

# International Student Mobility and Transformative Intercultural Learning in Estonia and Denmark

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**Abstract:** Attracting the best students into universities is a policy agenda driven by the state and universities in Estonia and Denmark. While the policies on internationalization of higher education (IoHE) in Estonia and Denmark are well crafted, the value that international graduates add to the learning environment and culture are hardly explored. Adopting a phenomenological approach, this study aims to describe transformative intercultural learning within the mechanisms of IoHE in Estonia and Denmark. Our analysis of participants' experiences reveals that international graduates from Africa bring diversity into the learning environment, which promotes teaching, learning and tolerance of other cultures. In view of this, the study recommends that actors in the IoHE in Estonia and Denmark should be willing to jettison any ethnocentric cultural mentality and adopt a relativistic mentality to promote intercultural coexistence and learning.

**Keywords:** higher education, transformative intercultural learning, student mobility.

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## 1. Introduction

Global interconnectedness has led students to cross national borders as consumers in search of better knowledge, skills, and ideas with which to respond to the growing demands of the 21st Century (Paige 2005, Knight 2003, Chen & An 2009, de Wit 2015). International student mobility (ISM) means the inclusion of more international students as both exchange and degree students in host universities and other institutions of learning (Mosneaga 2010). ISM is often discussed in the context of its value for students. However, the impact of international students extends beyond that (Altbach *et al.* 2009, EMN 2018, Abdulai 2018). International students make valuable contributions in the host countries in terms of scientific research, skills and innovations, providing an alternative source of skilled labor and contributing cultural diversity to the study environment, labor market and local community (Knight 2003, de Wit 2015). ISM's significant contributions to the knowledge economy and the phenomenal prospects it offers make it a center of reflection for researchers and host countries (de Wit 2015, EMN 2018). Meanwhile, the existing literature on ISM sheds light on the unequal nature of ISM from global south to global north by highlighting south-north ISM as a form of traditional economic migration, prioritizing poverty-driven migration and capital accumulation at the expense of other migration outcomes.

In this paper, we focus on transformative intercultural learning in the contexts of higher education in Estonia and Denmark. We argue that incorporating international and intercultural dimensions into host universities' learning cultures in Estonia and Denmark can increase intercultural contacts among domestic students, lecturers, administrators and host country nationals. It is imperative to remember that human beings are socialized in the environments in which they are raised. They develop values, beliefs, and worldviews different from people who are socialized in other cultures. Domestic students, lecturers, and administrators come to the universities with cultural equipment of their own: values, norms, language, beliefs and

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worldviews. For Hofstede (1997), university culture is a unique institutional culture. The ways in which graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa adapt to macro and micro cultures of their host universities and communities is fundamental to their transformative intercultural learning. Likewise, the ways in which domestic students, academic and non-academic staff, and host communities adapt to the multiple cultures in the university and community are significant for building their own transformative intercultural learning. One needs to consider universal academic culture vs. host university academic culture, national academic culture and international academic culture. The goal of this study is to describe how cultural encounters within the mechanisms of IoHE in Estonia and Denmark have shaped the basic contours of transformative intercultural learning experiences for Sub-Saharan African graduate students, domestic students, academic and non-academic staff at the host university and people in the community.

This study seeks to answer three research questions:

1. What mechanisms drive IoHE in Estonia and Denmark?
2. What value added do graduate graduates from Sub-Saharan Africa contribute to the experiences of Estonian and Danish students, academic and non-academic staff, and the local community?
3. How do graduate students from Sub-Saharan Africa experience change in the host university and local community?

