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'Agency in mobility': towards a conceptualisation of international student agency in transnational mobility

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ABSTRACT

Student mobility is becoming a prominent phenomenon of tertiary education in the twenty-first century. Internationally mobile students' lived experiences are intimately linked to their potential to exercise agency in transnational mobility. However, the notion of agency within the context of student mobility has not been the explicit focus of theoretical and empirical investigation. This article examines how international student agency is affecting and is affected by their experiences in transnational mobility. This process is conceptualized as "agency in mobility" in this article. Based on theoretical discussions and an empirical study that draws on interviews with 105 international students, this article shows that "agency in mobility" underscores not only the response to a temporal particular need but importantly produces spaces in which international students can potentially transform their present, their future beings and the communities with which they interact. Employing agency theory and positioning theory as conceptual frameworks, the research suggests four primary forms of "agency in mobility": *agency for becoming*, *needs-response agency*, *agency as struggle and resistance* and *collective agency for contestation*.

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International student mobility is fast-growing globally and becoming a distinctive feature of contemporary tertiary education (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). Globally, more than five million students are undertaking tertiary education outside their home countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2016). International education has become the lucrative service export market for English speaking countries including the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. In Australia, international education is the biggest service export industry generating almost 22 billion dollars for the national economy in 2015–2016 (Campus Review 2016). Within the context of the commercialization of education, international students are often constructed as objects or clients in transnational mobility while their agency as well as self-forming capacities might be easily neglected. Yet, transnational mobility represents the condition for cross-border students to transform their professional and personal life as well as their "social identities" (Rizvi 2011, 694). International students' propensity for manifold forms of agency exists prior to or in the course of transnational mobility. Envisaging self-change and mobility often precedes the mobility

itself. International students also have the potential to exercise different forms of agency when dealing with the challenges facing them during their sojourn, responding to emerging needs in the new country and transforming themselves through mobility. Although agency is central to international students' mobility aspirations and engagement, the notion of agency in the context of international education is not often explicitly explained or adequately theorized.

This research adopted Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory as a specific conceptual tool to complement "agency" theory to interpret the forms of international student agency emerging from the interview data (see section "Agency theory and positioning theory" for more detailed discussion of the research work on agency and positioning theory and how they are used together in this study). Positioning theory enables an insightful representation of the students' inter-subjective worlds that would otherwise remain invisible. In line with positioning theory, Harré and Slocum (2003, 176) argue that there is a distinction between what people believe they have or lack a right to perform and their acts in light of that belief. Thus, students' agency can be revealed through how they think they are expected to respond to the structure and how they personally want to respond. According to positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), people's behaviour, in this case the students' behaviours, can be understood as being intentional. Positioning theory complements agency theory in providing useful specific analytical tools and concepts, including *deliberate self-positioning*, *forced self-positioning*, *other-positioning* and *re-positioning*, to unpack not only what the international student participants do and why they do so but also to what extent they act and respond agentively in transnational social fields associated with mobility.

The empirical data from this research expands and contributes to the existing literature on student agency by making it explicit how agency is affecting and affected by international students' lived realities in transnational mobility. This process is referred to as "agency in mobility" in the article. Based on the theoretical discussions and empirical data including 105 interviews with international students, this article shows that the notion "agency in mobility" has the potential to provide new outlooks on international student agency and enrich the research field of student mobility. Four primary forms of "agency in mobility" have been highlighted in this research: *needs-response agency*, *agency as struggle and resistance*, *collective agency for contestation* and *agency for becoming*. *Needs-response agency* underscores international students' intention and action in response to the structural and social context around them to realize specific needs in transnational social spaces. *Agency as struggle and resistance* refers to international students' capacity to resist and reconstruct in response to challenging situations facing them in the host country. *Collective agency for contestation* encompasses the communal spirit and power international students mobilize to fight against unjust or undesirable situations. *Agency for becoming* situates the expression of agency in relation to international student self-transformation and future aspirations associated with mobility.

As mentioned earlier, this research highlighted four distinctive forms of "agency in mobility" that reflect the students' lived realities under the condition of mobility: *needs-response agency*, *agency as struggle and resistance*, *collective agency for contestation* and *agency for becoming*. The first three forms of agency have been informed by the existing literature on students' agency such as Hopwood (2010) and Edwards (2011), while the fourth form, *agency for becoming*, has emerged distinctively from the data of

this research as a new category of student agency in the field of international education. Our conceptualization of agency in this research is influenced by the life-course and identity approach to agency represented by Biesta and Tedder (2007), Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) and Emirbayer and Mische (1998), and previous work on student agency such as Hopwood (2010) and Edwards (2011). The latter stresses the need to consider relational nature of structure and individuals in viewing agency and how agency is understood in relation to individuals' response to structure and new situations, which has been categorized as *needs-response agency*, *agency as struggle and resistance* and *relational agency*, which we termed as *collective agency for contestation* (see section "Collective agency for contestation" for further discussion of this). However, the empirical data from this research indicates that international student agency appears to be distinctive as compared to other forms of human agency because the conditions for this group to develop and enact agency involve cross-border educational spaces and transnational relationships, which has strong implications with regard to their potential to redefine their perspectives and their "selves" or develop "*agency for becoming*". Transnational social fields where the formation and enactment of international student agency occurs (Fouron and Schiller 2001; Gargano 2009) involve the flow of ideas, practice and social networks associated with student mobility, which is embedded within evolving relationships. In the context of mobility, international students exercise agency through negotiating educational, social and cultural capitals, transnational social spaces, physical locales and the geography of the mind (Gargano 2009, 331). Nonetheless, how this abstractness is translated into a more nuanced concept that captures international students' imagination about mobility and their lived realities in the host country is lacking in the literature on international students.

