

**Workplace Stressors and Culture – Distinguishing International PhD Candidates’
Experiences and Well-being**

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Abstract

Among PhD candidates in the Netherlands, high dropout rates, delay and dissatisfaction are found (van Rooij et al., 2021). At the local level, differences between Dutch and international PhD candidates' well-being were noted in Groningen (BSS Faculty, 2020). Even though 51% of the PhD candidates are international (University of Groningen, 2019), the empirical knowledge about the academic experiences underlying internationals' well-being is hardly researched. To close this gap, this qualitative study sought to identify the distinct work experiences of international PhD candidates and to distinguish the stressors relevant for their well-being. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with international PhD candidates of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences (BSS). Based on an inductive approach, I used a thematic analysis to allow for exploration of candidates' lived experiences. I found that the most relevant stressors for candidates' well-being were outside of work, or unrelated to culture. Still, five workplace stressors were identified as relevant for well-being: (1) social interactions, (2) organizational structure, (3) the supervisor relationship, (4) harsh feedback, and (5) openness to ask questions. To increase international PhD candidates' well-being, I recommend the University of Groningen to ease creations of social networks (e.g., by reducing existing language barriers), to inform candidates about the motives of harsh feedback, and to provide more information about the Dutch academic system and the labour market. The main limitation of this study was the researchers' inexperience with qualitative methods.

Keywords: international PhD candidates, stressors, culture, experiences, well-being

International PhD Candidates' Experiences and Well-being

Globalization has accelerated internationalization activity within universities (Maringe, 2010). Nowadays, 51% of the PhD candidates at the University of Groningen are international (University of Groningen, 2019), and within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) area the share of internationals at university is the highest at the PhD level (Huberts, 2017). To achieve their personal goals, international PhD candidates need to adapt to a new culture both privately and academically. The codes of conduct and formal and informal institutions require time and effort for newcomers to get acquainted with. Indeed, international students of all academic levels have unique experiences compared to native students (Mori, 2000; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In view of the anomalous experiences of international students abroad and the large amount of international PhD candidates in Groningen, I have set out to explore the experiences of international PhD candidates at the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences (BSS) in Groningen. Besides looking at stressors, the present study aimed at discerning which experiences serve as determinants for international PhD candidates' well-being. At the BSS, 30% of PhD candidates reported to be neutral or (strongly) disagreeing about deriving a good feeling of doing their work (BSS Faculty, 2020). In addition, differences in satisfaction were noted between natives and internationals. Internationals, for example, reported more dissatisfaction about their development as an independent researcher, whereby reasons for these differences remain unknown. Therefore, I aimed to investigate whether culture might be a reason for differences in satisfaction. To enhance understanding of the acculturation of international students, more qualitative research is needed to explore their lived experiences (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Hence, in this study, I used qualitative methods to identify the personal experiences distinct to international PhD candidates at the BSS. Further, I inquired the perceived effects of these experiences on their well-being, and I reviewed existing

literature to identify through which pathways the perceived effects on well-being might occur, to advice possible strategies to increase international PhD candidates' well-being.

Theoretical Framework

The different experiences of international PhD candidates can be explained by several cultural theories. The present study draws on three theories, identified by Zhou and colleagues (2008), to offer a comprehensive understanding of international students in higher education: (1) social identity theory, (2) culture learning theory, and (3) the stress and coping framework.

The social identity theory holds that individual identity is affected by group membership and environment. The change of context accompanied by moving between countries can lead to anxiety provoking change in perceptions of self and identity, especially when identity was previously constructed from local social interaction (Zhou et al., 2008). While internationals might be struggling to define a clear identity, feeling identified is a strong predictor for student satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2016). Social identity theory thereby focuses on the cognitive components of the adaption process.

In contrast, the culture learning theory focuses on the behavioural aspects. It regards migration to a new country as a shock, whereby cultural adaptation is achieved through social interaction (Zhou et al., 2008). Based on the culture learning theory, Furnham and Bochner (1982) found that stress experiences by sojourners (i.e., temporary residents) are largely due to their lack of necessary social skills, needed to negotiate with a social situation. Moreover, culture learning theory stipulates that for sociocultural adaption to occur it is essential to have a good host language proficiency (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Other influencing factors are general knowledge about a new culture (Ward & Searle, 1991, as cited in Zhou et al., 2008), friendship networks (Bochner, McLeod & Lin, 1977, as cited in Zhou et al., 2008) and cross-cultural training (Deshpande & Viswesvaran, 1992, as cited in Zhou et al., 2008).

