FACULTY OF CULTURE & SOCIETY

School of Education

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Finding My Place: An Autoethnographic Exploration of My Experiences as an International Student in Aotearoa New Zealand

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the multifaceted experience of an international student from Saudi Arabia with Sri Lankan background, undertaking a Master of Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. This study utilizes autoethnography as its primary methodological framework, combining personal narrative with cultural analysis to investigate experiences of migration, adaptation, and professional development. Underpinned by a qualitative research paradigm, the study strongly emphasizes subjectivity and reflexivity, which is consistent with interpretivist traditions that place significant importance on an individual's lived experiences. The research utilizes reflective storytelling to explore three primary enquiries: the influence of the initial transition on the sense of belonging, the difficulties encountered in a predominantly non-Muslim society, and the role of the study experience in personal and academic growth.

Keywords: International Student Experience, Resilience and Identity, Migration Challenges, Autoethnography, Emotional Well-being

Acknowledgement

I want to begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks to Allah for guiding me through this journey. His support has given me strength during challenges and peace during uncertainty. Without His blessings, I wouldn't have been able to achieve this milestone.

Completing this dissertation has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding journeys of my life. I am profoundly grateful to all those who supported, encouraged, and guided me through this process.

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To my children, you are my greatest source of motivation and joy. Your smiles and resilience carried me through the toughest days. This dissertation is dedicated to you a reminder that with determination and love, we can overcome any obstacle. I hope this achievement inspires you to pursue your dreams with courage and determination. A special mention goes to my parents, whose prayers, love, and encouragement have been a constant source of strength. Your unwavering support and belief in me have always given me the confidence to follow my dreams.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to all international students who dare to dream and take the brave step of pursuing education far from home. May this dissertation serve as a reminder that resilience, hope, and determination can overcome even the greatest challenges.

Table of Contents

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

	19th January 2025
Signature	Date

Chapter 1: Contextual Background

Introduction

In life, there are moments that feel like turning points opportunities that call for courage, determination, and faith in the unknown. Shakespeare captures this sentiment eloquently in Julius Caesar:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

(Shakespeare, n.d.)

For me, the decision to leave my home and become an international student in Aotearoa New Zealand was such a moment. It was not merely a pursuit of academic aspirations but a leap into a new cultural and social environment that demanded resilience and openness. This dissertation reflects that transformative journey, a narrative of overcoming challenges, embracing growth, and seeking belonging in a place far from home. Like Shakespeare's tide, this experience has not only shaped my academic endeavours but also deeply influenced my personal identity and worldview.

This research, titled **"Finding My Place: An Autoethnographic Exploration of My Experiences as an International Student in Aotearoa New Zealand,"** investigates my lived experiences through the lens of autoethnography. This qualitative approach allowed me to critically engage with my journey, drawing on personal reflections to address broader themes in migration, education, and cultural adaptation.

The study is guided by the following research questions

- **Q1.** What were my experiences from enrolment to arriving in New Zealand, and how did these experiences impact my initial transition and sense of belonging?
- **Q2.** How did encountering a predominantly non-Muslim society challenge my initial perceptions of New Zealand culture?
- **Q3.** To what extent did my studies contribute to my personal and academic growth, particularly as a Muslim woman from Saudi Arabia with a Sri Lankan background?

This dissertation explores these questions by blending personal narratives with prior studies and theoretical frameworks, seeking to enhance understanding of the international student experience while providing insights into the emotional, cultural, and academic dimensions of migration.

1.1 Structure of the Dissertation

1.1.1 Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction provides an overview of the research, outlining its objectives, significance, and methodology. It sets the context for the study and establishes its relevance in understanding the international student journey.

1.1.2 Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing knowledge on the experiences of international students, with a specific focus on New Zealand. It examines key themes such as cultural adaptation, emotional resilience, and the role of institutional support, situating the research within a theoretical framework that includes Push-Pull theory and Self-Determination Theory.

1.1.3 Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter details the research design and methodology, emphasizing the use of autoethnography. It explains why this approach was chosen, how the data were collected through reflective writing, and the ethical considerations involved in self-narrative research.

1.1.4 Chapter 4: Findings Through Reflective Writing

The findings are presented through a series of reflective narratives that capture my experiences of transition, cultural adaptation, and academic integration. These reflections explore the emotional, psychological, and practical challenges I faced, as well as the milestones that marked my growth.

1.1.5 Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

This chapter analyses the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It explores the broader implications of the research, particularly regarding the emotional, cultural, and institutional dimensions of the international student journey. The chapter also discusses potential strategies for enhancing support systems for international students and provides future recommendations for research and practice in the areas of migration, education, and cultural adaptation.

1.1.6 Chapter 6: Conclusion

The conclusion reflects on the significance of the research, summarizing its key contributions and implications. It also offers recommendations for improving the experiences of future international students and concludes with a personal reflection on the transformative nature of this journey.

As a master's student, this dissertation represents more than an academic requirement it is a testament to the resilience and adaptability required to navigate a foreign land, pursue higher education, and forge new paths in the face of uncertainty. Through this work, I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of the international student experience and inspire others to embrace the tides of change with courage and determination.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

The experiences of international students in Aotearoa New Zealand have been the focus of growing scholarly attention, highlighting the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with migration and cultural adaptation. This chapter reviews the existing body of literature to explore the key themes that define this journey, including motivations for migration, the psychological and emotional dimensions of transition, and the role of institutional support systems. Drawing on established theories such as Push-Pull Model (Zaman et al., 2023) and Self-Determination Theory (Bandhu et al., 2024), the review critically examines how these frameworks illuminate, and sometimes oversimplify, the lived realities of students navigating identity, belonging, and integration in a new cultural landscape. These discussions provide a foundation for situating my research, which seeks to explore these themes through my personal lens as a Muslim woman and international student. The chapter bridges the broader academic discourse with the lived experiences of individuals, offering both critique and context for the narratives that follow.

2.1 Motivation for Migration

2.1.1 Push and Pull Factors in Migration

The decision to migrate is often rooted in the interplay between push factors conditions in the home country that drive individuals to leave and pull factors attributes of the host country that attract migrants. Push-Pull theory provides a foundational framework for understanding these dynamics. Push factors may include economic instability, inadequate healthcare, and political unrest, while pull factors encompass improved living standards, educational opportunities, and social stability (Zaman et al., 2023). According to Peralta et al. (2024) argue that intervening obstacles, such as financial constraints or logistical challenges, further influence migration decisions.

In the context of New Zealand, key pull factors include the country's high quality of life, transparent visa processes, and multicultural environment. Educational institutions, particularly the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), play a pivotal role in attracting international students by offering accessible academic programmes and practical support systems (Gibbs, 2017). Tabor (2021) highlights that career prospects and a perception of societal inclusivity significantly contribute to New Zealand's appeal as a destination for higher education.

2.1.2 Educational and Professional Aspirations

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), focuses on understanding human motivation and how it is influenced by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Manninen et al., 2022). SDT emphasizes that individuals are more likely to thrive in environments that support these needs. When applied to immigrant professionals, SDT provides insight into how motivation can be sustained despite systemic barriers (Wright, 2015).

Similarly, Educational migration is closely tied to professional ambitions. Literature emphasizes resilience, adaptability, and long-term goal setting as critical factors in achieving success (Kartika et al., 2020). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that intrinsic motivation is enhanced when individuals perceive their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as being met (Bandhu et al., 2024). The programme's approach aligned with my personal values and professional goals, which fuelled my motivation. However, SDT doesn't fully account for the external pressures and support systems that also influence perseverance. In my case, factors such as the guidance from mentors and institutional resources played a significant role in helping me maintain focus on my long-term objectives (Wright, 2015; Bandhu et al., 2024).

2.2 Emotional and Psychological Dynamics

2.2.1 Attachment Theory and Emotional Strain

The emotional toll of migration is profound, particularly for international students who leave behind their established social and familial networks. Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969) provides a foundational framework for understanding the psychological challenges associated with these separations. According to this theory, close attachments, especially with primary caregivers, are essential for emotional security, and their disruption during migration often leads to anxiety and distress. Migrants may experience emotional cycles characterized by disbelief, nostalgia, and gradual adaptation, as they work to integrate aspects of their past and present cultures (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984).

This process is particularly evident in the lives of students adapting to new educational and social environments. Grinberg and Grinberg (1984) describe the phenomenon of "cultural mourning," where individuals grieve the loss of their native cultural identity while striving to develop a sense of belonging in the host culture. These feelings often manifest as loneliness, sadness, and a longing for familiarity, reflecting the psychological complexities of migration.

Van Ecke (2005) expands on this framework by exploring the role of identity conflicts in exacerbating emotional strain. Migrants frequently face challenges in reconciling their pre-existing cultural identities with the values and norms of their host society. This process often creates tension between the desire to preserve one's heritage and the necessity of cultural assimilation. The struggle to find a balance can lead to significant mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and feelings of dislocation. These issues are further intensified by the lack of adequate mental health support systems tailored to the unique needs of migrants.

2.2.2 Mental Health Isolation

The emotional challenges faced by international students are further exacerbated by the isolation they often experience in their host countries. Loneliness is a common issue, as students must adapt to new environments without the support of their existing social networks. Ward and Masgoret (2004) identify weak initial connections as a significant factor contributing to this isolation. The absence of familiar social structures and the difficulties of building new relationships in an unfamiliar cultural context can intensify feelings of loneliness and vulnerability.

Research by Lewthwaite (1996) underscores the importance of resilience in mitigating the psychological impacts of isolation. Resilience, characterized by the ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity, emerges as a critical coping mechanism for many migrants. International students who cultivate resilience often demonstrate an enhanced capacity for emotional growth, enabling them to reframe their challenges and focus on their personal and academic objectives.

Social support systems play a pivotal role in alleviating the psychological burdens associated with migration. Bhugra and Becker (2005) highlight the concept of "cultural bereavement," describing the grief migrants experience as they adjust to the loss of their familiar social and cultural contexts. Strong social networks within host communities can provide emotional scaffolding, reducing the sense of loss and helping individuals adapt more effectively. These networks often include peers from similar cultural backgrounds, local community members, and academic mentors, all of whom contribute to the development of a supportive and inclusive environment.

The World Health Organization (2023) emphasizes the necessity of targeted mental health interventions for migrants, advocating for culturally sensitive approaches that address the unique challenges faced by international students. For instance, programmes that focus on mental health literacy, peer support groups, and access to culturally competent counselors have been shown to significantly improve emotional well-being. Such interventions are particularly important during the early stages of settlement when students are most vulnerable to emotional distress (World Health Organization, 2023).

2.3 Institutional and Bureaucratic Barriers

2.3.1 Visa process and Bureaucracy

Navigating immigration systems represents a significant challenge for international students, often imposing financial, logistical, and psychological burdens. The complexities of visa application processes, including rigorous documentation requirements, lengthy administrative delays, and uncertainties surrounding approval, contribute to heightened stress and anxiety among migrants (Maunganidze, 2019). Bureaucratic inefficiencies, such as unclear guidelines and inconsistent application outcomes, undermine the confidence of prospective students.

Carling and Schewel (2018) conceptualizes migration as both a psychological and bureaucratic journey, emphasizing the emotional toll of navigating institutional gatekeeping mechanisms. Migrants frequently face the paradox of needing to demonstrate extensive financial and academic credibility while simultaneously contending with uncertain outcomes. This dual burden imposes significant strain, particularly on those with limited financial resources.

Crumley-Effinger (2024) highlights the importance of transparent and efficient immigration policies in mitigating these challenges. User-friendly systems, including online visa tracking platforms and streamlined documentation processes, have been shown to reduce the psychological burden associated with migration. For example, New Zealand's adoption of transparent visa procedures serves as a key pull factor for international students (Tabor, 2021). These systems enhance migrants' perceptions of inclusivity and fairness, facilitating smoother transitions into host societies.

2.3.2 Financial and Housing Challenges

Financial constraints represent one of the most significant barriers faced by international students, particularly during the early stages of settlement. Visa-related delays frequently result in unanticipated expenses, such as costly last-minute travel arrangements or extended temporary accommodation, exacerbating financial pressures (Kukatlapalli, 2016). These challenges are further compounded by limited access to part-time employment opportunities and high living costs in host countries. Such financial stress underscores the critical need for institutional support, including financial aid programmes and flexible payment structures, to alleviate economic burdens on students.

Housing challenges add another layer of complexity to the settlement process. Securing appropriate accommodation is often fraught with difficulties, including limited availability, high rental costs, and inadequate consideration of cultural and religious needs. For instance, Muslim students frequently face challenges in finding housing that aligns with their values, such as avoiding mixed gender living arrangements (Alhudaib, 2023). The inability to access culturally sensitive housing exacerbates feelings of alienation, forcing many students to rely heavily on informal networks and community support.

Social networks play a pivotal role in addressing both financial and housing challenges. Ryan (2011) emphasizes the importance of collectivist values and family-oriented support systems in helping migrants navigate logistical obstacles. Peer networks, community organizations, and institutional housing services provide practical assistance, such as identifying affordable rental options, while also offering emotional support essential for coping with the stresses of relocation.

Institutions that recognize and address these intersecting challenges often foster better outcomes for international students. Flexible housing policies that accommodate cultural and religious needs, coupled with emergency financial aid programmes, significantly ease the transition process. Additionally, mentorship initiatives that connect students with local communities enhance their ability to navigate these barriers, promoting smoother adaptation to their new environment.

2.4 Settlement and Adaption

2.4.1 Environmental Adjustment

Adapting to new climates and cultural settings is a crucial component of the experience of migration, often presenting both physical and emotional challenges. Märtsin (2023) observes that environmental transitions, such as adjusting to colder climates or unfamiliar living conditions, can lead to discomfort and stress for migrants. These challenges are not limited to physical adaptation but extend to the emotional strain associated with the loss of familiar surroundings. Migrants frequently experience disorientation and uncertainty as they reconcile their expectations with the realities of their new environments.

Raphaela Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2023) highlights the active role migrants play in constructing a sense of belonging in their host countries. By engaging in processes of meaning-making, individuals bridge the gap between past experiences and present realities, creating a narrative of resilience and hope. This process often involves embracing environmental contrasts as symbolic of personal growth, transforming initial discomfort into an opportunity for adaptation.

