



**Exploring the Lived Experiences of South African
Students in International Student Mobility Programmes: A
Phenomenological Study**

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
School of Education**

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Declaration

I, Normah Happy Zondo, declare that:

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Abstract

This study offers a phenomenologically grounded account of South African students' lived experiences of international student mobility (ISM), foregrounding the voices of ten first-generation students from two South African universities. Situated within the enduring inequalities of South Africa's higher education landscape and the asymmetries that structure global internationalisation, the research examines student mobility to institutions in the Global North. The data were generated in the post-COVID-19 period, a context that heightened institutional uncertainty, intensified resource constraints, and reshaped imaginaries of global participation.

Conceptually, the study draws on phenomenological, sociological, and interpretive theoretical traditions to frame mobility as an embodied, relational, and structurally mediated experience. Phenomenology provides the ontological and methodological grounding for attending to lifeworld, intentionality, and intersubjectivity, positioning lived experience as the primary site of meaning. Sociological perspectives illuminate the structuring effects of habitus, capital, and global stratification, while interpretive and affective frameworks foreground relationality, emotion, and the circulation of power within transnational spaces. An explicitly intersectional and decolonial orientation challenges celebratory and technocratic accounts of internationalisation, interrogating instead the epistemic hierarchies and

structural constraints that shape who moves, under what conditions, and toward which futures.

Methodologically, the study is based on in-depth narrative interviews analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach enabled a detailed exploration of participants' sense-making across the full arc of mobility, from pre-departure processes and expectations, through academic and social encounters abroad, to post-return reintegration.

The findings reveal that mobility is neither a linear pathway to global competence nor a uniformly transformative experience. Instead, it unfolds as a complex negotiation shaped by aspiration, constraint, and agency. Participants described opaque selection procedures, uneven funding structures, and perceptions of institutional gatekeeping during the pre-departure phase. While abroad, they navigated unfamiliar pedagogical cultures, racialised and classed positioning, and the emotional labour of adaptation within Global North institutions. Upon return, many encountered limited institutional recognition of their expanded knowledge and shifting identities, producing tensions between personal transformation and institutional inertia. Across these phases, students' lifeworlds, shaped by rurality, race, gender, and first-generation status, travelled with them, mediating both opportunity and exclusion.

Based on these findings, the study argues for a reorientation of internationalisation agendas towards equity-driven, ethically attentive, and epistemically inclusive practice. It calls for greater transparency in selection processes, more context-responsive funding models, structured reintegration mechanisms, and sustained institutional reflexivity regarding partnerships and knowledge hierarchies between the Global South and Global North. By centring historically marginalised voices and adopting a decolonial phenomenological lens, the study reimagines ISM as a justice-oriented, relational endeavour. In doing so, it advances a forward-looking account of what it means to be mobile in an unequal and post-pandemic world, and of the responsibilities borne by universities in shaping mobility that is not only accessible, but meaningful and transformative.

Glossary of Key Terms (Thematic)

Given the conceptual density of the theoretical landscape, a glossary of key terms grounded in seminal scholarship (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Bourdieu, 1986; Husserl, 1970; Quijano, 2000; Ahmed, 2004; Mignolo, 2011) is provided to support readers' navigation of the study's intersecting phenomenological, sociological, and decolonial frameworks.

International Student Mobility (ISM)

Cross-border educational experiences such as study abroad, exchanges, or internships that shape student learning, identity formation, and transnational networks (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Knight, 2004).

Internationalisation (of Higher Education)

The integration of international, intercultural, and global dimensions into higher education systems and institutional missions; in this study, re-envisioned as a justice-oriented and decolonial practice (Knight, 2004; de Wit et al., 2015).

South African Higher Education

A national higher education landscape shaped by apartheid legacies, structural inequality, and ongoing transformation efforts within a globalised knowledge economy (Badat, 2010; Jansen, 2009).

Study Abroad Experiences

Short- or long-term educational mobility programmes that intersect with identity formation, belonging, and structural inequality (King, Findlay, & Ahrens, 2010).

First-Generation Students

Students who are the first in their families to enter university, often navigating higher education and mobility without inherited academic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Stephens et al., 2012).

Historically Disadvantaged / Previously Disadvantaged Students

A South African policy and social category referring to individuals and communities structurally excluded under apartheid, whose marginalisation continues to shape educational access (Badat, 2010).

Rurality and Mobility

The compounded structural inequalities and distinctive socio-spatial experiences of students from rural contexts in accessing higher education and mobility opportunities (Walker, 2012).

Theoretical and Philosophical Anchors

Phenomenology

A philosophical and methodological tradition concerned with describing and interpreting lived experience as it appears to consciousness (Husserl, 1970; Heidegger, 1962).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

A qualitative research methodology that explores how individuals make sense of lived experience through a double hermeneutic of participant meaning-making and researcher interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Lifeworld (Lebenswelt)

Husserl's concept referring to the pre-reflective, taken-for-granted world of lived experience that grounds all knowledge (Husserl, 1970).

Lived Experience

Subjective, embodied experience as directly encountered and interpreted by individuals within specific socio-historical contexts (Van Manen, 1990).

Intersubjectivity

The relational dimension of experience through which meaning is constituted between subjects (Stein, 1989; Schutz, 1967).

Intentionality

The phenomenological principle that consciousness is always directed toward something, structuring perception and meaning (Husserl, 1970).

Intersectionality

First articulated by Crenshaw in 1989 and further elaborated in her contemporary scholarship and public engagements, provides an analytic framework for examining how intersecting structures of race, gender, class, and other axes of power shape lived experience (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 2024).

Decoloniality / Decolonial Theory

A critical framework interrogating the enduring structures of colonial power in knowledge, institutions, and global hierarchies, advocating pluriversal futures (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011).

Decolonial Phenomenology

An approach that integrates phenomenological attention to lived experience with decolonial critiques of epistemic injustice and colonality (Al-Saji, 2014; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

White Epistemologies

Knowledge traditions that universalise Eurocentric perspectives while marginalising alternative ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2014).

World-Travelling

The movement across cultural and epistemic “worlds,” often involving misrecognition and creative negotiation (Lugones, 1987).

Methodological Reflexivity and Research Practices

Reflexivity

The critical examination of how the researcher's positionality shapes knowledge production and interpretation (Finlay, 2002).

Positionality

The researcher's situated identity and social location and its influence on research relationships and meaning-making (England, 1994).

Credibility

A qualitative criterion ensuring findings authentically represent participants' lived realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

The extent to which qualitative findings resonate meaningfully in contexts beyond the original study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

The overall integrity of qualitative research ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Interpretive Depth

The rigorous engagement with lived data while situating analysis within broader theoretical debates (Smith et al., 2009).

Institutional Reflexivity

The capacity of institutions to critically interrogate their practices, assumptions, and responsibilities within systems of inequality (Marginson, 2006).

Structural and Critical Dimensions

Coloniality of Power

The enduring global hierarchies of race, labour, and knowledge structured through colonial domination (Quijano, 2000).

Erasmus+

A European Union mobility programme facilitating international education partnerships and exchanges (European Commission, 2021).

Global Hierarchies

The stratified ordering of higher education shaped by unequal flows of power, prestige, and capital between the Global North and South (Marginson, 2006).

Unequal Mobility Regime

The stratified system of visas, funding structures, and recognition practices privileging certain students and regions (Shachar, 2009; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

Structural Inequality

Systemic inequities embedded in social and educational institutions that reproduce disadvantage across generations (Bourdieu, 1986).

Epistemic Exclusion

Processes through which marginalised knowledges and voices are rendered invisible or illegitimate (Fricker, 2007).

Epistemic Justice

Fairness in whose knowledge is recognised and legitimised within academic and institutional spaces (Fricker, 2007).

Cognitive Justice

The equitable recognition of diverse knowledge systems beyond Eurocentric dominance (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Politics of Voice

The struggle over whose perspectives are heard, authorised, and institutionalised (Spivak, 1988).

Politics of Belonging

The contested processes of inclusion, exclusion, and recognition within cultural and institutional contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Student Experience and Relational Dimensions

Cultural Adaptation

The ongoing process of adjusting to new cultural norms, practices, and expectations (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

Culture Shock

The stress and disorientation experienced when encountering unfamiliar cultural environments (Oberg, 1960).

Socio-Cultural Negotiation

The everyday practices of navigating between differing cultural codes and identities (Bhabha, 1994).

Identity Transformation

The reshaping of self-understanding through social and cultural encounters (Mezirow, 1991).

Identity Dissonance

Internal tension arising when inherited identities conflict with new contexts or expectations (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959).

Hybridity

The creation of new cultural meanings in the in-between space of transnational encounters (Bhabha, 1994).

Third Space

A conceptual zone of cultural translation where hybrid meanings are produced (Bhabha, 1994).

Belonging

The dynamic process of feeling recognised, valued, and "at home" within a community (Yuval-Davis, 2016).

Meaning-Making

The interpretive process through which individuals construct significance from experience (Bruner, 1990).

Hope and Resistance

Affective and political practices through which marginalised subjects reimagine futures despite structural constraint (Ahmed, 2004).

Resilience (Relational/Political)

Collective strategies of endurance and defiance against structural marginalisation (Ungar, 2011).

Community Cultural Wealth

Forms of aspirational, social, linguistic, and navigational capital embedded within marginalised communities (Yosso, 2005).

Diasporic Solidarity

Transnational networks of belonging and mutual support formed among migrants and mobile students (Clifford, 1994).

Narrative Imagination

The ethical capacity to enter and understand the experiences of others through storytelling (Nussbaum, 1997).

Agency of Becoming

The capacity to reconstruct identity and imagine alternative futures through lived experience (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Space Invader

The embodied experience of being marked as “out of place” within dominant institutional spaces (Puwar, 2004).

Emotional Geography

The interplay of place, affect, and identity in shaping lived spatial experience
(Ahmed, 2004).

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Chapter 1: Understanding the Context: Internationalisation, Mobility, and the Lived Experience

1.1 Introduction and Background

In the contemporary higher education landscape, internationalisation has become a strategic imperative, driven by the imperatives of globalisation, cross-border collaboration, and the accelerating circulation of knowledge (de Wit, 2011). Institutions across the globe are increasingly called upon to reimagine their roles within this transnational terrain, prompting shifts in how they approach teaching, research, and academic engagement. Within this dynamic and often uneven global order, internationalisation is conceptualised not only as an institutional strategy but as a transformative process, one that embeds international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the fabric of university life (de Wit, 2019; Knight, 2003).

Far from being a neutral or purely technical exercise, internationalisation speaks to deeper questions of access, equity, and epistemic legitimacy. Scholars such as de Wit (2020) have warned against reducing internationalisation to a quest for institutional prestige or economic returns; rather, its true potential lies in fostering meaningful intercultural understanding, expanding students' horizons, and redressing historical exclusions. This calls for an approach that is both global in aspiration and local in relevance,

responsive to the lived realities of students, especially in contexts marked by historical marginalisation.

This study adopts an interpretive phenomenological stance grounded primarily in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, while drawing on Husserlian concepts such as lifeworld and intentionality. This integrative orientation positions lived experience not as description alone but as interpretive, contextually mediated meaning-making.

One of the most visible and effectively charged expressions of internationalisation is international student mobility (ISM), which enables students to engage with alternative academic cultures, navigate diverse social contexts, and cultivate globally resonant competencies (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Framed as a potentially transformative learning experience, ISM is often linked to enhanced adaptability, intercultural competence, and intellectual development (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). However, access to these benefits is far from universal. Participation in mobility programmes is profoundly shaped by structural constraints such as financial limitations, policy frameworks, and institutional gatekeeping (Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020).

Despite the widespread enthusiasm surrounding internationalisation, much of the existing scholarship continues to privilege macro-level analyses, focusing on institutional strategy, rankings, or geopolitical trends (Altbach & Knight,

2007; de Wit, 2019). While such perspectives offer critical insights into the architecture of international higher education, they often eclipse the nuanced, everyday realities of students who traverse these global pathways. Leask (2015) calls for a reorientation towards student-centred approaches, foregrounding the voices of those who experience internationalisation not as an abstract policy ideal, but as a lived and often fraught journey.

The South African higher education context offers a compelling site for this reorientation. Shaped by a history of apartheid-induced isolation and post-1994 transformation, South Africa's engagement with internationalisation is uniquely positioned within the global South. Following decades of academic marginalisation, the post-apartheid era ushered in a policy shift aimed at reintegrating the national system into global knowledge flows, with internationalisation positioned as a tool for redress and transformation (DHET, 2019; Jowi et al., 2013). Yet, as Marginson and Sawir (2011) caution, an overemphasis on outward mobility and institutional branding risks reproducing the very exclusions that internationalisation seeks to undo.

While many South African universities now actively promote mobility programmes, the voices of the students who participate in these initiatives remain underrepresented (Smith et al., 2009). Much of the discourse continues to focus on institutional planning and performance indicators, with limited attention to how students encounter, interpret, and are transformed by

mobility (van Manen, 1997). This study seeks to address this omission by anchoring internationalisation in lived experience. It foregrounds students' narratives, revealing how they navigate complex terrain marked by visa delays, funding gaps, cultural displacement, and uneven academic support (Leibowitz, 2017; Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020).

In doing so, the study locates itself at the intersection of phenomenological inquiry and global higher education policy, bringing into dialogue the structural and the subjective. It probes the affective and intellectual labour of crossing borders, not only geographic but also epistemic and institutional, and attends to the meaning-making processes through which students reflect on their journeys. Particularly within the postcolonial South African context, where enduring inequalities intersect with efforts to 'internationalise', this study offers a grounded, contextually attuned account of what mobility means, for whom, and under what conditions.

Thus, this research moves beyond normative assumptions about internationalisation to examine the everyday, embodied, and reflective dimensions of student mobility. It positions student voice not as anecdotal but as epistemologically significant, offering insights that speak back to institutions, inform policy, and expand the conversation on global higher education in more equitable, human-centred directions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The rapid intensification of internationalisation in higher education has positioned international student mobility (ISM) as both a strategic imperative and a symbol of global academic prestige. Outbound mobility programmes are widely championed by universities as engines of transformation, mechanisms through which students are expected to acquire intercultural competence, global citizenship, and labour market competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected world. Within institutional discourses and policy frameworks, ISM is frequently framed in celebratory terms: a gateway to opportunity, personal growth, and global relevance (Altbach & Knight, 2007; DHET, 2019; Wit, 2020). However, beneath this valorised narrative lies a profound silence, the marginalisation of students' own voices, particularly their emotional, epistemic, and identity-laden engagements with mobility.

Stein et al. (2020), Marginson (2014), and Dei (2017) emphasise that the experience of mobility is socially situated and affectively complex, highlighting how dominant policy framings obscure the asymmetrical conditions under which historically marginalised students access and navigate international programmes.. In South Africa, a country whose higher education sector remains marked by enduring inequalities linked to apartheid legacies, this disjuncture between the promise and practice of internationalisation is particularly pronounced (DHET, 2019; Jowi et al., 2013). While internationalisation is often invoked as a lever for redress and re-engagement

with the global academic commons, questions of *who participates, how mobility is experienced, and to what ends* remain insufficiently theorised.

Much of the extant scholarship has tended to emphasise macro-level analyses, attending to national policy shifts, institutional strategies, and the growth of outbound mobility (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2020). While such perspectives illuminate structural patterns, they often obscure the lived realities of students themselves. The affective labour involved in negotiating new cultural and academic environments, the subtle epistemic recalibrations required in transnational classrooms, and the everyday acts of resilience that underpin mobility frequently remain invisible. This silence reflects a persistent epistemological gap, one that phenomenological approaches seek to address by foregrounding the subjective, contextually situated, and meaning-saturated experiences that define what it is to move across borders, not only geographically, but socially, culturally, and intellectually (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Van Manen, 1997). By centring these human dimensions, the study reveals mobility as an intricate, relational process, where opportunity and constraint are intertwined, and where the transformative potential of internationalisation emerges through the interplay of individual agency and structural conditions.

This study intervenes in that gap by foregrounding the *lifeworlds* of students engaged in outbound mobility. Drawing from phenomenological traditions,

the notion of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) refers to the pre-reflective, taken-for-granted world that individuals inhabit in their everyday existence, a world constituted through cultural, historical, relational, and affective entanglements (Husserl, 1931; Schutz, 1970). Far from being a neutral backdrop, the lifeworld is the horizon within which meaning emerges and experience unfolds. In the context of international mobility, students carry their lifeworlds with them, shaped by family histories, linguistic codes, educational trajectories, community values, and social aspirations, and reconfigure them through encounters with new institutions, cultures, and knowledge regimes.

For many South African students, particularly first-generation university attendees from rural or township areas and socio-economically precarious backgrounds, mobility entails not only geographic relocation but also ontological negotiation. They must learn to navigate unfamiliar systems, decode institutional norms, and confront often-subtle exclusions embedded in host contexts. Their experiences are shaped by constrained or delayed funding, bureaucratic visa processes, limited pre-departure preparation, and weak institutional scaffolding. Yet, these students also demonstrate remarkable agency, crafting new strategies of adaptation, forming solidarities, and exercising critical awareness in the face of an uneven terrain.

The experience of mobility, therefore, is far from uniform. It is always already situated, shaped by intersections of race, class, gender, language, and

institutional culture, and thus demands an interpretive framework that can capture its layered complexity. To understand mobility as lived, it is necessary to listen to the students themselves: to how they remember, narrate, and make sense of their journeys. Such listening is not merely empathetic but epistemic. It enables a re-theorisation of mobility as a space of possibility and precarity, of transformation and tension.

This inquiry responds to calls for a reorientation in internationalisation scholarship, one that moves beyond Eurocentric, policy-centric, and institutionally driven perspectives. Scholars such as Leask (2015) and Madge et al. (2015) advocate for a more grounded, context-sensitive and Southern-centred approach to internationalisation, one that is alert to the uneven geographies of knowledge production and the complexities of postcolonial positionality. By situating the research within a phenomenological framework, this study offers more than a methodological choice; it adopts an ethical stance that values depth over breadth, subjectivity over abstraction, and reflexivity over technocracy.

Ultimately, this research seeks to surface the dissonances between the scripted ideals of mobility and the lived experiences of those who enact it. It does not reject the potential of international mobility, but it complicates it, showing that, for many students, mobility is both a horizon of possibility and a mirror of

systemic exclusion. It is in the interplay of aspiration and constraint, of hope and hardship, that mobility's true meaning is forged.

In capturing these nuanced realities, the study affirms that the future of internationalisation depends not only on the expansion of programmes, partnerships, or metrics, but on the cultivation of attentiveness to voices that have long been peripheral to the discourse, yet central to its realisation. Only through sustained engagement with these lifeworlds, honestly, ethically, and rigorously, can institutions begin to align their internationalisation ambitions with the lived realities of those they seek to serve.

1.3 Research Objectives and Methodological Approach

At the heart of this study lies a commitment to excavating the felt meanings of international student mobility, not as a policy artefact, an administrative metric, or a transactional process, but as a deeply lived, emotionally textured, and socially situated journey. The study seeks to contribute towards a more nuanced, ethically attuned, and theoretically robust understanding of internationalisation within South African higher education, particularly through the lens of those historically marginalised by its processes.

1.4 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are fourfold:

1. To explore the lived experiences of students participating in international mobility programmes at South African universities, with a specific focus on their academic, cultural, and social encounters during their mobility journeys.
2. To examine how students interpret and construct meaning from their mobility experiences within the broader processes of internationalisation, considering institutional structures, socio-cultural adaptation, and personal transformation.
3. To analyse the broader implications of international mobility for students' academic and professional trajectories, including its impact on career aspirations, skill development, and global engagement.
4. To explore the influence of socio-economic background, institutional support, personal expectations, and post-mobility reintegration on students' international experiences.

These objectives serve as the scaffolding through which the study situates itself within the broader scholarly conversations on internationalisation, student mobility, and epistemic justice.

1.5 Research Questions

In alignment with these objectives, the study is guided by four interlinked research questions, each designed to elicit the inner contours of mobility as it is lived, narrated, and interpreted by students within the South African higher education landscape:

1. What are the lived experiences of students participating in international mobility programmes within South African universities?
2. How do students interpret and make sense of these lived experiences in the context of internationalisation processes?
3. What are the broader implications of these lived experiences for students' personal, academic, and professional trajectories?
4. Why do students reflect on their experiences in the ways that they do, and what socio-cultural, institutional, and personal factors shape these reflections?

These questions do not function in isolation, nor do they adhere to a strict linear progression. Rather, they form a constellation of inquiries, illuminating the complex interplay between individual agency, structural constraint, and processes of meaning-making. They allow for a layered and intersectional reading of international mobility: one that foregrounds student intentionality, while also attending to the institutional and epistemic terrains within which such mobility unfolds.

By asking not only what students experience, but also how and why they make sense of those experiences in particular ways, this study aims to capture the nuanced rhythms of becoming, belonging, and negotiating across borders, of space, identity, and knowledge. In doing so, it contributes towards decolonising the epistemic frames through which international student mobility

has often been theorised, privileging instead an understanding grounded in the lived realities of those who move, learn, and return.

1.6 Phenomenology as Interpretive Compass

The study aligns with Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology rather than a purely Husserlian descriptive approach, although both traditions inform its analytic orientation. To pursue these inquiries with the depth they require, the study adopts phenomenology as its primary methodological and epistemological compass. This orientation is not merely a method; it reflects a sustained commitment to engaging the world as it is lived and meaningfully experienced, rather than abstracted from the contexts that give it significance (Van Manen, 2016a, 2016b). Phenomenology enables the excavation of experience in its immediacy, its ambiguity, and its situated complexity, what Husserl (1970) described as the “lifeworld” (Lebenswelt), the pre-reflective ground of meaning upon which all understanding is built.

This approach privileges intentionality, recognising that consciousness is always directed toward something; it is never neutral or passive. In the context of mobility, students' reflections are shaped by what they bring with them, their histories, aspirations, vulnerabilities, and embedded cultural logics, and how these intersect with the new worlds they encounter. Drawing from the interpretive traditions of phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1965), the study emphasises that meaning is never pre-given

but *emerges* through students' ongoing engagements with unfamiliar academic systems, socio-cultural milieus, and institutional architectures.

The study also incorporates reflexivity as a methodological imperative. As Finlay (2002) argues, phenomenological research demands an ongoing awareness of the researcher's own positionality, acknowledging that meaning is co-constructed through dialogue, interpretation, and ethical attentiveness. Interviews, then, are not data extraction exercises; they are encounters, spaces where stories unfold, silences speak, and meaning is negotiated rather than discovered.

In practical terms, the study relies on semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected group of students who have participated in outbound mobility programmes, particularly Erasmus-funded exchanges. These conversations are not seen as "data" in the conventional sense but as phenomenological texts, rich narratives through which the students reveal how they navigated, resisted, or embraced the unfolding experience of being abroad. Analysis proceeds through an interpretative phenomenological lens, as outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), enabling both idiographic depth and thematic coherence.

1.6.1 *Epistemic Disjuncture and Embodied Mobility*

South African higher education occupies a space of profound paradox, simultaneously positioned as a vehicle for upward mobility, global connectivity, and social redress, while remaining deeply structured by enduring inequalities that trace back to the legacies of apartheid (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2020; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). These tensions surface acutely within international student mobility, where opportunities for global engagement coexist with material, cultural, and epistemic constraints that continue to shape who is able to participate fully and how students navigate transnational academic spaces (Crenshaw, 1992; Van Manen, 1997). The concept of epistemic disjuncture employed in this study draws on Fricker's (2007) theorisation of epistemic injustice, particularly the dynamics of testimonial credibility deficit and hermeneutical marginalisation experienced by historically excluded students. It further resonates with de Sousa Santos' (2014, 2018) articulation of cognitive justice and his critique of abyssal thinking, which exposes how certain knowledges are systematically rendered invisible within global academic systems. Together, these frameworks provide a conceptual vocabulary for interpreting the tensions that arise when students' embodied and culturally situated knowledges are devalued, misrecognised, or rendered unintelligible in transnational academic environments. Within the South African post-apartheid landscape, these epistemic tensions reflect

longstanding struggles over whose knowledge is legitimised, further intensifying the experience of disjuncture during outbound mobility.

Within this framing, international student mobility cannot be presumed to unfold as a uniformly empowering or emancipatory experience. For many participants, particularly those from rural, township, or under-resourced schooling backgrounds, mobility extends beyond a symbolic gateway to expanded academic horizons. It constitutes a deeply affective and institutionally uneven journey, often marked by structural silences, cultural dislocation, and emotional volatility (Walker, 2012; Wilson-Strydom, 2015, 2017).

Students often encounter complex bureaucratic hurdles, including visa procurement, pre-departure medicals, and institutional approvals, which they typically navigate with minimal guidance or culturally responsive support. Higher education institutions, often imagined as spaces of inclusion, frequently fail to recognise the diverse capitals—linguistic, cultural, and epistemic, that students bring, rendering these differences invisible, exoticised, or misinterpreted. For African students engaging in international mobility, markers of identity such as accents or dietary norms are sometimes read not as expressions of diversity but as deficits requiring correction or accommodation (Crenshaw, 1992; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Salter, 2013). These subtle micro-aggressions erode confidence and generate a persistent sense of misrecognition, highlighting the affective and epistemic challenges

embedded within globalised academic environments (Smith et al., 2009; Van Manen, 1997).

It is within these interstitial zones, between aspiration and alienation, between hope and dislocation, that a phenomenological orientation proves especially illuminating. In contrast to instrumentalist approaches that reduce mobility to numeric flows or policy compliance, phenomenology foregrounds the texture of lived experience: how students inhabit unfamiliar spaces, what they feel and fear, and how these encounters reconfigure their sense of self (Cockayne, 2025). This approach attends to the affective geographies, the 'emoscapes', that students navigate, revealing the emotional terrain through which agency is simultaneously enabled and constrained (Lee & Waters, 2024; Sidhu et al., 2016).

These are not simply cognitive encounters but embodied ones. Emotional labour becomes a silent requirement of mobility. Students learn to adapt speech patterns, suppress discomfort, manage assumptions from peers and lecturers, and perform belonging through curated expressions of confidence and cultural fluency. According to Salter (2013), such performances often occur within systems unprepared or unwilling to accommodate difference on equitable terms.

Yet, within this unease lies a quiet resistance. Students do not merely endure these frictions; they create strategies of survival and meaning-making. They form informal peer networks, engage in journalling or critical reflection, reclaim cultural markers, and selectively assert their subjectivities. They become, in effect, cultural cartographers, mapping out new intellectual, emotional, and academic terrains through acts of improvisation, adaptation, and refusal.

Phenomenology thus emerges not only as a methodological choice but as an ethical imperative. It insists on listening to students as sentient agents, not as datapoints in institutional reports. It draws attention to the existential toll that bureaucratic opacity, epistemic disregard, or cultural erasure can take. It allows the researcher to apprehend mobility as a form of becoming, where meaning, identity, and embodiment are constantly negotiated and reconstituted in flux.

This interpretive stance is particularly attuned to questions of social positioning and symbolic power. Drawing on the logic of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 2018), the study asks: What happens when one enters a global academic space but finds that one's way of knowing is unacknowledged, or one's accent provokes curiosity rather than collegiality? What does it mean to be globally mobile when belonging is quietly racialised, gendered, or contingent upon codes one has never been taught? And crucially, how do

students carry these encounters home, and what do they do with the shifts in selfhood that mobility engenders?

These questions orient the study towards a more ethically grounded understanding of internationalisation; one that centres the student not merely as a participant, but as a theorist of their own experience. In doing so, the analysis moves beyond institutional narratives of excellence or global competitiveness, foregrounding the messy, emotive, and deeply human dimensions of crossing borders in a world that is not neutral to difference.

1.7 Significance of the Study

By foregrounding the nuanced and affectively charged accounts of students' lived experiences, this study intervenes in dominant narratives that continue to frame international student mobility as a universally beneficial or politically neutral venture in global engagement. Such framings, often couched in the language of opportunity, employ technocratic rationalities that valorise metrics, rankings, and institutional gain while effacing the social and epistemic asymmetries embedded in global academic circuits (Stein, 2021; Tikly, 2020). In contrast, this research centres the subjectivities of students, particularly those emerging from historically marginalised South African contexts, and in doing so, it unsettles prevailing logics of internationalisation that treat mobility as an unqualified good.

Drawing inspiration from Madge et al. (2015), who argue for a more “southernised” and situated understanding of global education, the study reframes mobility not as a transactional solution to graduate unemployment or institutional visibility, but as a deeply embodied, high-stakes journey laden with affect, contradiction, and uneven possibility. Such reframing demands that we read students not as passive recipients of global goodwill but as navigators of complex geopolitical terrains, individuals whose journeys are shaped by race, class, language, history, and power.

The study’s contribution lies in its articulation of epistemic justice as central to both phenomenological inquiry and international education. It brings to the fore the often-muted voices of students whose experiences of mobility defy the dominant tropes of cosmopolitan ease and elite exchange. These are students who enter international spaces with humility, cultural dexterity, and critical awareness, mobilising resilience not as a neoliberal ideal but as a form of social navigation and epistemic survival (Ahmed, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Their accounts rupture the homogenising tendencies of policy discourse and offer grounded imaginaries of what internationalisation might become when reoriented from the peripheries rather than engineered at the centre.

In advancing these perspectives, the research promotes a more contextually responsive, ethically attuned, and socially reflexive understanding of international mobility. It invites institutions of higher learning, particularly in the

Global South, to reconsider not only who is afforded mobility, but at what cost, under what conditions, and towards what ends. If internationalisation is to move beyond rhetoric, then it must become accountable to the lived realities of those most affected by its designs; not merely to its outputs, but to its meanings; not only to movement, but to what that movement transforms, disrupts, or silences.

1.8 Addressing Limitations: Reflexive Boundaries, Self-Reported Experience, and Ethical Fidelity

All research unfolds within boundaries: epistemic, methodological, institutional, and interpersonal. In interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), these are not treated as peripheral constraints but acknowledged as constitutive of the inquiry itself. The articulation of limitations is thus not a procedural formality but a critical act of reflexive accountability. It requires grappling with the partiality of representation, the ethics of voice, and the entanglement of researcher and participant in the co-construction of meaning (Finlay, 2011; Van Manen, 2016b). Attending to such boundaries is an expression of epistemic responsibility, acknowledging not only what is illuminated but what remains unsaid or obscured.

1.8.1 Access to Participants and the Structures of Opportunity

One limitation of this study relates to access to participants. The sample was limited to undergraduate students from two South African universities, drawn

from those who had participated in Erasmus+ funded mobility. This delimitation emerged from the structures of availability, institutional permissions, and pre-existing networks through which access was negotiated. As a result, postgraduate students were underrepresented, and students participating in self-funded, informal, or South–South exchanges were not included. This absence is not framed as oversight but acknowledged as symptomatic of the very structural asymmetries within international mobility governance that this study seeks to interrogate (De Wit & Deca, 2020; Leask & De Gayardon, 2021).

Additionally, the study did not include students with disabilities, a gap which further limits the generalisability of the findings. While the participants reflected considerable diversity across race, class, gender, and geography, the study cannot claim statistical representativeness nor capture the full range of mobility typologies now emerging in the digital era.

1.9 The Nature and Nuance of Self-Reported Experience

The study's commitment to semi-structured interviews introduced inherent challenges linked to the complexities of memory, the pliability of narrative, and the interpretive labour required to navigate partial disclosures. Memory, as Van Manen (1997a) reminds us, is not a static archive but a living phenomenon shaped by context, emotion, and the present moment of recall. Participants' accounts were therefore understood not as transparent windows onto the past

but as hermeneutic enactments in which experience was actively revisited, reframed, and reinterpreted.

This interpretive fluidity aligns with the phenomenological ethos of situated meaning-making and does not diminish the study's rigour. Rather, it reflects Merleau-Ponty's (1962) understanding of the intentional arc of consciousness, through which new meanings may emerge belatedly, through reflection. To cultivate this depth, interviews were intentionally iterative and dialogic, allowing participants to clarify, expand, and even contest their earlier accounts. In several instances, follow-up dialogues were initiated by the researcher to revisit areas of ambiguity, confirm emerging themes, or clarify nuances where contradictions appeared. These interactions honoured the participant's epistemic authority and ensured that findings remained tethered to participants' lived realities.

1.9.1 Ethical Fidelity through Dialogic Confirmation

To strengthen credibility and uphold ethical fidelity, the research design incorporated ongoing opportunities for dialogic confirmation. Rather than adopting a procedural or tokenistic model of member-checking, the process here reflected an ethics of care and co-construction (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Participants were approached following transcription, not merely to validate accuracy, but to engage in reflexive dialogue about emerging interpretations. This iterative engagement allowed participants to refine, elaborate, or

recalibrate their accounts, reaffirming the phenomenological commitment to co-constructed meaning (Smith et al., 2009).

While not all participants engaged with this process in equal depth, those who did expressed appreciation for the opportunity to ensure that their experiences were faithfully represented. Several remarked that this feedback loop helped them feel heard, seen, and accurately understood, reinforcing trust within the research relationship. Moreover, these dialogues revealed the emotional textures of recall, where participants reconsidered earlier positions, revealing deeper layers of affect and reflection.

Ethical rigour was further maintained through ongoing supervisory dialogue, which served as a sounding board for interpretive decisions and potential blind spots. This aligns with Pillow's (2003) concept of methodological humility, a refusal of epistemic closure and an openness to complexity, contradiction, and the evolving nature of understanding.

1.9.2 Positionality and Relational Dynamics

The researcher's dual identity as a scholar-practitioner within the field of internationalisation inevitably shaped access, rapport, and interpretation. While this insider positionality facilitated trust and depth of dialogue, it also necessitated vigilance against over-identification, projection, or the inadvertent reinscription of institutional logics onto student narratives.

Attentiveness to relational dynamics, power, trust, cultural affinity, and language, was central to mitigating these risks. Interviews were approached as co-constituted encounters, where silence, hesitation, and non-verbal cues were recognised as integral to meaning-making (Finlay, 2012).

Ultimately, these limitations are not presented as methodological failings but as reflective of the situated, contingent, and inherently partial nature of qualitative inquiry. They foreground the ethical imperative of humility, attentiveness, and care, recognising both the boundaries of what has been articulated and the complexities that persist in the margins of representation. In embracing these reflexive boundaries, this study remains committed to producing knowledge that is relational, situated, and ethically responsive to the lived realities it seeks to illuminate.

1.9.3 Embracing Complexity Rather than Seeking Closure

Ultimately, the limitations encountered in this study are not obstacles to be controlled, neutralised, or regretted. Instead, they are recognised as integral features of the interpretive terrain within which this inquiry is situated. In alignment with Vagle's (2019) articulation of post-intentional phenomenology, the value of qualitative inquiry lies not in achieving definitive closure but in its generative capacity to hold space for ambiguity and complexity. The strength of this research resides in its openness to the partial, the provisional, and the

unfolding, allowing meanings to remain in motion, questions to linger, and insights to exceed the immediate contours of the data.

By acknowledging the epistemic, affective, and relational boundaries of this work, the study remains anchored in the ethical imperative to do justice to students' lived realities, not as static truths to be captured but as evolving, situated narratives of becoming. These reflexive engagements form not only a methodological acknowledgement but also a philosophical commitment to honouring the uncertainty, messiness, and depth of lived experience as it is told, retold, and reinterpreted.

Rather than seeking premature closure, this approach reaffirms the phenomenological commitment to openness, wonder, and attentiveness (Finlay, 2011; Van Manen, 1990). It acknowledges that every account given and every interpretation offered, exists within a web of relational, cultural, and institutional forces that shape what can be said, heard, and understood.

These engagements provide the interpretive scaffolding for the chapters that follow, positioning the study to make a meaningful contribution not through universal claims but through a careful, situated, and ethically responsive account of student mobility. In so doing, it opens pathways for broader reflections on the possibilities of more just, inclusive, and student-centred approaches to internationalisation within South African higher education and beyond.

1.10 Sample Size and Representational Depth

The relatively modest sample size, ten participants, might, in more positivist traditions, be framed as a limitation. However, in phenomenological research, depth rather than breadth is the currency of insight. The study followed a purposeful sampling strategy, prioritising experiential richness, demographic diversity, and institutional spread over statistical representativeness. In doing so, it adhered to a tradition that values close, sustained engagement with meaning as it is lived, not aggregated (Patton, 2014).

This design enabled the achievement of what Finlay (2012) describes as “experiential saturation”, a point at which thematic resonance across cases allows for layered yet coherent analysis. For example, while students’ experiences of institutional support varied, a recurring motif emerged around “invisible labour”, the unseen emotional and administrative work required to make mobility viable. The repetition of such motifs across distinct narratives lent the findings analytic robustness without sacrificing their idiographic integrity.

1.11 Ethics as Relational Practice in Phenomenological Research: Relational and Procedural Commitments

Ethical practice within this study was rooted not merely in procedural compliance but in a relational ethos that acknowledges the ontological and epistemological sensitivities of phenomenological inquiry. As Wiles (2012) persuasively contends, qualitative research ethics transcend formal protocols and enter the domain of lived, relational responsibility, requiring attentiveness

to participants' vulnerability, the dynamics of power, and the unfolding complexities inherent in researcher-participant encounters. Echoing this perspective, Dooly et al. (2017) argue that ethical considerations in qualitative research must permeate all phases from inception through to dissemination, not as isolated checkpoints but as an iterative, reflexive practice responsive to the human experience at the centre of inquiry.

While procedural ethics were meticulously upheld, confidentiality, informed consent, and the right to withdraw were standard and clearly communicated, this study engaged deeply with relational ethics, which foreground care, attentiveness, and mutuality (Ellis, 2007; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In moments of emotional disclosure, such as when a participant detailed the profound psychological toll of financial precarity during their mobility experience, the researcher responded not by extracting further detail but through holding space, attuned listening, and respecting silences as communicative acts. According to Finlay (2012), the phenomenological interview is not a data extraction site but a shared space of vulnerability and meaning-making where relational dynamics inform both ethical practice and interpretive depth.

1.11.1 *Safeguarding Anonymity and Institutional Ethics*

Aligned with the commitments articulated by Israel and Hay (2006), stringent measures were taken to protect both individual and institutional anonymity. Participating universities were deliberately absent from mapping within the

thesis, a practice designed to uphold confidentiality and minimise any risk of institutional or personal identification. As articulated in Israel and Hay (2006)'s seminal work, such practices not only align with formal ethical codes but also respond to the complex power relations embedded in institutional contexts. Hence, throughout this study, identifiers related to participants, institutions, specific academic programmes, or extracurricular affiliations were anonymised. Pseudonyms were systematically applied to all participants, and additional abstraction was utilised for particularly sensitive narratives to protect participant integrity without diluting narrative authenticity.

This attentiveness extends beyond formal compliance, reflecting Creswell and Poth (2016)'s assertion that confidentiality operates not solely as a procedural obligation but as a relational contract forged through trust. Vagle (2018) similarly insists that phenomenological inquiry demands an ethical sensibility that is alive to the ways in which participants entrust researchers with their lifeworlds, fragile, nuanced, and deeply personal terrains.

1.11.2 Data Management and Ethical Stewardship

Aligned with institutional requirements, data was securely stored and managed solely for academic purposes, with strict adherence to retention and destruction protocols. Data storage conformed to university regulations, which stipulate use exclusively for research purposes and retention only for a prescribed period. Consent forms, transcripts, and audio recordings were

securely archived, encrypted, and accessible only to the principal researcher. These measures align with the ethical recommendations outlined by Dooly et al. (2017), who highlight the necessity of transparent and secure data management as a cornerstone of ethical qualitative inquiry.

Further, data stewardship practices recognised that participants' narratives are not simply data points but extensions of their lived realities. As such, ethical stewardship of these narratives demanded a heightened sense of responsibility, an awareness underscored by those who advocate for ethics as an ongoing, embodied practice sensitive to participants' dignity and autonomy (Wiles, 2012).

1.11.3 *Philosophical Integrity and Epistemic Responsibility*

This study's ethical commitments are deeply entangled with its phenomenological underpinnings. According to van Manen (2014) phenomenological research, cannot divorce itself from ethical responsibility; the researcher's engagement with participants is inherently a moral encounter, shaped by care, respect, and a commitment to honouring the *lifeworld* of others. This philosophical grounding reinforces the view advanced by Adler (2022) that trustworthiness in qualitative research is inseparable from ethical rigour, demanding sustained attentiveness to the humanity, situatedness, and complexity of participants' experiences.

By positioning participants not as mere subjects but as co-constructors of knowledge, this study aligns with the relational imperatives underscored by Crowther and Thomson (2022), who emphasise that trustworthiness and ethical integrity are inseparable in phenomenological research. Ethical reflexivity was thus practised not only as a methodological strategy but as an epistemic orientation, shaping every engagement, decision, and representation of participants' voices.