Lastly, the stress and coping framework views moving to another country as a stressful life change and regards the individual responsible for adaptation. Specific causes of stress for international students include language issues, difficulties transitioning to a different system of teaching, and integrating with peers (Sovic, 2008). As reaction, people engaging in cross-cultural encounters need to be resilient, adaptive, and able to develop coping strategies for successful adaptation. In turn, stress management training can aid developing such coping strategies and promote adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008).

To conclude, the three described theories give separate views on why experiences of international PhD candidates might be different from those of native PhD candidates. In this thesis, I will use these theories to explain why distinct experiences of the international PhD candidates might have occurred. Further, I will base recommendations for improvement of well-being on these theories, whenever appropriate.

The Stressors of International Students and their Well-being

International students of all academic levels frequently experience a variety of adjustment problems (Tseng & Newton, 2002), consisting of four major categories: (1) *general living adjustments* (e.g., food, transportation, climate, and financial problems); (2) *academic adjustments* (e.g. language barriers, lack of understanding of the educational system, and the lack of effective learning skills for gaining academic success); (3) *socio-cultural adjustment* (e.g. discrimination, difficulties adjusting to new social/cultural customs, and norms and regulations), and (4) *personal psychological adjustment* (e.g. homesickness, loneliness, the loss of status or identity, and feeling of worthlessness). Especially the stressors of language barrier, educational difficulties, loneliness, and practical problems associated with changing environments weigh heavily on internationals (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Furthermore, international students experience less social support than domestic students, amplifying issues related to the stressors (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002).

In turn, the exposure to different adjustment problems can influence the well-being of individual international students. Mori (2000) showed that international students of all academic levels were at greater risk for various psychological problems than native students due to the demands for cultural adjustment. While international students viewed their cross-cultural experiences as a learning process and were satisfied with their academic experience, they also experienced more anxiety (Andrade, 2006), and acculturative stress through life changes (Berry, 2006). To mitigate these adverse effects on international students' well-being, the perception of a meaningful and successful study abroad life is essential (Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Yet, while there has been ample of research looking into the experiences of international students in general, the unique perspective of international *PhD candidates* has largely been neglected in the literature. However, for international and native PhD candidates, one in two candidates experience psychological distress, and one in three is at risk of common psychiatric disorder (Levecque et al., 2017). Among all PhD candidates in the Netherlands, high dropout rates, delay and dissatisfaction were noted (van Rooij et al., 2021), underlining the importance of looking at PhD candidates' experiences as distinct from those of the general international student body.

To close this gap in the literature, this thesis further explores to what extent factors relevant to the international PhD candidates' workplace may determine their adjustment and well-being. The work and organisational context are significant predictors of PhD candidates' mental health (Levecque et al., 2017) and surveys among PhD candidates showed that supportive relationships at work reduced emotional exhaustion (Hunter & Devine, 2016).

The supervisor relationship is essential for the well-being of PhD candidates and has, in fact, been shown to be amongst the top reasons for dropping out of a PhD program (Jacks et al., 1983). Furthermore, the relation with their supervisor affects PhD candidates' sense of

belonging and academic self-concept (Curtin et al., 2013); the sense of alienation (or acceptance) within their department; and the degree to which they were involved in their PhD programs (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). Compared to a Dutch supervisor/Dutch PhD candidate relationship, international PhD candidates' supervisor relationship might differ. For instance, the lack of cultural understanding can lead to confusion in supervision (Nilsson & Anderson, 2004) and to hesitancy in bringing up concerns to supervisors (Killian, 2001).

