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Identities lost and found: exploring long-term outcomes of international student experience

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INTRODUCTION

> " Australia impacted my life in a way that I can really measure. I can always tell my kids how this all happened and was, I would say, the beautiful plot twist of my life.

It started with a question:
What impact does learning English have for international students, in the long term?

Better job prospects and new career outcomes? Yes, often.
Increased enrolments into higher education and alternative educational pathways? Absolutely.
How about expanding global networks, and the ability to communicate in a connected world? Yes, that too.

But there's more. The literal and metaphorical student journeys in this research reveal a complex web of systems, networks, and unpredictable emergence that challenge how we might think about our impact on student experience, and not just a month or a year after graduation. To understand long-term impact, we have to explore broader ecosystems - life-long and life-wide learning. In breaking away from short-term targets, political cycles and established criteria for 'impact', we can open our eyes to different stories, and deeper meaning.

Identities lost and found acknowledges the complexity of international education and the individuals who contribute to its diversity. The insights shared here come from interviews with former students during May-August 2023. Some arrived in Australia over 20 years ago, others in the last 10 years; all bring thoughtful reflection to the experience of being an international student, and learnings for how we might support the experiences and outcomes of current and future students.

RESEARCH APPROACH

To understand impacts, we need to know what happened before, during and after the 'visible' learning experience. Qualitative interviews guided the exploration of past experiences, current lives, and future ambitions, sharing the narrative ownership with participants in a series of informal, flexible discussions.

Qualitative individual depth interviews (IDIs)

- 60 minute discussions, held online via video conference
- Interviews with 11 individual participants over a 4-month period
- Semi-structured discussion guide with key prompts about aspects of current and past experience.

Sample: adults who studied in Australia 10+ years ago

- Former students who had travelled to Australia to study around 10+ years ago (some as long as 23 years ago)
- Home countries included Brazil, Chile, China, Thailand, Italy, Switzerland, Taiwan and Japan
- Mix of male and female, various ages from late 20s to mid-40s

Pre- and post-interview engagement

Before each interview, participants were asked to find pictures to represent the best and worst moments from their study experience. As well as being part of the research discussion, some of their pictures are included in this report, with their kind permission.

After each interview, summary notes and key quotes were sent to each participant. They were invited to share feedback, correct any inaccuracies or add further detail to the summary, to ensure their voice was interpreted appropriately.

Research was conducted according to the ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics. Participant responses are anonymous; where individuals are identifiable in images, participants have given permission for these to be included in the work.

Students' (literal) journeys stretched across the world

Research participants represented 11 different countries across five continents. Countries of origin included Brazil, Chile, China, Thailand, Italy, Switzerland, Taiwan and Japan. Some participants had returned to their home countries when we spoke, whilst others had migrated to Australia, Canada and the UK.
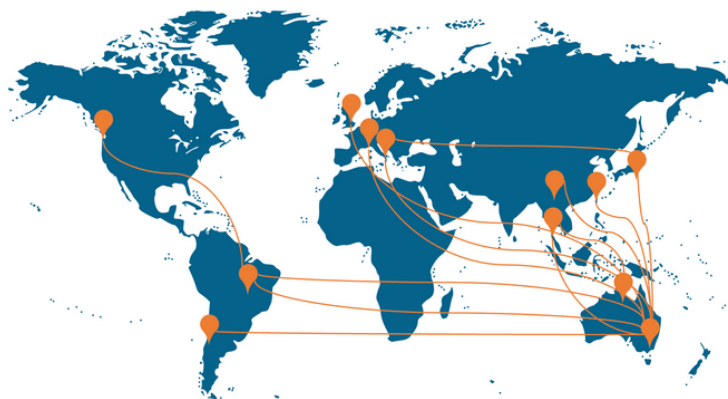
Some student journeys were (relatively) simple, but others took more unexpected turns...

A few participants described 'single loop' study experiences lasting from 7 months to 3 years. In these cases, students usually left their home country for a planned length of time, then returned home. In one case, the travel was originally planned for 4 months, then extended out to 3 years as they explored new opportunities and re-evaluated career plans.

