the fact that they do not attend events even though they are supposed and expected to.

We infer that Zahir wants to convey to us the comparison of his workload and the workload of the Danish buddies, arguably conveying that he, as an international student, puts a lot work in his role, while the Danish buddies' absence from the events and lack of seriousness could jeopardize the function of the Buddy Programme, and this would correspond to what he stated earlier; that the Buddy Programme is supposed to encourage Danes to help international students, but now, following his story, he maybe suggests that there is a heavy burden on the international students, attributing more positivity and agency to them and himself, while he strips Danes of agency and attributes blame to them, cf. level 1.

We further argue that he reinforces his sense-making of the Danes when he says that the buddy coordinators "organize events every month, once every month". After saying there are events every month, he specifies that it is "once every month", and the reason we believe he deems it necessary to do that is because he may think that one event per month is not much, and then he ends his quote by saying that most of the times, the Danish students are not seen participating in the events, attributing negativity and blame to Danish students by putting the sentences against each other.

Furthermore, Zahir's sense-making of Danish buddies' lack of engagement can be corroborated by an aforementioned survey, which found that a common issue in buddy systems in Europe is that domestic buddies tend to disengage from their responsibilities and that they often disconnect the

contact to the new international students, who seek to integrate (Lesk & Montaldo 2018, 19). The survey and Zahir's stories seem to contradict AAU's and the worldwide HEIs' ideology and intention of running a buddy programme, thereby confirming that buddy systems seem somewhat flawed despite an opposite image being communicated to prospective students, and thus it could be the ignitor of the ongoing issues of negative well-being and struggle at AAU.

While the first story concerned the fact that Danes do not frequently join the Buddy Programme as buddies, the second concerned the Buddy Programme in practice. The third story below concerns Zahir's perceived reason for the lack of participation from the Danish buddies, who are officially within the programme as buddies.

Story 3:

> *"Yeah, usually internationals are the ones who show up and we do have this thing that we always hear this problem from the students that you know their buddy is not really doing anything. The buddy is not really making any events. This has been a problem for a while, also before I became a buddy, but we don't really know how to get into that because we are at the end of the day volunteers, we cannot force them to do things."* (Appendix 3, 16)

In the above three stories, it seems that Zahir's sense-making of Danish buddies is that they lack responsibility and seriousness about their roles as buddies. In the above third story, Zahir starts by saying that *'internationals are the ones who show up'.* By saying this, we argue that Zahir, attributes a rescuer-like identity to the international buddies and himself, depicting them as the heroic agents who act and take care of others, while Danish buddies are positioned as the scapegoats with minimal agency.

Then, Zahir elaborates on his sense-making of the Danish students by stating that he and his fellow international buddies receive complaints from new students about their Danish buddies' lack of engagement and initiatives. When he says that it has been a problem for some time, also before he was a buddy and that they do not have a solution, arguably, it could indicate that there is a general shared understanding within the programme that Danish buddies are the root of many problems. The head of the Buddy Programme (The International Office) did not mention this, seemingly comprehensive, problem to us when we interviewed her. Instead, she was proud of the

programme and spoke only about positive things (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023). Now that Zahir says they have had this problem for a long time, we find it to be very contrastive to what we were told by the International Office, again discrediting the programme. We find it odd that the International Office held this information back in an interview which only concerned the Buddy Programme and the welcome week at AAU.

From our perspective, there could be three reasons for that. The first could be that the head of the Buddy Programme is simply unaware of the work in practice and reality due to a lack of participation or decision making related to anything else than funding events.
Another reason could be that she intentionally withheld some information because of a possible fear of losing face or discredit of the Buddy Programme.
The third reason could be that she does not perceive it as being a problem that can jeopardize the programme. If it is the latter reason, maybe her perception could derive from a thought that as long as there are international buddies who engage and sometimes do much more than needed, then it compensates for the Danish buddies' disengagement. But we cannot know for sure, and this is only a discussion of possible reasons for why she withheld some information from us. We did not ask Zahir for his thoughts about it. Nonetheless, the issues within AAU's Buddy Programme surely reflect the issues uncovered in the aforementioned survey on buddy programmes, confirming that there are common issues related the domestic buddies (Lesk & Montaldo 2015, 18-20).