1.11.4 Integrating Ethical and Methodological Coherence

The ethical commitments outlined here underpin and inform the study's broader methodological architecture, particularly its efforts to ensure trustworthiness. As Williams and Morrow (2009) argue, ethical engagement reinforces the credibility and depth of qualitative research, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in the integrity of the relational spaces from which they emerge. Reflexive journalling, layered questioning, and prolonged engagement were not only tools of methodological rigour but acts of ethical care, ensuring participants' narratives were approached with respect, sensitivity, and accountability.

1.12 Ensuring Methodological Rigour and Analytical Trustworthiness

Establishing methodological rigour and ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research remains foundational within phenomenological inquiry, where the emphasis lies not on objective generalisability but on the rich

illumination of lived experience. The imperative to ensure trustworthiness has been foregrounded in qualitative scholarship since Lincoln and Guba (1986)'s seminal articulation of the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, criteria which continue to underpin contemporary debates on qualitative rigour (Adler, 2022; Williams & Morrow, 2009). These criteria are neither prescriptive checklists nor rigid frameworks; rather, as Van Manen (2014) asserts, they offer a philosophical grounding for the researcher's ethical and methodological accountability throughout the research process. Recent literature has underscored the significance of maintaining transparency in articulating how trustworthiness is addressed at each stage (Crowther & Thomson, 2022; Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016), especially within studies rooted in hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology, where meaning is not discovered but co-constructed.

1.12.1 Credibility: Layered Meaning-Making Through Prolonged Engagement

Within the phenomenological tradition, credibility is inherently tied to the depth of engagement with participants and the phenomenon under investigation (van Manen, 2014). This study safeguarded credibility through prolonged, iterative, and dialogical engagement, aligning with the methodological expectations articulated by Hayre (2021), who underscores the importance of sustained interaction in fostering trust and eliciting deeper layers of meaning. According to Crowther and Thomson (2022), phenomenological credibility is attained through recursive, embodied

attentiveness to the data. This extended engagement went beyond the temporal duration of interviews and included the reflective analysis of narratives across multiple readings.

Credibility was further reinforced through methodological triangulation, understood not merely as a convergence of findings but as a textured, layered interpretive practice (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Institutional documents, policy frameworks, and field notes were engaged alongside participant narratives to reveal the tensions between formal institutional discourses and students' lived realities, thus enriching the interpretive depth and situating individual voices within broader structural contexts (Adler, 2022). This tactic supports the suggestion made by Ghafouri and Ofoghi (2016), that, when used carefully, triangulation improves confirmability and credibility by highlighting the complex character of social phenomena.

Moreover, the iterative use of analytical memos, reflexive journals, and layered questioning reflected the ethos of hermeneutic engagement described by Van Manen (2014), capturing evolving interpretive insights and moments of critical reflexivity. As Johnston et al. (2017) suggest, such practices are central to maintaining credibility in studies where the researcher's positionality and interpretive horizons shape the analytic process.

1.12.2 Transferability: Rich Descriptions and Contextual Anchoring

In qualitative research, transferability replaces notions of statistical generalisability with an emphasis on rich, thick description that allows readers to assess the resonance of findings within other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams & Morrow, 2009). This study attended to this imperative through detailed portrayals of the socio-cultural, institutional, and political landscapes within which participants' experiences were embedded. By offering contextually grounded narratives, the research invites readers to make informed judgements about the potential applicability of insights to analogous settings (Thomson & Crowther, 2022).

The practice of contextual anchoring reflects Van Manen's (2014) argument that phenomenological research must foreground the situatedness of experience, acknowledging that meaning arises from the entwinement of the personal with the socio-historical. In this study, attention was directed not only to the immediate experiences of mobility but to the broader South African higher education landscape, marked by historical legacies, linguistic politics, and ongoing negotiations of belonging. As Ghafouri and Ofoghi (2016) caution, transferability cannot be assumed; it must be earned through careful articulation of context and transparency about the limits of claims.

Furthermore, the study's thematic architecture was explicitly tied to participants' positionalities, rurality, first-generation status, and intersections of race, class, and gender, thus providing the "thick description" Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify as essential for enabling readers to discern transferability. In doing so, this research aligns with Adler's (2022) contention that transferability is fostered when studies remain attentive to the interplay between individual narratives and systemic structures.

1.12.3 Dependability: Coherence, Reflexivity, and Auditability

Dependability, closely aligned with reliability in quantitative paradigms, speaks to the consistency and logical coherence of research processes over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Hayre (2021) notes, dependability in qualitative work demands a transparent audit trail, documenting shifts in methodological choices, analytic strategies, and thematic emphases. In this study, dependability was ensured through meticulous documentation of the research journey, including field notes, decision logs, and memos that recorded theoretical turns and emergent questions.

Supervisory engagements served as additional sites of methodological scrutiny, fostering reflexive interrogation of analytic decisions and ensuring that shifts in interpretive focus were grounded in data rather than researcher bias (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016). Williams and Morrow (2009) emphasise that such accountability strengthens dependability, particularly in studies where

the researcher's subjectivity is acknowledged as an analytic resource rather than a contaminant.

1.12.4 Confirmability: Transparency and Reflexivity

Confirmability pertains to the extent to which findings are rooted in participants' narratives rather than shaped by researcher preconceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This principle was maintained through systematic, reflexive practices, consistent with Thomson and Crowther (2022), who regard reflexivity as an ethical and epistemic obligation in hermeneutic phenomenology. Analytical memos traced moments of theoretical tension, interpretive shifts, and points of uncertainty, ensuring that the evolving analytic story remained anchored in participant narratives (Johnston et al., 2017).

Data triangulation, as previously outlined, contributed to confirmability by situating participant accounts within broader documentary and institutional contexts (Adler, 2022). Moreover, the researcher's dual role within the higher education sector necessitated heightened reflexive vigilance, recognising the potential influence of professional identities on interpretive stances (Van Manen, 2014).

1.12.5 Reflexivity: Embodied Engagement and Ethical Responsibility

Reflexivity was integral throughout the research process, not merely as a methodological checkpoint but as an ongoing ethical posture towards the

data, the participants, and the researcher's own positionality (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Acknowledging the entanglements of insider-outsider dynamics, professional affiliations, and pre-existing knowledge structures, reflexivity was enacted through sustained journalling, peer debriefing, and supervisory dialogue (Thomson & Crowther, 2022).

Reflexivity also extended to ethical considerations, ensuring that power dynamics within interviews were managed with sensitivity and that participants' narratives were treated with respect, care, and attentiveness to their situated vulnerabilities (Adler, 2022). In accordance with the recommendations of Ghafouri and Ofoghi (2016), reflexivity was regarded as a dynamic, iterative process that emphasised epistemic humility and receptiveness to emergent meanings.

1.12.6 Triangulation: Multiplicity Over Convergence

Triangulation, approached here as a strategy for methodological enrichment rather than verification, drew upon multiple data sources, including policy documents, institutional reports, and field notes, to contextualise and deepen participant narratives (Williams & Morrow, 2009). What makes triangulation important in this study is not the pursuit of a singular, objective "truth," but the recognition that lived experiences of mobility are layered, situated, and relational. By placing student accounts alongside institutional texts and researcher field notes, triangulation highlights points of convergence and

divergence, revealing how personal experiences are embedded within the systemic structures that shape mobility.

In this way, triangulation enhances credibility by showing that interpretations emerge not from individual voices in isolation but from their connection to wider discourses and institutional contexts. It also contributes to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as trustworthiness, ensuring that findings are credible, dependable, and transferable. Most importantly, triangulation enables the analysis to capture the complexity of mobility, exposing the intersections between individual resilience, institutional practices, and policy framings. This resonates with Adler's (2022) view of triangulation as a means of embedding research findings within socio-institutional realities rather than treating them as isolated or anecdotal.

1.12.7 Data Management, Confidentiality, and Anonymity

Ethical rigour extended into the realm of data management, with adherence to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee protocols (HSSREC/00006016/2023). Participants were fully informed of the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and data security (Dooly et al., 2017). Pseudonyms replaced real names, and any identifying institutional information was removed or anonymised. The identities of the participating universities were intentionally withheld and not mapped in the study, thereby

safeguarding their anonymity and upholding ethical responsibility towards both the institutions and the individual participants. Data were stored securely on encrypted devices, with access restricted solely to the researcher. In compliance with institutional policy, materials will be retained for five years post-completion before secure destruction. Participants were explicitly informed that their contributions would be used solely for academic purposes within this doctoral study.

1.13 Chapter Outline

This thesis unfolds through a carefully sequenced structure, reflecting a deliberate narrative arc that moves from conceptual framing through empirical exploration, towards critical interpretation and reflective contribution. Each chapter is designed not as an isolated unit but as part of an evolving tapestry, bringing into sharper focus the lived realities of internationally mobile South African students. The structure aligns with phenomenology's ethos of returning "to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1997), privileging student voice, contextual embeddedness, and epistemological depth in the research process.

1.13.1 Chapter 1: Introduction – Framing the Inquiry

This opening chapter establishes the conceptual, empirical, and methodological foundations of the study. It articulates the research problem and presents the overarching questions and objectives guiding the inquiry,

alongside a rationale for examining international student mobility (ISM) within the South African higher education context. ISM is situated not merely as a policy tool or administrative mechanism but as a profoundly human, embodied experience shaped by histories of exclusion, aspirations for mobility, and struggles for epistemic recognition. Key terms and concepts are introduced, including lifeworld, access, equity, intersectionality, and the logics of internationalisation which anchor the theoretical and methodological framing. Special attention is given to phenomenology as both philosophy and method (Finlay, 2012; Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2014), establishing its appropriateness for exploring the complexity of lived experience within globalised academic spaces.

1.13.2 Chapter 2: Mapping the Landscape – A Critical Review of the Literature

Chapter 2 offers a critical synthesis of global and South African scholarship on internationalisation and student mobility, interweaving policy discourse, theoretical debates, and empirical research. Contemporary discussions around global citizenship, decolonisation, and the unequal geographies of academic opportunity are explored through key contributions, including recent global analyses of educational inequity (Langthaler & Malik, 2023; Scott & Bajaj, 2022). These studies expose how racialisation and socio-economic status continue to structure access to education across contexts, aligning with arguments that internationalisation often reproduces existing inequalities (Leask, 2015; Madge et al., 2015). The literature review makes visible significant

gaps, notably the absence of research that centres student voice within phenomenological inquiry, thus underscoring this study's originality and scholarly contribution. These critiques also speak to the broader need for relational, ethical, and socially just approaches to international education (Kashaka, 2025).

1.13.3 Chapter 3: Research Design – A Phenomenological Approach to Experience

This chapter details the study's research methodology, anchored within Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It provides a transparent account of participant recruitment, data generation through semi-structured interviews, and the subsequent stages of thematic analysis. Emphasis is placed on reflexivity, ethical integrity, and the relational nature of qualitative inquiry. Trustworthiness is established through strategies including prolonged engagement, crystallisation, and iterative member-checking, reflecting the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The chapter positions the researcher as a co-constitutor of meaning, remaining attentive to affective, relational, and power-laden dynamics that shape the research encounter and the production of knowledge.

1.13.4 Chapter 4: Findings – Navigating the Lived Worlds of Mobility

The fourth chapter presents the empirical heart of the study. Through rich narrative excerpts, it thematically explores students' lived experiences across four interconnected domains: barriers to access and information; identity and agency within mobility; transformation and belonging abroad; and post-return dissonance and reintegration. Rather than reducing these experiences to generic findings, this chapter honours multiplicity, contradiction, and nuance, foregrounding the emotional textures, ambivalences, and emergent epiphanies that characterise the mobility journey. Participants' voices serve as analytical anchors through which broader systemic and institutional dynamics are illuminated, aligning with the critical perspectives raised by recent global studies on educational inequity and racialisation (Langthaler & Malik, 2023). This chapter upholds the phenomenological commitment to listening deeply to both what is said and what is unsaid (Finlay, 2012; Van Manen, 1997b).

1.13.5 Chapter 5: Discussion – Reinterpreting Mobility through a Phenomenological Lens

Chapter 5 offers a deep, interpretative engagement with the findings, positioning them within broader theoretical, empirical, and policy discourses. The discussion is structured around five interwoven thematic domains:

1. Access, Equity, and the Politics of Information

2. Intersectionality, Social Positioning, and Student Agency
3. Transformation, Belonging, and Identity Reconstruction
4. Post-Return Reflections and Reintegration
5. Synthesis and Theoretical Reflections

Rather than imposing theory upon data, this chapter performs a dialogic reading between students' narratives and conceptual frameworks, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, decolonial critiques, and sociocultural constructions of the self (Bourdieu, 2008, 2011; Leask, 2015; Madge et al., 2015). It repositions international mobility not as a neutral or technocratic exchange but as a site of power, struggle, and potential transformation. These discussions resonate with the complexities surfaced in recent global analyses of educational equity and inequality (Langthaler and Malik (2023), further enriching the interpretative insights.

1.13.6 Chapter 6: Contributions, Reflections, and Future Pathways

The final chapter consolidates the study's theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions. It articulates how this research advances knowledge on international student mobility through its centring of marginalised voices and commitment to phenomenological depth. Practical recommendations are offered for institutional policy and practice, emphasising the importance of relational, ethical, and context-sensitive approaches to mobility within South African higher education. A dedicated reflective section provides an honest

account of the researcher's positionality, methodological challenges, and the emotional and intellectual labour involved in navigating the dual roles of scholar and practitioner (Finlay, 2012). This chapter concludes by reaffirming the transformative potential of grounded, student-centred inquiry in reimagining mobility as an ethical, relational, and contextually embedded phenomenon.

In sum, the chapters that follow do more than delineate the procedural arc of a research endeavour; they collectively offer a textured, ethically attuned, and analytically robust narrative of international student mobility as lived, negotiated, and continually reconstituted through the situated voices of those who traverse global academic borders. Rather than abstracting mobility into policy metrics or institutional outputs, this thesis foregrounds the affective, epistemic, and structural complexities that define such journeys. In doing so, it contributes not only to critical scholarly debates on internationalisation but to the broader transformative imperative of constructing more just, inclusive, and reflexive global learning environments. This contribution aligns with and deepens emerging calls for decolonised, humane, and student-centred approaches to international engagement in higher education (Langthaler & Malik, 2023; Leask, 2015; Madge et al., 2015).

1.14 Conclusion

Internationalisation in higher education is frequently narrated through the language of institutional strategy, competitive positioning, global rankings, knowledge diplomacy, and transnational networks (Tight, 2022). However, beneath these dominant discourses lies a more intimate, affective, and uneven terrain: that of the students who traverse borders not merely in pursuit of credentials, but in search of transformation, belonging, and epistemic recognition (Madge et al., 2015). It is within these lived, embodied journeys, replete with complexity, ambivalence, and contradiction, that the deeper, often overlooked contours of internationalisation are most vividly revealed, particularly when inquiry is grounded in phenomenological attentiveness to students' subjective meanings and affective landscapes (Finlay, 2002; Valentine et al., 2018).

This chapter has established the conceptual, empirical, and methodological foundations of the study, positioning it within a critical scholarly tradition attentive to the paradoxes, tensions, and possibilities embedded within South Africa's internationalisation agenda (Maringe & Sing, 2014). While international mobility programmes hold the promise of expanded academic horizons and access to global knowledge capital, they unfold within landscapes profoundly shaped by entrenched asymmetries – geopolitical, epistemic, and institutional – that contour students' experiences in ways demanding critical scrutiny (Madge et al., 2015; Tight, 2022). These dynamics are felt most acutely by

students from historically marginalised backgrounds, whose journeys are shaped not only by ambition and aspiration but by encounters with systems and spaces not always designed with their lived realities in mind (Maringe & Sing, 2014).

The research questions guiding this inquiry do not seek to measure outcomes in a conventional, quantitative sense; rather, they aim to illuminate how students experience, interpret, and make meaning of their mobility journeys, how they navigate institutional architectures, cultural dissonances, and affective landscapes that structure their paths (Tight, 2022). In foregrounding these lived narratives, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship aimed at reimagining internationalisation through the vantage point of student experience (Madge et al. (2015), challenging dominant logics and offering alternative, grounded ways of understanding mobility as both a personal and political act. This perspective aligns with the emerging literature that calls for more critical, contextually situated, and ethically attuned engagements with the internationalisation of higher education in the Global South (Maringe & Sing, 2014).

In delineating the methodological and ethical commitments underpinning this research, this chapter has situated the study within a tradition of inquiry that privileges reflexivity, relationality, and epistemic care (Finlay, 2012; Van Manen, 1997; van Manen, 2014). These commitments are not presented as mere

procedural formalities but as fundamental to the study's philosophical orientation, one that honours the co-constructed nature of knowledge and the responsibilities that flow from engaging with the *lifeworlds* of others (Vagle, 2018). The limitations acknowledged herein are not disavowals but rather markers of scholarly humility, signalling an openness to the contingencies and complexities inherent in phenomenological inquiry (Finlay, 2012).

As the thesis now transitions into the subsequent chapters, the narrative arc shifts from this conceptual and methodological grounding towards the presentation of empirical insights, critical interpretation, and reflective contribution. Each chapter builds cumulatively towards a richer, more textured account of international student mobility, as lived and narrated by South African students navigating the global academy from positionalities shaped by histories of inequality, cultural negotiation, and institutional precarity (Maringe & Sing, 2014). In doing so, the study advances not only empirical understanding but also broader scholarly and practical debates on the future of internationalisation, foregrounding students' voices as vital interlocutors in the ongoing reimagining of higher education's global engagement (Tight, 2022).

Chapter 2

Literature review

International Student Mobility: Conceptual Foundations and Lived Experience

2.1 Introduction and Purpose

This chapter advances a conceptually rigorous and analytically integrated review of international student mobility (ISM) as the central phenomenon of this study. Rather than subsuming mobility within the broader and often diffuse discourse of internationalisation, the chapter positions ISM as a distinct domain of inquiry concerned with cross-border student movement, the structural and institutional conditions that enable and constrain such movement, and the lived processes through which mobility is interpreted, inhabited and retrospectively narrated. Internationalisation is therefore engaged instrumentally—as policy architecture and organisational scaffolding—rather than as the primary analytic object. The intellectual centre of gravity remains mobility itself.

International student mobility has been variously theorised as human capital investment, as an instrument of global competitiveness, and as a vehicle for intercultural formation. Policy-oriented scholarship, shaped by market-inflected models of higher education, frequently casts mobility as a strategy of global positioning and economic return (Knight, 2004; Marginson, 2006). Within this framing, students appear as rational actors navigating opportunity structures to enhance employability and cosmopolitan capital. Yet critical

traditions complicate this economistic narrative. They demonstrate that mobility flows are unevenly distributed, stratified by access to resources, and embedded within asymmetrical global knowledge economies that privilege particular destinations, languages and epistemic traditions (Stein & McCartney, 2021). Mobility thus emerges not as a neutral educational good but as a socially patterned practice shaped by capital accumulation, institutional mediation and geopolitical hierarchy.

This chapter is organised in direct alignment with the study's research questions, ensuring coherence between conceptual framing and empirical inquiry. It begins by examining theoretical explanations of why and how students move, engaging push-pull frameworks, mobility capital, and sociological accounts of habitus and stratification. It then turns to access pathways and inequality, interrogating how mobility opportunities are differentially distributed and how first-generation status and Global South positionalities recalibrate both aspiration and participation. A subsequent section engages scholarship on lived experience, drawing on phenomenological and narrative studies that foreground identity negotiation, belonging and meaning-making across borders. The final section considers post-mobility reintegration, conceptualising return not as administrative closure but as interpretive reconfiguration.

Within this architecture, South Africa enters not as an object of exhaustive critique but as a contextual lens that renders stratification analytically visible.

Legacies of structural inequality, transformation imperatives and resource asymmetries shape outbound mobility participation, selection regimes and recognition practices. These dynamics are analysed specifically in relation to mobility rather than as a generalised commentary on national higher education. South Africa, therefore, functions as a prism through which the patterned character of mobility becomes legible.

The chapter moves deliberately beyond descriptive citation toward conceptual synthesis. It juxtaposes economic, sociological and postcolonial traditions; identifies convergences and productive tensions; and surfaces empirical gaps, particularly the relative absence of phenomenologically grounded accounts of outbound mobility from the Global South. In doing so, it establishes the intellectual foundation for an interpretive analysis that centres students as meaning-makers whose narratives illuminate how mobility is accessed, experienced and incorporated into trajectories of becoming.

Conceptual precision operates here as a methodological discipline. Key terms are used consistently; scope is explicitly bounded to outbound, credit-bearing student mobility; and adjacent phenomena—academic migration, staff mobility, and internationalisation at home—are analytically distinguished. While recognising the heterogeneity of modalities (semester exchange, short-term placements, credit-bearing study abroad), the review acknowledges that duration, intensity, and purpose shape the forms of learning, network

formation, and symbolic recognition that can be translated into subsequent academic and professional trajectories.

Debates over definition are not semantic but substantive. Distinctions between credit-bearing exchange and full-degree mobility, and between outbound mobility and internationalisation at home, imply different selection mechanisms, funding logics and regimes of academic recognition. Aggregated metrics that collapse these modalities risk obscuring patterned inequalities in participation, duration and outcome. By delimiting its focus to outbound, credit-bearing mobility, the chapter avoids conceptual slippage and secures analytic coherence with the study's aims.

Framed in this way, ISM is approached as a historically situated, socially stratified and experientially complex phenomenon. It demands theoretical clarity equal to its empirical richness and invites an inquiry attentive not only to structures of opportunity and constraint but also to the interpretive labour through which mobility becomes meaningful within students' evolving lifeworlds.

2.2 Structural Conditions Shaping Access and Experience

International student mobility (ISM) from South Africa is neither evenly distributed nor institutionally neutral. Patterns of participation are shaped by layered historical, institutional, and socio-economic conditions that mediate how students' access, experience, and interpret mobility opportunities.

Understanding these structural coordinates is essential for addressing this study's first and second research questions, which focus on preparation processes, funding pathways, and institutional support.

African higher education emerged within colonial architectures that positioned the continent primarily as a receiver of authorised knowledge (Ajayi, Goma & Johnson, 1996; Lulat, 2005). Although post-independence aspirations envisioned universities as sites of endogenous knowledge production and regional mobility (Zezeza, 2006), structural adjustment, resource compression, and donor dependency constrained institutional autonomy and the development of sustainable intra-African mobility circuits (Teferra, 2014). These longer histories continue to shape how mobility infrastructures are financed, legitimised, and prioritised across the continent.

In the post-1994 period, South Africa's reintegration into global higher education created renewed pathways for outbound student mobility. Policy frameworks positioned international engagement as integral to national reconstruction and global participation (Department of Education, 1997; DHET, 2019). However, implementation has unfolded within a differentiated system marked by enduring institutional asymmetries. Historically advantaged institutions entered the democratic era with established global partnerships, reputational capital, and administrative capacity. Historically disadvantaged institutions have contended with constrained funding, limited staffing in international offices, and fragile partnership networks (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015).

These asymmetries directly shape students' preparation processes. Access to mobility is mediated by institutional infrastructure: the availability of scholarships, clarity of selection criteria, administrative guidance, credit articulation systems, and pre-departure orientation structures. Where international offices are well-resourced, students encounter structured application pathways and clearer funding models. Where capacity is limited, preparation may involve navigating fragmented information, delayed approvals, or uncertain financial planning. Institutional prioritisation of mobility programmes thus becomes a lived experience rather than a policy abstraction, directly engaging Research Question 2.

Participation is further shaped by the distribution of capital. Financial resources, linguistic proficiency, prior academic achievement, and familiarity with bureaucratic procedures influence who is positioned to meet competitive selection criteria (Gopal, 2011; Madge et al., 2015). From a Bourdieusian perspective (Bourdieu, 1986), these forms of capital are unevenly accumulated, reflecting broader social stratification. Consequently, mobility opportunities may appear equitable in policy yet remain stratified in practice. For first-generation students or those from rural and working-class backgrounds, the costs—financial, affective, and symbolic—can render mobility simultaneously aspirational and precarious. These dynamics are directly

relevant to Research Question 1, which interrogates perceptions of equity, funding models, and selection processes.

Recent initiatives, including the Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Scheme and regional university consortia, seek to expand South–South mobility infrastructures and mitigate financial and cultural barriers (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015; Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2021). While such programmes signal a shift toward reciprocity and continental collaboration, their institutional reach and sustainability remain uneven. Mobility pipelines remain concentrated within institutions with established international networks.

Beyond questions of formal access, capability-oriented perspectives emphasise the conversion of opportunity into valued functionings. In mobility contexts, conversion depends on informational clarity, the timing and reliability of funding disbursements, academic recognition procedures, and the relational support that enables students to leverage unfamiliar environments. This framing clarifies why students with comparable formal access can experience divergent outcomes: conversion factors mediate whether mobility can be translated into academic progression, professional signalling, or durable networks.

Structural conditions not only shape access but also influence how mobility is experienced and later interpreted. Students' perceptions of institutional value—whether mobility is recognised, celebrated, or administratively

marginalised—inform their sense of belonging and academic legitimacy. Institutional recognition upon return, including credit transfer efficiency and reintegration support, further shapes how mobility is integrated into academic trajectories. These dimensions speak directly to Research Questions 3 and 4, which examine impact, identity, and post-return meaning-making.

Situating mobility within this stratified landscape clarifies that student lived experience is not solely an individual narrative of aspiration or transformation. It is embedded within institutional environments that distribute opportunity unevenly and signal, implicitly or explicitly, whose mobility is anticipated and supported. By foregrounding these structural mediations, this section establishes the contextual architecture necessary for interpreting accounts of preparation, support, growth, and reintegration in the chapters that follow.

Spatial inequalities further infringe access. Rural origin and distance from metropolitan campuses can increase informational costs, reduce exposure to programme advertising and preparatory workshops, and complicate the logistics of document procurement and visa processing. Schooling histories and digital connectivity similarly mediate readiness to navigate application platforms and partner requirements, reinforcing cumulative advantage among students embedded in better-resourced networks.

Financial aid architectures play a decisive role. The timing of scholarship announcements, the proportion of funding allocated to living costs versus

tuition, and the portability of aid across partners determine whether qualified candidates can practically accept offers. Where funding is fragmented or back-loaded, financially constrained students may self-exclude despite meeting academic criteria, underscoring how funding design interacts with social stratification to shape who moves.

2.3 Epistemic and Linguistic Mediation

International student mobility does not occur within a neutral epistemic terrain. In the South African context, mobility participation is mediated by linguistic and epistemic hierarchies that shape how students experience preparation, recognition, and academic legitimacy. English functions simultaneously as a gateway to global participation and as a mechanism of exclusion. While it is defended as a pragmatic lingua franca for international exchange, its dominance often marginalises African languages in formal academic spaces (Stroud, 2020).

These linguistic dynamics intersect with epistemic hierarchies in which Euro-American theoretical paradigms frequently anchor curricula, citation practices, and methodological norms. Jansen (2009) characterises this as epistemic dependency, wherein intellectual authority is implicitly externalised. For mobile students, such hierarchies may surface in subtle ways: in the need to translate local knowledge into globally legible forms, in the privileging of

Northern theoretical references, or in the uneven recognition of African scholarship.

Citation practices form a practical interface between language and legitimacy. When canonical repertoires remain narrowly drawn, the visibility of African scholarship and the evaluative criteria applied to student work are affected, shaping what counts as appropriate evidence and whose voices are treated as authoritative. Attention to citation politics, therefore, complements language policy debates by identifying how epistemic hierarchies are reproduced through everyday academic practice.

Assessment practices and rubric design can entrench these dynamics. If criteria implicitly privilege particular stylistic conventions, citation repertoires, or argumentative forms, students may be incentivised to align with dominant norms even when such alignment compresses local knowledge or multilingual expression. Attention to assessment, therefore, complements curricular debates by locating epistemic governance within the everyday practices of teaching and evaluation.

These tensions became highly visible during the 2015–2016 student protests, where calls for decolonisation foregrounded the politics of knowledge and belonging (Mbembe, 2015). Although these debates were not framed primarily around mobility, they illuminate the broader institutional environment

within which mobility is pursued. Students preparing for or returning from international study navigate not only logistical processes but also questions of intellectual validation and linguistic legitimacy.

Understanding these epistemic mediations is central to this study's third and fourth research questions, which explore academic growth, cultural negotiation, and post-return meaning-making. Mobility may expand exposure and confidence; it may also intensify awareness of knowledge hierarchies and positionality. Situating student narratives within this epistemic terrain allows the analysis to move beyond procedural access toward the interpretive dimensions of academic and cultural transformation.

2.4 Institutional Mediation of Mobility

International student mobility is shaped not only by national policy but by institutional capacity and strategic orientation. South Africa's differentiated higher education landscape produces uneven mobility infrastructures. Historically advantaged universities, equipped with established international partnerships and administrative capacity, often sustain structured mobility pipelines and comprehensive student support mechanisms (Badat, 2010; Cloete., 2015).

By contrast, institutions operating under resource constraints may find it difficult to sustain consistent funding streams, staff dedicated to international offices,

or scale exchange agreements. These disparities influence the clarity of selection criteria, the availability of financial aid, the efficiency of credit articulation, and the visibility of mobility programmes within institutional culture. Such institutional variation directly shapes how students perceive the value their universities place on mobility. Where mobility is embedded within strategic plans and celebrated as an institutional priority, preparation may be experienced as supported and legitimised. Where programmes are peripheral or administratively fragile, mobility may appear episodic or individually driven rather than institutionally sustained.

Institutional practice architectures—policies, routines, and temporalities of approval—also shape the lived timing of mobility. Application windows that misalign with partner calendars, ad hoc credit recognition, or late funding confirmations can introduce friction that disproportionately affects first-generation and financially constrained students. In this sense, institutional time operates as a structuring condition of equitable access and meaningful participation.

International offices often function as boundary organisations mediating between external partners and internal academic departments. Their mandate, staffing profiles, and authority to coordinate credit articulation and funding logistics influence whether programmes are routinised or reliant on ad hoc brokerage. Where boundary roles are weakly institutionalised,

coordination costs are borne by students, amplifying the salience of prior social capital in successfully assembling the mobility pathway.

These differentiated institutional environments are not merely administrative backdrops; they structure lived experiences of preparation, recognition, and reintegration. Aligning with Research Questions 1 and 2, this study therefore considers how institutional mediation influences both access pathways and perceptions of equity and support.

Taken together, structural and institutional mediations clarify the conditions under which identity work is undertaken; the next sections examine debates on mutuality, identity, and epistemic authority within mobility.

2.5 Mutuality, Identity, and Epistemic Hierarchies

Contemporary scholarship increasingly interrogates the normative assumptions underpinning internationalisation, particularly the persistence of hierarchical partnership models and epistemic asymmetries within global higher education. While collaboration is frequently framed in the language of reciprocity, research demonstrates that structural inequalities continue to shape knowledge production, funding flows, and reputational capital, often privileging institutions located in the Global North (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Mlambo & Baxter, 2018). These asymmetries extend beyond material resources to epistemic authority, influencing whose knowledge is legitimised and whose

institutional voice carries weight in transnational engagements (Lough & Oppenheim, 2017). In response, scholars advocating solidarity-based or justice-oriented internationalisation call for partnership models grounded in co-creation, long-term capacity building, and shared governance rather than symbolic collaboration (Benner & Pastor, 2021).

Parallel to this structural critique, a growing body of literature foregrounds the phenomenological dimensions of student mobility. Mobility is conceptualised not merely as geographic relocation but as a liminal process in which identities are destabilised and reconstituted. Turner's theorisation of liminality provides a foundational framework for understanding transitional states marked by ambiguity and reorientation (Turner et al., 2017). Within higher education contexts, students often occupy in-between positions, navigating unfamiliar institutional norms while renegotiating prior cultural and academic identities (Killick, 2011).

This identity negotiation unfolds within epistemic environments structured by power. Postcolonial and decolonial scholars argue that international academic spaces frequently reproduce hierarchies that marginalise non-Western epistemologies (Spivak, 2004; Ploner & Nada, 2020). Such dynamics may manifest subtly through curricular design, citation practices, pedagogical assumptions, and expectations of linguistic conformity. Delpit's (2018) notion of the "culture of power" further illuminates how implicit institutional codes shape

participation and recognition, often disadvantaging students unfamiliar with dominant academic conventions.

Identity formation in mobility contexts is therefore relational and performative. Drawing on hybridity theory, Bhabha conceptualises transnational encounters as generative “third spaces” where identities are negotiated rather than resolved (Easthope, 1998). Similarly, Giddens’ account of the reflexive self in late modernity situates identity as an ongoing project shaped through interaction and adaptation (Adams, 2002). Within international education scholarship, these perspectives have been extended to examine how students actively navigate, resist, or strategically adapt to institutional expectations (Tran & Vu, 2018; Madge et al., 2015).

Affect has also emerged as a central analytic in mobility studies. Emotional experiences of belonging, alienation, affirmation, and precarity are increasingly recognised as integral to the educational trajectory rather than incidental to it (Ahmed, 2004; Madge et al., 2015). These affective dimensions intersect with race, class, gender, and geography, shaping differential experiences of visibility and legitimacy within transnational academic spaces (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2013). Mobility thus operates within layered structures of inequality that extend beyond national borders.

Governance arrangements within partnerships also pattern the distribution of symbolic and material returns. Co-authorship norms, authorship ordering, and the location of editorial control in joint outputs can reproduce asymmetries even where resources are nominally shared. Similarly, eligibility rules and selection committees constituted externally to sending institutions may narrow the scope for local agenda-setting, with implications for which mobility is anticipated and legitimised.

Collectively, this body of scholarship positions international student mobility as simultaneously structural and experiential: embedded within global hierarchies of knowledge and power, yet lived through embodied processes of identity negotiation, emotional labour, and epistemic positioning. This conceptual framing provides a foundation for examining how students interpret, inhabit, and make meaning of their mobility experiences within the South African context.

2.6 Intersectionality, Social Positioning, and Agency

International student mobility is shaped by historically sedimented inequalities rather than unfolding as a neutral educational opportunity. For students from historically marginalised communities, mobility is mediated by race, gender, class, linguistic background, geography, and first-generation status. These social locations influence access, preparedness, belonging, and recognition within transnational academic spaces. Postcolonial analyses demonstrate that

higher education institutions often privilege dominant epistemic norms, rendering certain forms of cultural capital peripheral or invisible (Ploner & Nada, 2020). Intersectional scholarship further shows that overlapping identities structure both academic and socio-emotional experiences, producing uneven patterns of participation and legitimacy (Crenshaw, 2024).

Intersectionality, as articulated by Collins and Bilge (2020), provides a critical analytic for examining how systems of power co-constitute lived experience. Rather than cataloguing identity markers, this framework interrogates how social categories operate relationally within institutional contexts. In international student mobility, such analysis shifts attention from aggregate participation rates to differentiated conditions of movement: who accesses mobility, under what structural constraints, and with what consequences. Cho et al. (2013) caution that intersectionality requires attention to institutional arrangements and power relations, not merely descriptive diversity. Within global education, socio-economic capital, institutional embeddedness, and cultural fluency significantly shape the capacity to convert opportunity into meaningful educational outcomes (Brooks & Waters, 2011).

Affective and symbolic dimensions further complicate these trajectories. Mobility often requires students to negotiate unfamiliar pedagogical expectations, linguistic hierarchies, and implicit institutional codes. This emotional and cognitive labour, though frequently under-acknowledged,

forms a central component of the mobility experience (Baglow & Gair, 2019). Belonging, legitimacy, and academic confidence are shaped by how identities are read within host environments.

Operationalising intersectionality in analysis entails attending to co-constitution rather than additivity: how, for example, first-generation status interacts with rural origin and language to shape informational access; or how gendered expectations intersect with financial precarity to contour risk tolerance and programme selection. This orientation supports a more differentiated reading of mobility conditions and mitigates the tendency to treat categories as independent variables.

Methodologically, intersectional analysis recommends sampling strategies that surface heterogeneity within categories (for example, first-generation status across different faculties or campuses) and analytic moves that trace interaction effects rather than focusing solely on main effects. Attention to institutional texts—calls for applications, selection rubrics, and funding contracts—can further illuminate how categories are operationalised and how they shape differential conditions of movement.

At the same time, scholarship increasingly foregrounds student agency within these constraints. Tran and Vu (2018) conceptualise “agency in mobility” as the situated capacity to interpret, negotiate, and, at times, rework institutional

expectations. Marginalised identities are not solely sites of disadvantage; they may also function as sources of relational knowledge, multilingual competence, and adaptive capacity. However, agency operates within structural limits. Empirical analyses in the South African context indicate that mobility participation remains stratified, with students from urban, well-resourced, or elite schooling backgrounds disproportionately represented (Heleta & Chasi, 2023).

If social positioning structures the conditions of action, agency becomes intelligible through the narratives and practices by which students negotiate recognition. The next section examines agency as a relational and discursive practice.

2.7 Agency and Narrative Meaning-Making

While international student mobility is frequently analysed through institutional policy, funding structures, and strategic imperatives, a growing body of scholarship foregrounds the interpretive and narrative labour undertaken by students themselves. Dominant policy discourses often position students as beneficiaries of opportunity or instruments of economic and diplomatic agendas. In contrast, critical mobility scholarship emphasises students' capacity to interpret, negotiate, and reshape experience within transnational contexts (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Intersectional analyses underscore that agency is neither abstract nor uniformly distributed. As Collins and Bilge (2020) argue, social categories such as race, class, gender, and nationality operate relationally within systems of power, shaping the conditions under which individuals act. Within mobility contexts, agency is exercised in relation to institutional expectations, epistemic hierarchies, and social positioning. It emerges through situated practices of adaptation, negotiation, and at times resistance (Inouye et al., 2023).

Recent scholarship conceptualises agency not simply as autonomous self-direction but as relational and discursive practice. Xu (2021) describes the enactment of agency as resistance, wherein students respond to misrecognition or marginalisation through self-positioning strategies. Similarly, Yamamoto (2019) frames the “transitional self” as a dynamic identity negotiated across shifting cultural and institutional terrains. These perspectives highlight the oscillation between constraint and creativity that characterises many mobility experiences.

Narrative meaning-making constitutes a central dimension of this process. Storytelling, peer dialogue, reflective writing, and informal communication platforms function as sites where students interpret journeys and articulate evolving identities (Seithers, 2020). Abdulla (2017) demonstrates that meaning-making is often forged through struggle and reinterpretation, rather than seamless adaptation. Collective processes of narration can further reinforce

agency, as shared experiences generate solidarities and alternative interpretive frameworks (Bereményi & Durst, 2021).

Narratives are also temporally patterned. Pre-departure stories often feature anticipatory orientation and the work of assembling legitimacy; in-situ accounts foreground negotiation and recalibration; post-return reflections revisit earlier expectations in light of institutional reception and labour-market signals. Reading narratives longitudinally clarifies how meanings are revised across phases and how earlier institutional signals echo into later identity work. Digital platforms and peer networks increasingly function as distributed sites of guidance and validation, where information about funding, application tactics, and host expectations circulates informally. Such mediated spaces can amplify agency by lowering informational barriers and enabling collaborative problem-solving, while also reproducing inequalities when access to these networks is uneven.

Self-authorship occurs within institutional discourses that shape what forms of identity are legible or valued. Kettle (2005) notes that international students frequently engage in strategic self-presentation aligned with expectations of resilience, intercultural competence, or global citizenship. Such positioning may enable recognition but can also obscure tensions or exclusions embedded within institutional environments. Kim (2024) extends this analysis by conceptualising critical agency as the capacity not only to adapt but to interrogate structural conditions.

Viewed collectively, this literature positions agency in international student mobility as relational, negotiated, and embedded within broader politics of recognition. Students are not passive recipients of internationalisation processes; rather, they participate in constructing the meanings of mobility through narrative, reflexive, and sometimes resistant practices. This framing provides an analytic foundation for examining how students interpret and rearticulate mobility experience within specific institutional and socio-historical contexts.

2.8 Post-Mobility and Career Aspirations

Scholarship on international student mobility increasingly recognises that the period following return is not a discrete endpoint but part of a broader mobility trajectory. Rather than assuming a linear transformation, post-return literature conceptualises this phase as a continuation of identity negotiation, reflexivity, and reorientation within the constraints of local academic and socio-economic contexts. Mobility's impact is therefore understood not only through competencies acquired abroad but through the manner in which individuals navigate the conditions into which they return.