In the field of population movement, student mobility has not attracted a lot of attention until very recently (EMN 2018, Abdulai 2018). The available literature on ISM in Denmark and Estonia tends to focus on the motives for cross-border student mobility and global marketing of higher education (Douglas 2009, Monseaga 2010, Wilken & Dahlberg 2017). Some studies (Douglas 2009, Wilken & Dahlberg 2017) have shown how competition for international students has led to the transformation of national and European policy landscapes, while countering the negative effects of demographic aging. Only a relatively handful of studies (e.g., Abdulai & Roosalu 2020) have explored the different experiences and perspectives that African graduate students bring to the host university and society, at least in the Estonian context. The paucity of studies has motivated our quest for a phenomenological study on transformative intercultural learning within the mechanisms of IoHE in Estonia and Denmark. The study contributes to the knowledge base on ISM by focusing on the segment of internationally mobile students that come from the global south (Sub-Saharan Africa), which has been underexplored in h contexts in both Estonia and Denmark. Sub-Saharan African graduate students bring new values and perspectives to both countries, yet not a lot is not known about what they bring.

Next, we explain the study context, then the key concepts: globalization, IoHE, transformative learning and meaning-making. We then discuss our research methodology and present our findings, followed by discussion and conclusions.

## **2. Study context**

The study is located within the Estonian and Danish educational context. Estonia and Denmark are suitable for this study because the two countries are gradually positioning themselves to become attractive destinations for international students. Estonia, though a small country in the European Union, boasts over twenty higher-education institutions that offer well over a hundred degree programs, with English as the medium of instruction. In 2015-2016 alone, Estonia received over 700 Erasmus students, with Germany, Italy, France, the Czech Republic and Latvia as the top origins (P). Estonia receives international students from more than 100 countries. The year 2018 witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of

international admissions by nearly 25%. A majority of international students are enrolled in masters' programs; the number of international doctoral students has increased to over 500. In 2018, a total of 5,047 international students came from the EU: particularly Finland, Lithuania, and Latvia; from Asia: particularly India and Bangladesh; from the USA, Russia, Ukraine and Georgia; and from sub-Saharan Africa: particularly Nigeria and Ghana.

Denmark is one of the EU member states where internationalization of higher education stands high in the national agenda (Mosneaga 2010). In 2014, the total number of international students who enrolled in Danish universities and colleges was reported at 15,000, representing 12.5% of the total student population. Wilken and Dahlberg (2017) write that the majority come from neighboring countries: Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and Germany; and from the new EU member states, especially, Romania, Lithuania, Poland and Bulgaria. Most, especially those from the new member states, enroll in Danish universities to take advantage of the free education and the possibility of obtaining a student grant.

### **3. Literature review**

#### **3.1 Globalization and the mechanisms of higher-education internationalization**

It's important to clarify the distinction between two related but distinct concepts at they relate to higher education: internationalization and globalization. Knight (2003: 21) defines internationalization as "...the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels". Both at the national and university level, internationalization strategies are aimed at assisting students in adapting to the complexities of globalization. Knight writes that the essence of internationalization is to transform the higher-education landscape and build a culture of international, intercultural and, indeed, global competencies among students, lecturers and the wider academic community. Altbach (et al. 2009: 7) defines "internationalization" as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement to respond to globalization. Internationalization is a subset of globalization and the policies designed to respond to it, incorporating international programs into the mainstream programs in universities and other institutions of higher learning (de Wit 2015) where globalization appears as a natural process of interconnectedness and a product of policy: not least, policy to free markets from national barriers.

Knight (2003) defines "globalization" as the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, money, and ideas across borders worldwide. The interconnectedness of the world and evolution of the knowledge economy have not only made possible the rise in borderless education but promoted policies and programs to increase the international elements in higher education, incorporating global and intercultural dimensions into the course structures of universities and other institutions of higher learning. Paige (2005: 101 - 102) writes that globalization is about the world order, whereas "internationalization means creating an environment that is international in character. Thus, teaching, research, and outreach."