Zahir ends the above story by saying that since they are all volunteers, nobody can be forced to do certain things, compared to paid work, and arguably he sees it as a limitation to the Buddy Programme. Volunteering in Denmark is usually not paid (AES n.d), and thus Zahir probably knows about this socially constructed ideology of volunteering work in Denmark; information he must have received when he applied to become a buddy. Thus, he seems to comply with the Danish rules and ideology, but probably not identify with it. Perhaps he sees the rules as a limitation to the discipline involved. He is perhaps influenced by the Indian ideology of volunteering. In India, volunteers are paid (Thakkar et. al., 2012), and perhaps the Indian sense-making of volunteering can be somewhat opposite to the Danish sense-making of volunteering.

In the story below, we find that Zahir perhaps tries to see the world from the perspective of Danish students, almost putting himself into their shoes. It is a story about Danes being selfish, according to Zahir's reality. Zahir was asked why he thinks that Danes' attitudes are as he says they are, to which he replies:

Story 4:

> *"They only see the certificate. That is how I feel about it, and it is sad because it should be something you are very committed to. So actually the international students will come to events, but without their buddy, and there's always complaints that they have never met their buddies. Some sign up for it, but never does anything about it. So, like I said, I was officially only given five students in each semester, but I still took in 2-3 more students who had buddies that not really did anything. People were left stranded because we had a group that was functional, but they had groups which was not functional because the buddy was not responsible or was not doing what he was supposed to."* (Appendix 3, 16)

What we see from the above story is that, in Zahir's reality and sense-making, for the Danish students, it is all about getting the certificate, i.e., the proof that one has volunteered as a buddy. We find that Zahir, when he says that *'they only see the certificate'* positions the identity of the Danish students as being selfish, only thinking about improving their CVs for increased chances of getting future jobs, cf. level 1. Thus, one could assume that he may also think that Danes neglect the international students who have registered to get a buddy because of a desire to learn about Danish culture and way of life; a desire which the Danish students prevent them from realizing. By saying this, Zahir almost automatically constructs his own self-identity as the opposite of the Danes' identity as a heroic person who cares for others and is unselfish. For him, being a buddy is perhaps not about improving his CV but rather it is to help others and make a difference in the integration process because he can relate to international students' situations. But what could have made Zahir say, "they only see the certificate"? Could he be influenced by an underlying societal discourse about volunteering work? A survey from Ramboll found that many Danes lack the motivation to become volunteers, while the majority of the ones who then become volunteers, do it mostly to improve their CVs. It seems that there is a trend among Danish companies to convince students that their job opportunities will be improved if they have been volunteers (Rambøll 2017). We, as students, have also been informed countless times by professors and during events and workshops at AAU that we can improve our job opportunities by being volunteers. There is a possibility that Zahir has also been influenced by this growing pressure

and discourse, and perhaps he has witnessed that some students may have become volunteers despite a lack of motivation for it, which could be the reason that made him state that Danish buddies only do it for the certificate.

He then adds that "it is sad", thereby reinforcing his identity and position as one who cares about other people and probably that he identifies with the group of international students as he is also an international student and has had a buddy himself, thus creating affinity to this social group. This may also be how he intended to convey his own identity to us and be understood by us, cf. level 2.

Additionally, Zahir says that there are a lot of international students who never meet their actual Danish buddy because the Danes sign up to become a buddy but never show up, and the consequence is that students like Zahir are forced to take in more international students in their groups, and now, Zahir has two groups, a combined number of students of 11-12, while normally, it should be four to five students per group, according to the head of the Buddy Programme (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023), and AAU's website in the section about the Buddy Programme (AAU n.d). This is another objective which is not realized, and in turn, international buddies, like Zahir, can end up being overwhelmed by the task of handling five to seven more students who have been left to themselves by their Danish buddies, again jeopardizing perhaps the functionality of the Buddy Programme.

Then Zahir says that new international students most often expect a Danish buddy, indicating that internationals become somewhat surprised when they find out that Zahir or another international student is their buddy.

Story 5:

> "*So, you're asking, can Danish buddies integrate these international students with the Danish people? Yeah, I think they have an advantage in that, but it's not realized, right? Because I don't think that's how you do it in the Danish culture. I mean, maybe you do, but I don't know if you would randomly bring an international to a group of people that you have known for years, would you? Danes would not be comfortable in, you know, bringing these internationals to their real tight group. That is what I mean by building this from the ground up and do something about the gap"* (Appendix 3, 18)

From the above fifth story, it is apparent that, for Zahir, the objective of the Buddy Programme can only be reached on one condition; that more engaging Danes become buddies, and that this is the only real and correct way of integrating international students, but he concludes that reality is not as it should be, saying "but it's not realized, right?". This indicates that AAU has a Buddy Programme with flaws and objectives that are not reached, which is again contrastive to what we were told by the international office; that AAU has a well-functioning buddy programme with many buddies who help internationals integrate (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023).