Research shows that mobility often reshapes sense of self and imagined futures, expanding awareness of academic and professional possibilities (Marginson, 2014). However, these reconfigured aspirations interact with

structural conditions that may enable or limit actualisation. Madge et al. (2015) argue that institutional and social environments do not always recognise or incorporate the skills, dispositions, or broader perspectives students bring back, which can lead to ambiguity or discontinuity in the post-return phase.

A recurrent theme in the literature concerns the misalignment between personal transformation and institutional or labour-market recognition. Studies across diverse contexts note that students may experience a muted or uneven reception upon return, in which mobility-related growth is acknowledged symbolically but inconsistently integrated into academic or career pathways (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). This tension is often heightened for students from structurally marginalised backgrounds, for whom mobility expands horizons without necessarily altering the material constraints of the local contexts to which they return. Research on graduate transitions similarly highlights that labour-market opportunities do not uniformly reward international exposure, particularly where structural unemployment and inequitable access to professional networks persist (Van Mol et al., 2021).

Read through the lens of recognition and misrecognition, the value of mobility-acquired dispositions is mediated by institutional and labour-market logics. Symbolic acknowledgement without structural accommodation constitutes a form of misrecognition, clarifying why identity recalibration and aspiration re-alignment often occur alongside administrative reintegration.

Credential signalling and network activation are central to this phase. Where host-institution recognitions, supervisor endorsements, or co-curricular certifications are legible to local employers and academic gatekeepers, mobility can be converted into opportunities; where they are opaque, the signalling value is diminished. Alumni networks and peer communities may partially bridge this gap by translating experiences into locally intelligible narratives and references.

Post-return experiences are also shaped by affective and relational dynamics. The literature identifies challenges such as “reverse culture shock,” the recalibration of expectations, and the negotiation of shifting identities within familiar environments (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). These processes are influenced by the availability of social support, opportunities for reflection, and institutional mechanisms that facilitate re-entry. In contexts where such structures are limited, the interpretive labour of meaning-making often falls to students themselves.

Scholarly debates increasingly highlight the role of higher education institutions in the post-mobility phase. While outbound mobility receives significant policy and administrative attention, reintegration processes are less developed. Authors argue for the value of structured post-return spaces—such as facilitated reflection, peer dialogue, career-aligned mentorship, and opportunities to articulate mobility-related learning—both for student

development and for institutional learning (Madge et al., 2015; Arthur & Flynn, 2011). These interventions are presented not as prescriptive solutions but as mechanisms through which institutions can acknowledge mobility as a longitudinal learning process rather than a discrete event.

Across this body of work, post-mobility experience emerges as a dynamic intersection of aspiration, identity, and structural condition. International mobility may reorient a sense of possibility, but its longer-term significance is shaped by recognition, opportunity, and the institutional environments into which students return. Within the broader literature, this phase remains comparatively under-theorised, particularly in relation to students from the Global South and from historically marginalised backgrounds—highlighting the need for interpretive analyses that examine how students make sense of return within uneven socio-economic and institutional terrains.

2.9 Decolonising Internationalisation: Coloniality, Pluriversality, and Transformative Reconstitution

Contemporary debates on internationalisation in higher education are increasingly framed through the lens of decolonial critique. While dominant institutional narratives continue to position internationalisation as a neutral vehicle for global competitiveness, knowledge exchange, and intercultural exposure, decolonial scholars argue that it remains deeply entangled with the enduring logics of coloniality. Far from operating as a benign mechanism of

global engagement, internationalisation often reproduces epistemic hierarchies, geopolitical asymmetries, and racialised distributions of authority within the global knowledge economy.

At the centre of this critique lies what de Sousa Santos (2014) terms abyssal thinking: a system of epistemic classification that renders certain knowledges, languages, and histories invisible or inferior. Within international higher education, this manifests in the privileging of Euro-American epistemologies as universal, while African and other Global South knowledge systems are marginalised, folklorised, or treated as supplemental. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) extends this argument, demonstrating how coloniality persists not merely in economic dependency but in the structuring of curricula, research validation, and partnership architectures. Internationalisation, in this sense, is not external to coloniality; it can function as one of its contemporary carriers.

These dynamics are materially embedded. Student mobility flows disproportionately toward institutions in the Global North; research partnerships are often asymmetrically funded and agenda-setting; and institutional rankings consolidate a competitive hierarchy that privileges historically dominant systems. Such patterns are neither accidental nor neutral. They are structured by global regimes of capital, language dominance, and credential recognition that position some institutions as producers of authoritative knowledge and others as sites of consumption or peripheral contribution.

An intersectional lens further reveals how these hierarchies operate not only at the geopolitical level but also within student participation itself. Drawing on Collins and Bilge (2016), mobility cannot be disentangled from race, class, gender, nationality, and first-generation status. Access to international experiences is shaped by financial capital, institutional networks, linguistic competence, and familial educational history. Thus, even within decolonial aspirations, mobility risks reproducing elite circulation unless its structural gatekeeping mechanisms are interrogated.

If critique exposes the colonial underside of internationalisation, decolonial thought also advances a reconstructive project. Rather than advocating simple “delinking” from global systems, scholars propose pluriversality as an alternative organising principle. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) conceptualises the pluriversity as an institutional formation in which multiple epistemic traditions coexist without hierarchical subordination. This is not a call for epistemic relativism, but for relationality: knowledge traditions engage dialogically rather than competitively.

Paulson (2018) similarly advances the notion of pluriversal learning, in which mobility is reframed from one-directional knowledge acquisition toward reciprocal co-production. In this model, students and institutions do not merely absorb dominant epistemic frameworks; they participate in negotiated encounters that allow multiple knowledge systems to inform one another. Such

a reframing challenges the implicit assumption that educational value flows primarily from North to South.

Institutionally, this reconstructive project demands more than curricular inclusion. Le Grange (2016) argues that decolonial transformation requires restructuring governance, language policy, research priorities, and partnership design. Reciprocal collaboration must extend to co-authorship, co-supervision, shared agenda-setting, and equitable resource distribution. Without such systemic shifts, decolonial rhetoric risks being absorbed into the very structures it seeks to unsettle.

Within the African context, these debates intersect with continental aspirations articulated in Agenda 2063, which envisions higher education as central to intellectual sovereignty, regional integration, and sustainable development. Here, internationalisation is neither rejected nor romanticised; it is reoriented toward strategic agency. Mobility becomes valuable not insofar as it reproduces dependency, but insofar as it strengthens epistemic self-determination and fosters networks grounded in mutuality.

Crucially, decoloniality does not romanticise the local or deny global interdependence. Instead, it interrogates the terms on which interdependence is structured. Mbembe (2016) cautions that decolonisation must avoid both nostalgic nativism and uncritical cosmopolitanism. The task is

not withdrawal from global circuits, but their reconstitution under conditions of epistemic dignity and negotiated reciprocity.

This theoretical reorientation has direct implications for international student mobility. Mobility is not merely a logistical movement across borders; it is an encounter between differently valued epistemic worlds. Students carry with them historically situated identities and intellectual inheritances that may be affirmed, marginalised, or transformed within host contexts. To treat mobility as an unproblematic good obscures how such encounters are shaped by power.

Accordingly, decolonising internationalisation requires attending simultaneously to macro-structural architectures and micro-level experience. Structural reform without experiential transformation risks bureaucratic adjustment; experiential accounts without structural critique risk individualising what systemic inequalities are. A decolonial lens insists on its co-constitution.

Taken together, this consolidated framework positions internationalisation as a contested terrain. It is structured by colonial residues yet animated by transformative possibility. It reproduces hierarchy yet contains the seeds of pluriversal reconfiguration. For the present study, this duality is central: international student mobility is analysed neither as emancipatory by default nor as irredeemably complicit, but as a socially stratified practice whose transformative potential depends on how power, knowledge, and agency are negotiated across institutional and lived domains.

2.10 Theorising the Lived Experience: Phenomenology, Mobility, and Transformation within Coloniality

Contemporary scholarship on international student mobility increasingly calls for analytic approaches that move beyond quantitative indicators and policy-driven framings. While participation rates, graduate outcomes and employability benchmarks offer operational utility, they provide limited insight into the interpretive processes through which students make sense of mobility. In contexts marked by historical inequality and epistemic stratification, such as South Africa, an experiential orientation becomes methodologically and ethically necessary. Understanding mobility requires attention not only to structural arrangements but to how those arrangements are encountered, interpreted and woven into trajectories of becoming. To this end, the present study draws on phenomenology to illuminate how mobility is lived, perceived, embodied and re-narrated.

Phenomenology, particularly in its hermeneutic traditions, conceptualises experience as a site of meaning construction rather than a repository of impressions. Central to this orientation is the notion of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the background horizon through which individuals interpret and navigate social reality (Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1967). Mobility constitutes a reorientation of this lifeworld. Students move not merely across national borders, but across normative systems of recognition, authority, language and belonging. What was previously taken for granted becomes visible.

Assumptions about academic legitimacy, intellectual confidence and cultural familiarity are unsettled, rendering perceptible the historically sedimented structures that shape everyday understanding.

Schutz's account of intersubjectivity further clarifies that the lifeworld is socially structured through typifications and shared stocks of knowledge. When students enter new institutional and cultural environments, they encounter unfamiliar typifications: expectations regarding participation, performance, academic voice and disciplinary authority. These encounters are not neutral. They are mediated by asymmetries of power and epistemic hierarchy. Recognition and misrecognition occur within contexts where particular accents, epistemic references and intellectual genealogies carry differential legitimacy. Thus, the phenomenological lens does not abstract experience from structure; rather, it reveals how structure becomes perceptible in lived interaction.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as articulated by van Manen (2023), deepens this orientation by emphasising interpretive labour. Experience is temporally layered and narratively consolidated. International mobility unfolds across preparation, participation and return, each phase retrospectively reframed through memory and anticipation. Students do not simply undergo change; they interpret it. Emotional texture, bodily memory and relational negotiation become part of how transformation is articulated. Internationalisation, in this view, is not solely a policy domain but a field of encounter and reflexivity in

which shifts in identity and understanding take shape within specific institutional and cultural milieus.

To avoid treating experience as universal or disembodied, the study integrates intersectional analysis. Collins and Bilge (2020) conceptualise intersectionality as a critical framework attentive to how race, class, gender, nationality and other axes of difference interlock in structuring opportunity and constraint. Applied to mobility, this lens clarifies that students enter transnational academic spaces with differentiated forms of capital and precarity. First-generation status, racialisation, linguistic positioning and institutional background contour the conditions under which mobility is navigated. The lifeworld is therefore never abstract; it is socially located. Intersectionality situates phenomenological attention within broader distributions of power, ensuring that meaning-making is analysed in relation to historically structured inequality.

This convergence of phenomenology and intersectionality enables mobility to be theorised as both personally meaningful and structurally mediated. Studies have shown that the affective and experiential geographies of mobility often mirror global hierarchies of knowledge and recognition (Madge et al., 2009). For students from historically disadvantaged institutions or marginalised communities, mobility may entail negotiating spaces where their epistemic inheritances are peripheralised. Yet it may also open possibilities for reflexive repositioning and expanded intellectual horizons. Transformation, therefore, is

neither guaranteed nor uniformly experienced; it emerges contingently within fields of recognition and constraint.

Agency, within this framework, is relational and situated. It is expressed less through dramatic rupture than through everyday practices of orientation: reflective writing, strategic language adaptation, relational alignment and subtle forms of resistance (Seithers, 2020). Xu (2021) similarly demonstrates that agency materialises through struggle, relational support and the mobilisation of cultural resources rather than through autonomous individualism. Such accounts resist romanticising mobility while recognising students as active interpreters of their circumstances.

Theoretical discussions increasingly conceptualise transformation as liminal and iterative rather than linear. Yamamoto (2019) and Erichsen (2009) describe identity reconstruction as unfolding through ambiguity, reflexivity, and ongoing negotiation. Mobility suspends familiar certainties without guaranteeing stable incorporation into new contexts. Students often inhabit an in-between condition—no longer fully anchored in prior environments, yet not entirely assimilated into host settings. This liminality can generate heightened reflexivity, enabling critical awareness of previously invisible assumptions. At the same time, it may expose vulnerability within hierarchically organised academic spaces.

When situated alongside decolonial critique, phenomenology acquires additional analytic force. The epistemic hierarchies identified in decolonial scholarship are not abstract formations; they are lived in classroom interaction, curriculum design, assessment regimes and subtle cues of intellectual authority. Conversely, pluriversal possibility is experienced when alternative knowledges are recognised, and reciprocity is enacted. Mobility thus becomes the site where structural coloniality and personal transformation intersect. Structural reform without attention to lived negotiation risks remaining procedural; experiential accounts without structural critique risk individualising systemic inequality. Their integration allows for multi-scalar analysis.

For the present study, this synthesis is methodologically decisive. By centring student narratives, the research treats lived experience as epistemically generative rather than illustrative. Narratives disclose how institutional mediation, aspirational projects and colonial residues converge within trajectories of becoming. Phenomenology operates here not in tension with decoloniality, but as its experiential complement—revealing how the politics of knowledge are inhabited, negotiated and, at times, reconfigured through international student mobility.

Taken together, the preceding sections have established international student mobility as a structurally stratified, epistemically contested and experientially mediated phenomenon. Decolonial scholarship reveals the hierarchies that shape global knowledge exchange; pluriversal frameworks articulate

normative possibilities for reconstitution; phenomenological and intersectional approaches illuminate how these conditions are lived, negotiated and narratively consolidated. What emerges is not a singular account of mobility, but a layered conceptual terrain in which structure and subjectivity are mutually constitutive. The synthesis that follows consolidates these strands and clarifies the specific analytical contribution of the present study within this contested field.

2.11 Moving Beyond Delinking: Pluriversality and the Reorientation of Internationalisation

Debates on internationalisation increasingly recognise that global mobility patterns and knowledge flows remain structured by Eurocentric norms that privilege Northward movement, canonical Western curricula, and ranking systems that consolidate the Global North as the locus of epistemic authority. Within this architecture, African intellectual traditions are frequently positioned as peripheral, supplemental or context-bound rather than constitutive of global knowledge production (Heleta, 2016; Shay, 2016). Internationalisation thus operates not as a neutral exchange mechanism but as a historically sedimented field shaped by colonial legacies and asymmetrical regimes of validation.

Decolonial scholarship responds not merely by calling for “inclusion,” but by interrogating the classificatory logics that determine what counts as

international, legitimate and universal. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) challenges the universalising presumption embedded in dominant internationalisation discourse, advancing instead the notion of pluriversity, an institutional formation grounded in epistemic multiplicity and dialogical coexistence. Pluriversity moves beyond additive diversification; it demands reconstitution of the epistemic centre itself.

This critique resonates with de Sousa Santos (2015) theorisation of epistemicide, which identifies the systematic marginalisation or erasure of non-Western knowledge traditions within global academic practice. Epistemicide is reproduced not only through curricular exclusion but through funding priorities, citation regimes, language hierarchies and partnership asymmetries. Within such environments, international student mobility becomes a terrain of epistemic negotiation. Students encounter dominant intellectual traditions as normative, often navigating subtle pressures to translate, assimilate or silence alternative epistemic inheritances.

Mbembe (2016) articulation of epistemic disobedience deepens this argument by foregrounding practices of reclamation. Diversifying citation practices, foregrounding marginalised intellectual genealogies, integrating vernacular epistemologies and questioning canonical hierarchies are not symbolic gestures; they are interventions in the politics of knowledge production. These practices reconfigure who is authorised to speak and whose knowledge circulates as authoritative.

Intersectional analysis clarifies that these epistemic hierarchies are not abstract but lived through differentiated subject positions. Collins and Bilge (2020) emphasise that intersectionality reveals how race, class, nationality and language intersect in structuring power. Within mobility contexts, students occupy global academic spaces with uneven access to recognition and legitimacy. Internationalisation, therefore, functions simultaneously as a mechanism of reproduction and as a potential site of contestation.

Emergent developments within African higher education illustrate attempts to reorient this terrain. Regional mobility schemes, Afrocentric curricular collaborations and South–South research partnerships signal efforts to cultivate more polycentric knowledge networks (Teferra & Knight, 2008; Tikly, 2019). Such initiatives challenge the gravitational pull of Euro-American validation by affirming the sufficiency and authority of Southern epistemic traditions. Paulson's (2018) conception of pluriversal learning similarly advances pedagogies rooted in diverse cosmologies while remaining open to dialogical exchange.

Realising these commitments requires institutional restructuring rather than rhetorical repositioning. Le Grange (2018) argues that decolonisation entails transforming the logics underpinning governance, curriculum design, partnership formation and mobility programme architecture. Funding arrangements, research collaboration models and credit recognition systems must be recalibrated to resist extractive patterns and enable reciprocity.

In this reframing, internationalisation shifts from prestige-driven outward alignment toward relational, solidaristic and contextually accountable engagement. Such orientations resonate with the African Union's Agenda 2063, which situates knowledge production within continental priorities and regional integration. As articulated by Reiter (2018) and Zagelmeyer (2024), a pluriversal approach is not merely theoretical; it is political and ethical, challenging the monocultural inheritance of modernity and envisioning global engagement grounded in justice and mutual recognition.

For international student mobility, this reconceptualisation is consequential. Mobility is not simply directional movement toward established centres of authority; it becomes an encounter between differently valued epistemic worlds. Its transformative potential depends on whether institutional arrangements reproduce hierarchical validation or cultivate dialogical reciprocity. The lived negotiations of students—how they interpret recognition, navigate marginalisation and reconfigure intellectual identity—are therefore inseparable from the structural conditions under which mobility is organised.

This reorientation from hierarchical internationalisation to pluriversal engagement establishes the structural terrain within which experiential negotiation unfolds. The analysis now turns to phenomenology to examine how these epistemic conditions are encountered, embodied and made meaningful within students' lifeworlds.

2.12 Theorising the Lived Experience: Phenomenology, Mobility, and Transformation within Coloniality

Contemporary scholarship on international student mobility increasingly calls for analytic approaches that move beyond quantitative indicators and policy-driven framings. While participation rates, graduate outcomes and employability benchmarks offer operational utility, they provide limited insight into the interpretive processes through which students make sense of mobility. In contexts marked by historical inequality and epistemic stratification, such as South Africa, an experiential orientation becomes methodologically and ethically necessary. Understanding mobility requires attention not only to structural arrangements but to how those arrangements are encountered, interpreted and woven into trajectories of becoming. To this end, the present study draws on phenomenology to illuminate how mobility is lived, perceived, embodied and re-narrated.

Phenomenology, particularly in its hermeneutic traditions, conceptualises experience as a site of meaning construction rather than a repository of impressions. Central to this orientation is the notion of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the background horizon through which individuals interpret and navigate social reality (Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1967). Mobility constitutes a reorientation of this lifeworld. Students move not merely across national borders, but across normative systems of recognition, authority, language and belonging. What was previously taken for granted becomes visible.

Assumptions about academic legitimacy, intellectual confidence and cultural familiarity are unsettled, rendering perceptible the historically sedimented structures that shape everyday understanding.

Schutz's account of intersubjectivity further clarifies that the lifeworld is socially structured through typifications and shared stocks of knowledge. When students enter new institutional and cultural environments, they encounter unfamiliar typifications: expectations regarding participation, performance, academic voice and disciplinary authority. These encounters are not neutral. They are mediated by asymmetries of power and epistemic hierarchy. Recognition and misrecognition occur within contexts where particular accents, epistemic references and intellectual genealogies carry differential legitimacy. Thus, the phenomenological lens does not abstract experience from structure; rather, it reveals how structure becomes perceptible in lived interaction.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as articulated by van Manen (2023), deepens this orientation by emphasising interpretive labour. Experience is temporally layered and narratively consolidated. International mobility unfolds across preparation, participation and return, each phase retrospectively reframed through memory and anticipation. Students do not simply undergo change; they interpret it. Emotional texture, bodily memory and relational negotiation become part of how transformation is articulated. Internationalisation, in this view, is not solely a policy domain but a field of encounter and reflexivity in

which shifts in identity and understanding take shape within specific institutional and cultural milieus.

To avoid treating experience as universal or disembodied, the study integrates intersectional analysis. Collins and Bilge (2020) conceptualise intersectionality as a critical framework attentive to how race, class, gender, nationality and other axes of difference interlock in structuring opportunity and constraint. Applied to mobility, this lens clarifies that students enter transnational academic spaces with differentiated forms of capital and precarity. First-generation status, racialisation, linguistic positioning and institutional background contour the conditions under which mobility is navigated. The lifeworld is therefore never abstract; it is socially located. Intersectionality situates phenomenological attention within broader distributions of power, ensuring that meaning-making is analysed in relation to historically structured inequality.

This convergence of phenomenology and intersectionality enables mobility to be theorised as both personally meaningful and structurally mediated. Studies have shown that the affective and experiential geographies of mobility often mirror global hierarchies of knowledge and recognition (Madge et al., 2009). For students from historically disadvantaged institutions or marginalised communities, mobility may entail negotiating spaces where their epistemic inheritances are peripheralised. Yet it may also open possibilities for reflexive repositioning and expanded intellectual horizons. Transformation, therefore, is

neither guaranteed nor uniformly experienced; it emerges contingently within fields of recognition and constraint.

Agency, within this framework, is relational and situated. According to Seithers (2020) , it is expressed less through dramatic rupture than through everyday practices of orientation: reflective writing, strategic language adaptation, relational alignment and subtle forms of resistance. Xu (2021), similarly demonstrates that agency materialises through struggle, relational support and the mobilisation of cultural resources rather than through autonomous individualism. Such accounts resist romanticising mobility while recognising students as active interpreters of their circumstances.

Theoretical discussions increasingly conceptualise transformation as liminal and iterative rather than linear. Yamamoto (2019) and Erichsen (2009) describe identity reconstruction as unfolding through ambiguity, reflexivity and ongoing negotiation. Mobility suspends familiar certainties without guaranteeing stable incorporation into new contexts. Students often inhabit an in-between condition—no longer fully anchored in prior environments, yet not entirely assimilated into host settings. This liminality can generate heightened reflexivity, enabling critical awareness of previously invisible assumptions. At the same time, it may expose vulnerability within hierarchically organised academic spaces.

When situated alongside decolonial critique, phenomenology acquires additional analytic force. The epistemic hierarchies identified in decolonial scholarship are not abstract formations; they are lived in classroom interaction, curriculum design, assessment regimes and subtle cues of intellectual authority. Conversely, pluriversal possibility is experienced when alternative knowledges are recognised and reciprocity is enacted. Mobility thus becomes the site where structural coloniality and personal transformation intersect. Structural reform without attention to lived negotiation risks remaining procedural; experiential accounts without structural critique risk individualising systemic inequality. Their integration allows for multi-scalar analysis.

For the present study, this synthesis is methodologically decisive. By centring student narratives, the research treats lived experience as epistemically generative rather than illustrative. Narratives disclose how institutional mediation, aspirational projects and colonial residues converge within trajectories of becoming. Phenomenology operates here not in tension with decoloniality, but as its experiential complement—revealing how the politics of knowledge are inhabited, negotiated and, at times, reconfigured through international student mobility.

2.13 Synthesis and Conclusion: Integrating Knowledge, Gaps, and Study Contribution

The preceding review demonstrates that international student mobility (ISM) constitutes a mature and theoretically plural field, marked by substantial empirical accumulation and conceptual differentiation. Across economic, sociological and postcolonial traditions, several propositions are robustly established. Participation is structurally stratified. Push–pull frameworks Maringe and Gibbs (2008) and analyses grounded in capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Gopal, 2011) converge in showing that international mobility is shaped by uneven distributions of financial, social, and cultural capital. Within South Africa, apartheid legacies and differentiated institutional capacity further mediate access, producing layered inequalities across historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015).

Institutions, moreover, are not neutral conduits of opportunity. Their strategic prioritisation, administrative infrastructure and resource endowment shape not only selection and preparation, but also the quality of mobility experiences and the terms of reintegration (Hudzik, 2015). Mobility is simultaneously embedded within asymmetrical global knowledge systems. English-language dominance and the paradigmatic centrality of Euro-American scholarship configure the criteria through which academic excellence and epistemic legitimacy are recognised (Stein & McCartney, 2021; Stroud, 2020). At the level of lived experience, research confirms that mobility is affectively dense and

identity-shaping: liminality, hybridity and reflexivity characterise students' engagements across borders (Bhabha, 1994; Turner et al., 2017). Post-return trajectories are equally complex, involving recursive identity recalibration, renegotiation of recognition and relational reintegration (Tran & Vu, 2018; Waters, 2012). When read in concert, these strands position ISM as structurally conditioned, institutionally mediated, epistemically hierarchical and experientially significant.

Yet the review also exposes substantive lacunae. First, the field remains analytically fragmented. Structural, epistemic and phenomenological perspectives often proceed in parallel, with limited interrogation of how these dimensions interact within individual trajectories over time. Second, phenomenological accounts of outbound mobility from the Global South remain comparatively underdeveloped; much scholarship centres on Global North host contexts, leaving South African outbound experiences insufficiently theorised. Third, intersectional positionalities—particularly first-generation status and historically marginalised identities—are unevenly integrated into mobility analysis, with insufficient attention to how these intersect with institutional differentiation and epistemic hierarchy. Fourth, post-return meaning-making remains under-theorised: reintegration is frequently approached administratively rather than interpretively, obscuring the recursive labour through which belonging, aspiration and recognition are renegotiated.

This study addresses these conceptual and empirical gaps through an integrated interpretive framework that operates across four interrelated commitments. First, it synthesises structural stratification, institutional mediation and epistemic hierarchy within a single analytic lens, refusing their separation into discrete explanatory domains. Second, it centres student narratives as sites of interpretation, negotiation and embodiment, recognising narration as analytic practice rather than descriptive residue. Third, it conceptualises mobility as a longitudinal trajectory encompassing preparation, participation and post-return recalibration, thereby preserving temporal continuity. Fourth, it explicitly foregrounds first-generation and historically marginalised positionalities within a differentiated South African higher education system.

Rather than treating mobility as an event, policy instrument or bounded programme, the study conceptualises it as a recursive trajectory of becoming—structurally constrained, institutionally shaped, epistemically negotiated and affectively lived. This orientation reframes empirical inquiry: student accounts are understood as active meaning-making practices through which access, recognition and transformation are rendered intelligible across time and space.

A central throughline of the review has been integration. Classical push–pull and capital-based explanations illuminate patterned participation but do not adequately theorise the epistemic and linguistic conditions that shape academic legitimacy. Postcolonial and decolonial critiques render these

hierarchies visible, exposing how certain knowledge traditions acquire universal status while others are marginalised. Phenomenology and intersectionality, in turn, provide analytic resources for understanding how students inhabit these hierarchies—how identity work, self-positioning and relational negotiation unfold within stratified environments. The convergence of these strands produces a coherent analytic terrain in which access, experience and post-return recalibration are co-constituted rather than sequentially ordered.

Within this terrain, South Africa functions as an analytic prism rather than a comparative case. Historical inequality, institutional differentiation and policy ambition shape both the logistical and affective conditions of mobility: information flows, funding pathways, selection criteria and administrative navigation. Linguistic and epistemic hierarchies further mediate how achievement, knowledge and identity are interpreted. These structural and symbolic conditions establish the parameters within which identity work unfolds during mobility and upon return.

Temporality provides additional coherence. Mobility is framed as a longitudinal process through which aspirations are formed, identities renegotiated and future trajectories reimagined. Exposure during participation unsettles sedimented assumptions; return demands interpretive reconciliation between transformed selves and pre-existing social worlds. This temporal framing enables the study to trace how early structural positioning and institutional

mediation continue to shape post-return sense-making, academic progression and professional orientation.

Decolonial and pluriversal debates further recalibrate the evaluative horizon of internationalisation. Beyond additive inclusion, these perspectives interrogate epistemic authority, curricular design and partnership logics. Pluriversality reframes internationalisation as dialogical engagement among multiple knowledge traditions, while intersectionality sharpens attention to how social positioning shapes participation within that dialogue. Together, they provide conceptual criteria for interpreting legitimacy, justice and recognition as students encounter and assess mobility.

Methodologically, these commitments substantiate an interpretive phenomenological orientation. If mobility is simultaneously structural and experiential, then analytic attention to lifeworld, narrative practice and affective positioning is indispensable. Intersectional sensitivity ensures that first-generation status, rurality, class, race, gender and language are treated as relationally constituted positions within broader systems of power. This framework permits an examination of how agency is enacted within constraint and how mobility is converted—or contested—as students translate experience into academic and professional trajectories.

Finally, this synthesis clarifies the trajectory into Chapter 3. The study operationalises its conceptual commitments through design, sampling, data

generation and analytic procedures that maintain fidelity to structure, institution, epistemic hierarchy and narrative meaning-making. Interpretive phenomenology provides the methodological vehicle through which these dimensions can be explored empirically without collapsing complexity into instrumental metrics.

In sum, the chapter advances a conceptualisation of mobility that resists linear and instrumentalist readings. Mobility emerges instead as a recursive trajectory of becoming, shaped by stratification, mediation, hierarchy and narrative labour. By identifying the fragmentation of existing analyses, the under-theorisation of South African outbound mobility, the limited integration of intersectional positionalities and the insufficient conceptualisation of return as meaning-making, the review delineates the intellectual space this study inhabits. Centring student narration as the analytic site where these forces converge, the study offers a framework attentive to lifeworld, structural positioning and epistemic politics. This orientation provides the conceptual and methodological grounding for Chapter 3 and anchors the study's contribution within ongoing debates on stratification, recognition and transformative internationalisation.

Chapter 3: Methodological Groundings and Interpretive Approach

3.1 Introduction: Charting a Phenomenological and Decolonial Orientation

This chapter sets out the methodological architecture of the study, delineating the epistemological, philosophical, and ethical frameworks that shaped the research process. Rather than positioning methodology as a procedural account, the chapter advances a view of research design as an intentional, reflective, and situated endeavour, one that is shaped by the positionality of the researcher, the historicity of the field, and the entangled *lifeworlds* of participants. Aligned with the interpretive imperatives of phenomenology and informed by decolonial and intersectional insights, the chapter foregrounds ISM as a deeply embodied, affective, and socially embedded phenomenon (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Van Manen, 2016).

This framing moves beyond reductive conceptions of student mobility as a transactional or linear journey. It is instead situated as a complex and recursive process of becoming, marked by cultural negotiation, epistemic encounters, and shifting senses of self (Madge et al., 2015; Stein & Andreotti, 2016a). In this spirit, the methodology draws on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as both approach and ethos, enabling an exploration of how students

make meaning of their mobility experiences within particular social, institutional, and historical contexts (Smith et al., 2009).

Central to this chapter is the premise that methodology cannot be disentangled from theory or ethics; these elements coalesce within qualitative research as mutually constitutive dimensions of inquiry (Finlay, 2011; Pillow, 2003; Vagle, 2019; Van Manen, 2016). This orientation is particularly resonant within phenomenological traditions, where the philosophical, ethical, and methodological are recognised as deeply interconnected and are understood as inherently entangled within the interpretive act (Finlay, 2011; Pillow, 2003; Van Manen, 2016b). The interpretive logic informing this study is shaped by the conviction that students' narratives constitute more than data points; they offer situated, embodied accounts imbued with epistemic significance, affective resonance, and critical depth, as discussed within the wider literature on lived experience and education (Patel, 2015; Vagle, 2019). The chapter proceeds by mapping the study's theoretical orientations, explicating the rationale for a phenomenological approach, and detailing how reflexivity, narrative inquiry, and relational ethics were engaged in the co-construction and interpretation of meaning. It further outlines the operational dimensions of the research, including participant recruitment, data generation strategies, and the analytical processes through which student accounts were interpreted.

In laying this foundation, the chapter does not claim objectivity or neutrality. Instead, it embraces the interpretive and co-constructed nature of qualitative research, especially within the field of internationalisation, where power, access, and representation remain deeply contested (Maringe & Ojo, 2017; Tikly, 2019). The analysis that follows is therefore not framed as an extractive inquiry but as an act of epistemic accompaniment, attuned to complexity, anchored in context, and committed to justice.

3.2 Phenomenology as Orientation

Phenomenology offers a philosophical grounding for this study, not merely as a set of methods, but as a way of thinking, seeing, and listening. It privileges lived experience, what Husserl (1970) termed the *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*), as the starting point for knowledge-making. The lifeworld refers to the world as pre-reflectively experienced by individuals in their everyday engagements, prior to theoretical or analytical abstraction (Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1990). It captures the taken-for-granted, lived realities through which meaning, identity, and social relations are continuously negotiated. It is through this lens that mobility is approached in this study: not as abstract movement across borders, but as an unfolding existential, cultural, and epistemic event (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016; Van Manen, 2016a). Accessing these lifeworlds required careful methodological positioning; through in-depth interviews, reflective prompts, and attentive dialogue, the researcher engaged participants' accounts in

ways that foregrounded their own meaning-making, perceptions, and embodied experiences.

Philosophically, the study is situated within a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation. While Husserl's descriptive phenomenology informs the attentiveness to intentionality and lived experience, the interpretative stance adopted here aligns more directly with Heidegger's ontological turn and Van Manen's emphasis on meaning as always already situated. Experience is not treated as pure or self-contained, but as interpreted, relational, and embedded within historical and sociocultural contexts. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as articulated by Smith et al. (2009), operationalises this hermeneutic commitment through what is often described as a double hermeneutic: participants seek to make sense of their mobility experiences, and the researcher, in turn, interprets that sense-making. References to Husserl, Heidegger, and Van Manen, therefore, reflect philosophical lineage and conceptual scaffolding rather than methodological conflation. The study does not attempt to synthesise divergent phenomenological traditions; rather, it locates itself explicitly within an interpretative, hermeneutic trajectory.

In the context of international student mobility, phenomenology enables a deliberate slowing down, an attentiveness to how meaning is constituted through everyday negotiations of language, place, identity, and power.

Students' reflections on their mobility journeys are thus treated not as isolated accounts but as situated acts of meaning-making, shaped by memory, aspiration, and sociocultural inscription (Ahmed, 2000; Finlay, 2008). This orientation allows mobility to be understood not merely as an institutional process but as a lived transformation, textured by ambivalence, rupture, aspiration, and return.

The commitment to bracketing, *epoche*, is understood within this hermeneutic frame as a reflexive discipline rather than methodological purification. Rather than assuming the possibility of complete objectivity, bracketing involves a sustained and critical awareness of preconceptions in order to engage participants' experiences with openness and care (Finlay, 2014). In this study, bracketing was enacted as an iterative and documented process: through reflexive journalling, analytic memoing, peer debriefing, and sustained engagement with the literature, the researcher remained alert to the ways in which her professional positioning within the internationalisation landscape might shape interpretive choices. This reflexive posture is not presented as the elimination of bias, but as an ongoing ethical commitment to transparency, methodological humility, and accountability in the research encounter.

3.3 Bridging Theory and Method: Evolving Theoretical Frames as Methodological Contribution

In this study, theory and method were never treated as discrete or sequential domains but operated in reciprocal and evolving dialogue. Rather than entering the research with a fixed theoretical scaffolding, the conceptual framework emerged and expanded in conversation with the data, shaped by the lived experiences and layered narratives of the students themselves. This iterative interplay reflects what Gadamer (1975) describes as a “fusion of horizons” - a continuous negotiation between the researcher's interpretive lens and the unfolding insights arising from participants' accounts.

The study's initial conceptual anchoring was firmly grounded in phenomenology, not simply as a methodology, but as a philosophical orientation privileging embodied meaning-making, situated knowing, and the lifeworld as a site of inquiry (Finlay, 2008; Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 2016b). The phenomenological triad of the lifeworld, intentionality and meaning-making, and socio-cultural embeddedness provided both a methodological starting point and a deep philosophical frame for exploring lived experience (Heidegger, 1962; Schutz, 1970).

However, as students' narratives unfolded in their textured multiplicity, shaped by layered identities, power dynamics, affective registers, and uneven institutional architectures, it became evident that phenomenology alone

could not fully capture the richness, contradictions, and structural embeddedness of their experiences. The data itself prompted a theoretical widening, not as an afterthought, but as a deliberate methodological choice rooted in interpretive integrity. Intersectionality became central not only to the coding of data but to the formulation of interview prompts designed to surface the interplay of race, gender, geography, and class (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2013). Decolonial perspectives sharpened awareness of epistemic injustice and prompted ongoing reflexive interrogation of power relations within the research process (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Further conceptual companions emerged directly from the interpretive demands of the data: the sociology of capital and habitus offered tools for understanding the interplay of cultural and institutional resources (Reay (2015); Vygotsky's (1978) attention to the mediated nature of learning illuminated processes of academic adaptation; Ahmed's (2012) work on affective orientations deepened the reading of belonging and dislocation in institutional spaces; and phenomenological accounts of empathy and intersubjectivity, particularly Moran (2022)'s and Manganaro (2017)'s elaborations on Edith Stein's radical intersubjective framework, proved essential in capturing the relational and affective dimensions of mobility, where understanding the other is not merely an act of imaginative projection but a direct, lived engagement. Marginson's (2014) theorisation of global hierarchies provided a necessary macro-level counterpoint, situating individual experiences within unequal mobility regimes. This phenomenological grounding in empathy and

intersubjectivity also resonates with the decolonial imperative to reconfigure knowledge relations, challenging extractive gazes and enabling encounters where mutual recognition, rather than assimilation, becomes the starting point for transformative mobility.

This theoretical adaptability was itself a methodological contribution. It signalled a commitment to allowing the conceptual lens to evolve responsively rather than imposing a pre-fabricated framework onto participants' realities. In this sense, theory did not "float" above lived experience; it was shaped by it, moved with it, and was continually reoriented in light of new insights. The process aligns with Larkin et al.'s (2006) account of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a layered hermeneutic, balancing idiographic depth with theoretical expansion.

The ethical and epistemological stakes of such flexibility were heightened by the researcher's positionality within the internationalisation ecosystem. This insider–outsider stance demanded what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) term "the space between" - a disciplined oscillation between empathetic closeness and analytical distance. Reflexive practices, including journaling, peer debriefing, and analytic memoing, became crucial not only for documenting the research process but for tracing the evolution of the theoretical architecture itself (Glaser, 2013; Glaser & Holton, 2023). Memoing, in particular, served as an

intellectual workspace where emerging insights were interrogated, reworked, and grounded in the lived textures of student experience.

By explicitly acknowledging this evolution, the study affirms its commitment to epistemic humility and interpretive rigour. It demonstrates that phenomenology can accommodate theoretical plurality without sacrificing coherence, so long as its primary commitment remains to the *lifeworlds* it seeks to understand. This responsiveness to data is presented not merely as a pragmatic choice but as a principled stance; a refusal to confine lived realities within rigid conceptual boundaries, and an insistence that methodological frameworks in mobility research must remain as dynamic, situated, and transformative as the global journeys they seek to illuminate.

Therefore, this responsiveness opened the conceptual space for the intersectional and decolonial commitments that would come to anchor the interpretive work of this study, commitments explored in depth in the following section.

3.4 Intersectionality, Mobility, and the Decolonial Turn

As the analysis progressed, it became unmistakably clear that international student mobility was experienced through intersecting vectors of identity and structural constraint. The students who participated in this study did not navigate global spaces as abstract learners, but as historically situated

individuals, often racialised, gendered, classed, and geographically marked by the legacies of apartheid and postcolonial marginality. Here, the analytical lens of intersectionality, originating with and extended by Collins and Bilge (2020), proved crucial. It illuminated how power operates through overlapping configurations that shape lived experience in profoundly uneven ways.

Mobility trajectories were far from uniform. They were textured by experiences of symbolic erasure, linguistic surveillance, and racialised expectations. Within the Eurocentric logics that scaffold many Global North universities, students from historically marginalised communities, especially those from rural, working-class, and first-generation backgrounds, found themselves navigating spaces where legitimacy was often unspoken and coded in whiteness and privilege (Marginson, 2014).

Academic environments operated not only as spaces of knowledge acquisition but also as terrains where identity was negotiated and often misrecognised. Reay (2005) illustrates how classed and racialised bodies carry differential symbolic weight, frequently constructed as “out of place” within elite institutions. This sense of displacement was not a reflection of personal inadequacy, but an outcome of broader structural configurations that govern visibility, access, and legitimacy.

Narratives gathered in this study revealed the ways students negotiated selfhood through the interstices of aspiration, marginalisation, and affective labour. Reay et al. (2007) note that, even within ostensibly inclusive institutions, whiteness functions as an unspoken norm, a baseline against which other subjectivities are measured. In response, students often feel compelled to perform epistemic legitimacy through code-switching, academic mimicry, or strategic citation of Euro-American theorists. These acts, while sometimes offering recognition, are experienced as forms of epistemic concession, moments where self-authorship is strategically withheld to secure academic credibility.