Other participants had multiple loops in their study and professional journeys, initially going back home (e.g. for work or visa reasons) then returning to Australia to pursue different professional or personal goals. Few had planned to stay in Australia beyond their initial trip.

In some cases, journeys ended a long way from where they began, with migration to Australia, the UK, and Canada - none of which were envisioned at the start of each journey. In each case, there were certain aspects of the initial study experience that influenced those later decisions, including meeting a future partner, engaging in further study, and a desire for better quality of life.

Complexity theory as a framework for analysis

A relatively recent addition to educational research, complexity theory is transdisciplinary, stretching across domains as diverse as physics, biology, and economics. It challenges simplistic cause and effect analyses, seeking instead to understand complex systems and interactions, and how phenomena emerge:

> "Complexity thinking might be positioned somewhere between a belief in a fixed and fully knowable universe and a fear that meaning and reality are so dynamic that attempts to explicate are little more than self-delusions. In fact, complexity thinking commits to neither of these extremes, but listens to both." (Davis & Sumara, 2008)

In the context of this research, complexity theory leads us to consider the complex systems surrounding student experience, the role of adaptation, and the interplay between individual agency, social networks, and the emergent nature of learning experiences.

Systems

International education involves multiple, nested systems interacting with each other. These include social, legal, political, educational, employment, and environmental systems. They can have both positive and negative impacts.

Adaptation

International students are constantly adapting to unfamiliar experiences, both consciously and subconsciously. Adaptive efforts are ideally made by host countries, institutions and educators too, but this is not always the case.

Networks

Networks are essential to students, institutions and educators, connecting the student experience across borders and systems. Networks can be lost but also re-formed with the help of intentional connectors, communities and cultures.

Agency and emergence

Students may lose agency or 'ownership' of their study experience in challenging circumstances, and feel pressure to conform to set pathways. Learning can lead to unplanned, emergent outcomes, which are often rewarding in different ways.

Davis, B. & Sumara, D. (2008). Complexity as a theory of education. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry,* 5(2). http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci

02. NEW BEGINNINGS: SAME OLD SYSTEMS?

Student experiences are entangled in many systems, from regulatory, legal and political to social, cultural, educational, work and employment systems. As they move between countries, they navigate the legacy impacts of systems they leave behind, as well as unfamiliar systems in Australia.

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As one participant said, "We all bring massive baggage of different experiences to learn English. Some people come from a very reserved family or a very poor family, or they come from a very rich family and end up in so many different scenarios". This 'baggage' is often the product of complex systems, and can both help and hinder students as they transition between different environments.

Simplified systems diagram from the 'SANE' framework. To explore the full diagram and sub-systems visit:
https://miro.com/miroverse/sane-framework-for-student-support/

Systems can offer reasons to leave or choose destinations

Some students' decisions to travel were motivated by 'away' (from negatives) drivers, and others by 'towards' (positives) drivers, or a combination of both. Reasons to leave, even temporarily, included a lack of opportunities in life or work, difficult family situations, a lack of safety, quality of life or simply dissatisfaction, a sense that something was 'missing'.

> From a very young age, opportunities were already being taken away from me. I knew if I didn't leave, the opportunities will just continue to go, and I would have to keep doing whatever I could and settle for less than I thought I deserved.

'Towards' motivations included a desire for new life experiences, to improve career prospects, build language skills and self-discovery. Some left behind promising careers, promotions and other opportunities at home for the chance to experience something new and rewarding.

Unfamiliar systems can bring pleasant surprises, but also tensions

Some students recalled their surprise in everyday situations: walking into a bank without metal detectors or gun-wielding security; the unexpected friendliness of strangers in a country town. There were positive experiences of learning in active and collaborative styles which contrasted with educational systems at home. Others felt a sense of equality and opportunity, or an experience of safety in everyday life that was very different to their home country.
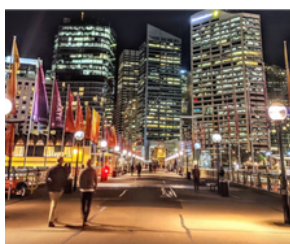
> I was walking alone at night on Pyrmont Bridge and I was like, this is what is called quality of living, coming back from work at midnight, not scared, going back home.

