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**Learning perspectives and experiences of Sri Lankan International  
postgraduate students in New Zealand.**

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**A thesis completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Education, the University of Auckland, 2018.**

## Abstract

International students in general are recognised as an important part in the social academic and economic development of any country. The participation of international students in higher education in world-ranked universities is increasing significantly worldwide. International students have high expectations of their tertiary education and rely on the host country to respect their own identities and cultural values. Literature exploring international students' learning perspectives and their experiences, however, often reports tension between the two. Although there is a sufficient body of research reporting Asian international students' learning experiences, Sri Lankan (SL) students as a minority group have not been investigated adequately. Responding to the gap in the literature, the current thesis investigated the personal learning perspectives and experiences of SL postgraduate students in Aotearoa/New Zealand and potential barriers to belonging of SL postgraduate students (e.g., discrimination or stereotyping), and academic implications if a sense of belonging was not experienced by them. Further, the thesis explored whether the academic expectations and expectations of SL postgraduate students' learning environments, were met. A qualitative design and phenomenological methodology were employed to analyse and interpret data from six SL postgraduate student participants, affording a deep understanding of their individual lived experiences. The findings suggested that although SL postgraduate students tolerated the misinformed labels they were given, they showed an acute awareness of the stereotypes associated with the labelling. Further, stereotyping and language barriers affected participants' social and psychological well-being. Implications for belonging and learning for SL international postgraduate students in Aotearoa/New Zealand, were revealed. The current study addressed a gap in the literature regarding awareness of SL students' experiences as international students in Aotearoa/New Zealand and sheds further light on international students' wellbeing and safety.

## **Dedication**

To my husband for his unconditional love and encouragement.

To my two daughters for their love, understanding and support.

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When I look back on my journey, I realise how much my path has been shaped by important people in my life. Completing a Master's degree is a great achievement in my life and I take this opportunity to thank the following people for their continued support.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Significant numbers of Sri Lankan (SL) students travel overseas for higher education and the majority of them travel to Australia, the US, Canada, Singapore, New Zealand, and Malaysia (D'Souza, 2017; Marambe, Vermunt, & Boshuizen, 2012). Tertiary education in a recognised and world-ranked university offers an additional and important paper qualification in the SL society (D'Souza, 2017). Therefore, many SL students view international education as a means to obtaining their higher education qualification and extending their employment prospects. It is believed that many Asian international students come to host countries with high hopes of gaining a better qualification but often encounter difficulties in adjusting to their new cultural environment. Engaging in international education abroad, therefore, may present challenging issues.

### **The Purpose of the Present Thesis**

This exploratory research conducted with SL postgraduate students in Aotearoa/New Zealand, has three key aims. A first aim is to examine SL international students' learning experiences. A second aim is to explore potential barriers to belonging of SL postgraduate students (e.g., discrimination or stereotyping), and academic implications if a sense of belonging is not experienced by them. The third aim is to explore whether SL postgraduate students' expectations of academic qualification and the learning environment have been met. In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, existing research about other international students' (specifically, other Asian students) learning experiences will be explored to gain an overall understanding of the international students' learning experience, and comparisons with the current SL group will be made. Thus, the research examines not only the unique experiences of SL students, but also whether, and if so how, SL postgraduate students have shared similar experiences with other Asian students. The findings of this study will be

beneficial for myself as well as other SL international students, including those who participated in this research by offering insight into the phenomena under investigation. Additionally, the final report will be useful for future SL students who would like to explore the learning experiences of previous students in order to successfully undertake study overseas.

The current research employed Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) as the theoretical lens, to explore barriers to adjustment and belonging. Ryan and Deci's (2000) research supports three basic needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness) that must be fulfilled to nurture well-being and health of students in order for them to accomplish academically. Deci and Ryan (2002) suggested that when people fulfil the three basic needs, they become self-determined and able to be intrinsically motivated to pursue the things that interest them. Further, achievement of the three basic needs has contributed to adjustment, and feelings of acceptance or belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2008). If acceptance and belonging are not achieved, international students will be less academically successful and may instead go through stress, isolation, and unhappiness (Hyun, Quinn, Madon & Lustig, 2007; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson & Pisecco, 2002). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), SDT represented a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. Perhaps more importantly, SDT offers a focus on how social and cultural factors support or discourage people's sense of choice and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance.