Mobility, in these accounts, does not unfold as a linear journey toward empowerment. Reay (2004a) theorises *habitus* as a site of continual negotiation, where bodily histories and affective repertoires come into tension with new institutional demands. Participants described carrying deeply embedded cultural and community practices into environments that often failed to acknowledge them. This tension produced what Reay (2008) identifies as a psychic split: a simultaneous desire for belonging and resistance to assimilation, surfacing as a dual consciousness shaped by affect, race, and class.

Emotional capital, as theorised in Reay (2004b), emerged as critical to these students' navigation of exclusionary landscapes. Emotions such as pride,

anxiety, shame, and hope were not incidental, they were the very mediums through which mobility was lived and understood. Whether managing familial expectations, resisting deficit narratives, or sustaining dignity in institutional spaces, emotional labour became an essential modality of survival and self-assertion. This reflects Goode's (2019) analysis of how classed, racialised, and gendered subjects carry affective and cultural archives that often remain unrecognised within dominant academic cultures.

These insights underscore the need to attend to the psychosocial dimensions of mobility, dimensions that are typically overlooked in quantitative assessments that prioritise throughput or global rankings. Rather than reinforcing these technocratic logics, this study foregrounds the affective and epistemic complexities of student journeys.

This form of epistemic dislocation resonates with what Maldonado Maldonado-Torres (2007) terms the "coloniality of being", a condition in which intelligibility and recognition are contingent upon assimilation into dominant frames.

In interpreting these accounts, decolonial theory offered a critical lexicon. Work by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2021), Mignolo (2011), and Reiter (2018) reveals how internationalisation often operates through epistemic hierarchies

that privilege Euro-American norms and marginalise Southern knowledges. In this study, the decolonial turn is not applied as a theoretical add-on.

By bringing together intersectionality and decoloniality, this section argues that mobility must be understood not only through metrics of access or achievement, but through the negotiations of identity, power, and meaning. The narratives shared here do more than describe internationalisation. They interrogate and reshape its contours, insisting that mobility is most transformative when it becomes a vehicle for reimagining the very terms of global belonging.

3.5 Theoretical Framework: Situating Phenomenology within Sociocultural, Decolonial, and Intersectional Terrains

The theoretical framework provides the conceptual architecture upon which this study rests, a scaffolding that sustains both the interpretive depth and the ethical commitments of the inquiry. Following Merriam's (2009) assertion that no research emerges in isolation but rather within established traditions and paradigms, this framework is not decorative but constitutive. It shapes how knowledge is approached, how meaning is drawn, and how students' experiences of international mobility are understood. This study adopts an intentionally layered approach, integrating insights from phenomenology, sociocultural theory, decolonial critique, and intersectionality. Together, these orientations make visible the complexity of mobility not as a linear academic

trajectory but as an embodied, affective, and socially situated encounter with power, identity, and belonging.

3.6 Phenomenology as Foundational Lens

At the core of this inquiry lies phenomenology, particularly in its evolution from Husserl's descriptive tradition to Heidegger's interpretive reconfiguration. Husserl's ([1913] 2001) emphasis on *epoché*, or the suspension of presuppositions, provides a disciplined attentiveness to how experiences present themselves in consciousness. Heidegger (1927/1962) repositions this inquiry within an ontological frame through *Dasein*, the notion of being-in-the-world, foregrounding the inseparability of human existence from its socio-historical contexts. Gadamer (1989) extends this further through his emphasis on historically effected consciousness, underscoring how meaning emerges through dialogic engagement with the world.

These traditions collectively resist treating the researcher and participant as detached observers. Instead, they affirm the situatedness of all human experience, an orientation that renders phenomenology a powerful lens for excavating the textured, often invisible contours of international mobility. As students cross borders, they do so not as neutral bodies but as meaning-makers already entangled in histories, expectations, and social imaginaries.

3.7 Integrating Sociocultural and Decolonial Perspectives

However, phenomenology alone does not fully account for the structural, cultural, and epistemic dimensions of power that contour these experiences. To enrich its interpretive reach, this study integrates sociocultural theory and decolonial critique, extending phenomenology's focus on *lifeworlds* into terrains of relationality, language, and material structures. Sociocultural perspectives, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on mediated learning and cultural tools, foreground how identities are formed through interaction with social, institutional, and cultural scripts. Mobility is thus understood not solely as an individual journey but as one mediated through hierarchies of language, knowledge, and institutional recognition.

Decolonial thought, particularly as articulated by Mignolo (2011), further sharpens this critique by illuminating the coloniality of power, the persistent Eurocentric logics that shape which knowledges, bodies, and histories are valorised or rendered invisible within global educational exchanges. In this framing, international mobility is not neutral; it is inscribed within geopolitical asymmetries that position students from the Global South within pre-existing hierarchies of value and legitimacy.

3.7.1 Intersectionality and the Politics of Experience

To grasp the full complexity of the participants' lived realities, this study embraces intersectionality not merely as a concept but as a way of seeing –

a lens honed within the intellectual and activist traditions of Black feminist thought. First articulated by Crenshaw (2024) deepened by the sustained contributions of Collins, intersectionality offers the analytical vocabulary to interrogate how race, gender, class, and other axes of identity do not operate in isolation but converge, overlap, and sometimes collide in shaping lived experience (Collins, 2015, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020).

In the context of international student mobility, movement across borders is never a neutral passage; rather, it is entangled with the residual architectures of coloniality, the uneven distribution of economic resources, the gendered codes of belonging, and the often-unspoken hierarchies of knowledge and language (Mignolo, 2011; Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

Intersectionality, in this sense, helps to read both silences and testimonies: to see not only who is present in spaces of internationalisation but also who is absent, and why (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). It compels attention to the embodied politics of mobility, the ways students navigate visible and invisible boundaries, and the uneven terrain on which they must assert their right to belong. As Collins (2015) emphasises, these dynamics are not simply additive; the experience of being a Black woman, for example, cannot be reduced to the sum of being Black and being a woman, it is a qualitatively different experience shaped by the interdependence of these identities.

By bringing intersectionality into dialogue with phenomenology and decolonial thought, this study resists siloed ways of knowing (Ahmed, 2012; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). It recognises that students' experiences of mobility emerge through multiple, coexisting frames: the immediacy of phenomenological encounters with self and world; the sociocultural and institutional mediations that structure academic lives; the enduring residues of colonial epistemologies; and the shifting positionalities students occupy in different contexts. Taken together, these perspectives offer a richer, more nuanced reading of mobility, one that honours the complexities, contradictions, and agency embedded in each student's journey.

This integrated framework transcends mere analytical utility to embody a committed political and ethical stance. It challenges tendencies to reduce student narratives to simplistic developmental case studies, instead positioning these stories as critical sites of agency, resistance, and transformative potential. By foregrounding intersectionality, the framework explicitly interrogates how power operates through interlocking identity categories, revealing the nuanced ways in which race, gender, class, and other markers shape access, belonging, and self-representation. Simultaneously, the incorporation of decolonial critique situates these lived experiences within the broader, often uneven geopolitical and epistemic landscapes shaped by colonial legacies and ongoing global asymmetries. Phenomenology provides the indispensable methodological grounding that enables a deep, attentive

listening to how these complex forces are embodied, negotiated, and narrated within the everyday lifeworlds of internationally mobile students. In doing so, the framework honours not only the multiplicity of student experiences but also the ethical imperative to engage with them in ways that are contextually situated, reflexive, and transformative.

3.8 Phenomenology and the Lived Experience of Mobility

The phenomenological concept of *lifeworld* is central to understanding the lived realities of international student mobility. Rooted in Husserl's (1970) original articulation, the lifeworld refers to the pre-reflective, taken-for-granted world in which individuals live and act. Merleau-Ponty (1962) deepens this notion by emphasising the embodied, sensory engagement through which we inhabit space and form meaning. Seamon (2018, 2023) extends these ideas to the spatial and experiential dimensions of human life, describing the lifeworld as a nexus of place, embodiment, and movement through which identity and belonging are continually negotiated. This is particularly relevant in mobility contexts, where shifts in physical and cultural environments can unsettle familiar lifeworld structures and require the reconstitution of place attachment (Seamon, 2018).

From a decolonial perspective, these phenomenological insights expose how students' lifeworlds are not neutral but shaped by intersecting structures of race, class, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies (Collins, 2015; Maldonado-

Torres, 2007). For students from the Global South, studying abroad often involves negotiating spaces where Western epistemologies dominate (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This interplay between phenomenology and decoloniality underscores how mobility can simultaneously expand and destabilise the lifeworld, generating opportunities for self-transformation while also confronting students with dissonances in identity, cultural capital, and epistemic recognition.

By situating mobility within the lived, embodied, and placed lifeworld, we gain a richer understanding of how students inhabit new geographies and reassemble belonging in ways that are deeply personal yet structured by broader systems of power (Merleau-Ponty, 1965; Seamon, 2018, 2023).

3.9 Intentionality and Meaning-Making

At the heart of Husserl's phenomenology lies the principle of intentionality, the recognition that consciousness is always of or about something, that every act of awareness is directed toward an object, real or imagined (Husserl, 1931). This "aboutness" of experience shifts the analytical gaze from merely cataloguing events to interrogating how phenomena are lived and imbued with meaning by the subject. Moustakas (1994) underscores that phenomenological inquiry must not only capture the descriptive texture of experience but also disclose the underlying structures of meaning that give such experience its particular significance. Similarly, Moran (2002) emphasises

that intentionality demands attention to the constitutive processes by which individuals interpret, situate, and reframe their encounters within a lifeworld shaped by culture, history, and relationality.

In the context of this study, intentionality provided both a philosophical anchor and a methodological compass for examining how international student mobility is not a neutral unfolding but a purposive, situated act. Student aspirations, expectations, and interpretive processes were considered across temporal axes, before departure, during immersion, and upon return, in order to reveal the dynamic interplay between anticipation, lived encounter, and retrospective sense-making. Such meaning-making was never abstract or disembodied; it was mediated through language, emotion, ideology, and memory, each of which was entangled with broader socio-political constraints and the imaginative horizons of possible futures (Van Manen, 2014).

From this phenomenological standpoint, international mobility emerges as a deeply intentional and interpretive project, a decision moulded by personal history, structural location, and the imagining of possible futures. Husserl's principle of intentionality reminds us that consciousness is always directed toward something meaningful (Husserl, 1982), and (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) emphasises that the past is never inert, but sedimented within our embodied readiness to act in new worlds (see Merleau-Ponty, 2012). For participants in this study, travelling abroad was never just a physical transition; it was a deliberate reorientation of being, an opening toward expanded intellectual

horizons, altered social positioning, and evolving senses of belonging or difference.

3.10 Socio-Cultural Embeddedness: Situating Mobility within Structure and Power

Phenomenology's power is amplified when it intersects with sociocultural theory, particularly in illuminating how experience is *always* embedded within social systems. Heidegger's emphasis on historicity aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) notion that human development unfolds through cultural tools and mediated social practices. For internationally mobile students, institutional culture, peer interaction, and disciplinary norms form part of the interpretive field within which meaning is constructed.

This orientation gains further complexity when read alongside Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital, which casts mobility not merely as educational but as a process of accumulation of legitimacy, distinction, and opportunity. Students' narratives often reflected this duality: they sought learning, yes, but also recognition, credibility, and symbolic capital. Such ambitions were not individualistic but informed by broader social and economic realities, including family expectations, funding structures, and racialised perceptions in host countries.

Here, the framework integrates a critical edge. Decolonial and intersectional theories remind us that *not all mobility is equally possible or equally rewarded* (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Patel, 2015). Students from marginalised contexts often bear the epistemic burden of translation, expected to assimilate into dominant norms while suppressing their own. The framework thus reads mobility as a site of epistemic tension, where adaptation can coexist with erasure, and where learning is often accompanied by unlearning, sometimes painfully so.

3.11 Synthesising Phenomenology with Critical Social Theory

Rather than treating theory and method as discrete, sequential stages of inquiry, this study enacts what Smith et al. (2009) characterise as the hermeneutic circle which is an iterative movement between part and whole, description and interpretation, voice and analysis. This is not a sterile back-and-forth; it is a dynamic, embodied process in which understanding is continuously deepened through the interplay of engagement and reflection. In this formulation, phenomenology does not hover abstractly above lived experience; it is anchored within it. It moves with the participant's voice, attends to their silences, and surfaces the submerged and sometimes uncomfortable layers of meaning that might otherwise remain unarticulated. This interpretive stance refuses the fiction of researcher neutrality. It accepts that research is inevitably situated, shaped by histories, positionalities, and power relations, and that interpretation is always political. This aligns with the

critical social theoretical position that knowledge production is never innocent; it emerges within contexts marked by inequity, contestation, and the potential for transformation. In this way, the phenomenological attentiveness to lived experience intersects with a sociocultural lens attuned to the structural and historical conditions that give those experiences their texture, and with a decolonial critique that challenges whose ways of knowing and being are legitimised or marginalised in the global academy.

The resulting synthesis is not an additive exercise but an epistemic reorientation. By weaving together phenomenological attentiveness, sociocultural insight, and decolonial critique, the framework sustains a richly contextualised reading of international student mobility. It recognises the who of experience, not as a generic case or mere data point, but as a person-in-relation, a subject-in-history whose trajectory is shaped by intersecting structures of opportunity and constraint. In doing so, the study moves beyond tokenistic inclusion towards a deeper epistemic accountability, one that listens with care, learns with humility, and acts with an awareness of the stakes involved when representing the voices of those navigating historically marginalised positionalities.

3.12 Phenomenology as a Guiding Framework: Capturing the Lived Realities of International Student Mobility

In a globalised higher education landscape often dominated by metrics, rankings, and policy imperatives, this inquiry deliberately turned toward

phenomenology as a counter-methodological choice, one capable of attending to the human depth and complexity behind the phenomenon of student mobility. Phenomenology provided both a rigorous and intimate lens through which to explore how mobility is lived, felt, and interpreted by students, particularly those negotiating the entangled legacies of coloniality and inequality in their cross-border journeys.

Husserl's (1970) injunction to return "to the things themselves" offered a methodological anchor, reminding the research to remain grounded in the immediacy and specificity of participants' experiences rather than subsuming them under pre-existing theoretical abstractions. In practice, this meant resisting the tendency to treat mobility solely as a logistical or policy category; instead, it emerged as a textured and sometimes dissonant process, one that reshaped identities, unsettled norms, and invited self-interrogation.

Heidegger's (1962) notion of *Being-in-the-world* (Dasein) further expanded the analysis by situating student experiences within their relational and contextual entanglements. For participants, arrival in a host country was not simply a geographical relocation but a shift into new social, academic, and cultural worlds, spaces that both received and refracted them. The process of becoming, in this context, unfolded not in isolation but through continuous negotiation with these worlds, shaping and being shaped by the dynamics of reception, adaptation, and resistance.

Equally influential was Merleau-Ponty's (1962) insistence on embodiment, which foregrounds the lived body as a site of knowledge. International mobility was thus not merely a cognitive project but an embodied one, registered in the chill of winter mornings, the fatigue of constant linguistic translation, the bodily awkwardness of unfamiliar social codes, and the warmth of shared cultural practices such as communal meals. These affective and sensory registers, often overlooked in structural analyses, become crucial to understanding how mobility was inhabited as well as narrated.

Finally, Van Manen's (1997a) framing of retrospective meaning-making underscored the temporal dimension of experience. Students' accounts, often given months or years after their return, revealed how time and distance mediated their interpretations. Events initially perceived as frustrating or alienating could later be reframed as formative, even necessary, to their personal and intellectual growth. This reflective reconstitution of meaning highlighted that mobility is not a closed episode but a continuing strand in the unfolding life-world of the student. Building on this, Röck (2024)'s process-ontological reading of phenomenology situates mobility within the constancy of change rather than as a fixed past occurrence. From this perspective, students' identities are not merely reshaped in retrospect but are continuously becoming through relational encounters, temporal distance, and the interplay of memory and anticipation. Furthermore, Röck and Neumann (2023)'s

reflections on the “phenomenology of the future” illuminate how experience extends beyond recollection into imaginative projection, suggesting that mobility is lived forward as much as it is remembered. Taken together, these insights position student mobility as both retrospective and anticipatory, a dynamic process of becoming rather than a concluded episode.

In synthesising these phenomenological principles with critical social theory, the study was able to trace not only the immediate textures of mobility but also their structural undercurrents and enduring resonances. The approach thus affirms that understanding international student mobility, particularly for those navigating historically marginalised pathways, requires engaging with it as both lived experience and situated history, as both a deeply personal journey and a politically charged phenomenon. In this sense, the analysis avoids a simplistic personal–structural binary. Much like Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of *habitus* as “embodied history, internalised as a second nature” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56), the personal narratives of mobility are not separable from structural conditions but are the very site where history, politics, and subjectivity converge. What emerges, therefore, is an account of mobility that is neither reducible to individual biography nor to structural constraint, but rather understood as the lived interplay of both (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992).

Building on this synthesis, the study’s theoretical scaffolding is not an abstract backdrop but an active interpretive partner, shaping how questions were

asked, how stories were heard, and how meaning was drawn. The hermeneutic movement between phenomenology's descriptive fidelity and critical theory's interrogative stance ensured that the research questions were never approached as neutral prompts but as openings into complex, historically situated *lifeworlds*. This demanded attentiveness to both the immediacy of lived moments and the wider social, cultural, and political structures that contour them. Within this dual commitment, to the singularity of experience and the systemic forces that shape it, the study's phenomenological orientation finds its fullest expression. The following section clarifies how this orientation was woven into the framing of the research questions, ensuring coherence between philosophical grounding, methodological choices, and the empirical realities brought forth by participants.

3.13 Bridging Research Questions and Phenomenological Orientation

Each of the four research questions in this study was deliberately constructed not as a call for factual reportage but as an invitation into meaning-making, an interpretive excavation of how students made sense of their mobility journeys.

The first research question, which explored students' experiences of pre-departure processes and preparations, aligned closely with Moustakas' (1994) articulation of *pre-reflective consciousness*, those intuitive and anticipatory

experiences that shape decision-making before formal engagement begins. Here, students' interactions with funding mechanisms, selection criteria, and institutional gatekeeping were not treated as administrative steps but as emotionally charged negotiations of hope, uncertainty, and belonging.

The second question, which examined students' perceptions of institutional engagement, drew on the phenomenological principle of *intentionality*, where consciousness is always directed towards something (Moran, 2002). Participants narrated institutional responses not merely as external realities but as interpreted actions, seen as supportive, dismissive, indifferent, or empowering depending on the relational dynamics at play.

The third question centred on the intellectual, cultural, and interpersonal shifts that occurred during students' time abroad. This aligned strongly with IPA's framing of experience as *meaning-making in action* (Smith & Osborn, 2007). For many, mobility was an epistemic rupture that unsettled familiar pedagogies and introduced new ontologies, prompting a reconstitution of identity and the emergence of new ways of knowing and being.

Finally, the fourth question considered how students made sense of their journeys upon returning home. This brought Van Manen's (1997a) notion of reflective hermeneutics to the fore, understanding the self in hindsight, through memory and narrative reassembly. Here, phenomenology enabled an

exploration of the *afterlife* of mobility, how the experience continued to reverberate in students' aspirations, institutional affiliations, and sense of purpose long after their physical return.

3.14 Methodological Coherence: Data Collection and Interpretive Depth

To remain faithful to this interpretive ethos, the study employed semi-structured interviews, enabling a balance between thematic focus and narrative flexibility. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) note that the qualitative interview is not merely a data-gathering tool but a dialogic encounter where meaning is co-constructed. Participants were encouraged to share their stories in their own terms, allowing emotions, silences, tangents, and memories to emerge organically.

Bracketing, drawn from Husserl's (1970) concept of *epoché*, served as a reflexive safeguard. Throughout the research process, deliberate effort was made to suspend prior assumptions and institutional biases, making space for the authenticity of student voices. This was especially vital given the positionality of the researcher as both an insider in the higher education system and an empathetic witness to student struggle.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was thus used not only as a method but as a sensibility, an approach that foregrounded the participant's

world while acknowledging the researcher's role in shaping meaning (Smith et al., 2009). In this way, phenomenology did not simply structure the research; it animated it.

3.15 Phenomenology as an Ethical and Epistemological Commitment

In sum, phenomenology served not merely as a method but as an epistemological stance, one that foregrounded voice, vulnerability, and transformation. Schütz's (1967) insights into *social typification* offered an additional layer of analysis, reminding us that experience is never purely individual but embedded in collective frames of meaning. Students navigated between typification of "African student," "exchange beneficiary," "first-generation learner," and "outsider" - often resisting, negotiating, or redefining these identities in their own terms.

By integrating this philosophical grounding with robust methodological design and deep engagement with student narratives, the study offers a textured, empathetic, and ethically committed exploration of international student mobility.

3.16 Research Objectives and Research Questions: Mapping the Landscape of Lived Experience

3.16.1 Research Objectives: Tracing the Trajectory of Transformation

At the heart of this study is the commitment to foreground the lived, embodied, and affectively textured experiences of South African students navigating the

complexities of international mobility. The objectives of this research are not arbitrarily constructed but arise organically from the phenomenological imperative to understand experience in its situated, relational, and meaning-making dimensions (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1997a). These objectives offer a deliberate counterpoint to dominant narratives that reduce mobility to metrics of participation or economic return, instead privileging how individuals experience, narrate, and interpret their mobility journeys within broader socio-institutional contexts.

These objectives reflect a philosophical commitment to treating student voices not as empirical artefacts but as rich sites of knowledge, sites where institutional structures, personal aspirations, and global imaginaries intersect in ways that are often contradictory, ambivalent, and transformative (Patel, 2015; Vagle, 2019). As such, the objectives provide a scaffold through which to interrogate how mobility becomes meaningful (or fraught) in students' academic, cultural, and personal lives.

At this point, I consider the different research objectives:

1. To explore the lived experiences of students participating in international mobility programmes at South African universities, with a specific focus on their academic, cultural, and social encounters during their mobility journeys.

Lejeune (2002) frames mobility as a liminal process, positioning individuals at the thresholds of familiarity and foreignness. This objective attends to those thresholds, moments of adaptation, confusion, exhilaration, and reflection, where identity is negotiated and reconstituted through new cultural, academic, and interpersonal landscapes.

2. To examine how students interpret and construct meaning from their mobility experiences within the broader processes of internationalisation, considering institutional structures, socio-cultural adaptation, and personal transformation.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) insights into the negotiation of symbolic capital, this objective interrogates how students do not merely undergo experiences but actively work to position these within broader trajectories of self-making, opportunity, and recognition. Such meaning-making is neither linear nor uniform but deeply shaped by institutional affordances, socio-economic positioning, and cultural imaginaries.

3. To analyse the broader implications of international mobility for students' academic and professional trajectories, including its impact on career aspirations, skill development, and global engagement.

Becker's (1993) conception of human capital underscores the significance of this objective: students' experiences abroad are often refracted through future-oriented logics, whether in the form of career aspirations, professional

networks, or perceived competitiveness in global labour markets. This analysis interrogates how such imagined futures are constructed, constrained, or recalibrated through the mobility encounter.

4. To explore the influence of socio-economic background, institutional support, personal expectations, and post-mobility reintegration on students' international experiences.

As Marginson (2019) reminds us, global mobility has the potential to either reproduce or disrupt existing inequalities, depending on how institutions configure access, scaffold support, and structure reintegration processes. This objective thus situates students' narratives within broader dynamics of privilege, marginalisation, and institutional responsiveness, illuminating how these forces shape both the mobility experience and its afterlives.

Collectively, these objectives signal an approach that privileges depth over breadth, narrative over metrics, and meaning over measurement, aligning firmly with the interpretive commitments of phenomenological inquiry. They reflect a commitment to honouring the complexity of student journeys rather than flattening them into homogenised data points or reductive generalisations.

3.16.2 Research Questions: Unpacking the Dimensions of Mobility

Emerging directly from these objectives, the research questions are designed not as linear prompts but as interwoven entry points into the multifaceted nature of international student mobility. In alignment with phenomenology's concern for how phenomena show themselves through lived experience (Van Manen, 1997a), these questions seek to illuminate the contours of mobility as narrated, felt, and interpreted by students navigating both personal ambitions and institutional landscapes.

The questions are informed by the understanding that experience is never neutral; it is mediated through the lifeworld, the historically and culturally sedimented world individuals inhabit (Husserl, 1970). Likewise, Heidegger's (1962) notion of being-in-the-world underscores that mobility is not merely geographic relocation but existential repositioning, prompting students to renegotiate their identities and sense of self within unfamiliar epistemic and cultural terrains.

1. Preparatory Experiences

What are students' lived experiences concerning the processes and procedures involved in preparing for their study-abroad programmes, including aspects of funding, selection criteria, models of funding, and perceptions of equity within the universities?

As de Wit et al. (2013) note, internationalisation does not begin at departure gates but within the often-invisible architectures of access: policies, networks, and forms of institutional recognition. This question seeks to reveal how administrative processes, information asymmetries, and socio-economic realities shape students' early engagements with the possibility of mobility.

2. Institutional Engagement

How do students perceive the importance and value placed on international mobility programmes by their institutions, and what are their lived experiences regarding the institutional support, recognition, and prioritisation of these programmes?

Knight and de Wit (2018) highlight how institutional discourses and priorities fundamentally shape the landscapes of internationalisation. This question probes whether students feel included within these logics or marginalised by them, attending to how institutional climates either cultivate or constrain a sense of belonging and value within mobility programmes.

3. Transformative Outcomes

In what ways do students reflect on the impact of international mobility on their academic growth, cultural understanding, and interpersonal relationships?

Kim's (2001) stress–adaptation–growth model foregrounds the role of discomfort and challenge in fostering resilience and transformation through

intercultural engagement. This question invites students to narrate these transformative arcs, how initial difficulties gave rise to new competencies, insights, and forms of relationality.

4. Post-Mobility Reflections

How do students make sense of their mobility experiences upon their return?

King and Raghuram (2013) warn against neglecting the return phase, where reintegration can surface tensions between transformation abroad and expectations at home. This question interrogates how students reconcile shifts in identity, aspiration, and worldview within institutional and cultural contexts that may not recognise or accommodate these changes.

3.17 Positioning the Inquiry Within Phenomenological Commitments

The articulation of these objectives and questions functions not merely as a procedural requirement but as a philosophical declaration of intent, signalling this study's anchoring within phenomenological traditions that privilege the lived, embodied, and situated dimensions of human experience (Van Manen, 1997a; Vagle, 2019). In centring student narratives, this research foregrounds the premise that meaning emerges through engagement with the world, through acts of narration, and through reflective dialogue between the self and others. Such an approach refuses reductionist tendencies that seek to universalise experience or abstract it into generalisable categories. Instead, it

recognises the interpretive, affective, and temporal dimensions through which lived experience is made sense of within particular socio-historical and institutional contexts (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970).

This inquiry is guided by the conviction that students' stories are not supplementary to the phenomenon under investigation; they constitute the phenomenon itself. In this framing, experiences of mobility are understood as unfolding within dynamic *lifeworlds* shaped by structures of power, cultural histories, and personal aspirations (Patel, 2015; Vagle, 2019). The research questions do not seek to extract definitive answers but rather to hold open spaces for complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction to surface, what Pillow (2003) refers to as the ethics of methodological humility, wherein knowledge is seen as contingent, situated, and provisional. In this respect, phenomenology is not solely a methodological choice but an ethical and epistemological stance, one that privileges attentiveness, reflexivity, and respect for the multiplicity of lived worlds (Finlay, 2011; Van Manen, 1997).

As the discussion now transitions to the practical dimensions of participant selection and the narrative approach to sampling, these philosophical and ethical commitments remain central. They shape the criteria for inclusion, the attentiveness to voice, and the reflexive stance adopted throughout the interpretive process. In remaining faithful to phenomenology's insistence on returning to the lifeworld (Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1990), this study continues to affirm the value of situated, storied, and affectively textured accounts as

vital contributions to understanding the complexities of international student mobility within the South African higher education landscape.

3.18 Participant Selection: A Narrative Approach to Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling, following Patton's (2014) emphasis on selecting information-rich cases for in-depth exploration. The original call for participation was open to South African students who had participated in any form of formalised short-term international mobility programme between 2011 and 2023. Importantly, the initial intent was not to target any specific funding stream or institutional partnership, but rather to gain access to a wide cross-section of student mobility experiences across time, disciplines, and institutional contexts.

However, in practice, the participants made available through institutional gatekeepers, primarily international offices, were those who had undertaken mobility through Erasmus+ and other structured, externally funded programmes. This outcome was shaped less by researcher selection and more by the realities of institutional records, administrative access, and programme visibility. Consequently, the final participant group consisted of students who had engaged in international mobility between approximately 2018 and 2022. While the broader eligibility window had included mobility as early as 2011, those earlier cohorts either could not be reached or did not respond.

The inclusion criteria were guided by the following:

Participants had completed a recognised short-term mobility programme, ensuring alignment with the study's focus on structured academic mobility; They represented a range of disciplinary and socio-cultural backgrounds, allowing for diversity in experience and reflection.

Their return from mobility had occurred within a range of approximately one to five years prior to the study, allowing them to reflect both on immediate post-return impressions and longer-term meaning-making.

While this study does not claim to be longitudinal in design, it nonetheless benefits from the temporal spread of participants' reflections. By engaging students who had experienced mobility some years prior, the study gained access to retrospective interpretations and meaning constructions that may not have been fully visible in immediate post-return accounts. This lends the analysis a temporal depth and opens space for future research to explore more formal longitudinal approaches that track the evolving impact of international mobility over extended periods (see Chapter 6).

In this way, the sampling strategy reflects both the logistical realities of institutional research and the theoretical commitment to lived experience. The resulting narratives provide a textured view into how mobility continues to

shape students' personal and academic trajectories well beyond the period of travel itself.

Table 3.1 Analysis of Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	University (Pseudonym)	Year Abroad	Host Country	Level of Study	Funding Source	Background Notes
Lucia	24	Female	Coloured	SLU	2021	Germany	UG	Erasmus	First-generation, township
Elena	26	Female	Black African	SLU	2019	Germany	UG	Erasmus + municipal grant	First-generation
Valeria	32	Female	Black African	INU	2018	Germany	PG	Erasmus	First-generation
Gabriella	31	Female	Black African	INU	2014	Germany	PG	Erasmus	First-generation
Emma*	30	Female	Black African	SLU	2018	Spain	PG	Erasmus	First-generation, township
Pablo	33	Male	Black African	INU	2016	Germany	PG	Erasmus	First-generation
Sofia	34	Female	Black African	INU	2016	Germany	PG	Erasmus	Non-first-generation, township
Luc	34	Male	Black African	INU	2016	United States	UG	Home university funded	First-generation, township

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	University (Pseudonym)	Year Abroad	Host Country	Level of Study	Funding Source	Background Notes
Fernando	29	Male	Black African	SLU	2017	Germany	UG	Erasmus	First-generation
Carlos	27	Male	Black African	SLU	2018	Spain	UG	Erasmus	Township background

3.19 Narrative Summary of the Participant Group

The study included ten South African students who had participated in international mobility programmes across various academic levels and periods. The group comprised nine Black African students and one Coloured student, with ages ranging from 24 to 34. Gender representation was balanced, with six women and four men, enabling a nuanced understanding of diverse experiences.

Participants were drawn from both undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts, capturing a spectrum of mobility experiences—from early academic exposure abroad to more advanced, postgraduate international engagement. Funding pathways varied: the majority were supported through Erasmus awards, one received an additional municipal grant, and one completed a U.S.-based mobility experience funded directly by his home institution.

Socio-economic context was an important dimension of the sample. Most participants were first-generation students from township or disadvantaged backgrounds, highlighting broader equity considerations in accessing international opportunities. Sofia was the only non-first-generation participant, providing a contrasting perspective within the group. Host destinations were predominantly European, with Germany most frequently cited, followed by Spain, and a single U.S. placement. Academic disciplines spanned engineering, communications, linguistics, design, business, and sciences, demonstrating that international mobility opportunities extended across diverse fields.

Participants' narratives emphasised the interplay between mobility and socio-economic realities, including pre-departure costs, family responsibilities, and household expectations. These factors shaped their experiences before, during, and after mobility, underscoring the lived context in which international engagement occurs.

Note: Some participants had multiple mobility experiences (e.g., short-term study abroad, semester exchanges, postgraduate study in different countries). Their accounts may reference different destinations when discussing preparation, academic environments, cultural encounters, or funding. This reflects the layered and complex nature of mobility trajectories rather than inconsistencies in reporting.

Overall, the sample illustrates a socially grounded, diverse group whose experiences highlight the intersections of race, class, gender, and generational status with international mobility. The participants' narratives demonstrate that mobility is not a uniform pathway but a context-dependent, multifaceted phenomenon.

3.20 Data Analysis Methods: Navigating the Depths of Lived Experience

In phenomenological inquiry, analysis is neither linear nor prescriptive, it is a dialogic encounter with meaning. Anchored in the interpretative phenomenological tradition articulated by (Smith et al., 2009), this study sought to uncover how students made sense of their mobility experiences within their own social, institutional, and historical contexts. However, the analytical process did not unfold within a vacuum. As the study progressed, the theoretical scaffolding underpinning the analysis evolved in response to the complexity of participant narratives. While phenomenology formed the epistemological and methodological foundation, new interpretive frames, such as hybridity Bhabha (Bhabha, 2015) symbolic capital Bourdieu (1986), and racialised mobility (Brown & Holloway, 2008), emerged as critical analytical tools during the iterative stages of coding and reflection.

This theoretical flexibility was not a departure from methodological rigour but rather an affirmation of it. As Finlay (2009) cautions, phenomenological analysis demands openness to the lifeworld of participants, an openness that necessitates evolving with the data, rather than imposing rigid conceptual frames. The emergence of new theories was, therefore, not incidental but integral to the interpretative depth of this study, particularly as student narratives traversed issues of power, identity, exclusion, and transformation, concepts that exceeded the boundaries of the initial proposal.

3.21 Evolving Theoretical Frames: From Foundation to Fluidity

While the research was rooted in a phenomenological epistemology, the theoretical framing was intentionally porous. The original proposal did not anticipate the use of postcolonial, decolonial, or intersectional theories. These interpretive frames emerged as the data demanded more nuanced conceptual lenses to understand the entanglements of race, class, language, and geopolitical location in shaping mobility experiences. The flexibility to accommodate such theoretical evolution reflects the study's commitment to meaning-making as a dynamic, emergent process.

In this way, the thesis honours the tension between foundational consistency (phenomenology) and interpretive responsiveness (evolving

theoretical insights), a methodological stance that aligns with interpretive qualitative traditions more broadly (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

-Bridging Analysis and Trustworthiness

To enhance analytical integrity and ensure epistemic rigour, this study employed an integrated suite of strategies aligned with interpretive qualitative paradigms. One such strategy was crystallisation, conceptualised by Richardson (2000) and later expanded by Ellingson (2009), which intentionally replaced the traditional logic of triangulation. Moving beyond the search for a singular truth, crystallisation embraces the metaphor of the crystal, multifaceted, partial, and refractive, as a way of generating layered and nuanced insights. In this study, it facilitated the interplay of student narratives, institutional discourses, and theoretical framings, allowing for a more textured and polyvocal interpretation of international student mobility.

Complementing this, reflexive journaling and memo-writing, practices often associated with grounded theory traditions, were employed as ongoing self-examination and analytic synthesis modes. These reflexive tools enabled the researcher to record emerging patterns, track conceptual shifts, and articulate positional reflections. More than a record-keeping exercise, journaling fostered a continuous interrogation of underlying assumptions and interpretive moves, ensuring that meaning-making remained dynamic and responsive,

unfolding in dialogue with both the data and the theoretical scaffolding of the study (Glaser et al., 2013; Glaser, 2013; Holton, 2007).

Member validation further reinforced interpretive rigour by engaging participants in the verification and refinement of emergent findings. This dialogic exchange enabled a relational form of credibility checking, wherein the voices of participants remained active in shaping the narrative arc of the research.

Crucially, reflexivity functioned not as an isolated technique but as a continuous methodological posture. The researcher's dual positioning, as both insider and scholar within the internationalisation ecosystem, necessitated a vigilant attentiveness to power, perspective, and interpretive accountability. Reflexive journalling thus became a key space for negotiating these tensions, capturing moments of insight, discomfort, and critical recalibration throughout the research journey.

In line with a postmodern qualitative stance, this approach privileged complexity over coherence and multiplicity over certainty. Crystallisation, reflexivity, and collaborative verification were not simply procedural choices, but ethical commitments to a methodology that seeks to honour the richness, partiality, and lived intricacy of the student stories at its centre.

3.22 Reflexive, Evolving, and Situated Analytical Approach

In phenomenological research, analysis unfolds not through rigid procedural steps but through a deep engagement with the data's emergent textures, contradictions, and silences (Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2019). This study embraced an interpretive posture that aligned with phenomenology's call to dwell attentively in the messiness of lived experience, allowing meaning to surface through iterative cycles of reflection, analysis, and critical interrogation. The analytical process was characterised by openness rather than closure, prioritising depth, nuance, and the ethical responsibility to remain attuned to participants' lifeworlds as they were narrated and constituted within particular social, institutional, and historical contexts (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970).

From its inception, this inquiry was rooted in core phenomenological principles: the centrality of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the intentionality of consciousness, and the situated nature of meaning-making. These conceptual anchors, drawn from foundational phenomenological scholarship (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1967), informed both the generation and interpretation of data. They sharpened the study's attentiveness to temporality, intersubjectivity, and the entanglements of self and world that shape the experience of international mobility.

As narratives unfolded, however, it became evident that phenomenology alone could not fully capture the layered social, cultural, and institutional structures that shaped participants' experiences. The data itself demanded a conceptual widening, an interpretive agility responsive to the intersecting terrains of power, access, and identity that permeated students' accounts. This reflexive evolution did not mark a departure from phenomenology but a deepening of its commitments. The study drew judiciously from complementary traditions; Bourdieu's (2005) concepts of habitus, symbolic capital, and institutional recognition provided critical traction for understanding how students navigated exclusion, positioned themselves within hierarchies of academic value, and negotiated access to resources within unequal systems.

Moreover, insights from Ahmed's (2012) work on institutional atmospheres and affective economies proved invaluable in surfacing how feelings of alienation or belonging were not merely personal but structurally conditioned. Students' expressions of marginality, ambivalence, and resilience were read through theoretical lenses attuned to the relational and mediated nature of learning, echoing Vygotsky's (1978) dialogical emphasis on tools, language, and cultural scripts in shaping developmental trajectories. In addition, critiques of internationalisation as a globally uneven, often exclusionary imaginary (Marginson, 2014) sharpened the analysis of how mobility is lived differently

depending on socio-economic positioning, institutional status, and geopolitical location.

This theoretical agility, moving between phenomenological description and critical interpretation, allowed the study to maintain fidelity to its participants' narratives while situating these within the broader structures of knowledge, power, and institutional practice. The analysis thus held in tension the immediacy of lived experience with the structural conditions that shaped its articulation, disruption, or silencing.

3.23 Reflexivity and the Researcher's Embedded Presence

Commitment to reflexivity was integral to the interpretive design of this study. Phenomenological inquiry recognises that the researcher participates in the co-construction of meaning rather than occupying a detached observational stance, a position articulated by Finlay (2002) and reinforced by Giorgi (2009) in framing the researcher as instrument of interpretation. Reflexivity therefore functioned not as procedural add-on but as methodological discipline and ethical obligation.

Hermeneutic phenomenology does not assume that presuppositions can be fully suspended. Instead, as van Manen (2014) emphasises, reduction requires vigilant attentiveness to pre-understandings and their influence on interpretation. Professional embeddedness in internationalisation practice

introduced particular interpretive risks. Daily engagement with student mobility processes, especially financial mediation, funding approvals, and crisis support, meant that narratives of financial precarity, bureaucratic delay, and logistical strain were deeply familiar.

Students regularly approached the office seeking assistance with airfare shortfalls, insurance gaps, delayed Erasmus disbursements, and travel costs associated with visa appointments often located outside the province. Even fully funded students frequently required bridging resources before stipends were released. Direct exchange students without institutional funding navigated even more precarious arrangements, often requesting guidance or emergency support. Exposure to these recurring institutional patterns shaped expectations entering the research encounter.

Reflexive journalling was therefore used to interrogate how professional familiarity might normalise structural difficulty or prematurely interpret participant accounts through administrative logic. Smith and Osborn (2007) caution that reflexivity cannot eliminate influence but can render it transparent. Early analytic memos reveal this tension:

“Financial struggle feels expected. Similar cases appear weekly in office consultations. Need to resist categorising this as routine administrative friction. For participant, this is not routine. It is anxiety, uncertainty, negotiation of dignity. Do not collapse lived distress into institutional procedure.”