The Experiences of International PhD Candidates at the BSS

At the local level, differential experiences of international and native PhD candidates have been reported at the BSS. The last PhD report (BSS Faculty, 2020), distributed before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, showed that, compared to Dutch PhD candidates, international PhD candidates report less statements of emotional exhaustion (e.g., feeling empty at the end of the day or feeling tired when waking up with a new working day ahead); less stress about data collection; more dissatisfaction about their development as an independent researcher; more stress about their future career; and more anxiety about their career prospects. Furthermore, international candidates think more frequently that supervisors are not preparing them for well for their future career, although reasons for these differences remain unclear. Moreover, the international staff of the University of Groningen brought up language-based exclusion. Internationals experience problems taking part in faculty life because Dutch faculty members refuse to use English (Young Academy Groningen, 2020). Lastly, a well-being survey amongst all PhD candidates at the University of Groningen found that responses by Asian PhD candidates were generally more positive than those by Dutch candidates, whereas most negative results were found amongst South American PhD candidates (Van Rooij et al., 2019). It remained unclear why these different experiences occurred.

Aim

Given these results, the aim of the study was twofold. Firstly, by employing a qualitative approach, I sought to discern the distinct work experiences of international PhD candidates at the BSS. Secondly, informed by cultural theories, I inspected why the distinct experiences might have occurred and how they could relate to the well-being of internationals. Based on this, recommendations were proposed to the University of Groningen which could help to improve the well-being of their international PhD candidates. By employing a qualitative approach, I gained detailed insights into the perceptions and perspectives of the international PhD candidates at the BSS and was able to understand what it is like for international PhD candidates to work at the BSS.

Methods

Design

As a group of three students, Tessza Badric, Ilona Breeuwsma and Niklas Kranz set up this study, conducted one-on-one interviews and made a coding scheme. We decided to do a qualitative study because there was a need for deeper exploration of the mechanisms of PhD candidates' experiences to enrich the well-being surveys of the University of Groningen. Qualitative methods describe lived experiences more detailed, nuanced, and realistic than a quantitative analysis. 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, 2012). That is, we did not try to fit the data in a before decided coding scheme or themes. Instead, we searched for patterns in the data to create themes.

Positionality statement

Reflexivity is important in qualitative research since we as researchers are the measuring instrument. Overall, we believe that we were supportive of all the interviewees expressing their opinion and we were able to build a comfortable and friendly relationship

with them while keeping it professional. We continuously paid attention and reflected on the intersubjective dynamics between the interviewer and interviewees.

Personally, I believe that culture has much effect on human behaviour. Therefore, I was eager to establish an understanding of the cultural influences among PhD candidates. However, I quickly learned from my supervisor and peers to refrain from creating an overarching picture of cultures, and instead stay closer to the individual experiences.

Moreover, I realised that it was easier to talk about negative rather than positive experiences. Although participants often described negative affect in more depth, we also gave importance to the overall evaluation of their experiences, which were often more positive.

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 like Hofstede (2012). 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 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, resulting 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 master’s 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's 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's degree in Groningen.

Interviews

Out of nine interviews, we conducted four interviews online through Google Meet and five interviews in person with the use of an audio recorder. The duration of the interviews was between 30 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 Tessza Badric, Ilona Breeuwsma, and Niklas Kranz. 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 one of them was already answered during a preceding question. An exception was the question *“If you imagine an ideal work environment. How does it look?”*. By accident, this question was not asked to the participants by one interviewer. During interviews, we had the freedom to deviate from the interview guide by exploring further promising answers (e.g., when a participant indicated (strong) emotions on a topic).

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 A.

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 letters A, B, C.

Data Analysis: Coding

We based the data analysis on the inductive approach of Braun and Clarke (2012). 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 attached Excel file.

Results

In the interviews we identified two main themes. The first was that international PhD candidates perceive common cultural differences in the Dutch work environment, but how these cultural differences are experienced is individual. The second was that there is only little perceived effect of cultural differences on well-being in the work environment.

Perceived Cultural Influences at Work

The perceived common cultural differences at work related to three broad categories. The participants noted that in the Dutch work environment: (1) few personal relations are maintained, (2) high independence exists, and (3) there is a high focus on productivity.

