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**Cultural Communication:  
From Inner Thoughts to Dialogue**

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glory K. Kubicek". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'G' and 'K'.



## **MA Programme Euroculture Declaration**

I, Glory Kubicek, hereby declare that this thesis, entitled “Cultural Communication: From Inner Thoughts to Dialogue”, submitted as partial requirement for the MA Programme Euroculture, is my own original work and expressed in my own words. Any use made within this text of works of other authors in any form (e.g. ideas, figures, texts, tables, etc.) are properly acknowledged in the text as well as in the bibliography.

I declare that the written (printed and bound) and the electronic copy of the submitted MA thesis are identical.

I hereby also acknowledge that I was informed about the regulations pertaining to the assessment of the MA thesis Euroculture and about the general completion rules for the Master of Arts Programme Euroculture.

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## **Abstract**

Student perception studies of experiences in higher education face a significant gap in understanding. To address this gap, this study analyzed the shared educational experiences of students from diverse backgrounds through dialogue. Seeking to explain how students of the Euroculture Erasmus Mundus Master of Arts Program positioned themselves in their educational experiences, this study conducted focus groups of current and previous Euroculture students. Five focus groups, each consisting of two to four students, discussed a variety of questions pertaining to their educational experiences ranging from background information to influences on personal perceptions of education for an hour and a half. Results showed three main conclusions. First, commonalities amongst most groups in the form of terms used and ideas presented proving that there are certain notions and ideas common to students in shared educational experiences regardless of discussion with others. Second, that individual backgrounds, family influences, personal views, and goals all make far more of a difference in how students discuss their educational experiences and position themselves within them than other generalized factors such as country of origin. And third, even coming from different cultural and personal backgrounds, students always find a way to relate and share commonalities when discussing their experiences, thus bringing a level of solidarity among students to educational experiences.

**Keywords:** student perceptions, internationalization, higher education, dialogism, Erasmus Mundus

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>Chapter One</b>	8
1.1 What is Euroculture?	8
1.2 Case Studies of Student Perceptions	11
<b>Chapter Two</b>	17
2.1 Literature Review	17
<i>Internationalization in Higher Education</i>	18
<i>Student Perceptions</i>	22
<i>Dialogism</i>	24
2.2 Theoretical Framework	26
2.3 Methodology	26
<b>Chapter Three</b>	34
Focus Group Results	34
<b>Chapter Four</b>	39
Discussion of Results	39
4.1 “Sequential”	40
4.2 Focus Groups	44
<i>Focus Group One</i>	45
<i>Focus Group Two</i>	50
<i>Focus Group Three</i>	53
<i>Focus Group Four</i>	58
<i>Focus Group Five</i>	62
<b>Chapter Five</b>	65
Conclusions	65
<b>Bibliography</b>	68



## Introduction

“We seldom realize, for example that our private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society”<sup>1</sup> -Alan W. Watts

This paper could've begun with any cliché quote, so you may be asking yourself- *why this one?* Let's talk about why.

Countries of origin, cultures, languages, backgrounds, upbringings, environments, and personal interactions all impact a person's development and perceptions. All of these and many more influence the way the world is perceived, the language used, the morals and values held, the roles in society, and the interactions and relationships with others. As a result, language and interaction form a large part of how humans interpret the world and make sense of their experiences. Most person-to-person interactions occur through dialogue. With that realization in mind, Mikhail Bakhtin, a Soviet-era theorist, introduced the concept of dialogism in the twentieth century, bringing about the thought that humans are in dialogue with everything and everyone in the world.

Bakhtin argues that we are never outside of dialogue. Originally, Bakhtin's theories of dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony were applied in literary analysis; however, these same theories can have applications in the social world as well.<sup>2</sup> They help us to understand human interactions, nuances in conversation, and why someone may begin a conversation with a certain point of view and then end it with a completely new one. While there seems to be an overwhelming amount of monologism present in today's world (i.e., governments, classrooms, etc.), this paper focuses on the contexts in which dialogism is most appropriate and important to be applied—in education to gauge student experiences.

Broadly speaking, dialogism can be used to enhance understanding of student perceptions in education through conversation analysis of student dialogues surrounding their educational experiences. How do they describe their individual experiences? How do they interact with the others during the discussion? Are their experiences diverse or the

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Watts, “The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are,” Vintage Books ed., (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Robinson, “In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia” *Ceasefire Magazine*, July 22, 2021, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/>.

same? How do they compare their experiences? In what way are they positioning themselves in their cultures, backgrounds, and experiences? The questions generated are endless. While the questions are endless, so are the possibilities. This study will narrow that broad range by focusing specifically on graduate students of the Erasmus Mundus Master of Arts Euroculture Program. That means the backgrounds, geographical locations, and country of origins are all quite varied, but the commonality amongst these students is their decision to study in Europe in this rather specific and unique program.

This “specific and unique” program draws on an element of internationalization uncommon in most other programs. Euroculture describes itself as “a critical and interdisciplinary approach to analyzing European culture, politics, and society in a globalized context”.<sup>3</sup> The internationalization and globalization premise of the program are what make it so distinctive. Euroculture contains eight different universities within Europe and four partner universities outside of Europe, draws students from around the world, and promotes mobility through mandatory studying in at least two European universities during the program length. In addition to all this, in the third semester, students choose either a research track or professional (internship) track at, again, one of the eight European or four partner universities or any location around the world.<sup>4</sup> The design of the Euroculture program is distinctive and, as such, so are the experiences of the students.

There has been much research done on internationalization in higher education and international student experiences, yet research of the specific context of this study is lacking. This study proposes that there are two main gaps: how studies methodologically approach understanding international students in a broad sense in internationalization in higher education and how researchers approach an individual understanding of students in case studies of student perceptions. Typically, methodologies towards internationalization in higher education focus on the national and institutional aspects of education, almost completely excluding the student view. Whereas in studies of student perceptions in higher education, international students are classified in one of two categories: study abroad students staying in a singular international setting for a set amount of time or international students traveling to a foreign country for the entire duration of their studies.

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<sup>3</sup> “About,” Euroculture, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.euroculturemaster.eu/about>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Few if any studies have been conducted regarding international programs with a mobility focus throughout the entirety of the program, such as Euroculture. As a result of these two gaps, there is a hole in the literature regarding the type of international student enrolled in Euroculture and other Erasmus Mundus Programs. Additionally, the majority of studies on international students aim to find generalizations and broad explanations for student experiences, usually based on cultural backgrounds and home countries. The main way they do this is through utilizing mass survey methodology. On the contrary, this project aims to expand outside of surveys to use qualitative methods, such as focus groups, to gain in-depth insight into the perceptions of graduate students who have studied or are currently studying in the Euroculture Program and how they position themselves in higher education and their experiences. This study aims to answer the question: How do students in a shared educational experience from diverse cultural backgrounds interact, compare, and share their experiences and relate to one another through conversation and position themselves within their experiences? This data will be contextualized through literature on focus group methodology, theories of dialogism, the role of internationalization in higher education, and case studies conducted on student perceptions in education.

Chapter One presents a background of the Erasmus Mundus Euroculture Program as well as previous case studies regarding student perceptions in higher education and their relevance to this study. Chapter Two will then propose and compare recent literature about internationalization in higher education, student perceptions in higher education, and dialogism in a literature review. It will also describe the theoretical framework followed by the methodology used for this study. Chapter Three addresses the data and briefly presents the results of the study. Chapter Four offers an in-depth discussion of the results. Lastly, Chapter Five closes the research by presenting the conclusions and implications drawn from the study and suggestions for the future.

## Chapter One

### 1.1 What is Euroculture?

Euroculture is part of the Erasmus+ Programme in Europe and one of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degrees (EMJMD). According to the Erasmus+ 2019 Annual Report, Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degrees are:

highly integrated study programmes delivered by an international consortium of higher education institutions... [with an] aim to foster excellence, innovation and internationalization of higher education institutions, strengthen the quality and the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area, and improve the competences, skills and employability of Master students.<sup>5</sup>

During the academic year of 2019/2020, there were 132 ongoing Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's degrees, Euroculture being one of them. While there are joint master's degrees outside of the Erasmus+ network and outside of European Union countries, this small number of programs (132) makes up a very niche corner in international education and higher education in Europe. Internationalization in higher education is becoming more common but it is still rare to see programs of such an international extent.

So, what is Euroculture and why is it the focus of this study? Starting in 1998, coming after the end of the Cold War in Europe, a program emerged with the aim to offer a European studies curriculum that revolved around the interplay of culture, society, and politics in Europe, with the goal of understanding how Europe and European integration could be contextualized and what these concepts meant to citizens.<sup>6</sup> This is where the Master of Arts Euroculture program was born. As previously mentioned, Euroculture is a unique program containing eight European universities (Universidad de Deusto in Spain, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in the Netherlands, Georg-August-Universität in Germany, Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie in Poland, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci in the Czech Republic, Université de Strasbourg in France, Università degli studi di Udine in Italy, and Uppsala Universitet in Sweden) and four overseas partner universities outside of

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission, and Youth Directorate-General for Education Sport and Culture, "Erasmus+ Annual Report 2019," 2020, 45, [https://op.europa.eu/publication/manifestation\\_identifier/PUB\\_NCAR20001ENN](https://op.europa.eu/publication/manifestation_identifier/PUB_NCAR20001ENN).

<sup>6</sup> Janny de Jong et al., eds, "European Studies and Europe: Twenty Years of Euroculture," *Studies in Euroculture*, Göttingen: Göttingen University Press, 2020, 7, <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2019-1225>.

Europe (Indiana University- Purdue University in the United States, Universidad Nacional Autónoma in Mexico, Osaka University in Japan, and Savitribai Phule Pune University in India). However, this wasn't always the case.

Over the years, Euroculture has grown and matured like any other program. The consortium partners (academic and non-academic) have increased, the program transitioned from sixty to ninety and eventually to 120 ECTS, and the diversity of the program (training, location, etc.) continues to evolve. All these factors led to Euroculture becoming what we know it to be today, where students choose at least two of the European universities to attend in their first year followed by either the professional (internship) track or the research track and revisiting one of their first two universities in their second year. Euroculture boasts that it is “ideal for students who understand that Europe’s future will be shaped not only by economics and politics, but also by struggles over identities, values, and heritage”<sup>7</sup> as well as “bring[ing] different disciplinary perspectives together as a powerful tool to create new ways of looking at the existing situation and thereby com[ing ] to new knowledge on the situation”,<sup>8</sup> making this an exceptional program.

Euroculture presents an innovative approach to European studies for two main reasons: because of the interplay of economics, politics, and culture and the citizen rather than the institutional focus. Due to these approaches, Euroculture is appealing to students from a variety of educational backgrounds. This unconventional setup naturally attracts interest amongst both European and international students. Even the non-international students become international students with the mobility aspects of the program. In this case, we use the definition of international students put forth by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which is “students crossing borders for the specific purpose of studying”<sup>9</sup> to dispel any confusion of who constitutes an international student. As a result of the distinctiveness of programs like Euroculture, there are few, if any, studies of student perceptions and student experiences in these programs. That is what makes this program perfect for the nature of this study in examining student perceptions and experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> “Home”, Euroculture.

<sup>8</sup> De Jong et al., eds, “European Studies and Europe,” 10.

<sup>9</sup> Nick Clark, “What Defines an International Student? A Look Behind the Numbers,” WENR, September 1, 2009, <https://wenr.wes.org/2009/09/wenr-september-2009-feature>.

Finally, every few years, the Euroculture consortium commissions in-depth research on the experiences and career paths of its alumni, known as the Euroculture Alumni Research Report. The latest of these studies was published in August 2019 and analyzed the data of students starting between 2011 and 2016. They justified their choice of years by noting that 2011 was the year in which the program switched from a ninety ECTS credit program to a 120 ECTS credit program. This commissioned study gave general information about the number of students enrolled, gender, average age, nationality, and academic background. In the final pages, it also included what students believed to be the strengths and weaknesses of the program. There were 462 students who started between 2011 and 2016 and of that approximately twenty-five per cent of those students were male whereas approximately seventy-five per cent were female. The Euroculture Alumni Research Report also indicated that the most common ages to start the Master program were twenty-three, twenty-two, and twenty-four, respectively. Obviously, there were outliers, and some students were older and younger than this, but these were the most common starting ages.

There were fifty-six different nationalities represented with thirty-four of those nationalities represented by less than one per cent of the students. Some of the most significant groups of nationalities represented were German, Dutch, French, and Italian.<sup>10</sup> These were not shocking since there is a consortium university in each of these countries, so logically speaking it would make sense that students were more aware of the Euroculture Program in these countries and had a larger number of students represented. The final general information the Euroculture Alumni Research Report examined was the academic background of students. For this portion of the report, the researcher also turned to LinkedIn to gather information. Through this method, they were able to gather academic background information on previous studies of 347 of the 462 alumni. It was determined that many Euroculture students had backgrounds in Cultural Studies often combined with Literature or Languages and “other” backgrounds such as Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Social Sciences.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the Alumni Report also assessed program learning outcomes, strengths, and points for improvement from student responses. The Alumni

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<sup>10</sup> Elze Wiertz, “Euroculture Alumni Research Report,” University of Groningen, August 2019, 4-7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 9.

Report survey presented twenty options to choose as strongpoints and the same twenty options to choose as needing enhancement. The report concluded that:

The depth of the programme, the coordination between the universities and the research and methodology classes are mentioned most often as areas which should be enhanced... [but] the overall score alumni awarded to the programme is an 8.02/10.<sup>12</sup>

This study clarifies the demographics of Euroculture students and their trajectory after Euroculture, but it is limited in the scope to which it encompasses more personal and individual aspects, such as experiences and perceptions. It gives a good overall sense of student satisfaction and experience in a qualitative manner but cannot provide much additional comment on the individualized perception. The Euroculture Alumni Research Report is the closest thing currently available to having a concrete study of Euroculture student's experiences and perceptions, but still lacks necessary details.

