

International PhD Experiences in the Work Environment and Well-being

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Abstract

There is an increasing internationalization of doctoral students in Europe, including the Netherlands. However, research on experiences of international PhD students regarding their work environment from an emotional perspective, and research dealing with the well-being of international PhD students, is very limited. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study at the University of Groningen to explore the underlying factors that play a role in international PhD student's experiences. Our research question is the following: How do international PhD students experience the cultural differences in their work environment and how do they perceive the relationship between these differences related to work and their well-being? The study draws on semi-structured interviews with nine international doctoral students of the faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences. The interviews were thematically analyzed with an inductive approach. International PhD students seem to recognize common cultural differences in the Dutch PhD work environment, which are the lack of personal relationships in the workplace, differences with regard to the independence related to one's own work, and differences in productivity. However, how these cultural differences are experienced is very individual. Furthermore, the participants did not perceive cultural differences in the work environment to have an effect on their well-being. It is important to note that this study only examined cultural differences in the Dutch PhD work environment.

Keywords: international PhD students, cultural differences in the work environment, well-being, the Netherlands, qualitative research

International PhD Experiences in the Work Environment and Well-being

The importance of understanding the experience of international doctoral students in their work environment and how these experiences affect their life outside work is rapidly increasing. Early in the 1970s, developed European countries started to encourage the mobility of doctoral students (Kyvik et al., 1999). By now, universities in these countries have taken the lead in accepting international PhD students. For example, the UK, Germany, France, Netherlands, Italy, Belgium and Switzerland, are known for accepting the highest proportion of Chinese Ph.D. students (88.89%) of all Chinese PhD students abroad (Shen et al., 2017). The increase in the share of international doctoral students can be very well observed in the Netherlands as well (Nerad & Evans, 2014; OECD, 2008). According to the Association for Dutch Universities (VSNU, 2022), almost half of the PhD students in the Netherlands are international.

However, despite the large percentage of international PhD students, information about how they experience their PhD in a foreign country is lacking (Andrade, 2006; Streitwieser et al., 2012). The biggest gap in the literature seems to be research regarding the emotional aspects of international PhD students and their well-being. Even though studies on the experiences of international undergraduate students and internationals in other work environments can be a valuable source to gain a better understanding of international PhD student experiences, evidence suggests that PhD education is a unique environment to be studied due to its mixed features of working and education (Delamont et al., 2000). Therefore, it might be important to gain a better understanding of international student's emotional experiences and their well-being related to cultural differences specifically in the PhD environment. To first give a clear overview, an elaboration on existing literature regarding international PhD's experiences from an emotional perspective is presented below.

Additionally, literature regarding how the PhD work environment is related to the well-being of PhD students in general, and the relevance of studying specifically international PhD student's well-being, is detailed.

Theoretical Framework

Due to a diversity and occasional lack of agreement among the literature available regarding how different emotional aspects of being an international PhD student are experienced, it is hard to generalize how international PhD students feel about certain aspects of their work environment. However, there are some common aspects identified by past research that influence PhD experiences and some evidence regarding how satisfied international PhD students are in the Western world, specifically.

Aspects Influencing International PhD Experiences

There are multiple studies suggesting that international PhD students are prone to experience a lack of social integration in their work environment (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Ku et al., 2008; McClure, 2007; Okorochoa, 1996; Trice, 2004; Trice, 2007; Zhai, 2004) and there are many underlying aspects claimed to play a role in this phenomenon.

One of them is socializing with domestic students. While there is evidence suggesting that lack of interaction between domestic and international students is associated with lower emotional engagement, and lower academic satisfaction (Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Trice, 2004), social contact with domestic students also seems to be related to negative consequences such as anxiety and depression (Schram & Lauver, 1988).

Furthermore, lack of social integration also seems to depend on whether PhD students experience discrimination and negative attitudes towards their home country (Perrucci & Hu,

1995), and whether they have differing core cultural values. For example, international PhD students that have non-Western core values find it difficult to adjust to a more individualistic and competitive mindset and feel like this mindset is in the way of getting to know other students (Selby & Woods, 1966). Other aspects related to lack of social integration include language barrier (Curtin et al., 2013), and insufficient time spent at the faculty (Kyvik et al., 1999).