Few Personal Relations at Work

Firstly, the PhD candidates experienced little personal connections at work. However, this was valued differently by individuals. In general, participants indicated that their work environment is friendly and helpful. Supervisors and colleagues were quickly available to help when necessary. For that reason, participants A, C, D, H, G, and I were positive about the interactions at their work environment. Where participants G and I indicated that their work relationships are not personal and deep, this was fine for them since their focus was mainly on their PhD project. In contrast, participants B, C, E and F perceived the lack of personal connection at work as unsatisfying. For example, participant F noted that the colleagues are friendly. However, he was also sad that there was not more personal contact at his department. He would prefer to have a more social and collaborative work environment to cope with loneliness. Similarly, participant B noted a less personal atmosphere than what he is used to in his home country. Participant B noted that he already created his own social network outside of work. Therefore, he did not feel “*inclined to socialize and make friends at work*”, and he can accept the non-personal connections at work better. Still, in an ideal work environment he would be “*more close to everybody in the team.*” In comparison, participant

E experienced the lack of personal interaction as very negative. He remembered that the interactions at work in his home country were “*very joyful*” and “*relaxed*” and he had friendships at work, while in Groningen he feels interactions are “*less personal*” and “*less emphatic*.” Especially the interaction with the supervisor was unsatisfying, as he says: “*my supervisor doesn't care about my feeling, he focuses on what you do and what you are planning to do, that's all, it doesn't matter how you feel.*”

Furthermore, a language barrier was identified. It made conversations less deep and personal, resulting in a less personal work environment. For instance, participant B stated: “*maybe if the department was more international and they would speak more in English then that would motivate me more to socialize with them.*” Likewise, participant E said: “*they [Dutch people] don't want to use English in their free time.*” Moreover, participants C and I recognised social issues as they were not always sure if their conversation partner understood what they were trying to say.

Independence in Dutch Work Environment

Secondly, the high independence in the work environment was challenging for candidates. Participants applied different coping methods and differed in their evaluation of the high independence. For example, many participants indicated difficulty with little guidance in their PhD. Evaluations ranged from desire for more private guidance, or desire for an overall structured PhD with deadlines, to participants saying that this independence is helpful for their personal development. For instance, a participant noted that because of the Chinese background “*it is a little bit difficult for me to, like totally depend on my idea. I need more from my professor.*” Likewise, participant G experienced limited guidance and confusion in her PhD. She coped with it through her strong internal motivation to do research. Participant B noticed that for the process of the entire PhD, a system of guidance is lacking to ensure that the goals of the PhD are met. For participant B, this lack of structure and having to

plan individually led to uncertainty. Similarly, participant H found it difficult to cope with the freedom. However, she recognised that way of working is profitable to her now. To compare, participant E still experiences some difficulty finding out his project on his own, which, to him, was very annoying.

Another remark that was often mentioned was the egalitarian relationships held in Dutch academia. This closely related to the lack of guidance experienced by the PhD candidates. As participant G put it: *“The supervisor is the expert there [home country], but here they put themselves not the expert. They put themselves as our colleagues.”* Participants F and A also noticed more equal relationships in the Netherlands compared to their respective home culture. Whereas participants G, F, and A did not express any particular feeling about these novel egalitarian professional relationships, participants H and I expressed their satisfaction. For example, participant H said *“They [professors] treat students very equally to them and they are very openly curious about students’ questions.”*

Moreover, the independence when to ask questions was something new. Especially the openness to ask questions during the PhD was applauded. Participant A explained that in her home country the research topic is provided by supervisors. Afterwards, working on the research is more independent in the home country because there is a boundary to ask supervisors questions. In the Netherlands, she stated, you need to find your own research topic independently, *“and then if you have a problem you cannot solve, you can ask your professor for help, like that.”* Likewise, participant B noted in the Netherlands *“ideally everybody is expected to sort things out by themselves at the beginning.”* He would prefer to have less independence in this starting process. In contrast, participants C, D, G, H, and I expressed their content about the possibilities to ask questions. Participant C clarified that there is less openness to ask questions in her home country. Especially asking simple questions is avoided

in her culture. The fact that simple questions can be asked in the Netherlands to solve problems was highly appreciated. For example, participant H said:

Sometimes I thought the question was very basic. I shouldn't ask that. But they [supervisors] still encourage me to ask more questions and they helped me solve my problems very immediately. So far, I really enjoy both the help they give to me, but also the courage they give to me.