This entry marked an important analytic shift. What appeared institutionally as process inefficiency or funding cycle timing emerged phenomenologically as embodied uncertainty, delayed belonging, and fragile participation. Bourdieu's (1986, 1990) theorisation of capital and field further reframed these reflections by illuminating how access to liquidity, bridging funds, and familial reserves shapes capacity to convert opportunity into participation. Financial mediation was therefore interpreted not merely as logistical detail but as structuring condition of mobility access.

Professional proximity also required bracketing assumptions about institutional responsiveness. Familiarity with internal decision-making processes initially inclined interpretation toward viewing bureaucratic safeguards as necessary compliance mechanisms. However, returning repeatedly to participant language exposed how identical processes were experienced as opacity, exclusion, or delayed recognition. Reflexive engagement prevented

alignment with institutional rationalisation and re-centred analysis on lived meaning.

Power dynamics within interviews also warranted scrutiny. Institutional affiliation carries symbolic authority, potentially shaping disclosure, particularly where critique intersects with funding or programme access. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe interviews as performative spaces in which participants calibrate narrative in response to perceived power. Explicit clarification of independence from funding decisions and assurance of confidentiality were therefore prioritised to mitigate hierarchical influence.

Bracketing in this study operated as sustained analytic vigilance rather than once-off declaration. Through journalling, memo writing, and iterative return to participant phrasing, professional knowledge became object of reflection rather than interpretive default. Positionality was neither denied nor bracketed out of existence; it was examined as analytic resource and potential constraint. In this way, reflexivity deepened rather than weakened interpretive rigour, aligning with Finlay's (2002) argument that transparency regarding embedded presence strengthens phenomenological credibility.

3.24 Temporality, Incompleteness, and the Elusiveness of Longitudinal Meaning

Finally, the temporal boundaries of this study presented their own interpretive challenges. Mobility, as King and Raghuram (2013) argue, is best understood as a longitudinal unfolding, where effects ripple across time and context, shaping identities, opportunities, and affiliations in complex ways. Participants were engaged at varying intervals post-return, offering insights into early and mid-term reflections but not the full arc of transformation. Some narratives revealed integration and recalibration, while others gestured towards unresolved tensions or futures still in flux. These variances enrich the data but also underscore the partiality of the temporal lens.

Carlos, for instance, articulated a narrative of professional reorientation grounded in his mobility experience, while Lucia remained suspended between an expanded worldview and the frustrations of institutional stasis at home. Such differences reflect the uneven temporalities of adaptation, belonging, and career capital, echoing Teichler's (2004) assertion that the

enduring impacts of academic mobility unfold over extended periods, often decades. While this study offers valuable insights into immediate and emergent post-return reflections, it acknowledges its limitations in capturing longer-term trajectories.

A future longitudinal design, tracking participants across one, five, and ten-year intervals, would yield a more dynamic portrait of mobility's afterlives. For now, this study remains temporally situated, offering a cross-sectional glimpse into the interplay of memory, meaning-making, and institutional navigation within the specific contexts of South African higher education and global mobility structures.

3.25 Reframing Analysis as Ongoing, Situated, and Ethical

In consolidating these methodological reflections, this chapter underscores analysis not as a finite task but as an ongoing, situated, and ethically charged process, one that evolves in responsiveness to participants' narratives and the shifting interpretive horizons they open. The study's analytical strategy maintained allegiance to phenomenology's core commitments while embracing the conceptual pluralism necessary to honour the data's depth and complexity. This interpretive posture affirms the study's contribution to a more expansive, critically reflexive, and ethically attuned tradition of phenomenological inquiry into international student mobility.

3.26 Analytical Method: From Lived Meaning to Thematic Crystallisation

The data analysis process unfolded across three recursive and interlinked stages, aligned with the hermeneutic depth of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), while integrating thematic structuring as articulated in Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive approach.

3.26.1 Stage One: Immersion and Phenomenological Reduction

The first stage involved deep immersion in participant narratives through repeated listening and detailed transcription. By engaging in *epoché*, the bracketing of preconceptions, interpretation was grounded in the participants' lifeworlds rather than filtered through the researcher's own assumptions (Husserl, 1970). This reduction facilitated an entry into the situated meanings embedded within the data, paying attention not only to what was said, but to the emotional and contextual cadence of each account. For example, when one student described visa struggles as a "test of patience and faith," the interpretive focus moved beyond logistical inconvenience to questions of agency, precarity, and hope.

3.26.2 Stage Two: Initial Coding and Narrative Clustering

In this stage, data were coded through descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual lenses. Codes such as "bureaucratic exhaustion," "social reinvention," and "institutional silence" were used to preserve the texture of student expression

while allowing patterns to emerge across cases. These codes were not abstract categories but interpretive acts, each shaped by the dynamic interplay between data and theory. IPA's double hermeneutic was crucial here; participants were making sense of their worlds, and the researcher was making sense of that sense-making (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

3.26.3 Stage Three: Interpretive Synthesis and Thematic Crystallisation

The third stage involved the synthesis of meaning across transcripts. Through an iterative process of comparison, contrast, and dialogue with theory, three overarching themes crystallised. This thematic architecture did not emerge fully formed but evolved through recursive engagement with the data and constant interrogation of emerging insights. Concepts such as identity transformation, cultural adaptation, and strategic agency were not predefined but became visible through sustained analytic dwelling. Crystallisation, as opposed to saturation, was the preferred metaphor here (Ellingson, 2009), allowing for multidimensionality and contradiction within themes.

3.27 Final Thematic Architecture

The interpretive journey culminated in the identification of three meta-themes. Each theme reflects a distinct yet interconnected domain of experience, shaped by personal, institutional, and global forces.

3.27.1 Theme 1: Preparation for International Mobility – Navigating Processes, Procedures, and Challenges

Emerging from early codes such as “visa anxieties” and “funding delays,” this theme captured the strategic and affective labour of preparation. Participants spoke of planning, persistence, and mental readiness, revealing how access to mobility is as much about navigating systems as it is about academic merit.

“It felt like a game you weren't told the rules for, you just had to learn quickly or you'd miss the opportunity.”

3.27.2 Theme 2: Institutional Support and Recognition of Mobility Programmes

Initially surfaced as “institutional disconnects,” this theme deepened into a layered understanding of institutional (non)responsiveness. Students' experiences ranged from frustration with administrative delays to moments of support that altered their journeys. Through theoretical engagement, this theme illuminated both the affective cost of institutional misrecognition and the agency exercised by students to seek structural coherence (Ahmed, 2012; Bourdieu, 1986).

“I found one admin person who really cared, she helped escalate my case. Without her, I would've given up.”

3.27.3 Theme 3: Academic, Social, and Personal Development – Towards Identity Reconstruction

The third theme moved from observations of academic adjustment to deeper reflections on identity shifts, cultural hybridity, and emerging global subjectivities. Students described themselves as returning “bigger versions” of who they were, more confident, more attuned to difference, and more aware of their positionality in the world. These accounts resonate with theories of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), resilience (Kim, 2001), and cultural negotiation.

“I didn’t just learn from lectures. I learned from navigating a world I didn’t grow up in and learning who I could become in it.”

Table 3.2 Thematic Development Across Analytical Stages

Initial Codes	Refined Sub-Themes	Final Theme
Bureaucratic hurdles, visa stress, info gaps	Strategic planning, emotional labour, logistical negotiation	Preparation for International Mobility
Credit transfer issues, lack of institutional contact	Institutional barriers, informal navigation, agentic interventions	Institutional Support and Recognition of Mobility Programmes
Culture shock, academic adjustment, homesickness	Resilience, intercultural competence, identity reconfiguration	Academic, Social, and Personal Development – Towards Identity Reconstruction

By grounding its analytic process in phenomenological attentiveness and theoretical responsiveness, this study offers more than thematic categorisation.

It presents a deeply reflexive, epistemically modest, and theoretically robust account of international student mobility. The evolving theoretical lens, shaped by the data rather than imposed upon it, affirms that phenomenology, when engaged with critically, can remain open to conceptual innovation without losing coherence.

This study thus models a methodological contribution to mobility research: an approach that is capacious enough to hold ambiguity, layered enough to honour complexity, and principled enough to centre student voice as both method and message.

3.28 Navigating Constraints and Positionality in Phenomenological Inquiry

Every research undertaking, regardless of its intellectual rigour or methodological precision, is shaped by inherent constraints, some emerging from the very frameworks that make deep inquiry possible. Within this phenomenological study, such limitations do not diminish its contribution but rather offer a reflective aperture into the contours of knowledge construction. As underscored in scholarly discussions on qualitative research Creswell and Poth (2016) acknowledging these constraints becomes a vital gesture of reflexivity, enhancing rather than undermining scholarly integrity. In this spirit, what follows is not merely a catalogue of methodological boundaries, but a

critical engagement with the epistemological, contextual, and positional dynamics that contour this research.

This interpretative analysis, deeply anchored in the lifeworlds of internationally mobile students, intentionally favoured depth over generalisability. The stories shared, shaped by social location, memory, and cultural context, are not replicable artefacts but vivid enactments of meaning-in-the-making. What this chapter aims to illuminate, then, is how methodological intentionality, researcher subjectivity, and socio-temporal specificities interact to shape what could be known, and how.

3.28.1 The Scope of the Study: Sample, Scale, and Situatedness

Phenomenological inquiry privileges depth over breadth, seeking textured understanding of how individuals interpret lived experience rather than statistical generalisability (Smith et al., 2009). This orientation informed participant selection, scale, and analytic procedure. The study engaged ten undergraduate and postgraduate students who had participated in international mobility programmes. While the call for participation was open to all mobility types, the final sample comprised nine Erasmus-funded participants and one supported by institutional funding, drawn from two South African universities with distinct historical and socio-educational trajectories.

The invitation to participate was disseminated broadly to all eligible South African students during the specified period. Participation was voluntary and not restricted by race. The final sample therefore reflects a self-selecting group of students who responded within the recruitment window. No white students were among the respondents; this reflects uptake rather than recruitment design. Most participants were first-generation students, a factor that proved analytically significant in tracing differential access to capital, institutional navigation, and mobility conversion.

Within IPA, adequacy is determined by analytic depth and coherence rather than numerical expansion. Ten participants enabled sustained engagement with each case through detailed coding, development of emergent themes within individual accounts, and careful cross-case synthesis. As analysis progressed, thematic structures stabilised, with later interviews refining existing interpretations rather than introducing fundamentally new experiential domains. Patterns relating to funding precarity, institutional mediation, first-generation positioning, relational negotiation, and post-return recalibration recurred with increasing conceptual clarity, signalling interpretive saturation grounded in experiential structure.

Participant narratives did not converge in terms of identical experiences. For instance, Lucia described cultural dissonance in Germany, contrasting with others who found European interpersonal formality liberating. Such divergence

affirms van Manen's (2016) argument that phenomenological knowledge resists premature synthesis and remains attentive to situated particularity. Convergence was evident at the level of developmental process: across funding structures and first-generation status, participants described negotiation of economic uncertainty, decoding unfamiliar pedagogic expectations, and recalibration of belonging upon return.

The decision to prioritise a small, purposively selected cohort reflects methodological alignment rather than empirical limitation. As Patton (2014) notes, qualitative sampling seeks relevance and richness, not demographic representativeness. While the focus on Erasmus-funded undergraduates circumscribes transferability, inclusion of postgraduate and first-generation students strengthened analytic insight into how structural location shapes relational labour and capital conversion. The boundedness of the sample enabled analytic intimacy while highlighting avenues for future comparative research across institutional typologies, funding models, and social positionalities.

3.28.2 Linguistic and Cultural Nuances in Cross-Language Expressivity

Interviews were conducted primarily in English, which functions as the dominant language of instruction at the institution. However, several participants possessed rich multilingual repertoires, including isiZulu, Sesotho, and Setswana, and moved fluidly between languages during the interview

encounter. This code-switching reflected everyday communicative practice rather than linguistic deficit. In many instances, participants drew on indigenous terms, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded phrases to convey affective and relational meanings that would have been diminished if rendered exclusively in standard academic English.

There were moments in which participants appeared to search for words when describing emotionally dense experiences of mobility. One participant, for example, described feeling “disconnected” during her time abroad. Upon reflexive consideration, it became evident that the English descriptor functioned as a partial approximation rather than an exhaustive articulation. A phrase drawn from her home language might have more accurately captured a composite affect—blending longing, estrangement, cultural nostalgia, and relational rupture. Such instances highlighted how emotional nuance can become compressed when lived experience is mediated through a second or institutionally dominant language.

Scholarship in cross-cultural psychology reinforces this concern. Emotional expression is not universally encoded; it is shaped by culture-specific systems of meaning and linguistic availability (Fontaine & Breugelmans, 2021). Languages differ in the granularity with which they name affective states, and certain emotional concepts resist direct translation. Özkan (2024) critiques universalist models of emotion, arguing for culturally situated understandings

that recognise implicit, relational, and contextually embedded forms of affective expression. These perspectives problematise the assumption that English-language research can fully capture the phenomenological texture of culturally diverse participants' experiences.

Within this study, translation did not take the form of formal external linguistic conversion. Given shared multilingual competence and cultural familiarity, interpretive mediation occurred within the interview encounter itself. When participants shifted languages, clarification was sought in real time to ensure semantic precision. During transcription, indigenous terms were retained where analytically significant, followed by contextual translation in brackets. This approach preserved linguistic texture while maintaining analytic accessibility. Temple and Young (2004) caution that translation in qualitative research is never merely technical; it is interpretive, relational, and ethically charged. Consistent with this insight, interpretive decisions regarding phrasing, emphasis, and contextual meaning were documented in analytic memos. Translation was treated as part of the hermeneutic process rather than as a neutral procedural step.

Importantly, moments of hesitation, silence, or linguistic searching were not interpreted as communicative failure. From a phenomenological standpoint, such pauses may signal the limits of available language in capturing embodied or culturally saturated experience. These moments were therefore

read as analytically meaningful – as cues to the density of affect and the complexity of cross-cultural meaning-making.

South African multilingual discourse frequently involves the interweaving of several languages within a single conversational sequence. This hybridity was treated not as methodological complication but as data in its own right, illuminating identity positioning, relational orientation, and affective nuance. Rather than neutralising linguistic complexity in pursuit of analytic uniformity, the study sought to honour how meaning was produced through culturally situated speech practices.

In this way, language was understood not merely as medium of communication but as epistemic terrain. Attending to its textures, limits, and shifts formed an integral component of the study's commitment to phenomenological sensitivity and cultural reflexivity.

3.29 Embracing Limitation as Scholarly Invitation

Rather than viewing limitations as deficits, this study regards them as generative opportunities to sharpen focus, deepen reflexivity, and invite future inquiry. The recognition of methodological boundaries, temporal situatedness, and interpretative complexity is not an act of scholarly concession but a commitment to epistemological humility.

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, the credibility of qualitative inquiry rests not in its claim to universality but in its transparent engagement with complexity. In this spirit, several pathways for future research emerge: longitudinal engagement with student trajectories; inclusion of postgraduate and underrepresented student cohorts; comparative studies across institutional geographies; and multilingual data collection approaches.

This study, situated within the socio-political climate shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and unfolding debates on decolonisation in South African higher education, captures a moment in transition. de Wit and Altbach (2020) observe that pandemic-era mobility foregrounded new questions of equity, risk, and access. These contextual pressures, while limiting in certain respects, also deepen the significance of the findings, positioning them within a transformative global discourse.

In embracing its limitations with transparency and critical engagement, this research asserts its place within the evolving canon of internationalisation scholarship. The following chapters will continue this interpretative journey, amplifying student voices and synthesising theoretical insights to illuminate not only how mobility is experienced, but how it fundamentally reconstructs the subjectivities of those who traverse its pathways.

3.30 Situating the Methodological Grounding

This chapter has excavated the methodological architecture of the study, anchoring it firmly within phenomenological inquiry and interpretative meaning-making. Far from being a neutral recounting of research procedures, this chapter has positioned methodology as an ethical and epistemological stance, one that privileges lived experience, embraces co-construction, and remains reflexively alert to its own assumptions and limitations.

Phenomenology, as both philosophical grounding and methodological compass, has informed each stage of the research process: from participant engagement and purposive sampling to data generation through semi-structured interviews, and the layered analysis guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The choice to centre student voices as meaning-makers, rather than mere subjects, has enabled a textured and humanised account of international mobility, one that attends to the socio-cultural, emotional, and institutional dimensions of the journey.

Importantly, this chapter has not only detailed the research design but also grappled with its constraints, methodological, positional, linguistic, and contextual. The discussion on limitations has illuminated the delicate tensions inherent in cross-cultural interpretation, the impact of researcher positionality, and the epistemological humility required in navigating fragmented narratives and shifting temporalities. Rather than detracting from the study's

contributions, these reflections strengthen its integrity, aligning with scholarly calls for reflexive transparency in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In foregrounding the importance of ethical care, context sensitivity, and conceptual rigour, this chapter prepares the reader for the transition from method to meaning. What follows in Chapter 4 is not a mechanical presentation of data but a journey into the intimate, complex, and at times contradictory realities of international student mobility. Here, the student participants emerge not as data points but as interlocutors, agents of knowledge whose narratives challenge, deepen, and extend our understanding of global academic encounters.

As their voices begin to surface in the next chapter, the reader is invited to enter the *lifeworlds* of these students: to listen not only to what they experienced, but to how they made sense of those experiences, how they navigated unfamiliar terrains, encountered institutional logics, negotiated identity, and forged new affiliations. These stories are as much about movement as they are about transformation; they are about how borders, geographic, epistemic, and personal, are crossed, resisted, and reimagined.

Thus, the methodological foundation laid here is not a static blueprint but a dynamic invitation to engage with experience phenomenologically, to

interpret deeply, and to remain attuned to the evolving contours of what it means to move, to belong, and to become.

3.31 Methodology as Praxis and Philosophical Commitment

To conclude, this chapter has detailed the methodological underpinnings of the study, anchored in a commitment to phenomenology as both philosophy and practice. At its heart lies a dedication to understanding international student mobility not through predetermined variables or metrics, but through the richly textured *lifeworlds* of those who have lived it. Drawing on the interpretive ethos of Van Manen (1997a) and the analytical rigour of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), the study positions student narratives as central epistemic sites from which to explore the ethical, emotional, and political contours of global learning.

Rather than apply theory to data, the methodology allowed theory to emerge from data, an orientation grounded in what Pillow (2003) terms methodological humility. Through iterative listening, reflexive memoing, and layered interpretation, the research design prioritised attentiveness to meaning as it is lived, not abstracted. This was not a neutral stance; it was a politically and ethically situated one. To centre the voices of historically marginalised South African students in global education research is to interrupt the epistemic conventions that have long underwritten internationalisation

discourse. In this sense, the research methodology itself became an act of epistemic justice.

The chapter also clarified the layered analytical architecture of the study. While phenomenology provided the core interpretive stance, the evolving nature of the data necessitated a more expansive lens. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1992), decolonial critique (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in McLeod, 2024; Holland et al., 1998) were incorporated not as decorative add-ons, but as conceptual tools summoned by the data itself. Their integration into the interpretive process enriched the analysis, illuminating how student experiences were shaped not just by personal disposition or academic performance, but by structural inequalities, symbolic exclusions, and socio-political histories.

Moreover, the chapter engaged with the practical mechanics of qualitative inquiry, including ethical considerations, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and thematic analysis. These dimensions were not approached as technical steps to be mechanically completed but as relational and interpretive processes requiring sensitivity, reflexivity, and care. Within a phenomenological frame, research unfolds in dialogue, not as something done *on* participants but *with* them, acknowledging the co-constructed nature of meaning (Finlay, 2011; van Manen, 2014). In practice, this meant that informed consent was not treated as a single moment of agreement but as an iterative process, revisited at key stages of the study. The use of pseudonyms

was carefully discussed, allowing participants to retain a sense of ownership while protecting confidentiality. Where applicable, participants were engaged to confirm certain details of their accounts to ensure accuracy and resonance, rather than to validate or sanitise their voices. This practice was consistent with the phenomenological ethic of care—what van Manen (2016) describes as attentiveness to the lived meanings of others, which guided decisions at each step. Such strategies sought to preserve participants' dignity and agency throughout, grounding the inquiry in dialogical respect and relational trust.

In embracing crystallisation rather than triangulation, this study acknowledged that qualitative truth is never singular but refracted, partial, and contextually situated (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2003). Richardson (2003) first proposed the crystal as a methodological metaphor—multifaceted, multi-angled, and shifting, offering richer possibilities than the rigid geometry of triangulation. Ellingson (2009) later extended this into a full methodological framework, demonstrating how crystallisation enables researchers to move fluidly between grounded, analytic practices and creative, interpretive forms of representation. These perspectives highlighted the study's commitment to plurality, resisting the flattening impulse of universal claims in favour of layered, co-constructed meaning.

As we move to Chapter 4, the findings are not presented as definitive conclusions, but as thematic interpretations grounded in student voices. The

phenomenological lens remains central, yet the narrative shifts from methodological scaffolding to lived expression, inviting readers to a closer engagement with how international student mobility is experienced, navigated, and made sense of by those at its heart.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, drawing on in-depth interviews with South African students who participated in international mobility programmes during their university enrolment. The focus is on participants' lived experiences as narrated in their own words. In line with the phenomenological orientation of the study, the chapter prioritises description over interpretation, attending closely to how students experienced, understood, and articulated their mobility journeys.

The findings are organised in direct alignment with the four research questions. The chapter proceeds sequentially through the mobility trajectory: pre-departure preparation and access; institutional recognition and support; academic, cultural and interpersonal experiences abroad; and post-mobility sense-making upon return. This structure reflects the temporal arc of participants' accounts while maintaining analytical coherence with the study's aims.

Verbatim excerpts are used extensively to foreground participant voice. Quotations are presented as primary data rather than illustrative embellishments, and care has been taken to represent a range of perspectives across institutions, socio-economic backgrounds, and mobility formats. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.

This chapter does not engage in theoretical interpretation or extended analytical commentary. Its purpose is to present a faithful and systematic account of students' experiences as described by them. Conceptual analysis and theoretical integration are undertaken in Chapter 5, where these findings are interpreted in relation to debates on internationalisation, equity, identity, and student agency within South African higher education.

The chapter therefore establishes the empirical foundation of the thesis, providing a structured and evidence-based account of how international mobility is experienced, navigated, and made meaningful by participating students.

4.2 Motivations, Aspirations, and the Drive to Study Abroad

For many South African students, the pathway into international mobility was not paved through institutional directives, formal invitations, or policy briefings. Rather, it began with something more personal—curiosity, conversation, and the quiet determination to imagine a life beyond the familiar.

Carlos recalled how his interest in studying abroad was sparked by observing international students on his home campus during his first year:

"I noticed many exchange students from abroad and became fascinated by their experiences. I made friends with some of them, and many were from Germany. That got me curious about studying abroad."

This initial curiosity matured into focused determination. In his second year, after hearing a lecturer announce that applications would soon open, Carlos began taking deliberate steps toward his goal:

"That's when I really started focusing on doing well academically and asking my lecturers about the process."

He actively sought clarity about the selection criteria and was informed that academic performance would be decisive:

"They told me it was based on academic performance, you get selected if you perform well."

Preparation, in his case, extended beyond coursework. Years before formally applying, he had already secured a passport:

"Luckily, I already had my passport. I had my passport for years. I was determined to travel one day."

When the programme destination changed unexpectedly, he was ready:

"My Head of Department said I was lucky. But he also mentioned that instead of going to Germany, the university was now sending students to Spain."

Carlos's narrative reflects aspiration as anticipatory labour—mobility imagined and prepared for long before institutional confirmation. The passport becomes more than a document; it signifies projected selfhood, a materialisation of imagined possibility.

Other participants described similarly proactive, though less formally structured, trajectories. Pablo learned about the programme through a friend:

"The first thing he asked was, 'Do you have a passport?' I didn't, so I got one, applied, and the process moved forward from there."

The application process itself required cultural preparation:

"They asked a lot of questions about German culture, so I had to do some research on that..."

Informal peer networks thus often functioned as gateways into mobility. Opportunity circulated relationally before it was formalised administratively.

Gabriella's narrative further deepens the theme of aspiration by situating it within biographical and socio-spatial context. She located her desire to travel in childhood imagination and township upbringing:

"I grew up in a township and always told my family that I would travel the world."

Here aspiration precedes institutional awareness. It is not triggered by programme advertisement but rooted in long-standing self-narration. Mobility appears as imagined transcendence of spatial and structural limitation. Her metaphor of travel as compulsion conveys its affective force:

"Travelling is like a bug. Once it catches you, you want to do it over and over because it opens up your perspective."

Travel, in Gabriella's account, is epistemic expansion. It reconfigures perception. The "bug" metaphor signals not escapism but transformation through exposure—an opening of worldview that unsettles inherited horizons.

Importantly, Gabriella's aspirations were not detached from academic discipline. Rather, mobility intensified her academic orientation:

"It made me realize that I could achieve anything I wanted, as long as I was willing to work hard."

Her motivation was sustained through institutional performance structures:

"Travelling motivated me to work even harder academically so I could stay in the Genius Club."

Yet this recognition was conditional:

"It's not like a lifetime membership — you have to earn it every year with distinctions."

Here aspiration intersects with meritocratic precarity. Academic excellence becomes both gateway and maintenance mechanism. Mobility is not only imagined freedom; it is structured through performance regimes that demand sustained distinction. Gabriella's account illustrates how aspiration operates within institutionalised expectations of continual achievement.

Other participants framed their motivations in terms of existential disruption. Lucia described a moment of dissatisfaction:

"I remember sitting in a boring lecture and thinking, this can't be all there is. I wanted to shake things up, to be somewhere where I'd have to start from scratch."

Mobility appears here as self-displacement—an intentional unsettling of comfort and predictability.

For Elena, the impetus was developmental:

"It wasn't just about the qualification. It was about growth, learning in a different context, testing myself, expanding my worldview."

Carlos similarly drew inspiration from familial precedent:

"My older brother had studied abroad and talked about how much it changed him. I knew I wanted that too, not just the education, but everything that came with it."

Fernando articulated aspiration as boundary-crossing beyond small-town limitation:

"I come from a small town. I knew I had to take a risk to break out of that box. Studying abroad was my way of doing that, even if I didn't have all the resources."

Valeria expressed tentative hope intertwined with self-doubt:

"To be honest, I didn't think I would be chosen. But I applied because a small part of me wanted something extraordinary, something outside my comfort zone."

Across these accounts, mobility emerges not merely as academic advancement but as existential orientation. It is imagined escape, structured challenge, relational inheritance, and self-reinvention. Students did not passively await institutional validation; they prepared materially (passports), strategically (academic performance), and imaginatively (self-narration) long before formal selection.

Phenomenologically, aspiration functions as horizon. It orients action toward a not-yet-realised future. In contexts marked by structural inequality, such orientation carries particular weight. For students like Gabriella, growing up in a township, or Fernando, from a small town, mobility represents both symbolic and material re-scaling of possibility.

Thus, the drive to study abroad was not reducible to employability metrics or institutional prestige. It was animated by curiosity, relational influence, disciplined striving, and deeply personal visions of transformation. Mobility began long before departure—within imagination, conversation, and the quiet insistence that another world might be reachable.

4.3 Navigating Cultural and Linguistic Transitions: Challenges and Catalysts for Growth

The onset of international mobility was not always accompanied by excitement. For many students, it began with a confrontation with difference

marked by linguistic negotiation, unfamiliar social codes, and subtle experiences of exclusion. These disruptions were not incidental; they formed part of the transformative architecture of mobility. Cultural dislocation became both challenge and catalyst.

4.3.1 Language Barriers and Communication Adjustments

Language emerged as one of the most immediate and pervasive sites of adjustment for participants. While some students found partial relief in the widespread use of English among younger populations, linguistic inclusion was uneven and highly context dependent. Valeria reflected on this generational divide:

"It wasn't too bad because a lot of the students we interacted with in Germany spoke English... It was mainly the older generation who didn't speak English."

This divergence created layered communicative landscapes. In university settings and urban youth spaces, English facilitated smoother interaction, but in intergenerational or public contexts, students encountered resistance and, at times, exclusion.

Everyday transactions frequently required improvisation and alternative communicative strategies. As one participant explained:

"In cafés, we often had to use Google Translate, pointing at the bread or food to show what we wanted."

Here, technology became a mediating tool, allowing students to navigate mundane encounters such as ordering food or making small purchases. Yet, in other contexts, linguistic barriers were significantly more rigid. Reflecting on experiences in Strasbourg, another participant noted:

"However, in Strasbourg, if you don't speak French, you're on your own. People wouldn't respond to us in English."

This refusal to accommodate English shaped both access and emotional experience:

"It was frowned upon when we greeted people in English. So, we had to rely on broken French, gestures, and using the internet to figure things out."

In these moments, communication extended well beyond vocabulary; gesture, tone, posture, and embodied improvisation became essential. Linguistic competence, therefore, was not simply about grammar or fluency—it involved negotiating dignity, inclusion, and belonging in spaces where students' linguistic identities carried social meaning.

Despite these challenges, participants also described how shared disorientation fostered a sense of camaraderie and collective resilience within mobility groups:

"Being in a group made it more fun. Getting lost was part of the adventure."

For some, these linguistic encounters prompted deeper reflection on multilingualism and the cultural politics of language recognition. Emma captured this sentiment:

"We have such a unique culture where people speak different languages at the same time and still understand each other... People need to feel like their language matters."

Together, these narratives highlight how language—its presence, absence, accessibility, and refusal—shaped students' mobility journeys, revealing both the challenges of communication abroad and the renewed appreciation for the linguistic diversity and fluidity within their own contexts at home.

4.3.2 Cultural Practices and Everyday Norms

Cultural practices became visible to participants through the routines that structured daily life abroad. One of the most prominent adjustments related to temporal discipline. Students repeatedly described the precision with which time was organised in the host country, particularly within public transport systems. As one participant explained,

"In Germany, everything was on time. If a bus was scheduled to arrive at 10:30, it was there at 10:30, not a minute later."

This punctuality was initially experienced with surprise:

"I got the shock of my life when I was three minutes late for a bus, and it was already gone."

Time was regulated rather than flexible, which created a powerful form of cultural learning. Participants internalised this structure during their stay, and many felt the shift upon returning home:

“When we came back to South Africa, I experienced reverse culture shock because the trains and buses are often late.”

Mobility not only required temporal adaptation; it also recalibrated participants' own expectations of time, shaping how they interpreted and valued punctuality after returning.

Beyond time, students encountered domestic and bodily norms that at times produced discomfort. Everyday practices within host families revealed cultural assumptions about privacy, modesty, and bodily exposure that differed from participants' own upbringing. One participant described being startled by an invitation to a sauna, accompanied by an explanation that nudity was expected. The sense of unease was immediate:

“I was completely taken aback. I felt uncomfortable and unprepared for that norm.”

Embodied responses were shaped by prior socialisation, and cultural relativism did not eliminate feelings of vulnerability. These encounters illuminated how race, gender, and body consciousness shape individuals' interpretations of everyday practices.

Hygiene routines further exposed implicit cultural differences. Participants recounted being surprised by norms around bathing frequency:

"They were surprised by how much we take showers. They only showered once every two days, which was shocking to me."

Comments from hosts sometimes drew on simplified or stereotyped assumptions about African contexts, which produced moments of tension. Yet students often responded by quietly maintaining their own routines:

"I still needed to shower daily, especially after being out all day."

Such decisions reflected personal comfort as well as a subtle refusal to internalise reductive narratives.

Other domestic rhythms required careful navigation. Living with a host family created an awareness of hospitality boundaries and expectations:

"Staying with a host family means you have to be mindful. You do not want to overstep or impose because they are hosting you."

Temporal discipline was embedded in household routines as well:

"Dinner was at 7 PM sharp, and you had to be on time."

Even recreation reflected different cultural orientations. One participant noted that swimming in a nearby lake was regarded as part of everyday life, whereas for them it diverged from the bathing norms they were familiar with:

“They would swim in a lake instead of taking what I considered a proper bath. It was a strange adjustment.”

Across accounts, cultural learning did not unfold only in formal academic spaces. It emerged in kitchens, bathrooms, bus stops, dinner tables, and neighbourhood lakes. These micro-encounters required participants to interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist unfamiliar norms. Mobility therefore operated through the ordinary, and it is in these small negotiations that students developed broader cultural reflexivity and an expanded sense of self.

4.3.3 Racialised and Cross-Cultural Encounters

Not all encounters were benign. Border spaces revealed the racialised dimensions of mobility.

One participant described arrival in Frankfurt:

“When we arrived in Frankfurt, the white students went through customs smoothly, but those of us with dreadlocks were pulled aside and subjected to extra scrutiny.”

The experience escalated:

“I even had a dog sniffing around me, and I’m terrified of dogs. It was a traumatic experience.”

Airport security became a site where global mobility hierarchies were materially enacted. Appearance mediated suspicion.

Yet participants articulated a coping strategy grounded in composure:

“It taught us to remain calm and let them do their job, even if it felt discriminatory.”

Calmness here functioned as protective discipline. Students navigated vulnerability through emotional regulation.

Racialised curiosity appeared in more mundane settings as well:

‘In public transport, some older people would look at me with my dreadlocks and want to touch them.’

Such moments blurred fascination and objectification, reinforcing awareness of embodied difference.

4.3.4 Cross-Border and Multilingual Encounters Beyond Germany

Experiences outside Germany echoed similar themes. In France, linguistic exclusion was again foregrounded:

‘In France, people wouldn’t respond to us in English ... we had to use gestures and broken French.’

Communication required persistence and humility. Yet the unpredictability of travel retained its adventurous undertone:

‘Getting lost was part of the adventure.’

Mobility thus oscillated between discomfort and discovery.

4.3.5 Growth Through Disruption

Across these narratives, language and culture were not peripheral to the mobility experience. They were central terrains of negotiation. Students encountered punctual transport systems, unfamiliar hygiene norms, sauna etiquette, racial profiling, generational language divides, and public curiosity about their hair and accents.

These encounters unsettled taken-for-granted assumptions about time, privacy, race, and communication. Yet within this unsettlement, growth emerged. Students cultivated adaptability, interpretive flexibility, and intercultural awareness. They learned that fluency involves more than vocabulary, that punctuality reflects cultural orientation, that bodily norms are socially constructed, and that stereotypes travel across borders.

Mobility, in this sense, was not merely geographic relocation. It was movement within the self. Linguistic improvisation, cultural recalibration, and encounters with difference became formative sites of reflexivity.

Through navigating cafés with translation apps, adhering to precise dinner schedules, responding calmly to discriminatory scrutiny, and reframing disorientation as adventure, students expanded their interpretive horizons. Language functioned not only as communication tool but as marker of belonging and boundary. Culture was not backdrop but lived texture shaping perception and identity.

In confronting difference, students did not simply adapt. They reconfigured how they understood themselves in relation to others, to institutions, and to global structures of mobility.

4.4 Institutional Scaffolding and the Architecture of Support

The architecture of institutional support experienced by South African students in international mobility programmes revealed a landscape that was often uneven, at times affirming and relational, at others fragmented, opaque, or entirely absent. Data collected across multiple student narratives painted a textured picture of institutional scaffolding that unfolded across three distinct phases: before departure, during mobility, and upon return. Each stage presented its own configuration of support structures, relational engagements, gaps, and missed opportunities. Crucially, however, cutting across all three phases was a recurrent and deeply consequential concern, the lack of accessible, clear, and inclusive information about international mobility opportunities.

4.4.1 Lack of Information and Awareness

Participants frequently drew attention to a troubling gap in the dissemination of information regarding study-abroad programmes within their universities. For many, opportunities for international mobility were shrouded in a kind of institutional invisibility, often accessible only to a select few. Valeria described this lack of visibility as disproportionately affecting students in specific faculties:

"Sometimes we don't even know that there are opportunities like this available. I only found out because my lecturer mentioned it to me in passing. But many of my classmates didn't hear about it at all."

She also pointed to clear disciplinary disparities in how mobility programmes were promoted:

"If you're in Engineering or Business, they're constantly talking about these opportunities. But in the Humanities or Health Sciences, there's nothing. By the time you hear about it, it's too late because applications have already closed."

For Elena, this informational gap persisted well into her academic trajectory, only surfacing when it was almost too late:

"It was the first time I heard about such a programme, and that was during my final year. In my first two years, I didn't know of any international programmes. There wasn't much exposure or information about it."

In the absence of institutional channels, informal networks often served as crucial sources of information. Pablo described how peer influence shaped his awareness and eventual participation:

"I found out about it from a friend who had previously participated in a similar study abroad programme. He told me about this opportunity in Germany, all expenses paid. The first thing he asked was, 'Do you have a passport?' I didn't, so I got one, applied, and the process moved forward from there."

However, Pablo reported receiving strong institutional support once the process began:

"Honestly, no. The process wasn't difficult at all. I had strong support from the university."

He remained keenly aware that many of his peers were not as fortunate:

"If it wasn't for my friend telling me about the opportunity, I don't think I would have known about it."

"Even now, I engage with students who don't know about these opportunities. That's where the biggest barrier is, how can you take advantage of something you don't know about?"

Fernando added another layer to the issue, identifying institutional communication failures related not only to programme promotion but also to clarity around costs and logistical requirements:

"You see the email saying apply, but they don't tell you what you'll need to spend beforehand. Tickets, visas, health insurance, it's not clear who pays for what."

These narratives collectively suggest that the issue was not merely one of personal oversight but rather a broader institutional lapse in equitable outreach and communication. As Luc succinctly put it:

"Not many students knew about the programme. In terms of raising awareness, it wasn't a priority."

What emerges, then, is a portrait of institutional scaffolding that begins not with funding or logistics, but with the politics of information, who receives it, through which channels, and when. Across these accounts, participants repeatedly emphasised that access to accurate, timely, and targeted information was

foundational to equitable participation in mobility programmes. Without it, many capable and motivated students were left out of opportunities that could have transformed their academic and personal trajectories.

4.5 Application and Pre-Departure Support

The earliest phase of the mobility journey, application and preparation, often set the tone for what was to come. While some students found this stage well-supported, others struggled with inconsistent communication and unclear procedures.

Lucia described the frustration she encountered during the application process:

"Emails went unanswered, deadlines weren't communicated properly. I almost missed the opportunity because I couldn't get confirmation in time."

Fernando echoed these challenges, recalling a process riddled with confusion:

"It felt like I was chasing shadows. You'd get told one thing this week and something completely different the next. At one point, I thought, maybe it's just not meant to happen."

In contrast, Elena recounted a much more affirming experience, where an administrator played a vital role in guiding her through the logistical complexities:

"There was one administrator who went out of her way to help us with everything, from passports to accommodation. Without her, I don't think I would have made it through the pre-departure stress."

Yet even where administrative support was provided, several participants felt unprepared for the emotional and cultural dimensions of departure. Carlos shared his sense of being left to manage alone:

"It was like, 'you're going, great, now off you go.' But emotionally, mentally, I wasn't really prepared."

Sofia offered a series of reflections on the gaps she experienced in her university's pre-departure support. For her, the lack of a structured induction left students ill-prepared for even the most practical aspects of travel.

"It would have helped to have a proper induction and information on what to pack and how to prepare for different climates. For example, we packed lotions for winter, not knowing the restrictions."

Her concern extended beyond luggage or travel protocols. As she continued, it became clear that the missing guidance had implications for her emotional readiness as well.

"At that time, it would have helped to have some induction on what to expect at the airport, security, and cultural shocks in a foreign country."

These early missteps in preparation took on even greater significance when students encountered racism and cultural disorientation abroad, experiences

that, in her view, could have been anticipated and addressed with more honest institutional briefings.

"Yes, especially the culture shock and racism we experienced. I wish we had been briefed about these issues."

Looking back, what stood out most starkly for Sofia was the sheer minimalism of the support provided:

"I wish there had been an induction session and more support. The only support I received was the shuttle to the airport."

Even in cases where pre-departure guidance existed, students often noted a lack of anticipatory information about financial planning, as Fernando recalled:

"The International Office guided me through the process, but they need to be clearer about costs. I had no idea what I was getting into financially until I was deep in the process."