Moreover, international PhD students emphasized the role of their academic supervisor in both their socialization in the work environment and their overall experience. It might be that having a good relationship with supervisors is the most important factor influencing the success and well-being of international PhD students (Ku et al., 2008; Kulej & Park, 2008; Paglis et al., 2006). Since international PhD students tend to experience social isolation in their work environment to a greater extent than domestic students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Ku et al., 2008; McClure, 2007; Okorochoa, 1996; Trice, 2004, 2007; Zhai, 2004), it might be that their expectations regarding supervisor relationships also differ. For example, it was found that international PhD students seem to value having an advisor relationship based on personality and interpersonal closeness to a greater extent than domestic PhD students (Rose, 2005).

Finally, it is to be noted that how emotional aspects of being an international PhD student are experienced might be highly context dependent. Firstly, PhD student's cultural background might influence how they perceive their PhD experiences. Secondly, how international PhD students experience their work environment might depend on which faculty or department they work in due to disciplinary differences. For example, international PhD students in 'soft' disciplines, such as Humanities and Business, have to rely on less personal

contact with their supervisor (Kyvik et al., 1999) and are more encouraged to think divergently and view their work through their own cultural lens (Trice & Yoo, 2007) than PhD students in ‘hard’ disciplines, such as Engineering, Biology, and Physical sciences (Biglan, 1973a, 1973b; Braxton & Hargens, 1996). Furthermore, Stubb et al. (2011) suggest that even within disciplines, there is a large variation when it comes to how PhD students experience their work. Therefore, focusing on a diverse range of specific settings, such as different faculties, might be crucial.

Satisfaction of International PhD Students in the Western World

Despite international PhD students in the Western world facing challenges related to the sudden change of living in a different society, culture, and language system instead of “only” coping with a new academic setting (Perrucci & Hu, 1995), they seem to be satisfied with their PhD experiences overall and might even have a higher satisfaction with their overall experience compared to domestic students (Harman, 2003). They were appreciative of the opportunity to learn how to manage in an international research environment (Kyvik et al., 1999) and indicated increased self-confidence (Danish Research Academy, 1996), personal growth, and faster maturing due to overcoming all kinds of obstacles (Blume, 1995). Furthermore, they feel positive about developing a greater research attitude when working in Europe (Shen et al., 2017).

Well-being

Even though literature related to the emotional aspects of international PhD student experiences exists, there is little known about how working in a culturally different work environment affects international PhD student’s affectivity outside work. To gain a better

understanding of affectivity outside work, it might be useful to look at the overall well-being of international PhD students.

It is important to note that throughout the paper, well-being is defined based on Ed Diener's research and systematic review of existing literature on subjective well-being. His theoretical model of subjective well-being includes a hedonic component which consists of positive affectivity (PA) and negative affectivity (NA), and the cognitive judgment about one's life which is referred to as life satisfaction (Eid & Larsen, 2008). Moods and emotions together are labeled as affect. Positive affectivity includes joy, contentment, pride, affection, happiness, and ecstasy. Negative affectivity includes guilt, shame, sadness, anxiety, worry, anger, stress, and depression (Diener et al., 1999).

In contrast to well-being, when put in an occupational health context, research suggests that ill-being is a mismatch in the relationship between the individual and the environment instead of merely an individual symptom. (Cole et al., 2010; Elo et al., 2003; Leiter & Maslach, 1988; Maslach, 2003). Based on this, it might be that the interaction between PhD students and the PhD work environment influences PhD's well-being (Stubb et al., 2011). Since cultural differences in a work environment might contribute to a mismatch between an individual and the work environment, and there is evidence that there can be psychological symptoms associated with cross-cultural adaptation in the work environment (Perrucci & Hu, 1995), it might be important to investigate how international PhD student's well-being is affected by the Dutch work environment. However, it is to be considered that cultural value discrepancies might not be connected to psychological distress due to PhD students that go abroad being more flexible with their values (Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Ward & Searle, 1991).

Due to the little amount of studies concerned with international PhD's well-being, presenting an overview of the most important factors influencing PhD student's well-being in general can be a starting point for better understanding in which areas cultural differences in the work environment might affect international PhD's well-being. Based on an overview of findings, the variation in how well-being is experienced among PhD students is considerable. Therefore, instead of trying to generalize how PhD students experience their well-being, it seems that researchers shifted towards trying to understand the influencing factors in how these experiences are created.