After stating that things are not realized, he then explains that he thinks that it is due to the Danish culture, saying that the objective of the Buddy Programme clashes with the social culture in Denmark, and Danes' social skills by saying "Because I don't think that's how you do it in the Danish culture". He questions whether a Dane would ever bring a random foreigner into his safe group environment of friendships, further adding that he thinks it would be uncomfortable for a Dane to do so. By questioning and doubting Danish culture in this way, he implicitly critiques the goals and objectives of the Buddy Programme. We find this as a powerful contrastive feature in this story, a contrast to almost the entire existence of the Buddy Programme. His storytelling about the perceived cultural clash resonates with his earlier statements that concerned his observations of Danish people as being reserved and introverted, in relation to group work. A red line slowly becomes apparent in his statements. We find Zahir to be frustrated over the development and current situation with the Buddy Programme, to which they have no solutions to. Perhaps his way of reasoning and seeing the world is from the cultural perspective, often using the impact of culture to justify why things are as they are. He acknowledges that this is how Danish culture is, but that it comes with certain consequences when related to the Buddy Programme but also to group work and general social interactions.

We see that Zahir's stories reflect other studies' findings; international students, despite being part of a Buddy Programme, can still struggle due to flawed buddy systems that fail to reach their objectives, while consisting of domestic buddies who fail to fulfill their roles. Also, many internationals do not even get assigned a buddy. A survey found, that out of more than 12,000 students enrolled in European Universities, only 48 % were part of buddy systems, with a majority of them stating that they were not convinced of the usefulness of a buddy system (ESN, 2016),

reinforcing the possibility that despite AAU perceives its Buddy Programme as being well-functioning, in practice, reality may be different, as Zahir's stories indicate. This proves why it can be dangerous to almost only rely on a buddy programme as part of the initiatives for helping international students integrate; something AAU and the International Office do (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023).

Summary

The small stories indicate that Zahir seems influenced by cultural values of India. He often compared Danes to Indians and gave indications that he may have wished circumstances were different and somewhat similar to what he comes from in India.

He gave strong indications that AAU are mostly to blame for the problems we discussed. It may seem that he thought that AAU failed to connect domestic and international students better to make them establish a social relationship that would benefit the social and academic environment at AAU. Furthermore, in Zahir's sense-making, AAU seems to lack a more international environment since some personnel lack English-skills, while some information is still written only in Danish.

In terms of the Buddy Programme, it could seem that reality, from Zahir's focalization, does not align with the provided information and marketing of the programme. Following Zahir, there is a lack of Danish buddies, while the ones registered, fail to fulfill their roles and responsibility. There seems to be no solution to the current problems in the programme.

A variety of the stories that Zahir provided us, related to culture, social and academic adjustment, and the Buddy Programme, seem to align with a majority of the stories from studies and surveys on international students. Thus, it seems there is a shared number of positions that have been constructed in similar discourses, ultimately increasing the credibility of Zahir's stories.

We argue that the findings from Zahir's small stories indicate a possible reason and explanation for why there are still internationals at AAU who struggle and experience a negative well-being. AAU's self-presenting image seems to clash with the stories provided by Zahir. Here, reality speaks more than a perceived institutional image.

9. Conclusion

Key findings: Exclusive environment, lack of help from AAU, in-grouping and out-grouping, English not practiced sufficiently, marginalization, inequality, Buddy Programme lacks buddies, Danish buddies abandon their international students, cultural differences.

The analysis of the interviewed free movers sought to examine when and how identities were constructed in the micro stories (small stories), to then identify the emergence of a possible macro story, i.e., a master or counter narrative.
This was done through three interviews that were related to the free movers' involvement in the Buddy Programme but turned out to also concern their educational experience at AAU and social lives outside of AAU.
Each of our informants, Luka, Lang, and Zahir provide many small stories, some of them being positive – which was especially in relation to the Buddy Programme – however, a majority of the small stories could directly be related to or classified as possible reasons for the development of negative feelings about their well-being – which was a combination of remarks in relation to their educational experiences and their participation in the Buddy Programme. Their stories seem to align with a wider societal context and discourse about international students being subject to similar experiences, conveyed in past studies presented in our literature review, background chapter and additional studies mentioned in the analysis. More specifically, our informants' many stories, especially concerning the Buddy Programme, seem to be contrastive to various uplifting information that we gathered from our initial interviews with the International Office and Master Admission at AAU (Krogsgaard and Bertovic 2023), while stories related to other things such as internationalization, services, provision of help and cultural awareness arguably also seems to be explicitly contradictive to the various sections on AAU's website where the university presents itself and appeals to prospective international students (AAU, n.d).