## 1.2 Case Studies of Student Perceptions

It is relatively easy to come across case studies examining student satisfaction at the university level. Universities even offer student evaluations nearly every semester for every course, sometimes even university-level evaluations. These surveys ask questions pertaining to the content of the courses, student satisfaction with teaching methods and approaches, and suggestions on how to improve students' learning experiences. While this is all practical and useful for an institution and its teachers, it does nothing to measure the experience of the student from an individual or personal level. In these evaluations, students are not asked about their experiences within the campus culture or with fellow students, nor their relationships with their teachers. Evaluations offer valuable and vital understanding of academics, but they are only a small fraction of the overall student experience. Moreover, studies conducted regarding student satisfaction typically focus on very specific groups of students, again limiting the scope of the understanding. Many studies draw from groups such as: students enrolled in English as a Second Language

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 34.

courses<sup>13</sup>, international students studying at a specific university,<sup>14</sup> or students of a precise program,<sup>15</sup> amongst others.

This section will cover three studies previously conducted regarding student perceptions in higher education. Each of these studies were chosen because they were relevant to the study in this paper regarding student perceptions and experiences in Euroculture. All studies were briefly mentioned in the Introduction and will be expanded upon further here regarding the information gathered from them, their results, and the way in which they fit into this study of Euroculture.

First is the study done by Prem Ramburuth and Massimiliano Tani at an Australian university that surveyed approximately 2,200 undergraduate students. As mentioned in the paper, this study focused on “students’ perceptions about the extent to which prior learning backgrounds, their competence in language and communication, their ability to interact with local students and their attitude to teaching staff, impacted on their learning”.<sup>16</sup> The survey considered demographic information of respondents and showed that respondents came from across nine faculties. Respondents averaged 21.5 years in age with fifty-five per cent being female and forty-five per cent being male. Additionally, forty per cent of respondents were in their first year whereas twenty-two per cent in their second year, twenty-one per cent in their third, and seventeen per cent in their fourth and fifth years.

It is interesting to note that this study considered second- and third-generation students of immigrant parents and, as a result, asked about country of birth, nationality, and cultural background. A significant number of respondents were Australian-born or of Asian descent since Asian countries tend to be the main source of international students in Australia.<sup>17</sup> Ramburuth and Tani’s study concluded overall that “experiences and perceptions of learning in higher education vary amongst students born in different countries even when quantitative approaches and basic statistical techniques are applied”,<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jane Knight, “Internationalization Remodeled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales,” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 8, no. 1 (March 2004): 5–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303260832>.

<sup>14</sup> Prem Ramburuth, and Massimiliano Tani, “The Impact of Culture on Learning: Exploring Student Perceptions,” *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal* 3, no. 3 (August 21, 2009): 182-95, <https://doi.org/10.1108/17504970910984862>.

<sup>15</sup> Hongjiang Xu, “Students’ Perceptions of University Education – USA vs. China,” *Research in Higher Education Journal*, March 2011, 1–10.

<sup>16</sup> Ramburuth and Tani, “The Impact of Culture on Learning,” 183.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 193.



which is to be expected. The study found that there were significant differences of experience and perception between students born in Australia, Asian countries, and elsewhere. These differences ranged from prior learning and preparation, self-confidence and participation in classroom activities and discussions, interaction with peers, and engagement with professors and teaching staff.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, some drawbacks in the study can be seen. For example, certain research collection methods can only offer so much in terms of student perceptions. Surveys limit the choices and restrict critical thinking and analysis by offering set choices. While students may have an easier time answering with pre-made choices, that might not necessarily encompass their true perceptions. Moreover, Ramburuth and Tani's study focused on undergraduate students, which hugely affects student experiences. Many times, students have yet to have any international experiences when entering undergraduate studies, then making the transition to an international setting more challenging. And finally, Ramburuth and Tani's study included second- and third-generation immigrants. While there is a certain level of internationalization present for second- and third-generation immigrants their experiences are going to be completely different being born and raised in the country than someone immigrating to the country after being born and raised in a completely different cultural and educational society. A positive note seen in Ramburuth and Tani's study is that it encompassed more of the student experience than most other studies (i.e., information regarding learning background and interaction with other students and teaching staff).

Second, we look at the study by Andrew Wearing, Huong Le, Rachel Wilson, and Rodney Arambewela pertaining to Vietnamese international student experiences at an Australian university. This study interviewed ten Vietnamese postgraduate international students, eight females and two males, from a variety of degree programs including policy, economics, and business tracks at the university. Half of the participants were interviewed in thirty- to forty-minute face-to-face interviews while the other half were interviewed by email. Participants were given their choice of preferred interview method. The interviews collected basic demographic information followed by fifteen questions regarding

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 182.

international student experience, expectation before arriving at the university, their experiences at the university, and suggestions for improvement.

The analysis of the study found that certain themes were recurring throughout participants' narratives. Of these themes, four were noted in the results: language, teaching and learning experience, assessment, and on-campus learning environment. This study noted that all participants interviewed referenced some concerns about the English language ability and expected that studying in Australia would improve their abilities. The study also mentioned that students seemed to be aware of differences in teaching styles and learning approaches between Western societies, like Australia, and Asian countries. Participants also pointed to the way of assessing students at the Australian university, mentioning group projects, and speaking in class. Finally, students discussed their expectations regarding the on-campus environment hoping to interact with Australian students and immerse themselves in Australian culture only to find many international students, especially Asian international students.<sup>20</sup>

Again, various drawbacks and limitations appear in this specific study of international student experiences. The methods of this study are slightly better than that of the previous case; however, since half of the respondents replied by email, it again limits the interaction aspect and ability to fully assess students' perceptions. The researchers failed to mention how the ten participants were chosen for the study, making reproduction of such a study more difficult. Additionally, this study limited the scope of understanding by focusing specifically on Vietnamese students excluding many other international students and making it less relevant to Euroculture students particularly. This limited focus also contributes to why respondents gave similar responses and why certain themes appeared more frequently because their educational backgrounds likely contributed to their experiences and expectations coming from the same cultural background. Finally, it is important to note that the positive aspects of this study come from their detailing of the results and discussion and by not over generalizing based on such a small sample size.

Third, Julianne East is one of the few scholars contributing knowledge in a more methodologically comprehensive way. East examines international students as “customers”

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Wearing et al., “The International Student’s Experience: An Exploratory Study of Students from Vietnam,” *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (2015): 71–89.

and focused specifically on a group of international students at La Trobe University in Australia. The study sample included students from a variety of nationalities, different genders, multiple faculties, and various lengths of stay. First, they distributed sixty questionnaires at the Bundoora campus of La Trobe University measuring service quality based on the SERVQUAL questionnaire, which is a questionnaire specifically designed to measure service quality. Second, thirty-nine participants (questionnaire respondents and non-questionnaire respondents) enrolled in the class “English as a Second Language 1”, participated in group discussions. Last, ten students who completed the questionnaire were chosen for in-depth interviews.<sup>21</sup> East’s study focused more on the student as the customer, gaining insight into how students perceived the relationship between their purchase (cost of education) and the service (the educational experience). Findings from the study indicated that:

...most students wanted an experience that was more than a transaction: they wanted to be responsible for their own learning, but they also wanted assurance, responsiveness and empathy from their teachers; they wanted to interact with local students, and they wanted to be involved in the Australian university learning experience.<sup>22</sup>

East’s research is one of the more comprehensive studies done because of its mix of methodological choices and a wider and more inclusive range of students. A drawback of this study is that the perspective it is approaching international students from is vastly different than the study of Euroculture students and that it is another study addressing international students in Australia (again, vastly different than the approach of Euroculture).

These three studies are exemplary examples relating to the study of Euroculture students’ perceptions in higher education. Obviously, every research study has its own drawbacks and limitations, but good ones will provide more pros than cons and give a clear path as to further research that can extend beyond their own study. These three studies do just that. Their methodologies nor their demographics are particularly helpful in understanding Euroculture students, but their research questions and results provide insight

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<sup>21</sup> Julianne East, “International Students Identified as Customer: Their Expectations and Perceptions,” *Changing Identities*, January 2001.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

into the correct questions to ask, what might be found, and how the results from Euroculture can be used.

Each of the studies examine different aspects of student experiences and by overlapping them they can be used to give a broader picture of the complex international student experience. For example, one study:

...sought to capture the experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and provide insights into their perceptions of factors that might facilitate and/or hinder their learning and cultural interaction.”<sup>23</sup>

while another:

...explore[s]... the perceptions of Vietnamese international students with regard to their experiences with teaching and learning in Australia... [and] provides recommendations on how to improve students’ experiences as consumers of higher education.<sup>24</sup>

Each study examines students from a unique angle. Additionally, the results of these specific studies are especially helpful in hinting at what could possibly be found in the study of Euroculture students. Even though these three studies focus on international students in Australia, they can still have potential applications for experiences of international students in Europe, mainly in the form of their results. Each of these studies provided significant results important for my own research question of understanding shared educational experiences in Euroculture students from diverse cultural backgrounds from their conversations and interactions with one another.

Next, we take an in-depth look at the literature regarding internationalization in higher education, student perceptions, and dialogism.

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<sup>23</sup> Ramburuth and Tani, “The Impact of Culture on Learning,” 183.

<sup>24</sup> Wearing et al., “The International Student’s Experience,” 72.

## Chapter Two

### 2.1 Literature Review

While there have been several separate studies on internationalization in higher education, dialogism and conversation analysis, and student perceptions in education, few researchers have considered the interplay of these concepts. Little is known about how language and culture contribute to student perceptions in the new internationalized arena of higher education. Even less research is found on conversation analysis or dialogue between students to understand their experiences. Why is it so uncommon to see studies about international students' perceptions? And why is it even more uncommon to see studies incorporating the dialogue from these students? When searching through the literature, articles and studies relating to internationalization in higher education are plentiful, but these studies are typically relating to the policies, implementation, and globalization aspects of internationalization.

Studies relating to student perceptions typically use methodological practices such as surveys. Few and far between are studies using interviews and even less frequently focus groups or group discussions are used. Rarely do we see the cultural or personal aspects of internationalization in higher education. Most studies try to generalize student experiences based on cultural backgrounds or large-scale surveys meant to gather generic information and simplify responses. In the previous section, we briefly mentioned pros and cons in some of the literature, but here we will examine in-depth common themes and gaps and how the Euroculture study addresses these themes and contributes additional knowledge where it is lacking, presenting both a review of literature and a theoretical framework to move forward. Literature pertaining to this study of Euroculture can be broken down into three main categories: internationalization in higher education, student perceptions, and dialogism and conversation analysis.

## *Internationalization in Higher Education*

With the growing popularity of internationalization in higher education, one thing becomes extremely apparent, that there is still much contested about the precise definition of “internationalization”. The most widely-used and cited definition of internationalization is that presented by de Wit et al. defining internationalization in higher education as:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society.<sup>25</sup>

This definition of internationalization is adapted from Jane Knight’s definition where she stated “Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education”.<sup>26</sup> De Wit et al.’s definition is used by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service), also known as DAAD<sup>27</sup> and the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education<sup>28</sup> when defining internationalization.

Other articles such as those by Jane Knight<sup>29</sup> and Sue Robson<sup>30</sup> use the pre-adapted definition of internationalization first stated by Knight. Even further, there are some who reference both de Wit et al.’s definition and Knight’s definition of internationalization, but ultimately do not absolutely define it, but rather argue that there are a variety of views of which a select few are widespread.<sup>31</sup> Finally, there are some who would rather utilize the term “globalization” (which is another debate in and of itself) instead of

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<sup>25</sup> Hans de Wit and Fiona Hunter, “The Future of Internationalization of Higher Education in Europe,” *International Higher Education*, no. 83 (December 2, 2015): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2015.83.9073>.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Knight, “Updated Definition of Internationalization,” *International Higher Education*, no. 33 (March 25, 2015): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2003.33.7391>.

<sup>27</sup> Uwe Brandenburg et al., “Internationalisation in Higher Education for Society (IHES),” *Concept, current research and examples of good practice (DAAD Studies)*, Bonn: DAAD, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Hans de Wit et al., “Internationalisation of Higher Education,” *European Parliament*, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Knight, “Internationalization Remodeled,” 5–31.

<sup>30</sup> Sue Robson, “Internationalization: A Transformative Agenda for Higher Education?” *Teachers and Teaching* 17, no. 6 (December 2011): 619–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2011.625116>.

<sup>31</sup> Ulrich Teichker, “Internationalisation Trends in Higher Education and the Changing Role of International Student Mobility,” *Journal of international Mobility* 5, no. 1 (2017): 177–216, <https://doi.org/10.3917/jim.005.0179>.

internationalization, such as Anneliese Dodds<sup>32</sup> and Philip Altbach.<sup>33</sup> The reality of internationalization (or globalization) in higher education is that it means different things to different people in different contexts. For some, it means student and teacher mobility, study abroad and exchange programs, or joint projects and international partnerships. To others, it means branch campuses, international education delivered at home through online courses, or adding an international dimension to the curriculum. Due to the broad nature of the term, internationalization in higher education encompasses many aspects. While internationalization is still varied in its definition, there are a few common themes that do recurrently appear throughout the literature.