One of the main influencing factors in the PhD work environment related to PhD's well-being, identified by several articles, include personal and academic social interactions. These consist of supervisor relationships (Caesens et al., 2014; Cornér et al., 2017; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Juniper et al., 2012; Schmidt & Umans, 2014), interactions at the faculty and the university at large (Caesens et al., 2014; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Juniper et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013; Schmidt & Umans, 2014; Zahniser et al., 2017), and the scholarly community (Cornér et al., 2017; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Schmidt & Umans, 2014; Stubb et al., 2011). These factors can be seen as dual factors since they can either function as a support in the work environment, therefore enhancing well-being, or as destructive friction between students and the learning environment, hindering well-being (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Other factors influencing well-being of PhD students include one's own learning, workload, frequency of evaluation, resources, imbalance between work and private life, and whether there is a competitive atmosphere (Pyhältö et al., 2012).

This Study

To contribute to the existing knowledge, we wanted to understand how cultural differences are experienced by international PhD students in the Dutch PhD work environment, and more specifically, in the field of behavioral and social sciences. Besides the scientific relevance, our research could have practical relevance for the BSS faculty of the University of Groningen. According to a survey conducted by the BSS faculty, PhD students struggle with work-load, a suboptimal work-life balance, stress about finishing in time, the large emphasis on publishing, feeling a high responsibility to make the PhD project a success, insecurity about future career, problems with their supervisor, and feeling isolated. We might enrich the survey by gaining a better understanding of how international students experience their PhD and how these experiences affect them outside work. Therefore, our research question is the following: How do international PhD students experience the cultural differences in their work environment and how do they perceive the relationship between these differences related to work and their well-being? Since the lack of literature regarding how cultural differences are experienced by international PhDs students in the Dutch work environment and regarding the relationship between cultural differences in the PhD work environment and overall well-being of international PhD students, we decided to take a qualitative approach in order to explore the topic and create a starting point for further research.

Methods

Design

As a group of three students (Ilona Beeuwsma, Niklas Kranz, and Tessza Badric), we set up this study and collected the data. Since we are interested in the meanings attributed to international PhD experiences by the research participants themselves, rather than the

identification of cause–effect relationships, using a qualitative method is the most suitable due to its more detailed, nuanced and explorative nature. Likewise, we chose a thematic analysis with an inductive approach, as it gives the flexibility to identify and interpret patterns or themes given the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). That is, we did not try to fit the data in a predefined coding scheme or themes. Instead, we searched for patterns in the data to create themes.

Positionality

To increase the integrity and trustworthiness of my qualitative research, it is important to use reflexivity as a tool to locate myself and my research partners within the research process. This applies to all stages of my research including the stage of pre-research, data collection, and data analysis. When it comes to the pre-research stage, it is important to note my convictions regarding my research topic that might have influenced the whole process of my research. Based on my own experience as an international student, I expected to find a strong influence of cultural differences on PhD experiences and international PhD student's well-being. I had the presumption that students have negative experiences due to lack of personal relationships in the work environment and the Dutch productivity, and positive experiences due to the well-functioning Dutch educational system. In the stage of data collection, even though me and my research partners continuously paid attention and reflected on the intersubjective dynamics between the interviewer and interviewees, we found ourselves occasionally steering the conversation by prompting negative experiences which might have slightly skewed the research in a particular direction. Overall, however, we believe that we engaged in critical language awareness (Fairclough, 2001), were supportive of all the interviewees expressing their opinion and were able to build a comfortable and friendly relationship with them while keeping it professional. Throughout the data analysis, when

noticing the diversity in the experiences of our interviewees, I tried to closely pay attention to my initial assumptions and approach the phenomenon to be investigated with openness and wonder, and engage in explicit, self-aware meta-analysis.

Participants

In total, we included nine participants in our study. Sampling until theoretical saturation was not possible due to limited time. To solve the ontological question of how to group different cultures, we decided to separate cultures by nationality similar to Hofstede (2011). Due to cultural similarity we excluded Dutch and German PhD candidates from our participants. To select our international participants, we made a list of all PhD candidates at the BSS faculty of the University of Groningen. From this selection, we excluded the Dutch and German nationalities based on a look at their names. The remaining people got an invitation email from us. This resulted in a total amount of 36 invitation emails. In the email correspondence, we asked the following four questions: ‘What is your nationality?’, ‘How long have you been doing your PhD?’, ‘When did you move to Groningen?’, and ‘Are you a bursary or employed PhD candidate?’. Based on this, we invited the PhD candidates who did a PhD for at least one year and were living in Groningen, but did not do their Masters in Groningen. With this approach we were able to select six participants. After not finding enough participants, we decided to loosen our criteria. We now allowed PhD candidates who had already finished their master degree in Groningen to participate, as well as first year PhD candidates. Eventually, the study included five participants from China, one from Mexico, one from Turkey, one from Columbia, and one from Indonesia. One of these participants was a first year PhD candidate, one was a second year PhD candidate, three were third year PhD

candidates, and four were fourth year PhD candidates. Three of the students had already done their master degree in Groningen.