Productivity in Dutch Work Environment

Thirdly, productivity enhancing measures like strict scheduling and harsh feedback were new for candidates, and sometimes challenging to cope with. Whereas participants noted that it was difficult for them to adapt to the strict day-to-day scheduling, all indicated that it benefits their organisation and that they try to adapt to this Dutch way of scheduling. For example, participant F stated “*my Dutch colleagues are like a clockwork*”, whereas he said about himself “*I don't have that much structure, that is something difficult, I haven't learned to have that structure.*” Still, he acknowledged the advantages of strict scheduling, although he did not enjoy it. Participants A and G also recognized the strict day scheduling, acknowledged the benefits, and tried to assimilate to the cultural norm of scheduling. Likewise, participant B indicated that he admired the effectivity of strict scheduling although he is used to a more unorganized day-to-day planning.

Furthermore, the feedback that the PhD candidates received in Groningen was perceived as direct and harsh. Some participants regarded the straightforward feedback as discouraging and downgrading, while others indicated their satisfaction due to the clear and informative information. For example, participant E found his feedback very judgemental, resulting in him thinking “*I am not good enough to be PhD.*” Likewise, participant F stated sometimes “*you feel like they [supervisors] are destroying you.*” Especially at the start of the PhD, participant F was overpowered by the direct and harsh feedback. By now, he has gotten

used to it. In a similar manner, participant C realised after some time that colleagues ask questions about her project to improve their understanding, whereas in her home country asking many questions indicates a negative attitude. While, at first, she was upset by getting much feedback, after understanding the rationale she could accept the feedback without negative affect. In contrast, participants G, H, and I indicated their satisfaction with the feedback they had received. Respectively, they indicated to have encountered informative feedback, efficient and straightforward communication, and quick and detailed responses. To accept the feedback, it always helped if the candidates were aware that direct feedback is common in the Netherlands.

Well-being and Cultural Differences

The second main theme is the perceived effect of cultural differences on well-being in the work environment. It is divided in two sub-themes: (1) other factors at work influencing well-being more than cultural factors, (2) factors outside work related to being an international are affecting PhD experiences and well-being much more than cultural differences at work.

Other factors at Work Influencing Well-being

Firstly, participants found it difficult to directly relate their international status to their well-being. Moreover, they often indicated that the work environment, and thus the experiences, are similar for Dutch and international PhD candidates. However, personality, Covid-19, the PhD project, and their supervisor relationship were relevant for the international candidates' well-being.

Candidates noted that personal characteristics have a substantial impact on their well-being. For example, participant C said *"I feel like I am the person that can separate work and life. What I am experiencing in the work can not affect my personal life."* Participant B indicated that it was nice to have like-minded people around him. Further, participant I

indicated to be a positive person, participant D was nervous and anxious in social situations due to not being an outgoing person, and participant F worried due to procrastination. These factors had significant influences on their individuals well-being.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic had varying consequences leading to changes in well-being. For example, participant A stated to miss social interaction due to Covid-19. Moreover, for internationals the pandemic was of special importance because it hindered integration, as experienced by participants B and I. Participant I also described that online meetings were difficult for her to follow because her English was not sufficient. The lacking language ability got reinforced by missing offline interactions to learn English. For one participant, the Covid-19 pandemic was a worrying situation because she experienced negative sentiments in society towards Chinese individuals. For participant G, the Covid-19 pandemic forced her to come to Groningen at a later stage than the start of the PhD, which created chaotic situations. In contrast, participant H felt like there is no impact of Covid-19 on her PhD.

Further, the PhD project constituted heightened well-being for participants who enjoyed their topic, whereas publication pressure and financial insecurity of the PhD lowered well-being for others. For participants I, H, and F, the PhD created positive emotions. The well-being of participant I is high mainly because the project went well. Likewise, participants H and F indicated that they love their topic and doing research. On the contrary, publication pressure and competition from peer pressure was identified by participant C to have a negative influence on her well-being. For others, financial pressure has led to negative affect. Participant E stated:

Normally, I like doing research actually, I like reading, I like writing, at the beginning it was like that, and then it became a rule and I had to finish it, because I have scholarship, [...] I am not enjoying it anymore.