International students and stereotypes

The plethora of literature on international students in both the higher education and vocational education sectors tends to depict this group as passive and deficit subjects in transnational mobility. Existing literature in higher education essentializes this group, especially "Asian" students, as being quiet passive learners who lack critical thinking and other skills needed to succeed in a "Western" academic culture (Samuelowicz 1987; Lacina 2002). Empirical evidence from a four-year study by Tran (2013) also indicates that the educational discourse in vocational education also constructs international students as "outsiders" or a marginalized group who do not share the contextual knowledge and background understandings privileged in an "Anglo-Saxon classroom". Another stream of the literature which is also dominated by the deficit frame focuses primarily on identifying the difficulties and struggles of international students in the host learning environment. These challenges are seen to be predominantly tied to language problems, and cultural differences (Cownie and Addison 1996; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002). This stream of literature implies that these difficulties are unique to international students (Coate 2009). Echoing this view, Bartram (2006, 1) further argues that the destructing nature of this dominant perspective also lies in the way international students themselves "might also come to accept this rather impoverished view – a view clearly antithetical to supporting the development of the independent and self-directing learner that higher education arguably aims to promote." Other studies (e.g. Ee 2013; Mason 2012) based on interviews with international students and

discourse analysis in the United States and Australia show evidence of international students being victims of racial discrimination, violence and political denial in the broader community.

Yet recent scholarly work (Marginson 2014; Montgomery and McDowell 2009; Tran 2008, 2011, 2016), critiques the literature that makes stereotypical assumptions about the learning of international students based on their cultural characteristics or positions them as passive recipients of education in the host country. The dominant approach of the literature that sees international students as the problem or simply objects in the transition to another higher education system fails to acknowledge the complexities of student development associated with cross-border mobility and their potential to transform. An emerging stream of literature in both higher education and vocational education thus offers alternative perspectives and constructs international students as active self-forming agents (Marginson 2014; Montgomery and McDowell 2009; Tran 2016; Tran and Vu 2016), who are unlikely to passively accept the inequalities, challenges and discriminations inscribed on them and who can enact self-change.

This study acknowledges the important role of gender, ethnicity and social classes in shaping the nature and degree of international students' agency. However, within the scope of this article it does not aim to provide a detailed account of international students' agency based on gender and class. The way students mediate their agency might be subject to the influence of various personal and background factors that it would be useful to further explore in future studies.

Agency theory and positioning theory

While considerable literature uncovers uncomfortable realities about international students as a marginalized disadvantaged group, there is a critical lack of empirical work that examines the impact of such social positioning upon their learning and wellbeing and to what extent they enact agency (Edwards 2011; Hopwood 2010) and re-position themselves in the discursive practices of their educational institution and the broader society (Harré and van Langenhove 1999).

The concept of agency is central to this research. *Agency* in this article refers to an individual or collective capacity to act with "intentionality" in line with "rational" choices and in response to a given circumstance; therefore, it "is the condition of activity rather than passivity" (Hewson 2010, 13). Our view of agency is in line with the life-course and identity approach to agency (Biesta and Tedder 2007; Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Emirbayer and Mische 1998), which makes a case for individuals' ways of "constructing their life courses through choices and actions" (Eteläpelto et al. 2013, 60) in their active engagement with the surrounding "ecological" circumstances (term suggested by Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015) (see Eteläpelto et al. 2013, for a full review).

Despite the extensive literature on agency in a broader context, student agency in the field of international education has been quite under-researched. One study that is prominently relevant to the current research is that by Hopwood (2010) who draws on empirical data from interviews and observation of doctoral students' capacity to enact agency in a specific Australian university. Hopwood (2010, 106) argues that "an individual powerlessness in the face of institutional and wider social structures is interpreted as a situation in which agentic internalisation of, response to and perhaps appropriation of such conditions may

arise." The author specifies two forms of agency: needs response agency and agency as struggle, based on the empirical evidence collected from doctoral students' narratives within this specific institutional context. Students exercise needs response agency through their attempts to achieve particular learning, social or wellbeing needs (Hopwood 2010). Students enact agency as struggle and resistance when they struggle against or "break away" from injustices or inequalities (Hopwood 2010, 114). This research also shows that institutional forces play a crucial role in supporting or enabling students' capacity to enact agency and in shaping the wider social structures over time. These two ways of conceptualizing agency are used in this article to uncover how international students exercise agency in the host country. A form of agency often identified in the literature stems from when individuals resist or fight against dominant ideologies (Koro-Ljungberg, Bussing, and Cornwell 2010). Agency should be understood in relation to not only people's response to structure and new situations but also to their changing needs and outlooks in the host country (Kosic and Triandafyllidou 2003). This is especially important with regard to international students as their mobility and settlement in a new country can lead to changing needs and aspirations. Notwithstanding, how they act and respond to these changes remains largely unknown in related literature.

Whether agency succeeds or fails depends on not only students' individual efforts, but it is also contingent on the availability of resources, institutional and structural factors influencing the students' lived realities. As Biesta and Tedder (2007, 137) posit, agency is comprised of "achievements," which "result from the interplay between individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors" in a unique "ecology." Research evidence also suggests the importance of the mediating role of institutions and how that, in turn, shapes structure and the possibility and degree of agency over time (Hopwood 2010; Edwards 2011; Obeng-Odoom 2012). Various institutional mediating factors, ranging from public policy to the university's strategies, should be at the heart of shaping international students' experience (Obeng-Odoom 2012, 209). Therefore, the issue is not simply about structure and agency but also the mediating role of institutions.