Morse and Mudgett (2017) highlights the emotional dimensions of homesickness, describing it as a longing for familiarity and emotional connections. These findings emphasize the importance of reconciling past and present experiences to foster a sense of belonging, a critical step in successful adaptation.

2.4.2 Cultural Integration

The successful integration of migrants into their host societies relies heavily on their ability to navigate and adapt to cultural norms. Berry's Acculturation Theory (2005) underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between one's heritage culture and the culture of the host country. This integration strategy, which promotes positive adaptation outcomes, involves active participation in local customs and practices while preserving key aspects of one's native identity.

Cultural Frame Switching Theory further explains how immigrants adapt to new cultural contexts by adjusting their mental frameworks. Separa (2024) highlights the significance of intercultural exchanges in shaping migrant perceptions and behaviors. Participating in local customs, such as greetings and expressions of gratitude, fosters a sense of inclusion and cultural respect. This process is particularly evident in multicultural societies like New Zealand, where diverse cultural practices encourage integration and acceptance.

Participating in daily cultural practices, such as social greetings or shared communal activities, facilitates smoother cultural integration. Wan and Awang (2009) emphasize the role of dietary preferences, particularly for Muslim migrants, in fostering a sense of cultural continuity. For instance, accessing halal food options in a host country can represent a critical step toward building comfort and familiarity in a new environment. These seemingly small victories contribute significantly to the overall adaptation process, helping migrants feel more included and valued.

Social networks also play a pivotal role in cultural integration, acting as conduits for emotional and practical support. Kim et al. (2018) note that connections with local and cultural communities enable migrants to navigate daily challenges more effectively, such as understanding social norms, finding resources, and developing coping strategies. These networks foster a sense of inclusion, reducing cultural stressors and promoting well-being. Institutions that encourage community engagement and intercultural exchanges further enhance the experience of integration, creating spaces where migrants feel respected and acknowledged.

2.4.3 Identity Negotiation and Hybridity

The process of identity negotiation is a central theme in the adaptation journey, reflecting the complexities of blending native and host cultural identities. Simonis (2012) describes cultural hybridity as a negotiation process that fosters resilience and adaptability while preserving core cultural values. Migrants often navigate the dual roles of retaining their heritage while participating in their host society, which can result in the creation of a hybrid identity that respects both cultures.

Butcher and McGrath (2004) describe status adjustment as a re-evaluation of personal achievements in a foreign context. International students often face feelings of inadequacy as their prior accomplishments are undervalued in the host society. However, this experience also provides opportunities for growth, allowing students to enhance their outlook and develop emotional resilience.

However, this process is not without challenges. Berry (2017) highlights the phenomenon of acculturative stress, which arises from the tension between cultural preservation and assimilation. Migrants may experience internal conflicts as they strive to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to the norms and expectations of their host country. This stress can manifest as feelings of alienation, loss, or confusion about one's place in the new cultural landscape.

Supportive environments that recognize and value cultural diversity are essential in mitigating the effects of acculturative stress. As Berry's (2017) Acculturation Theory suggests, institutions and communities that actively foster inclusivity, through measures such as language support programmes and culturally sensitive services, enable migrants to navigate these tensions more effectively. For instance, spaces where diverse cultural practices are celebrated, rather than marginalized, empower migrants to construct hybrid identities with confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging.

2.5 Academic and Professional Growth

2.5.1 Educational Challenges

International students frequently encounter substantial academic pressures as they adjust to the unfamiliar structures and expectations of foreign educational systems. Smith and Khawaja (2011) note that disparities between home and host country educational methodologies often leave students feeling inadequately prepared, contributing to heightened stress and anxiety. These challenges can include differences in teaching styles, assessment methods, and academic expectations, requiring students to quickly adapt to new standards of performance and engagement.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a valuable framework for understanding how autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to motivation and resilience in academic contexts (Legault, 2016). For international students, navigating academic challenges independently fosters personal growth and self-reliance, aligning with SDT's emphasis on intrinsic motivation. The ability to overcome these obstacles not only builds students' confidence but also enhances their problem-solving skills and adaptability, traits that are critical for success in global professional landscapes.

Language barriers compound these challenges, as students may struggle to communicate effectively in academic settings. This difficulty often affects their ability to engage in discussions, complete assignments, and form connections with peers and faculty. Institutions that offer tailored support, such as language training programmes and culturally sensitive curricula, significantly aid students in navigating these hurdles (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Mentorship programmes, peer support groups, and academic resources further facilitate this adjustment process, helping students build confidence and competence.

2.5.2 Professional Networking and Growth

Professional networking is a vital aspect of growth for international students, particularly as they transition from academic environments to the job market. Nguyen et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of informal networks, noting that personal connections and referrals often provide more effective pathways to employment than formal job applications. These networks allow students to access hidden job markets, understand industry expectations, and gain practical insights into local work cultures.

Inclusive workplaces play a crucial role in fostering the professional growth of international students. Lenis (2024) argue that culturally inclusive environments not only enhance career opportunities but also strengthen a sense of belonging for migrant workers. Workplaces that respect and honour diverse cultural identities empower students to contribute meaningfully while preserving their unique perspectives. Such environments are essential for building confidence and professional competence.

Mentorship and professional development initiatives further bridge the gap between education and employment. Programmes that connect students with industry professionals provide valuable guidance, enabling them to align their academic achievements with career goals. Additionally, institutions that prioritize networking events, career counseling, and skill development workshops equip students with the tools needed to navigate competitive job markets (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Building professional relationships enhances students' sense of achievement and belonging. Al-Tamimi and Edwards (2022) argue that professional connections provide mentorship, guidance, and a deeper understanding of host country work environments. Persistent engagement with local communities and professional networks facilitates smoother integration into the workforce.

However, systemic challenges, such as credentialism, create significant barriers for immigrant professionals in New Zealand, limiting their ability to capitalize on networking opportunities and professional growth.

Credentialism presents a pervasive challenge for immigrant professionals in New Zealand, often preventing them from utilizing their qualifications in the local labour market effectively (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2022). This misalignment frequently leads to underemployment or employment in fields unrelated to their expertise, limiting their ability to fully integrate into the workforce. Abdul-Karim (2018) identifies systemic barriers in the recognition of foreign qualifications, which hinder skilled migrants from achieving roles that align with their expertise. These challenges are exacerbated by recruitment processes that prioritize formal qualifications over practical skills and experience, as noted by Zajda (2015). Such practices can marginalize immigrant professionals in professional networking settings, preventing them from accessing opportunities that reflect their true potential.

Addressing credentialism through policy reforms, such as equitable recognition of foreign qualifications and skills-based recruitment approaches, can enhance the efficacy of professional networking initiatives. By prioritizing the integration of diverse talent, New Zealand's labour market can better harness the unique skills and experiences of immigrant professionals, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic economy (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2022).

2.5.3 Challenges in the Workplace

International students often face significant challenges in workplace settings, including discrimination and a lack of institutional support. Tran and Hoang (2020) explore these difficulties, highlighting how unequal power dynamics and exclusionary practices undermine students' sense of belonging and well-being. Such experiences are compounded by the reluctance of institutions to address workplace discrimination, leaving international students vulnerable to exploitative practices.

Advocacy systems and inclusive leadership are essential to fostering environments where international students feel valued and respected. Paldon (2024) emphasize the importance of agency in empowering students to seek workplaces that align with their values and needs. Inclusive workplaces that honour cultural identities and practices provide the foundation for professional growth and cultural inclusion. As Tran and Hoang (2020) argue, creating a genuine sense of belonging requires more than surface-level acknowledgment of cultural diversity; it demands active engagement and respect for diverse perspectives and contributions.

2.6 Social and Cultural Inclusion

2.6.1 Social Support Networks

The importance of social support networks in mitigating cultural stress and facilitating smoother transitions for international students cannot be overstated. Bhugra and Becker (2005) describe these networks as vital emotional scaffolds that provide a sense of stability and security during periods of cultural adjustment. The concept of "surrogate family networks," which includes relationships with peers, mentors, and community members, plays a crucial role in enhancing the mental well-being of migrants. These surrogate connections often compensate for the absence of familial support, offering emotional, social, and practical guidance that helps students navigate unfamiliar environments.

Social ties play a pivotal role in the social and cultural inclusion of international students, providing essential emotional and cultural anchoring during their transition to new environments. Al-Tamimi and Edwards (2022) emphasize that these connections foster a sense of belonging and alleviate feelings of alienation. Relationships with peers, mentors, and local community members not only provide emotional support but also help students navigate practical challenges.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). The collaborative learning environment and friendships formed during the master's programme illustrate the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky's (1978) theory posits that learners achieve higher understanding through social interaction and support. Research by Johnson and Johnson (1999) highlights the benefits of peer learning in enhancing educational outcomes and fostering a sense of community (Vu et al., 2020).

Kuo (2014) emphasizes the buffering effect of peer connections on emotional stress. Establishing friendships within academic and local communities fosters a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of isolation, a common experience among international students. Participating in shared activities, such as sports, cultural events, or academic clubs, not only strengthens these connections but also provides opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives. Such interactions contribute

to the development of cultural competence, resilience, and a positive outlook on the migration experience.

Engaging with local communities also plays a pivotal role in enhancing social integration. Research, including findings by Kuo (2014) and the OECD (2019), highlights how building ties within the host society promotes emotional well-being and fosters a sense of inclusion. These connections, whether formed through volunteering, participating in local traditions, or joining cultural organizations, help students better understand the norms and values of their host country. Furthermore, they enable the development of effective coping strategies, allowing students to adapt successfully to new cultural environments while maintaining their unique identities.

2.6.2 Cultural Inclusion in Institution

Institutions that prioritize cultural diversity create environments that foster belonging and inclusion for international students. Mak et al. (2014) underscore the significance of embedding inclusive practices into institutional frameworks, noting that this reduces identity conflicts and promotes multicultural acceptance. In New Zealand, the integration of Māori values, such as manaakitanga, exemplifies a commitment to inclusivity. This value system, centred on respect, care, and hospitality, fosters an atmosphere where international students feel welcomed and valued.

Engaging with Māori cultural practices allows international students to connect deeply with New Zealand's heritage, enhancing their sense of belonging. Participating in pōwhiri (welcoming ceremonies), learning te reo Māori, and appreciating Māori art provide opportunities for students to immerse themselves in local traditions, fostering inclusion and cultural understanding (Bethel et al., 2020). These experiences enrich international students' academic and social lives, promoting intercultural competence and meaningful relationships essential for their well-being. However, balancing their cultural identities while adopting aspects of Māori traditions can lead to internal conflicts regarding belonging (Ward & Masgoret, 2015). Additionally, some students may struggle with the risk of cultural appropriation, where elements of Māori culture are adopted without sufficient understanding, potentially causing offense (Smith, 2021). Despite these challenges, respectful engagement with Māori traditions broadens worldviews, enhances intercultural communication, and fosters a sense of connection to New Zealand's multicultural society (Tawagi & Mak, 2015).

Cultural inclusion extends beyond symbolic gestures to encompass tangible initiatives. For instance, accommodating religious practices and dietary preferences, such as providing access to halal food and celebrating cultural festivals, demonstrates a broader commitment to diversity. As Wan and Awang (2009) highlight, such efforts reduce barriers to inclusion and help students maintain their cultural practices in a foreign environment.

Inclusive educational frameworks also contribute significantly to cultural integration. Institutions that incorporate diverse perspectives into their curricula not only educate students about global issues but also affirm the cultural identities of international students. These practices enhance students' sense of belonging and encourage active participation in their host societies. Additionally, leadership and advocacy within institutions are crucial for promoting cultural inclusion. Leaders who prioritize multicultural initiatives and engage with diverse student communities foster environments where cultural diversity is celebrated and valued.

2.7 Emotional Costs and Resilience

2.7.1 Sacrifices and growth

The migration journey often entails profound emotional and social sacrifices, such as prolonged separation from family and the challenge of adapting to unfamiliar cultural contexts. Watt and Badger (2009) highlight the emotional toll of these sacrifices, emphasizing that the absence of loved ones and the forfeiture of familiar support networks frequently result in feelings of loneliness, sadness, and homesickness. These emotional burdens, however, are not without potential positive outcomes. The resilience developed through these hardships enables migrants to grow both personally and professionally, cultivating adaptability and strength in the face of adversity.

Brown and Brown (2013) expand on this notion by illustrating how the sacrifices inherent in migration often serve as a foundation for achieving long-term educational and professional goals. Migrants who successfully navigate these challenges demonstrate a high degree of perseverance, which fosters a sense of purpose and fulfillment. For international students, the dual responsibilities of academic success and cultural adaptation often become transformative experiences that enhance their capacity for problem-solving, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy.

Acculturation is a critical process in the journey of international students as they adapt to and accept a new cultural setting. Coles and Swami (2012) emphasize that establishing connections with local networks and fostering an inclusive environment can alleviate the stress associated with cultural adaptation. Inclusive societies that actively embrace diversity enable smoother transitions for international students, reducing feelings of alienation and fostering a sense of belonging.

This aligns with Coles and Swami's (2012) assertion that establishing connections with local networks and creating inclusive environments helps alleviate the stress associated with cultural adaptation. This mutual adaptation process strengthens emotional resilience and allows international students to integrate more effectively into their new environment.

2.7.1 Agency and Adaptability

Proactive agencies play a central role in enabling migrants to overcome the complexities of their environments while preserving their cultural identities. Lenis (2024) underscores the importance of agency in empowering international students to navigate institutional barriers and pursue their objectives. Migrants who take an active role in shaping their experiences are better equipped to address challenges such as discrimination, financial constraints, and cultural dislocation.

Adaptability is equally critical in fostering resilience. Migrants often balance the preservation of their cultural heritage with the need to assimilate into the host society, a process that can lead to the development of hybrid identities (Berry, 2017). Institutions and workplaces that provide inclusive and supportive frameworks create environments where migrants feel respected and valued. This inclusivity not only helps individuals navigate cultural tensions but also encourages them to engage fully with their academic and professional roles.

Supportive institutional frameworks further enhance adaptability by providing tailored resources such as mentorship programmes, mental health support, and career development opportunities. These systems enable migrants to align their goals with available resources, fostering a sense of belonging and achievement. Additionally, inclusive workplaces that embrace cultural diversity empower migrants to contribute meaningfully while maintaining their unique perspectives.