First, there is the method by which internationalization is approached. Many scholars approach and define internationalization in the context of national-level or institutional-level methodology. Rarely is internationalization approached from an individual or student perspective. For example, the most recent release of the Bologna Process from 2020 talks about priorities for the upcoming decade and within these priorities there are many mentions of internationalization at the national and institutional levels and the effects from those perspectives. Some priorities of the Bologna Process include curriculum reform and learning outcomes at institutions of higher education and international openness where universities are expected to “embed their activities in an institutional culture of internationalisation and global collaboration”.<sup>34</sup> Both of these priorities stem from institutional-level foci.

While reports such as the Bologna Process mainly focus on institutional and national perspectives, students are included in this as well. They intend to implement policies at an institutional level to benefit students at the educational level. Many times, the intentions are good, but the policies are not always effective. They tend to generalize the needs of students, something we also see in student perception studies. Knight presents us with the ways in which internationalization may be approached at both the national and

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<sup>32</sup> Anneliese Dodds, “How Does Globalisation Interact with Higher Education? The Continuing Lack of Consensus,” *Comparative Education* 44, no. 4 (November 2008): 505–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060802481538>.

<sup>33</sup> Philip G. Altbach, “Globalisation and the University: Myths and Realities in an Unequal World,” *Tertiary Education and Management* 10, no. 1 (January 2004): 3–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2004.9967114>.

<sup>34</sup> Education, Audiovisual, & Culture Executive Agency, *The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, 2020, [https://op.europa.eu/publication/manifestation\\_identifier/PUB\\_EC0220828ENN](https://op.europa.eu/publication/manifestation_identifier/PUB_EC0220828ENN).

institutional levels as well. She argues that national and sector levels approach internationalization in five ways: programs, rationales, ad hoc, policy, and strategic whereas institutional and provider levels approach internationalization in six ways: activity, outcomes, rationales, process, at home, and abroad (cross-border).<sup>35</sup>

Each of these approaches make it clear that they are still addressed from higher perspectives and taking students into consideration when formulating policies though not actually involving students nor evaluating the approaches from student perspectives. Often national and institutional level policies overlap to some degree. While there is nothing inherently wrong with understanding internationalization in higher education from institutional and national perspectives (and it is necessary in many cases) it also misses a large spectrum of additional information available—the perspectives of those partaking in the international higher education with firsthand experience in the area, students.

Second, there is the role of English in internationalized higher education. Many scholars point to this aspect at some point in their evaluations. Altbach notes that “the role of English affects higher education policy and the work of individual students and scholars”<sup>36</sup> whereas Dodds mentions that there is a link between globalization and concentration of power and that the influence of globalization shifts towards a “western model” of education or “Anglo-American” and “imperialist” systems of higher education.<sup>37</sup>

With English becoming the global language, it makes sense that most international programs are offered mainly in English. English has become a necessary skill. Most international publications, journals, and articles are in English, and it is increasing in popularity as the international working language. Many countries worldwide make English classes mandatory at school from a young age, and it seems to be common knowledge that if you want to travel or work in business (especially internationally) you will eventually be required to learn English. As a result of this new globalized world English influences international policy heavily. Altbach again points out that “major international academic centres – namely the leading research-oriented universities in the North, especially those that use one of the key world languages (particularly English) – occupy the top tier”.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Knight, “Internationalization Remodeled,” 19-20.

<sup>36</sup> Altbach, “Globalisation and the University,” 10.

<sup>37</sup> Dodds, “How Does Globalisation Interact with Higher Education,” 510-11.

<sup>38</sup> Altbach, “Globalisation and the University,” 7.



These “top tier” universities dominate the production and distribution of knowledge, thus strongly affecting academic standards globally.

Third, we see a strong influence of the economy on education (or commercialization of education) and competition in education. These two are grouped together because they often go hand-in-hand. The European Parliament Committee on Education and Culture states, “from the second half of the 1990s onwards, there was a gradual shift from political to economic rationales for internationalization” and that:

...international student recruitment, preparing graduates for the global labour market, attracting talent for the knowledge economy, cross-border delivery of education, and capacity building have become important pillars of the internationalization of higher education over the past decade.<sup>39</sup>

These statements are not the only one’s pointing to an economic motive for internationalizing higher education. In addition, we see “new franchise arrangements, foreign and satellite campuses, online delivery, and increased recruitment of fee-paying students”,<sup>40</sup> all excellent proof of the new trend of commercial education. Larsen, Morris, and Martin even estimated that in 1999, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries had thirty billion dollars in post-secondary trade, which equaled about three per cent of their total services trade.<sup>41</sup>

It is clear that commercializing education is not a new concept, but with the rise of internationalization it does provide a new arena for economic and commercial growth to take place as well as provide a much larger customer base. International higher education institutions have begun competing in a sense. Scholars recognize this competition throughout the higher education arena and recognize that global rankings play a key role in the reputation of countries and as well as institutions.<sup>42</sup> Even someone growing up in a non-English speaking country has most likely heard at least the names of some of the larger more prestigious universities such as Harvard University or Oxford University. It is to the advantage of institutions to have their name known on more than just a national scale.

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<sup>39</sup> De Wit et al., “Internationalisation of Higher Education,” 43.

<sup>40</sup> Knight, “Internationalization Remodeled,” 24.

<sup>41</sup> Kurt Larsen, John P. Martin, and Rosemary Morris, “Trade in Educational Services: Trends and Emerging Issues,” *The World Economy* 25, no. 6 (June 2002): 849–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9701.00466>.

<sup>42</sup> De Wit et al., “Internationalisation of Higher Education,” 48.

### *Student Perceptions*

It is necessary to understand relevant literature on student perceptions in education. As previously mentioned, it is quite easy to find literature pertaining to student perceptions of home university programs (satisfaction surveys, student evaluations, etc.) but more challenging to find literature relating to other experiences (study abroad, international programs, etc.) and nearly impossible to find studies done combining these concepts to understand individual international student perceptions. A relatable note of this gap in the literature is pointed out in Julianne East's article where she also mentions that "while much is written about the needs of international students, little has been written about how international students perceive their experience...".<sup>43</sup>

Studies of student perceptions in higher education are varied in their foci. One consistent theme throughout many student perception studies is location. There are a significant number of studies done on international students in Australia. Studies that were previously mentioned such as the study of 2,200 undergraduate students at an Australian university<sup>44</sup> or the study of English as a Second Language students at La Trobe University in Australia<sup>45</sup> as well as studies that were not previously mentioned such as one person's thesis on Saudi Arabian student perceptions in an Australian university,<sup>46</sup> a study of Vietnamese international students experiences undertaking their education at an Australian university,<sup>47</sup> or the study published by the International Education Association of Australia about international student experiences<sup>48</sup> all root their data in understanding the experiences of international students in Australian universities. Most likely this is because international students in Australia make up twenty-one per cent of tertiary enrollments in Australia and only six per cent in other countries. Furthermore, international students are enrolling more frequently in graduate-level programs with forty-eight per cent of enrollments being at master level and thirty-two per cent being doctoral candidates. Of this large number of

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<sup>43</sup> East, "International Students Identified as Customer."

<sup>44</sup> Ramburuth and Tani, "The Impact of Culture on Learning."

<sup>45</sup> East, "International Students Identified as Customer."

<sup>46</sup> Ashley Mark Orth, "International Students' Perceptions of their experience of higher education in Australia: A focus on Saudi Arabian student in their first year of a business course in a major Australian university," Doctoral, Queensland University of Technology, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Wearing et al., "The International Student's Experience".

<sup>48</sup> Ravichandran Ammigan and Debra Langton, "The International Student Experience in Australia: Implications for Administrators and Student Support Staff," International Education Association of Australia (IEAA), November 2018.

international students, many are coming from Asian countries with the top seven sending countries in 2019 being: China, India, Nepal, Brazil, Vietnam, Malaysia, and South Korea, respectively.<sup>49</sup> This data tells us that there is a large base for exploring international student experiences in Australia. It also explains why there is more literature exploring the perceptions of international students in Australia than in other places.

A significant factor in student perception studies is the methodology used. Methodological approaches seem to be widely varied based on scope and research focus/research question. The most basic studies used only a single methodology, typically surveys, to survey a large group of participants such as Ramburuth and Tani's study,<sup>50</sup> Honjiang Xu's study,<sup>51</sup> or the survey of 21,000 international undergraduate students,<sup>52</sup> whereas slightly more in-depth and complex studies used interviews to gather data such as Wearing et al.'s study<sup>53</sup> and Orth's dissertation,<sup>54</sup> and finally an even more in-depth study utilized surveys, interviews, and group discussions such as East's study<sup>55</sup>. Each of these particular methodologies have their strong points as well as limitations.

As for survey methodology, it is useful for large-scale studies looking for generalities amongst specific groups but limited in finding particularities amongst small specific groups. Interviews are slightly better in this aspect of noting particularities of individuals; however, in one of these studies half of the interviews were conducted by email and the other half face-to-face, which brings into question the effectiveness of the email interviews as they seem to be almost equivalent to open-ended surveys. Lastly, the mixed methodology approach should be the most effective and useful, in general, although in the study noted here, it did not survey, interview, and conduct focus group discussions with the same participants. This can lead to varied results and inconsistent findings. As a result, the mixed methodology approach would have been better conducted by utilizing these methods to assess and compare experiences amongst the same participants in each

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<sup>49</sup> Studying in Australia, "International Student in Australia Statistics," Accessed August 7, 2021, <https://www.studying-in-australia.org/international-student-in-australia-statistics/>.

<sup>50</sup> Ramburuth and Tani, "The Impact of Culture on Learning."

<sup>51</sup> Hongjiang Xu, "Students' Perceptions of University Education – USA vs. China," *Research in Higher Education Journal*, March 2011, 1–10.

<sup>52</sup> Studying in Australia, "International Student in Australia Statistics".

<sup>53</sup> Wearing et al., "The International Student's Experience".

<sup>54</sup> Orth, "International Students' Perceptions".

<sup>55</sup> East, "International Students Identified as Customer."

methodology and from the same groups (i.e., same class or background). There were simply too many variables in this mixed methodology approach.

### *Dialogism*

First and foremost, we must acknowledge the effect language has on a person's perception of the world, at least to some degree. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, first brought about in 1929, proclaimed there was a link between the language someone spoke and thought and perception and most commonly defined as:

A theory developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf that states that the structure of a language determines or greatly influences the modes of thought and behavior characteristic of the culture in which it is spoken.<sup>56</sup>

This hypothesis is the basis of many theories linking culture, cognition, and language. Amongst these are Summa Linguae's discussion of the link between communication and perception<sup>57</sup> or Basel Al-Sheikh Hussein's article describing the evolution of the hypothesis and its implications for today.<sup>58</sup>

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is one of the most basic, foundational ways in which we understand language and human interaction. Sapir himself even stated:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society,<sup>59</sup>

a concept much in line with Bakhtin's, the Soviet-era theorist discussing dialogism we talked about in the Introduction.

Robinson draws similar conclusions through interpreting Bakhtin's work that relates to Sapir's work, stating that those following Bakhtin's philosophy believe that "the social world is also made up of multiple voices, perspectives, and subjective 'worlds' ... [and] to

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<sup>56</sup> www.dictionary.com, "Definition of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis | Dictionary.Com," Accessed August 13, 2021, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/sapir-whorf-hypothesis>.

<sup>57</sup> Summa Linguae, "Communication & Perception: Does Language Affect How We Think?," February 21, 2020, <https://summalinguae.com/language-culture/communication-vs-perception-of-the-world-does-language-affect-how-we-think/>.

<sup>58</sup> Basel Al-Sheikh Hussein, "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Today," *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2, no. 3 (March 1, 2012): 642–46, <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.3.642-646>.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science," *Language* 5, no. 4 (December 1929): 207-14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/409588>.

exist is to engage in dialogue...”.<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, however, extended his analysis of dialogism even further using heteroglossia. “Heteroglossia” is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as, “the fact of there being two or more languages or types of a language in a place [or opinions in a text]”,<sup>61</sup> the original quotation referring to language and the brackets referring to a literary sense. Each of these concepts are linked to the idea of the interplay between language, interaction, and culture. While many sources may not explicitly use these terms, their ideas and hypotheses tend to be the same.

Some examples of these schools of thought include studies done on the exploration of the relationship between language and culture from a cultural linguistics stance<sup>62</sup> and an article discussing the significance of the implementation of interactional discourse in cognitive linguistics,<sup>63</sup> showing the wide variety of applications for these concepts.

Additionally, an article drawing upon these same concepts poses the question of:

What should we identify as minimal stimulus conditions that presumably motivate the way that individual and group distributed frames of reference and action come into existence in order to initiate, sustain and alter social interaction (for example, talk, facial expressions, body movement, smell, prosody, semantic/syntactic/phonological/pragmatic complexity, artifacts, physical/spatial conditions, interpersonal relations, cultural practices)?<sup>64</sup>

Simply put, this quote poses the question of: how is language brought to life by social interactions? Only it asks it in a more complex and convoluted way. Again, drawing us back to this idea of dialogism. All these sources show just how interconnected these concepts are and the desire of human beings to understand these connections. Quoting Bakhtin, he says:

In a conversation, both speakers are different from each other and the utterance each makes is always different from the other’s (even when one appears to repeat the “same” word as the other).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Robinson, “In Theory Bakhtin”.

<sup>61</sup> “Heteroglossia,” Accessed August 13, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/heteroglossia>.

<sup>62</sup> Alfredo Hernandez Corsen, “Language, Culture, Perception, and Knowledge,” *McNair Scholars Journal* 13, no. 1 (2009): 63–71.

<sup>63</sup> Elisabeth Zima and Geert Brône, “Cognitive Linguistics and Interactional Discourse: Time to Enter into Dialogue,” *Language and Cognition* 7, no. 4 (December 2015): 485–98, <https://doi.org/10.1017/langcog.2015.19>.