Interviews

Out of nine interviews, we conducted four interviews online through Google Meet and five interviews in person. The duration of the interviews was between 30 minutes and 75 minutes. We sent all participants the informed consent form and study information form before the interview. At the start of the interview, we asked the participants whether they agreed with the informed consent and the interview being recorded. We encrypted the audio recordings and stored them on a university server until the end of the research. They were only accessible by Ilona Breeuwsma, Niklas Kranz and Tessza Badric. After the study was completed we deleted the audio files. The study had been approved by the Ethics Committee of Psychology at the University of Groningen (code for approval: PSY-2122-S-0013).

We conducted the interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. We asked all questions in the interview guide unless it was already answered during a preceding question. An exception for this was the question “If you imagine an ideal work environment, how does it look?”. This question was accidentally not asked to the participants of one interviewer. During our interviews we had the freedom to deviate from the interview guide by exploring further promising answers. For example, when a participant indicated (strong) emotions on a topic, the topic was further explored.

The interview guide included three main elements: (1) questions with a focus on how the PhD candidates experience the work environment at the faculty in general, (2) questions focusing on how cultural differences are experienced in their work environment, (3) questions

that evaluate how well-being is perceived to be influenced by cultural differences in the work environment. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix.

The interviews were manually transcribed using the program F4 Transkript. Unless requested otherwise by the participant, interviews were written down word by word. Such a request was made by one participant. Non-verbal language, such as laughing, was added when it was influencing the interpretation of the text. In these transcripts, the participants were pseudonymized by using different codes eg. A, B, C, etc.

Data analysis: coding

We based the data analysis on the inductive approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Our thematic analysis started with reading all the interviews and highlighting the data relevant to our research question. We coded these parts in detail, trying to stay as close to the text as possible. All nine interviews were then discussed in depth with the whole group. Due to different interpretations of the interviews in our research group, we faced difficulties with coding. Our main struggle was to agree on the emotional weight of certain statements. This was resolved by giving more value to the interpretation of the interviewer, since he or she knew the interviews' sentiment best. Therefore, we eventually agreed on common codes which reflected the content and the meaning of the interviews. Based on our descriptive coding, we looked for patterns in our interviews and grouped our codes according to them. Eventually, we merged our grouped codes into more abstract themes and agreed on a theme scheme together. The process of agreeing on a final theme scheme was challenging due to difficulties with the organization of the themes. This was due to a high interconnectedness between our themes and sub-themes. The final scheme can be found in the Excel file attached.

Results

Cultural Differences in the Dutch PhD Work Environment

Our results suggest that international PhD students experience some common cultural differences in Dutch work environment. However, how these cultural differences are perceived is quite individual.

Lack of Personal Relationships

Firstly, international PhD students indicated that people are not personal in the Dutch PhD work environment. That is, Dutch people in the work environment are seen as friendly, helpful, and very often described as “nice”, but the PhD’s relationships with these people does not reach a deeper, more personal level: “I only knew a few members, but I think our relationship is nice, but as I said it’s not very deep communicating. It’s only greetings and, egh, talking about the work environment, not outside that.” (E)

However, to what extent this is seen as negative differs per person. Some mentioned the lack of personal relationship in the Dutch work environment as something positive: “So first thing is less judgemental, so I found out that other people don’t care so much about your personal life so that made me very comfortable.” (A) On the contrary, some noted that their affectivity at work is negatively influenced by the lack of personal relationships, causing feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and isolation.