2.8 Research Gap

Existing literature explores the experiences of international students, but there is a noticeable lack of focus on the gender-specific challenges faced by Muslim women. For example, Berry's (2005) acculturation theory and Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory provide valuable insights into cultural adaptation and emotional strain but fail to capture the intersection of gender and religion in shaping these experiences (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984). Research on Muslim women in academic contexts, though growing, often focuses on broader migration or integration challenges rather than their specific journeys as international students. For instance, studies often address issues such as Islamophobia, identity negotiation, and navigating academic spaces within generalised frameworks.

Importantly, there is a limited exploration of how Muslim women, as international students, balance their cultural and religious identities with the demands of academic life in predominantly non-Muslim societies. This gap is significant because Muslim women's experiences are distinct and shaped by unique societal expectations, cultural norms, and institutional barriers. By focusing on this under-represented group, this study aims to contribute to the literature by providing a deeper understanding of the gendered dimensions of the international student experience, particularly for Muslim women.

2.9 Research Significance

This research is significant because it addresses an underexplored area: the lived experiences of Muslim women as international students, particularly those navigating cultural and academic transitions in a non-Muslim society. By focusing on the intersection of gender, religion, and cultural identity, this study provides valuable insights into how these factors influence adaptation, resilience, and identity negotiation.

Existing literature on international students often generalizes findings or focuses on male experiences, leaving a gap in understanding the unique challenges faced by women. This research aims to fill that gap by shedding light on the gendered dimensions of international student experiences, offering a voice to an often-overlooked group.

Furthermore, the study's autoethnographic approach allows for a deeply personal exploration of these themes, contributing to a richer understanding of the emotional, cultural, and academic dimensions of migration. The findings can inform institutions on how to create more inclusive and supportive environments for diverse student populations, ultimately enhancing their academic and personal development.

By highlighting the stories and experiences of Muslim women, this research not only contributes to the academic discourse on migration and education but also inspires future studies to adopt a more intersectional perspective in examining the experiences of international students.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological framework employed to examine the experiences of an international student in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ethnography serves as a tool to analyze cultural practices in their natural context, while autoethnography enables a detailed exploration of lived experiences, blending personal narratives with broader cultural dynamics. These approaches are particularly suited for capturing the emotional, social, and academic complexities associated with migration and identity negotiation.

The chapter also presents the findings of my personal and professional journey as an international student in New Zealand, derived from ten reflections structured into four interconnected phases. The first phase, **The Decision to Migrate and Initial Preparations**, focuses on the motivations and logistical steps taken to embark on the migration journey, highlighting aspirations, family priorities, and the challenges involved. The second phase, **Navigating a New Environment**, captures the emotional and practical adjustments required to settle into life in New Zealand, with an emphasis on cultural adaptation and developing independence. The third phase, **Building Connections and Overcoming Challenges**, examines the significance of social networks and community support in addressing housing issues, cultural adjustments, and the emotional impact of family reunification. The final phase, **Embracing Growth and Future Aspirations**, reflects on the achievements and growth that emerged from overcoming challenges, focusing on professional development and personal milestones.

These four phases collectively provide a framework for understanding the transformative moments of this journey, offering insight into the lived realities of migration and higher education. The reflections illuminate themes of resilience, adaptation, and growth while presenting a narrative shaped by the interplay of aspirations and the sacrifices required to achieve them.

Post-ethnography is discussed as an emerging methodology that considers the impact of globalization and digital interactions on cultural narratives. Although not directly applied in this study, its potential relevance for future research is acknowledged. Critically, the findings illuminate the tension between aspiration and the sacrifices required to achieve it. From overcoming systemic barriers like visa rejections and professional setbacks to grappling with emotional hurdles such as homesickness and cultural adjustment, these ten reflections reveal the layers of complexity involved in such a journey.

The chapter further justifies the selection of autoethnography, emphasizing their capacity to connect personal and cultural insights. Ethical considerations, including maintaining confidentiality and practicing reflexivity, are also addressed to ensure the integrity and respectfulness of the research process. By highlighting individual experiences and critically examining the broader implications of these challenges, the chapter offers a deeper understanding of the lived realities of international students striving for success in a foreign landscape.

3.1 Ethnography

Ethnography is named from the Greek words ethnos (people) and graphei (to write), emphasising the goal of providing comprehensive, holistic insights into persons' worldviews and activities in their natural environments (Reeves et al., 2013). It is believed that Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was the first to use the word "ethnography" in 1922. Its foundations are in social anthropology, a descriptive discipline that places a strong emphasis on the study of culture and cultural behaviour (Dharamsi & Charles, 2011).

In accordance with Hammersley (1985), “the objective of ethnographers is to enter the worldview of the individuals in these contexts by documenting their culture, perspectives, and practices” (Reeves et al., 2013, p. 152). Studies that describe and explain a variety of social phenomena among diverse culture-sharing groups are included in ethnographies, which are not only studies of ethnic rites and behaviours. The way that culture-sharing communities understand their experiences and derive meaning from their interactions is shown in these ethnographies, which provide a thorough description and analysis (Dharamsi & Charles, 2011).

Creswell (2005) asserts that the critical ethnographer investigates social concerns such as victimisation, hegemony, domination, repression, empowerment, inequality, and injustice. The result of many methods is ethnographic research (Rector, 2000). In addition to many other practices, it encompasses seeing and looking, hearing and listening, handling objects, describing, interviewing, recording, reading, documenting, and working with data, including labelling, coding, transcription, storing, transformation, sharing, comparison, interpretation, visualising, and quoting. These activities take place in a wide range of social contexts, such as fieldwork locations, data sessions, seminars, conferences, and the writing desk, and they take place at every step of the anthropological research process. Ethnographic research entails particular temporalities and spatialities and, like other activities, connects bodies, thoughts, artefacts, technology, and constructed environments (Ploder & Hamann, 2020).

However, globalisation appears to have rendered conventional concepts obsolete, as the concept of location has seemingly lost its significance. These difficulties must be seen in light of international social interactions. Ethnography's epistemological foundation is the study of individuals who are in or impacted by certain circumstances, albeit the location might sometimes be ambiguous. Marcus' effort to place this within the framework of multi-sited ethnography recognises that many locations are now connected to the outside world in a variety of intricate ways rather than being isolated (Naidoo, 2012). According to Gertner et al. (2021) we can determine that despite having their origins in anthropology, ethnographic methodologies are today extensively used in many other sectors. In order to comprehend a group of individuals, these methods often include researchers spending time in "real-world" environments and conducting observations and interviews. In addition to improving the quality of the data gathered, this intensive involvement forces researchers to confront the moral conundrums that arise when researching disadvantaged groups.

3.2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that prioritises the researcher's personal experience as a fundamental aspect of investigating social, cultural, and political issues. Originating in the late 20th century and notably developed by Ellis and Bochner in their 2000 publication, this approach aims to contest conventional research paradigms that regard the researcher as an impartial observer. It incorporates the researcher's personal experiences into the research process, facilitating a narrative approach that merges personal storytelling with critical analysis (Ward & Delamont, 2020).

Autoethnography is fundamentally a practice of identity work that is both self-conscious and deliberate, empowering the researcher to take control of their narrative. The presentation of self to others and to oneself facilitates individuals' understanding or representation of worldly phenomena that transcend the self. This method is described as a self-narrative that positions the individual within their social environment (Butz & Besio, 2009).

In etymological terms, autoethnography is derived from Greek: auto (self), ethnos (nation), and grapho (to write), and essentially means to write (research) about a nation (group of people) and the self (the researcher). Reed-Danahay (1997) explains that autoethnographers may vary in their emphasis on graphy, ethnos, and/or auto (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012).

Autoethnography is a research method that integrates personal narrative with cultural analysis, enabling researchers to examine and articulate their experiences in relation to wider cultural contexts. By emphasising the researcher's self-observation and self-analysis within their actual circumstances, this technique allows access to essential aspects of human experience that standard methodologies may ignore. Autoethnographers use personal experiences to understand cultural phenomena, with the self as the fundamental focus of the research. This approach can uncover insights that are frequently unattainable through traditional ethnographic methods (Vryan, 2006).

3.3 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a technique aimed at comprehending human behaviour and experiences via an in-depth exploration of their fundamental meanings. This approach emphasises comprehending the social and cultural factors that influence individual viewpoints, in contrast to techniques that depend on numerical data. It often uses methods such as interviews and participant observations to reveal the depth of personal narratives (Poulos, 2021). This paradigm is especially beneficial in sociology, psychology, and anthropology, where understanding the subtleties of human interactions and settings is crucial (Poulos, 2021).

According to Atkinson (2019), one of the characteristics of qualitative research is its capacity to provide in-depth, "thick" descriptions that give important perspectives into social realities that are often disregarded or marginalised. This depth enables scholars to access viewpoints that may otherwise stay obscured. Focusing on reflexivity in qualitative research allows researchers to critically evaluate their biases, privileges, and cultural influences, providing a more equitable interpretation of the findings (Attard, 2017). This procedure improves the dependability of the results and adds to the overall rigour of the study (Attard, 2017).

Furthermore, qualitative research questions established power relations, mainly via methods such as autoethnography. It challenges colonial research paradigms by elevating the perspectives of marginalised communities and promoting more inclusive, socially fair practices (Ellis et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the definition of qualitative research has continued to provide a dilemma. Despite early pioneers like Weber and Malinowski establishing its foundations, the word "qualitative" gained prominence in sociology only in the 1970s. Attempts to define it tend to be descriptive rather than exact, highlighting its essentially interpretative character and the persistent discussions on its association with quantitative methodologies (Denzin, 2017). Qualitative research, via its versatility and critical self-awareness, is a robust framework for examining the intricacies of human experience and revealing insights into the social world.

3.4 Justification for Using Autoethnography

Autoethnography is the optimal methodological selection for my research because it integrates personal story and culture analysis. As an international student with two children and a 20-hour workweek in early childhood education, I encounter significant challenges that make conventional data-gathering approaches unfeasible. Reflective writing is a data source for comprehensively examining my lived experiences within their social and cultural settings. This approach highlights the importance of subjective experiences, offering detailed insights into the intricacies of living as an international student (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography offers a detailed view of the creation and transformation of subjectivities via its interaction with theoretical frameworks, which allow for a critical evaluation of discursive formations and practices. As shown by Thompson-Lee (2017), this methodology generates complex, embodied, and embedded narrative accounts that emphasise deficiencies in policy and practice (Ward & Delamont, 2020). Conventional research methodologies often neglect these intricacies owing to a 'conceptual distance', a term used to describe the detachment or separation from the subject matter established by positivist frameworks. Briggs, Gololobov, and Ventsel (2024) contend that deep participation in social activities yields more comprehensive data and significant insights into identity and group norms, which are essential for comprehending behaviours (Briggs et al., 2015).

Moreover, my spouse is now employed overseas, unable to get a position in New Zealand. Due to the significant burden of family duties, he cannot allocate time to seek employment here. Independently managing all responsibilities has emerged as one of the most difficult experiences of my life. Autoethnography enables me to critically analyse my positionality, allowing for more in-depth reflection on my preconceptions and the impact of my own past story on my study. This method offers an effective framework to express experiences frequently disregarded or silenced by social or individual limitations. Through my own experience, I aim to connect with and encourage other international students facing similar challenges. I want to cultivate connection and empathy among this often-marginalised group by sharing these stories.

I anonymised representations and used several data sources to maintain ethical integrity and a thorough story. By using autoethnography, I enhance my voice and foster a broader understanding of the difficulties others encounter in similar situations. Autoethnography integrates personal thoughts with broader cultural topics, ensuring a comprehensive and morally sound approach. Similar to ethnographic research, this approach emphasises the significance of subjective experiences and social norms, facilitating a thorough comprehension of the reasons and meanings behind behaviours (Briggs et al., 2024). Consequently, autoethnography is the most appropriate selection for my dissertation.

3.5 Post-Ethnography

Post-ethnography is a contemporary approach to ethnographic research that redefines traditional methodologies to address modern culture's complexities better. According to Papailias (2021), it adapts to the digital age through database narratives and multimodal storytelling, enabling researchers to create non-linear and flexible representations of cultural practices. This approach is particularly significant in understanding the impact of digital platforms, such as social media, on cultural expression.

A key feature of post-ethnography is its emphasis on radical empiricism, which, as Goodall (1991) explains, involves direct sensory engagement with cultural experiences rather than abstract theorising. Influenced by theorists such as William James, this viewpoint promotes reflexivity, pushes the limits between participants and researchers, and fosters more profound, more genuine understandings of lived experiences. Additionally, postethnography challenges the conventional representation of cultures by focusing on actions and behaviours. Kopf (2018) highlights the need for multisite research and cooperation, acknowledging the impact of digital technology and globalisation. This method offers a broader perspective of identity and origins by including people as co-researchers, going beyond Eurocentric paradigms.

Creativity and practical participation are also included in this methodological change. To improve methodological knowledge, Ravindran et al. (2020) explain how ethnographers combine genres in their writing to represent their field experiences. Furthermore, Elie (2020b) highlights mesography as a cooperative approach that tackles practical problems and cultivates fair connections between researchers and the community. Ultimately, post-ethnography challenges conventional ethnographic goals, prioritising inclusivity, innovation, and cultural relevance in an interconnected, media-driven world.

3.6 Research Approach

This research adopts a **qualitative research approach** to gain a deeper understanding of my personal experiences during the process of migration, adaptation, and professional development in New Zealand. The decision to use a qualitative approach was driven by the need to explore complex, subjective aspects of migration that quantitative methods may overlook, such as emotional responses, cultural dislocation, personal growth, and the intricacies of adjusting to a new country and culture (Barrero & Yalaz, 2018).

A qualitative approach provides the flexibility to explore lived experiences in a detailed and nuanced manner (Lim, 2024). In this context, the research aims to capture the personal challenges, strategies, and transformations I experienced through migration and cultural adjustment. By emphasizing an individual's lived experiences, the qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how various factors such as societal norms, professional environments, and cultural shifts shaped my journey. This approach is well-suited to studying the dynamics of migration, as it offers insight into not just external circumstances but also the internal, psychological processes of navigating new cultural and professional landscapes (Sun & Zhu, 2024).