In this research, international students' agency is interpreted using not only agency theory mentioned earlier but also Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory. Positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999) highlights that people, as agents, can act intentionally and have potential to make changes to the world in which they live, a point also emphasized by agency theory (Edwards 2011; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hopwood 2010). Overall, both agency theory and positioning theory are concerned with how individuals position themselves and exercise their agency through accommodating or resisting the discourse structure.

However, while agency theory provides the researchers with a critical lens to examine the extent to which the international student participants act agentively in responding to the institutional and social structures in which they operate, positioning theory is concerned with the discursive constructions of individual storylines through which a person's actions can be made intelligible and seen as social acts (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, 16). Positioning theory thus provides the analytical tool to unpack how students' intentions and acts can be understood as being positioned by the social structures as well as by their own agency, and how institutions shape the student experiences. The mediating role of the institutions in shaping the agency of the students is revealed through the students' storylines. Within social structures, individual students have the capacity to reposition themselves in

terms of transforming discourse practices, and such capacity is termed as individuals' agentive power.

Both agency theory and positioning theory highlighting student agency can be revealed through their process of positioning themselves in relation to people and communities with which they interact (Edwards 2011; Harré and van Langenhove 1999; Hopwood 2010). However, within positioning theory, Harré and van Langenhove (1999, 17) further argue, "[f] Fluid positionings, not fixed roles, are used by people to cope with situations they usually find themselves in." Positioning theory highlights the shifts in positions as the narrative unfolds and as people interact with artefacts within discursive practices (Davies and Harré 1999). Initial positioning can be challenged and this leads to the possibilities for individuals to reposition themselves. Therefore, people experience changes through the opportunities to act agentively and through the creation of new positions for themselves. Winslade (2003) argues that the possibility of contradiction in discursive positioning is necessary for individuals to exercise agency and make changes. In analysing the student agency revealed through their positioning and repositioning, the following four analytical tools from positioning theory have been used:

- (1) *Deliberate self-positioning* – where an individual takes on a particular stance to achieve a particular goal. This category will enable the analysis of students' agency revealed through the ways they position themselves in mobility.
- (2) *Other positioning* – where taking a position results in positioning the other person in a correlative way. This will be applied to analyse students' agency in relation to their other-positioning of different actors (for example, teachers and peers) and different social practices with which they interact.
- (3) *Forced self-positioning* – where an individual performs an act as required or expected by a different social force. In this study, forced self-positioning will be drawn on to analyse how students position themselves in the ways they think are required by different social forces (for example, the institutional structure or power imbalances, etc.).
- (4) *Repositioning* – where an individual adopts a new position as a result of previous experiences and interaction. This analytical category will explore how students may redefine their ways of thinking and acting due to a certain impact.

The positionalities of research participants and researchers: It is important to acknowledge the dynamics of the positionalities of both the research participants and researchers in this study and their potential to influence participants' acts of positioning in the interview and the interview data used in this article. Thomas and James (2006) stated "when one argues for the validity of qualitative inquiry one is arguing for a reinstatement of the validity of interpretation and understanding in a social world" (779). That understanding is to some extent subjective and shaped by our own personal and social background. In the context of this study, the researchers' personal experiences as Vietnamese international students whose English is not their first language and as teachers of international students in different Australian institutions provide us with insights into the research topic, help us develop an intimate understanding of the experiences our participants shared and help to construct our identity as an insider in this area. Importantly, the critical reflective lens and theoretical knowledge we have built up through various research projects on international education and in this study in particular has been drawn on to create a balanced approach and minimize

Table 1. The students' national origins and courses.

Nation of origin	Number of interviewees	VET course	Number of interviewees
<i>South Asia</i>		Food and hospitality	40
India	22	Management & commerce	10
Other	2	Building & carpentry	16
<i>Northeast Asia</i>		Information technology	9
China	18	Hairdressing	8
Korea	10	Community welfare work	5
Japan	2	Automotive	4
<i>Southeast Asia and the Pacific</i>		Others	13
Vietnam	18	Total	105
Other (Malaysia,Philippine, Thailand)	7		
Mauritius	5		
<i>Europe and the UK</i>			
UK	9		
France	1		
Germany	1		
Italy	1		
<i>South America</i>			
Brazil	2		
Argentina	1		
Others	6		
Total	105		

issues of “insider” bias in data collection and interpretation. Our former status as international students to some extent helps the participants feel comfortable in sharing their experiences during the interview but at the same time might impact on how the participants position themselves in relation to us and in effect, on the nature of the data collected. Therefore, the findings reported in this article reflect participants’ acts of positioning in the social context of the interview and these may or may not be identical to their acts of positioning across different social, cultural and academic contexts with which they interact.

The research

This article is derived from a research project funded by the Australian Research Council. This research includes interviews with more than 150 international students and staff as well as fieldwork conducted in dual-sector and vocational education institutions in three main states of Australia: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and Victoria (VIC). The primary aim of the research is to analyse international students’ study purposes in vocational education and training (VET), social experiences and agency in the host country. The key research questions include (1) What are international students’ purposes in enrolling in a VET course in Australia and how does their study purpose affect the nature of their learning and social experience? (2) What kinds of learning and social activities have they engaged in during their VET course? (3) Whether and to what extent do they exercise their agency in the context of their learning and social experiences in Australia?

After gaining approval from the ethics committee at the university where the researchers were based, the student participants were selected based on the broad criteria that they are enrolled as an international student in either a public or private VET institute in Australia and they volunteer to participate in the research. International student participants were recruited through an invitation sent to their institutions. Those who agreed to participate

were asked to attend a face-to-face interview which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The participants were enrolled in a wide range of VET programmes including Hospitality, Building and Construction, Finance, Community welfare, Hairdressing, Automotive and Information technology (IT). Second interviews were also undertaken with a small number of students. These students were recruited based on their willingness to participate in the second interview. The purpose of the second interview is to understand what changes the students have made with regard to their learning and social adaptation six months after the first interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. With consent from the participants, the lead researcher took part in various student activities and visited them at workplaces. Participation in and observation of these activities enabled the researcher to have more insightful understandings of international student experiences and agency manifestations. This article focuses primarily on the semi-structured interview data with 105 international students with regard to how they exercise agency in the host country. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms are used and institutions are kept anonymous.