The factors that were perceived to contribute to the lack of personal relationships in the Dutch work environment include Dutch people’s preference for separation of work and social interactions, the language barrier, and the lack of collaborative work with colleagues in the workplace. According to our interviewees, it is difficult to build a personal relationship with Dutch people due to Dutch people’s lack of interest in making friends with the international students in the workplace due to an already existing social network outside

work. Many participants also indicated language barrier as a factor that interferes with socializing and building personal relationships in the work environment. This language barrier took mainly two forms. Firstly, some indicated that Dutch people tend to speak Dutch despite having non-Dutch speaking people around them. Secondly, international PhD students also struggled with English being their second language. However, to what extent people were bothered by the language interfering with socializing differed per person. While some indicated that the language barrier was present but did not bother them, others said that it makes socializing and integration much harder and causes discomfort. Furthermore, some participants related lack of collaborative work to the lack of personal social interactions in the Dutch work environment. The students that made this link emphasized their preference for more collaborative activities and work due to the desire of having closer relationships with teammates and colleagues: “I would also like to have a very nice relationship with other colleagues at our department. I hope we can have more social activities but also some more research communicating, like taking some conferences together, and some other activities.” (E)

Independence

Another cultural difference in the Dutch work environment commonly noted by international PhD students is the independence they receive regarding their work. The Dutch work environment is fostering a self-reliant attitude by providing less guidance regarding scheduling and structuring of PhD's work:

There is not like a proper system to ensure that you can divide a bit more equally the amount of work, you know? No one tells you like “Come on, stop a little bit because you are using too much time here.” (I)

Furthermore, by building less hierarchical relationships in the professional settings. The lack of hierarchy seems to be the most apparent in supervisor relationships. Some participants indicated that they feel like their relationship with their supervisor is based on equality and that supervisors have a facilitating role in their Phd project, rather than a leading one. They also noted that this less hierarchical relationship is apparent when it comes to asking questions regarding the PhD projects, since supervisors are very encouraging and open to discussion.

Even though both the lack of hierarchy and the lack of guidance are related to independence, how positive PhD students are about these two aspects is different. The way in which lack of hierarchy builds a sense of independence is seen as positive by all participants. However, to what extent independence regarding the day-to-day structuring of their work is perceived positively by them is more diverse. On the one hand, some participants noted that despite finding it hard to have such an independence in structuring their own work, especially in the beginning of their PhD, they see it as part of their development. It gives them the feeling that they have the opportunity to explore their own interest and do their project for themselves, and teaches them critical thinking. On the other hand, some participants expressed a preference for more guidance due to experiencing negative emotions such as a strong fear of getting lost, feelings of insecurity, chaos, and loneliness.

Productivity

The third cultural difference in the Dutch work environment commonly noticed by international PhD students is a difference in productivity. In this context, we used productivity as an umbrella term for efficiency, efficacy, punctuality, and workload.

To what extent the Dutch work environment is perceived as productive, however, is again highly varied. Firstly, there are people saying that the workload is “not that high ” and have no struggles related to the different aspects of Dutch productivity mentioned above. A

second group of people, despite finding it difficult to adjust to, perceive the Dutch work environment as very efficient and are positive about the Dutch punctuality and straightforwardness. Lastly, for some, the Dutch efficiency and productivity is perceived as demanding, critical, overwhelming, and leading to self-questioning:

Sometimes I feel like I am not good enough to finish my PhD, I am a really bad student, I am not good enough to be a PhD. That is normal, all these feelings became normal feelings to me, I live with them now, I am not complaining anymore. (D)

Participants that had difficulties with adjusting to the Dutch productivity often also expressed these with regard to the feedback they received:

The first thing I wrote, I felt really good about myself, the first article kind of, and the feedback was like “nothing makes sense, and it doesn’t have a structure, there is no point”, and I was like “fuck”, so yea I felt basically destroyed, and this repeats again during the PhD. (B)

Well-being

Another main finding is that the participants did not perceive cultural differences in the work environment to have an effect on their well-being. Even though affectivity at work and work satisfaction can be affected by cultural differences in the PhD work environment, the interviewees indicated that the effect of these cultural differences is not large enough to influence their well-being. Instead, according to them, other factors related to work, and factors outside work related to being an international, influence well-being more than cultural factors related to the work environment.

Factors Related to Work Influencing Well-being

The main factors related to work influencing well-being include personality, COVID-19, being a PhD in general, and supervisor relationship.

Some students indicated that personality plays an important role in how they experience their well-being related to their work. Firstly, some people attribute the match/mismatch regarding interpersonal relationships, and a sense of belonging at work to similarities/differences in personality and not to cultural differences:

I am not sure if that is also cultural, but that also helped me a lot because I am also, I think it is more personality wise. I am also with being like really alternative and rebellious. So yeah, I felt identified. (I)

Secondly, some people give personality a mediator role. For example, they believe that there is no effect of cultural differences on their well-being due to them having a positive personality in general, or due to their ability to not take the negative emotions from work home.