The primary method employed for this research is **narrative inquiry**, which is particularly valuable in capturing personal experiences and emotions in the context of migration. Narrative inquiry focuses on storytelling as a means of data collection, allowing the researcher to reflect on significant life events and the meanings ascribed to them (Ruthellen, 2016). In this case, it allows me to document and analyze key moments of my transition, from the emotional challenges of homesickness and isolation to the practical challenges of adapting to New Zealand's professional landscape and educational system. By writing personal reflections, I was able to trace patterns in my thoughts and feelings over time, which helped illuminate how specific experiences shaped my identity and sense of belonging in a new environment.

Moreover, **reflexivity** plays an integral role in this research approach. Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of how their own perspectives, biases, and experiences shape the research process (Ide & Beddoe, 2023). In my case, reflecting on my experiences as an international migrant allowed me to critically examine not just the external events I encountered, but also my internal

reactions and coping mechanisms. By engaging in self-reflection, I was able to uncover the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of my adaptation process that may otherwise have been overlooked. Reflexivity also enabled me to connect my personal journey to larger themes within the field of migration studies, such as identity formation, cultural assimilation, and the challenges of establishing a new life in a foreign land.

The **narrative approach** was complemented by a **case study methodology**, allowing for the examination of a specific individual (myself) within the broader context of migration and adaptation in New Zealand (Maneri, 2023). By focusing on my unique experiences, the research allows for a detailed exploration of the specific challenges and transformations that I underwent, with an emphasis on how cultural, societal, and professional factors intersected in shaping my journey. This approach also provides the opportunity to analyze the contextual influences that impacted my ability to adapt and the resources (both personal and external) that I leveraged during the process.

In terms of data collection, the research primarily relied on **self-reflection and personal documentation** through written narratives. This form of data collection is particularly suitable for qualitative research, as it allows for a more fluid and personal exploration of experiences (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Additionally, the process of writing served as a therapeutic and analytical tool, helping me gain new insights into my experiences by revisiting events, thoughts, and emotions from a reflective standpoint. Writing also enabled me to organize and make sense of the complexities of migration, such as the tension between maintaining one's cultural identity and assimilating into a new society.

For this autoethnography dissertation, I chose ten reflections because they represent the key phases of my journey as an international student. These reflections illustrate how I navigated significant cultural, environmental, and emotional challenges, and how those experiences contributed to my personal growth, adaptation, and understanding of a new environment. The reflections span from July 2022 to September 2024, marking the most transformative period of my experience. I decided to stop at this point because continuing further would have risked exceeding the word limit and potentially overwhelming the narrative with too much detail. By this stage, I felt my research questions had been thoroughly answered, and the most meaningful aspects of my journey had been captured.

Rather than focusing on isolated events, I structured the reflections to highlight the phases I went through, each one representing a stepping stone in my growth and ability to adapt to a new culture and environment. Through this combination of narrative inquiry, reflexivity, and case study methodology, this research provides a holistic view of the immigrant experience, focusing on personal transformation, cultural integration, and professional development within the context of migration to New Zealand. These ten reflections provide a complete and focused narrative that conveys both the challenges and triumphs of my experience. This approach allows for a deep understanding of the interplay between individual and societal factors in shaping the experiences of migrants, offering insights that are relevant not only to my personal journey but also to the broader academic discourse on migration, adaptation, and identity formation.

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3.7 Ethical Considerations

To maintain the research's integrity, conducting an autoethnographic study that examines personal experiences as an overseas student requires careful consideration of ethical problems. Although the researcher's thoughts form the main focus of this work, some important ethical issues must be resolved.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Although this research does not include direct involvement of others, the story might reference individuals and organisations. Although official permission may not be needed, anonymising these references is crucial to respect their privacy. Maintaining the identities and private information of those indirectly engaged depends on ensuring confidentiality (Chang, 2016).

Vulnerability and Self-Disclosure

Significant self-disclosure is a moral imperative in autoethnography, and it must be done with the utmost care. Given the possible emotional and social implications, researchers should rigorously assess the parameters of sharing personal information. To ensure that sensitive parts of the story are carefully and ethically revealed, it is essential to strike a balance between openness and vulnerability and the researcher's wellbeing (Mirza, 2023).

Reflexivity and Representation in Autoethnography

Autoethnographic research requires reflexivity to maintain ethical standards. The best way for researchers to prevent letting their prejudices, preconceptions, and ideologies affect their findings is to continuously self-reflect. To provide a fair and complex portrayal of experiences, reflexive practice entails critically analysing the researcher's positionality and how it affects the story (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011). It is critical to portray and understand the story in an ethical manner. Researchers should avoid sensationalism and exaggeration while presenting their experiences genuinely and courteously (Aiko, 2024). Analysis must be based on evidence and responsibly consider the story's intricacies and complexities.

Emotional Impact

Adequate support mechanisms are necessary when reflecting on personal experiences because it can elicit strong emotions. In order to mitigate the emotional burden of the research process, researchers anticipated seeking assistance from mentors, colleagues, or professional counsellors. This method guarantees that the researcher's welfare is preserved throughout the investigation (Wall, 2008).

Cultural sensitivity is essential for autoethnographic research that involves international students. In order to prevent ethnocentric biases and guarantee inclusive representation, researchers must approach diverse cultural contexts with respect (Chang, 2008). In order to preserve confidentiality and safeguard sensitive information, it is imperative to adhere to institutional guidelines and implement appropriate data handling and storage practices (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnographic research can retain integrity by adhering to the following principles, which promote responsible and respectful engagement with the narrative (Edwards, 2021).

Chapter 4 – Finding through Reflective Writing

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my personal and professional journey as an international student in New Zealand, derived from **ten reflections** that explore the challenges, milestones, and transformative moments that shaped my experience. These findings offer insight into the realities of navigating academic, cultural, and personal transitions. Each reflection serves as a piece of the larger puzzle, uncovering themes of resilience, adaptation, and growth within the broader context of migration and higher education.

Critically, the findings illuminate the tension between aspiration and the sacrifices required to achieve it. From overcoming systemic barriers like visa rejections and professional setbacks to grappling with emotional hurdles such as homesickness and cultural adjustment, these ten reflections reveal the layers of complexity involved in such a journey. The chapter not only highlights individual experiences but also critically examines the broader implications of these challenges, offering a deeper understanding of the lived realities of international students striving for success in a foreign landscape

4.1 Four Phases of the Journey

Migration is a transformative journey that unfolds in a series of interconnected stages. Each phase brings its own set of challenges, experiences, and growth opportunities. These four phases, deciding to migrate and making initial preparations, adjusting to life in a new environment, building connections while overcoming challenges, and finally, embracing growth and planning for the future, together tell a story of resilience, adaptability, and personal transformation. Each phase is a vital piece of the journey, shaping the overall experience and leaving a lasting impact.

*4.1.1 **Phase 1**: The Decision to Migrate and Initial Preparations*

This phase encompasses the initial reflections on the journey to New Zealand, focusing on the decision-making process and the steps taken to prepare for this significant transition. Reflections 1 and 2 are central to this stage, which highlights the interplay between aspirations, family priorities, and the challenges of navigating complex logistical processes.

The decision to migrate was not made lightly. It involved careful consideration of various countries and universities, with New Zealand emerging as the ideal choice due to its family-friendly policies, cultural appeal, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Reflection 1 delves into this deliberation, emphasizing the transformative potential of education and the practical steps required to pursue a master's degree at AUT.

Reflection 2 expands on the challenges faced during visa preparation, illustrating the emotional and bureaucratic hurdles encountered. From gathering essential documents to addressing visa rejections, this stage required persistence and adaptability. These reflections underscore the resilience needed to navigate the complexities of migration and set the foundation for future phases.

4.1.2 ***Phase 2:*** *Navigating a New Environment*

This phase captures the experiences of adjusting to life in New Zealand, focusing on the realities of settling into an unfamiliar environment. Reflections 3 and 4 explore the emotional and practical challenges of this stage, from cultural adaptation to mastering independence.

Reflection 3 describes the initial arrival in New Zealand, marked by feelings of isolation, homesickness, and awe at the natural beauty of the new surroundings. Practical difficulties, such as finding suitable accommodation and navigating a different climate, highlighted the complexities of starting anew. Meanwhile, Reflection 4 examines the journey toward independence, including learning to use public transportation, adapting to local norms, and managing academic expectations.

Together, these reflections illustrate the resilience required to overcome the discomfort of unfamiliarity and the determination to establish a foothold in a new country. This phase highlights the importance of small victories in building confidence and fostering personal growth.

4.1.3 ***Phase 3:*** *Building Connections and Overcoming Challenges*

This phase emphasizes the significance of social connections and the ability to navigate persistent challenges. Reflections 5, 6, and 7 provide insights into the struggles and successes experienced during this stage, including housing issues, employment opportunities, and family reunification.

Reflection 5 examines the emotional toll of housing instability and cultural adjustment, while also highlighting the determination to find a stable living situation. Reflection 6 focuses on the importance of building social networks, which provided emotional support and practical guidance in overcoming feelings of isolation. Reflection 7 captures the pivotal moment of family reunification, bringing emotional stability and reinforcing the importance of familial bonds in sustaining motivation.

This phase illustrates how human connections, and resilience can transform adversity into opportunity. It underscores the value of community support and adaptability in navigating the multifaceted challenges of migration.

4.1.4 ***Phase 4:*** *Embracing Growth and Future Aspirations*

The final phase of this journey reflects on the achievements and growth that emerged from overcoming challenges. Reflections 8, 9, and 10 focus on professional development, personal milestones, and the gratitude derived from these experiences.

Reflection 8 explores workplace experiences, highlighting lessons learned about leadership, cultural inclusion, and professional growth. Reflection 9 celebrates key milestones, such as academic achievements and cultural events, which fostered a deeper sense of belonging. Reflection 10 emphasizes the culmination of this journey, reflecting on resilience, gratitude, and the pursuit of future aspirations.

This phase encapsulates the transformative power of migration, showcasing how challenges can inspire growth and shape a forward-looking perspective. It highlights the importance of perseverance and the rewards of embracing new opportunities, concluding the journey with a sense of fulfillment and optimism.

4.2 Exploring the Journey Through Ten Reflections

4.2.1 Reflection 1: Why New Zealand, Why AUT why MEd

Having worked as a teacher for over 14 years, I have always been passionate about learning and growing in my career, aiming to make a significant difference. I thought pursuing a business degree would broaden my perspective, as everything revolves around business. However, I felt a persistent craving for something more. Together with my husband, we began researching universities in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

While these countries had their advantages, they also presented more negatives than positives for our needs, especially considering our two children, who are an essential part of our lives and would need to accompany us. Growing up in Saudi Arabia, I had a very overprotective and conservative upbringing, which influenced my thinking.

New Zealand was initially not on our radar due to its reputation for having a challenging visa process and its closed borders during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, one of our MBA lecturers suggested considering New Zealand. Intrigued, we started exploring the possibilities and opportunities it offered, and our perspective began to shift.

My husband is a passionate rugby fan who has played the sport since high school. He has always admired the All Blacks and deeply appreciates New Zealand's sportsmanship. Inspired by his enthusiasm, I decided to pursue my education in New Zealand. Another significant reason for this choice was the educational benefit for our children; unlike in other countries, children of master's students can attend public schools for free.

As I reflected on this journey, I was reminded of a Māori whakataukī:

"Ko te manu e kai ana i te miro, nōna te ngahere.
Ko te manu e kai ana i te mātauranga, nōna te ao."
(The bird that partakes of the miro berry owns the forest.
The bird that partakes of knowledge owns the world.)

(University of Auckland)

This proverb resonates deeply with my story. Just as the bird chooses the nourishment that defines its domain, I chose education as the sustenance to transform my career and provide a brighter future for my family. It reminds me that through knowledge, we can transcend boundaries and create opportunities.

With these motivations, I applied through a top reputable consultancy in New Zealand, and they recommended two universities for my further studies. I applied to the University of Waikato for a master's degree in leadership and to Auckland University of Technology (AUT) for a Master of Education. My goal was to become an academic director or work on an accreditation team. My passion for teaching and desire to learn new strategies to make a difference in education drove my decision.

Initially, Waikato rejected my application for the master's in leadership but suggested their Master of Education programme instead. After discussing my possibilities with them, they re-evaluated my application and accepted me within a few days for the MEd programme. Meanwhile, AUT requested additional documents, which delayed the process. After two weeks of submitting the required paperwork, I received an offer of admission from AUT.

I had to choose between these two reputable universities, and I carefully weighed my options. Both institutions have a strong reputation, but several factors made AUT the more attractive choice for me. Firstly, AUT is in Auckland, which is convenient since I will be living alone. As New Zealand's largest city, Auckland offers a vibrant environment with many opportunities for professional growth and networking.

The Master of Education programme at AUT particularly stood out to me because of its focus on contemporary educational practices and research. This programme aims to equip educators with the purpose of education and theoretical knowledge, aligning perfectly with my ambition to become an academic director or join an accreditation team. As an international student, I am required to study full-time, and AUT's programme is well-structured to meet my academic and professional needs.

AUT's strong industry connections and partnerships with schools provide valuable opportunities for practical experience and professional development, which will enhance my career prospects. The university's modern facilities and resources, along with its commitment to cultural diversity and inclusiveness, create a supportive and enriching learning environment. My educational consultants also recommended AUT, confirming that it would be the best fit for my aspirations and personal circumstances.

In conclusion, while both universities offered great opportunities, AUT's location, programmeme focus, industry connections, and supportive environment made it the better choice for me. I am excited to start my journey at AUT and look forward to the opportunities it will bring.

4.2.2 Reflection 2: Preparation for visa processing

After we received the acceptance letter from AUT, we found ourselves in Madina, visiting the holy place. That's when we had to figure out how to pay the tuition fee and transfer the money to AUT. We decided to visit the bank for assistance, given the substantial amount involved. The bank staff were incredibly helpful and patiently guided us through the entire process.

Once we successfully transferred the fee for two semesters, AUT provided us with a receipt. This receipt was crucial as we gathered all the necessary documents for our visa application. Despite feeling anxious because the semester was approaching and our visa hadn't been processed yet, we faced another challenge: completing the required medical examination in Saudi Arabia.

The medical test posed its own challenges as well. It was only conducted at a specific hospital in Dhahran, which meant taking time off from work. We set out early in the morning and spent the entire day at the hospital, waiting to complete all the necessary checks and tests. It ended up taking two full days away from work to get everything done.