There were also stories of students caught up in complex and confusing systems, whether dealing with visas and bureaucracy, finding work, getting paid and treated fairly, and adjusting to different educational norms and expectations. In some cases, the consequences of these systems were serious, causing long-term anxiety, or resulting in a reluctant decision to return home.

> When I had to apply for a postgraduate visa, it was one of the most stressful situations in my life. I had one week to submit my new visa application. My life depends on one person's decision – the immigration officer. If he doesn't like what I gave him, I have to go back.

Navigating systems:
how can teachers and institutions support?

Peers, teachers, and institutions can become key 'anchor' points in a student's daily life, especially in the early weeks and months after arrival. Most are navigating multiple systems at the same time, from educational and social systems, to practical systems for transport and accommodation, work and the bureaucracy of living, working and studying overseas.

Guidance from those who have trodden similar pathways or can explain how the systems work can mean the difference between success and failure, getting paid or getting exploited, staying the course or having to go home.

It was very scary – I didn't know what it means to figure out all those different things like a visa, a different home, how I'm going to earn money, how I'm going to stay in touch with my friends and family…

It was [my teacher] who noticed. I was very lonely, and I really needed those people at school.
She was super supportive. Listening to my concerns, she was way more than an English teacher. It was just very nice to have her on my side.

03. ADAPTATION: ONCE YOU LEAVE, YOU'RE NEVER THE SAME

The international student experience is one of constant adaptation as they work through unfamiliar experiences, consciously and subconsciously. Reciprocal adaptive efforts are ideally made by host countries, institutions, peers and educators, but this is not always the case - leaving students to fit in, or fall out of the system.

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Throughout the research there were countless examples of adaptation from students, in major and minor ways, from before they arrived until long after they finished their studies. Some of these adaptations are easier to observe, including language adaptations, study, living and travel routines, and learning to manage new aspects of life in a foreign country.

Other types of adaptation are less visible, but potentially more profound: shifting attitudes towards other cultures; increases or decreases in confidence; relaxing into a different way of life, or managing anxiety from pressure to achieve and survive independently. Across the board, individuals felt themselves forever changed by their experiences, in some cases leading to major life decisions or 'plot twists'. Even those returning home never felt quite the same.

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It's interesting how when you live with somebody, even from another nationality, you get a little bit from him if you're elastic enough, and he gets a little bit from me.

Participant photo reproduced with permission.

Adaptation comes in many (difficult) forms

Some students had established reputations in their home country that led to challenging adaptations in mindset when they came to Australia. A high-achieving scholarship student felt dramatic shifts in self-perception when faced with writing requirements for high level academic English: "Suddenly I realised, oh, I'm nothing, I'm stupid, I can't even write a sentence…"

Intimidated by early communicative challenges and shocked at high prices in shops and cafes, another student tried to minimise her interactions at first, but soon found herself not only losing confidence, but also negatively impacting her own physical health.

> I'm scared to order something because when you order something they're like 'Huh? Pardon?' and I'm like, did I say something wrong? So I lost like 6 kilos in two months…

There were also positive experiences of adaptation from students who recalled the enjoyment of meeting different people and cultures, and the unfamiliar style of learning. Some noted the contrast with their own educational background, and loved the more 'active' and discussion-driven learning. Many talked about re-adapting these learning techniques to later contexts, too.

> Every time I went to the class my brain was breaking!
> Every day is different. I felt really fresh, and I fell in love with this model and this class.

Participant photo reproduced with permission.