<sup>64</sup> Aaron V Cicourel, “The Interaction of Discourse, Cognition and Culture,” *Discourse Studies* 8, no. 1 (February 2006): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445606059547>.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London; New York: Routledge, 1990, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10098622>.

This is proven true through the various studies reflected here as well as in everyday life.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

The lack of literature incorporating and interrelating internationalization in higher education, student perceptions, and dialogism is the largest gap, followed by the approaches in addressing internationalization in higher education (policy approaches rather than student approaches) and the inconsistent methodology of examining student perceptions in higher education (typically quantitative and generalized rather than qualitative and individualized). Each brings its own issues, solvable by combining these areas and utilizing the best and most comprehensive structures from each. This study of Euroculture revolutionarily involves all three concepts to understand the interplay of student perception in internationalization as well as the use of focus group methodology to understand student perceptions in higher education. In both instances, dialogism is the conductor of the change in tactic. Rooting the approach and methodology in dialogism through focus groups changes the outlook and attitude of the study. Contributing significantly to a new way of understanding student perceptions and experiences.

## 2.3 Methodology

The chief research problem was to gain a better understanding of how students position themselves in their academic and educational experiences, both undergraduate and graduate. To determine how people interact, share their experiences, adapt and compare these experiences, and interact with one another and what all of this conveys about shared educational experiences of students from different cultural and educational backgrounds. To do this, primary qualitative data from students who had already finished previous undergraduate degrees and were studying for their first or second graduate degree in Euroculture or those who had already finished their Euroculture graduate degree was needed. After extensive research into methodological options, it was determined that focus

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groups were the best choice of data collection methodology concerning this specific research question.

To narrow the focus for participant selection criteria, the emphasis shifted specifically to students in the Euroculture program. To allow for the maximum number of participants, the focus groups were opened to Euroculture students of the 2020-2022 cohort, 2019-2021 cohort, 2018-2020 cohort, 2017-2019 cohort, and 2016-2018 cohort. An initial survey of interest was distributed at the beginning of May 2021 through various channels to past and present Euroculture students to determine participant availability and willingness to participate. This initial survey was posted to the Euroculture 2019-2021 Facebook group, the Euroculture 2020-2022 Facebook group, the EuC Gottingen 2021 WhatsApp group (a group chat amongst Euroculture students studying in Gottingen in the Summer Semester of 2021, both second and fourth semester students), as well as sent by email from the Euroculture Consortium (to the 2020-2022 cohort and 2019-2021 cohort), the Olomouc Euroculture coordinator (to all students who studied in Olomouc during any semester and from any cohort), and the Gottingen Euroculture coordinator (to all students who studied in Gottingen during any semester and from any cohort).

The initial survey included basic information regarding participants, such as: cohort year, first and second university choices, home country, and availability for focus group participation. Based on this initial data, students were then placed into focus groups, mainly accommodating availability, but also trying to coordinate based on home country and background to make groups more homogeneous when possible.

In total, seventeen individuals indicated they were available and would like to participate in the focus groups. Participants were sent a short email including all other members of the focus group indicating the date, time, and a brief recap of what they would be discussing. Of the seventeen interested, fourteen individuals ended up taking part in the research. All focus groups consisted of between two and four participants. Focus groups were then conducted virtually via Zoom in mid-May over the span of five days: Wednesday, May 12, 2021, Thursday, May 13, 2021, Friday, May 14, 2021, Saturday, May 15, 2021 and Thursday, May 20, 2021 (which was an additional focus group added). Each focus group was allotted one hour and thirty minutes total for discussion.

The moderator (me) developed a “focus group guide” based on articles and sources relating to focus group preparation, moderation, and analysis. Included in the guide were a brief welcome, “pre- focus group” ground rules/guidelines for our discussion and opening/additional questions taken from Richard Kreuger’s *Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews*. The “focus group guide” is listed below as could be found on the document used:

### **FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION:**

#### **Welcome**

- Introduce moderator and assistant

#### **Our topic is ...**

- The results will be used for ...
- You were selected because ...

#### **Guidelines**

- No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view
- We're tape recording, one person speaking at a time
- We're on a first name basis
- You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views
- Rules for cellular phones and pagers if applicable. For example: We ask that your turn off your phones or pagers. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.
- My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion
- Talk to each other<sup>66</sup>

**Opening question:** Brief introductions, where you are from, where you did your undergraduate degree, what you studied

### **FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS:**

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<sup>66</sup> Richard A. Krueger, “Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews,” (October 2002), 3.



1. What was your undergraduate experience like? (learning approaches, culture, focus of studies, etc.)
2. Describe the learning approaches you experienced during your undergraduate studies.
  - a. What differences in learning approaches did you notice between your undergraduate and graduate studies?
  - b. Specific learning approaches during your undergraduate studies?
3. What made you want to enroll in Euroculture or an international program? (the commonality that brought you all here is wanting to study in Europe)
4. What expectations did you have for graduate studies based on your undergraduate experiences?
5. What surprised you when you got here?
  - a. Reality of graduate studies?
6. What cultural views on education were there in your home country?
7. How do you think cultural background shaped your educational experiences?
8. How do you think your educational background shaped your experience in your current studies?
9. Do you think your cultural background influenced the way you interact with professors/ authority figures?
  - a. Probe: In what ways?
10. Do you think your cultural background influenced the way you interact with classmates/ other students?
  - a. Probe: In what ways?
11. Are there any questions that you think I should have asked but didn't? Or are there any final comments you would like to make?

Other questions during the focus group:

1. Different experiences between the two semesters?
2. Was there a specific reason for choosing your universities?
3. Is there anything that you would change about your undergraduate and graduate experiences?

The questions in the “FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS” section were all created before the focus groups took place and were the main objectives to guide the discussion. The questions in the “Other questions during the focus group” section were questions that arose from discussion in the groups. Not all questions were asked outright in groups if the moderator felt that the group had already sufficiently talked about the topic relating to the question or if the moderator felt that the group viewed other topics as more important based on their discussions. The list of “FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS” were the ones to be asked and answered first as they were what was perceived as containing the most relevant information to the study.

The data analysis process was long and tedious, but ultimately rewarding and enlightening. The data was mainly processed and analyzed using HappyScribe and MAXQDA. All audio recordings were uploaded to HappyScribe to be automatically transcribed through their system and then personally rechecked by the researcher to assure accuracy. Afterwards all transcripts and video recordings of the Zoom sessions were then uploaded to MAXQDA for further detailed analysis of each focus group. The detailed analysis included using conversational analysis to spot subtle interactions between participants to gauge the dialogism occurring in the discourse. In addition to paying attention to the interactions of the participants, focusing on participants tones, gestures, and body language were of key importance in understanding their perceptions of their experiences as well. Furthermore, the specific language and words used were analyzed as were the shared and differing experiences of the participants. Conversation analysis with an “utterance-by-utterance” approach was used when listening to the recordings and doing the coding. Some coding labels included: reflections of experiences, relationships with professors, relationships with classmates/colleagues, cultural, expectations, motivations, comparisons (undergraduate, graduate, abroad), and many more.

Focus groups were chosen because they offered an opportunity to research communication theory and dialogism to best understand the research focus: how do students from diverse cultural backgrounds in a shared educational experience interact, compare, and share their experiences, and relate to one another? Conversation analysis “identif[ies] the connections that exist between particularities that are found in the details of

human action and the generalities that can be derived from shared organizational problems and resources”<sup>67</sup>, which means that this was the only suitable method to draw from both individual experiences and shared group experiences.

Articles on focus group methodology from Iowa State University<sup>68</sup> and Sue Wilkinson<sup>69</sup> give significant evidence to support why focus groups were the best methodological choice for this particular study. One of the main advantages of focus groups is that “the researcher listens not only for the content of focus group discussions, but for emotions, ironies, contradictions, and tensions”,<sup>70</sup> which allow the researcher to understand facts and the meaning behind the facts. Since perceptions and opinions cannot accurately be measured numerically the meaning and intention behind perceptions must be understood. Another advantage of focus groups was their flexibility and allowances for conversation, which was not offered through conducting surveys. Grudens-Schuck, Allen, and Larson point out in their article that “Good conversation ebbs and flows. Individuals laugh, tell personal stories, revisit an earlier question, disagree, contradict themselves, and interrupt.”<sup>71</sup> such interactions are not possible through surveys and are limited in interviews. Focus groups are a good way to understand what Sue Wilkinson describe as an “individual’s lifeworld”<sup>72</sup> or rather a person’s own understanding, experience, or viewpoint on a particular topic. Based on these above examples and a variety of others not mentioned, it can be concluded that other methodological choices (surveys and interviews) were ill-suited for this specific study.

Other studies conducted have focused on interviews or mass survey data to understand student perceptions in higher education, such as the work of Prem Ramburuth and Massimiliano Tani<sup>73</sup> and Hongjiang Xu’s.<sup>74</sup> These previously conducted studies sought

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<sup>67</sup> Communication Theory, “Conversation Analysis,” April 27, 2015, <https://www.communicationtheory.org/conversation-analysis/>.

<sup>68</sup> Nancy Grudens-Schuck, Beverlyn Allen, and Kathlene Larson, “Methodology Brief: Focus Group Fundamentals,” *Extension Community and Economic Development Publications*, May 1, 2004, [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/extension\\_communities\\_pubs/12](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/extension_communities_pubs/12).

<sup>69</sup> Sue Wilkinson, “Focus Group Methodology: A Review,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 1, no. 3 (January 1998): 181–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.1998.10846874>.

<sup>70</sup> Grudens-Schuck, Allen, and Larson, “Methodology Brief”.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Wilkinson, “Focus Group Methodology: A Review,” 185.

<sup>73</sup> Ramburuth and Tani, “The Impact of Culture on Learning.”

<sup>74</sup> Xu. “Students’ Perceptions of University Education – USA vs. China.”

out students' individual perceptions and drew generalities between individual's separate experiences. On the other hand, this specific study aimed to understand individual's perceptions of themselves and their shared educational experiences in the Euroculture program by observing dialogue and interaction between students and how they compare these experiences, relate to one another, and position themselves within this dialogue. Additionally, many of these studies focused on perceptions of learning among students, whereas this study focused on the perception of experiences in relationship to culture.

This study contributes to this field by adding an additional approach to understanding student perceptions in higher education. Furthermore, due to the unique nature of the Euroculture Program there are very few studies that can be conducted in a similar capacity (i.e., a program made completely of international Erasmus students due to changing universities and countries each semester). As a result of this uniqueness, research of this specific capacity is rare, meaning this study contributes largely to this field in adding additional "non-typical" types of international programs to the discussion. While some may view this lack of generalizability as a weakness the opposite is true. Generalizable studies are plentiful, yet more personal and individualized ones are atypical. In this way students are understood as distinctive individuals with unique individual experiences rather than non-specific quantitative statistics, adding an extra layer of complexity and understanding

As with any research, obviously, there are limitations. For example, this study was conducted during the time of COVID, which greatly influenced not just student experiences, but general experiences all over the world. Even so, this research did not focus on how the COVID situation changed students' experiences. This obviously had an impact, yet this study was focused more on the "typical" experience that would have been, whereas COVID will eventually end, and students will resume to more "normal" conditions. Therefore, this information wasn't relevant in this instance for understanding students' perceptions and the impact of that information was minimal on the study as students were able to make a distinction between what might have been and what COVID ultimately changed. However, this could be an interesting point of further research for future studies on student perceptions and experiences.

The second limitation would be the group size for the focus groups. While most methodology literature typically suggested between five to ten participants per group, this

study had between two to four participants per group. Smaller group sizes were not intentional, but due to participant availability and some last-minute participant cancellations, the groups ended up being smaller. While small group size was not intentional there were many benefits to smaller groups. Some examples include more room for participants to discuss in the allotted time as well as participants being more willing to participate. Since focus groups were conducted virtually smaller groups sizes were preferable, as it gave a sense of being more intimate and inviting than being in a virtual chat with people you may have never met in person. Overall, the challenges encountered were easily overcome and posed no significant impact on the true nature of the study.

## Chapter Three

### Focus Group Results

Mentioned extensively in the methodology section, here will be a brief recap. This study was comprised of five focus groups with between two and four participants per group (four participants in focus group one, two participants in focus group two, three participants in focus groups three and four, and two participants in focus group five), for a total of fourteen participants. During the focus groups, students were asked to give a brief introduction of themselves including, but not limited to, where they were from, where they did their undergraduate studies, and what they studied. Briefly listed below is the demographic information gathered from the focus groups. Twelve of the fourteen participants were women, and the other two participants were men, which is not uncommon for research of this nature. Of the fourteen participants their nationality breakdown is as follows: three participants from the Netherlands, two participants from France, two participants from Germany, two participants of mixed nationality (French Brazilian and Moroccan Italian), one participant from China, one participant from Denmark, one participant from Indonesia, one participant from Kyrgyzstan, and one participant from the United States.

Participants also came from a variety of educational backgrounds including: the Performing Arts, German Studies, European Studies, Psychology, Foreign Languages and Literature, History, Political Science, Linguistics, Cultural Anthropology, English Literature and Linguistics, Chinese Literature and Linguistics, or some combination of the degrees listed. Additionally, one of the participants had already completed a master's program before entering Euroculture and another had done a "pre-masters" to be eligible for Euroculture. Participants attended a mix of seven out of the eight universities in their first year of Euroculture with the Universidad de Deusto in Spain being the only one not attended as their first- or second-semester university by any of the participants. Lastly, the participants fell into one of the three most recent cohorts: 2018-2020, 2019-2021, or 2020-2022. Two participants were from the 2018-2020 cohort, nine from the 2019-2021 cohort, and three from the 2020-2022 cohort. Focus groups were comprised of a mix of gender,

nationality, educational background, and cohort so no one group contained participants from a single demographic background.