A recurring experience among participants was the lack of clear communication from institutional offices. Students often described feeling as though they had to initiate and manage the flow of information themselves. One participant expressed this frustration succinctly:

"The whole preparation process was really confusing. We weren't given clear dates, and sometimes they'd change plans without informing us. I felt like I was the one who had to keep chasing information." – Sofia

In some cases, delayed communication created a sense of instability and even doubt about whether the mobility experience would materialise. As another student shared:

"There were times I thought maybe I wasn't going anymore because nothing was being communicated. Like we didn't know about the visa stuff until very late, and I had to rush everything." – Carlos

Concerns around funding were another dominant thread in students' accounts, with several participants expressing anxiety over what costs were covered and what remained their responsibility. The uncertainty often led to last-minute scrambling:

"Funding was the hardest part. I kept hearing we'd be supported, but nobody really explained what exactly was covered. I had to borrow from family at the last minute just to be safe." – Emma

For some students, the lack of structured pre-departure guidance extended to the most basic logistics. The absence of a clear orientation or checklist left them relying on personal initiative and online research:

"It's like the institution expected us to just figure everything out ourselves. I had to Google most of the things, what to pack, how to apply for a visa, even the insurance part." – Luc

4.6 Support During Mobility

While abroad, the quality and continuity of institutional support also varied. For some, this phase was marked by consistent communication and relational

care. Elena described how the International Office remained present and engaged:

"The International Office was very supportive, and they kept us informed via group messages. We had access to staff who were ready to assist us with any issues we had, which was invaluable."

This sense of being supported, not just administratively but interpersonally, offered students like Elena a feeling of being held by the institution even across geographic distances.

International experiences also revealed contrasts in institutional preparedness. Valeria noted shortcomings in the U.S. context:

"When we arrived, they were not prepared for us. The rooms weren't ready, and we had to wait for bedding. It felt like they didn't even know we were coming." – Valeria

This comparative view highlighted the importance of structural efficiency in enabling students to feel welcomed and ready to engage.

4.7 Post-Mobility Reintegration

For several participants, returning home introduced a new set of challenges that differed from those encountered abroad. Reintegration involved navigating academic requirements, institutional systems, and everyday life in ways that were not always straightforward.

Fernando described administrative difficulties related to credit transfer and academic equivalence:

"That's where some challenges arose, when I returned. The courses I took abroad had to be equivalent to those at my home university for credit, but there was one module that didn't quite match. I had to come back and write a special exam because it was my final year."

The situation was compounded by time pressure and accommodation concerns:

"I missed both the main exam and the supplementary exam, so I had just two days to prepare after returning. I had to prepare for an exam within two days and also find accommodation, as I was no longer registered for that academic year after returning in February 2018."

He also described confusion arising from a lack of coordinated communication between departments:

"I didn't have to register to write a special exam, and that gap created some confusion. Other departments within the institution didn't have that information, which led to challenges."

Reflecting on the broader issue, he noted:

"The main issue is that students have to source information on their own. There's no clear guideline for students participating in exchange programmes."

He added:

"Once you're in, things change, and you need additional support, not because you're special, but because the circumstances require it."

Fernando further explained how exchange students sometimes fall outside standard institutional processes:

"For example, under normal circumstances, no student stays in residence without being registered. But for exchange students, you face these exceptional cases."

He concluded:

"The challenge is that many departments aren't aware of the programme or how to support students, either while they're abroad or when they return."

While some participants encountered administrative gaps, others described shifts in their everyday experiences upon returning. Emma spoke about adjusting again to local systems and rhythms after becoming accustomed to different structures abroad. She described feeling unsettled by differences in punctuality and public systems, noting that aspects of daily life that once felt ordinary now stood out more sharply. At the same time, she expressed a renewed appreciation for South Africa's multilingual environment, observing that everyday language practices—such as moving between languages within a single conversation—felt newly significant after spending time in a more linguistically uniform setting.

Emma also reflected on how the international experience influenced her professional trajectory. She described feeling more confident in workplace settings and believed that her exposure abroad strengthened her communication skills. However, she indicated that the value of her international experience was not always fully understood or recognised in local contexts.

Reintegration also unfolded through peer relationships. Luc described how, after returning, he actively encouraged others to consider exchange opportunities:

“When I came back, I told anyone who would listen. I was a tutor at the university and made sure all my students knew about it. I believe one or two even went on exchange because of that.”

His account suggests that returning students sometimes became informal sources of information and encouragement for others considering mobility.

Across participants, post-mobility reintegration involved navigating academic requirements, institutional communication, professional transitions, and shifting perceptions of home. Their accounts highlight both the practical demands of re-entry and the personal adjustments that accompanied returning.

4.8 Financial Barriers

Financial considerations emerged as a significant dimension of the mobility experience, shaping both access to and participation in exchange programmes. For some participants, costs were immediate and substantial.

Lucia described the high upfront expenses:

“Flights alone were ridiculous, over R20,000 for the return trip. Then you get there, and you need accommodation, food, transport... I paid R9,000 per month for housing in Germany.”

She explained that the timing of funding intensified the strain:

"For Erasmus, the grant only comes after you arrive. So you have to find that money upfront. I was lucky my family helped, but not everyone has that privilege."

Fernando similarly described difficulty managing pre-departure expenses:

"I couldn't afford the flight ticket until I approached the Research Office. They helped, but I didn't even know they could do that. It felt like I stumbled onto a solution by chance."

Carlos recounted mandatory pre-departure costs:

"We had to pay for medical insurance for the duration of the stay. We also had to pre-book a return flight, and the university would reimburse us once we arrived in Spain."

In his case, personal networks became crucial:

"My ex-girlfriend, who's German, paid for my medical insurance and flights, and I reimbursed her once I received the money back from the university."

Elena described institutional support as decisive in enabling her participation:

"Covering my travel costs was a huge relief, I wouldn't have been able to afford the tickets or travel insurance on my own. Preparing for the trip, such as buying clothes for the colder climate, added to the costs. I did have to contribute to things like the visa and passport, but overall, SLU's support made a big difference."

However, she noted:

"Not all programmes are fully funded, and if students have to cover major costs like travel and insurance, it can become a huge obstacle."

Day-to-day expenses abroad also placed pressure on participants. Fernando explained:

"My scholarship didn't cover all expenses, so I worked odd jobs. It was exhausting, but I had no choice."

Luc described managing his finances carefully:

"I had to be extremely frugal. Every outing was a calculation. But I also learned how to survive."

He also highlighted the visibility of institutional funding:

"I had to pay a service fee in the US, about R3,600 converted. Through my connection with INU's Prodigy Club, I got the fee funded by the university's Academic Development Services."

Although his programme was fully funded, he reflected:

"Once you're on the programme, you can tell it's important to the institution, especially given the funding. But in terms of raising awareness, it wasn't a priority... Not all students can afford such opportunities without financial assistance. Another barrier is awareness, not many students knew about the programme."

Pablo, while not personally constrained, recognised financial barriers for others:

"Finances can definitely be a big barrier, especially for someone like me, from a background that's not wealthy."

He added:

"The exchange rate makes it even more challenging. You need more money to fully enjoy the experience."

Fernando raised concerns about clarity around funding responsibilities:

"When MOUs are signed between universities, and when a third-party funder like Erasmus is involved, there needs to be clear communication about who will cover the expenses before a student leaves their home country. If this isn't addressed, only certain students—those who can afford it—will have access."

He further noted:

"When the call for applications comes out, it doesn't specify the costs students will need to cover before going abroad. It just states that it's a scholarship, but it doesn't explain the expenses that come before departure."

Emma described experiencing financial anxiety before departure:

"I was quite worried about money initially. I thought I'd need more..."

She later realised the programme was fully funded:

*"...but it turned out the university provided everything. It was a full-ride program."
"Yes, everything was covered."*

Despite this, uncertainty led her to seek additional funding:

"At one point, I even tried raising more funds, but it wasn't necessary in the end."

She explained that while most costs were covered, some remained:

"The visa was covered, but I had to pay for the passport myself."

Emma also noted how limited awareness shaped perceptions:

"Other barriers that might prevent students include not knowing that these opportunities exist and that they are funded."

"A lot of people were surprised when I told them I didn't have to pay."

She contrasted this with other programmes:

"We discussed another international program... it was about R90,000... not all universities covered it."

In describing one of her mobility experience, she explained:

"I wrote to about 2000 people asking for funding."

"In the end, I got a tuition waiver, and a professor at INU paid for my flight."

"I raised money in different ways..."

"...but I knew that when I got there, I'd have to find work to cover my living."

In contrast, Gabriella described a fully funded experience:

"No, the funding came directly from the university."

"I also received a stipend for personal expenses during the trip."

"We didn't face any major issues with funding."

Across accounts, financial experiences ranged from fully funded participation to significant upfront strain and uncertainty. Participants described navigating airfare, insurance, accommodation, visa costs, service fees, and daily living expenses. Even where funding was available, timing, clarity, and awareness shaped how accessible these opportunities felt in practice.

4.9 Academic Recalibration and Epistemic Shift

Participants spoke extensively about their academic experiences abroad, often describing the transition as both challenging and formative. The shift into unfamiliar pedagogical systems required significant adjustment, particularly in relation to learning autonomy, classroom dynamics, and access to academic resources.

Lucia recounted how the change in teaching style compelled her to engage with her studies in a new way:

"The level of independence expected was scary at first. But over time, I realised it helped me take charge of my learning in a way I hadn't before." - Lucia

Carlos echoed this shift in academic expectation, noting how classroom engagement differed from what he was accustomed to in South Africa:

"Back home, you're taught to listen. There, they encouraged you to question, even your professors. It changed how I think." - Carlos

For Fernando, the contrast in academic infrastructure between the host and home university was immediately apparent. Access to well-resourced environments shaped his ability to engage with academic tasks:

"Their libraries were amazing, but I didn't always feel like I had the same tools to succeed. I was catching up while they were cruising." - Fernando

Carlos added further reflection on the physical environment, pointing to both similarities and contrasts:

"The facilities were quite similar. But, of course, Spain is a football country, so things were a bit more advanced in terms of cleanliness and general maintenance. The campuses were also quite large, there were three different campuses."- Carlos

However, not all aspects of the academic environment felt unfamiliar or superior.

While some participants were surprised by lower academic standards in the host countries, they gained confidence in their intellectual capacity. Luc shared:

"Academically, though, I was a bit disappointed... I was used to more in-depth essay writing and research. It made me realise that I'm just as good as, if not better than, the students there."- Luc

For Carlos, academic content remained comparable, though the physical infrastructure was more advanced:

"Academically, I won't lie, it didn't change much for me. I still think that in South Africa, we have a higher level of learning... But the campuses were quite large and well maintained." - Carlos

Pablo spoke less about academic content and more about the broader learning environment, highlighting the efficiencies embedded in the host institution's operations:

"In terms of the university environment, I noticed efficiencies that we are falling behind on back home. We also had support from the state, which allowed us to visit various places like museums and factories, enhancing the experience."

Across these narratives, students described a process of recalibration, adjusting not only to new academic systems but also to different expectations of participation, responsibility, and institutional support. Their accounts reflect how studying abroad introduced them to unfamiliar learning cultures, often requiring them to shift how they approached their academic work.

4.10 Everyday Living and Cultural Immersion Abroad

Living arrangements played an important role in shaping participants' everyday experiences abroad. In Germany, Valeria described a structured household rhythm that required attentiveness to etiquette and punctuality:

"Dinner was at 7 PM sharp, and you had to be on time. You don't want to overstep or impose because they're hosting you."

Some aspects of home life introduced unexpected discomfort. Valeria recalled how local norms around nudity created unease:

"They told us, 'By the way, you go naked in the sauna.' I was taken aback... As a black curvy girl, I felt like they would see me as a fetish, so I politely declined."

Pablo also lived with a white host family and reflected on the differences he observed in household dynamics:

"I also experienced living with people from a different background. Staying with a white family was quite different from my previous experiences."

His stay prompted further reflection on relationship norms within the host household:

"Staying with an older couple who were not married also challenged my views on relationships. Their lifestyle was normal for them, with no ambitions to marry."

Participants also described adapting to the physical environment and local contexts. Pablo, who travelled during winter, noted the contrast in climate and his first encounter with snow:

"The weather was another challenge. We left in January from warm weather to the peak of winter, where it started snowing... We were curious about the snow, and it was magical when it touched our faces."

He added that navigating everyday spaces required adjustment:

"There were challenges adjusting to new street names and terminology. In shops, I often spoke English while they spoke German, which was difficult."

Living arrangements also shaped participants' autonomy and mobility. Emma reflected on her freedom to travel independently and on missed opportunities she later recognised:

"I could have explored more during that time. I came back with some leftover money, but I should have used my Schengen visa to travel more and visit more countries."

Her reflection highlights a living context that offered flexibility for independent movement, budgeting, and weekend travel during the mobility period.

4.11 Culinary Exposure and Everyday Cultural Encounters

Food emerged as one of the most immediate and tangible sites of cultural encounter across the students' mobility journeys. Participants did not merely

“eat abroad”—they negotiated new flavours, new routines, and new cultural meanings embedded in everyday culinary practices. These encounters marked moments of both comfort and discomfort, shaping how students understood cultural difference, belonging, and adaptation.

For some, the shift in dietary patterns symbolised the beginning of a broader cultural transition. As Pablo recalled, even familiar routines were transformed by the diversity of food available abroad:

“Then there were basic things like food. I was used to eating pap, and now I was eating all sorts of different cuisines every day.”

For others, culinary spaces became opportunities for cultural diplomacy. Carlos described how shared meals opened avenues for connection, storytelling, and mutual exchange with local peers:

“The culture was amazing. Spanish people are so vibrant and welcoming... We had cookouts where I got to introduce them to South African food, and they showed me their traditional dishes. It was a great exchange.”

Over time, these engagements fostered new tastes and affinities, with Carlos developing a lasting appreciation for local cuisine:

“Oh, the food was great! I loved the tapas, it became my favourite very quickly. The tapas... my favourite dish. Even to this day, I would fly there just to get some.”

By contrast, Luc's experience revealed how culinary encounters could also surface unexpected forms of cultural difference. Rather than novelty or diplomacy, what stood out for him were the structural contrasts in food availability, pricing, and portion norms:

"There wasn't much of a culture shock... But I did notice how different the food was there, the portion sizes were massive, and junk food was so cheap and accessible. Healthier options... were much more expensive."

Together, these narratives show how everyday food practices—what is eaten, how it is prepared, when it is shared, and what it represents—became powerful markers of cultural learning. Culinary encounters thus functioned not merely as sustenance, but as meaningful spaces where students negotiated identity, belonging, exchange, and adaptation across borders.

4.12 Confronting Prejudice and Developing Resilience

Some of the most jarring cultural encounters recounted by participants involved moments of overt racial bias, unfamiliar and unsettling experiences that left lasting impressions. For Valeria, these encounters began almost immediately upon arrival in Europe:

"I had dreadlocks at the time... The white students went through customs smoothly, but those of us with dreadlocks were pulled aside for extra scrutiny. I even had a dog sniffing around me, and I'm terrified of dogs. It was traumatic, but the pre-departure orientation prepared us to remain calm."

Despite the distress of such encounters, the incident also underscored the importance of prior preparation. For Valeria, the emphasis on composure and self-control during pre-departure briefings became crucial resources for navigating moments of hostility and misrecognition abroad. These preparatory tools helped her manage situations that could easily escalate, reinforcing the emotional labour required of students who travel while racialised as Black.

Other participants echoed similar experiences of suspicion, surveillance, and racialisation, even in ordinary settings such as shopping centres or public transport. Sofia recounted one such moment that left a lasting impression:

"I remember a time when the police were called because they suspected we stole chocolate."

She later reflected that the encounter had little to do with the item itself; rather, it revealed how their bodies were read and interpreted in that context:

"I think the police were called not because they thought we stole the chocolate, but because we were Black. They thought there was a possibility we might have stolen it. The police officer who came through had been to South Africa and visited Cape Town."

Through these narratives, it becomes evident that students often carry an additional burden abroad—the need to remain alert to how they are perceived, and to deploy strategies of restraint and emotional regulation to navigate environments where implicit bias and racialised suspicion persist.

Alongside these moments of exclusion and prejudice, students also recounted the ways in which diasporic solidarity provided both comfort and practical support. In Sofia's case, informal networks played a crucial role in helping her navigate linguistic challenges:

"The African community helped with language barriers because we spoke English. If we needed to navigate areas where German was spoken, we used friends who spoke the language."

For others, such as Valeria, cultural encounters required constant negotiation, balancing discomfort with curiosity and self-awareness. She recalled one such moment during a local festival:

"I remember during Oktoberfest, we were on a train with students from other villages, and it was clear we were the only Black people. A 16-year-old girl on the train asked if she could touch my hair."

She described her internal processing of the moment, noting how her response was shaped by both place and context:

"When that girl asked to touch my hair, I paused because I realised it wasn't coming from a bad place. She was just curious because she'd never seen Black hair before. If that had happened in South Africa, I might have responded differently, but in Germany, I understood the context and responded accordingly."

Emma's account reflects a recurring theme across several narratives: the need to interpret cultural encounters within their specific context, resisting immediate judgment, while still acknowledging their racial undertones. This

emotional labour, often unspoken yet continuous, required both resilience and adaptability.

4.13 Social Connections and Growth

Participants described mobility as a catalyst for interpersonal growth and social identity formation. Carlos's social integration was shaped through everyday encounters and the gradual acquisition of a new language:

"At first, it was hard to communicate, but I gradually picked up Spanish... When I first arrived, I had no internet connection, so I couldn't even use Google Translate... Over time, I adapted and made friends."

He later added with visible excitement:

"The social experience was one of the best parts."

Luc offered a particularly vivid portrayal of how being seen and recognised on campus became a source of personal pride and confidence:

"I really built a profile for myself on campus... I was selected to give the closing speech. I even weaved a song into it, 'My Way' by Frank Sinatra, and adapted it to 'We Did It Our Way.'"

His social connections extended beyond campus and into cultural spaces of celebration. Recalling time spent with a host family, he reflected:

"I spent Christmas with a Spanish family from Ecuador in New York... In their culture, Christmas Eve is the big celebration, not Christmas Day."

These accounts illuminated how global friendships, symbolic rituals, and communal moments reshaped students' sense of social belonging and expanded their cultural reference points.

Several students also shared how the experience of mobility translated into tangible assets for their careers and professional identities. Luc explained:

"Because of the work I did on campus, I earned money and built relationships... It was a form of networking and personal branding that I didn't realise I was doing at the time."

He further observed how the experience enhanced his profile:

"Having the international mobility experience on my CV definitely gave me a competitive advantage. I've been very fortunate."

The long-term influence was equally significant:

"The biggest influence is the fearlessness it's given me in pursuing international opportunities... Now, I've considered and explored opportunities in Canada."

4.14 Broadened Worldviews and Reflective Transformation

Students' narratives revealed that international mobility did far more than offer travel or academic exposure. It shifted their sense of self, expanded their understanding of possibility, and reshaped how they interpreted the world around them. For Gabriella, these encounters cultivated a renewed orientation to the world — one marked by openness, curiosity, and an expanded horizon of meaning. Her reflections illuminate transformation as

both an inward and outward journey, one that endures long after the mobility experience has ended.

"Once you start travelling... it changes your perspective on yourself, your country, and the world."

"It opened up my perspective and showed me what's possible."

"You realise how small the world is and how we can make a difference. I view the world through a different lens now."

Pablo reflected on societal values:

"The experience profoundly impacted how I view the world. In South Africa, owning a car is a significant achievement, but in my host country, it's a minor priority."

"I was eager to travel more; any opportunity I get, I'll grab it. It really opened up my mind and changed how I view the world... during that time, I went to France and Zurich in Switzerland."

He also reflected on a renewed appreciation for South Africa:

"It truly changed my worldview and helped me appreciate my country more, despite its challenges. South Africa still has incredible opportunities." – Pablo

Carlos described how the mobility experience expanded his worldview and ambitions, especially in terms of entrepreneurship and international exposure:

"It made me think about starting a business, working abroad, and connecting with people from different places... Networking with others who have travelled really opened up new ideas and possibilities."

He emphasised the value of stepping outside familiar environments, even within local contexts:

"It's essential for people to get out of their comfort zones, even if it's just travelling to another province within the country."

Luc similarly shared reflections that underscored a shift in perspective, especially around economic opportunity:

"What really amazed me was the number of options available to make money. Unemployment is almost non-existent unless you just don't want to work."

In describing everyday social interactions, he noted the ease of linguistic integration in the United States, but also highlighted how cultural markers such as accent became sites of curiosity:

"... no significant language barriers in the US since English is the main language, but I did notice that people were fascinated by our South African accent."

4.15 Narrating the Lived Realities of Student Mobility

These narratives offer more than individual glimpses into discrete experiences; they collectively form a textured, polyphonic tapestry of aspiration, resilience, constraint, and self-authorship. Stitched through the uneven seams of a higher education system that is simultaneously aspirational and structurally bounded, the accounts captured in this chapter compel a rethinking of international student mobility, not as a linear journey of opportunity, but as a layered, negotiated, and often precarious passage. What emerges most vividly is that

mobility is not merely a movement across borders; it is a process deeply embedded in asymmetrical conditions of access, meaning-making, and institutional recognition.

For many participants, the journey began not at the airport, nor even with a formal application, but in moments of imaginative projection, quiet aspirations nurtured in dorm rooms, informal exchanges with peers, and acts of persistent inquiry in the face of institutional opacity. These early phases were not passive; they were characterised by what Appadurai (2003) describes as the capacity to aspire, the enactment of agency within structurally constrained environments. Students sought to visualise themselves in global spaces that had not yet extended a formal invitation, often confronting scripts of internationalisation not written with them in mind. In these moments, students were already engaging in subtle forms of world-making, constructing new imaginaries of possibility while contending with the emotional labour of uncertainty.

What threaded consistently through these narratives was the decisive role of institutional scaffolding. This was not limited to financial support or logistical coordination; rather, it extended to symbolic and epistemic forms of recognition. The politics of information surfaced as a central determinant of access. Participants described knowledge about mobility opportunities as fragmented, contingent on faculty discretion, or circulating through informal peer networks. In this way, institutional architectures of communication, how,

when, and to whom information was disseminated, served not merely as neutral administrative processes, but as gatekeeping mechanisms that tacitly shaped who could imagine themselves as mobile. These dynamics recall what Stein and de Andreotti (2016b) critique as the stratified architecture of global education, where internationalisation, far from being universally accessible, is often mediated through logics of privilege and selectivity.

Moreover, access to mobility could not be reduced to academic merit or the technical availability of placements. Instead, students navigated a multi-dimensional terrain involving opaque procedures, unstable or ambiguous funding models, and varying degrees of responsiveness from institutional actors. Where support structures were present, be they in the form of responsive advisors, knowledgeable peers, or coherent programme frameworks, students found space to thrive. In their absence, they drew upon informal know-how, improvisation, and persistence, often bearing significant personal and emotional costs. These accounts reveal how mobility is sustained not only by formal policy but by affective economies of care, trust, and informal mentorship.

As students moved across cultural and academic terrains, they did not merely cross national borders, they encountered and adapted to new epistemic spaces, recalibrating their ways of thinking, relating, and belonging. These were not only intellectual adjustments but embodied and affective transformations. Snow became more than a meteorological novelty; it

became a metaphor for dislocation and wonder, a marker of how the unfamiliar can both enchant and unsettle. Drawing on Westfall's (1994) insight that space is socially produced, these narratives reveal how mobility engages the body as well as the mind, requiring students to adjust to new climates, foods, social codes, and pedagogical norms.

Importantly, mobility was experienced not as a uniform rite of passage, but as a differentiated journey shaped by gender, class, geography, and institutional affiliation. First-generation students from rural contexts often described an acute sense of self-surveillance and performance, of needing to prove their worth not only abroad but upon return. These feelings reflect broader dynamics of symbolic violence (cf. Bourdieu, 1986), where exclusion is enacted not through overt denial but through subtle invalidation, misrecognition, or the absence of support. Yet these students did not remain passive. Many cultivated informal leadership roles, becoming mentors, information brokers, and advocates within their communities. In doing so, they performed what Holland (2001) might call figured worlds, relational, narrative-based enactments of identity that push back against institutional silences.

Perhaps the most compelling insight emerging from this chapter is the recognition that institutional scaffolding begins not with resources, but with communication. Who receives information, how it is framed, and when it becomes available determines not just access to mobility, but the very possibility of imagining oneself as mobile. Participants consistently highlighted

the decisive role of inclusive, timely, and transparent communication. Without it, even the most capable and motivated students found themselves marginalised from opportunities ostensibly designed for them.

The chapter has purposefully refrained from premature theorisation. Instead, it has presented the students' voices as interpretive agents in their own right, allowing their accounts to breathe, to resonate, and to unsettle dominant narratives about what internationalisation is, and who it is for. In doing so, it invites a more grounded, more humanised understanding of global education, one attentive to silence as much as speech, to absence as much as access.

As we now transition to Chapter 5, the focus shifts from presentation to interpretation. The rich and layered narratives presented here will be placed into critical dialogue with theoretical frameworks, phenomenological, intersectional, sociocultural, and decolonial. We will interrogate how students' lived experiences illuminate the structural architectures, institutional cultures, and socio-political conditions that shape the internationalisation of South African higher education. The questions raised in this chapter, about access, support, identity, and transformation, now form the basis for a deeper inquiry into the relational politics of mobility. It is to these interpretive and critical horizons that we now turn.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

5.1 Introduction

To journey is to move through more than space. It is not merely to cross geographical borders but to traverse interior terrains of identity, aspiration, vulnerability, and becoming. The narratives presented in Chapter 4 were not static recollections of mobility events; they were textured accounts marked by dissonance and affirmation, rupture and reconstruction. These are not stories of students who simply studied abroad. They are accounts of students who encountered the world—and in so doing, were reconstituted by it—through affective, epistemic, and ontological negotiations that reshaped how they understood themselves and their futures.

This chapter returns to those narratives not to restate them, but to re-read them. The purpose is neither explanatory detachment nor thematic repetition. Rather, it is interpretive deepening, guided by a phenomenological sensibility that privileges lived, embodied, and relational experience (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970; van Manen, 1997, 2016). Consistent with van Manen's insistence on remaining with the "texture" of lived experience, interpretation here does not dissolve student accounts into abstraction; it seeks to illuminate the structures of meaning through which mobility was inhabited.

Three phenomenological anchors orient this interpretive work: the lifeworld, intentionality, and socio-cultural embeddedness. The lifeworld, as articulated

by Husserl and extended sociologically by Schutz (1970), foregrounds the pre-reflective horizon within which students made sense of unfamiliar academic and cultural contexts. Their encounters abroad were never neutral; they were filtered through inherited assumptions, material realities, and social histories. Intentionality underscores the directedness of consciousness—the hopes, anxieties, ambitions, and uncertainties that shaped how students prepared for, engaged in, and reflected upon their mobility journeys. Meaning-making, in this sense, was constitutive rather than retrospective.

Socio-cultural embeddedness situates these narratives within layered structures of power and mediation. Drawing on Heideggerian ontology alongside cultural-historical theory associated with Vygotsky and the sociological formulations of Bourdieu—particularly habitus, capital, and field—mobility emerges as structurally conditioned and symbolically mediated (Bourdieu, 2008, 2018). Students' trajectories were shaped by material constraints, institutional logics, linguistic capital, and historically sedimented hierarchies of recognition. Agency, therefore, appears not as unbounded autonomy, but as negotiated practice within asymmetrical fields of possibility.

Critical scholarship sharpens this lens. Ahmed (2007, 2012, 2013) demonstrates how institutional discourses of diversity often function simultaneously as invitation and regulation, incorporating difference while managing its disruptive potential. Her argument that institutions “incorporate difference” in ways that preserve institutional coherence resonates with participants'

accounts of racialisation, conditional belonging, and subtle exclusion within mobility spaces (Ahmed, 2012). Similarly, Marginson (2014) reminds us that mobility is always mobility within structure, embedded in global stratifications that shape access, funding, recognition, and post-return reintegration. Sharon Stein (2020) further urges a decolonial posture of epistemic humility, resisting premature resolution and remaining attentive to the ethical and geopolitical complexities of global higher education.

Against this backdrop, students' voices are treated not as illustrative anecdotes but as epistemic sites. The task is hermeneutic: to listen recursively, to attend to silences and tensions, and to interpret how meaning is constituted across time—before departure, during immersion, and upon return. This interpretive posture aligns with Husserl's (1970) call to return "to the things themselves", while recognising that lived experience is always already socially mediated and historically situated.

The chapter is therefore organised around four interpretive constellations aligned with the study's research questions:

1. **Access and Equity** – examining students' lived experiences of preparation, funding, selection processes, and perceptions of institutional fairness.
2. **Institutional Mediation and Support** – exploring how mobility was prioritised, scaffolded, recognised, and institutionally valued.

3. **Academic, Cultural, and Relational Transformation** – analysing reflections on intellectual growth, intercultural encounters, and interpersonal reconfiguration.
4. **Return, Reintegration, and Meaning-Making** – interrogating how students make sense of mobility in retrospect and situate it within longer-term trajectories.

Through this structure, the chapter moves from structural access to existential interpretation, tracing how mobility is lived, mediated, and ultimately woven into students' evolving sense of self and possibility.

5.2 Cultural and Racialised Encounters: Negotiating Belonging and Difference Abroad

Beyond policy metrics and participation rates lies a lived terrain in which mobility is experienced as emotional displacement, epistemic negotiation, and embodied exposure. Participants' accounts demonstrate that international mobility was not merely an academic opportunity; it was an encounter with difference that required ongoing recalibration of belonging, legitimacy, and self-understanding.

From a phenomenological standpoint, these encounters can be understood as disruptions to the lifeworld (Husserl, 1970; Schutz, 1970). Students entered spaces in which taken-for-granted norms—linguistic, climatic, pedagogical, social—no longer held. Carlos's experience of travelling alone to Spain

illustrates this vividly. Although selected within a cohort, he ultimately departed as the sole participant from his institution. “Honestly, I don’t think I would have managed without her,” he reflected, referring to his former partner who happened to reside there. His account foregrounds a critical insight: while institutional mobility frameworks emphasise formal support systems, lived resilience often depends on informal affective infrastructures (Brown & Holloway, 2008).

Lucia’s reflections further illuminate the phenomenology of estrangement. Despite possessing foundational German proficiency, she found herself silenced by colloquial fluency and rapid speech. “It’s not easy being the quiet person in a place where no one understands you.” Language here functioned not merely as communication but as social capital. Through a Bourdieusian lens, linguistic capital—valued differently across fields—structured participation and peripheralisation (Bourdieu, 2008). The disorientation extended beyond speech: climactic shock and unfamiliar social rhythms unsettled embodied comfort. These are not peripheral details; they mark the corporeal dimension of mobility often absent from institutional discourse.

Racialisation emerged as a more acute site of negotiation. Valeria’s experience in Germany underscores how mobility spaces are not neutral but stratified. Her reflections on hypervisibility—“As a black curvy girl, I felt like they would see me as a fetish”—foreground intersectional vulnerability (Crenshaw, 2024). At Frankfurt airport, intensified scrutiny linked to her dreadlocks became,

in her words, “traumatic”. Such moments echo Ahmed’s (2007) argument that bodies marked as “out of place” are made to feel their difference through institutional practices that appear routine yet function as regulation.

Similarly, Luc’s curtailed six-month visa—contrasted with longer permits granted to female peers—reveals how mobility governance is neither fully transparent nor evenly applied. While causality cannot be conclusively determined, his narrative raises questions about the discretionary logics embedded within migration systems. Scholarship on racialised border regimes suggests that ostensibly neutral processes often reproduce historical hierarchies (Achiume, 2021). His case demonstrates how mobility is shaped not only by academic readiness but by geopolitical and securitised imaginaries of who is deemed investable or secure.

Yet these encounters were not solely experiences of marginalisation. They were also moments of intellectual and relational expansion. Luc described realising “how small and connected the world is,” signalling the formation of global relational consciousness. However, his critique of multiple-choice pedagogies in the United States complicates the assumption of Northern academic superiority. Here, students actively evaluated epistemic standards rather than passively internalising hierarchies. This aligns with Marginson’s (2014) argument that students are self-forming agents within global fields, not merely recipients of institutional capital.

Across narratives, belonging was negotiated rather than granted. Students inhabited mobility as a tension between aspiration and exposure, recognition and regulation. Interpreting these accounts required reflexive attentiveness: as a researcher, I remained conscious of the risk of over-theorising moments that participants themselves narrated with vulnerability and ambivalence. The analytic task was therefore to illuminate structural patterns without subsuming lived nuance.

International mobility, in this thematic constellation, emerges as an encounter with power—embodied, institutional, and symbolic—through which students renegotiate identity in real time.

5.3 Post-Mobility Transformation: Reconstituting Self and Aspiration upon Return

If mobility abroad unsettled the lifeworld, return required reconstitution. Students' post-mobility reflections reveal that transformation was neither immediate nor uniformly celebratory. Rather, it unfolded as a gradual reinterpretation of self, aspiration, and positionality.

Valeria described her mobility as a generational rupture. Raised in a township context, studying abroad materialised what had once seemed implausible. Her subsequent academic achievements—Dean's List recognition and induction into the Golden Key Honour Society—were narrated not simply as meritocratic outcomes but as evidence that exposure reshaped her

academic confidence. “Travelling motivated me to work even harder academically.” Through a Bourdieusian lens, mobility can be read as the acquisition and conversion of capital—cultural exposure translating into renewed academic habitus (Bourdieu, 2018).

However, the transformation extended beyond performance. Elena articulated increased openness: “Socially, I’m more open to different personalities and design styles now.” This suggests what phenomenology would term an expanded horizon of intentionality—future possibilities reimagined through prior encounter. Such shifts resonate with research linking mobility to intercultural competence and employability (Knight & de Wit, 2018), yet participants framed these gains less as strategic accumulation and more as altered disposition.

Importantly, return also exposed asymmetries. Students re-entered home institutions where their international experiences were not always fully recognised or structurally leveraged. This uneven translation of capital reflects what Marginson (2014) describes as global stratification: value is not inherent but field-dependent. Experiences celebrated abroad may require renegotiation upon return.

In interpreting these accounts, I remained attentive to the tension between narrative coherence and lived complexity. Participants often articulated transformation retrospectively, weaving struggle into progress. While it may be

tempting to frame these accounts as evidence of mobility's inherent virtue, a reflexive stance resists such linearity. As Stein (2020) cautions, global education can simultaneously expand horizons and reproduce inequities. The students' stories illustrate precisely this duality.

Post-mobility meaning-making, therefore, is neither triumphalist nor disillusioned. It is integrative. Students returned altered—not detached from structural realities, but more critically attuned to them. Mobility became part of their evolving narrative identity, shaping career imaginaries, relational openness, and self-efficacy.

Sections 5.2 and 5.3 collectively demonstrate that international student mobility does not unfold as a linear progression from opportunity to achievement. Rather, it emerges as a layered and recursive process of encounter, negotiation, disruption, and reconstitution. Anchored firmly in participant testimony and supported by carefully deployed theoretical lenses, the analysis offers an empirically grounded and critically attentive account of how mobility is experienced, structurally mediated, and ultimately integrated into students' evolving trajectories of becoming.

5.4 Constructing the Architecture of Mobility: Uneven Foundations and Fragile Frames

Participants' narratives reveal international student mobility not as a singular event but as a structurally mediated passage shaped by institutional design. The metaphor of architecture captures this dynamic: mobility is constructed through policies, funding models, communication systems, and administrative processes that both enable and constrain participation. However, this architecture is uneven. Its foundations are shaped by historical disparities, bureaucratic rhythms, and selective attentiveness.

Empirically, students did not encounter mobility as a seamless institutional pathway. Rather, they navigated fragmented processes, opaque timelines, and variable support. Opportunity was structured not only through formal eligibility criteria but through visibility—who received timely information, who was encouraged to apply, and who felt authorised to see themselves as legitimate participants.

Through a Bourdieusian lens, these conditions reflect the unequal distribution of capital within institutional fields (Bourdieu, 1986, 2008). Economic capital determined who could absorb hidden costs; social capital shaped who accessed informal guidance; cultural capital influenced who felt confident navigating bureaucratic requirements. What appears administratively neutral therefore operates as stratified design.

At the same time, students were not passive occupants of this architecture. Several repurposed institutional gaps into sites of agency—seeking information independently, mobilising peer networks, and negotiating compliance requirements with limited guidance. Here, agency is understood phenomenologically as situated action within constraint, not abstract autonomy.

In interpreting these accounts, I remained attentive to my dual positioning as researcher and higher education professional. The architectural metaphor risks implying intentional exclusion; however, participants' narratives more often revealed systemic opacity than deliberate denial. This distinction is important for analytic integrity. The issue is less malevolence than misalignment between institutional design and students' lived realities.

Thus, mobility architecture emerges as neither wholly enabling nor wholly obstructive. It is a negotiated structure—containing openings, bottlenecks, and blind spots—within which students assemble their journeys incrementally.

5.5 Access, Equity, and the Politics of Information

Access to mobility in this study was rarely initiated through formalised, transparent channels. Instead, it frequently began through informal disclosure: a conversation with a lecturer, a peer who had previously travelled, or incidental awareness of an opportunity. Valeria's reflection captures this ecology of circulation:

“We heard about it through someone who had already gone. There was no real poster or email. It wasn’t publicised widely, it was just like, if you knew, you knew.”

Her account illustrates how access was mediated through relational proximity rather than universal communication.

This pattern resonates with Ahmed’s (2012) notion of institutional directionality: pathways are made more visible to some bodies than others. Directionality does not always operate through overt exclusion; it functions through familiarity, recognition, and established lines of movement. Students positioned closer to informed networks moved with relative ease, while others encountered uncertainty and delay.

From a phenomenological perspective, the politics of information is lived affectively. Several participants described early engagement with mobility as “guesswork” or “luck.” Information gaps produced hesitation and self-doubt. Drawing on Husserl’s (1982) concept of intentionality, students remained oriented toward mobility as a horizon of possibility, even when that horizon was indistinct. Their pursuit was sustained less by institutional clarity than by aspirational momentum.

However, intentionality alone could not overcome structural asymmetry. Where communication was fragmented, students experienced subtle delegitimation—questioning whether mobility was “for people like me.” These

moments align with Merleau-Ponty's (1965) insight that experience is embodied and spatial; exclusion is not merely procedural but lived as disorientation.

Bourdieu's (1986) framework clarifies the mechanism: information itself functions as capital. Access to knowledge about deadlines, funding streams, and nomination processes is unequally distributed. Informal relay systems—though often well-intentioned, reproduce advantage by privileging those already embedded within supportive networks.

Reflexively, I note that as an internationalisation practitioner, I am acutely aware of how communication strategies are designed. Participants' narratives, therefore, required careful listening to avoid defensiveness or institutional rationalisation. The analytic emphasis here is not on blame but on structural pattern: information circulation is never neutral, and its uneven flow shapes who perceives mobility as attainable.

Equity in this context cannot be reduced to eligibility criteria alone. It is constituted through timing, transparency, responsiveness, and institutional follow-through. Whose emails receive prompt replies? Whose queries are treated as viable? Whose uncertainty is met with guidance rather than silence? These are operational questions, but they are also ethical ones.

Conceptualised phenomenologically, access is not simply a threshold crossed; it is a horizon perceived as reachable. When information is withheld, delayed,

or informally gated, that horizon contracts. When communication is proactive and transparent, it expands.

Viewed collectively, this section demonstrates that access to mobility is architecturally structured through communication ecologies. The politics of information is therefore central—not peripheral—to understanding equity in outbound mobility. By grounding interpretation in participant testimony while selectively mobilising phenomenology and Bourdieu, this analysis maintains empirical fidelity while clarifying the structural conditions that contour students' pathways.

5.6 The Politics of Institutional (Dis)Engagement in International Student Mobility

This section addresses Research Question 2, which examines how students perceive the importance and value their institutions place on mobility programmes, and how they experience institutional support, recognition, and prioritisation.

While policy documents often present international mobility as strategically embedded within institutional missions, participant narratives reveal a more uneven lived reality. Institutional engagement emerged not as a stable, coordinated system but as a variable, faculty-dependent, and frequently contingent upon informal networks.

From a phenomenological perspective, institutional support is not merely a structural provision; it is a lived encounter (Husserl, 1970; Finlay, 2009). Students did not describe “support” in abstract terms. They described unanswered emails, shifting deadlines, family reassurance, fragmented guidance, and moments of unexpected care. Support was experienced bodily and emotionally, not administratively.

Valeria’s recollection of a family-inclusive pre-departure orientation illustrates institutional engagement at its most responsive:

“My parents... were included in the pre-departure orientation. That really helped in calming my parents down.”

This intervention did more than provide information; it acknowledged socio-cultural context. In doing so, the institution temporarily aligned programme design with students’ lifeworlds. Such moments signal what justice-oriented internationalisation might look like in practice.