Heading home and adapting again - or not

Whilst some chose to stay in Australia after their studies, many returned home and 'adaptation' had to begin again. There were positive adaptations with increased confidence at work, changing jobs or starting families. Homecoming brought new perspectives on home cultures, with more or less satisfaction, or intentions to live differently, consciously re-evaluating their national identity. Others described feeling like strangers in their own country, or a sense that their home city was too small now, prompting another move, away from where they started.

> You realise you've changed; they've changed.
> I wanted to go home [to Australia]. You feel lost. You don't belong THERE anymore, and you don't belong HERE.

Adaptation:
how can teachers and institutions support?

International students are too often critiqued for failing to adapt to cultural and educational systems, and rarely credited for the constant adaptations they make in multiple aspects of their lives, from the language they speak, to the completely new life routines they establish. Teachers and institutions could better acknowledge these adaptations, encouraging students to articulate and celebrate their achievements beyond the academic or professional.

Can institutions and teachers be 'humble' enough, as a former student suggests here, to adapt in return? Institutions offer student support, but most often to help students adapt to institutional systems and ways of operating. In contrast to new students, institutions have decades of experience in hosting international students that could be put to better use, ensuring student services and educators have the skills and care to adapt and learn too.

> I was thrown in the deep end when I came to Australia. I knew nothing. I had just turned 19, and it was that shock of being in a country that's multicultural, studying in the city, cultures I had never been in contact with before...

> A good teacher is humble. To be able to take the perspective of the person who is trying to learn English and guide them, not just doing that little exercise or that grammar, but on a bigger scale. A teacher truly cares, she's not just doing her job.

04. NETWORKS: RELATIONSHIPS THAT SUPPORT AND SUSTAIN

Networks are essential to students, institutions and educators, connecting the international student experience across borders and systems. Social networks can be lost but are also re-formed with the help of intentional connectors, communities and cultures.

This research was full of stories about people, and the importance of relationships. As one participant noted, "It wasn't the things that we learned inside the classroom. These human interactions outside the classroom, this was the most important thing for me."

Networks were lost and left behind, family connections were broken by difficult choices, and relationships put on pause to allow for educational journeys. For many, networks were the key to a successful experience - whether through the support of one or two important individuals, or the welcoming warmth of a class or school community.

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I have no one to call, it's like, 4am in Brazil, then I start to wonder what am I doing here, so far away from home. It was the first time I started getting scared, like I didn't do the right thing.

Participant photo reproduced with permission. Photo taken from accommodation near Central Station, Sydney, just after arriving in Australia.

Feeling the loss of familiar networks

Travelling far from their homes and families, international students can find themselves entirely alone for the first time in their life. They may not have been conscious of the importance of networks they had at home, but the loss of close friends, family support, educational contacts and work colleagues can hit hard. Some recover quickly and establish new networks, but for others, authentic connection takes much longer.

> In the beginning I struggled to make connections and it was awkward because I was the oldest one. I didn't feel I belonged. The fact that I didn't connect was a personal struggle, and I love connections. I love making friends.

The difference a connection can make

Research participants shared stories about relationships that made a difference, especially when things were hard. One student described how she practiced Academic English presentations with a friend "because he was nervous to stand in front of people. So I said to him, 'Look at my face. I will be supportive'." Others had slow realisations over time that they were not the only ones among peers, including local students, who were struggling with their study experience.

> I realised that they were also struggling in many different ways, it was not just me feeling the challenges, loneliness, uncertainties, shame, stress, and many more feelings.

Communication as an enabler for connection

Communication often started as a huge barrier for students, but being among other learners helped to build confidence and psychological safety to take communicative risks, especially for those who had little experience in spoken English. One student described his new flatmates' unconditional acceptance of him and the realisation that he did not need to be worried about his pronunciation or limited vocabulary - everyone was in the same boat, learning at the same time.

> I used to share a room with an Iranian guy. English was not our first language, and we could communicate to each other. We could translate feelings to each other.

Networks:
how can teachers and institutions support?

Facilitating networks can be challenging for institutions, who may rely on orientation activities or other organised events to connect students with peers. Ongoing opportunities to connect are just as important, allowing students to form networks in their own time, in ways that are comfortable for them.