In response to the challenges of globalization, governments and higher-education institutions are placing growing emphasis on IoHE by designing policies and programs to take advantage of the growing knowledge economy: the information society. In the European Union, the Bologna reforms were designed to bring dynamism into higher education in Europe by stimulating the creation of a European Higher Education Area (Tamtik & Kirss 2016). The reforms established a platform for competition in European higher education and enhanced international student mobility within Europe, and as well as with other parts of the world (Sursock & Smidt 2010). The skilled labor needs of developed countries are increasingly seen as dependent on the ability to attract and retain the best brains possible to counter the negative effects of an aging population and low birthrate (Douglass 2009,

Mosneaga 2010). The European Union and its member states are working on strategies to enhance the attractiveness of Europe's higher-educational system (EMN 2018).

In 2007, the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research designed a comprehensive strategy for the internationalization of Estonia's higher education system 2006-2015. The aim was to make Estonia higher-educational institutions more visible and competitive (Tamtik & Kirss 2016). Meanwhile in Denmark, the internationalization of higher education recognizes that international students and researchers are an important tool in the global search for the best brains (Mosneaga 2010).

### **3.2 Transformative learning and meaning making in Estonia and Denmark**

Transformational learning theory was developed by Jack Mezirow (1985) as a theory of adult learning, built on Jurgen Habermas' (1981) communicative and emancipatory theory.

“Transformative” denotes the processes of causing lasting change in the complex lenses through which people view the world around them (Mezirow 1997: 5). Transformative learning transforms challenging frames of references to make them more open, inclusive, and adaptive to change.

The aim of this study is to explore transformative intercultural learning within the mechanisms of the internationalization of higher-education in Estonia and Denmark. Transformational learning theory is used to highlight how participants in the study use critical reflection based on their interactions to change their dysfunctional means of constructing realities (Christie et al. 2015).

Mezirow's theory has been criticized for overemphasizing the rational aspects of learning at the expense of the nonrational, emotional and social aspects (Kitchenham 2008). In spite of the limitations ascribed to the theory, it is still relevant for this study where it is used to analyze how sub-Saharan African graduate students' experiences are shaped by the host university and community. It is used as well to examine how interactions between domestic students, academic and non-academic staff, and the sub-Saharan African students contribute to knowledge construction and reconstruction at the host university.

We have used the concept of the *semiosphere* to highlight the dynamism of culture and meaning making in the context of transformative intercultural learning within IoHE in Estonia and Denmark. The term was coined by Estonia semiotician, cultural theorist, and literary scholar Juri Lotman in 1984 as a metaphor based on the principle of biology; the intention was to shed light on cultural dynamism and general understanding of the processes underlying meaning making (Kalevi 2015). The semiosphere is defined as the semiotic space necessary for the existence and function of language and culture (Lotman 1990). The semiosphere is marked by diversity, heterogeneity, and an infinite number of different and even contradictory semiotic systems (Kalevi 2015). This implies that meaning making between international graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa, domestic students, academic and non-academic staff, and local community is progressive, complex and sometimes contradictory. Transformational learning theory posits that meaning making depends not only on the context but on the organic whole, involving the actors engaged in meaning making, the entire semiotic system, and cultural history (Lotman 1990: 123).

## **4. Research design and method**

The goal of this study is to describe how cultural encounters within IoHE in Estonia and Denmark shapes the basic contours of transformative intercultural learning experiences between Sub-Saharan African graduate students, domestic students, and academic and non-academic staff at the host university and in the community. We adopted a phenomenological approach to highlight the participants' lived experiences: not just what they experience, but how they experience it.

We confined our application of phenomenology to its existential wing associated with Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Schutz. Although these philosophers differ in many subtle ways, they share a common concern for what Husserl called the life world or *Lebenswelt* (Burrell & Morgan 1979). We applied the principle of the “*epoche*” for selection of participants and data collection. This principle requires setting aside every preconception about the subject and viewing it from a fresh perspective (van Manen 1990). Our biases and everyday knowledge about transformative intercultural learning in Estonia and Denmark were stripped away.