Preparing all the documents needed for the visa was no small task either. We had to gather our educational certificates, property records, work experience letters, and proof of sufficient funds to cover both living expenses and university fees. It was a stressful time, but we managed to navigate through it, step by step.

Initially, New Zealand immigration rejected my visa application, questioning the genuineness of my request. Receiving the rejection letter was devastating and left me feeling heartbroken. Determined to prove my case, we promptly gathered and submitted additional documentation to support my application. One key requirement was my passport, which I had first obtained upon arriving in New Zealand. In a stroke of luck, my mother had saved all our passports and even our initial air ticket stubs. This thorough documentation helped us demonstrate our preference for living in Saudi Arabia and our intention to return after I completed my degree and gained work experience in New Zealand.

Finally, my visa was approved, and we had to start planning for my travel to New Zealand. While I was excited, I also felt a deep sense of anxiety. As soon as my visa was granted, the consultants submitted the family visa application. However, they informed us that it would take at least two months to process, meaning I would have to fly alone. This unexpected news made me panic, but my husband offered full support and encouragement. His unwavering belief in me bolstered my confidence.

I packed my suitcase carefully, ensuring everything was in order for my departure. However, on the morning I was set to leave, disaster struck, the zipper on my suitcase broke. In a rage, we rushed out to buy a new one, while my husband was juggling his work responsibilities. This added a layer of stress to an already emotionally charged day.

In Saudi Arabia, it is still uncommon for women to travel alone, a practice that is slowly evolving. Leaving my children behind was particularly heart-wrenching. I entrusted my mother with their care, knowing they always relied on me. This transition demanded that they become more independent, a difficult adjustment for all of us.

I had to catch a late-night flight from Saudi Arabia to Dubai. My husband and father drove me to the airport. Saying goodbye was one of the hardest things I had ever done. My heart felt like it was being torn apart, and my eyes filled with tears. My daughter clung to me tightly, and it took all my strength to let her go. My son, too young to fully grasp the situation, simply said, "Come back soon." My parents, though devastated, reassured me that they would take good care of my children. My husband, though clearly sad, hid his emotions well to keep me from feeling more distressed.
As I stood at the airport gate, a wave of emotions washed over me, fear, hope, and quiet determination. In hindsight, two Māori proverbs perfectly capture my journey.

First,

"Mā te kaha, mā te wairua, ka āhei ki te whakatutuki ngā moemoeā"

(With strength, with spirit, dreams can be achieved),

speaks to the courage it took to leave my family and step into the unknown.

Second,

"Kia kaha, kia māia, kia manawanui"

(Be strong, be steadfast, be patient),

became a silent mantra as I navigated the challenges of adapting to a new culture and environment.

(University of Canterbury, 2019)

At the time, I knew little about New Zealand's language or customs, yet these words resonate deeply with the resilience and determination that shaped my experience. Together, they reflect not just the obstacles I faced but also the strength and patience that allowed me to move forward and pursue my dreams.When I landed in Dubai, the waiting time for my next flight was almost four hours. Those hours felt endless, filled with a mix of exhaustion, anticipation, and the weight of the farewells.

Finally, after a grueling 12-hour flight, the plane touched down early in the morning in Auckland. As I stepped off the plane, I was greeted by a landscape that exceeded all my expectations. The lush greens and rich earthy browns were breathtaking, a vivid contrast to the arid deserts I was accustomed to. Despite the challenges and emotional turmoil, I had faced, I knew that this journey was crucial for our future. With my husband's unwavering support and the strength drawn from my family's encouragement, I found the courage to embrace this new chapter on my own.

4.2.3 Reflection 3: Arriving in NZ and appropriate place

Upon receiving my visa, I was overwhelmed with emotion. While my entire family shared in the joy, I struggled to process the reality of leaving my entire life behind. This move was a golden opportunity to advance my career and knowledge, but the sacrifice weighed heavily on me. I kept questioning if it was truly worth it, despite my husband's reassurances that our family would eventually join me and that this sacrifice was for a brighter future. As a woman, nothing is more valuable and precious than my children, husband, and parents. I yearned to have them with me every moment of my life. I packed with tears and joy, mixed feelings I found difficult to express in words.

Finally, I arrived in New Zealand on July 28, 2023. This date was not planned, but I had to be in New Zealand by then due to a requirement from AUT (Auckland University of Technology). Unfortunately, the tickets were costly because it was the summer vacation period in Saudi Arabia, and everyone was flying out of the country. As a result, the travel expenses were quite high for us. If we had received our visa earlier, we could have booked our tickets at a lower cost, but we faced delays due to the re-application process. This added to our financial strain.

Another challenge was finding accommodation, as we didn't know anyone in New Zealand. My husband looked into student lodgings at Akoranga, but as practicing Muslims, my father and husband were uncomfortable with the shared housing arrangements, as they couldn't guarantee it wouldn't be a mixed-gender accommodation. We also considered Airbnb, but the costs were prohibitive, and we had to stick to a budget.

Finally, my father realized that a distant relative of my mother's was living in New Zealand. Although my husband generally prefers not to depend on others, we had no choice but to listen to my father. We reached out to this relative, and thankfully, they agreed to host me initially. The lady also promised to help me find a suitable house. Upon my arrival at the airport, my mom's relative and his son-in-law came to pick me up. Having just come from Saudi Arabia, where it's mostly hot, I found the cold weather to be quite a shock. I shivered as I walked towards their car, feeling the chill in my bones.

As we drove, they asked if I needed to go to the university to get my ID card sorted. We made our way to Northcote and headed to the Student Hub. The lady at the Student Hub was incredibly kind, greeting me warmly with a heartfelt, "Welcome to New Zealand." She took down my details and led me to a room where they would take my ID picture. I was so exhausted from the journey that I could barely muster a smile for the photo.

On our way back, I was astonished by the sight of heavy rain pouring down on one side of the city while the other side remained sunny, complete with a beautiful rainbow. It was a spectacle I had never witnessed before. The lush greenery, with trees and plants flourishing everywhere, made me feel as though I had stepped into a scene from a movie. The contrast to the deserted landscapes which I was used to was outstanding, and it left a lasting impression on me.

Upon arriving at their home, I was warmly greeted by the relatives. We shared a delightful breakfast; they suggested resting but I found myself unable to sleep due to the jet lag. The exhaustion from travel, combined with the need to prepare for the upcoming week's class, weighed heavily on my mind. I had missed the orientation and the first session of one of my modules, which only added to my stress and anxiety. My head felt like a blank book with empty pages, and I was lightheaded, making it impossible to rest.

As I lay in bed, shivering from the cold, I was overwhelmed with feelings of homesickness. I missed my family deeply, especially the comforting cuddles from my six-year-old son. The familiar warmth and affection which I was accustomed to were absent, leaving me feeling isolated and lonely. Doubts about my ability to adjust to this new environment started to creep in, and I found myself longing to return home.

Despite my overwhelming emotions, I knew I had to focus on my studies. After two days of battling my feelings and the lingering effects of jet lag, I finally managed to watch the entire video of the missed class. It was a challenge to concentrate, but I pushed through, determined not to fall behind.

The following day, we needed to take care of some essential tasks, including setting up a bank account, exchanging Saudi Riyals for New Zealand Dollars for living expenses, and obtaining an IRD number. They took me to a nearby mall to handle these errands. However, I couldn't help but compare it to the malls back in Saudi Arabia, finding it lacking in comparison. Everything seemed too pale in comparison to what I was used to, and I struggled to see anything in a positive light.

I felt torn between my life in Saudi Arabia and my new beginnings in New Zealand. The transition was proving to be more challenging than I had anticipated, and I was caught in a whirlwind of emotions, unsure of how to navigate this new chapter in my life.

4.2.3.1 The Pikorua Symbol and Its Connection to My Journey

The **Pikorua** (intertwined spiral) is a traditional Māori symbol that represents connection, growth, and the unbroken bonds between people, even when separated by great distances. Its visual form resonates deeply with my personal narrative of leaving my family behind and embarking on a new life in New Zealand.

When I arrived in New Zealand, I was immediately struck by the warmth and inclusivity of its people and culture. During my first class, I was welcomed in the beautiful Māori language, which made me feel part of the community from the very beginning. This heartfelt connection, combined with the respect and kindness shown by the people of New Zealand, deeply inspired me. Their culture, rooted in values of unity, growth, and respect for nature, resonated with my personal journey and planted the seed for my inspiration to incorporate the Koru into my reflection.

The Koru is a spiral design inspired by the unfurling frond of a silver fern. In Māori culture, it symbolizes new beginnings, growth, harmony, and renewal (Taonga, 2005). The circular shape represents the continuity of life and its constant movement forward, while the unfurling form signifies personal growth and a return to one's roots. Its significance goes beyond aesthetics, embodying values of balance and connection, making it a powerful cultural symbol.

I chose the Koru because it reflects my own journey of growth and transformation as an international student. Just as the Koru represents the unfolding of new life, my time in New Zealand marked a period of self-discovery and renewal. The symbolism of harmony and balance within the Koru aligned perfectly with my experiences of adapting to a new culture while staying rooted in my own identity. It also embodies the kindness and inclusivity I encountered in New Zealand, making it a meaningful representation of this chapter of my life.

To develop my Koru-inspired piece, I began by studying the cultural significance of the Koru in Māori art and understanding its deeper meanings. I then reflected on how its symbolism connected to my personal experiences. Using the spiral form, I created a design that embodied my evolving journey. Each curve of the spiral represented a step forward, and the flow of the design reflected my ongoing growth and transformation. This process allowed me to not only create a meaningful piece but also to connect more deeply with the culture that inspired it.

Figure 1 **NZ National Symbol - Koru**

Figure 1 **kōwhaiwhai** *Source: Author*

1. Family and Whānau

The blue spiral in the illustration represents my family. The cornerstone of my existence and my source of strength. Their love, support, and sacrifices are reflected in this part of the symbol, showing their enduring influence in my life despite being physically apart.

The Pain of Separation

At this point in my story, the blue spiral of the pikorua reflects the overwhelming emotions I felt when leaving my family behind. Packing my belongings with tears in my eyes, saying goodbye to my children, husband, and parents. It was one of the most heart-wrenching experiences of my life. Yet, their love and the knowledge that this sacrifice was for a brighter future kept me grounded.

The blue spiral signifies the enduring connection I feel to my family. Even as I struggled with homesickness and the absence of their comforting presence, their love remained my anchor.

2. Personal Growth and Challenges

The green spiral represents my journey of transformation and growth. Moving to New Zealand brought with it homesickness, isolation, and cultural adjustment, yet it also allowed me to take bold steps toward a brighter future for my family. This spiral encapsulates the sacrifices made and the resilience developed.

Overcoming Initial Challenges

Upon arriving in New Zealand, I was faced with immediate challenges, navigating an unfamiliar culture, finding accommodation, enduring jet lag, and processing my mixed emotions of excitement and homesickness. This part of the journey is symbolized by the green spiral, which represents my personal growth. Each challenge tested my resilience but also contributed to my transformation as I began to adapt and find my footing in this new land. For instance, the difficulty of finding suitable housing reflects the twists and turns of the pikorua uncertain but eventually leading to progress.

3. The Intersection of Aspirations and Sacrifice

The red point at the intersection of the spirals symbolizes balance, a critical aspect of my journey. It marks the emotional and spiritual equilibrium between my commitment to my family and my aspirations. This "balance point" reflects the sacrifices made for the sake of growth, unity, and I hope for a better future.

Finding Balance Amid Sacrifices

In this section, the **red balance point** represents the emotional tension I experienced as I stood at the crossroads of my aspirations and the sacrifices I made to pursue them. This was the moment I began to reconcile my longing for family with my determination to embrace this golden opportunity. Each task I undertook, from setting up a bank account to preparing for classes, was a step toward achieving the balance symbolized by the red point. It highlights how I started to integrate my family's love with my personal ambitions, finding strength in their support to navigate this challenging transition.

4.2.4 Reflection 4: Finding Independence and Navigating New Zealand

My distant cousin's husband helped me fill out the IRD form and mentioned that I would receive a call to verify my identification. I needed a home address to open a bank account with IRD, so I couldn't open an account at that time. Instead, I exchanged the money and entrusted my cousin to keep it safe. This decision was influenced by the fear of guns and theft, as depicted in movies. A few days later, I had to attend a class at AUT North Campus. To get there, I needed to travel from Ranui to Britomart. My cousin and her husband offered to support me with the journey, but I felt hesitant to accept their help because she had recently given birth and had a year-old daughter. I felt it would be overwhelming for her to assist me.

I decided to use public transport since I would need to live independently until my family joined me. I believed I could manage on my own, especially since my cousin reassured me that New Zealand is a safe country, and I shouldn't hesitate to ask for help if needed. Her husband came along to guide me in getting an AT Hop card. We took the train to Britomart, where I purchased the card. I remembered my cousin showing me how to use Google Maps the previous day, as I had never used it before. I then took the NX1 bus to the university. Her husband asked the bus driver to help me get off at the right stop since I was new to New Zealand.

One thing I noticed about New Zealand was how people greeted and thanked each other, including bus drivers and train officers. This was quite different from what I was accustomed to back home. When I arrived at the Akoranga stop, I crossed the bridge and followed the signboards to the university, which had unusual structure and surroundings. The classroom was in a hut-like building, and with the pouring rain, it felt quite cold. However, the others in the course didn't seem to feel the same way. The lecturer arrived ahead of time, and once everyone was present, we started by introducing ourselves. Each person began with a greeting in Māori before continuing in English, which made me curious. Although they weren't of Māori origin, having migrated from different parts of the world, they still adhered to this tradition. We had 12 people in the module, all pursuing a Postgraduate Diploma.

During my first two classes at AUT North Campus, my lecturer introduced the assignment requirements for the module. Coming from a background where achieving top grades was always a priority anything less than a B+ was met with parental disappointment, I carried the same determination into my master's studies. However, I initially found the requirements unfamiliar and challenging to navigate. Recognizing my concerns, the lecturer provided thoughtful guidance. She suggested booking sessions at the library for additional support and directed me to the Student Hub for help with navigating Canvas. I also attended several workshops on referencing, conducting article searches in the library, and structuring assignments. These pastoral support services at AUT proved to be incredibly helpful, equipping me with the tools and confidence to meet academic expectations and aim for excellence.