Taking the initial interviews with administration offices, and AAU's website as well as the literature on internationalization – in that it has become expected and a sign of prestige to promote oneself as a globally engaged institution – into account, there seems to be an institutional master

narrative within AAU (positioning level 3) that points to that the university is a welcoming, culturally-aware and internationalized HEI who is equipped for providing help to international students to ensure they get a successful time as students, i.e. a local master narrative within AAU. Still considering positioning level 3 from the theory, further justifying the master narrative, by looking towards many other HEIs in the world, research states that a majority of them have an institutional narrative which is consistent with the narrative within AAU. Thus, there seems to emerge a shared, common master narrative that AAU shares with worldwide HEIs.

On the other hand, concerning the international students from AAU that were interviewed, they seem to form a shared and local narrative among themselves; a local narrative that, combined with the micro stories from international students provided in past studies referred to during the analysis as proof of evidence as well as our literature review, make up a challenging narrative; a counter narrative that is shared among not only our three informants but also the international students in the world who have provided very similar stories to those of Lang, Zahir, and Luka. We must assume that this makes up a shared identity of our informants; shared with the other internationals in the world, consequently leading back to the worldwide issue among HEIs; having a standardized approach to every international student, which in turn forms a shared identity of international students who share the same issues and experiences.

The perceived institutional environment and experience at AAU, from our informants' perspectives, gave reason for them to construct a variety of stories that may seem to contradict the institutional narrative from AAU, which could indicate two possible separate identities; an identity which complies with the master narrative, as seen when they indicate understanding and acceptance about some issues, while the other identity does not comply with the master narrative, which can be seen in the contrastive stories with explicit negative wording, and combined, they emerge as being one single counter narrative, challenging the local institutional master narrative from AAU and the institutional master narratives from worldwide HEIs; narratives which can be perceived as the underlying social context to a majority of their stories.

The three informants often constructed victim-like identities in their stories, while they attributed blame and responsibility onto AAU as being the active agent responsible for many of the outcomes in the stories, while the Danish society and culture was also a crucial factor in some stories.

The elements that create the countering narrative from the three informants are their combined stories that we analyzed upon; stories that are, generally, related to bad social and academic experiences. Interestingly, each of the stories and the negative discourses and experiences that surround them could all be related to one specific conclusion; that AAU lacks more focus on the internationalization of the university at home or the realization of objectives related to it. As Jane Knight stresses in her various publications about internationalization, HEIs around the world are in, what she calls, a brain race; a hunt for the best students, while HEIs are also under an intensifying pressure of keeping up with the competitive race of increasing internationalization, which, in the past, was related with attaining cultural exchange, knowledge and idea-sharing, while, now, it has switched to being a purpose of realizing political and economic objectives; a modernized purpose of internationalization that has reformed the term into being rather a commercialization rather than internationalization. The findings from the analysis; the provided stories and expressions of negative experiences could seem to be directly related to AAU's internationalization efforts; efforts that could seem to have been rather promoted than actually realized.

10. Discussion

In our literature review and throughout our analysis, we mentioned the culture shock from the U curve (Lysgaard 1955; Ward et. al. 1998; Reid 2013) as possible reason for negative well-being, however, our findings did not point that much to this issue, not saying they did not have any remarks in relation to the Buddy Programme and other factors at AAU, but very rarely did they express how that made them feel homesick or withdrawn from social events as a result of a culture shock. In fact, none of our informants say that they have no social circle and that is maybe because of the times we live in. Chien states: *"...the more one travels abroad, the less culture shock for one"* (Chien 2016, 45). Arguably, due to globalization and information dissemination through the mass media and the internet, students adjust differently from the U-curve hypothesis. We argue that the blurring of borders, English as a lingua franca and technological development has bridged somewhat of a gap between cultures. Coming to a Western country is no longer that foreign for people, especially not for people within the EU, which is also reflected in our analysis in that Lang and Zahir have much stronger ties to their upbringing. However, our informants have

experienced negative well-being, but in terms of dropping out or rejecting social events or friendships, we are not under the impression that they have gone through a phase of culture shock per se. We believe this makes the issue of well-being more complex, because contrary to the traditional presentation of how a definite culture shock takes shape, it cannot be noticed to the same degree in our informants. Their perception of negative well-being has more to do with integration and a perception that they are not included in the study environment, where the international environment stands for itself e.g., through the Buddy Programme.