#### 4.1 Participants and interviews

To find participants, emails were sent to the heads of departments of target universities in Estonia and Denmark. The email provided detailed explanation of the rationale behind the study. When approvals were granted, we adopted the snowball sampling technique to identify the participants, used when potential participants are hard to find (Creswell 2007).

We interviewed forty-six participants in English in Estonia and Denmark. Participants were twenty students, eight administrators, ten lecturers and eight community members. We selected participants we deemed to have experienced the phenomenon we were interested in. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted by one of the coauthors and carried out in two phases. The first was conducted with twenty-three participants in Estonia August-December 2018. The second was conducted in Denmark March-May 2019. First-phase participants included eleven females and twelve males 20-44 years at the time of the interviews: ten students (five host country, five sub-Saharan African); ten higher-education representatives (five academic, five administrative); and four community members. Second-phase participants were eleven males and twelve females 20-50 years at the time of the interviews. See Table 1.

**Table 1:** Profile of selected participants.

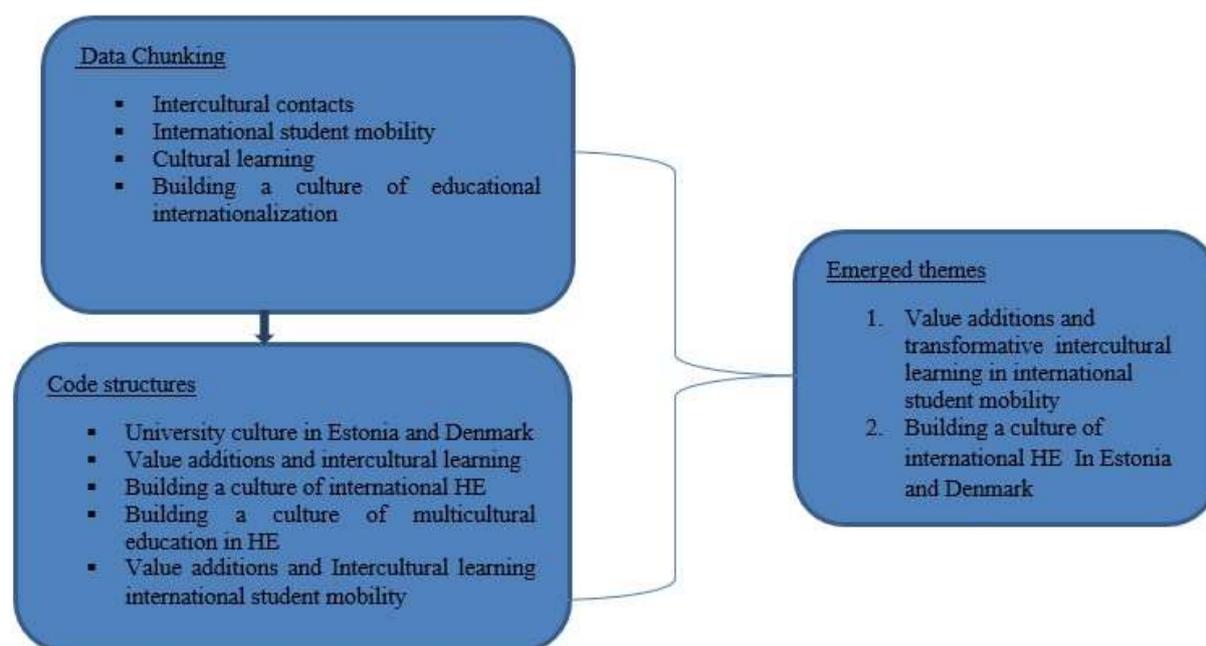
Code	Sex	Role	Experience in the area of interest	Country of origin
DK-6	M	teacher/entrepreneur	10 years	Denmark
DK-2	F	non-academic staff	12 years	Denmark
DK-1	F	non-academic staff	6 years	Denmark
DK-5	F	researcher/lecturer	15 years	Denmark
DK-7	M	student	2 years	Ghana
DK-14	F	student	2 years	Cameroon
DK-3	M	student	3 years	Ghana
DK-7	M	student	4 years	Ethiopia
ES-13	M	student	2 years	Kenya
ES-10	M	student	4 years	Nigeria
ES-8	F	student/non-academic staff	4 years	Estonia
ES-9	F	non-academic staff	5 years	Estonia
ES-12	F	non-academic staff	7 years	Estonia
ES-11	F	researcher/lecturer	5 years	Estonia