The five focus groups were coded meticulously using sixty-four different coding options. On top of these codes, each participant was also coded individually. This dual coding method allowed for cross-referencing of codes across focus groups and analysis of individual perspectives as well. Based on the participant codes, it was found that the division of talking time, for each person was different per group. Some had more equal division of “Talk Time” while others were more imbalanced. Not all the percentages add up to one hundred per cent and that is because of the MAXQDA software. MAXQDA counted each of the focus groups as between ninety-eight per cent and ninety-nine per cent coded because typically, the last few minutes were spent talking about other subjects unrelated to the study after the focus group questions had concluded.

From the data gathered during the study some common themes emerged across the focus groups. Coded as “SEQUENTIAL” in MAXQDA these themes appear across multiple focus groups and sometimes all. These themes are further divided and analyzed from one of two categories: language/terms carried throughout groups or ideas carried throughout groups. It is important to note such themes because focus groups were separated and to the best of the researcher’s knowledge none of the focus group participants were aware of who were in other groups, questions to be asked, or things discussed. So, it is not likely that once the interviews were concluded that they shared information with others. Some of the language/terms carried throughout the focus groups included: “prestige” (found in Focus Group One Focus Group Three, Focus Group Four, and Focus Group Five), “bubbles”- which includes terms like “friend bubbles” and “Euroculture bubble” (found in Focus Group One, Focus Group Three, and Focus Group Five), and finally “culture shock/cultural shock” (found in Focus Group One, Focus Group Three, and Focus Group Four). Ideas carried throughout the focus groups included: disappointment of academic level of Euroculture, common expectations, and reflections of influences of family, friends, and environment on education and experiences.

As previously noted in the Methodology section of this paper of the eleven “focus group questions” and the three “other questions during the focus group”, not all of them were asked outright. As a result, each focus group had a different amount and mix of the

questions participants were deliberately asked. A thorough breakdown of questions asked in each focus group is listed below:

**Focus Group One Questions Asked:**

1. Please describe your undergraduate experiences.
2. What were your expectations for your graduate studies?
3. Do the different semesters play a role in your experiences?
4. Were there specific reasons you chose certain universities in Euroculture?
5. What are the cultural views on education and learning in your home countries?
6. How do you think your cultural backgrounds influence your perception of education and your own educational experiences?
7. Is there anything you would like to add?

**Focus Group Two Questions Asked:**

1. Please describe your undergraduate experiences.
2. What were some differences between undergraduate and graduate studies that you noticed?
3. What were your expectations for your graduate studies?
4. What differences were there between the two universities/semesters?
  - a. Cultural aspects of the universities
5. Were there specific motivations for choosing specific universities?
6. What were your motivations for applying to Euroculture or other international programs?
7. What are the cultural views of education in your home countries?
8. Do you think that the cultural perceptions from your home countries have shaped the way that you view education and your own experiences with education?
9. The perceptions towards education coming from your home countries, have they shaped your own perception and experience in education?
10. Did your cultural background influence the way you interact with professors or classmates?
11. Is there anything you would change about your undergraduate or graduate studies?



12. Is there anything you would like to add or anything you feel like I should have asked?

**Focus Group Three Questions Asked:**

1. Please describe your undergraduate experiences.
2. Did you have any expectations for your graduate studies based on your undergraduate experiences?
3. What were your motivations for applying to Euroculture/international programs/masters programs?
4. What are the cultural views of education in your home countries?
5. How did the cultural views of education in home countries shape your own views towards education?
6. Anything to add?

**Focus Group Four Questions Asked:**

1. Please describe your undergraduate experiences.
2. What were your motivations for applying to Euroculture/international programs?
3. What were your expectations for graduate studies?
4. Were there differences in learning and teaching in your undergraduate versus graduate studies?
  - a. If so, what were they?
5. What are the cultural views towards education in your home countries?
6. How did home country cultural views shape your perception of education?
7. Do your cultural views influence the ways you interact with professors or classmates?

**Focus Group Five Questions Asked:**

1. Please describe your undergraduate experiences.
2. What were your expectations for the graduate program?
3. What were the cultural views of education in your home countries?

4. How do your cultural backgrounds influence the way you interact with professors and classmates?
5. Anything additional you feel is relevant to your experiences?

Upon further analysis of these questions, there were four topics consistently asked about during the focus groups:

1. Describing undergraduate experiences
2. Expectations of graduate program
3. Cultural views of education in home country
4. How cultural views shape perception of education / How cultural views shape interactions with professors and classmates

This fourth point is divided into two because it was often asked as two separate questions or some mix of these two questions were asked.

Motivations for applying to Euroculture or other international programs were directly asked about in three of the five focus groups, but all five of the groups mentioned this aspect at some point. Focusing on the language/terms carried throughout groups, we can then draw from a variety of codes to understand each participant individually and how they changed perspectives or added to their opinions within the focus groups.

## Chapter Four

### Discussion of Results

There is so much more to understanding students' perceptions than simply their answers. To gain a full picture, it is best to see what direction they head given a certain question, how they describe their experiences, and how their descriptions and reflections ebb and flow throughout conversations and the introduction of new perspectives. This section aims to discuss some of the results mentioned in the previous section and provide some examples of each. First, we will focus on the language/terms and ideas found throughout the focus groups, followed by a discussion of each focus group through individual's responses to the four questions asked in each group as well as motivations (asked in most of the groups, but discussed in each of the groups). As previously mentioned, one of the main gaps in the literature regarding student perceptions comes from the large-scale generalization of specific groups of international students. Because of this, this research addresses individuals and avoids generalizing about "all" international students or certain cultural stereotypes.

Through discussions of student responses to the questions asked we will also be able to answer the original research question aiming to explore how students coming from shared educational experiences in Euroculture from diverse cultural backgrounds interact, compare, and share their experiences, and relate to one another through conversation. In addition, we can also draw conclusions about how students position themselves in their experiences and why this information is important, subjects to be discussed further in the Conclusions section. It is important to note that many of the codes overlap, but it is necessary to discuss them separately as well as interconnectedly to get a more complete picture of the data moving from a broad overview of the groups to individuals' perspectives.

Because this study is more focused on understanding individual perceptions and the way they are changing and evolving through their conversations, it makes the most sense to look at each focus group individually. Due to the methodology (focus groups) and the focus of the study (dialogism) there is much interconnection between student perceptions, which is unsurprising. These connections will be talked about more clearly and concretely in the

Conclusion. Here, all five focus groups will be discussed individually regarding introductions and self-descriptions, undergraduate experiences, expectations, and motivations for applying to Euroculture and wanting to go abroad, cultural views of education in participants home countries, and the influences of family, friends, and environments on participants perceptions of education.

#### 4.1 “Sequential”

One of the first things to jump out from the data was the “sequential” code of frequently used words and ideas that spanned multiple focus groups. Broadly speaking, one of the reasons that this code and its themes mark a unique characteristic in this study is that it indicates students with shared educational experiences will utilize similar terminology and discuss similar ideas, regardless of whether they are presented with the choices or not. This is relevant as in many other studies, we remarked that students were presented with surveys leading them to set choices to describe their experiences and not much freedom in further expressing their opinions. As previously noted, there are three main terms appearing at various times in the group interviews: “prestige”, “bubbles”, and “culture shock/cultural shock”. Here we discuss the first two terms and their implications in detail and briefly look at the third. Then, we look at the common ideas carried through the focus groups. These themes are briefly mentioned here as they are discussed in more depth in relationship to individual experiences. These common themes included: students’ main expectations from their master’s program, disappointments with their experiences in Euroculture, and influences on their perceptions and experiences in education (including, but not limited to family, friends, home countries, and their environments).

Relating to the terms, the first one to be addressed is “prestige”. It was used by participants to describe ideas related to their undergraduate experiences or perceptions in their home countries regarding higher education. The second and third terms, “bubbles” and “culture shock/cultural shock” were used to describe experiences relating to Euroculture. For the term “prestige”, in Focus Group One and Focus Group Four, the moderator is the one who introduced the term when asking about perceptions of education in home countries. In both groups, we notice that the term is frequently used and by nearly every

individual. However, in Focus Group Three and Focus Group Five the term was not introduced by the moderator, and we notice that it was still brought up, but not as frequently used. This could indicate that while students still had this thought of prestige it wasn't one of their first thoughts when reflecting on views of higher education in their home countries unless directly mentioned.

In Focus Group One, participants did not immediately pick up the term “prestige” as common use after the moderator posed the question. It was only after some discussion and listening to others that the term became something participants began to focus on. We notice that it was first used by Student B remarking “in my home country [Indonesia], the majority of people actually don't go to higher education, and maybe that's also why higher education is seen as prestige” followed by Student A re-reflecting on education in their home country after hearing this remark following up on what they have already talked about by saying, “In terms of prestige, I think there is a now more than ever like a big division among the Brazilian population in which a portion of it either dreams about it or thinks...like it's the path towards knowledge”, lastly followed by Student D noting that “there's like different levels of prestige and the way that people categorize different universities” and “I think the universities that carry the most prestige, the Ivy League schools, are the ones that are going to be the most expensive”.

Additionally, from Focus Group Four, we notice these mentions of “prestige” again. Conversely, participants in Focus Group Four used the term “prestige” in an alternate manner, mentioning that “here [Kyrgyzstan] governmental institutions are not really prestigious as...in many other countries in the world... [but that] it's really prestigious to be educated, to have a higher degree.” Student J notes that “naturally, when you have an academic degree, people will think that you know your things, you know what you've studied, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you're, as a person, very prestigious”.

Even amongst these two focus groups we notice that their perceptions and reflections change based on their interactions and listening to others speak. Once one of the participants started describing and thinking about “prestige” in their home countries, it led to others beginning to think about it and reflect on it in their home countries as well. So, even though they may have already answered the question, after hearing the responses of others they developed new perspectives and ideas on the matter of home country's

perception of higher education. There doesn't seem to be any link on a country basis as the participants remarking about prestige come from different countries (Indonesia, Brazil, the United States, Kyrgyzstan, and The Netherlands). These perspectives of "prestige" stemming from what they believe to be the cultural views in their home countries most likely contribute to the way they approach education and their outlooks and feelings regarding education. Someone coming from a country where higher education is seen as the norm will most likely not place as much significance on degrees as opposed to someone from a country where it is a bit more prestigious to hold a degree.

The second and third terms carried throughout focus groups pertain to Euroculture experiences of the participants talking about "bubbles" (i.e., friend bubbles and Euroculture bubble) and "culture shock/cultural shock". Neither of these terms were introduced by the moderator, so participants truly initiated these terms themselves. We first see the term "bubble" used in Focus Group #1 where Student A mentions that in Germany "they have their own close bubbles, and you don't really enter it and that's it" and Student D follows up adding, "it's a little bit harder to get inside of someone's friend bubble in Germany" and then Student B commenting "I completely agree with the German thing of like friend bubbles, but I think that's probably also a northern European thing because, well, I was expecting it since that's the same in Denmark. And it was the same in Sweden as well".

Focus Group One focused more on "friend bubbles", specifically in the German education system where three of the four participants noted this as being a part of their experiences. We notice that the only person who did not mention "friend bubbles" did not study in Gottingen during their time in Euroculture. This idea seemed to be focused more on the culture in Germany and how students related to that. Furthermore, Student A and Student D studied together in Gottingen their first semester so it can be assumed that they had similar experiences due to that or they had already discussed this issue at some point before. This does not, however, explain Student B's own reflection of this and their addition that it seemed there were similar "friend bubbles" seen in Sweden and their home country Denmark. An interesting extension of this "bubble" concept is found in Focus Group Three and Focus Group Five referring to a "Euroculture bubble". The first mention of this "Euroculture bubble" comes from Student I in Focus Group Three when they state "with COVID it's just not possible to meet people that are not in your Euroculture bubble",

which is then followed by Student G reflecting on their experiences in Euroculture and noting that “it's still very much this Euroculture bubble, which is also great, it's a great cohort. I've met great people, but it is very much a bubble”. This was again mentioned in Focus Group Five by Student N, who remarked that “the program is a bit inward looking like we're really in a Euroculture bubble and we don't really meet the locals, the local people”.

Student I, Student G, and Student N all come from different Euroculture cohorts showing that this same feeling of having this “Euroculture bubble” extends beyond just singular students or focus groups, but even across multiple cohorts. Because if three students, from three different cohorts, in two different focus groups comment on this same concept unprompted it is not far-fetched to believe there could be others who feel this way as well. While the different groups are referring to different types of “bubbles”, (i. e., friend bubbles in Germany in Focus Group One and Euroculture bubbles in Focus Group Three) overall, these comments still contribute to this sense that there are “pockets” within Euroculture in various aspects. The “culture shock/cultural shock” term carried throughout the groups is varying in its implications in student perceptions. For example, Student D refers to culture shock during their study abroad experience in their undergraduate degree, Student G refers to culture shock when interacting with professors in Euroculture at the university in Krakow, and Students J, K, and L all mention their lack of cultural shock coming into Euroculture. Even though the ways in which culture shock are talked about in their experiences are different it's important to note that for five of the fourteen focus group participants culture shock played a role in how they viewed their experiences and the ways in which they related to specific events they viewed relevant to their experiences.