Teachers may be surprised at the ongoing role they can play in enabling networks and being part of them too, both within class communities but also in their role as trusted contacts in an unfamiliar country. Even in the transitory context of education, students may see their teachers as part of their extended network and remember their empathy and guidance many years later.

> My first experiences were horrible, horrible, horrible. I used to cry a lot. I left my friends, my family. I left my girlfriend. What the f– am I doing here? Everybody's talking in English. I cannot understand a thing.

> [The teacher] gave me support, just like, 'Anything you need, you can talk to me'. It was very touching for me; it was one of the most important things during the English course.

05. FINDING AGENCY: THE UNPREDICTABLE BEAUTY OF EMERGENCE

International students can easily lose agency or a sense of 'ownership' of their study experience in challenging circumstances, feeling pressure to conform or achieve according to set pathways. Their study experience can also result in a new kind of agency and unplanned, emergent outcomes, which may only be evident years later.

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Former students expressed their sense of agency, or loss of it, in many different ways. Some felt it lightly - a temporary shift as they adjusted to circumstances, found their bearings, and re-constructed their identities as international students, part of new networks and communities. For others it weighed more heavily, in unexpected ways. Disappointment at not being the high achiever their friends, family or culture expected of them, or a lost professional identity, shifting from respected roles at home, to difficulty finding work at all in Australia.

Re-claiming ownership of identities took time, conscious effort, and support from others as they explored paths they had never considered before; outcomes were often positive, but rarely aligned with what they set out to achieve at the start of their learning journey.

> In Melbourne, it came to the surface, this feeling of being an artist, to know myself as an artist. I remember sending a message saying, Hey mom, I'm an artist. I don't want to be an architect.

Licensed street art in Melbourne, created by student. Participant photo reproduced with permission.

Agency can be lost - or taken away

For many international students, the inability to explain or express themselves confidently in English can have significant impacts on their sense of self. Already intimidated and feeling 'lost', students also shared stories where their identity was questioned, 'edited' or exploited by others: being told how to pronounce their own name by an insensitive teacher on the first day of class, for example, or having to fight for wages from an unscrupulous employer who was known for avoiding payment to international student workers.

> It's incredibly intimidating and you lose who you are, completely. You feel so stupid for not being able to speak. I felt so dumb, all the time. [...] I was reflecting back on who I am - I had to find myself again.

With support, agency can emerge in new ways

Whilst some students found their own ways to embrace emerging identities, others found the support of groups and individuals invaluable. When family ties broke down for a student who wanted to change her life plans, the class community and teacher were there to listen, enabling her to take the decision "for the first time in my life on my own". Over time, others took ownership and pride in their identity as international speakers of English, understanding former weaknesses as strengths they could leverage for the benefit of others.

> I realised having a different perspective, and English barriers, adds a lot of value to our work because we're always trying to find a way that people can understand.

Learning 'without fear', and emergent teaching identities

Students also found agency in learning, picking up study skills which they continued to draw on, years later, and applied in new contexts. A university teacher used methodologies from his English classes when he returned home, developing his own teaching identity. A hospitality manager described adapting the techniques she had learned as an English student to then train Ukrainian refugees working in the kitchens at a retail chain in the UK, drawing on her own experience to show, not tell, when spoken communication was challenging.
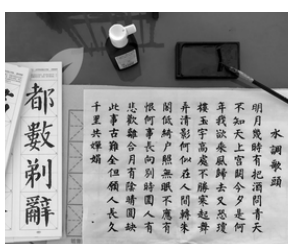
> I can learn anything I want. Now I have unlocked the power to learn [...] I'm learning Japanese, and writing those beautiful shapes, and I don't have fear of it. I feel like I can do it.

Agency and emergence: how can teachers and institutions support?

Academic achievement and employment outcomes can dominate institutional narratives on international student experience. If they become the only focus, however, we not only undermine the broader identities and life choices of students, but also miss opportunities to highlight unplanned pathways and celebrate emergent experiences that don't fit traditional expectations.