Likewise, having an ending contract led to uncertainty and sleepless nights for participant B.

Lastly, it was noted that the evaluation of the supervisor relationship was closely related to well-being, and the evaluation of the overall PhD experience. For participant H, the supervisors were helpful in taking away negative affect, like anxiety and uncertainty, by showing positive and encouraging attitudes to her. Likewise, participant C felt supported by “*helpful supervisors*” and participant F stated to be happy due to the close friendship he has with the supervisor as she also cared about how he feels beyond the academic environment. This is a feeling that participant E did not encounter with his supervisor, as he missed any empathy. This created highly negative affect in him. Participant B had a similar experience. However, he was able to change his PhD. He saw the change in supervisor as a key element for him to feel more comfortable in the new faculty. His new supervisor was much more personally active and passionate, which instilled him with passion as well.

Factors Outside Work Affecting PhD Experience and Well-being

Secondly, factors external to the work environment were noted to influence the work experience as well as well-being. The factors are social networks outside of work, knowledge of the educational system, climate and food, and struggles related to moving to a new country.

Participants noted that a supportive social network had a positive effect on well-being. For instance, a participant noted that helpful roommates improved her experiences. Participant E noted that it is particularly hard to make Dutch friends although he perceived himself as an extraverted person. This made him sad and constituted “*feeling really isolated.*” Participant A also noted this difficulty and expressed her discontent by saying:

And also I like try to make the Dutch friends, but I think it is also a little bit difficult for me to like really join their life. [...], I think in the social area, I think I am negatively influenced.

According to participant H, social networks are different for internationals, but that it is upon the person to create their own network.

Moreover, some candidates indicated that Dutch people's higher general knowledge of the educational system is a factor for different experiences compared to internationals, negatively influencing internationals' well-being. Participants I and E noted that the Dutch are much more familiar with the teaching environment and prepared for their PhD. Moreover, participants F and B respectively described resulting uncertainty and sleepless nights from their undecided future career. Likewise, participant A noted that *"right now the burden for me is the, the career thing."*

More external factors with great effects on well-being were the climate and the food. Participant B described the effect of weather by saying: *"my first winter here, that was really the hardest thing."* Similarly, participant A acknowledged that loneliness and missing family came up especially in the rainy, cold, and dark winter days. For participants A, C, and F, the lunch habit was especially unsatisfying. Participant F described *"I would talk about how disappointing is the food and the lunch, [...] if I have something from my culture here, I would say let's have real lunch together all the time."*

Lastly, some candidates indicated the peculiarities of being an expat negatively influencing their well-being. For example, having to miss family members was difficult for participant A. Missing family was recognised by participant B, who added difficulties with *"all the procedures that you need to know that you need in order to live in the Netherlands."* Another participant recognised difficulty with paperwork for insurance, finding a house, and a school for her children. Participant B concluded *"So all those things like money wise, or family wise, friends that make personal life more complicated and of course it affects the PhD at the end."* Somewhat disagreeing, participant E recognised financial benefits in the Netherlands like rent allowance.

Discussion

Findings

Well-being measures at the BSS reported different outcomes for international PhD candidates compared to native candidates (BSS Faculty, 2020). To that end, I sought to identify unique workplace stressors for international PhD candidates at the BSS and relate them to their well-being. Five workplace stressors related to well-being were identified in the interviews: (1) social interactions, (2) organizational structure, (3) the supervisor relationship, (4) harsh feedback, and (5) openness to ask questions. However, it was also noted that the greatest influences on well-being were not culture or work related.

Social Interactions

Overall, the work interactions were identified as helpful and friendly. Still, the evaluation of the work interactions was dependent on the desire for emotional connection, and the coping mechanisms applied by the individuals varied.

Individuals who indicated high personal importance on their projects' progress experienced the helpful relations at work as very positive for their well-being. Their project was crucial for a successful life abroad, and a successful and meaningful life abroad is essential for the well-being of international students (Tseng & Newton, 2002).