Relating to ideas carried throughout groups, one of the first discussed is the disappointment in the academic level of Euroculture in relation to the student expectations. While this wasn't cited much (only by Student E, Student M, and Student N), it is of significance because the first two references of it came from French nationals, who also both mentioned that the academic level in France during their undergraduate studies was quite demanding. In addition, both students studied history for their undergraduate degrees. While it would be reasonable to assume their undergraduate degree focus and country of origin had something to do with this expectation and disappointment it cannot be

ascertained. It can, however, be concluded that certain country backgrounds do influence student expectations. A handful of other students coming from different countries (i.e., The Netherlands and Italy) also described similar disappointments in comparison to what they were expecting, while not explicitly linking it to academic level disappointments nor to the program overall. Some disappointments arose from certain expectations for specific semesters and others for specific universities. Again, the common theme noted in these disappointments is the fact that students had certain standards in mind coming from their own educational backgrounds.

Second, there is a collective theme of shared expectations that continuously arises in discussion. One of the numerous shared expectations and motivations comes from the idea of networking and mobility. In Focus Group One, Student A states, “I decided to come for this master’s with a clear intention of networking”. This networking idea is again seen in Focus Group Three by Student H saying, “I also really admired the chance to get in contact with people from so many different places” and Student I also noting, “to sum up what you just said, exchange among each other, of course, then the mobility aspect” as factors in what they expected and why they were motivated to apply to Euroculture.

The same themes are continued in Focus Group Five where both participants note the networking and mobility aspects with Student N stating, “the strong points of Euroculture is traveling around and meeting new people” and Student M agreeing that “the good thing is like the networking thingy, I guess”. These examples are some of the many statements regarding networking and mobility within Euroculture, showing that these two themes seemed to have a strong impact on many student experiences. Finally, the influence of family, friends, and the environment was a recurring theme of influence on education perception and educational experiences. This theme frequently emerged in nearly every focus group from one participant or another. Influences ranged from educational environment, country influences, family and friends, and personal views towards education.

#### 4.2 Focus Groups

The “Sequential” code referred to the commonalities seen across all the focus groups. Some of these common phrases and shared perceptions were previously mentioned,



but others have not yet been listed. Among these other commonalities, all participants included about their Euroculture experiences were how they spent their first and second semester and sometimes even what they did for the third semester (research or internship track). This information is considered valuable because it reveals the ways in which students described themselves and how they uniquely position themselves in their cultures, education, and experiences. Because the mention of their Euroculture semesters was unprompted by the moderator and it continued throughout most of the focus groups, we note that this information is relevant for situating their experiences.

### *Focus Group One*

First, each focus group started with introductions. The introductions were typically brief and did not carry much interaction. Student A introduced themselves as “half French, half Brazilian” and further elaborated that they were “born in France and... grew up in Brazil”. Student B followed with “I’m from Indonesia and I studied in Indonesia as well for my bachelor degree”. Student C continued “I’m from Denmark and I took my undergraduate there” and Student D concluded the introductions by mentioning, “I’m from the U.S., I grew up mostly in California. I did my bachelors in Chicago”. The interesting thing about the introductions is the way in which students describe themselves in relation to their countries. For example, Student A describes themselves as “French” and “Brazilian” whereas the other three students remark that they “are from” a certain country rather than noting their nationality or identifying with it, making it sound more detached.

Second, participants were asked about their undergraduate experiences. This question prompted more interaction and comparison between students when discussing. Student C started this discussion and remarked that even their own home country thought the university they attended was “a bit special” and categorized it as “a hippie university” with many group projects and a lot of criticism in the public debate. Student D then commented that they went to a “pretty small liberal arts university” where they:

always had really small classes and got to not necessarily be friends with my professors but know my professors a little bit and have a lot of "handholding" in a way, at least in comparison to what I've experienced in European systems...

They then compared this experience to their experience in Europe where the “German education systems are kind of a little bit more hands off” and in France it was “in many ways like even more hands-off than Germany”, respectively talking about their first and second semester universities of Euroculture. They even note “the type of schooling I was used to in the states where you're taking notes in every classroom based on what the teacher says, and you have like a test at the end and then it's done” comparing this to the more open and discussion-based system of Euroculture.

Student D briefly mentions how there was more contact with their professors in their undergraduate degree than they have experienced with professors in Euroculture. Student A continues the discussion describing their own undergraduate experience as “quite unique” coming from a degree in the arts where “you see your colleagues naked now and again”. This unique closeness of Student A’s undergraduate experience stemmed from their unique university experience stating “my university is the biggest in the state...but we were like forty new students every year...so we were kind of a tiny campus and we knew everyone” which in turn led them to have rather close relationships with their professors and fellow classmates as well, noting that, “both with colleagues and professors, we had very, very close connections” and “I would call my professors by their first name and on Fridays it happened that I would go drink a beer with them”.

Student A as well noticed this distinction between their undergraduate and experiences in Europe saying, “both with colleagues and professors, we had very, very close connections, which is kind of different to Euroculture and Europe in general”. Lastly, Student B described their undergraduate experience as “so different from like studying and teaching in Europe, because as with many other Asian countries, we are more like formal and like seniority is important in the university”, explaining that students must use formal titles such as “Mr.” and “Mrs.” when addressing professors and that you “respect older people”. Student B also emphasizes the relationship between students in Indonesia stating:

...students were like afraid of asking sometimes or afraid of answering wrong, because if you answer wrong, well the teacher won't be angry, but like your peers will look at you or something like that and it feels like so it's uncomfortable...

This is apparently different than what they have experienced in Europe. They also add, after hearing another participant discuss a similar experience that “most of the format of the class

is lecture, sometimes seminar...but it's really rare that you have a live discussion". Students reflect on their undergraduate experiences in relation to what they have experienced in Euroculture. Student A and Student D both mention the "small" universities they came from and how this affected their experiences for their graduate degrees. Each student focused on a mix of different aspects of their experiences discussing the cultural and interactional aspects with teachers and classmates while also discussing the academic approaches and formalities or hierarchies prevalent in their undergraduate experiences. They bring in relevant ideas which then spark something in another participant's memories how they experienced something similar as well.

Third, participants discussed their motivations for applying to Euroculture and their expectations for the program. Many of the responses relating to motivations and expectation were closely related or interconnected. This is most likely because students' motivations influenced what they expected from the program. Student C was the first to mention their motivations and expectations relating to Euroculture reflecting that their initial thought was about a more active social life stating that, "one of the reasons why I applied for the Euroculture was actually that I wanted to have a more active social life during my study" and to be "more engaged with people who also wanted to invest some more time in the social things". Student A then noted that their motivations for studying in Euroculture was with a "clear intention of networking" and that they wanted to come to Europe and their dual nationality made that easier. They also stated, "I didn't want to come to work... like, directly, you know, just like arrive here out of nowhere and not knowing anyone and just trying to find a job. So, I thought, like, doing a master's would be interesting". When discussing their expectations, they said, "I don't think I had many expectations, to be honest... I maybe expected that people would be a bit more welcoming...[but] as for professors, like, I don't think I was expecting anything, really". These expectations are most likely linked to their Brazilian background, where they described themselves as "warm and welcoming" and the fact that their main motivation was to network, so they were not as concerned with the study aspect of the program. Furthermore, Student D notes that they "found this master's...and decided to do it" but not because they were passionate about studying European studies or furthering their academic career to a PhD but rather because:

...I love living abroad and I love having these kinds of experiences where I'm, you know, somewhere totally new and have to meet new people and learning more about other cultures...I wanted, of course, to network a bit and to have friends in Europe, and learn, and learn about like European culture and everything, but in an immersive kind of way...

Like Student A, Student D had no real expectations other than wanting to network, meet people from other cultures, and learn in an immersive way. Again, like Student A, their motivations were the root of their expectations. Student B had slightly different expectations for the master's program coming from a more strict and hierarchical background than the others. They noted that they mainly wanted "to be able to say anything and to share my opinions on anything without being seen...as bad or without someone... hate me after that because of my opinion, you know, like more critical and like free speech, free opinion environment..." They also didn't mention their motivations until much later than the others, so their motivations and expectations did not have as much of an explicit connection as the others. Student B cites that they "fell into some kind of comfort zone" at their job and felt like there were "some things that I want to find answers that I cannot find it in my job" as the motivation for going back to school. After hearing other motivations and expectations Student C reflected on their own answer and decided to add to it mention like the other participants that:

I think actually, I also didn't have many to begin with, and I chose the master as well because I wanted to improve my English... [and] ended up with this one because I liked the idea about moving abroad and challenging myself, and I liked the theme.

We notice that for three of the four students their expectations stem mostly from their motivations for continuing their studies. It can also be seen that their cultural and previous educational backgrounds played into this as well. Student B's previous educational experienced played a significant role in what they wanted and expected for their studies in Europe. Additionally, we see changes and additions to answers due to the interactive component of the focus groups and new reasons being presented, sparking new ideas for others as well.

Lastly, questions three and four are strongly linked and thus talked about together. It was here that this focus group introduced the term "prestige" to describe their home country's views of higher education. While this was one of the key terms used, there were

various other ideas sprouted from the awareness of cultural views of education. For example, Student A talks about a “huge division” in the views towards education in Brazil.

Noting that:

a portion of it [the population] either dreams about it or thinks... like it's the path towards knowledge. And then there is a portion of the population who say, like, yeah no, universities are only for like using drugs and making parties at the expense of the government.

And remarking that “there is a considerable difference in Brazil in regard to what kind of professions you can have when you have a degree and when you don't”. Further elaborating by discussing these upper-class and lower-class divisions, which are also found in others answers in the group. For instance, Student B makes a similar remark, “basically the middle to upper class, they go to universities and parents see universities as a way to improve for their children's career options later...”. Furthermore, Student B elaborates on this idea noting that this influenced their own perceptions of education and swayed some of their decisions. They noted, “I don't feel like I have another choice other than going to university, because that's what I told before. It's just the culture that makes that your life should go like that in terms of education”. Student A also realizes the influence of their parents and their environment on their perception towards education noticing:

I'm super biased because both of my parents are professors in the university and the public one, so of course I grew up in an environment that was like it wasn't even an option, like going to the university, wasn't even like I could never in my life consider not doing it. Even a master's is like I joke when I talk about that with friends. I'm like master's is the minimum education in my family. Like if you have anything lower than that, it's incomplete.

But also reflecting and realizing that “because I am part of a portion of the population that is privileged enough to be able to spend four years, just studying. It was something that I knew would be beneficial for me anyway” and “even if my parents were not professors, I would say that just because I am in that part of the population, I would have seen higher education as a way to go”. This seems to be the common narrative for each of the participants in this group as Student C and Student D each felt the perception of education in their home countries was greatly linked to socioeconomic status and was expected of them, either from society or their families. Student C notes, “in Denmark, it's usually a package, if you take a bachelor's you take a master's” as well as “it's also

dependent on where you're from in the country and social and family ties". They also realize that they are "completely shaped off the view we have in Denmark on our education for sure". Student C also briefly talks about how they wanted to be an actress as a child and the environment they were in changed that for them, lending them to want to be "intellectual" instead.

Student D had similar remarks to make stating, "the general feeling that I always got is like pretty much everyone goes to university...it's assumed" and their perception was strongly influenced by family and those around them mentioning how "the way that my family thinks about education, and people from elementary school and high school" played a part. Each participant strongly recognized the influence their cultural backgrounds, whether personal or societal, played in how they perceived education and their relationship with it. Many were aware of such socioeconomical divides in their countries as well and how this played into the "prestige" aspect of education on a societal level. Generally, direct influences typically came from more personal sources, family and friends being the most frequent. Overall, perceptions from each individual linked to others in some form simply due to the nature of the study.

### *Focus Group Two*

Again, Focus Group Two started with introductions and again students introduced their Euroculture semesters into their introductions unprompted. Though here it was interesting to note that these two participants were from different cohorts (2018-2020 & 2020-2022). Student F introduced themselves first briefly stating "I'm originally from the Netherlands and I did my undergrad at the University of Amsterdam", short, sweet, and to the point. Student E on the other hand, spent more time elaborating about their background as they felt they had a more "convoluted" story. In their introduction they noted that they:

grew up in a small town...went to Dublin to learn English...did the double degree of history and English literature of philology and civilization at Paris...did one year of civic service...decided to give it, like a sort of European touch...[and] decided to just go abroad and for that, I joined Euroculture.

Giving a fuller more comprehensive understanding of their educational and personal journey that eventually led them to Euroculture. Again, we note that both participants indicated their Euroculture semesters, but neither associated themselves closely with their

countries like in Focus Group #1. Student F solely noted “I’m originally from the Netherlands”, while Student E did not even mention their country of origin.

Second, participants discussed undergraduate experiences. Student F started by mentioning that they had “a very positive undergrad experience”, but that they started very young and that “looking back might have been quite a rash decision to go into university at that point in time”. In general, Student F talked about their undergraduate experiences from an academic standpoint noting that they had a “very large focus on research” and that it was principally “research-based” in its approach with conferences and “practicing the world of academia”. Student E then noted that they had an opposite experience in the academic approach where their undergraduate studies were “not very strongly research- oriented” they also discussed a more vertical “relationship of power” between students and professors, noting that it was a difference of “day or night” to their experience with professors in Euroculture and how “horizontal the relationship of power was” between students and professors.

Student F then added more about the structure of their studies after hearing Student E discuss theirs, mentioning that their program offered a lot of “freedom” to adapt the studies and specialize in specific interests. Both students focus more on the academic approach and set up of their undergraduate studies rather than cultural aspects which is what Focus Group One focused on more. This could indicate that these participants perceived their academic studies to be more impressionable on their undergraduate lives than other aspects. Furthermore, Student E was study two bachelor’s degrees simultaneously and Student F was mainly concerned with finishing their degree quickly meaning neither probably had much time for extracurriculars outside of academia.