One key feature of phenomenological research lies in its capacity for genuine understanding of lived experience as described by the participants (Creswell 2007). This requires direct exchange between researchers and participants. For our study, in-depth face-to-face interviews were supported by a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was made available in advance via email to all participants to reflect upon and allow them to share their experiences. After two days' time for reflection, participants were interviewed. The questions were open-ended, offering the opportunity to probe answers further. We asked the international graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa to explain why they had decided to

study in an international environment. We asked them to describe their experience of the multicultural learning environment and their relationship with their lecturers, peers and host community. We asked the domestic students, academic and non-academic staff and members of the local community to describe their learning experiences in interaction with students from sub-Saharan Africa and the meaning they had made based on those intercultural interactions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview session took about one hour minimum and one-and-a-half hours maximum. To ensure the validity of the data, a member cross-checking approach was applied whereby the transcribed data were presented back to ten of the participants to assess the extent to which the data represented their views accurately.

#### 4.2 Analytic approach

Phenomenology plays emphasis on descriptions but not explanations of how and why meanings are generated. We adopted a dimensional analytic approach to describe the dimensions represented in the data. Dimensional analysis provides a methodological framework in which each dimension represents a component of the research phenomenon (Bowers & Schatzman 2009). We read through the transcripts to get a sense of what was said and organized the data into chunks or significant statements. We read all the naive descriptions with a critical reflection on the experiences described to maintain our phenomenological attitude. We read the text again, this time with the aim of identifying key themes, employing classic content analysis (Creswell 2007). The number of times each theme occurred was ranked, and the most significant-seeming or frequent themes were selected as the main themes. See Figure 1 for a summary of the data transformation.



**Figure 1:** Data transformation.

Data interpretation was premised on Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutic phenomenology. This focuses on the interpretation of significant statements in the data for meanings and significance. We read through the entire dataset line by line, teasing out the deeper meanings found in participants' shared experiences.

## 5. Findings and discussion

The findings and discussion are structured into two main themes: (1) value added and transformative intercultural learning in relation to ISM and (2) building a culture of IoHE in Estonia and Denmark.

Table 2 presents a summary, highlighting the shared and diverging experiences of participants: African students, Danish and Estonian students, university administrators, and members of the local community. We identified instances of transformative intercultural learning, cultural sensitivity, and possibilities for broadening academic and cultural horizons. The Danish and Estonian lecturers, students and administrators shared the view that inclusion of African students into the university enriched teaching and learning. This was not shared by the African students.

Participants pointed out that inclusion of international students promotes the economy of the host countries. Cultural misunderstandings were perceived differently by African students, university administrators, and host-country students. The African students experienced discrimination as part of their intercultural learning, but this was not the experience of the host-country students. The African students highlighted new teaching and learning methods, but the host-country students and administrators did not mention that as part of their own experience of transformative intercultural learning. Internationalization strategies and expectations of the IoHE were common experiences among the administrators but were not mentioned by the Estonian, Danish or African students.