The students' national origins and courses are summarized in Table 1.

The researchers read the interview transcripts several times and used NVivo software version 10 to code the interview data. The first-named author did the preliminary coding of the interview transcripts and highlighted the phrases, sentences and paragraphs that align with a specific pattern of agency as described in the literature: *needs-response agency*, *agency as struggle and resistance* or *collective agency for contestation* (Edwards 2011; Hopwood 2010). Then, each of these phrases, sentences and paragraphs were compared with all of the others, which represents a process of constant comparison of data (Thomas 2013, 276). Part of this constant comparative method (Thomas 2013) uses names and colours to code the data and highlight the most prominent patterns and the key meanings associated with the process of exercising agency as constructed by the participants. However, this process of constant comparison and the use of agency theory is flexibly drawn on to allow the researchers to capture the theme or pattern of student agency that do not explicitly fit into the three forms of agency or the pre-defined analytical framework based on the existing literature but emerged substantially from the phrases, sentences and paragraphs in the data-set. This category is termed as *agency as becoming* in this research. The co-author then carefully read through the preliminary coding and identified the most prominent aspects of the themes or patterns and coded data highlighted by the first-named author. After that both authors considered those themes again taking into account the existing literature and positioning theory and both authors worked on the interpretation of the data. The key aspects central to this article were thus identified and developed through a thorough mutual process of engagement with the interview excerpts and relevant theory, constant comparison of data (Thomas 2013), interpretation of patterns and reflection that involves both researchers. This dynamic process of mutual and constant comparison involving both researchers also allows them to pay attention to the unique nature of student mobility in the context of negotiating transnational space and educational, social and cultural context associated with mobility rather than rigidly adhering to the categories of student agency as described in the literature. Owing to the scope of the article, a small number of excerpts, which are typical of the data-set under each pattern or theme were selected to be used, following the constant comparison method as described earlier. Italics are used to highlight some parts of the interview excerpts that contain the key points conveyed by the participants. The next section will

discuss these manifestations of agency in mobility in light of relevant theory on agency and positioning theory.

Agency for becoming

The interview data makes a case for international students' ways of envisaging and proactively cultivating both their personal development and transformation of the context in which they engage, which we term as *agency for becoming*. Although this agency concept is new in the discussion of international students' agency, it resonates with a well established strand of theorizing agency as "life-course notions" (Eteläpelto et al. 2013). It also echos and extends previous depictions of international students as self-forming agents (Marginson 2014; Pham and Tran 2015; Tran 2011, 2016). The following interview excerpts provide further insights into how *agency for becoming* is manifested in the lived realities of a group of student participants.

In the first place, *agency for becoming* involves the individual's active engagement in constructing his/her own life-course (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003) in the "interplay" with "influences from the past and orientations towards the future" (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015, 626; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In the following interview excerpt, the student participant Riya's reasoning and future planning offers a vivid example for this aspect of *agency for becoming*. In light of positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), Riya's elaborate account of her past–present–future self-positioning illustrates her capacity to devise a comprehensive master plan for her choice of studying Community Welfare in Australia:

[F]irst I'll give you a bit of general background so you will have much understanding of my purpose. I did my high school, then I joined a bachelor school in India in physiotherapy. [...] Then I did my internship there in the hospital for six months. As soon as I finished my course, [...] I came back to my home. And then there I joined a hospital and I was working in the hospital as a physiotherapist and it was for three years. And at the same time ... I was volunteering in that whole organization as a health worker. I saw that we do have so many problems in the health system of our country.

So I was thinking that if I want to work in the national health government health department then I need to have [...] some community experience and some formal education so I can straight away apply for the job as a health worker in government health department. *And I wanted to work there. I want to work there and make the system much better* because our government is spending billions of dollars for the betterment of the people. But still we do have malaria cases existing in our country. There are hundreds of these small diseases which are still existing in my country [...] *I wanted to have some formal education so I came here [Australia]. I joined the community welfare course. [...] And as soon as I'll finish that, then I will go back to my country and join that health [system] in our country.* (Riya, Indian, Community welfare, VIC, emphasis added)

In line with positioning theory, Riya's *agency for becoming*, or her decision to pursue transnational education and her future goal, is underpinned by how she views her past, present and future self (van Langenhove and Harré 1999). Specifically, her past self-positioning sheds light on the aspired future self-positioning, which altogether explains the present-self positioning and her agency. Riya's past-self positioning depicts an educated professional who was concerned with the community welfare issues in India and motivated to empower herself through education and career change. This aspiration is manifested in Riya's future-self positioning as a civil servant with qualifications and authority to bring about positive

changes to the wellbeing of the disadvantaged in her homeland. In order to take a leap from the past to future-self positioning, Riya's present-self positioning is presented with a self-driven decision to enhance her professional capacity and experience through "formal education" in a developed country like Australia.

Riya's self-positioning provides an empirical reflection of the agency model that Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) develop based on relevant work by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), arguing that agency is configured by past experiences and orientated towards the future. The intentionality of Riya's act of pursuing transnational education as a self-directed response to the given external circumstance in her country resonates with Hewson's (2010) view of agency. Yet rather than emerging from mobility, it is noteworthy from this finding that Riya's agency for becoming precedes and enables transnational education mobility. Riya's projection of who she wants to become, and how she can attain her goal reflect the "intentionality" and "forethought" properties of agency (Bandura 2006), or the "projectivity" dimension of agency discussed in Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 971). According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 984), projectivity manifests "agentic processes [to] give shape and direction to future possibilities" and the actor's "imaginative engagement of the future." As a new contribution to the current literature of international students' agency, the empirical finding in this study suggests that international students' agency, understood as an act of thinking, imagining and making decisions, can precede their actual engagement in transnational mobility.