Third, participants were asked about motivations for applying to Euroculture and their expectations of the program. In this specific group their motivations seem to be separate from their expectations, with their expectations coming more form their undergraduate experiences. Student F first mentioned that their main motivation for applying to Euroculture was to “expand my knowledge further than just the field of literature and linguistics” because they realized they had many more interests outside that field, and it had become too narrow for them. Student E followed up by noting that they were more “at ease” in an international environment and “looking at what the curriculum

had to offer, the opportunities to travel between different places. It was going to offer me like a direct perspective of things which I wouldn't have had” when reflecting on their decision to apply to Euroculture. They also mentioned that they wanted to “get out of the French system” which they described as “very rigid”.

As far as expectations for the program Student F noted, I... can't really pinpoint what my initial expectations were, but I knew that I had to lower them when I finally started because I started in the middle of the pandemic”, as they were part of the 2020-2022 cohort. They did however anticipate that their first semester in Groningen would be like their undergraduate, having studied in Amsterdam and being from the Netherlands. Also noting that their expectations were based on their bachelor's experience. Student E was “expecting this level to be a bit higher” and was “expecting the program to be a bit more intense”, again expectations based out of their demanding undergraduate experience. They also mentioned how they thought they would have more classes about political science and European studies as well.

As already stated, both students in Focus Group Two were influenced by their undergraduate studies when thinking about what they envisioned for their graduate studies. This could be in part that both participants were from university countries (France and the Netherlands) or that they were accustomed to a European style of education and expected that because of this being a European program.

Questions three and four are again linked for a joint discussion. In this particular focus group, there is much interaction and dialogue between participants surrounding these two specific questions. Each participants thoughts and comments constantly lead to the evolution and rethinking of their own experiences and perceptions. Student F directly jumped in and stated that “in the Netherlands, education is valued very high...[and] there are two main perspectives that a lot of people conform to”. They mentioned that first, “you need to finish your education as quickly as possible”, which they explained to be a result of the 2008 financial crisis where student benefits were cut and education became loan based and second, that there is “so much more value put to education in the field of science compared to education in the field of humanities, politics, [and] economics”.

Student E then noticed how the French perspective was similar that there was a “preference...like towards what you would call sort of technical studies” and that there was



a “feeling of elitism” in France as well. Student E also remarked that “university's free, which is a good thing, but it's also like very much under financed and so it results in a poor quality”. This comment then led Student F to add to their answer mentioning that in the Netherlands “universities as well, especially in humanities, are also underfinanced”. Then reflecting on the influences on their own perceptions of education Student F mentioned that “I think looking that what we just discussed, I never quite realized how much I was actually influenced by these certain perceptions” and reflected on how they felt they had to “go through the system quickly” and finish their degree as fast as possible and noticed that this first reason played a large role in why that was the case. Furthermore, Student F recounted how during high school in the Netherlands you must choose a direction to focus on (math and sciences or the humanities) and recounted that “I was convinced until the decision day that I had to choose between the two that I was going to go into the science one” again noticing this influence of societal expectations on their opinions towards their own educational experiences, even from a young age.

Student E contributed to the discussion by agreeing that there was a similar system in France and that they actually did choose the scientific route and recalled that, “I hated it. I was lame at everything. I was barely making it”. Again, referring to their previous comments about cultural views of the country they noted that, “despite France being a country of equality. It's still a very elitist country. So that's perhaps what drove me to go to Paris and then do these studies”. Participants in Focus Group Two noticed strong links between their country’s perceptions of education and their own, showing that the influences in these instances were more cultural and societal than personal. Often participants did not even realize these influences until deliberately reflecting on them during this study. New thoughts and ideas brought in by each participant led to continued new ideas and additional views. Overall, the two participants share rather similar experiences in most aspects.

### *Focus Group Three*

Focus Group Three started with introductions, per usual. This time it was slightly different than the previous two focus groups though. Students did not introduce their Euroculture semesters here and spent more time discussing specificities of their undergraduate studies or plans after Euroculture. Student H started introductions briefly

noting, “I’m from Germany and I did my undergraduate... in Bavaria in southern Germany”. Student G followed and stated, “I’m from the Netherlands and I did my undergraduate studies... at the UvA, which is the University of Amsterdam, and partially at the SciencePo in Paris”. Lastly, Student I introduced themselves by saying “I’m from the 2020-2022 cohort and I’m currently in Gottingen and for my undergraduate...I had two subjects” simply mentioning their cohort and current location and further elaborating on their undergraduate subjects and plans after Euroculture, excluding where they were from or where they did their undergraduate studies. Based on their introductions, participants of this groups seemed more focused on future plans and the role their undergraduate studies played in those plans. Participants focused more on their educational backgrounds and what they were interested in and want to achieve with those interests.

Second, participants discussed their undergraduate experiences. Student G started by answering this question by noting that what they took away most from their undergraduate studies was the “amount of self-studying that you do in the Netherlands”, estimating that in a “40-hour week...there is about between 28 and 33 hours of self-study”. They discussed this as being the case at the University of Amsterdam, where they did their bachelor’s, as well as in Groningen where they studied in Euroculture. Student H then described their undergraduate experience as “a lot of pressure” because of their specific program concentration. They noted, “that was definitely something that influenced my whole undergraduate studies that you always had to have this pressure and... reach really high grades” because their program field was very competitive and selective in who would then carry on to the master’s. They also briefly mentioned the academic approach as a “mixture between lectures and seminars” and that the knowledge was “a little bit more generalized”. Student H also discussed how students did not personally know professors and vice versa due to their cohorts being thousands of people. Finally, Student I remarked that their experience seemed to be opposite from the others regarding the stress and self-study aspects. They mentioned:

I studied humanities and I took my time so I did not do it in the six semesters that I could do it. And it was really relaxed. There was not so many courses. The topics were not that hard to grasp, looking from now, of course...

Student I also discussed how they did a lot outside of university stating, “I worked. I partied. I had a good life.” Of the three participants, two were German (Student H and Student I), yet we see that they had very different undergraduate experiences. These differences could be based on several things, field of study, attitude towards their studies, or responsibilities and hobbies outside of university, to name a few. We also notice the significant amount of interaction from the participants and how they often compare and contrast their experiences, often bringing about new thoughts and reflections as well.

Next, participants discussed their motivations for applying to international programs (as two of the three applied or had intentions of applying to multiple Erasmus Mundus programs) and their expectations when it came to their graduate studies. Student H cited multiple reasons as to why they were motivated to study in Euroculture mentioning that they wanted to “combine psychology and politics...[and] thought that’s an interesting angle” in addition to viewing the mobility aspect as a “really big argument to apply” as well as wanting to meeting people from around the globe, not wanting to start working yet, and lastly “get more specialized in a field”. From Student H’s motivations sprang their expectations of the program as well remarking that they had hoped for more specialization from the program, a sentiment also pointed out from Student G.

Student G mentioned that they intended to apply for multiple international master’s and that they had “decided to study something other than European studies, which is very heavy on the political relations” and that is why they chose Euroculture. They discussed how they wanted to do something with the European Union, but they were not that interested in politics and wanted to do it from a different angle, hence leading to Euroculture. After hearing Student I mention the international aspect of the program Student G added to their response mentioning, “I definitely agree, because I didn't mention the international aspect, but... I knew I wanted to study abroad as well”. Student G had similar expectations to Student H, noting that they expected their first semester to be similar to their undergraduate experience as they started in their home country for Euroculture (Student G started in Groningen and is from the Netherlands and Student H started in Gottingen and is from Germany), in addition to expecting to be specializing in something.

This concept of specialization something Student G mentions on two occasions first saying, “I was expecting... like a master's degree to specialization and working towards something that is quite niche” and moments later mentioning “I think I was expecting really to be like specializing in something”. Finally, Student I described their motivations as “exchange among each other, of course, then the mobility aspect, European Union as a well theme and a framework. And then for me, the most important thing was the interdisciplinarity”. Something general they noted about education was:

for me, it was always the aspect of freedom that I have there [university], there are a few years that I can learn something that interests me. I can have, I can have leisure time as well... it's not only that I educate myself regarding skills, university skills or education, but personally as well. And the university gives you that context. There's space for personal development as well in university and next to or beside to university.

This general motivation of education seemed to shaped Student I's expectations more than anything remarking that during their master's they were “prepared to not have that [freedom] and to be more at university” and that they “imagined it would be much harder regarding the skills”. The interesting aspect of these three motivations and expectations is that Student G and Student H seemed to align in most aspects even coming from different countries whereas Student H and Student I had rather different motivations and expectations even though they are from the same country. This indicates that, at least for these two specific students, there does not seem to be a link between their cultural backgrounds and their motivations and expectations for their educational experiences abroad.

In questions three and four, participants of Focus Group Three carried similar ideologies of the cultural views of their home countries, but differences in the influences on their own perceptions of education. As first mentioned in Focus Group Two participants in this group discuss the secondary education set up where students choose a path to follow from their teenage years. Student G began by remarking that a hallmark of the Dutch educational system was the idea that “you are set for life with this first step and there's this path that you can take through that step and that's what you will end up in society as well”. They also furthered that by saying “Dutch don't like to say that they're classist, but I think at least that our educational system is definitely classist” and noting that “the Dutch, like at

least secondary education, is very good at making their students think that the fact that they are in a certain level makes them better or worse than other people”.

Student G then mentioned how these bold views of the Dutch educational system also influenced their thinking and perception towards education, noticing that there was “a lot of frowning upon people who did like the lower education and also people who did my level of education and then decided to not go to university” in Student G’s specific circle of friends and the people they were surrounded by. Student H followed up by noting that it was “quite similar to Germany” in relation to the societal and cultural views (choosing your path from a young age). However, Student H focused more on the view that education was held in high regard, commenting that:

I think in general, many people believe what I just said, that you have better chances to earn more money and you may be also... more, yeah, well regarded in society, so that you have a better standing...

Student H also noted that they believed their perceptions was not necessarily influenced by society, but more so their family stating:

I really believed that I have better chances with a university degree and also more chances with a master's degree than just with the undergraduate degree, I think. And in general, I think it's for me, it's not so much about the cultural or societal expectations, but more like something driven from home... because my parents both have an academic background, they always encouraged us to do that...

Coming from the same country view towards education Student I did not really elaborate more on their perspective of Germany’s view towards education, but agreed with the idea put forth by Student H. They did, however, describe the influences affecting their own perceptions which seemed to be in line with Student H’s, noting that:

...for me, I always had the feeling that I'm very free in my decision, and yes, at school we were giving the image that the university is the best option. But at home, I was taught that it's more important to do something that I enjoy...and not that I have to achieve something very specific.

From these responses, there seemed to be more commonalities between Student H and Student I in the influences and perceptions, most likely relating from home country. Student H noted that many German kids spend much time at home during their primary school years, giving us good reason to believe this is where the motivations, influences, and perceptions originate. Again, this would make the influence less country specific and more

personal and family specific. Conversely, Student G echoed what we heard in Focus Group Two from another Dutch participant that they were strongly influenced by the cultural and societal expectations.

#### *Focus Group Four*

Focus Group Four started with introductions mainly focused on discussing their academic backgrounds and mentioning their Euroculture master's theses. Students noted very briefly their nationalities/ where they were from with Student J starting by saying "I'm Dutch" and a more detailed discussion of their undergraduate and previous educational studies and how their Euroculture thesis tied into their plans after Euroculture. Student L followed in the same manner noting "I'm from Kyrgyzstan", detailing their undergraduate experiences, and discussing their thesis topic. Lastly, Student K kept the same pattern simply stating, "I'm from China", briefly mentioning their Euroculture thesis, and then speculating about what they might potentially do after Euroculture. Since thesis topics were not directly asked by the moderator but brought in by Student J relating their potential career path after Euroculture to their thesis, it can be assumed that the other participants followed suit on incorporating their thesis topics into their introductions. Student K and Student L did not seem to have any connection between their thesis topics and plans after Euroculture, so it is most likely not significant in that aspect for either of them.

Secondly, participants discussed their undergraduate and previous educational experiences. This group was more unique in this aspect because Student J did what they called a "pre-master's" which they described as an additional six months after their undergraduate degree to be eligible for starting a master's program, Student K had already completed a master's in their home country before starting Euroculture, and Student L studied in an American university in Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, this focus group was comprised of varied cultural and national backgrounds comparable to Focus Group One, with participants here coming from The Netherlands, China, and Kyrgyzstan. As a result, it would not be expected that there would be large commonalities between their educational experiences in their home countries due to these factors. However, some interesting commonalities came about. Student L had much to say regarding their undergraduate experience. The members emphasized that their degree was completely in English being

taught at an American University and that they experienced a “big shock” and a “language barrier” their first year.

The only negative thing that they mentioned was, “that this university was trying to make the Soviet style teaching and the American style of teaching, and it was really, sorry to saying this word, but fucked up...”. They described their university as an “island...in Kyrgyzstan”, but said they felt “completely comfortable” studying there. They also compared it to the “European style” where you “have to be involved in class”, which most likely led to them feeling more at ease with the transition to studying in Europe later on. Student J described their undergraduate experience as a “step down from a normal academic institution” as they went to a University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands which the Dutch participant in Focus Group Three described as the “middle level” of education in the Netherlands. Student J remarked that Dutch education in general is “very much focused on the students contributing to the lecture” and “quite demanding”, sentiments expressed by other Dutch participants in other groups. They noted at their specific university that they were taught by “people all from a professional background so all who also had already worked in a certain field related to what they were teaching”, but that they felt like they were not properly prepared for thesis writing when it came time and as a result spent longer in their degree than usual.