Then, we stated, that our proposed perception of AAU's institutional image reflects to almost perfection the institutional images from other worldwide HEIs, offering a majority of the same services and courses to international students (James-MacEachern 2018, 261) while the recruitment strategies also align with the image of being welcoming and accommodating towards international students and all cultures i.e., being internationalized. This means that, by taking AAU and worldwide international students' stories into account, they can be perceived as being countering the institutional master narrative from worldwide HEIs, including AAU.
Now, we just mentioned that HEIs offer a majority of the same things. As Jane Knight has stated in her work on internationalization at home, HEIs have drastically moved away from the original object, which concerned knowledge exchange, cultural exchange and increase of education quality (Knight 2012, 29). However, now, the majority of HEIs in the world are subject to intense pressure from political and economic objectives, which dictate the operation of HEIs (Knight 2012, 29; Wulz & Rainer 2015, 46), while it leaves HEIs with their original objectives and trends clashing with the trends of national priorities and policymaking (Rosenblit 2015, 25). This has led to a perception that international students, especially those enrolled in European HEIs, are viewed as a financial resource that benefits the country (Wultz & Rainer 2015, 46). What is even more problematic is that modern information and communication technologies, combined with the increasing presence of national, economic, and political objectives within the operations of HEIs, have arguably led to a cultural homogenization, eroding national cultural identities (Knight 2012, 29). Could this have led to a significantly decreased cultural awareness towards international students at AAU? One could argue that HEIs are obliged to treat domestic and international students as one entity, however, it could arguably lead to various problems related to the countless instances of culture clash and the distancing that emerge whenever a course becomes multinational. What

happens if these cultural differences are not paid attention to? We have encountered stories from our informants and referred to past studies that indicate experiences of lingua franca English not being practiced as an institutional language, cultural shock, social and academic exclusion due to a lack of cultural awareness from domestic students, professors, and AAU as an institution.

However, struggling to cope with the lack of internationalization can arguably occur for both international and domestic students. Worldwide HEIs in Western cultures expect international students to do most of the cultural adjustment (Smith 2021, 218), however, what happens if domestic students are not prepared to contribute to an international community? We argue that both international and domestic students are deprived of the chance to study in an internationalized environment, which ultimately conflicts with the narrative that AAU is this major, top of the line, international player in the academic arena. Is this the ideal way of recruiting international students then if the outcome is negative? We would argue that it should be a two-way process of adjustment; international students adjusting to the new social and academic culture, and vice versa i.e., having both HEIs, as institutions, and their domestic students adjust and learn more about their fellow international students and their cultural backgrounds. An example of the consequences was found in an American study, where the university and its professors treated international students based on a shared belief about who they were, i.e., which academic experiences they had, how their social skills were, and which challenges they faced. The students were treated in a very generic way, and ultimately, the HEI and its professors never recognized the reality, and by the time they did, the international students had developed severe stress, isolation, homesickness, and financial problems (Andrade 2006, 138). But the two-way process of adjustment could somewhat be jeopardized because a book on internationalization specifically labels Denmark as being a country that perceives international students as ‘welfare students’ (Beelen & Jones 2015, 54). Could this stigma influence the Danish HEIs and Danish students to such a degree that it prevents or complicates the goals of internationalization, or simply complicates having international students in Denmark? Zahir explicitly expressed his doubt in relation to having Buddy Programmes in Denmark due to his sense-making of Danish culture, saying that people are introverted and that it is difficult for Danes to invite foreigners, even Danes, into their tightened groups.

Taking this further, it would then compromise the objectives of having the Buddy Programme at AAU, i.e., a bearing element of AAU's international infrastructure. However, Lang and Zahir discredit the programme with stories that indicate that reality does not reflect what AAU communicates about it. Studies show that HEIs have become increasingly commercialized in the last 20 years, where international students are basically viewed as a financial benefit for countries. This means that HEIs' efforts have also reflected a very standardized recruitment and somewhat passive approach to international students; an approach that seems to continuously bring more consequences than positives, and arguably a reason for many issues among international students at AAU and in the world.

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