In contrast, other individuals indicated that work was given too much attention and the connections between individuals too little. Although much progress was made, well-being was suffering from a lack of emotional connection at work. Possibly, these participants have a more interdependent self-construal, getting self-esteem from connecting with other people and harmonious interpersonal relationships (Singelis, 1994). Since supportive relationships at work reduce emotional exhaustion of PhD candidates (Hunter and Devine, 2016), the University of Groningen could explore, especially for these individuals, possibilities to create a more supportive work environment with more emotional connection. An opportunity is to

decrease the language barrier to allow deeper connections between colleagues. Internationals could be stimulated to learn Dutch, or Dutch people could be stimulated to speak English.

To cope with the impersonal work environment some PhD candidates found their own social network. The ones who found deep connections outside of work reported much better well-being than those with little social contacts. The Culture Learning theory proposed that friendship networks help for sociocultural adaptation, explaining why participants with such a network reported more satisfaction. In contrast, the ones who were used to emotional connections but did not find such connection in Groningen experienced negative affect. Possibly, they were confronted with anxiety provoking change in perception of self, as proposed by the social identity theory. The individuals previously perceived themselves as extravert, whereas in the new social environment they are unable to create connection. In such situations, Zhou et al. (2008) advised to get these people to imagine themselves in the role or identity of other persons. This strategy would enhance self-esteem and overcome barriers to inter-group harmony. Future research could explore if such a strategy is helpful for PhD candidates struggling with defining a new identity. Further, the BSS could make efforts to ease creations of social networks. Possibilities include, but are not limited to, lecture series, colloquia or social events like dinners specially dedicated to PhD candidates, both Dutch and international.

However, the claims about social interactions must be interpreted with caution, as the unprecedented pandemic situation might have had unknown influences on interaction, making it incomparable to other generations. Further research could explore if the impersonal work environment remains noticeable after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Organizational Structure

Furthermore, many felt lost during their PhD due to a lack of guidance. Whereas some felt unsupported and expressed discontent with the working style, others absorbed this style of

working and perceived it as beneficial to their independent working on the PhD. Similarly, some participants had difficulties with the strict day-to-day scheduling of the Dutch. Again, the individuals who internalized the Dutch practise more stated higher content. According to Ryan and Deci (2001, as cited in Chirkov et al., 2003), for all cultural practises a positive relationship exists between more internalized or autonomous regulation of cultural practices and well-being. Therefore, I propose to conduct future research on how to improve the internalization of cultural practises of international PhD candidates at the BSS. On the other hand, the University of Groningen could explore how the lack of guidance and strict scheduling can be adjusted to reduce the strain on and accommodate the desires of candidates.

Supervisor Relationship

Next, participants noted that supervisors have an extra role for international PhD candidates. Some supervisors, for example, helped in sociocultural adaptation by explaining the Dutch culture and served as an important source for knowledge about the academic and labour system. Still, many felt like they had inadequate knowledge of the educational system and their future career possibilities. This can possibly be one of the reasons why international PhD candidates reported higher anxiety about their future career prospects in the PhD report (BSS Faculty, 2020). The University of Groningen is recommended to provide more information about the Dutch academic system and labour market to international PhD candidates to clarify their future options. Possibly, this can be done by distributing the information to supervisors of internationals and encouraging personal discussions. Moreover, I advocate for an informal meeting between the supervisor and the candidate before the first professional meeting. Therein, knowledge can be shared, worries of the candidates can be discussed, and supervisors can indicate their preferred work ethic. With this, a better supervisor relationship may be established.

Further, supervisors showing interest in the candidates and their projects had beneficial effects on well-being. Overall, it was noted that all Chinese participants indicated good supervisor relationships. As Chan (2018) showed that most Chinese PhD candidates in the Netherlands experience positive doctoral supervision and the well-being survey at the BSS found Asian candidates having highest well-being outcomes (Van Rooij et al., 2019). A further study could focus on this subgroup to further explore mechanisms underlying (supervisor relationship) satisfaction at the BSS.

Harsh Feedback

Almost exclusively, the participants felt disparaged at the start of their PhD by the harsh feedback. The harsh feedback was interpreted as a sign of being unqualified and incapable of doing a PhD. Only once the candidates were aware that harsh critique is normal and is meant to improve their paper, they could embrace the feedback. For the future, it is recommended to inform candidates from the start of the PhD about the motives of (harsh) feedback to alleviate worry and insecurity.