The English they spoke wasn't quite the same as British or American English; they spoke quickly, making it easy to miss words if not paying close attention. I found it challenging to understand most of the class requirements and what needed to be done. The lecturer guided me to the student hub and AUT library for more help, but I still felt overwhelmed and somewhat left out as I was processing everything.

We were divided into groups, and I was paired with a New Zealander and a Chinese student. Despite the heavy rain pouring down all day, the six-hour class continued, and by the time it was over, it was late evening. I hadn't realized I needed to buy lunch, and as a Muslim, I can only eat Halal meat, so I ended up with just a small cup of hot chocolate, which cost $6, much more expensive than I expected.

My cousin texted me, offering to pick me up, but I declined, not wanting to inconvenience her, especially with the heavy traffic due to the rain and the fact that she had a baby with her. Through Google Maps, I learned that I needed to take the NX1 bus, and luckily, my Chinese friend from the group was also heading to the city, so she accompanied me to the city in the NX1 bus. I had a great time with her. The weekend was busy that we were invited to my cousin sister's friend's house.

4.4.5 Reflection 5: Coping with Change and Finding Stability

I struggled to adjust to the cold weather in New Zealand, as the jackets I brought from Saudi Arabia weren't warm enough. This, combined with anxiety and depression, made it a difficult time for me. I even found myself scolding my husband over the phone for leaving me in a situation where I had to deal with various issues, especially since my mom's cousin and his wife were visiting at the time. Initially, they treated me well, but things became strained over time. Before this, I had asked my cousin sister to help me find a new place, but I wasn't familiar with the apartment rental system in New Zealand. To make things worse, I couldn't download the Trade Me app because I hadn't adjusted my phone's regional settings after moving from Saudi Arabia. Despite everything, I was determined not to give up, even though I felt a strong connection to my life in Saudi Arabia holding me back.

After lining up several viewings for the week, we drove around Northcote and other parts of the suburbs, checking out different apartments. Eventually, we found a house near Unitec, where my cousin's husband had lived as a student long before COVID. It had two rooms and a bathroom. However, when we went to collect the keys that evening, the neighbourhood was dark, with loud music and people dancing, a situation that didn't seem suitable for living. My cousin sister was unhappy with the place, so we decided to cancel the deal. Unfortunately, the lady refused to refund the full amount, and we ended up losing $100 out of the $2,200 as her service fee.

At that point, I felt lost, unsure of what to look for in a house. We were offered a shared room in a house, but my husband didn't agree to those conditions. Finally, we scheduled viewings in the CBD and looked at several apartments on the 15th floor. None of them appealed to me, as my mind kept comparing them to the spacious houses with large rooms in Saudi Arabia.

With one last hope, we visited the final apartment. It was amazing, and we secured it by paying the next day. I finally felt relieved knowing that it had all the essentials, so I only needed to purchase a few additional items. Moving my two suitcases and other belongings should have been straightforward, but my mom's uncle and aunt made the process difficult with their constant complaints and unnecessary remarks. Despite feeling guilty for relying on them after staying with

them for two weeks, I reminded myself to stay strong. Thankfully, their daughter and son-in-law were incredibly supportive. She even drove me to the city apartment with all my belongings and helped me get the apartment keycard.

They left me in the afternoon, around 2 or 3 p.m. Before that, she dropped me off at The Warehouse to pick up new bed sheets and pillows. After making my purchases, I decided to walk back to the apartment, mentally retracing the car route in reverse. However, the walk quickly became overwhelming, almost like hiking uphill. My chest started to hurt, and I was panting heavily by the time I finally reached the apartment. Exhausted, I set up my room but was too drained to even think about dinner. The house was completely silent, and the loneliness hit me hard, I missed my family more than I could express.

The night passed, and I woke up early the next day, feeling even more isolated since I had no way to contact my family. Setting up the internet would take at least three weeks, which was frustrating given how quickly things were arranged back in Saudi Arabia. Thankfully, when I called the internet provider, they kindly offered a free phone package so I could study and complete my assignments.

Navigating the city was another challenge. I wasn't familiar with Google Maps, so I had to rely on walking and public transport everywhere I went. After returning from university, I would lock myself in the apartment, only leaving when absolutely necessary, like for grocery runs to Countdown. During this time, I tried reaching out to my cousin sister a few times for help, but she never picked up or responded.

At that moment, an overwhelming sense of isolation consumed me, making me realize how solitary our journey through life truly is. I began to see how much of life is shaped by our own individual struggles. Despite my qualifications and career achievements, I felt completely lost and inadequate, as if all my education and recognition meant nothing in the face of simple challenges. It was a humbling experience, one that made me confront the fact that I still had much to learn about resilience.

4.2.6 Reflection 6: Building Connections and Exploring Opportunities

The day after my youngest sister called, she told me that if I didn't take action and find my way, no one else would do it for me. Despite her advice, I still stayed inside, focusing on my assignments and mastering the challenging task of referencing articles. The pressure to achieve A's, only to receive B's, added to my frustration, but I saw it as a challenge to overcome.

One day, while waiting for the lift at my apartment before heading to class at Northcote, I met a lovely woman from Pakistan with her six-year-old daughter, who was the same age as my son. Her acquaintance was a blessing. She showed me around and taught me many things, including where to find groceries. Despite being pregnant and working as an admin at a medical centre, she took the time to help me. The best part was that she helped me find halal meat at a place called Sandringham in Auckland, as I hadn't had meat for almost two weeks and was feeling like a vegetarian. It's worth noting that while many in New Zealand misunderstand halal, its true meaning is about slaughtering an animal in the name of Allah, ensuring it is done without causing unnecessary pain.

She supported me in my job search, while most people in New Zealand simply recommended sites like Seek.com or LinkedIn.com. She advised me to take a more proactive approach by calling and networking directly with people, leveraging the experience I gained from living in the diverse culture of Saudi Arabia. I began applying to various jobs in fields I would have felt ashamed to consider back in Saudi Arabia or Sri Lanka jobs like cleaning, helping, being an unskilled labour, or babysitting. Despite my efforts, I had no luck; everyone told me I needed New Zealand experience. I couldn't help but think, how am I supposed to gain experience if no one gives me a job? This is a common issue everywhere, where even fresh graduates are expected to have experience, leaving me puzzled by the unrealistic requirements.

My sister in Australia, who worked as a reliever in Early Childhood Education (ECE), encouraged me to explore job opportunities in that field. I applied to Aroha Consulting and Jit bug, but while Jit bug turned me down due to my lack of experience, Aroha accepted my application. I submitted all my documents and was thrilled to start my first job in New Zealand. On my first day, I got lost

and ended up taking Uber. The driver advised me that it wasn't worth spending so much on transportation for just a few hours of work, suggesting I use public transport instead.

In the following days, I faced the challenge of traveling to different ECE centres. I had to take a train, then a bus, and walk a few minutes, all while ensuring I arrived on time by leaving the house an hour early. Although the pay was low and the work inconsistent, I was determined to learn everything about ECE. I accepted every task given at the centre and didn't give up on learning this new field.

Reinforcing the idea that people and relationships are the most important aspects of life.

"He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata."
What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people.
(Inspiring communities, 2018)

This proverb highlights the importance of human connections and community, reflecting the support and kindness you experienced from those around you. It underscores the idea that people and relationships are at the heart of everything.

One weekend, my classmate from AUT reached out and asked if I would like to join her for a day out. I happily accepted, and she traveled all the way from Northcote to show me around Auckland. She took me to beautiful parks, beaches, schools, and the Auckland Viaduct Harbour, explaining New Zealand's culture along the way. She also told me about nearby mosques I could visit for prayers, which I found incredibly comforting. To top it all off, she took me to a halal dining place, where she joined me for a meal. Although she usually drinks during her weekend outings, she chose not to that day out of respect for me. Her kindness made a world of difference during that difficult time.

In New Zealand, I started feeling increasingly unhappy and I missed my family deeply. Despite coming from a religious family in Saudi Arabia, I had always been more inclined towards music and worldly things, believing mostly in the importance of kindness, empathy, and forgiveness. But in New Zealand, without friends, family, or anyone to support me through sickness or any kind of need, I found myself turning more toward prayer. I prayed for strength and comfort, feeling as though something might change soon. As September neared, my heart held onto hope.

4.2.7 Reflection 7: Reuniting with My Family

In mid-September, I received the incredible news from my husband that their visas had been approved. He had tried to surprise me by withholding the email from our immigration consultants, but with my busy schedule of work and university, he had to break the news early. Our consultants had been an amazing source of support throughout the process, playing a key role in bringing us to New Zealand. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude and joy, immediately diving into preparations for my family's arrival, juggling shopping, work, and studies all at once. Words cannot truly capture the happiness I felt in those moments.

My husband's friend kindly offered to drop them off at our apartment, keeping me updated on their arrival time. Though the flight was delayed, I had breakfast ready for them early in the morning. When they finally arrived, my children rushed to hug me, and even my typically shy husband embraced me warmly. We invited the friend to join us for breakfast, but he graciously declined. Despite their jet lag, we spent the entire day together, relishing our reunion. Over the following days, we were busy sorting out essentials like getting AT HOP cards, exploring Britomart, and handling administrative tasks like securing an IRD number and adding my husband to the apartment lease. There was an extra charge for adding him, as we had to create a new agreement, but everything was finally settled.

Next, we had to arrange schooling for the children. We applied to Freemans Bay School for my son and Auckland Girls' Grammar School (AGGS) for my daughter. However, with the schools on September break, we had to wait for the application process to resume. In the meantime, we made the most of the holidays by visiting beaches, parks, and taking bus and train rides, which were a new and exciting experience for my children, given the limited public transportation options in Saudi Arabia.

After two weeks, we received a call from AGGS for my daughter's interview. The school's interior had a charming "Harry Potter" aesthetic, which amused us, but the kindness and warmth of the deputy principal stood out even more. AGGS embraced Māori culture, and we were in awe of the way the school honoured the indigenous heritage. As a master's student, I was fortunate that we didn't have to pay school fees for either of my children, something we were deeply grateful for to the New Zealand government.

Purchasing the AGGS uniform for my daughter was a bit costly, but worth every cent. On her first day of high school, our excitement was palpable as we captured the special moment with photos. The assistant principal gave us a warm tour of the school, and I was relieved to find that they provided halal food and fully respected my daughter's choice to wear a headscarf. The genuine care, inclusivity, and warmth we experienced at AGGS made us feel incredibly welcomed and blessed.

As for my son, his school application took a little longer, but we eventually received the call for his interview, and the process moved smoothly from there. Both my children quickly adapted to their new environment, having already been exposed to diverse settings. They absolutely loved the engaging learning style, the expansive playground, and the wide range of sports offered things that were limited at their previous school due to the harsh climate in Saudi Arabia. It was a wonderful beginning to this new chapter in our lives in New Zealand.

4.2.8 Reflection 8: Workplace Challenges and Lessons Learned

The arrival of my family brought immense joy and a sense of grounding, yet as this chapter unfolded, I was confronted with a series of professional hurdles that demanded not only emotional resilience but also critical reflection on my career path and workplace dynamics

At one of the centres where I was relieving, the owner confronted me angrily about arriving 30 minutes late due to a bus delay. I had already informed the centre manager and offered to make up the time by staying 30 minutes later, to which she said she'd consider it. However, the way the owner spoke to me was unlike anything I had experienced before. I reported the incident to Child Care Centre Consulting, but they didn't take any action. This encounter left me shaken, as I believe that being in a leadership position doesn't give anyone the right to treat others poorly. While I acknowledged my mistake in being late, I felt there were more respectful ways to address the issue. I struggled to move past the situation, and although I continued relieving, my heart wasn't in it. I decided to search for a job closer to home and found a centre in the CBD. An acquaintance who worked there recommended it, saying the environment was great, so I applied after this incident.

I called to inquire about any reliever vacancies and was quickly accepted to join Child Care Centre as a reliever. From the start, I was met with a supportive and caring environment, led by a centre director and supervisor whose leadership is both visionary and charismatic. I have learned a great deal from the teachers in the classroom, and the best part of working at Child Care Centre has been the constant opportunity to gain new experiences and knowledge.

Before coming here, I already had a deep respect for New Zealanders, especially after witnessing their compassionate response to the Christchurch Mosque shooting. The way the community protected and supported those in fear, along with Jacinda Ardern's empathetic leadership, left a lasting impression on me. This positive image has only been reinforced through my experience at Child Care Centre.

The staff at Child Care Centre have always respected my decision to wear a scarf, understanding that it's something I cannot remove. They appreciated my work and encouraged me to keep learning and striving for excellence, which has motivated me to continuously improve.

4.2.9 Reflection 9: Celebrating Milestones and Building Memories

The Centre Manager was incredibly supportive, allowing me to work full-time during the official holidays, which made me feel engaged and happy, a feeling I hadn't experienced in a long time due to the anxiety, depression, and loneliness I had been going through. Having my children with me brought some comfort, though I missed my husband. He is working overseas because he couldn't find a job here at the time and had to return to fulfill his job contract. He also has responsibilities not only towards us but also towards his sister in Sri Lanka. Despite the challenges of working full-time, taking care of the children, and navigating shopping trips by bus, the supportive environment at ECE centre gave me a sense of love and care. Every country has its ups and downs, but in my experience, I have met some of the most amazing people in New Zealand.

As the holiday period came to an end in December, my children and I were excited to experience awaited the event. The crowd was vibrant, and the presence of New Zealand's police and fire brigade ensured a strong sense of safety. Watching the fireworks in one of the world's first countries to ring in the New Year 2024 was an unforgettable experience. While the children missed their dad, we felt incredibly blessed to be in New Zealand, sharing this special moment together.
As the months passed, my second semester began, and I had to start early due to the number of classes required. My lecturer, who was also the head of the Education Department, made a lasting impression on me. I was excited, especially since there were only four of us in the class, which was held in South Campus. Every lesson and piece of knowledge I gained from her was unforgettable. Her teaching style helped me retain the material, and her support was invaluable. The activities she designed made learning easier and more enjoyable. I can confidently say that if I had not attended that module, I wouldn't have met my ideal dissertation supervisor. She was so in tune with her students' needs that she helped connect me with a supervisor perfectly suited to my research topic.