Student K discussed more about their master’s experience in China rather than their undergraduate experience. They noted things such as, “the atmosphere was very good” and they felt a “sense of freedom” because they could do anything they wanted to do. They also mentioned it was more international remarking that there were “lots of international festivals and international exchange programs”, you can “see the international students everywhere”, and due to practical requirements, they had to “teach Mandarin in Australia for one year”. From participants’ previous educational experiences, Focus Group Four seemed to share this “international” component even coming from such varied educational backgrounds and countries.

Participants’ discussion of motivations and expectations were rather brief as they tended to divulge into other subjects and ideas. Student L started by noting their motivations on numerous occasions, first by remarking, “my intentions from after the graduation in school was to move to Europe”, talking about wanting to move to Europe

even directly after high school but encountering some problems. Then, they mentioned that they wanted to move out from their home country and studying in Europe was “the first step toward moving to other country”. As for expectations, they did not seem to have many and simply stated they thought after a masters they would be “more specialized and like more concentrated on one or two directions”. Next, Student J described their motivation as “mainly to do with the fact that after I graduated from my undergrad, I felt like I still wanted to learn some more. I felt like my knowledge was a bit limited in a sense” and “basically just not wanting to start job hunting yet”. And as for expectations they expected Euroculture to be “more focused on theory and on academia” than they were used to. Lastly, Student K stated that their motivations came from two places. First, they were teaching in middle school but still felt that it was not international enough. They described it as “every day I feel there's lots of output, but not enough input”. Second, was the exam organized by the Chinese government that can only be taken once after finishing graduate studies and how they missed the exam by one point, so they noted that:

I think if I did another master and when I about graduate, I have another chance to take that exam. And what we learned from Euroculture, it's very similar to the exam, so yeah, that's why I decided to choose this program.

As for expectations, Student K never mentioned any, but rather discussed other things. For each student, these two questions seemed to be merely brushed over and instead led to other topics or discussions they were passionate about (i.e., the state of education in their home countries or what they viewed as shocking when arriving in Europe). Students built off each other's thoughts to give them inspiration for what to discuss, but they did not “borrow” ideas or incorporated others' ideas into their own in an interactive and flowing way, which was seen in other focus groups.

Finally, questions three and four are again grouped. Student L began by noting that there is a “big hierarchy of educational institutions in terms of efficiency and in terms of quality of education” in their home country. They describe the culture of education as “very diverse” remarking that, “not all of the students have opportunities even to apply and graduate from the undergraduate universities, not even the graduate study”. They go on to describe the private sector universities as the “huge powers”, but also as the more expensive universities. They discuss the issues of money in their home country in relation



to university suggesting this commercialization found in education, a concept mentioned by Student K as well. Student L indicated that their own perceptions towards education were based off seeing family and friends attend the public universities in Kyrgyzstan and seeing the difference and remarking that, “this difference in their perceptions not only of the education, but the whole life...is huge”, thus influences their own vision towards education and which path they would take. Student J immediately remarked while laughing “This question for me is slightly difficult to explain or to answer, and I think...that's also kind of the answer to the question in and of itself”. They cited a personal example to better explain:

...when I did an internship during my undergrad, I was just an intern at the organization. But even I was expected to speak up in meetings and to share my thoughts, even though I was just the intern. So that's kind of, you know, that also translates to some degree to how education is perceived. It doesn't necessarily mean if you've got an academic degree that you are more important or a bigger deal than somebody who did one of the lower levels of education.

When then reflecting on their own perception and influences they noticed that their own experiences of “partaking in education” have had a “massive influence” on how they look at it. They also believed that this view translated into how they interacted with their fellow classmates as well noting:

...it's very important, based on my experiences before in education, to listen to what your fellow students have to say as well, because there is not one single truth in education even, everybody's perception is influenced by their background.

A very thoughtful and reflective statement incorporating not only their own beliefs but a further acknowledgement of others, similar to a statement made in Focus Group One from Student A. Lastly, Student K described their country’s view towards education as “an opportunity to change your destiny” and something very valued and respected. They noted that people “show respect for the educated people in China” and that there is a “hierarchy”, and you have an “edge” if you come from a top university or have studied abroad. They also described this idea mentioned by Student C in Focus Group One of there being too many educated people and too many people with master’s and doctorates. These views shaped their own as they also stated that they believed education was “a means to change your destiny”, but that their experience in their master’s in China made them realize “if I really want to pursue for a Ph.D., it really must be because I passionate about this topic. It's not just about a title”. We see from the responses that in this case each individual was

strongly influenced by the view their country had towards education. These perceptions and influences either deterred participants from a certain path or helped lead them in that direction.

#### *Focus Group Five*

Participants of Focus Group Five were very active and interactive with one another as it was such a group of two participants. Again, the topics diverged frequently showing the true interests and thoughts that students had of their experiences. Introductions in this group were longer. Student N introduced themselves very briefly stating “I’m French. I’m from Paris”, briefly mentioning their undergraduate studies, and noting their Euroculture semesters like in a few of the other focus groups. Student M gave more length and content in their introduction. Briefly mentioning where they were from stating, “I was born in Morocco. Grew up in Italy, most of my life. Basically, all my life” followed by a longer more elaborate discussion of their undergraduate studies. Student N followed up by prompting Student M to discuss where they spent their Euroculture semesters as it was something they did not previously mention. We notice that for Student N, their Euroculture semesters seemed to be central in positioning themselves in their educational experiences whereas for Student M their cultural background and previous educational experiences were more significant.

Second, students discussed their undergraduate studies. Each student focused on different aspects. For example, Student M discussed more of the social and cultural aspects related to their experiences. They noted that they were “working full time” and “did not attend all the classes” and as a result “didn’t sadly enjoy the student life”. Additionally, they mentioned that “most of the teachers were really passionate about their subject, very passionate about their job” as opposed to talking about student-teacher relations or the teaching approaches professors used. This differed from Student N’s discussion of their undergraduate experiences where they mentioned more the academic side of things. They noticed that they had “very formal relations” with professors and that you “could not even joke with them” as they were seen as “some kind of gods” in their fields. They also compared the large number of courses they had each semester and the very large class sizes

as contrasting to what they experienced in Euroculture. They also mentioned the methods of assessment as being mainly written exams and “no oral exams, almost no presentations”.

Finally, Student N briefly discussed student life and noted that “everything you do is pretty much political at university” regarding the extracurricular activities. As a result of these thoughts Student M then discussed more about the assessment methods at their university as well as in school growing up. Student N and Student M seemed to have rather opposite experiences upon first look, but through their own descriptions and interactions they concluded that they had “quite a few similarities with [their] undergrads...”.

Third, participants briefly discussed their motivations and expectations of Euroculture. Student M noted that their main motivation for studying in the program was to “go out of the languages and literature bubble”, in addition to graduating from two universities and moving around, all views that have been echoed throughout other focus groups. Their expectations did not seem to stem from these motivations as Student M mentioned that they expected to make up for their lack of student life in their undergraduate (which was hindered by COVID) and that they “expected people to be really engaged and that people would think something and act accordingly” (referencing how they noticed students would write one thing in a paper but not truly believe it).

Student N on the other hand did not mention any motivations in applying for the program but expressed that they were expecting “an international program like, well... more international people with very different backgrounds” as well as a higher academic level. Overall, the expectations of both students came from their undergraduate experiences as well as their personalized imagination of what Euroculture would be based on how Euroculture sold itself to students or their own understanding of the program.

The final two questions, three and four, linked very strongly for participants of this focus group as well. Student M began by remarking that “in Italy...going to uni is actually not a very smart choice because it kind of seen sometimes as a waste of time” recounting their own personal story of how they were making very good money in their job straight out of high school. They shared on numerous occasions the reasoning behind their own personal perception towards higher education and the influences leading to it for them which was their parents. They mentioned first:

I went to a high university... because of my parents who moved their whole like life for me to give me an education. For them is just like no matter what job you're going to be doing is important, is to have those degrees and that you are educated. For them, education is the most important thing in the world.

And again, later recounting again they went because “education was very like important for my parents”. Student N then noted:

...there is a form of culture in France. It's that you don't take a gap year. Like you go out of high school...you go straight to university, then you don't take a gap year after your undergrad. You go straight to your masters. Like if you take a gap year to work, I mean work, maybe it can be excused in a way, but if you take your gap year to travel, people are like, why would you do that?

Demonstrating this strong academic culture of continuing through until the end in one single go, like that mentioned by a variety of other students throughout the focus groups. Student N then goes on to note that when listening to professors “you just drink their words in” and that there is little to no interaction or asking questions and as a result of that academic culture they believe it definitely had an effect on their behavior in class mentioning that they are “quiet and listening and not always giving inputs”. They also noted that “my parents always made it pretty clear that I can do whatever I want with my life as long as I have a master’s degree”, indicating that their family also had a strong influence on their perception of education and what was expected of them.

When describing how education is viewed in their home countries, neither participant had an extensive amount to say, but both participants described in depth the strong personal influences for education from family. Focus Group Five had more discussions regarding topics outside of the core questions asking. Some included: complaints and challenges in Euroculture, the idea of commercialization in higher education (including many discussions regarding money, scholarships, and the price of education), and personal antidotes and stories. Due to these factors, there is less to note about the core questions as this focus group deemed other things more important in their discussions, which then tells of more in other ways about their perceptions of higher education and their experiences.

In the next section, these findings, their relationship to the literature, and what can be done with this data will be summarized.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions

*How do students in a shared educational experience from diverse cultural backgrounds interact, compare, and share their experiences and relate to one another through conversation and position themselves within their experiences?*

This was the question this study set out to answer. In short, a simple conclusion or response to this question is not possible. Why? Because understanding student perceptions' is much more complicated than quantitative survey data or generalized conclusions. However, this study can conclude one thing for sure: student experiences are much more personalized and individualized than we are typically led to believe. Based on the qualitative data of each individual focus group as well as an overview of all the focus groups, it can be concluded that individual backgrounds, family influences, personal views, and goals all make far more of a difference in how students discuss their educational experiences and position themselves within them than other generalized factors such as country of origin. Second, we can conclude that even coming from different cultural and personal backgrounds, students always find a way to relate and share commonalities when discussing their experiences, thus bringing a level of solidarity among students to educational experiences.

The unconventional approach of using focus groups as opposed to surveys or interviews is what led to the results and was quite effective. As previously mentioned, many studies on these topics look for generalities about specific countries or groups, whereas approaching the data from this method centralized on the student rather than the group. The results overall were not unsurprising considering that individuals' environments and upbringings typically have a large influence on their personal views, however, there were some more surprising aspects from the data that was unexpected.

Among these unexpected revelations were the results of the "sequential" code in the data and the impact of interaction on experiences within the groups. As noted, the "sequential" code noted commonalities found between more than one focus group such as shared terminology or shared ideas. This was shocking because shared terminology and ideas were expected within the groups, but to see those things extended across multiple

focus groups, when participants had no contact with others outside of their focus group, was unanticipated. From this, it can be concluded that there are certain notions and ideas common to students in shared educational experiences regardless of discussion with others. In this same code it was shocking how frequently students brought in their Euroculture experiences in their introductions unprompted. It was unexpected as students found it relevant to mention their Euroculture semesters whereas the researcher did not consider this aspect of information as particularly relevant, showing that researchers can not anticipate everything that will be important to the participants no matter how hard they try.

The second unexpected part of the study was the impact of interactions on comparison of experiences within the groups. This became especially apparent in Focus Group Four, where there was little interaction between participants, and they seemed to keep the same order to answer questions each time. While there was little interaction there still seemed to be influence in what participants discussed in their own answers after hearing the responses before theirs. Since there was almost no interaction between participants it would have been assumed that they would not have an influence on each other, however, the opposite seemed to be true, and the lack of direct interaction between participants still impacted responses and influenced direction of conversation.

Based on these conclusions, researchers should strongly consider the impact of methodological approaches on understanding student perceptions as well as using more dialogism and student-centered methods in understanding internationalization in higher education. As mentioned in the literature review, internationalization in higher education centers around policies at the national and institutional levels to understand education whereas the data of this study indicated that students seemed to have many valuable ideas to improve their educational experiences. Moreover, further research can be conducted in this area that this study did not cover. As this study was performed amid the COVID-19 global pandemic it would be important to discuss the impact of this on student experiences. Participants in this study referenced the pandemic and its impact on some occasions. While the mentions of the pandemic and its impacts on most students were brief and overall, not largely significant, it was shown that the pandemic had a strong impact on expectations for students of the 2020-2022 cohort starting their graduate studies in the pandemic. While this information did not limit the scope or results of this study COVID-19 should be studied

further regarding the future impacts on international students, mobility programs, and student experiences.

This research is an example of the interplay of internationalization in higher education on student perceptions using dialogism. It resituates conventional ideas in an innovative way by incorporating the three main ideas of internationalization in higher education, student perceptions in higher education, and dialogism. As previously noted in the literature review this study involves all three concepts to understand the interplay of student perception in internationalization as well as the use of focus group methodology to understand student perceptions in higher education. In both instances, dialogism is the conductor of the change.

By rooting the approach and methodology in dialogism through focus groups the outlook and attitude of the study changes. This addresses the gap as there was previously no research using this interdisciplinary tactic and very few studies using focus group methodology. Additionally, these findings challenge other study's conclusions that there are generalities to be made based on country of origin or cultural background. It utilized a smaller sample size to gain more individual perspectives challenging the traditional thought that larger sample sizes were more conclusive.

Overall, this study is the first of hopefully many to approach student perspectives in this way and to give direction to future researchers aiming to understand the unique experiences of students in such a specific program. Additionally, it provides more inclusive methodological approaches to examine how students interact, compare, and share their experiences, relate to one another through conversation, and position themselves within their experiences.

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