However, these experiences were not universal. Several participants described inconsistent communication and limited follow-through. Lucia recounted repeated unanswered correspondence and unclear logistical expectations. Sofia reflected on the absence of practical preparation: “We needed proper induction and information on what to pack.” These accounts reveal gaps not in policy existence but in policy enactment.

A Bourdieusian lens clarifies the pattern. Faculties possessing greater symbolic capital—such as Engineering or Business—appeared to circulate information more consistently. Valeria observed:

“In Engineering or Business, they’re constantly talking about these opportunities.”

Here, informational visibility functions as capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Access is mediated through disciplinary positioning and relational proximity rather than uniform institutional design. Pablo’s remark that a friend—not the International Office—first asked whether he had a passport further demonstrates how informal networks substitute for formal accountability.

Theoretical engagement here remains deliberate and bounded. Bourdieu’s (1986/2018) theory of capital illuminates structural differentiation, while phenomenology, as articulated by van Manen (1997) and Smith et al. (2009), clarifies how those differentiations are lived and interpreted. Together, these lenses demonstrate that institutional engagement is never neutral; it actively shapes who experiences mobility as supported and who encounters it as precarious.

Carlos’s reflection captures the emotional cost of minimal scaffolding:

“It was like, ‘you’re going, great, now off you go.’ But emotionally, mentally, I wasn’t really prepared.”

This statement reveals the limitations of administratively complete yet affectively thin engagement. The university fulfilled procedural requirements, but psychosocial preparation remained largely individualised. Such dynamics resonate with critiques of neoliberal responsibilisation in higher education, where institutional success is celebrated while risk is individualised (Shahjahan, 2012).

Financial support emerged as indispensable yet unevenly experienced. Lucia reflected starkly:

“If the money had not been given to me, it was impossible for me to participate.”

Her account foregrounds funding as a decisive enabler. Without it, mobility would have remained aspirational rather than attainable. At the same time, this dependency underscores structural inequality: access is conditional upon financial intervention. As Perna (2006) demonstrates in her work on student choice, financial resources fundamentally shape participation pathways, while Marginson (2016) situates such disparities within stratified global higher education systems. Participants' narratives confirm that funding mitigates exclusion but does not dissolve it.

In contrast, Gabriella described a fully funded experience:

“No, the funding came directly from the university.”

“I also received a stipend for personal expenses during the trip.”

“We didn’t face any major issues with funding.”

Her account reflects institutional coherence: funding was not only available but direct, timely, and comprehensive. Across the dataset, financial experiences ranged from fully supported participation to significant upfront strain and uncertainty. Students navigated airfare, visa costs, insurance, accommodation, service fees, and daily living expenses. Even where funding existed, its timing, communication, and procedural clarity shaped whether mobility felt secure or precarious in practice.

Theoretical engagement here remains deliberate. Bourdieu's (1986/2018) framework clarifies how economic capital structures opportunity, while phenomenology illuminates how such structuring is lived – as anxiety, relief, conditional belonging, or institutional affirmation. Funding operated not merely as resource allocation but as symbolic recognition. Where processes were clear and coordinated, students experienced mobility as institutionally endorsed. Where communication was fragmented or delayed, financial support felt fragile, even when ultimately granted.

Reintegration further exposed this unevenness. Institutional attention was concentrated at the point of departure, where clearance and compliance were required; return often demanded self-navigation. This asymmetry

suggests that mobility is highly visible when outbound but less systemically integrated upon re-entry. The lifecycle of support, therefore, reveals implicit institutional priorities.

Reflexively, as a practitioner situated within internationalisation structures, these findings require disciplined interpretation. It would be convenient to attribute inconsistencies to resource constraints alone. However, the patterned variability across accounts suggests structural unevenness rather than isolated administrative lapses. The issue lies not in individual oversight but in differentiated institutional engagement.

Students' perceptions of institutional commitment were shaped less by strategic discourse than by everyday practices: timely communication, equitable information flow, family inclusion, coherent preparation, and meaningful reintegration. In relation to Research Question 2, institutional value was interpreted through responsiveness and relational attentiveness rather than policy rhetoric. Where these practices were present, mobility was experienced as affirmed and legitimate. Where fragmented, it appeared selective or peripheral.

Institutional engagement in international mobility thus functions as a moral architecture. Decisions regarding communication, funding distribution, preparation, and reintegration are not administratively neutral; they structure recognition, legitimacy, and belonging. If mobility is to operate as a justice-

oriented endeavour rather than a reputational instrument, support must extend beyond transactional facilitation toward sustained, relational accountability.

5.7 Financial Barriers and Structural Inequality

This section speaks directly to Research Question 1, which interrogates students' lived experiences of preparation, funding models, and perceptions of equity in mobility participation.

Participants' narratives demonstrate that financial constraint was not merely a logistical hurdle; it functioned as a structural regulator of participation. Funding frameworks shaped not only who could travel, but under what emotional and material conditions mobility became viable. Financial architecture therefore operated as a filtering mechanism embedded within internationalisation practice.

Although scholarships such as Erasmus and institutionally managed awards expanded formal access, students consistently described a gap between availability and accessibility. Funding required procedural literacy, upfront liquidity, and confidence in navigating administrative systems. Even “fully funded” awards often required advance payment for flights, visa fees, and accommodation deposits prior to reimbursement. For students without financial buffers, this sequencing produced acute precarity.

Through a *Bourdieuian* lens, this reflects the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Funding structures presume financial flexibility and bureaucratic fluency. Students lacking these resources faced delayed confirmation, reliance on informal borrowing, or the emotional strain of contingency planning.

One participant described relying on a former partner to cover initial travel costs. While framed pragmatically, this reliance on affective networks signals institutional shortfall. The burden of bridging financial gaps shifted from the system to the student. Such dynamics resonate with Nancy Fraser's (2020) framework of justice, which insists that redistribution (funding) must be accompanied by recognition of differential starting positions. Without this dual lens, merit-based funding risks reinforcing inequality rather than redressing it.

Exchange rate disparities further complicated expectations. Several students initially converted euro or dollar stipends into rands, perceiving abundance. Once abroad, they confronted the reality of high living costs. What appeared generous in domestic currency translated into constraint in host contexts. Financial literacy and contextual orientation were, therefore, as important as the award itself.

Importantly, informational asymmetry compounded economic inequality. Some students learned about niche funding opportunities through clubs or peers rather than institutional outreach. Access to financial support thus

depended on informational capital. Making funding available did not ensure equitable reach.

Reflexively, I am cautious not to romanticise narratives of frugality and resilience. Students described rationing meals, limiting social integration, or working odd jobs to supplement stipends. While these experiences were sometimes framed as growth, they also reflect systemic insufficiency. Interpreting them solely as resilience risks obscuring structural responsibility.

In relation to Research Question 1, these findings reveal that funding models shape perceptions of equity not only through award size, but through timing, transparency, eligibility logic, and lifecycle support. Financial aid enabled participation, yet its design frequently reproduced conditional access. Mobility remained “fair,” as one participant remarked, “but only if you already knew how to ask.”

5.8 Personal, Intellectual, and Academic/Professional Growth

This section addresses Research Question 3, which explores how students reflect on the academic, cultural, and interpersonal impact of mobility.

Participants consistently described mobility as transformative, yet transformation was neither uniform nor purely celebratory. It unfolded as epistemic decentring, relational expansion, and professional reorientation.

From a phenomenological perspective, these shifts can be understood as reconfigurations of “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1962). Students encountered unfamiliar pedagogical styles, research infrastructures, and academic expectations. These encounters prompted comparison rather than passive admiration. Exposure to advanced facilities led some to re-evaluate assumptions about institutional capacity and epistemic hierarchy.

Luc’s critique of multiple-choice assessment abroad, for example, destabilised the presumed superiority of Northern academic systems. Rather than internalising deficit narratives about home institutions, he engaged in critical comparison. Such reflections demonstrate active meaning-making rather than epistemic submission.

Intellectual growth also manifested as reflexive awareness. Participants described questioning inherited assumptions and situating their education within broader global contexts. This aligns with the idea that mobility catalyses epistemic reflexivity (King & Raghuram, 2013), yet in the data, these shifts were narrated experientially rather than theoretically. Students spoke of “seeing differently,” “thinking bigger,” or “realising how connected the world is.”

Socially, intercultural negotiation required adaptation. Early discomfort in unfamiliar settings became a threshold for growth. Drawing on Husserl’s (1982) notion of the lifeworld, these moments represent recalibration of meaning structures rather than simple cultural adjustment.

Professional trajectories were also reshaped. Exposure to international research environments clarified postgraduate ambitions for some participants. Others described enhanced confidence, public speaking, and cross-cultural communication skills. These developments resonate with career capital frameworks (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), yet participants framed them less as strategic accumulation and more as expanded possibility.

However, gains were not automatically transferable. Several students expressed concern that domestic labour markets might undervalue international experience. Here, the conversion of cultural capital remained contingent (Bourdieu, 2002). Mobility did not guarantee upward mobility; it expanded horizons while leaving structural constraints intact.

Identity reconstruction emerged as a recursive process. Students narrated mobility as a pivot point in their biographies. Yet reflexivity was not entirely self-directed. Some described pressure to “make mobility count” or demonstrate visible transformation. This introduces tension between authentic growth and performative expectation.

In interpreting these narratives, I remain attentive to the double hermeneutic inherent in interpretative phenomenological analysis: participants interpret their experience, and I interpret their interpretations. The analytic aim is not to inflate transformation but to trace how meaning is constituted across time.

In relation to Research Question 3, mobility fostered intellectual reflexivity, intercultural competence, and professional reorientation. However, these gains were mediated by structural conditions and post-return recognition. Transformation was therefore both expansive and bounded—an unfolding process rather than a completed state.

5.9 A Phenomenological Account of Socio-Cultural Experience Abroad

This section addresses Research Questions 2 and 3, examining how students narrate their socio-cultural encounters abroad and how these experiences reshaped identity, belonging, and interpersonal practice.

Participants' accounts confirm that mobility constituted more than geographic relocation; it disrupted the taken-for-granted background of everyday life. Drawing explicitly on Husserl's (1970) concept of the lifeworld, this disruption is understood as a disturbance of sedimented meanings. Students repeatedly described moments in which ordinary practices—greeting rituals, conversational tone, punctuality, domestic routines—ceased to feel self-evident. For example, several participants contrasted the perceived emotional reserve of European social interactions with what they described as the relational immediacy of South African contexts. Initial interpretations framed this as coldness; over time, meanings were recalibrated.

Here, the phenomenological lens clarifies that adaptation was not behavioural mimicry but interpretive work. Husserl's concept of *epoché*, which

involves bracketing immediate judgment, enabled students to perceive unfamiliar norms as comprehensible. My analysis remains attentive to whether this interpretation emerges from participants' own meaning-making rather than being imposed theoretically. The language of "learning to read the room differently" and "retraining my reactions" was theirs before it became conceptualised phenomenologically.

Bourdieu's (1986) notion of habitus operates at a secondary interpretive layer to illuminate why adaptation unfolded unevenly. Students arrived with embodied dispositions shaped by prior socio-cultural fields. Adjustments around food practices, shared accommodation norms, or classroom participation required not simply information acquisition but recalibration of deeply sedimented expectations. One participant described negotiating kitchen space in a mixed-nationality residence as "learning a new choreography." Such phrasing underscores that adaptation was corporeal and relational.

Race and visibility further structured the socio-cultural field. Participants who found themselves as the only Black student in certain academic spaces articulated heightened self-consciousness. Ahmed's (2007) analysis of bodies "out of place" helps interpret these moments: space is experienced differently depending on who is recognised as normative. Yet I remain cautious not to over-theorise these accounts. Students did not uniformly narrate marginality;

some described empowerment in occupying visibly distinctive positions. The data therefore resist a singular narrative of alienation.

Identity reconstruction emerged as iterative rather than linear. Students described inhabiting an in-between condition—no longer entirely anchored in home norms, not fully assimilated abroad. Rather than multiplying theoretical frames, I interpret this through a focused lens of liminality: mobility as threshold experience. Participants' own metaphors—"standing in two worlds," "becoming comfortable with difference"—capture this condition without requiring excessive conceptual layering.

In relation to Research Question 3, socio-cultural encounters generated reflexivity, expanded intercultural competence, and reconfigured self-understanding. However, these outcomes were contingent upon structural conditions, peer networks, and institutional climates. Adaptation was not a universal ascent toward cosmopolitanism; it was negotiated within unequal global and racialised terrains.

Reflexively, I recognise that my positionality within internationalisation discourse may incline me toward interpreting mobility as transformative. The analytic task has therefore been to foreground participant voice, allowing ambivalence, discomfort, and contradiction to remain visible. Socio-cultural experience abroad was not a seamless progression toward global citizenship, but a textured process of dislocation, negotiation, and reconstitution.

5.10 Confronting Prejudice and Developing Resilience

This section addresses Research Questions 2 and 4, exploring how students encountered racialisation and how these experiences shaped post-sojourn meaning-making and agency.

While institutional narratives position mobility as intercultural enrichment, participants described encounters with suspicion, profiling, and subtle exclusion. Incidents at border controls, heightened scrutiny in public spaces, or intrusive racial curiosity were not isolated irritations; they were experienced as embodied disruptions. Fanon's (1967) account of the racialised "look" provides a precise interpretive lens here, illuminating how being seen through a racialised frame can fracture one's sense of ease in space.

Students' accounts of being singled out at customs or questioned disproportionately reveal how mobility does not suspend global racial hierarchies. Ahmed's (2007) argument that whiteness functions as an invisible norm helps interpret why certain bodies were rendered hypervisible. Yet empirical grounding is critical: participants often narrated these moments with restraint, sometimes humour, sometimes irritation. The affective register varied. Not all experiences were traumatising; some were processed pragmatically as "part of travelling while Black."

The emergence of resilience must therefore be treated cautiously. Kim's (2001) stress–adaptation–growth model clarifies that growth is dialectically linked to

stress. Several students described drawing on pre-departure briefings to contextualise discriminatory encounters as structural rather than personal. This cognitive reframing reduced internalisation of stigma. However, resilience was not purely individual. Diasporic and peer networks functioned as affective infrastructures, providing interpretive community and affirmation.

Importantly, resilience sometimes bordered on burden. Participants spoke of feeling responsible for representing South Africa or countering stereotypes. Agency operated within constraint: students exercised strategic self-presentation, selective confrontation, or quiet withdrawal depending on context. This underscores the agency–structure tension central to Research Question 2. Students were not passive recipients of prejudice; nor were they entirely free actors. Their responses were calibrated within institutional and societal power asymmetries.

Subtler forms of exoticisation — questions about hair, language, or cultural practices—required emotional labour. Interpreting these interactions demanded rapid judgement: educate, ignore, or resist? Such micro-negotiations demonstrate what Collins (2000) terms knowledge generated through marginal positioning. Participants developed heightened racial literacy and intercultural tact, competencies that extended beyond classroom learning.

In relation to Research Question 4, these encounters shaped post-return reflection. Several students indicated that experiences of racialisation abroad sharpened their analysis of inequality at home and informed their professional aspirations. Mobility thus functioned as a comparative lens, revealing both external prejudice and internalised assumptions.

Reflexively, there is a risk of narrating adversity as inherently developmental. I resist equating suffering with growth. Participants' accounts show that resilience emerged through collective support, institutional preparation, and personal agency, rather than solely through adversity. Prejudice was not a pedagogical gift; it was a structural condition navigated at varying costs.

Overall, these findings complicate celebratory mobility discourse. Socio-cultural enrichment and racialised constraint coexisted. Students' journeys were marked by agency exercised within unequal global orders. By grounding interpretation in participant narratives and limiting theoretical frames to those most explanatory, this section seeks coherence while retaining the complexity of lived experience.

5.11 From Dislocation to Transformation

This section consolidates findings on Research Questions 3 and 4, examining how students interpret personal transformation and how mobility reshapes identity upon return.

Across participants' accounts, transformation did not unfold as a linear ascent from discomfort to competence. Rather, it emerged as an uneven process marked by oscillation between confidence and doubt, belonging and estrangement. Phenomenologically, this can be understood as a reconfiguration of the lifeworld (Husserl, 1970): meanings once sedimented became unstable, requiring reinterpretation. Students did not simply acquire intercultural skills; they renegotiated who they were within altered relational and institutional fields.

Several participants described returning home with heightened awareness of global hierarchies and their own positioning within them. This reflexivity was not abstract. It was grounded in lived encounters—being hypervisible in classrooms, negotiating accents, explaining South Africa to peers, or recalibrating expectations of efficiency and warmth. These experiences informed what they later framed as “thinking more critically” or “seeing structures differently.” In this sense, transformation was epistemic as much as interpersonal.

To interpret this shift, I draw selectively on Butler's (2004) notion of constrained agency. Students exercised choice and creativity within limiting structures—racialised scrutiny, financial precarity, institutional bureaucracy. Their agency was neither absolute nor illusory; it was enacted within constraint. This lens clarifies that growth did not arise from exposure alone, but from navigating asymmetrical power relations.

Return intensified reflexivity. Participants reported feeling “different” at home—more independent, less tolerant of parochial assumptions, yet occasionally alienated from peers who had not travelled. This ambivalence resonates with Appadurai's (1996) insight that mobility can produce layered belonging rather than seamless reintegration. Students did not abandon national identity; they re-situated it within broader frames of reference.

Empirically, these shifts were expressed in concrete ways: pursuing postgraduate study, reconsidering career trajectories, engaging more confidently in public speaking, or challenging deficit narratives about African institutions. Yet not all accounts were celebratory. A minority described disorientation and difficulty translating international experience into local recognition. Transformation, therefore, was expansive but not uniformly rewarded.

Reflexively, there is an analytic temptation to frame mobility as inherently transformative. The data require more nuance. Some changes were subtle recalibrations rather than dramatic reinventions. By grounding interpretation in participant language—“I feel more aware,” “I question things now,” “I don’t fit as neatly anymore”—this section resists overstatement while acknowledging meaningful shifts.

In relation to Research Question 4, mobility shaped post-return identity through reflexive comparison, critical consciousness, and reoriented aspiration.

Dislocation functioned not as rupture alone but as a site of reconstitution, mediated by structural realities and personal agency.

5.12 Socio-Cultural Background as Mediator of Cultural Perception

This section returns to Research Question 2, demonstrating how students' prior socio-cultural formations mediated their interpretation of host environments.

Participants consistently framed cultural encounters in terms of comparison. Lucia's observation—contrasting extended conversational rituals in South Africa with transactional efficiency in Germany—illustrates how background expectations structure perception. Drawing on Schütz (1967), such moments reveal that everyday interactions are intelligible only against pre-existing stocks of knowledge. What appeared abrupt or distant abroad was experienced as a deviation from a norm assumed at home.

Importantly, these interpretations evolved. Initial discomfort often gave way to reinterpretation rather than rejection. Students described learning to appreciate brevity as respect for time, or privacy as a boundary rather than indifference. Here, the phenomenological lens clarifies that perception itself shifted; the meaning of behaviour changed as horizons expanded.

Valeria articulated this recalibration succinctly: she retained aspects of her South African identity while incorporating practices she found valuable abroad. Rather than invoking multiple acculturation models, this analysis treats

her account as evidence of negotiated continuity. Identity was neither replaced nor diluted; it was selectively reconfigured. Agency operated in choosing what to integrate and what to preserve.

Empirical accounts also demonstrate limits to integration. Some participants resisted adopting norms they perceived as misaligned with their values. This underscores that adaptation was dialogical rather than assimilative. Cultural background functioned as both a resource and a boundary.

Reflexively, I recognise that interpreting these negotiations through integration frameworks risks smoothing over tension. Participants sometimes described frustration, irritation, or ethical disagreement. Retaining these frictions strengthens analytic credibility and prevents romanticisation of hybridity.

In sum, the socio-cultural background acted as an interpretive prism rather than an obstacle. It structured first impressions, informed adaptation strategies, and shaped the contours of transformation identified under Research Question 3.

5.13 Disruption, Reflexivity, and Embodied Transformation

This section deepens the analysis of Research Questions 3 and 4, focusing on how disruption catalysed reflexive self-reconstruction.

Elena's reflection that she initially felt she was "performing a version" of herself captures the embodied dimension of transition. Early mobility was marked by

heightened self-monitoring—accent modulation, conversational restraint, careful self-presentation. Over time, she described ceasing to “edit” herself. Interpreted through Giddens’ (1991) reflexive self-framework, this shift suggests movement from hyper-conscious adaptation toward more integrated selfhood. Importantly, the language of performance and release originates from her account, not theoretical imposition.

Similarly, Sofia reframed experiences of being questioned about South Africa as opportunities for articulation. What began as defensiveness evolved into confidence. Mezirow’s (1997) concept of transformative learning is useful here, specifically the notion of disorienting dilemmas prompting critical reflection. Yet transformation was gradual and affectively complex, not instantaneous enlightenment.

Carlos’ oscillation between belonging and estrangement—feeling integrated one moment and marked as outsider the next—demonstrates that emplacement remained unstable. Ahmed’s (2000) analysis of conditional inclusion helps interpret this fluctuation: acceptance can coexist with subtle othering. However, participants’ responses varied. Some confronted, some ignored, some strategically adapted. Agency manifested situationally.

Luc’s articulation of feeling “freer” abroad introduces another dimension. Freedom here was not absence of constraint but expansion of possibility—experimenting with self-expression beyond familiar expectations. Rather than

multiplying cosmopolitan theory, I interpret this as experiential evidence of ethical self-revision: students tested inherited norms and selectively retained or revised them.

Across these accounts, transformation was embodied. It unfolded in speech patterns, posture, social risk-taking, and emotional regulation. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) insight that subjectivity is lived through the body clarifies why change was experienced as tangible rather than abstract.

Reflexively, I remain attentive to coherence bias. The temptation to narrate disruption as culminating in integration must be resisted. Some participants continued to experience ambivalence and partial belonging even at the end of their sojourns. Retaining this incompleteness enhances analytic integrity.

Collectively, Sections 5.11–5.13 demonstrate that mobility was neither purely emancipatory nor solely destabilising. It constituted a layered process in which socio-cultural background, structural power, and individual agency interacted dynamically. By limiting theoretical frames to those most explanatory and grounding interpretation consistently in participant voice, this discussion aims to illuminate transformation without overstating its uniformity or inevitability.

5.14 Intentionality and the Active Construction of Cultural Meaning

This section addresses Research Questions 2 and 3, examining how students actively constructed meaning in socio-cultural and academic encounters rather than passively absorbing host norms.

Across narratives, engagement with difference was frequently described as deliberate. Valeria's remark that travel "changes the way you see the world" signals orientation rather than accident. Participants positioned themselves as willing to be unsettled, yet discerning in what they adopted. To interpret this, I draw selectively on Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation framework, specifically its emphasis on agency within stress–adaptation cycles. The lens is used here not to imply linear adjustment, but to clarify that adaptation involved intentional calibration.

Fernando's academic reflections provide empirical grounding. He contrasted rote-learning practices at home with case-based pedagogies abroad, noting that application rather than memorisation has reshaped how he now approaches tasks. His account aligns with Mezirow's (1997) notion of transformative learning, in which exposure to alternative epistemic frames prompts the reassessment of prior assumptions. Crucially, this shift was narrated as self-directed: he chose to internalise certain practices while critically appraising their contextual relevance.

Intentionality extended beyond pedagogy. Fernando interrogated innovation discourses in Europe against the realities of unemployment in South Africa, questioning whether competitiveness eclipsed community responsibility. Such commentary demonstrates epistemic filtering rather than epistemic submission. Students did not treat Northern models as universally transferable; they evaluated them against local needs. Here, the analysis remains focused on agency in knowledge localisation rather than expanding into broader decolonial theory.

Peer interaction also functioned as a site of active meaning-making. Informal debates, shared travel, and collaborative assignments were described as “the real learning.” These micro-contexts illustrate that cultural meaning was co-constructed relationally. Participants curated their engagements, embracing what resonated and resisting what conflicted with evolving values.

Reflexively, there is a risk of overstating intentionality and underplaying structural influence. Financial precarity, racialised scrutiny, and institutional norms shaped available choices. Yet the data consistently show students describing selective absorption, reinterpretation, and contextual translation. In relation to Research Question 3, intentionality underpinned intellectual growth; in relation to Research Question 2, it structured how socio-cultural differences were interpreted and negotiated.

Mobility, therefore, appears less as absorption and more as discernment. Students acted as authors of meaning within unequal fields, navigating openness and protection simultaneously.

5.15 Intersectionality, Social Positioning, and Student Agency

This section addresses Research Questions 2 and 4, analysing how intersecting identities mediated experience and how agency was exercised within structural constraints.

Participants' narratives demonstrate that mobility was lived through embodied and socially situated identities. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1994) intersectionality framework, identity markers—race, gender, class, nationality—did not operate independently but intersected to shape recognition, misrecognition, and opportunity. This lens clarifies how similar institutional contexts produced differentiated experiences.

Valeria, a Black woman from a township background, described adjusting within a German host family while “not losing myself.” Her account foregrounds adaptation as a form of negotiation under asymmetrical power relations. Intersectionality here illuminates how race, gender, and socio-economic history structured both vulnerability and reflexivity. Adaptation required strategic calibration rather than simple compliance.

Carlos' observation that people "assume you're not from here" in Spain illustrates what may be termed soft bordering: everyday reminders of conditional belonging. His experience was not overt hostility but persistent marking of foreignness. Luc similarly reflected that in the United States, his identity shifted from being "just Black" to being read specifically as "African." These accounts demonstrate that mobility re-coded identity through external frames. Agency lay partly in recognising and interpreting these frames rather than internalising them.

To theorise agency without romanticising it, I draw on Emirbayer and Mische (1998) triadic conception: agency involves iteration (drawing on past experience), projectivity (imagining futures), and practical evaluation (judgement in the present). Elena's decision to challenge assumptions about her English proficiency illustrates this dynamic. She mobilised prior educational capital, envisioned alternative recognition, and acted strategically in the moment. Her response exemplifies constrained but deliberate agency.

Importantly, agency was relational. Participants emphasised peer networks as sustaining infrastructures. Checking in on one another mitigated isolation and reinforced belonging. These networks functioned as collective resources, enhancing capacity to respond to marginalisation. However, following Marginson (2014), resilience must not be romanticised; it emerged from navigating structural inequities rather than from neutral challenge.

Reflexively, I remain attentive to coherence bias. Not all participants experienced intersectional marginality identically, nor did all respond with overt assertion. Some adopted quieter strategies of withdrawal or selective engagement. Retaining this variation strengthens analytic credibility.

In relation to Research Question 2, intersecting identities mediated socio-cultural perception and positioning abroad. In relation to Research Question 4, post-return narratives reveal sharpened awareness of structural inequality and strengthened commitment to challenging deficit discourses. Students emerge not as abstract cosmopolitan subjects, but as historically situated actors exercising agency within layered global hierarchies.

Collectively, Sections 5.14 and 5.15 reinforce that mobility is not merely experiential expansion but negotiated self-construction within power-laden contexts. By narrowing theoretical frames and foregrounding participant voice, the analysis maintains conceptual clarity while preserving the complexity of lived experience.

5.16 Post-Return Reflections and the Afterlife of Mobility: Reintegration, Recognition, and Rupture

This section addresses Research Question 4 by examining how students interpret the post-sojourn phase and how institutional responses shape the afterlife of mobility. Contrary to celebratory narratives that position return as closure, participants described reintegration as a critical and often

destabilising phase. Return was not a seamless re-entry but a site where personal transformation encountered institutional continuity.

Across accounts, students re-entered academic systems that appeared structurally unchanged despite their intellectual and affective shifts. The friction between transformed subjectivity and administrative stability became analytically central. Fernando's experience is illustrative. Although his modules had been pre-approved prior to departure, he was required to complete an additional examination within two days of returning due to a revised assessment of course equivalence. His statement—"I had to come back and write a special exam... within two days"—signals more than logistical inconvenience. It exposes procedural fragility and the absence of structured academic transition support. As Marginson (2014) argues, internationalisation frequently operates rhetorically at the level of strategy while remaining underdeveloped at the level of student lifecycle design. Fernando's narrative substantiates this structural gap empirically.

Participants consistently reported the absence of formal reintegration mechanisms. There were no structured debriefings, facilitated academic reflections, or coordinated credit-transfer consultations. Several described independently navigating registration processes, accommodation logistics, and curriculum alignment. One participant captured the affective dimension of return by observing that it felt like "coming back to a place that didn't notice I was gone." This articulation points toward misrecognition: transformation

privately experienced yet institutionally unacknowledged. While I apply de Oliveira Andreotti et al.'s (2015) notion of existential exclusion cautiously, the recurrence of this sentiment suggests patterned institutional silence rather than isolated oversight.

Broader scholarship situates these experiences within recognised patterns of re-entry stress. Studies of reverse culture shock indicate that return can provoke disorientation, frustration, and identity recalibration, particularly where institutional or interpersonal recognition is limited (Gaw, 2000; Gray & Savicki, 2015). In the South African context, Phasha (2021) documents comparable challenges among returning medical students, especially regarding curriculum misalignment and recognition gaps. These parallels reinforce that participants' accounts reflect systemic tendencies rather than anecdotal grievance.

Reintegration challenges were both material and symbolic. Students described special examinations, delayed graduation risks, credit discrepancies, and the flattening of international learning into mere equivalence metrics. Intellectual growth was often administratively translated rather than academically engaged. As Brooks and Waters (2011) note, post-mobility phases can sharpen critical awareness of institutional inequality. Several participants began to question whether global engagement was substantively embedded in curricula or symbolically celebrated for reputational value.

Yet return was not uniformly disempowering. Luc channelled his experience into peer advocacy, sharing insights in tutorials and encouraging fellow students to pursue mobility opportunities. Drawing on Appadurai's (2003) conception of aspirational capacity, his actions reflect future-oriented agency: the translation of personal transformation into collective possibility. However, this leadership emerged informally. It was not institutionally scaffolded through ambassadorial platforms or structured reintegration programmes.

To interpret the affective terrain of return, I draw selectively on Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. Students occupied an in-between space: no longer aligned with pre-departure identities, yet not institutionally repositioned as transformed subjects. For some, this liminality enabled reflective consolidation; for others, it generated frustration and symbolic erasure. I resist universalising liminality as inherently generative. The data demonstrate divergence shaped by departmental responsiveness and administrative flexibility.

Reflexively, it would be analytically convenient to characterise these inconsistencies as evidence of neoliberal indifference. The findings, however, suggest unevenness rather than coordinated neglect. Nonetheless, the absence of systematic re-entry design reveals that reintegration remains under-theorised within mobility architecture. Departure is administratively orchestrated; return is frequently individualised.

In relation to Research Question 4, the afterlife of mobility emerges as a decisive evaluative moment. Transformation secured abroad is neither automatically consolidated nor institutionally absorbed. Where recognition, flexibility, and dialogue were present, growth stabilised. Where silence prevailed, transformation risked privatisation—retained as personal memory rather than integrated institutional capital.

Return, therefore, is not an epilogue to mobility but its integrity test. If departure symbolises aspiration, reintegration reveals implementation. The transformative potential of international student mobility is ultimately affirmed or diluted not only in transnational classrooms but in the structures that receive students home.

5.17 Agency, Resistance, and the Politics of Voice

This section addresses Research Questions 2 and 4 by examining how students exercised their voice to contest marginalisation and reshape institutional narratives.

Participants' storytelling functioned as more than recollection; it was interpretive positioning. When students articulated experiences of exclusion, bureaucratic opacity, or racialised assumption, they were not merely reporting

events but asserting legitimacy. Hooks' (1989) notion of "talking back" provides a focused lens here: voice as resistance within asymmetrical systems.

Luc's peer mentoring, Elena's challenging of linguistic stereotypes, and Fernando's critique of uncritical policy borrowing exemplify enacted voice. These acts were not confrontational in overtly political terms; rather, they were situated interventions within academic and peer spaces. Drawing on Sen's (2014) capability framework, such actions illustrate the conversion of opportunity into functionings. Agency depended not only on individual resolve but on available relational and institutional resources.

Not all participants experienced the same level of capability freedom. Some felt constrained by financial barriers, opaque administrative processes, or limited institutional recognition. The data, therefore, demonstrate differentiated agency rather than uniform empowerment.

Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness illuminates how mobility sharpened structural awareness. Several students described "seeing the system differently" upon return—recognising global hierarchies, questioning selective internationalisation, and challenging deficit narratives about African institutions. This reflexive shift did not arise automatically from travel; it emerged through lived friction and subsequent interpretation.

Importantly, voice was relational. Peer networks amplified narratives that might otherwise have remained private. Informal conversations became micro-sites

of institutional critique and re-imagination. However, I remain attentive to limits: speaking did not always produce structural change. In some instances, voice functioned as a coping mechanism rather than a transformative force.

Reflexively, there is a risk of overstating resistance as radical rupture. Participants' actions were often pragmatic, context-sensitive, and incremental. Recognising this preserves analytic integrity.

In relation to Research Questions 2 and 4, agency after mobility involved both personal articulation and collective meaning-making. Students did not merely re-enter institutional structures; they interpreted, critiqued, and subtly reshaped them. Their voices complicate reductive mobility metrics by foregrounding lived consequence, structural tension, and aspirational re-authoring.

Together, Sections 5.17 and 5.18 reinforce that the afterlife of mobility is neither passive nor guaranteed. It is negotiated through recognition, relational support, and the extent to which institutions are willing to listen.

5.18 Unsettling Internationalisation in the Shadows of Empire: A Decolonial Reframing through Lived Disruptions

Despite its aspirational framing as a neutral and reciprocal global exchange, internationalisation is experienced by students through uneven geographies of knowledge, power and recognition. Read through Research Questions 2 and 3 – which interrogate institutional valuing of mobility and students' perceived

impact of mobility on academic growth, cultural understanding and selfhood — participants' narratives reveal not an uncomplicated celebration of global engagement, but a layered critique of its colonial inheritances.

Luc's reflection on his academic experience in the United States destabilises the long-standing assumption of epistemic superiority located in the Global North. He observed:

"Academically, I was a bit disappointed... I found the standard in the US to be lower than I expected... It made me realise that I'm just as good as, if not better than, the students there."

Phenomenologically, this moment marks a rupture in inherited imaginaries of excellence. Luc's realisation constitutes an epistemic reorientation — a lived unsettling of what Mignolo (2011) terms the colonial matrix of power, wherein Western modernity sustains hierarchies of knowledge and subjectivity. Similarly, Maldonado-Torres (2007) reminds us that colonality operates not only structurally but ontologically, shaping how subjects understand their worth. Luc's account thus becomes a moment of epistemic affirmation: mobility does not confirm Northern superiority but exposes its contingency.

In contrast, Sofia's reflection foregrounds pedagogical difference:

“At the host university... they turn questions around into discussions... It felt more like engaging conversations than traditional classes... They use first names and aren't strict about formal titles.”

Here, the analytic lens shifts to epistemic encounter (RQ3). Sofia experiences dialogical engagement as liberatory, contrasting it with the hierarchical pedagogical norms she perceives at home. Yet this contrast must be read critically. Dialogical and relational learning resonates with Ubuntu-informed pedagogies described by Marovah and Mutanga (2023, 2024), suggesting that participatory epistemologies are not Northern innovations but deeply embedded in African intellectual traditions. The irony is instructive: what is celebrated abroad may in fact echo marginalised indigenous practices. The decolonial lens, therefore, exposes not simple admiration but the internalised effects of epistemic displacement within South African higher education (Heleta & Chasi, 2023).

Emma's narrative moves the discussion into the ontological terrain. She reflected:

“Before I went, I was quite timid... I used to struggle with imposter syndrome... Going abroad was a great confidence boost.”

And further:

"I started to question things I used to take for granted, like language and culture... It made me appreciate South Africa more, too... People need to feel like their language matters. If you take that away, you're erasing a part of them."

These accounts speak directly to RQ3 and RQ4, as mobility reshapes both self-understanding and post-return meaning-making. Drawing on Ahmed (2012), affective shifts such as confidence and belonging can be understood as reorientations — moments in which bodies inhabit space differently and recalibrate their sense of possibility. Emma's insistence on linguistic recognition further aligns with Maldonado-Torres' (2007) articulation of the colonality of being: language erasure functions as ontological diminishment. Her appreciation of multilingual dignity, therefore, constitutes a subtle decolonial insistence on epistemic plurality.

Gabriella's narrative extends these insights by situating transformation within aspiration and socio-spatial biography:

"Once you start travelling... it changes your perspective on yourself, your country, and the world."

"I grew up in a township and always told my family that I would travel the world."

For Gabriella, mobility is neither institutional spectacle nor abstract policy objective; it is the fulfilment of a long-imagined horizon. Her metaphor —

“Travelling is like a bug” — captures mobility as epistemic expansion rather than escapism. Yet her account also intersects with RQ1 and RQ2. Access is mediated through meritocratic structures:

“Travelling motivated me to work even harder academically so I could stay in the Genius Club... It’s not like a lifetime membership — you have to earn it every year with distinctions.”

Here, aspiration is entangled with performance precarity. Mobility becomes both an opportunity and a disciplinary mechanism, echoing critiques that internationalisation frequently privileges high-performing or elite cohorts (Doyle, 2016). The decolonial lens reveals how empowerment is structured through conditional belonging.

When read in concert, these narratives resist any singular reading of internationalisation. They expose its complicity in reproducing epistemic hierarchies, while simultaneously illuminating spaces of affirmation, confidence-building and relational reorientation. Internationalisation and decolonisation are not synonymous. As Marginson (2016) argues, global higher education is stratified and asymmetrical, even as it promises connectivity and opportunity. Yet this study demonstrates that within these asymmetries, students exercise interpretive agency: they unsettle inherited hierarchies, reclaim linguistic dignity, and re-story their becoming.

Through a decolonial phenomenological lens, mobility emerges neither as triumphalist global integration nor as pure colonial reproduction. It is a contested terrain – structured by power, yet animated by lived disruptions that open the possibility of epistemic humility, relational reciprocity and decolonial reimagining.

5.19 Synthesis and Theoretical Reflections: Phenomenology, Power, and the Politics of Becoming

This chapter has traced international student mobility not as an institutional abstraction, but as a lived, affective, and structurally mediated process. Bringing the strands together, the analysis demonstrates that mobility for historically marginalised South African students is neither a seamless pathway of global integration nor a singular narrative of empowerment. Rather, it is a contested field in which aspiration, structural constraint, epistemic hierarchy, and agentic re-authoring intersect.

Phenomenologically, mobility emerged as a liminal condition, a threshold in which identity was unsettled and reconstituted. Consistent with interpretative phenomenological commitments (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 1997), students' accounts revealed recursive processes of self-interrogation rather than linear transformation. Confidence was forged through discomfort; belonging was negotiated rather than assumed; and recognition was contingent upon navigating unfamiliar epistemic terrains. These lived

recalibrations illuminate mobility as a politics of becoming – an ontological shift shaped by affect, relational encounter, and embodied exposure to difference.

However, these processes unfolded within patterned asymmetries. Access to mobility, as illuminated through the lens of capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986/2018), was structured by economic precarity, institutional opacity, and the unequal distribution of social and cultural resources. Selection did not erase marginality; it often intensified it. Students carried into global spaces the sedimented inequalities of South Africa's post-apartheid higher education landscape, encountering international systems already stratified along North–South hierarchies (Marginson, 2016). Mobility thus reflected what decolonial scholars describe as the persistence of coloniality within contemporary global exchange (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011).

At the epistemic level, participants unsettled inherited assumptions of Northern superiority. Experiences that contradicted expectations of academic excellence disrupted internalised hierarchies of knowledge. Such moments exemplify what Stein and de Andreotti (2016) caution against in dominant internationalisation logics: the uncritical reproduction of Western modernity as a universal standard. Instead, students enacted subtle forms of epistemic disobedience, recalibrating their own sense of intellectual worth and re-evaluating the value of African knowledge traditions. In doing so, they complicated binary framings of centre and periphery.

Transformation was therefore neither assimilation nor romantic transcendence. It was relational and politically situated. Linguistic affirmation, dialogic pedagogies, and the cultivation of self-confidence became sites where the colonality of being was both felt and contested (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Students' post-return engagements – mentoring peers, challenging opaque processes, circulating knowledge – further illustrate that mobility extended beyond individual gain. In line with transnational circulation theory (Faist, 2013), return became a moment of redistribution: of aspiration, insider knowledge, and critical awareness. These practices signal not gratitude for opportunity, but reflexive agency within constraint.