In February, I returned to working 20 hours per week. Out of the blue, a Sri Lankan friend of mine called to tell me about a job opening for a teacher aide that she had seen advertised in a Facebook group. However, she informed me that the assistant principal was the one responsible for the hiring, so I contacted them and arranged an interview. The biggest challenge was the distance my train

was delayed, and I wasn't familiar with the area. I ended up arriving an hour late, but despite the delay, the Assistant Principal conducted my interview without hesitation. He was professional, but at the same time, kind and understanding. Instead of making any negative comments, he expressed his apologies upon learning that I had travelled all the way from the Central Business District. His considerate approach made me feel more at ease, and I appreciated his empathy during such a stressful moment. He asked the required questions and mentioned that without registration, he wouldn't be able to offer the job. I requested the opportunity to volunteer and applied for police vetting, as that was a requirement for the role.

After returning home and reflecting on the long travel time, my husband expressed his concerns about the distance, suggesting that I not take the job. His worries weighed heavily on me, but what followed was an even deeper sense of frustration. I had gone through the interview process, and despite all my years of experience, I was unable to even secure a position as a teacher aide. It felt as though everything I had worked for had been disregarded.

I have spent years building my career, starting as a teacher assistant while completing my bachelor's degree, and then pursuing all the necessary qualifications, followed by validating my teaching credentials to obtain teacher registration in Saudi Arabia. Over the course of nearly 14 years, I dedicated myself to continuous learning through professional development, always striving to be the best teacher I could be. Yet, in New Zealand, it feels as though all of that experience has been rendered meaningless simply because I don't have local teacher registration. The fact that I'm now expected to volunteer just to showcase my potential is disheartening, as it seems to erase everything, I have worked so hard for.

As I reflect on my journey in New Zealand, I am reminded of the Māori proverb:

"Whāia te iti kahurangi, ki te tūohu koe, me he maunga teitei."

"Pursue that which is precious, and do not be deterred by anything less than a lofty mountain."

(Woodward Education, 2024)

This proverb encourages one to strive for their highest goals and not to be disheartened by obstacles. It aligns with your determination to continue pursuing your passion for teaching and making a difference, despite the hurdles you've faced.

One of the most difficult things for me has been the interview process. The questions seem to be based on abstract concepts and irrelevant proof, rather than reflecting the real-life skills and experiences that make a teacher effective. From my perspective, a teacher's true ability is demonstrated through their work in the classroom, how they engage with students, how they create an environment for learning, and how they adapt to challenges. Yet, here, it feels as though my years of hands-on experience and the growth I have achieved as a teacher are overlooked in favour of passing on a set of interview questions that don't truly assess teaching capabilities.

I also started to realize the biases that exist within the community here. It became clear to me that, in some cases, certain people from particular nationalities or backgrounds are given more opportunities, while others are left to prove themselves again and again. This subtle exclusion can be discouraging and hurtful, especially when you are trying your best to fit in and contribute, yet still feel like an outsider.

It is hard not to feel disillusioned when you have worked so hard, yet your past experiences are ignored and the doors you hoped to open seem locked. But I also know that I am more than just my qualifications. I am a dedicated teacher who is passionate about helping students grow, and I trust that eventually, my efforts will be recognized. Despite the challenges, I will continue to move forward, knowing that true teaching is about the impact you make in the classroom, not the labels or questions that are placed on you.

4.2.10 Reflection 10: Gratitude and Resilience

The job hunt had me feeling exhausted, and with my husband's advice, I decided to put my dream of becoming a teacher aide on hold. Instead, I planned to stick with relieving at the childcare centre. It felt like the right choice, especially with fasting month approaching and assignments piling up. I needed to maintain my grades, at least B+ or B, to get enrolled for the dissertation in the final semester. Fasting was already going to be a challenge. I was used to shorter work hours back home, which gave me more time for religious activities during this sacred month.

At the beginning of the year, I faced a task I had never encountered before renewing my daughter's passport. It was a challenging process, but I was determined to get it done. The first step was to find a notary who could help me in Auckland's CBD library. Fortunately, I learned that I did not need to make an appointment; I simply needed to have my husband's signature on the required paperwork, which had been sent from Saudi Arabia via DHL.

Once the signature was in hand, the next hurdle was sending the documents to the Sri Lankan embassy in Australia. I was frustrated to learn that there was not an embassy in New Zealand, which meant I had to rely on DHL. I travelled all the way to the post office by train, but when I arrived, I was informed that I needed to show a valid ID, my passport. I had not been aware of this requirement. Realizing there was no time to waste, I rushed back home, retrieved my passport, and returned to the post office to finally complete the task. It was a long and tiring process, but I was relieved to have everything sent off and my daughter's passport renewal on its way.

March, though, was an unforgettable month before fasting began. My youngest sister from Australia visited, and we made the most of every moment together. We took the ferry from Auckland Downtown Ferry Terminal to Devonport, had a lovely lunch out, and had a blast at the Auckland adventure park luge. Then, to top it all off, my husband surprised me with a visit just before Eid. The joy I felt was indescribable.

At the same time, my second module was in full swing, and that's when I met some of my true friends. One was a New Zealander with roots in Fiji, and the other was an international student

from Sri Lanka. Both of them were in their first year of the master's programme, I was in second semester. Every class felt like an adventure, filled with fun and laughter. The bond we shared was more than words could express. Our lecturer, who taught us about education and curriculum analysis, brought a fresh perspective, and the subject itself was so engaging that it only made our connection stronger.

Looking back, March was a whirlwind of happiness, filled with cherished moments of family, friendship, and personal growth. Two days before Eid Ul-Fitr, my friend, who had previously informed me about a job opportunity, gave birth to her fourth child. My husband was around at that time, and he went to visit her. During the visit, she introduced me to her friend, who had just arrived in New Zealand from Sri Lanka. She asked if I could help her with her job hunt, and although we tried many options, she struggled to land a job due to her visa restrictions.
Wanting to support her, I shared my experience and guided her the way I knew best: volunteering at schools. This was the same place where I had been interviewed, and I felt a deep sense of responsibility to help, as I remembered how difficult it had been for me when I was in a similar situation. I did my best to support her, feeling it was an obligation to assist someone in need, just as I had once been helped.

Celebrating Eid in New Zealand was a completely new experience for me, one that I will always cherish. The atmosphere at Eden Park was unlike any Eid celebration I had ever known. People from different nationalities came together, sharing the joy of the occasion, and the whole place buzzed with excitement. Food stalls lined the area, offering an array of international flavours, and there was even a stall supporting Palestine, reminding us of all the importance of solidarity and compassion.

For the children, it was a day of pure delight. They raced down a giant inflatable slide, enjoyed free rides, and had the chance to take pictures with the New Zealand police, making the day feel like a special adventure. The stage show was filled with performances that brought laughter and joy to the crowd, especially the little ones.

Back home, before I came to New Zealand, Eid was a time for family, prayers, special home-cooked meals, and visits to friends. The familiar warmth of those traditions always filled the air. While celebrating in New Zealand was a different experience, it still carried the same spirit of togetherness and celebration. As I prayed and enjoyed the home-cooked dishes, I was reminded that, no matter where we are, the essence of Eid is about connecting with loved ones, near or far. After Eid, my husband flew back to Middles East , leaving me with mixed emotions. While the joy of the celebration lingered, his absence reminded me of how much I missed him. Though I kept busy with new routines, I couldn't help but long for his presence, eagerly looking forward to our next reunion.

In the midst of this, we celebrated my son's birthday, and he requested a visit to the museum since he loves dinosaurs and historical exhibits. It turned out to be an amazing experience, one of the best museums we had ever seen. We explored the entire place with so much excitement and awe. A few weeks later, my friend and her family, along with her Sri Lankan friend and her family, planned a trip to the SEA LIFE Kelly Tarlton's Aquarium. We were all amazed by the penguins' discipline and the sharks, which felt so surreal. It was an unforgettable day spent in wonder at the beauty of the ocean's creatures.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

The discussion chapter reflects on the emotional, cultural, and academic challenges of navigating life as an international student in Aotearoa New Zealand. Grounded in personal experiences and supported by theoretical frameworks such as Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Berry's Acculturation Theory, it explores themes of isolation, resilience, and identity negotiation. The chapter highlights how social and institutional support systems, cultural integration, and moments of personal growth shaped the journey. By weaving personal reflections with academic insights, this discussion aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities and transformative nature of the international student experience.

5.1 Navigating Isolation: Emotional and Psychological Dynamics

Moving to New Zealand as an international student brought significant emotional and psychological challenges. The initial feelings of separation from my family mirrored Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969), which highlights the anxiety and distress caused by the disruption of close familial bonds. Migrating alone, especially from a close-knit and culturally rooted background, intensified my sense of loneliness and emotional dislocation, a phenomenon often referred to as "cultural mourning" (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984). These emotions reflected what the literature describes as an emotional cycle involving disbelief, nostalgia, and gradual adaptation. Van Ecke's (2005) exploration of identity conflicts resonates with my experience, as I struggled to reconcile my pre-existing cultural identity with the norms of New Zealand society. This tension, longing for the warmth of my family while simultaneously trying to embrace a new cultural landscape, was a constant presence. Resilience, as emphasized by Lewthwaite (1996), became a critical tool in overcoming isolation and fostering emotional growth during this transition. The emotional strain of being uprooted from familiar surroundings is consistent with Grinberg and Grinberg's (1984) findings that migrants often alternate between periods of adaptation and moments of nostalgia and grief.

5.2 Support Systems and Adaptation

Social and institutional support systems were pivotal in helping me navigate my new environment. Relatives guided me through basic logistics, while institutional resources such as AUT's Student Hub and library workshops provided academic support. Meeting a Pakistani acquaintance who introduced me to halal food and cultural specifics not only catered to my religious needs but also provided a sense of belonging. This aligns with Ward and Masgoret's (2004) findings on the importance of initial connections in alleviating isolation.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978) highlights the role of interaction in overcoming barriers. Collaborative learning environments at AUT enabled me to achieve higher levels of understanding through peer and faculty support, illustrating the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Engaging with local communities through cultural events, mosques, and shared activities further provided emotional resilience. Bhugra and Becker's (2005) concept of surrogate family networks underscores the importance of such relationships in fostering stability and encouraging integration.

5.3 Navigating Cultural and Environmental Transitions in a Non-Muslim Society

The transition from Saudi Arabia's arid deserts to New Zealand's lush greenery symbolized a broader journey of cultural and environmental adaptation. This shift brought both challenges and opportunities, shaping my personal growth. Raphaela Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2023) narrative on meaning-making environmental transitions felt particularly relevant as I began to view my new surroundings not as obstacles but as opportunities for growth. The incorporation of Māori proverbs, like the pikorua, into my reflections helped me embrace Berry's Acculturation Theory (2005), which emphasizes balancing heritage with the norms of a host culture.

Adapting to a predominantly non-Muslim society was one of the most defining aspects of this journey. Before arriving, I was uncertain how I would maintain my identity and practices while integrating into a vastly different cultural environment. Practical difficulties, such as accessing halal food and finding culturally suitable housing, highlighted the challenges described in Berry's (2005) theory, which identifies the stress migrants face in navigating the dual pressures of preserving cultural identity and embracing integration.

These initial concerns began to ease as I engaged with the inclusiveness embedded within New Zealand society, particularly at AUT. Practices like beginning introductions with Māori greetings and embracing manaakitanga (hospitality) resonated deeply with my own values, providing a framework of cultural respect. Ward and Masgoret's (2004) emphasis on the role of societal and institutional support in fostering a sense of belonging for migrants aligns with this experience. Such inclusive environments not only alleviated cultural stress but also created opportunities for meaningful engagement.

One transformative aspect was the curiosity and respect shown by peers and faculty toward my faith. Their thoughtful questions and genuine interest reflected the cultural integration process described in Berry's (2017) framework, where individuals maintain their heritage while actively participating in the host society. This helped me realize that my identity as a Muslim woman could coexist harmoniously within a multicultural context.

Navigating dietary preferences and religious practices, such as finding halal food, remained challenging. However, discovering local resources and adapting strategies over time made these adjustments more manageable. Wan and Awang's (2009) discussion on culturally sensitive accommodations and Separa's (2024) concept of cultural frame switching resonates with these experiences, highlighting the dynamic and transformative process of adapting behaviors to situational demands.

Ultimately, this journey taught me that strong social networks and community support are critical in easing cultural adaptation. As Bhugra and Becker (2005) argue, such support systems play a significant role in helping individuals navigate and thrive in new environments. This process was not only challenging but also deeply enriching, fostering both personal and cultural growth.

5.4 Overcoming Academic Challenges

Transitioning to a new educational system involved unfamiliar teaching methods, language barriers, and high expectations. These struggles echoed Smith and Khawaja's (2011) findings on the pressures faced by international students. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) illuminated my intrinsic motivation to excel despite these challenges. Meeting the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness sustained my motivation.

AUT's workshops on referencing, library searches, and assignment structuring bridged gaps between my academic background and new expectations. While language barriers initially posed difficulties, institutional support tailored to international students gradually eased these, enabling academic success. This experience reinforced the importance of resilience in adapting to academic challenges.

5.5 Identity and Growth

Negotiating my identity amidst dual cultural influences was an ongoing process. Simonis' (2012) concept of cultural hybridity captures this journey, where I integrated elements from both cultures to create a hybrid identity. Incorporating Māori values into my reflections exemplified this integration, while Berry's (2017) concept of acculturative stress highlighted the challenges of balancing cultural preservation with assimilation.

Using Māori proverbs as a source of strength deepened my connection to New Zealand's cultural heritage while enriching my personal growth narrative. Writing about my experiences allowed me to make sense of cultural tensions and recognize moments of growth, aligning with Ellis' (2011) emphasis on autoethnography as a tool for understanding individual and cultural identities.

5.6 Navigating Identity through Multicultural Engagement

Moving to New Zealand not only brought academic and professional challenges but also opened the door to exploring multicultural dynamics. The cultural diversity encountered in this country allowed me to engage with communities from different ethnic backgrounds, reshaping my understanding of identity and belonging.