Well-being was also linked to factors related to the nature of PhD in general rather than cultural differences in the work environment. This included both negative factors, such as publication pressure and pressure related to workload:

I think I feel pressure and it is difficult for me to focus. Especially to work from home. A lot of things that I need to do, then it is hard for me to focus on my work and then like everything was delayed. I really don't like it. But, and then the pressure again. So it is a very negative circle. There is work and I cannot focus on it. And I need to delay it and the pressure again. And then it like very, very, very, very vicious circle. And then it makes me anxiety and yeah, under depression like that. (C)

and positive ones, such as the opportunity to do research based on one's own interest which gives PhD students fulfillment and satisfaction.

In addition, all students noted the impact of COVID-19 on their PhD experience and well-being. Due to the virus, working in the office was restricted, which, as the participants indicated, affected their social life at work in a negative way. Furthermore, due to working from home, some students feel like they have no structure in their day-to-day life. However, to what extent these were seen as a problem is quite diverse. While some believe that there is no effect of the limited socializing and lack of structure on their well-being, others experience loneliness, stress, pressure to adapt, anxiety, depression, and have trouble sleeping.

Lastly, in the interviews, all students indicated that supervisors play a significant role in their PhD experience. Having a supportive and helpful supervisor and close relationships with supervisors were associated with satisfaction regardless of whether cultural differences were present in the relationship.

Factors Outside Work Related to Being an International and Well-being

International PhD students noted that factors outside work related to being an international influence their PhD experience and well-being more than cultural differences in the PhD work environment.

Firstly, it was pointed out by participants that the biggest disadvantage for them is not knowing the Dutch educational system and the system of the government in general, as much as the domestic students. As a result, some students experienced uncertainty and worry regarding their career perspective, and felt unprepared. Secondly, participants directed our attention to the struggles they faced related to moving to a new country, and noted that these struggles had an impact on their PhD project in their transition phase due to lack of time and stress. These were related both to their home country and the Netherlands, and included administrative problems, such as acquiring insurance, visa, permission from their home country, financial problems related to scholarship, and housing. Furthermore, PhD's missing

their family and the Dutch climate had a negative impact on their well-being by increasing loneliness and feeling homesick.

Despite the struggles related to being an expat, international PhD students indicated increased life satisfaction due to good living conditions in the Netherlands in terms of financial support and the amount of opportunities provided:

At this point it is very good. If I compare my quality of life here with the quality of life I would have in [home country], of course I want to stay here. There are many things, many facilities that we have here that I wouldn't have in [home country], so even though there are cultural differences and there are things that I would like different and are better from my perspective, it is still really good, everything is still really good, so I feel great. (B)

Lastly, having a social network outside work seems to function as a buffer against challenges faced regarding the PhD in general, the cultural differences in the PhD work environment, and living in a new country. Students related having a support system outside work to positive affectivity, and decrease in negative affectivity, such as loneliness resulting from not having personal relationships in the work environment.

Discussion

The aim of my study was to better understand how international PhD students experience the cultural differences in their work environment and how they perceive the relationship between these differences related to work and their well-being. Our findings suggest that international PhD students seem to identify the same cultural differences in the Dutch work environment but how they experience these cultural differences is very diverse. According to our findings, there are mainly three cultural differences identified in the Dutch

work environment having an impact on international PhD experiences. These include lack of personal relationships in the work environment, independence regarding PhD work, and difference in productivity. Furthermore, international PhD students did not perceive these cultural differences in the work environment to have an effect on their well-being. Instead, other factors related to work, and factors outside work related to being an international, were seen as influencing well-being more than cultural factors related to the work environment. The main factors related to work influencing well-being include personality, COVID-19, the nature of PhD in general, and supervisor relationship. The factors related to being an expat influencing well-being are struggles related to moving to a new country, not knowing the Dutch system, and good living conditions in the Netherlands.

When reflecting on our findings in regard to previous research, there are some common aspects identified both by our participants and other international PhD students. Namely, the lack of social interactions in the workplace seems to have a significant role in previous research as well (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Ku et al., 2008; McClure, 2007; Okorochoa, 1996; Trice, 2004; Trice, 2007; Zhai, 2004), and was linked to both language barrier (Curtin et al., 2013) and the lack of interaction with domestic students (Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Trice, 2004). By contrast, except for the current study, independence regarding PhD work and productivity as cultural aspects have not been identified in previous studies concerned with international PhD experiences.