The finding also supports Marginson's (2014, 10) notion of "mobility" as a means to transform the "space of possibles" (Bourdieu 1993, 30, cited in Marginson 2014), adding that the intended transformations can be two-fold. Riya's self-positioning illustrates that the international student enacts agency not only for self-transformation but also for positive changes happening at a wider scope, i.e. her home country. In other words, international student agency in mobility can be directed at both the "space of possibles" of their own and also of a larger community beyond themselves.

This notion of two-fold agency for "becoming" is reiterated in other interview excerpts in which the "space of possibles" of international students' agency also encompasses the host society.

I think, beside[s] your studying, you *should participate, contribute into some of the social activity*. [...] A few months ago, last semester, I did the Bluey Day, we do fundraising for Bluey Day Foundation for the students who have cancer. (Hải, Vietnamese, Hospitality Management, VIC)

I'm helping those disabled people in like to learn how to cook, to learn how to apply for a job. And you know some of them, they're having a doctor appointment so we are going with them and just helping them in the doctor's appointment. (Samar, Indian, Community Service, QLD)

Well, we have to do vocational placement. I'll be starting at a salon so. Other than that volunteer work as well, [...] just like other hair shows and stuff like that. (Yuka, Papua New Guinean, Hairdressing, QLD)

I used to work volunteer for the [Hunter] Institute ... I'm assistant chef to help my chef making cake and bread for any student coming and eat. [...] sometimes they give me certificate because I used to work as the volunteer. [...] *I saw a lot of the international students contribute for the Australian*. Like they work as the volunteer when the Australian had the bushfires, I saw so many friends that study in the university, they work as volunteers. They went to the countryside to help the people clean and build the house for the people. (Hoàng, Vietnamese, Cookery, VIC).

These interview excerpts represent a number of examples illustrating how the host community is included in the realm of international students' agency. These student participants' self-positioning of their lived experiences shows their strong sense of engagement in the society and their agentic endeavours to become a valuable member of the host community through an array of volunteering activities such as fundraising causes and charity work. Their agency for becoming pertains to their potential to innovate and engage in entrepreneurial ventures outside their study and *in the benefit* of the host community. This finding offers an empirical insight into the concept of entrepreneurial agency, which is regarded as an important aspect of international students' sociocultural agency yet still remains short of empirical evidence in studies about international students in Australia (Volet and Jones 2012, 273).

Moreover, in most of the interview excerpts earlier, the students' self-positioning also indicates that they are apparently able to connect their volunteer work with their vocational interests/majors in community welfare (Samar), hairdressing (Yuka) or cooking (Hoàng). Purposeful engagement with these activities paves the way for a "transformative experience" in learning, which according to Pugh (2011, 111), takes place when learners utilize the class contents in the contexts outside classrooms and "experience the world in a new, meaningful way." This finding suggests international students' capacity to draw on external opportunities to internalize experience and intellectual resources that support their professional development and help enhance their employability, and at the same time, contribute to the transformations of the broader social structures they are attached with.

The research findings are testaments to previous researchers' depictions of international students with endeavours and commitments to taking initiatives as change agents (Marginson 2014). In light of positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), the findings also add a number of empirical insights for a more nuanced understanding of international students' agency in pursuing transnational education and extra-curriculum activities during their sojourn. International student agency for becoming is embedded in their imaginations of future aspirations and transformations of "space of possibles" for themselves and/or a wider community in their home/host country through transnational education and involvement in social activities. This underlines the "transformative" characteristic that is believed to be inherent in agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971) and the experience of "otherness" in international mobility (Killick 2012).

Needs-response agency

Another form of agency emerging from this study is *needs-response agency*. In addition to large dreams and broad entrepreneurial engagement, international students' mobility experiences are inclusive of more temporal learning, social or well-being needs, which require them to exercise agency in order to satisfy these specific demands (Hopwood 2010). While it is a rampant stereotype that international students, especially "Asian" students, are passive and reactive in expressing and addressing their needs, by drawing on the concepts of self-positioning, other-positioning and repositioning in positioning theory, research findings about *needs-response agency* presented later suggest otherwise.

For example, when talking about their agency in the learning environment, a number of student participants refer to their initiatives to address their own learning needs, and to contribute to the learning process as co-constructors of knowledge:

Sometimes it's so confusing subject. So confusing and I *will try to ask the teacher and make him explain for us more, give more examples.* (Tâm, Vietnamese, Accounting, VIC)

So for the class? *I'm pushing them, I'm pushing them. I bring up a lot of new things.* I require the lecturers to use some activity or to push more, to give them some more work. *I always raise some new idea toward the class to discuss* because I'm a talkative student in the class. *I always pick something new and ask the teacher to explain for the students.* For example, if we study about business model, because I have a business background and law background, and I use some of my experience to give them some, to let them discuss. (Hải, Vietnamese, Hospitality Management, VIC)

Actually I did a few times, *to talk about my country activity into the class activity or class work.* Most of them is in international marketing opportunity. So we all explain how to enter the products from Australia to other countries. *I bring some of my knowledge to the classroom.* And people realize that Vietnam is the new developing country. They didn't know much about Vietnam [before]. (Mạnh, Vietnamese, Marketing, VIC)

Positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), which posits that intentional acts are revealed through the way people position themselves and others, provides a helpful lens to examine the intentionality of the students' *needs-response agency*. In the first interview excerpt, Tâm positions himself as a learner in need of a more detailed explanation of the learning contents, and he other-positions his teacher as a valuable resource that he can turn into in the classroom. Therefore, he makes an agentic effort to mobilize the teacher's resource by asking questions and requesting further clarification, thereby enabling him to engage more effectively with learning. Tâm's agency in addressing his learning need is opposite to the stereotypical portrayal of international students being passive and silent in class that could be found in previous studies such as Samuelowicz (1987) and Lacina (2002).