**Table 2:** Summary of findings.

Group	Shared experiences			Different experiences		
	Students from Africa	Estonian/Danish students	Estonian/Danish university reps	Students from Africa	Estonian/Danish students	Estonian/Danish university reps
D1	transformative intercultural learning			cultural misunderstandings		
	broadens academic and cultural horizons					
D2	enhances cultural sensitivity, humility and sense of tolerance			discrimination	<i>not the experience of hosts</i>	
D3	<i>not the experience of African students</i>	enriches teaching and learning		new teaching and learning methods	<i>not the experience of hosts</i>	
D4	contribute to the local economy			<i>not the experience of students</i>		Strategies for internationalization
						strategies for managing international students
						expectations of the internationalization policies

### 5.1 Theme I: Value added and transformative intercultural learning in relation to ISM

International students not only cross national borders as consumers in search of better knowledge, skills, and ideas to respond to the challenges of the globalizing world, but also as persons possessing “intangible resources”: knowledge, culture, creativity, innovation, and experiences. Participants were asked to describe their experience teaching an international class where Sub-Saharan African students were included. A professor in Denmark responded:

**DK-5:** Teaching an international class is not an easy task, but it comes with interesting experiences. It sort of broadens my horizon and opens me up to new ways of looking at issues. Eh... I learned a lot about other societies and cultures like that of Ghana and other countries. During classes, I actively take note of the fact that people are different and come from different cultural backgrounds. So, when we have class discussions and presentations, students use example from their own contexts and cultural backgrounds.

An Estonian participant explained:

**ES-11:** It is an interesting experience for me and for the students as well. I learned from them, and they also learned from me. Getting to know different contexts that you normally don't read a lot about and you don't know a lot about. Our education is certainly Europe centered or perhaps with influences from Anglophone countries. We don't really know a lot about other countries in the world; especially, countries that are outside Europe. I think there are mutual learning experiences.

The quotes highlight such shared experiences as transformative intercultural learning, the possibility of broadening academic and cultural horizons, and the enrichment of teaching and learning. These revelations are in keeping with Chang (2006), who saw cultural diversity as a learning resource and source of enrichment for teaching and learning rather than a burden. They support transformative learning theory, which holds that -- when people are faced with disorienting dilemmas -- they can be compelled to transform the lenses through which they view situations in a way that will fit the new experience (Mezirow 1997). The critical question is, does the presence in Estonia and Danish universities of international students from the global south -- Sub-Saharan Africa -- guarantee transformative intercultural learning? We believe that the presence of these students is an important starting point for intercultural contacts, but it need not necessarily guarantee transformative intercultural learning. For universities and other institutions of higher learning in Estonia and Denmark to promote transformative intercultural learning, more work needs to be done to build macro and micro cultures at the individual, state and university levels.

The interview data reveals that IoHE enhances cultural humility, sensitivity, and sense of tolerance. With this in mind, participants were asked to share their experiences of learning with people from other cultures. This was how one student in Aalborg University shared his experience about group work.

**DK-14:** Eh... after two months of lectures, we were asked to form groups and write a project for the semester. It was not easy forming groups because of the diversity in our class. For instance, in my first group project in Aalborg University, we were six in the group. We had two Danes, two students from Poland and Hungary, and two Africans. You can imagine. It was one of the biggest groups. We had different expectations and different ways of learning. So, managing the group and coming out with a good project was a challenge, but at the end, we managed our differences.

This participant casts light on the challenges of managing people from different cultural backgrounds and the importance of transformative intercultural learning in multicultural group work. Members of the group were able to transform their "disorienting dilemmas" (Mezirow 1997) in a way that had conformed to the expectations of and demands on the group. These findings resonate with Fennes and Hapgood's (1997: 37) proposal that creating multicultural learning environments with the intention to promote transformative intercultural learning requires that all the actors should be culturally sensitive.

The data shows that international students not only add value to teaching and learning; they contribute to the local economy, including the branding and marketing of their host universities. A teacher and an entrepreneur in a Danish university explained:

**DK-6:** Eh..., I heard international students come with a lot of money because they have to pay tuition fees and living expenses. The other issue is that the presence of international students could have a great impact on businesses. Eh..., for the program we run -- culture and global studies -- the international students give the university and the program good profile.