However, it is worth noting that such an emphasis on social interactions by our interviewees might be due to the tendency of students in the field of behavioral and social sciences to focus more on social interactions within the scholarly community than students from other fields (Pyhältö et al., 2012). Furthermore, such a prominence of independence might be due to the fact that international PhD students in 'soft' disciplines, such as

Humanities and Business, have to rely on less personal contact with their supervisor (Kyvik et al., 1999), and are more encouraged to think divergently (Trice & Yoo, 2007). Therefore, since our study was conducted among students from the BSS faculty, it is necessary to further investigate how cultural differences shape PhD experiences in different departments and faculties.

Moreover, despite past research suggesting that international PhD students have a desire for close relationships that went beyond the casual level (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Trice, 2002), how important having personal social interactions was perceived, is much more diverse in our study. It is to be noted, however, that in the current study, theoretical saturation could not be reached due to a small number of participants. Additionally, resulting from convenience sampling, five out of nine participants were from China, and they were the ones indicating that the lack of personal relationships in the workplace doesn't bother them.

Furthermore, even though we cannot attribute people's experiences to specific cultures because that is not what we were investigating, it might be important to note that people with a similar cultural background seem to experience other cultural differences in the Dutch PhD work environment similarly as well. While people from South America, Eastern countries, and China noted the same cultural differences, Chinese people indicated that they experience cultural differences to a much lesser extent and they are much more positive about them and satisfied with their work environment. This is also in accordance with the research by Shen et al. (2017). When it comes to people coming from non-Western countries, our findings regarding the three main cultural differences in the Dutch work environment, namely, lack of personal relationships in the work environment, independence regarding PhD work, and difference in productivity, are in line with the idea that international students that have non-Western core values find it difficult to adjust to a more individualistic and competitive

mindset and felt like this mindset was in the way of getting to know other students (Selby & Woods, 1966).

Therefore, it could be interesting for future research to explore to what extent PhD's perception of these cultural differences in the Netherlands are dependent on one's cultural origin. A useful tool to do so might be putting cultural differences experienced by international PhDs in the context of the Hofstede model of national cultures (Hofstede, 2011). When it comes to the cultural differences identified by our study, all three could be somewhat linked to either the dimension of individualism or the dimension of long-term orientation. Firstly, based on Hofstede and Minkov's (2010) categorization of countries, the lack of personal relationships in the workplace and the independence regarding PhD work could both be linked to the Netherlands being highly individualistic. The fact that these two cultural differences were noted by all the participants also makes sense when looking at the origin of our participants, since all of them come from countries that score low on individualism. Secondly, differences in productivity recognized by participants could be related to the dimension of long-term orientation. This would also be reasonable to assume since our participants from China, which is a higher scoring country on long-term orientation than the Netherlands, did not perceive the work environment as highly productive. By contrast, participants from countries that score low on long-term orientation indicated struggling with Dutch productivity. However, to arrive at any conclusions, a reflection on past research, and future research is needed to explore to what extent cultural differences can be put in the context of cultural dimensions of Hofstede or other cultural frameworks, such as Schwartz's cultural model (Schwartz, 1999).

PhD students did not perceive cultural differences to have an impact on their well-being. It might be that this is simply due to the fact that PhD students that go abroad are more flexible with their values and, therefore, cultural differences are not connected to how they experience their well-being (Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Ward & Searle, 1991). It is to be noted, however, that since this research based the concept of well-being on Ed Diener's components of subjective well-being, it only focused on positive and negative affectivity, and life satisfaction. Therefore, it might be important to see if findings regarding cultural differences in the work environment and well-being are consistent across other theoretical frameworks of well-being as well. For example, further research could use the Six-factor Model of Psychological Well-being which includes aspects of positive relationships with others, personal mastery, autonomy, a feeling of purpose and meaning in life, and personal growth and development (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Even though our study initially focused on cultural factors in the work environment and their influence on well-being, due to the explorative nature of our study, we identified other factors influencing international PhD's well-being that might need further consideration in future research. Firstly, some students indicated that personality plays an important role in their PhD experience and how cultural differences in the PhD work environment are perceived. In line with our research, some evidence suggests that individual doctoral students' skills and attitudes such as motivation, self-regulation (Pyhältö et al., 2012; Sakurai et al., 2017), and self-esteem (Perrucci & Hu, 1995) might be major factors influencing PhD experience. Secondly, in accordance with previous research (Ku et al., 2008; Kulej & Park, 2008; Paglis et al., 2006), supervisor relationship was indicated to be one of the most important contributing factors to PhD experience. Additionally, our participants also