In the other two excerpts, the students demonstrate similar *needs-response agency* but with quite contrasting positioning. Different from Tâm, both Hải and Mạnh other-position their teachers and classmates with specific needs that they can support, and position themselves as a valuable resource for their learning community. Hải's other-positioning, for example, shows the need for teachers in transnational classrooms to introduce more activities, more new ideas and more depth, while according to Mạnh's other-positioning, his classmates need more comparative perspectives in the international marketing subject from a developing country like his home country, and their understanding about such a country as Vietnam also needs to be updated. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 998), by recognizing the "ambiguous, unsettled, or unresolved" of the particular situation, in this study the classroom contexts, the students perform their agency of problematization, as the first aspect of the practical-evaluative element of agency which is believed to bring about changes. Moreover, through enacting their agency of responding to their needs and their peers' learning needs, these international students are able to make their voices heard, their identities visible, and their contributions perceptible to other members in the learning context.

Needs-response agency is also conveyed in relation with the student's cultural identity. The following interview excerpt illustrates the role of student agency in co-constructing cultural other-awareness and repositioning themselves. From the perspective of this student's self-positioning, international students are active agents in bridging existing gaps, assumed to be within themselves and others, in mutual cultural understanding. Through attending to the needs of both ends, the students reconstruct their cultural identity and relationships with other social actors with whom they interact:

I try to let them know about my culture, my country, what we do, like all our points of view we discuss. We learn from each other. [...] Contributing is really important. And you know it makes you close with the class and everyone around you. (Amanda, Hairdressing, Lebanese, VIC)

The empirical data in this study challenges the sweeping “deficit model” inscribed on international students (term suggested by Montgomery and McDowell 2009, 455) maintaining that being quiet, submissive and disengaged is a permanent ubiquitous culture-embedded characteristic of international students (Lacina 2002; Samuelowicz 1987). It also questions teachers’ general “otherization” views of international students elicited from previous studies, assuming that these students bring about challenges to teaching (see Volet and Jones 2012, 257). In contrast, the students’ positioning in this study corroborates the construction of international students as “agentic beings” with the capacity to configure and control their own learning, to proactively adopt different strategies to engage with the teaching-learning community, and to co-cultivate knowledge (Marginson 2014; Montgomery and McDowell 2009; Tran 2011).

Furthermore, the findings also provide instances of international students’ “more complex” agency in learning, such as “advocating their personal and cultural values” to the teaching contents (Tran 2011, 90). This characteristic of needs-response agency is developed and mediated by the unique transnational social fields created by educational mobility that could be more typical of international students than local students. The significance of this form of agency is that it enables international students to retain and also to reproduce the inter-cultural capital embedded in their transnational mobility into their learning context and the host community.

Agency as struggle and resistance

The interview data also present *agency as struggle and resistance* – a form of agency which is believed to entail the power to reconstruct and to (self)-transform when the agent has to confront “contradictory or otherwise problematic situations” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1012). As a group of cross-border students who are coping with various internal and external challenges, an indispensable dimension of international students’ agency is their struggle and contestation against unfavourable or disagreeable conditions. As Hopwood (2010, 114) posits, students’ struggle manifests their agency, which is evident through their “resilience, resourcefulness and capacity to change tack or break away.”

The international student participants in this research present a range of approaches to exercising their agency as struggle and contestation, both inside and outside their institution. The following interview excerpts unfold a variety of approaches the students employ to deal with unjust and unfavourable situations:

I’m not that person who always makes complaint. Sometimes I hide things with myself. I will let it pass because I have this idea that maybe it will change. So, I always see things first and observe it if it will change because when it changes, okay, no worries. But when it’s not, that’s the time for me to talk. (Anja, Phillipino, Hospitality Management, VIC)

I contribute also by complaining because it’s an opportunity for them [institution and teachers] to be aware of something that is going wrong in the system. Yeah I do complain a lot. Every single thing that I see wrong I give them the opportunity to change it by complaining. (Phil, Mauritius Hospitality Management, VIC)

I'm actually in the process of a complaint process against [Institution's name] because last year they told me that I can't uphill because I'm an international student. And because of that I had to repeat a lot of subjects which I'm very well qualified for. And I had to pay that money and I had to sit in class and study it which I didn't need to. I mean, by the rules of the university I'm allowed to uphill. I've now lodged a complaint because they gave me the wrong information. And I think that's a very serious problem if you tell an international student that something false for which they have to pay so much extra money and time and then it turns out that they were completely wrong. (Sarani, Indian, Community Welfare, VIC)

I've got the potential to fight with the people over here. That's it. Because I was so upset with the treatment at the college, the management, the bureaucracy over here, I'm fighting for three months with these bureaucrats over here in Sydney. The education department, the ACPET [Australian Council for Private Education and Training] and everything everywhere. So I know I've developed my potential to fight with these people. (Saleh, Indian, Community Welfare, NSW)

In light of positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), these interview excerpts show that the students self-position differently, and they face different situations, hence, enact their agency differently. For instance, Anja, the Philipino student, positions herself as an introvert, perceptive and patient person who prefers to start with observation and to allow time for the situation to adjust itself. If the circumstance remains unresolved, she accordingly repositions herself and chooses to speak up about her discontent. The notions of self-positioning and re-self-positioning shed significant light on the understanding of agency through Anja's explanation of her approach to contestation. Anja's agency is embedded in her understanding of her inner self, or, her "way of being in, seeing and responding to the world" (Edwards 2000, 200). This typifies the kinship relation between personal identity and agency asserted by Killick (2012, 373) who posits that "it is how people see their *self-in-the-world*, which shapes inclinations and the will to *act-in-the-world*."