Māori traditions and their emphasis on community, as embodied in values like manaakitanga (hospitality) and whanaungatanga (relationships), became particularly significant in my journey. These values underscored the importance of forming connections, not only within my immediate circle but also with the broader community. Participating in pōwhiri (welcome ceremonies) and learning simple phrases in te reo Māori deepened my respect for Aotearoa's cultural heritage. Berry's Acculturation Theory (2005) aptly frames this process of balancing cultural integration with maintaining one's heritage identity. Engaging with peers from various cultural backgrounds at AUT further enriched this experience. Group discussions and collaborative projects fostered a sense of mutual respect and understanding. Drawing from Bhugra and Becker's (2005) insights on the psychological benefits of surrogate family networks, these interactions provided emotional scaffolding that alleviated the isolation of living away from my family.

The multicultural environment also presented opportunities to reflect on and celebrate my own cultural identity. Sharing aspects of Saudi Arabian and Sri Lankan traditions with others not only strengthened my sense of self but also fostered a spirit of cultural exchange. This aligns with Simonis' (2012) concept of cultural hybridity, illustrating how my identity evolved to incorporate both my native and adopted cultural influences.

Through these engagements, I began to perceive identity not as a fixed construct but as a dynamic interplay between cultural roots and new experiences. The Pikorua, with its intertwined spirals, symbolizes this journey, a constant negotiation of connection and growth. This evolving understanding of identity has not only shaped my personal development but also enhanced my ability to navigate the challenges of migration with greater resilience and adaptability.

5.7 Building Resilience Through Community Connections

Resilience emerged as a recurring theme throughout my journey, underscored by the importance of building connections within diverse communities. As Ann et al. (2014) suggest, social networks act as a buffer against the psychological strains of cultural adjustment. This was evident in my participation in local cultural events and mosque activities, where I found solace and solidarity.

The act of forging new friendships and maintaining old ones fostered emotional stability. Conversations with peers who had faced similar challenges reinforced my belief in the shared human experience of migration. For instance, casual discussions with classmates from various countries and other international students offered valuable insights into their coping mechanisms, helping me refine my strategies for adaptation. Observing how others balanced cultural diversity with daily routines provided valuable insights into navigating challenges. These perspectives offered inspiration and practical approaches for adaptation without being confined to a singular viewpoint.

Furthermore, my interactions with the academic community highlighted how university resources and support systems played a key role in helping international students adjust and succeed. The personalized guidance from faculty members at AUT not only facilitated academic success but also boosted my confidence in navigating the complexities of the new educational landscape.

These moments underscored Vygotsky's assertion that collaborative environments stimulate intellectual growth, further affirming the necessity of community-based resilience.

5.8 Exploring New Cultural Narratives Through Food and Traditions

Food and cultural practices became gateways to understanding and integrating into New Zealand society. My initial struggles with finding halal food led me to uncover vibrant multicultural hubs such as Sandringham, a neighbourhood that introduced me to diverse cuisines and a welcoming community. Engaging in shared meals and culinary exchanges with friends from various backgrounds provided not only physical sustenance but also a means of cultural dialogue.

Moreover, participating in cultural festivals like Diwali and Lunar New Year offered rich, immersive experiences. These events became opportunities to appreciate the shared values of hospitality and celebration while broadening my perspectives. Such engagements mirrored the dynamic intercultural exchanges described in Cultural Frame Switching Theory (Separa, 2024), illustrating how migrants adapt by fluidly navigating multiple cultural paradigms.

These interactions reaffirmed the significance of embracing diversity as a path toward personal growth. They also emphasized the universal language of food and tradition in bridging gaps and fostering mutual respect, enabling me to see my migration journey as a contribution to a broader, interconnected world.

5.9 Reimagining Success Through Adaptation and Growth

Reflecting on my journey, I realize that my idea of success has transformed. In Saudi Arabia, success meant achieving specific academic and career goals. However, in New Zealand, it became about being adaptable and learning to thrive amid uncertainty. This shift reflects the broader findings of Brown and Brown (2012), who describe migration as a transformative process that redefines personal values and aspirations.

In facing challenges, whether academic or cultural, I found hidden strengths in resilience and creativity. I began to view obstacles not as impossible hurdles but as chances to learn and grow. Each small victory, whether mastering referencing skills, navigating an unfamiliar public transport system, or understanding local customs, became a clear demonstration of my adaptability. These successes showcased my ability to confront difficulties directly, learn valuable lessons, and ultimately thrive even in complex and unfamiliar circumstances.

Ultimately, this journey has reinforced the importance of viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and growth, encouraging me to reframe my narrative not as one of struggle, but as one of triumph and self-discovery.

Chapter 6 – Limitations, Implication and Recommendations

6.1 Limitations

Reflecting on my journey of exploring personal experiences through autoethnography, I encountered both meaningful insights and notable limitations. This section organizes the challenges and weaknesses of my research under three main themes for clarity: methodological issues, contextual barriers, and broader implications.

6.1.1 Methodological Issues: Strengths and Weaknesses of Autoethnography

One significant limitation of autoethnography is its reliance on subjective storytelling. My narrative as a Muslim woman from Saudi Arabia with a Sri Lankan background offered a unique perspective, but it lacked external validation. Without supplementary methods, such as interviews or surveys, my findings remain deeply personal and are not easily transferable to a broader audience. While this subjectivity enriched the depth of the study, it inevitably restricted its generalizability.

Another challenge was the emotional engagement required. Writing about topics such as homesickness, isolation, and cultural adjustment often influenced my interpretation of events. While these emotions provided authenticity to the research, they sometimes disrupted the balance between critical analysis and personal reflection. This limitation required conscious effort to maintain objectivity and ensure the study's integrity.

The absence of a comparative framework also limited the study. Autoethnography is highly individualistic, and the lack of perspectives from other international students or stakeholders meant that broader patterns or shared experiences could not be systematically identified. Adding such elements could have enriched the study by situating personal narratives within a larger context, offering a clearer understanding of shared challenges.

6.1.2 Contextual Barriers: Cultural, Practical, and Social Challenges

Adjusting to life in a predominantly non-Muslim society brought specific contextual challenges. For instance, navigating cultural differences in dietary norms, social practices, and group interactions required significant effort. These adjustments provided valuable insights into cultural adaptation but may not fully align with the experiences of international students from other backgrounds.

Practical hurdles compounded these challenges. Securing accommodations consistent with my cultural and religious values proved particularly difficult. This experience, though personal, reflects a larger systemic issue of insufficient support for diverse cultural needs in student housing. Similarly, adapting to New Zealand's academic expectations, such as unfamiliar group work dynamics and referencing styles, highlighted gaps in institutional orientation programmes. These issues suggest broader improvements needed in educational frameworks to better support international students.

Additionally, the limited opportunities to engage with multicultural communities in some parts of New Zealand presented challenges in building a sense of belonging. This lack of cultural representation and understanding amplified feelings of isolation, particularly in academic and professional settings. These barriers reveal how systemic gaps can affect the social and emotional well-being of international students.

6.2 Implications

6.2.1 Broader Implications: Systemic Influence on International Student Experiences

This study sheds light on the profound impact of systemic structures on the lived experiences of international students. It reveals how institutional policies, resource allocation, and academic expectations shape both opportunities and challenges for students adapting to a new environment. For example, access to culturally tailored resources and inclusive academic practices was essential in supporting my adaptation but also exposed significant areas requiring institutional improvement.

The findings further illustrate that challenges faced by international students, such as navigating housing options or adjusting to unfamiliar academic practices, are not isolated incidents but reflections of broader systemic shortcomings. These systemic factors, including the lack of robust cultural support and insufficiently structured orientation programmes, significantly influence student outcomes and integration.

By focusing on the interplay between individual struggles and institutional frameworks, this research highlights the need for academic systems to adapt more effectively to the diverse needs of international students. Autoethnography proved instrumental in capturing these nuances, offering deep insights into how systemic challenges intersect with personal journeys. However, the inclusion of additional methodologies, such as interviews, surveys, or longitudinal studies, could provide a broader perspective by linking individual experiences to larger systemic trends. A mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative depth with the wide-ranging scope of quantitative data insights with the breadth of quantitative data, would allow for a more holistic understanding. This is because quantitative data, such as surveys or statistical analysis, can provide generalizable patterns across larger populations, while qualitative insights capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences. Together, these methods complement each other, offering a richer and more actionable understanding of the challenges and systemic barriers faced by international students.

6.3 Future Research Recommendations

The study "Finding My Place: An Autoethnographic Exploration of My Experiences as an International Student in Aotearoa, New Zealand" provides an in-depth and personal account of navigating the complexities of migration and adaptation. While it offers valuable reflections, it also opens up opportunities for further research to deepen understanding and enhance the support systems available to international students.

6.3.1 Identity and Belonging

The relationship between culture, gender, and religious identities significantly shapes the experiences of international students. Future research should focus on how overlapping identities affect students' adjustment and integration into new cultural environments. For instance, Muslim women often navigate unique challenges in predominantly non-Muslim societies, balancing their faith with societal expectations. Investigating these dynamics can help create targeted programmes that respect and support diverse identities.

A valuable area to explore is how students blend aspects of their original and host cultures, often called cultural hybridity. Understanding this process over time can provide insights into how students develop their sense of identity, belonging, and resilience. Research using storytelling or creative methods, such as narrative approaches or other creative research methods, could offer a detailed and personal perspective on their experiences, adding depth to what conventional methods might uncover.

6.3.2 Institutional Support and Inclusivity

Educational institutions are essential in significantly influencing the experiences of international students. They can create supportive environments that foster learning, cultural exchange, and personal growth. While initiatives such as orientation programmes and mental health services are invaluable, further investigation into how these services can be optimized is needed. Comparative studies across institutions could identify best practices for supporting diverse student populations.

Cultural and religious practices often serve as anchors for international students. Research could explore how providing access to halal food, prayer spaces, or celebrating cultural festivals impacts students' sense of inclusion and well-being. Furthermore, integrating Indigenous knowledge, such as incorporating Māori values in New Zealand it could offer valuable lessons for creating inclusive and respectful environments in other contexts. Examining the intersections of Indigenous and migrant experiences may also reveal ways to foster greater cultural understanding and stronger community connections.

6.3.3 Post – Ethnography: Expanding Research Horizons

Post-ethnography expands traditional research methods and offers an innovative way to study the experiences of international students. It emphasizes using diverse data sources, such as textual narratives, visual elements, and participant collaboration, to create a well-rounded understanding of cultural adaptation. Techniques such as detailed narrative documentation can highlight how students adjust to new environments, while collaborative methods ensure that participants' perspectives are actively represented in the research.

This approach can also incorporate sensory-based analysis to explore emotional and physical responses to unfamiliar settings, offering unique insights into the migration journey. By integrating these methods into a broader research framework, post-ethnography bridges the gap between traditional methodologies and the dynamic realities faced by international students. Additionally, it provides a way to examine systemic influences, such as institutional policies and cultural frameworks, on student experiences. These insights can inform targeted interventions and policies for diverse student populations. Future studies could also investigate the broader systemic factors influencing student experiences, such as global migration policies and local institutional practices. A multisite post-ethnographic approach could provide a comprehensive perspective on how students navigate interconnected cultural, academic, and professional landscapes. These insights would not only enrich theoretical understanding but also inform practical interventions and policymaking to better address the challenges faced by international students.

Conclusions

This dissertation has offered an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of an international student from Saudi Arabia, with a Sri Lankan background, pursuing a Master of Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Employing an autoethnographic approach, the research critically analysed the personal and cultural dimensions of migration, adaptation, and professional growth, providing a holistic narrative enriched by theoretical frameworks and reflective storytelling.

The dissertation is organized around four interconnected phases and ten reflections that capture the transformative journey in a structured manner. The four phases, The Decision to Migrate and Initial Preparations, Navigating a New Environment, Building Connections and Overcoming Challenges, and Embracing Growth and Future Aspirations frame the research, with each phase highlighting key aspects of the migration experience. Within these phases, ten reflections provide detailed insights into topics such as selecting New Zealand, overcoming visa challenges, adapting to new cultural norms, building independence, creating meaningful connections, reuniting with family, celebrating milestones, and developing resilience.

The journey begins with the decision to migrate, influenced by personal aspirations and familial considerations. This initial phase highlighted the interplay between individual ambition and systemic challenges, such as navigating visa processes and adapting to new societal norms. The complexities of this transition were compounded by cultural differences and the emotional strain of separation from family, underscoring the resilience required to persevere in an unfamiliar environment.

A key focus of the narrative was finding a balance between the students' conservative upbringing and New Zealand's diverse and inclusive culture. This process involved both adapting to the new environment and learning more about themselves. Participating in Māori cultural practices, such as manaakitanga (hospitality and kindness), helped the student understand New Zealand's unique cultural foundation. It also highlighted how mutual respect and inclusiveness play a vital role in creating a sense of belonging.

Academically, the narrative emphasized the transformative potential of education as a pathway for personal and professional growth. The structured support systems provided by Auckland

University of Technology including workshops, mentorship, and pastoral care played a pivotal role in bridging cultural and academic gaps. These resources enabled the student to navigate academic challenges, align their aspirations with the programme's offerings, and develop the skills necessary for leadership in education.

The dissertation also sheds light on systemic barriers that persist for international students, including financial pressures, housing challenges, and workplace inequities. These obstacles underscore the need for more inclusive policies and institutional reforms to ensure equitable opportunities for all. The narrative draws attention to the importance of creating culturally sensitive support systems that address the unique needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

In reflecting on the broader implications, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the international student experience. It highlights the emotional, cultural, and academic dimensions of migration, offering insights into the resilience and adaptability required to thrive in a new environment. The findings call for educators, policymakers, and institutions to recognize the critical role of cultural exchange and institutional support in shaping the success of international students.

Ultimately, this dissertation serves as both a personal testament and a scholarly contribution. It celebrates the courage required to step into the unknown, the strength to overcome challenges, and the transformative impact of education. By sharing this journey, the research not only enriches academic discourse but also inspires others to embrace the possibilities of growth and connection in the globalized world.

`This journey has been one of resilience, growth, and unwavering determination. Each challenge faced has shaped not only my professional path but also my personal identity. To my family, who have been my foundation, and to all who dare to step into the unknown in pursuit of their dreams, this is for you.

"Mā te huruhuru ka rere te manu."
(Adorn the bird with feathers so it can fly.)

(J, 2019)

Let this remind us that with the right support and preparation, we can rise above challenges and achieve greatness`.

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