...While an administrator in Estonia said:

**ES-12:** The presence of international students in Estonia Universities is good for the economy. After their graduation, some of them would stay in Estonia and work. Eh... even if they move elsewhere to work, they would be ambassadors for the university and Estonia.

Again, the findings are in keeping with those from previous studies. De Wit (2015) noted that "pull" factors for international migration should not be limited to the good conditions in the host countries -- quality education, employment opportunities, and security; critical reflection should be made on the contributions that international students make to the national and local economy of the receiving country. The Economic Times (2018) reported that, on top of tuition fees, spending by students from European and non-European countries have become a major factor supporting local economies. The report highlighted that London alone gains £4.6 billion a year as a result of the economic activities of international students.

Meaning making is a crucial part of educational internationalization. When students were asked whether they had developed intercultural friendships during and after their study period, some answered in the affirmative. Probed about how cultural meanings were fashioned of their interactions, a sub-Saharan African graduate student at an Estonian university explained:

**ES-13:** Eh... it was quite difficult understanding ourselves at the beginning. Perhaps it was due to cultural differences. We experienced some misunderstandings, but as we moved on it was somehow better.

Another sub-Saharan student, based at Aarhus University, shared:

**DK-7:** I think it was somehow complex, because... dealing with someone from different value systems. It was quite difficult -- especially, interpreting cultural reactions with somebody from a different cultural background. Eeh... where I come from, if someone actually smiles at you, it means the person is happy with you; so, I realized, there were some fake smiles.

Due to differing value systems, multiple, complex meanings were ascribed to behaviors depending on whether one was a graduate student from sub-Saharan Africa or a domestic student. All the parties come to the learning environment with different cultural equipment: language, beliefs, and worldviews, among other cultural variables. The idea of multiple, complex meanings being ascribed because of different socialization systems resonates with Juri Lotman's (1990) notion of the semiosphere, defined as the space of meaning generation. The meaning-making process between international graduate students, domestic students, academic and non-academic staff, and local community could be both progressive and sometimes contradictory, occasionally leading to miscommunication or misinterpretation.

## 5.2 Building a culture of IoHE in Estonia and Denmark

Participants were asked to explain the rationale behind IoHE in Estonia and Denmark. A faculty secretary in Denmark had this to say:

**DK-1:** The internationalization policy in Denmark is aimed at positioning Danish Universities to be globally recognised, attract the best students to Danish Universities and other institutions of high learning, and retain those who can contribute to knowledge, services and the labour market after their graduation.

A participant from an Estonian university said this:

**ES-8:** Eh... we have both national and university wide internationalization strategies. Eh... for instance, the Estonia internationalization strategy 2015-2020 is aimed at making universities more international and promoting Estonia as an attractive study destination by recruiting talented international students to study in Estonia.

At the state level, both Danish and Estonian policy makers expect universities to offer programs that are globally recognized, by creating an environment for teaching, learning and service provision that is international in character. The objectives for internationalization of education in Denmark and Estonia resonate with European Union policy strategies to make Europe an attractive destination for studies by recruiting talented students and researchers who may be retained to contribute to the labor market after their studies (EMN 2018). To translate these visions into reality, Estonia has the initiative Estonia 2020, which is its competitiveness plan, and a national strategy for achieving the Europe 2020 objective of increasing the international competitiveness of higher education, attracting talent to areas that are important for the Estonian economy (EMN 2018:14-15). The Danish government vision is to make Danish institutions of higher learning globally competitive and international in character (Wilken & Dahlberg 2017, Mosneaga 2010). While these policy initiatives are laudable, implementing them is another matter -- one that is mediated by three actors: a) the state b) universities and c) target end users of the policies. Attracting the best talent into a university is a means to an end but not an end in itself. Estonia's and Denmark's quest to attract the best international students to study in their universities with the intention to integrate some of them into the labor markets afterward may not yield good results if comprehensive cultural integration and immigration policies are not designed to support the students.