This finding also depicts the "intentions" that shape a series of "purposeful" activities (Hopwood 2010, 105) that Anja performs: thinking–observing–repositioning–choosing to act. From Emirbayer's and Mische's (1998, 999) perspective, Anja demonstrates two principal tones of practical-evaluative agency, which are "problematization" – the "recognition that the concrete particular situation at hand is somehow ambiguous, unsettled, or unresolved" (998), and "decision" – "deliberation aims toward decision (or choice), the resolution to act here and now in a particular way." This finding points out that the impression of international students' being quiet does not necessarily mean international students, especially Asian students, are being passive, submissive or indifferent. This biased view fails to unpack the complexity of international students' intentions and their agency underpinning their behaviours.

Different from Anja, the other three students appear to be very "vocal" in demonstrating their agency to "resist and subvert the logics and practices of the established order" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1001). These respondents all self-position with an action: "to complain", "to lodge a complaint" or "to fight", but they attach dissimilar meanings to their action based on their positioning in a particular context. Phil, for instance, self-positions his act of complaining as his right and duty to make contributions to his institution, because he believes that recognizing what and where the problem is offers the system a chance to change positively. Meanwhile, Sarani's act of complaining is related to her forced self-positioning, which, according to van Langenhove and Harré (1999, 26), differs from self-positioning in that "the initiative now lies with somebody else" external to the actor. According to her account, Sarani forced-positions herself in response to the way she was

other-positioned by her institution in the previous year that she was not qualified for earning credits for the subjects in her past degree(s). Sarani's reasoning for her agency of contestation is contingent on the interaction between (a) self-positioning of her rights as a qualified student, (b) other-positioning of her institutions' obligations to provide correct information and follow fair procedures, and (c) forced self-positioning of her rights/duties to do herself justice as the victim of unfair treatment from the institution. Similar to Saranie, Saleh's agency of fighting is shaped by his forced self-positioning as a victim of the bureaucratic system and self-positioning as a person with the capacity to protest. Through the lens of positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), this study shows that international students' agency is contingent on how they position themselves and the context which influences their other-positioning and forced self-positioning.

International students' agency as struggle is also manifested in their intentional move to counter inequalities at work:

I've been exploited by my employer so far but I have some plan I have to get some PAYG and also some other documentations, the legal documentations, without telling the boss about what I am going to do. I will collect all these documents and I will lodge the complaining to the Fair Work Organization. Then I will write the letter the boss and within seven days he has to pay me the rest of the money or otherwise I can lodge the complaint to the Fair Work (Chou, Korean, Cookery, NSW)

Similar to previous findings, this is a case of forced self-positioning in which Chou shows her agency in making a stand against the exploitation and illegal treatment at the workplace imposed by her employer, whom she other-positions as violating the legal rights of the employees and failing conduct of the employer's obligations. This international student portrays herself as an active self-forming agent who is unlikely to accept passively the inequalities and discrimination inscribed on herself. By detailing each step in her contestation, Chou's agency reflects the agentic process of *projectivity*, the tenets of which are described in Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 984):

the locus of agency here lies in the *hypothesization of experience*, as actors attempt to reconfigure received schemas by *generating alternative possible responses* to the problematic situations they confront in their lives. Immersed in a temporal flow, they move "beyond themselves" into the future and *construct changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present.* (emphasis added)

Chou's agency in mapping measures and devising the future possibilities in her fight to protect her right at work is an important finding that enriches the current literature which has identified the victimization of international students in the host society (Ee 2013; Mason 2012). It invites future research to devote more attention to unpacking how international students respond to being abused and being discriminated against when participating in a workplace in a foreign country, especially their agency in negotiating the power imbalances with their employer.

Collective agency for contestation

An important dimension of agency emerging from this study is *collective agency for contestation* or "relational agency." "Relational agency", as Edwards (2011) defines, refers to "a capacity for working with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems" (34). In his study of doctoral students with the majority of participants being international

students, Hopwood (2010, 110) concludes that the students' agency is exhibited in their mobilization of relationships to meet particular needs. This strategic act of agency is illustrated in the following interview excerpt in which the student is faced with the adverse situation that his college has been closed:

[I]nitially we haven't had any idea that what to do. And then myself, I organized all the people and I took all the students about to find, all the students to the ACPET office here in Sydney. Yeah. And I collected forms that we need to have the relocation. And we filled out the forms of relocation and we submitted that form to the ACPET office in Sydney. Then later we went to our general consulate office. We met our consular over there and we mentioned our reason of what we are in such a mess that college has closed and we are nowhere. And after two days ACPET organized a meeting with the students and at the meeting they said, okay, we are going to relocate you within 28 days. (Saleh, Indian, Community Welfare, VIC)

The situation that provoked the student's agency act was extremely inimical, because when an institution was suddenly closed down, the students' wellbeing and sense of belonging are the most vulnerable. In this interview excerpt, Saleh describes his initial reaction as feeling lost and not knowing what to do, yet his resilience and agency prevented himself and his peers from being passive and powerless victims of this unfavourable condition. Saleh forced-self-positions as a quick-minded and proactive agent who swiftly mobilizes group power through "organizing" other students who are suffering from the same problem, and then seeking official support from his country's general consulate office as a political capital for the collective contestation. In his response, Saleh's switching from "I" to "We" when talking about his group movement demonstrates his re-self-positioning from being an individual agent to part of a collective act. According to Edwards (2011, 34), essential to the relational agency is the ability to collaborate with others "to expand the 'object of activity' [...] by recognising the motives and the resources that others bring to bear as they, too, interpret it." In this case, Saleh shows his capacity to "recognize" the purposes and the resources shared among international students in similar situations with him. Additionally, the students as a group were also able to utilize external resources thanks to Saleh's agentic strategies in collecting forms, submitting the forms to the ACPET office, and explaining the situation to the consulate general office. This reflects the important capacity to "create common knowledge" (Edwards 2011, 35) for collaborative agency.