emphasized the impact of COVID-19 on their well-being. However, we did not consider personal factors in our interviews, and we could not explore supervisor relationships in terms of cultural differences since we did not get any information on the supervisor's cultural background. Therefore, further research taking personal factors, supervisor's cultural background, and the pandemic into consideration might be crucial to gain a better understanding of international PhD experiences. Finally, based on our results, we suggest future research to focus more on factors related to being an expat outside the work environment when it comes to studying international PhD's well-being.

Having done research in the setting of a Dutch PhD work environment functions both as a limitation and as a strength of our study. On the one hand, our findings regarding the main cultural differences in the work environment are only applicable to the Netherlands. On the other hand, we gained knowledge on the cultural differences that might need to be considered specifically in the Netherlands. Furthermore, when it comes to the practical implications, our research might contain useful information for the BSS faculty of the University of Groningen. Even though it might be difficult to create a work environment that suits every student due to such a diversity in experiences and needs of international PhD students, based on our research, internationals might need to be educated about the Dutch way of communicating in the work environment, and the expectations regarding structuring one's own work. Furthermore, we advise the faculty to monitor the needs of international PhD students regarding social interactions in the work environment. Additionally, since participants indicated that factors outside work related to being an international affect PhD experience and well-being much more than cultural differences at work, it might be helpful for internationals to also have more guidance outside the work environment.

Despite some limitations, our research intended to bring attention to the importance of studying international PhD students and understanding their experiences in a culturally different work environment. Furthermore, since our qualitative research explored the factors that play a role in international PhD student's experiences from an emotional perspective, it might be a starting point for studying international PhD students more in terms of their well-being.

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Appendix

Interview guide

Give a short introduction about our research.

“Did you read the study information form and the informed consent?”

“Do you agree with what is stated there?”

Introduction

Goal: Small impression of personal PhD experience (keeping it easy)

>If I were to start my PhD next year, how would you describe what doing a PhD is like to me based on your own experiences?

>You are dedicating 4+ years of your life to contribute to academia. What drives you to do so?

> Do you still want to stay in academia after the PhD? Why (not)?

Work environment

“First, I would like to talk a little bit more about your work environment.”

>Could you describe how you experienced your first few months at this faculty?

>Could you describe the social integration policies at the faculty for PhD students?

>How do you experience the academic community in your work environment?

Cultural differences

“We are particularly interested in the views of international students. Therefore, I would like to relate your work environment with you being an international student.”

>If a friend of yours from a similar cultural background would start their PhD next year what advice would you give regarding working in a Dutch work environment?

>How did you experience the transition to the Dutch work environment as an international student?

>What, if any, struggles did you experience as an international student?

>Were there particular things you liked about the new environment as an international student?

>What would you imagine would be different in how you experience your PhD versus how a Dutch student experiences their PhD?

- > How has your experience regarding working in a culturally different academic system changed now that you have worked here longer?
 - >What aspects contributed to these developments?

- >Could you describe your relationship with other staff members/colleagues?
 - >Could you describe how cultural differences are present in your relationship with other staff members/colleagues?

- > If you imagine an ideal work environment. How does it look?
 - > In what way is it different from your current work environment?

Well-being

“There are several PhD students saying that their well being is affected by their work environment. We are specifically interested in how international PhD students experience their well being in the dutch work environment. Some experience their life satisfaction and affectivity more as positive and some more as negative. *Positive affectivity* is typically characterized by enthusiastic, energetic, confident, active, and alert.

- >How would you say your positive emotions and moods in your everyday life changed since you started the PhD?
 - >To what degree do you think this is related to the culturally different work environment?

Negative affectivity is typically characterized by sadness, lethargy, distress, and un-pleasurable engagement.

- >How would you say your negative emotions and moods in your everyday life changed since you started the PhD?
 - >To what degree do you think this is related to the culturally different work environment?

- >How would you say your overall life satisfaction is influenced by working in a culturally different work environment?