Institutions and teachers have a role to play as part of a trusted ecosystem supporting student experience. They may see qualities in students and opportunities for personal, academic and professional development that would not otherwise be apparent. These former students show that voicing these observations with compassion and care can truly change lives.

> I thought my life would change forever, for the better. And it did - after 10 years, it's spectacular. But I thought it was going to be like this in the beginning. It's a process, I think it's part of the beauty of the process.

> [My teacher] saw the potential in me.
> I would never think I was going to be able to start a Masters overseas. Never crossed my mind, that was never a dream.
> And she changed my life.

IDENTITIES, LOST & FOUND

> " I became more grateful for what my parents have achieved and enabled me and my sister to have. My view of my country has improved. I really started to value those small things that I wasn't even aware of before living abroad.

It started with a question:
What impact does learning English have for international students, in the long term?

We can measure impact in many ways, including course completions, migration statistics, work experiences, and career progression. Even within this small sample of participants, we see a rich array of academic and professional outcomes: students who started with plans to improve their English, then stayed to pursue new passions in postgraduate study; others changed career trajectories from banking to social work, media to software programming, or found a new identity in teaching, academia, occupational therapy, or as a designer and artist.

But that's not the whole story. With hindsight, these former students reflected on profound journeys of self-discovery, too. They spoke of changed cultural attitudes and minds opening up to expanded global networks, different ways of learning and confidence to engage with the world around them differently. They now pass those attitudes on to their friends and family, encouraging siblings, nephews, nieces and their own children to embrace the joys and challenges of living and learning beyond geographical and cultural boundaries.

As one student recalled: "Everybody said, to find yourself, you have to go to India. But I think I found myself in Australia!"

To my teacher:
what would I like to tell you now?

At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there was something they would like their former teachers to know about their impact on their lives and learning. A sample of their responses are shared below.

> You didn't just teach us, you lift us up. You made me see the most beautiful life, you have really good energy and the way you teach us, I think it's really wonderful.

> Thank you so much for your passion for teaching English. You transmitted that love to me and to all those you have taught. And that was very important for me.

> She was my first English teacher and I have huge love for her, it's this relationship that goes both ways. She was an amazing English teacher - super patient, super funny, super charismatic and a people person, it was so easy to talk to her and not feel intimidated and I wanted to learn more. She wouldn't give up on me.

> It may be just one student for you but this student will carry you forever, because it's a huge impact that you guys have on our lives.

> They are just brilliant people. I would really love to not only thank them, but also to tell them how important that was. Having someone at school especially, a place where you go every day, who listens to you and to your concerns. They don't need to have the solution, but only to have those quality moments of listening and just supporting you, that means so much.

> Thank you for being vocal, seeing the potential and telling your students what you saw. Thank you for changing my life - you saw something, and you told the student.

WHERE NEXT?

If you work in a higher education institution where international students are in the mix, it's highly likely that their experiences are entangled in complex systems both in Australia and overseas, requiring constant adaptation on their part, and impacting their ongoing academic, personal and professional experiences. How well is your institution supporting these emergent identities at different points in the student journey?

To understand more about complexity theory and its potential applications for international student support, you can download an interactive template at miro.com/miroverse/sane-framework-for-student-support/. The template includes:

- A virtual 'complexity library' of podcasts, videos and articles from selected scholars in educational research
- A map of interconnected systems impacting international student experience, and template to create your own version
- A guide to exploring student needs at different points along their journey, and template to create your own
- Stakeholder analysis template to explore how a complexity lens might apply in your own context
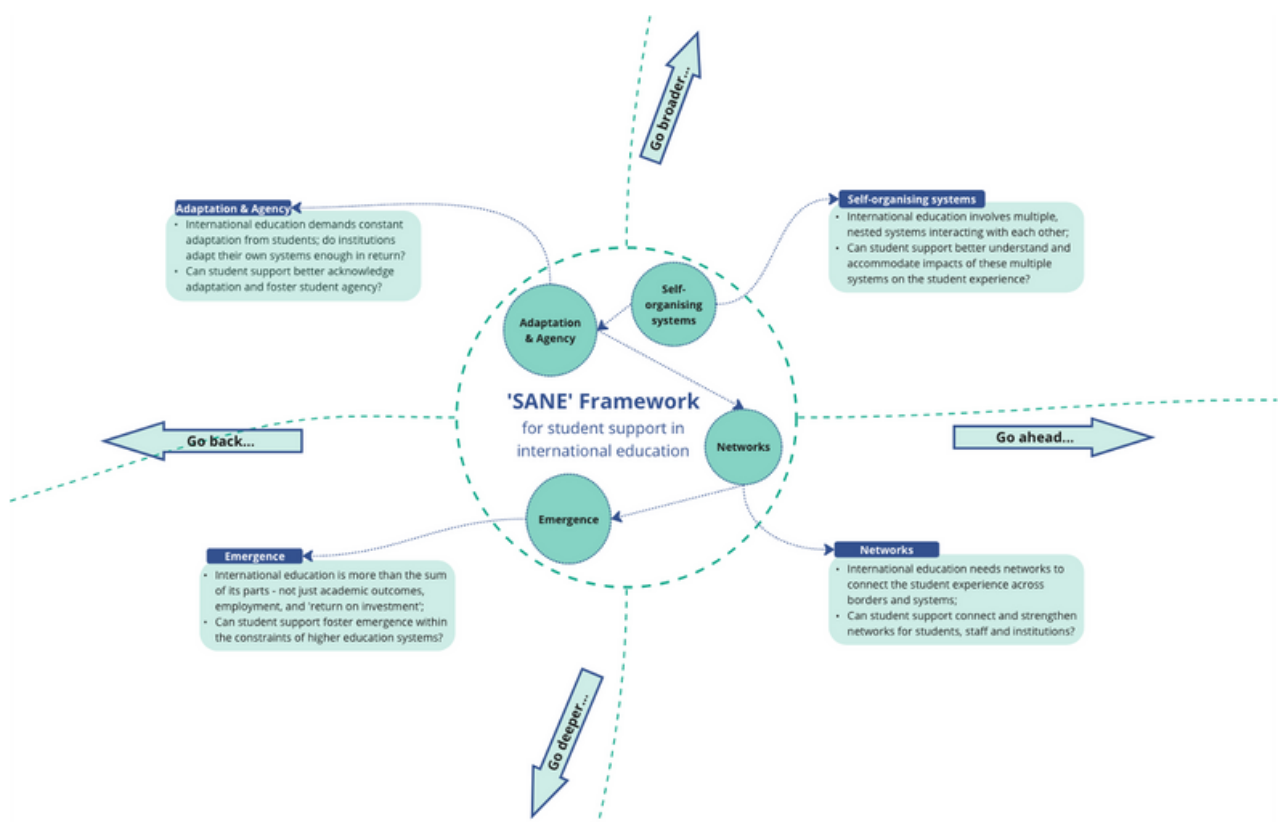
To discuss the framework, schedule a workshop for your team or discuss how research can help identify gaps and opportunities in student experience, contact lucy@lucyblakemore.com

Thank you to English Australia for the initial inspiration to conduct this research for the 40th Anniversary conference in 2023. Your tireless advocacy for recognition, standards, and professionalism in this sector over the last 40 years provides the foundations on which learning experiences are created.

To the teachers who offered suggestions and connections to students, thank you. Your care and passion for your craft live on in students' memories, in their life choices, and their ongoing enthusiasm for learning and discovery.

Above all, thank you to the former students who opened their minds and hearts, not only to this research process, but also to the experience of living and learning in a foreign country. Thank you for your honesty about the highs and lows, the joys and challenges, and for permission to share your words and experiences here so that we can continue learning.

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thank you | obrigada | ขอบคุณ | gracias | ありがとう | grazie | 谢谢 | danke

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