An exception was a participant who had done extensive research about the working habits in the Netherlands and knew that harsh feedback is part of the culture. This is in line with the Culture Learning theory, which holds that general knowledge of the new culture is advantageous to alleviate that stress. Possibly, the University of Groningen could implement a cross-cultural training at the start of the PhD to indicate the lack of guidance and harsh feedback norms in Dutch academia, or implement a cross-cultural training for supervisors to indicate common difficulties of international PhD candidates.

Asking Questions

Another particularity of the Dutch work environment, noted by Chinese participants, is the openness to ask questions to colleagues and supervisors. They indicated that in China one tries to avoid asking easy questions. The candidates particularly liked the openness to ask

questions because it accelerates the process of the PhD. This again connects to the importance of creating a successful life, by means of a successful PhD career, for well-being measures (Tseng & Newton, 2002). In a short timeframe, they were able to adopt this working style. This is in line with Chirkov et al. (2003), who suggest greater internalization of vertical cultural practises, with practises and norms supporting equality or interchangeability amongst people, compared to horizontal cultural practises, with hierarchical or subordinate social relations. Future research can explore if this sentiment is shared within the wider Chinese student body at the BSS, possibly examining the relationship with the high well-being outcomes of Asians at the BSS (Van Rooij et al., 2019).

Non-Cultural and/or Non-Workplace Stressors

Although workplace stressors distinct to international PhD candidates were mentioned, participants noted that the greatest stressors are not culture based and/or not at work. According to participants, for both natives and internationals a PhD can be challenging, supervisors can be a good or bad fit, and personal strength is necessary to cope with difficult situations. The sentiment was that internationals were treated similarly to Dutch PhD candidates at work. Still, the internationals faced extra stressors such as lacking a social network outside of work, novel food habits, weather differences and administrative nuisance. Although not present in the work environment, these factors created extra adversity.

These stressors are found by international students of all academic levels (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tseng & Newton, 2002), and come naturally when moving to a new country. Therefore, I believe that university can hardly take away those stressors. Instead, it could offer stress management training to develop coping strategies, like the Stress and Coping framework proposes (Zhou et al., 2008), or warn internationals of the existence of such struggles.

Limitations

The main limitations of this study was our inexperience with qualitative methods. This might have led to leading questions in the interviews, and imperfect interpretation of the data, as giving meaning to interviews is a generic skill which need to be trained (Joffe, 2011). Moreover, conducting interviews with a group of three inexperienced students could have led to unstandardized interviews.

Furthermore, due to the time pressure from the thesis deadline, it was not possible to conduct the necessary amount of interviews to reach saturation, although in qualitative research it is recommendable to collect data until the point of saturation (Willig, 2013).

Another limitation occurs with interpreting the data. As shown by Meyer (2014), cultures have their own way of giving feedback. For example, Meyer (2014) showed that individuals from countries who speak with high context and give indirect negative feedback have the norm of blurring and downgrading negative messages. When analyses are done by a person used to low context and direct negative feedback, this could lead to misinterpretation of feedback. This could for example have led to me (from the Netherlands) overlooking issues from interviewees (e.g., Chinese) when an issue was not directly addressed.

Lastly, our sample might be slightly biased towards PhD candidates with special interest in cultural differences. The self-selection bias could overstate the actual influence of culture on well-being.

Concluding remarks

Despite the limitations, I believe that our study provided relevant insights into the distinct experiences of international PhD candidates at the BSS and their respective importance on well-being. Our results indicated that, in line with previous research, distinct experiences exist among internationals. In the current study, satisfaction of social interactions, degree of guidance, supervisor relationship, feedback, openness to asking questions and struggles related to moving to a new country were distinguished by candidates as relevant for

their well-being. Future well-being surveys at the BSS could include these factors to verify if they remain relevant for well-being of international PhD candidates when testing a larger sample.

To improve the well-being of international PhD candidates, I recommend the University of Groningen to ease the creations of social networks, provide more information about the Dutch academic system and initiate an informal meeting between the supervisor and the candidate before the first professional meeting. In contrast, I advocate to preserve the openness for PhD candidates to ask questions to superiors

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

Intro

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 unpleasurable 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?