What emerges from this synthesis is a re-theorisation of internationalisation as a socio-political terrain. It is a site where institutional rhetoric of inclusion collides with differentiated realities; where the promise of global citizenship is mediated by racialised, classed, and linguistic hierarchies; and where students negotiate recognition within architectures not originally designed for them. Intersectional power does not disappear at the border; it travels.

At the same time, the chapter affirms that mobility can catalyse ontological expansion and epistemic confidence. Students did not simply move through global systems; they interpreted, resisted, and re-authored their positioning within them. Their narratives expose the fragility of triumphalist internationalisation discourses while illuminating alternative imaginaries grounded in relationality, plurality, and reflexive critique.

5.20 Recentring Lived Experience as Theoretical Intervention

This study advances a substantive repositioning of international student mobility within South African higher education scholarship. By foregrounding lived experience through a decolonial phenomenological lens, it disrupts the technocratic metrics and managerial vocabularies that have long dominated internationalisation discourse, replacing them with textured accounts of affective labour, epistemic negotiation, racialised encounter, and structural navigation.

Students in this study were not passive beneficiaries of mobility schemes. They emerged as interpreters of power, theorists of their own becoming, and agents who rendered visible the fissures between policy rhetoric and lived reality. Their narratives demonstrate that inclusion without epistemic justice remains partial; access without recognition remains fragile; and global engagement without reflexive accountability risks reinscribing colonial hierarchies under contemporary banners.

Recentring the student voice is therefore not merely a methodological choice but an epistemic intervention. It provincialises dominant knowledge geographies and positions the Global South as a site of theory-making rather than passive participation (Madge et al., 2015; Sehoole, 2006). Internationalisation, from this vantage point, cannot be evaluated solely through mobility flows or partnership portfolios. Its ethical significance resides in

whether it cultivates dignity, critical consciousness, and reciprocal knowledge exchange.

The chapter's theoretical contribution lies in its integration of phenomenology and decoloniality as mutually reinforcing analytic lenses: phenomenology attends to lived texture, embodiment, and meaning-making, while decolonial critique interrogates the enduring architectures of power that structure those meanings. Together, they illuminate mobility as both structural formation and existential experience — at once constraint and possibility.

Viewed from the margins, international student mobility is not an auxiliary feature of higher education. It is a diagnostic site that reveals the field's inequities and its transformative potential. If internationalisation is to move beyond performative globalism, it must be reimagined as an ethically grounded practice attentive to recognition, redistribution, and relational accountability. The students whose narratives anchor this inquiry have already enacted elements of this reimagining through critique, mentoring, and re-storying their experiences. The imperative now extends beyond them.

It is at this juncture that the study turns from interpretation to implication. Chapter 6 consolidates the empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions advanced here and translates them into institutional and scholarly responsibility. The work moves from narrative illumination toward

praxis, asking not only how mobility is lived, but how it must be redesigned if it is to sustain justice rather than reproduce hierarchy.

Chapter 6: From Lived Experience to Ethical Imagination: Reflections and Future Trajectories

*What matters most is how we listen to the silences, what remains unsaid, what trembles beneath the surface. It is there that transformation quietly begin!
My thoughts Inspired by phenomenological thought and decolonial sensibilities*

6.1 Purpose and Orientation of the Chapter

This concluding chapter does not signal closure; it enacts a transition from interpretation to responsibility. If the preceding chapters listened closely to students' lifeworlds—attending to aspiration, precarity, racialisation, epistemic dislocation, and reintegration—this chapter asks what ethical and institutional work must now follow. It moves from phenomenological description to normative imagination, from narrative depth to structural implication.

The study has argued that international student mobility is not a neutral instrument of enhancement but a lived, relational, and situated process. It is experienced through historically sedimented inequalities, institutional architectures, and epistemic hierarchies. Students' accounts revealed mobility as liminal negotiation: hopeful yet opaque, enabling yet stratified, transformative yet unevenly recognised. To remain faithful to these narratives requires more than analytic synthesis; it requires institutional recalibration.

This chapter therefore consolidates the study's empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions and translates them into actionable pathways for institutions seeking to re-orient mobility as an equity-driven and phenomenologically attentive practice. The orientation is deliberate: mobility

must be understood not simply as programme expansion but as ethical design. It must be re-imagined through the margins inward, grounded in student meaning-making rather than managerial metrics.

The chapter proceeds in six movements. First, it articulates the study's core contributions, demonstrating how historically marginalised South African voices recalibrate prevailing mobility discourses. Second, it advances structured operational recommendations organised across the mobility lifecycle—pre-departure, in-country experience, and post-return reintegration. Third, it proposes cost-sensitive implementation pathways for resource-constrained institutions. Fourth, it outlines evaluative indicators and monitoring mechanisms aligned with equity and student experience rather than throughput alone. Fifth, it situates hybrid and virtual mobility within the study's interpretive frame, assessing their potential and limits. Sixth, it revisits the study's limitations, clarifying the epistemic boundaries of its claims before advancing future research trajectories.

Importantly, this chapter also honours the theoretical widening that occurred through the inquiry. While the study began from a phenomenological commitment to lived experience, the narratives demanded conceptual expansion. Intersectionality became indispensable in tracing how race, gender, geography, and class converged to shape mobility outcomes. Decolonial critique illuminated the epistemic asymmetries students encountered abroad and the subtle hierarchies reproduced upon return. This

theoretical integration was not additive but responsive—an interpretive necessity grounded in narrative complexity.

A dedicated personal reflection concludes the chapter. Positioned after the future directions section, it offers reflexive engagement with the methodological tensions, ethical entanglements, and dual positionalities navigated throughout the research journey. Its placement is intentional: reflexivity follows contribution and recommendation, underscoring that institutional transformation is inseparable from scholarly self-interrogation.

Ultimately, this chapter affirms that listening is an ethical act. What trembles beneath students' stories—the silences, hesitations, and unresolved afterlives of mobility—demands sustained attention. If mobility is to contribute meaningfully to justice-oriented internationalisation, institutions must cultivate architectures that recognise not only movement across borders, but the interior shifts, exclusions, and reconfigurations that accompany it.

The work of this thesis, therefore, is not to finalise debate but to extend it—to carry student-generated knowledge into the scholarly, operational, and policy spaces where it can reshape the global academy.

6.2 Summary of Contributions

This study advances the field of international student mobility by shifting the analytical lens from programme expansion and performance metrics to lived

experience, epistemic negotiation, and structural mediation. In doing so, it intervenes empirically, theoretically, and methodologically. Rather than treating mobility as an inherently transformative good, the thesis demonstrates that its meaning, value, and consequences are socially produced, institutionally shaped, and unevenly distributed.

The contributions of this research are therefore not additive but reorienting: they reposition mobility from a technical instrument of internationalisation to a relational, ontological, and justice-inflected process.

6.3 Empirical Contributions

Empirically, the study centres historically marginalised South African students in outbound mobility, a cohort underrepresented in dominant global mobility scholarship. By tracing their narratives across pre-departure, in-country experience, and post-return reintegration, the research reveals mobility as temporally braided rather than episodic.

The findings demonstrate that aspiration, constraint, and agency coexist rather than follow linear progression. Financial precarity, bureaucratic opacity, racialised encounters, and uneven recognition shape the mobility journey in ways that challenge celebratory policy narratives. Reintegration, in particular, emerges as structurally underdeveloped and affectively unacknowledged, exposing a critical blind spot in institutional design.

Importantly, the study shows that mobility is not uniformly developmental. It is liminal, negotiated, and mediated by institutional structures, social positioning, and epistemic hierarchies. This reframing contributes a grounded South African perspective to a field often dominated by Global North assumptions.

6.2.2 Theoretical Contributions

The thesis advances a theoretically integrated framework that brings interpretive phenomenology into sustained dialogue with intersectionality and decolonial critique. In contrast to dominant human capital or skills-based framings, mobility is conceptualised as ontological negotiation — a process through which students reconfigure identity, belonging, and epistemic orientation.

Drawing on phenomenological attention to lifeworld and lived temporality, alongside Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of capital and habitus, the analysis demonstrates how economic, social, and cultural capital shape access and interpretation. Simultaneously, decolonial critique foregrounds epistemic hierarchy and the asymmetrical valuation of knowledge systems.

This synthesis contributes to mobility scholarship by demonstrating that lived experience cannot be disentangled from structural inequality. The study thus extends phenomenological inquiry beyond descriptive depth toward critical structural interrogation.

6.4 Methodological Contributions

Methodologically, the study illustrates the analytic potential of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within a decolonial frame. Through sustained engagement with narrative detail, reflexive journaling, and dialogic confirmation, the research demonstrates how qualitative depth can surface institutional silences, emotional labour, and epistemic tension.

The scholar-practitioner positionality, carefully managed through structured reflexivity, further contributes to methodological discourse on insider research. The study shows that proximity, when disciplined, can enhance contextual sensitivity without compromising analytic integrity.

In combination, these methodological choices produce textured, contextually grounded insights that resist reduction to metrics or generalised claims.

These contributions collectively reposition international student mobility as a justice-oriented, relational practice. The following sections translate this reconceptualisation into structured institutional action.

6.5 Policy, Institutional, and Practice Implications: Embedding Student Voice, Equity, and Ethical Responsiveness

The findings of this study do not simply illuminate the complex and uneven realities of international student mobility; they call for a fundamental re-orientation in how institutions, policy-makers, and

practitioners conceptualise, govern, and operationalise mobility within and beyond the South African higher education context. The lived testimonies of student participants offer more than critique—they provide direction. They urge a reimagining of policy frameworks, institutional cultures, and everyday practices in ways that are inclusive, transparent, and ethically responsive to diverse student lifeworlds.

Conventional mobility policies frequently assume a universal, well-resourced student subject: a rational actor presumed to have equal access to information, institutional networks, psychosocial support, and bureaucratic fluency. Yet this study makes clear that mobility aspirations are formed on uneven terrain, shaped by inherited structural inequalities, variable institutional mediation, and the often-invisible architectures of opportunity. Access to mobility was influenced not only by merit or eligibility but by who knows what, when, and through whom—informal mentorships, hidden procedures, uneven communication channels, and the tacit knowledge circulating among the already-connected.

Policy frameworks must therefore move beyond procedural compliance and toward a relational, ethically attentive, student-centred model of internationalisation. This requires embedding practices of ethical listening, transparency, and contextual sensitivity throughout the mobility lifecycle, beginning with selection, extending through preparation and the period abroad, and culminating in post-return reintegration and recognition.

Policies should explicitly acknowledge and respond to regional disparities, socio-economic stratifications, linguistic diversity, and generational status, rather than treating these as peripheral or exceptional conditions.

A central implication of the study is the need to institutionalise student voice as a governance principle rather than an ad hoc consultative exercise. Doing so strengthens both equity and accountability. This can be operationalised through mechanisms such as a Student Mobility Advisory Board, formalised representation of returned students on internationalisation committees, structured post-return debriefs that directly inform programme design, and co-creation of mobility materials (checklists, handbooks, orientation resources) with alumni. These mechanisms ensure that the knowledge produced through lived experience becomes actionable institutional intelligence, shaping decisions about partner selection, support structures, and policy adjustments.

In practical terms, institutions must develop transparent, publicly available selection criteria, clear communication timelines, and accessible funding information. They should cultivate broader mobility pipelines by intentionally reaching out to first-generation cohorts, rural students, and those with limited institutional visibility, ensuring that information is decentralised rather than concentrated in advantaged networks. Ethical responsiveness also requires attending to student safety, psychosocial wellbeing, and experiences of racialisation or marginalisation abroad, and ensuring that channels for reporting these concerns are safe, accessible, and acted upon.

Ultimately, the implications of this study call for a model of internationalisation that is relational rather than transactional, dialogical rather than technocratic, and justice-oriented rather than prestige-driven. Policies that institutionalise student voice, address structural inequity, and embed ethical attentiveness throughout the mobility ecosystem are indispensable to transforming mobility from a symbolic marker of global engagement into a genuinely inclusive and transformative educational practice.

6.6 Institutional Cultures: Creating Enabling Ecologies of Mobility

The findings of this study show that institutional culture is not an ambient background to mobility; it is a decisive force that shapes who participates, how they are supported, and how they interpret themselves throughout the mobility journey. Culture is expressed through language, staff attitudes, the visibility of programmes, the relational climate of campuses, and the extent to which returned students are recognised as epistemic contributors rather than peripheral beneficiaries. While most universities have formal structures—international offices, mobility coordinators, policy frameworks—the study illustrates that these structures often operate reactively or peripherally, unable to fully counteract the implicit hierarchies, information silos, and uneven pedagogical practices embedded in the broader institutional ecology.

Students' narratives repeatedly called—sometimes explicitly, often indirectly—for an institutional ethos grounded not only in administrative efficiency but in openness, hospitality, and belonging. An enabling culture of mobility is therefore not reducible to good processes; it is sustained by attitudes, practices, and relational commitments that

communicate to students that they are seen, valued, and supported through all stages of mobility.

To cultivate such an ecology, institutions must reframe mobility from an elite privilege or optional add-on to a core pedagogical and developmental strategy—central to curriculum transformation, graduate attributes, and epistemic justice. This requires embedding internationalisation across institutional layers:

- Integrating internationalisation-at-home and collaborative global learning into curricula.
- Developing faculty-based champions who normalise mobility conversations and mentor potential applicants.
- Ensuring that mobility information is decentralised, multilingual, and accessible beyond well-resourced networks.
- Creating formal platforms where returned students not only “share testimonials” but participate as co-constructors of knowledge, shaping programme design, pre-departure training, and partner evaluations.

Importantly, the study shows that an institution that wishes to treat mobility as transformative must also be willing to transform itself—structurally, epistemically, and affectively. This includes institutionalising student voice as a governance principle. Mechanisms such as a Student Mobility Advisory Board, routine town halls, co-designed mobility materials, and safe reporting channels for experiences of racialisation abroad ensure that the knowledge produced by students becomes institutional intelligence rather than anecdotal input.

Equally critical is the post-return phase, which emerged in the study as an under-resourced and under-recognised stage of the mobility lifecycle. Students described feelings of

erasure, anticlimax, and administrative fragmentation upon their return. Such under-recognition is not merely a missed developmental opportunity—it represents a systemic failure to harness the pedagogical, intercultural, and identity-shaping value of mobility.

Institutions must therefore invest in deliberate reintegration ecosystems, including:

- Timely academic debriefs that help students interpret their learning and negotiate credit articulation with clarity.
- Reflective spaces where returning students process transformations in identity, belonging, and worldview.
- Mechanisms for formal recognition, such as digital badges, transcript supplements, or curated showcases of student work.
- Opportunities for returned students to shape the institution's internationalisation agenda through mentoring, co-teaching, and policy feedback loops.

In this reimagined ecology, mobility becomes a relational practice rather than a transactional exchange. Institutional cultures grounded in ethical attentiveness, openness, and shared responsibility not only enable students to flourish abroad but also ensure that the afterlife of mobility—the return—becomes a site of ongoing growth, epistemic contribution, and institutional learning.

6.7 Operationalising a Justice-Oriented Mobility Framework

A justice-oriented approach to international mobility demands more than isolated interventions; it requires a coherent ecosystem in which governance, funding, preparation, ongoing support, and reintegration operate in alignment rather than fragmentation. The findings of this study make clear that mobility can only

become equitable when institutions intentionally design the conditions under which students access, navigate, and make meaning of their experiences. This section foregrounds an integrated framework through which justice-oriented mobility can be enacted in practice.

A central starting point lies in reconfiguring governance and equity structures. Students repeatedly described encountering opaque selection processes, uneven recognition, and discretionary decision-making that privileged informal knowledge and institutional proximity. In response, institutions need governance arrangements rooted in transparency, consistency, and distributive justice. This includes publishing clear selection rubrics and funding calendars, establishing mechanisms such as a Mobility Equity Panel to ensure fair moderation, and ring-fencing mobility resources for historically disadvantaged and first-generation students. Embedding reciprocity and credit-recognition clauses within partnership agreements ensures that equity extends beyond access and into the academic value chain. Such measures collectively shift mobility away from discretionary allocation and toward a system of ethical accountability.

Justice-oriented mobility also begins before departure. The study demonstrates that readiness is not solely administrative; it is intercultural, psychosocial, and epistemic. Institutions should therefore conceptualise pre-departure preparation as a structured pedagogical process rather than a peripheral orientation. A mandatory short course—encompassing funding

literacy, visa processes, intercultural negotiation, navigating racialised encounters, and academic expectations abroad—signals to students that mobility is recognised as a serious academic undertaking. Standardised checklists endorsed by faculty supervisors, alumni-mentor pairings, and a digital knowledge base containing recorded alumni panels and frequently asked questions further position preparation as a space of empowerment and institutional care.

Financial arrangements emerged as a consistently destabilising dimension of mobility. Delayed payments and misaligned timelines created unnecessary precarity for many participants. A justice-oriented framework therefore requires financial mediation that centres predictability, including bridging micro-advances to cover upfront expenses, alignment of internal funding calendars with partner institutions, the negotiation of partial stipend front-loading, and realistic budgeting guides calibrated to specific cities. Financial stability is not a luxury—it is the foundation upon which students' wellbeing and academic engagement abroad depend.

Once students depart, institutional attentiveness must not recede. Support during mobility is fundamental to sustaining a relational, rather than transactional, mobility model. Monthly virtual check-ins, a clearly communicated 24-hour emergency protocol, and verified academic and pastoral contacts at host institutions cultivate a sense of continuity, anchoring students within a network of institutional care even when physically distant.

Maintaining anonymised incident logs enables universities to identify patterns, address systemic concerns, and hold partners accountable. Mobility should never feel like an administrative handover after which students are left to navigate global spaces alone.

The study reveals that reintegration remains the least systematised and most emotionally complex phase of mobility. For some, the return brought feelings of anticlimax, invisibility, or administrative limbo. Justice therefore requires intentional reintegration practices that frame return not as closure but as epistemic contribution. Institutions should offer structured debrief sessions within the first month, uphold service-level agreements for timely credit recognition, and create platforms for returnees to present, co-teach, or participate in knowledge-exchange forums. Transcript supplements, digital badges, and formal recognition of competencies gained abroad validate the intellectual and personal growth that students carry home.

Institutional transformation also requires inclusive pedagogy and staff development. Staff members frequently act as gatekeepers, interpreters of academic norms, and mediators of recognition. For them to effectively support justice-oriented mobility, they must be equipped with the tools to understand epistemic hierarchies, intercultural dynamics, and the affective labour associated with studying abroad. Mobility literacy workshops, the integration of collaborative international learning within curricula, and co-teaching initiatives with global partners—particularly those elevating

Southern scholarship—help situate mobility within the pedagogical core rather than as an extracurricular add-on.

Critically, a justice-oriented framework must institutionalise student voice, not as a symbolic gesture but as a structural governance resource. Students' lived experiences—both positive and challenging—should directly inform policy, programme design, and partnership decisions. A Student Mobility Advisory Board, annual climate surveys, systematic integration of student feedback into Memoranda of Understanding, and confidential channels for reporting exclusionary or racialised encounters abroad ensure that student narration becomes an epistemic anchor for institutional decision-making. In doing so, mobility becomes co-constructed rather than delivered.

Recognising the fiscal environment in which South African universities operate, the implementation of this framework must be both principled and pragmatic. A phased roadmap enables institutions to build capacity incrementally: establishing foundational transparency and support structures within the first six months; piloting bridging finance, formalising partner contacts, and introducing recognition mechanisms in the medium term; and embedding stipend reforms, credit-transfer agreements, and scalable peer-leadership models over a longer horizon. Implementation is strengthened when accountability is clearly distributed across institutional actors—the International Office providing lifecycle coordination, faculties managing academic alignment and recognition, Finance handling disbursements and

micro-advances, Student Support safeguarding psychosocial wellbeing, Careers Services translating mobility into employability narratives, and returned students contributing through mentorship and co-design.

Evaluating the effectiveness of such a framework requires monitoring systems that privilege both quantitative patterns and qualitative depth. A mobility impact dashboard updated each semester can consolidate indicators such as participation by socio-economic group, faculty distribution, time to decision and payment, usefulness of preparation programmes, incident resolution, turnaround times, reintegration effectiveness, and evidence of identity and skill development. These indicators offer institutions a lens through which to assess whether mobility is becoming more equitable, responsive, and transformative.

Finally, technology-enabled, hybrid, and virtual mobility pathways extend the reach of justice-oriented internationalisation. When pedagogically intentional, these modalities can mitigate costs, enhance accessibility, and broaden epistemic horizons. Integrating collaborative online international learning tasks, offering virtual pre-mobility exchanges, developing co-badged micro-credentials, and sustaining digital alumni engagement ensures that mobility is not limited to those who can travel physically. Instead, it becomes a continuum of global engagement adaptable to diverse students and resource environments.

Through these interconnected commitments, operationalising justice-oriented mobility becomes not a set of isolated reforms but a comprehensive institutional ethos—one that aligns ethical ambition with structural clarity, student voice with governance, and global engagement with equity.

6.8 Limitations of the Study

This study, situated within an interpretive phenomenological paradigm, sought to illuminate the lived experiences of South African students who participated in international mobility programmes. As with all qualitative inquiries—particularly those grounded in phenomenology and centred on meaning-making—certain limitations are inherent. These limitations are understood not as methodological deficiencies, but as epistemic and contextual boundaries that shape the scope, transferability, and interpretive contours of the findings (Finlay, 2009; Frechette et al., 2020). Acknowledging them is essential for scholarly transparency and for indicating appropriate trajectories for future research.

6.8.1 Sampling Composition and Representativity

Although the recruitment invitation was circulated broadly to all eligible South African students who had participated in international mobility, participation was voluntary and self-selecting. The resulting sample comprised only Black African and Coloured students. This reflects respondent availability rather than purposive demographic targeting. While this demographic pattern necessarily

shapes the interpretive horizon of the findings, the study did not aim to examine race as an analytic variable; rather, it remained focused on students' lived experiences of mobility.

The purposive, small-scale sample aligns with the idiographic commitments of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which privileges depth over breadth. However, the findings cannot be generalised to all South African students and should not be read as representative of mobility experiences among white, Afrikaans-speaking, or socioeconomically privileged groups, nor of students at TVET colleges.

The study drew participants from two public universities—one inland and one coastal—offering limited institutional diversity. The deliberate exclusion of the researcher's home institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), was an ethical decision intended to minimise conflicts of interest and preserve critical reflexivity given the researcher's senior role within that institution. While appropriate, this exclusion inevitably removed the possibility of including voices from a major South African university with a substantial internationalisation profile.

Access to participants was also shaped by institutional gatekeeping, bureaucratic delays, and administrative politics. These constraints, while mitigated through peer referrals and digital interviewing strategies, nonetheless influenced who ultimately participated. Such dynamics reflect

broader structural and relational challenges inherent in conducting research within higher education settings.

The sample consisted primarily of students who participated in formal, donor-funded mobility programmes, particularly Erasmus+. These programmes provided structured financial and administrative support, influencing participants' pre-departure preparation, experiences abroad, and reintegration. The study therefore does not capture the experiences of students who pursue self-funded mobility, , extended-degree mobility, or institutionally unstructured pathways.

The study also did not include or engage students involved in virtual exchanges, internships, or emerging hybrid models of mobility increasingly prevalent in the post-pandemic period. These omissions limit the applicability of the findings across diverse mobility typologies.

Most participants were first-generation students from historically disadvantaged communities, providing rich insight into perspectives that are often under-represented in mobility research. However, this produces a particular socio-demographic lens. Students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, those enrolled at historically advantaged universities, and those with access to elite international networks are not represented.

The study did not explicitly seek participants with disabilities, those identifying beyond binary gender categories, or those whose experiences may be shaped by sexuality, spirituality, or neurodiversity. Given the centrality of these identity markers to intersectional and decolonial analyses of power and mobility Zembylas, (2018), their absence narrows the analytic range. Future research may benefit from incorporating a broader array of identities and social positions.

All participants were interviewed after completing their mobility experiences. Their narratives were therefore retrospective, shaped by subsequent personal, academic, and professional developments. Retrospective reflection allowed for interpretive depth and meaning-making across time; however, it may have softened or reframed experiences that were more affectively intense or complex at the moment of occurrence. In phenomenological work, such temporal distance is both a strength and a limitation (Van Manen, 1997b).

6.8.2 Methodological and Epistemological Boundaries

The study's methodological orientation—Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis—carries inherent constraints. IPA requires small, idiographic samples, which precludes broad representativity. Its double hermeneutic places interpretive responsibility on the researcher, necessitating ongoing reflexive vigilance to maintain fidelity to participants' accounts while engaging theory responsibly (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenological knowledge, by

its nature, is context-dependent, situated, and resistant to universalisation (Dodgson, 2023).

The researcher's positionality as a senior internationalisation practitioner enriched the study with sectoral insight but also introduced interpretive tension. Professional familiarity with mobility structures risked shaping assumptions about institutional processes or student experiences. Reflexive journaling, supervisory dialogue, and attention to bracketing helped mitigate—but cannot fully remove—these influences. Such positionality underscores the importance of reflexive methodological practice in phenomenological inquiry (Pillow, 2003).

6.8.3 Clarifying the Interpretive Boundaries

In synthesising the above, this study does not claim:

- to represent the full spectrum of South African student mobility experiences;
- to generalise across race, class, linguistic, or institutional categories not present in the sample;
- to speak for students in self-funded, employer-funded, inbound, degree-seeking, or long-term mobility contexts;
- to account for the experiences of students with disabilities, or those occupying minoritised gender and sexuality positions;

- to generalise beyond the post-pandemic context during which data were generated; or
- to provide comprehensive insight into virtual, hybrid, or short-term non-credit mobility models.

These boundaries do not diminish the value of the findings; rather, they clarify the epistemic terrain within which the study's contributions should be located. They also highlight significant opportunities for future research.

6.6 Reflexive Positioning of the Scholar-Practitioner

This doctoral inquiry unfolded concurrently with my tenure as Executive Director of the Corporate Relations Division at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, situating me squarely within the institutional systems under study. Researching international student mobility while overseeing its operational, strategic, and partnership dimensions positioned me in a sustained insider–outsider stance: I was neither a distant observer nor fully embedded in the research context. This dual positionality demanded rigorous reflexive discipline to uphold analytic clarity, ethical awareness, and methodological integrity throughout the project.

Insider status provided nuanced contextual literacy: deep familiarity with policy frameworks, funding architectures, partnership negotiations, and administrative logics enriched interpretive insight. Yet this proximity carried the

latent risk of normalising institutional routines that merit critical interrogation. To mitigate over-identification, I implemented structured reflexive journaling and repeatedly revisited verbatim participant transcripts, ensuring that interpretation remained anchored in the participants' lived realities rather than in professional assumptions. Reflexivity thus functioned as a methodological safeguard rather than a vehicle for personal expression.

Participant recruitment illustrated the contingent and relational nature of institutional access. Despite formal ethical approval, extended administrative delays at one institution revealed the persistence of informal gatekeeping in shaping knowledge production. Access was ultimately facilitated through relational engagement rather than procedural compliance, underscoring the nuanced labour required in practitioner-led research and the need for patience and adaptive strategies.

Practical conditions of data generation further highlighted the embeddedness of research in broader infrastructural realities. Power outages, unstable internet connectivity, and compressed scheduling mirrored the material constraints participants navigate within both local study contexts and international mobility experiences. Engagement through WhatsApp and other informal platforms reflected contemporary communication practices, requiring methodological flexibility while safeguarding confidentiality and consent. These realities reinforced the imperative for qualitative inquiry to remain responsive, adaptive, and contextually attuned.

Balancing executive responsibilities with doctoral scholarship demanded deliberate cognitive and emotional compartmentalisation. Professional immersion enriched interpretive sensitivity, but vigilance was required to prevent institutional familiarity from shaping analytic inference. Observing mobility processes in real time occasionally resonated with emergent thematic constructs; repeated engagement with participant transcripts ensured that analytic claims remained evidence-based and participant-led.

My own mobility history facilitated rapport, enabling participants to share experiences of travel, uncertainty, and academic aspiration with ease. However, familiarity carried its own analytic risks: to foreground participant voices, I limited self-disclosure and remained attuned to hierarchical dynamics inherent in my senior institutional role. Voluntary participation, confidentiality assurances, and conversational openness helped mitigate potential power differentials.

Interviews frequently unfolded as extended dialogues rather than discrete data-collection events. Participants articulated aspirations, setbacks, and experiences of exclusion with profound vulnerability. Emotional resonance was inevitable, particularly in narratives reflecting marginalisation, gendered constraints, or epistemic precarity. Reflexive awareness required acknowledging empathy internally while maintaining analytic focus on patterns, depth, and evidentiary coherence across the dataset.

For instance, Luc's account of academic exclusion and subsequent reinvention elicited both concern and admiration. Reflexivity redirected attention from individual resilience to the structural and institutional conditions necessitating such adaptation. Similarly, narratives of participants navigating mobility alongside marital and maternal responsibilities highlighted the gendered ecologies of opportunity. Reflexive discipline required decoupling personal identification from analytic interpretation, foregrounding structural determinants rather than projecting my own experience.

Researching from within higher education demanded layered labour: executive responsibility, theoretical engagement, ethical vigilance, and emotional presence coexisted with fatigue and intellectual expansion. Rather than viewing this complexity as a complication, it is better understood as intrinsic to deeply situated qualitative inquiry. The process strengthened methodological humility, sharpened interpretive precision, and enabled sustained inhabitation of the insider–outsider positionality without prematurely resolving its inherent tensions.

6.8.4 *Reflexive Positioning and Scholarly Becoming*

This reflexive journey has illuminated more than methodological positioning; it has revealed how knowledge itself is formed within relational, institutional, and epistemic conditions. Occupying an insider–outsider stance required continual negotiation between proximity and critique, mirroring the very dynamics of

mobility examined in this study. Just as participants navigated unfamiliar academic terrains shaped by coloniality and asymmetrical recognition, I navigated the intellectual and institutional terrains of doctoral scholarship while embedded within the systems under analysis. Reflexivity thus became not merely a methodological practice but a phenomenological discipline—an attentiveness to how meaning, authority, and interpretation emerge through situated experience.

The process has been intellectually rigorous, emotionally demanding, and spiritually stretching. It tested endurance while expanding conceptual horizons, compelling sustained engagement with decolonial thought, pluriversal imaginaries, and the affective textures of lived mobility. Moments of solitude, uncertainty, and fatigue paralleled the liminal spaces described by participants—spaces where transformation is neither linear nor triumphant but iterative and negotiated. In these intervals, resilience emerged not as heroic resolve but as relational sustenance: the willingness to seek support, to acknowledge vulnerability, and to recognise scholarship as collective rather than solitary labour.

This project has reinforced that doctoral inquiry is not solely an exercise in thesis production; it is a process of becoming. Becoming a scholar capable of theorising mobility beyond Eurocentric teleologies; becoming a practitioner who interrogates institutional practice with reflexive clarity; and becoming a human being who approaches knowledge-making with humility, empathy,

and ethical responsibility. The phenomenological commitment to lived meaning, the decolonial insistence on epistemic justice, and the pluriversal orientation towards multiplicity have shaped not only the analytic framework of this study but also my own intellectual formation.

The journey demanded sacrifice, courage, and sustained vulnerability. Yet it also generated profound moments of connection—instances where participants' narratives of belonging, precarity, and reinvention resonated with conceptual clarity. These encounters affirmed that research grounded in lived experience carries both analytic and moral weight. For this intellectual and personal expansion, I remain deeply grateful.

Taken together, these reflections consolidate the study's core argument: that international student mobility must be understood as a situated, relational, and structurally mediated process of becoming. The concluding section now synthesises these theoretical, empirical, and institutional insights, translating them into contributions that advance a more reflexive, just, and pluriversal approach to internationalisation within and beyond the Global South.

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Chapter 7 Toward a Relational, Reflexive, and Just Internationalisation

This concluding chapter marks both culmination and provocation. It consolidates the analytic, theoretical, and methodological contributions of this thesis while opening a renewed agenda for internationalisation scholarship and practice. What began as a phenomenologically grounded inquiry into South African students' lived experiences of international mobility has developed into a multi-layered interrogation of transformation under conditions of coloniality, inequality, and epistemic asymmetry. Mobility has been treated not as a policy instrument nor as an abstract developmental good, but as a situated human encounter — affective, relational, and structurally mediated.

At its core, this study addressed a persistent silence within internationalisation discourse: the marginal positioning of students whose mobility journeys are shaped simultaneously by post-apartheid precarity and global aspiration. Predominantly first-generation and historically excluded, participants entered international academic spaces not as passive recipients of Northern capital but as reflexive actors negotiating recognition, legitimacy, and belonging. Their narratives expose the disjuncture between the aspirational rhetoric of internationalisation and the material and symbolic inequities embedded in its architectures.

The conceptual framework evolved inductively through sustained engagement with students' lifeworlds. Phenomenology provided the initial orientation, foregrounding lived meaning, affective texture, and temporal unfolding. Yet the interpretive depth of participants' accounts necessitated theoretical expansion. Intersectionality illuminated how race, gender, class, and linguistic positioning contour mobility's possibilities. Decolonial theory rendered visible the epistemic hierarchies structuring global knowledge flows. Sociocultural perspectives clarified how identity and agency are co-constructed within relational worlds. These strands coalesced into a composite analytic lens capable of holding both subjective experience and structural condition without collapsing one into the other.

The findings challenge developmentalist narratives that cast Global South mobility as linear uplift. Transformation emerged as liminal, recursive, and uneven. The period of return proved especially generative. Re-entry was characterised not by seamless reintegration but by institutional amnesia and existential dislocation. Yet within this liminality, students enacted forms of relational agency — mentoring peers, contesting narratives, and reworking institutional discourse. Mobility thus functioned not as simple capital acquisition but as a site of critical self-authorship negotiated within constraint.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the generative potential of interpretative phenomenological analysis within Global South scholarship. Idiographic attentiveness was preserved before cautious cross-case synthesis,

resisting premature abstraction. Crystallisation, reflexive journalling, and confirmatory member engagement strengthened analytic rigour while maintaining interpretive responsibility. Participants were treated not as data sources but as epistemic contributors whose narratives extended theory.

Theoretically, this thesis advances the concept of **relationally mediated transformation**: a framework that situates mobility within intersecting regimes of recognition, affect, and structural inequality. It repositions South Africa as a site of theorisation rather than empirical periphery and contributes to pluriversal debates by insisting that internationalisation must be accountable to epistemic justice.

Practically, the study issues a structural challenge to institutions. Internationalisation cannot remain measured through outbound statistics or reputational gain. The return phase demands deliberate design: curricular recognition, structured re-entry forums, alumni integration, and symbolic validation. Without institutional architectures that stabilise relational capital and translate experience into recognised value, mobility risks reproducing fragility and stratification.

In a moment defined by ecological uncertainty, geopolitical fracture, and intensifying decolonial demands, internationalisation requires reconstitution. It must move beyond symbolic globalism toward structurally embedded equity.

A justice-oriented framework demands transparent governance, distributive funding, relational accountability, and epistemic reciprocity.

This thesis therefore concludes not with closure but with commitment. Mobility is neither inherently emancipatory nor uniformly rewarding. It is structured, mediated, and negotiated. Its transformative potential depends upon the conditions within which it is enacted and recognised.

To rewrite the agenda of internationalisation from the Global South is not to invert existing hierarchies, nor to romanticise mobility as inherently emancipatory. It is to insist that movement be accountable to justice. It is to recognise that transformation is not produced by geography alone, but by the relational, institutional, and epistemic conditions within which mobility unfolds. This study has shown that international student mobility is neither uniformly transformative nor inherently equitable; it is structured, mediated, and negotiated within enduring architectures of power. If internationalisation is to endure with integrity, it must move beyond symbolic globalism toward structurally embedded equity, relational accountability, and epistemic reciprocity. Only then can mobility become more than circulation. Only then can it become a practice of recognition, repair, and shared human becoming.

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Appendix 1: Ethics clearance

11 September 2023

Normah Happy Zondo (991240871)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear NA Zondo,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006016/2023

Project title: Lived experiences of students participating in international student mobility programmes
Degree : PhD

Provisional Approval – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 05 August 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC). The protocol has been provisionally approved, subject to the following conditions set out below being addressed:

1. Please attach gatekeeper permission letters

Kindly upload your response on Tab 8 of the RIG online system as soon as possible. Please do not submit a new revised application.

This approval is granted provisionally and the final clearance for this project will be given once the above-mentioned condition(s) has been met. Note that data collection may not proceed until final ethics approval letter has been issued after the remaining conditions have been met and approved by the research ethics committee.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours faithfully



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix 2: Informed consent letter



School of Education,
College of Humanities,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Edgewood Campus

24 March 2024

Dear Participant,

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

My name is Normah Zondo, a PhD candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting research on the lived experiences of students who have participated in international mobility programmes. In this regard, I am interested in requesting your participation in an interview to gather relevant information.

Please be informed of the following:

- Your confidentiality is assured, as any information provided will be anonymised and not attributed to you personally but rather presented from the perspective of a member of the population.
- The interview is expected to last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.
- Any data you provide will be used solely for the purposes of this research and will not be used against you in any way.
- All collected data will be securely stored and will be destroyed after a period of 5 years.
- Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any point without facing any penalty.
- There are no financial benefits associated with your involvement; it is purely for academic purposes.
- If you consent to be interviewed, please indicate your willingness for the interview to be recorded by ticking the appropriate box for audio and/or video recording. Additionally, indicate your preferred platform for the interview (Zoom or Microsoft Teams).

Equipment	Willing	Not willing
Audio equipment		
Photographic equipment		
Video equipment		

Preferred platform: ☐ Zoom ☐ Microsoft Teams

Should you have any queries or wish to proceed with the interview, you may contact me using the following details:

[REDACTED]

My supervisor, Professor Brian Lester Shawa, can be reached at the following address:

Email: [REDACTED]
Phone: 031 350 6107

Alternatively, you may contact the Research Office through:

Ms. Mariette Snyman (HSSREC Research Office)
Tel: 031 260 8350
Email: Snymanm@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for considering participation in this research project.

DECLARATION

I, [full name of participant], hereby confirm that I have read and understood the contents of this document and the nature of the research project. I willingly consent to participate in the research and understand that I may withdraw from the project at any time without obligation.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

(Parent's Signature if the participant is a minor): _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Research Instrument

APPENDIX ONE

Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself:

- where are you from?
- which school did you go to?
- age, gender, ethnicity?
- your family, siblings
- did your parents or siblings attend university?
- how did you pay for your university studies? (self-funded, bursary, NFSAS, other)
- are you currently working or furthering your studies?
- level of study at the time of participating?

1. Please tell me about your decision to participate in International Student Mobility Programme.

a. Which year did you participate?

2. How did you find out about the programme?

a. Why did you choose programme A instead of B, C or D? What attracted you to the university and the country?

3. Please describe how you see yourself as a student.

a. When you found out that you were selected, describe any feelings or questions that came up.

b. How was the mobility programme process explained to you?

c. Can you explain your understanding of what the International Student Mobility Programme is all about?

d. What five words popped into your mind when you found out you were accepted to participate in the International Student Mobility Programme?

e. Was this your first travel outside the country?

- f. How did your family feel about you taking up this opportunity?
 - g. What did you do to prepare yourself for the journey?
 - h. What did the university do to prepare you for the journey, the host university and the country?
 - i. What do you wish you knew before participating in International Student Mobility Programme?
4. Please describe a typical routine and strategies you used to adapt to a new environment?
- a. Did you find it easy to make new friends?
 - b. Was it easy to find your way around?
5. If you think back to joining the university from high school, please describe how prepared you felt to start university?
6. How have attending lectures in the host university been different from your home university? What stood up for you?
- a. What can you tell me about the facilities?
7. Please describe what it felt like to interact with students from other countries?
- a. Did you get an opportunity to share your country and culture with other students? If so, how did it make you feel?
 - b. What did you learn about the host country regarding the city, people, culture, and religion?
8. How did participating in International Student Mobility impact you?
- a. Socially
 - b. Academically
 - c. Financially
 - d. Personally
 - e. Emotionally
 - f. Culturally
9. What are your long-term plans for your education or career? How has participating in International Student Mobility impacted those plans? Either positively or negatively?

a. Did you see participation in International Student Mobility as beneficial or detrimental to your educational and career goals?

b. How did being in a foreign country contribute to your cultural awareness?

c. Give me five words to describe your lived experience as an exchange student.

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as an exchange student?

Appendix 4: Editor's letter

Crispin Hemson

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This is to confirm that I have undertaken language editing of a doctoral thesis by Normah Zondo, entitled *Exploring the Lived Experiences of South African Students in International Student Mobility Programmes: A Phenomenological Study*.

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6th October 2025