How ready are universities to manage the challenges of incorporating international and intercultural dimensions into the functions and structures of universities? Participants were asked, how does your university manage the increasing number of students from Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as international students from other countries? A member of the non-academic staff at an Estonian university responded:

**ES-9:** Hmm... the number of international students keep increasing almost every year, but it is not that huge, eh.... I think we definitely need to strategize on how to adapt and manage the changing trend.

A participant from Denmark said:

**DK-2:** Every year, we take the international students through an orientation program. Eh... in the program, we teach them the Danish system, who to contact for what and where. The municipality also organizes Danish language course for international students, and other expatriates to enable them communicate with those who cannot speak English outside the university environment.

In Estonia, the growing enrolment rate of international students has changed the trends. However, there seems not to be comprehensive strategies to manage the increasing numbers. The key issue is how open and prepared are domestic students, lecturers, administrators, and local communities to deal with students from diverse cultural backgrounds? The Danish participant highlighted the acquisition of the Danish language, along with orientation on Danish culture and society, as strategies to facilitate the integration of international students into the learning environment and host community. The provision of Danish language courses is a good idea. Nevertheless, the success of the language program depends on the willingness of the international students to learn the language and the ability of the instructors to exhibit good teaching methods so that students can overcome the challenges of acquiring a new language.

A PhD candidate in Estonia was asked to tell his story about his experiences:

**ES-10:** ...During my interactions with my faculty members, I observed that there are some people I came across and they were very nice to me, and some of them appear not wanting to see me. Er... in a PhD workshop, I just observed that, another participant in the group was a bit uncomfortable -- perhaps, by my colour or the topic I was investigating. So, I had to find a nice way of excusing the professor from the workshop.

A participant from Denmark said:

**DK-3:** Er... the issue of racism was just a myth to me, but my stay in Denmark has actually exposed the reality which is very shocking. In my first incident, I was actually stopped from entering a Danish night club because blacks were not allowed there. The painful thing was that, the gatekeeper allowed my Danish girlfriend in and I was left outside holding her bag. Those are some of my bad experiences living in Denmark.

The two participants highlight racist behavior meted out to some international graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa by some faculty, staff and students. Greater attention needs to be paid to how key actors manage people from different cultural backgrounds. The goal is to minimize stereotypical, discriminatory and ethnocentric practices towards other nationalities and cultures. This is congruent with Chen and An (2009: 197) who write that “the ability to learn new ways of interacting, and to deal with the frictions in the processes of adjusting ourselves to new cultural realities, will decide the degree of our success while living in a culturally diverse society”. The key actors in internationalization should be willing to shift their frame of reference to cultural pluralism, incorporate other worldviews into their own, and jettison the mentality of “we” versus “them”.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper examines transformative intercultural learning within the internationalization of higher education in Estonia and Denmark. Our analysis of the study participants' experiences reveals that the presence in Danish and Estonian universities of international graduates from Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere is an important starting point for intercultural contact and learning, but it does not guarantee transformative intercultural learning. The study concludes that, for institutions of higher learning in Estonia and Denmark to promote transformative intercultural learning, more work needs to be done to build a university culture that fosters an environment for intercultural teamwork and shared learning. The study highlights racist behavior meted out to international graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa. The study suggests that the key actors in internationalization of higher education should be encouraged to shift their frame of reference to a culturally diverse worldview, abandoning the “we” verses

“them” mentality in favor of a culturally relativist, open-minded mentality towards other cultures.

One limitation of the study is that it focused on transformative intercultural learning within the mechanisms of IoHE in Estonia and Denmark. The study did not include other migrant groups such as expatriates to examine their experiences and perspectives. Fulfilling the aims of IoHE in Estonia and Denmark should be approached holistically to include international students from other European countries.

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