This finding extends the concept of collective agency and the current understanding of the motivations and functionality of groupings or networking by international students in the host society. In addition to connecting to one another for mutual social support when living in a "parallel society" within the host society (Gomes 2015, 532) or for specific learning needs (Cullen et al. [1994] and Francis [2007], cited in Hopwood 2010, 110; Montgomery and McDowell 2009), international students also strategically enact their collective agency with external organizations to protect their group from adversity, and to restore their right and identity in the host society.

Conclusions

There are four forms of "agency in mobility" that emerge from the students' positioning (Harré and van Langenhove 1999) in this research: *agency for becoming*, *needs-response agency*, *agency as struggle and resistance* and *collective agency for contestation*.

Agency for becoming is a new form of students' agency that this research contributes to the existing literature of student agency in international education. It is new because, based on the empirical data, it makes the first case within the context of international education that international students enact agency not only in the service of their own becoming, but also for transforming "space of possibles" (Bourdieu, 1993, 30, cited in Marginson 2014, 10) of a wider community in the home or host society. Such an endeavour encompasses the transformative perspectives about agency and transnational mobility in education. Additionally, the current research points out that the intentionality property of agency can be embedded in a self-initiated act of imagining and decision-making; therefore, international students' agency for becoming can *precede* their actual engagement with transnational mobility. Situated in the broader discussion of agency, *agency for becoming* is in line with the life-course and identity strand of theorizing agency represented by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Biesta and Tedder (2007) and Eteläpelto et al. (2013). It complements the existing theorization of agency by providing empirical evidence to address explicitly the intentionality aspect of agency towards a larger community, not only towards one's "self".

The current study also provides empirical evidence to enhance the existing discussion of other forms of agency, particularly in previous studies such as Hopwood (2010) and Edwards (2011). Based on the concepts of self-positioning, other-positioning and repositioning in positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), the notion of "needs" and "agents" in *needs-response agency* is extended in this study. The students perform this type of agency when they identify "gaps" within themselves, and also in other social actors such as their teachers and classmates. In the classroom context, when international students enact agency to address their own needs, they are *proactive learners*; when their agency addresses the need of others in the learning community, they are *agentic co-constructors of knowledge*; and when both needs are attended, they are *re-constructors* of both their *identity and relationships* with other social actors with whom they interact.

Regarding international students' *agency as struggle and resistance*, through the lens of positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), this study highlights the contingency of agency on the students' self-positioning and the context that influences their other-positioning and forced self-positioning. With the latter, this finding extends an understanding about the relation between personal identity and agency suggested by Killick (2012). Agency not only depends on how people see themselves, but it is also shapes how people see others and how people see themselves as a result of how others view them.

This study also contributes significant empirical evidence of not only individual agency but also *collective agency as contestation*, in which international students form a network to execute their agency against adversity, exploitation and stereotyping. International student experience is shaped by the mediating role of institutions and the critical role of student agency in projecting and executing the intended transformations of mobility experience against injustices.

While these four types of agency addressed in this research are not exclusive to international students, a number of their characteristics could be more distinct among this group than among local students. For instance, for international students, agency for becoming is more particularly associated with the students' engagement in and connectedness with at least two transnational social fields of their home and host country. Educational mobility also provides international students with unique conditions to mediate their needs-response agency to contribute to reciprocal intercultural learning.

It is also important to recognize from the research findings that the extent to which and the manners in which individual students enact agency vary among individuals, depending on their subjectivity and conditions. Not all participating students talked about their agency in the interviews, whilst some students appeared to be more agentive than others. Additionally, as noted earlier, international students are participating in the transformative discourse directed either by themselves or external factors such as their family or existing social norms and beliefs. In this discourse, overseas education is used as a vehicle to help them transform their family's economic capital into the symbolic capital (their degree) as well as professional and social advancement (Brooks and Waters 2011; Tran 2016). For some students, this is at their parents' will, ergo they are more passive in the decision-making; while for others, it could be initiated as an investment in their future. Nevertheless, it is also recognized that many other students remain passive and dependent on their parents or other agents in the decision-making, therefore, putting limits on their agency.

To enhance the experience of international students, policy changes at different levels are needed. First, at the institutional level, policies on international students and international education in general need to move beyond simply providing educational services to creating productive conditions and external opportunities for international students to act agentively and to participate in different aspects of the host society. The possible existence of wider institutional structures, especially the student union, that may/may not facilitate the engagement of international students, need to be taken into account in building an institutional environment that is conducive to student agency. This study thus invites further research into conditions that *can* and *are still needed* to facilitate and empower agency of international students. Second, policy effort needs to focus on raising the awareness of the wider community of the enormous untapped potential cultural and intellectual resources that international students bring to transnational education contexts and host countries. Developing strategies aimed at integrating international students' diverse knowledge, cultures and experiences into Australian classrooms, workplace and communities is essential to optimizing learning for all. Third, institutions and involved parties must work *collaboratively* to enhance international students' capacity for agency and to prevent international student exploitation.

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