The current research will utilize a qualitative method. A phenomenological methodology will be employed as this method affords a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and complexity of their issues to belonging (Creswell, Hansen, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). The goal of qualitative phenomenological research is to describe the lived experience of a phenomenon. It has been suggested that

“epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity...” (Lester, 1999, p. 1). Phenomenology further allows the meanings of the lived experiences of few individuals to be described, and those participants’ personal views on the phenomenon under study to be reported (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). As such, a phenomenological approach will afford the collection of rich data addressing the three aims of the current research on SL students’ learning experiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

### **The Need to Examine SL Students’ Learning Experiences**

Previous literature (Andrade, 2006; McKenzie & Schweitze, 2001) has demonstrated why it is important to investigate negative learning experiences or issues pertaining to international students’ study experiences. Andrade (2006), and McKenzie and Schweitze (2001) suggested that such information afforded insight to newcomers’ realistic understanding of the educational background in which they would be studying. Although research (Birt, Sherry, Ling, Fisher, & Lee, 2004) has demonstrated that many international students encounter tremendous difficulties, most such research routinely fails to critically examine the specific reasons for international students’ struggles in the host country. International postgraduate students can face many challenges pertaining to their studies. However, Asian students, specifically from non-English-Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), compared to other international students, appear to experience a sense of not being included due to many factors (Li, 2016). Lin and Scherz (2014) studied the educational experiences of Asian international students attending Western tertiary institutes and emphasised students’ problems with adjustment, learning challenges including English language skills, issues with socio-cultural backgrounds, homesickness, not having local friends, and perceptions of sexual openness. It is suggested that some of these issues have been found to affect students’

academic achievements and their sense of belonging (Lee & Rice, 2007; McKenzie & Schweitze, 2001).

Education Counts (2016) statistics confirm that the number of postgraduate students coming to Aotearoa/New Zealand increased significantly from 2010 to 2016. Moreover, international education is the fifth largest export industry in the country, contributing \$2.6 billion in 2013 and \$3.1 billion in 2015 to the New Zealand economy (Joyce 2013; McPherson, 2016). In fact, enrolments in higher education swell annually, enhanced by New Zealand governmental targets set to double the income from higher education from \$2.6 billion to \$5 billion by 2025 (Joyce & Woodhouse, 2013). It may be suggested as a point of tension that although the income from tertiary education is forecast to rise in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it cannot be assumed that potential challenges to international students' learning experiences in that country may diminish over that period of time. Therefore, whether these students encounter issues with social integration is an area to be further studied. As stated in the International Students' Wellbeing Strategy (described in more detail in the following chapter), to maintain and to safeguard education as an export industry (as established by the New Zealand government), it is important to attend to the voices of Asian international students, address their concerns, and meet their academic needs (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The aim of selecting this topic, "Learning perspectives and experiences of Sri Lankan International postgraduate students in New Zealand" is described below. As an international student, I hardly met Sri Lankan international under-graduate students but few postgraduate students. Although research in New Zealand on postgraduate students (e.g., Li, 2016) documented Asian students' experiences and expectations of international education, research on SL students' experiences specifically is limited. In spite of the significant increase in the number of SL students studying in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2016), their

concerns and expectations are insufficiently represented in the literature. Therefore, the current research aims to address this lacuna in the research by investigating perspectives of SL international postgraduate students' academic experiences, belonging, and expectations of study in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

### **Overview of the Study**

The current thesis comprises five chapters. As mentioned previously, Chapter 1 (the Introduction) is intended to provide context for subsequent discussions of the experiences and perceptions of SL postgraduate students living in New Zealand. In Chapter 2 (the Literature Review), the current study is situated within related literature. Further, Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical underpinnings of international students' learning expectations in general, and explains challenges such as discrimination, stereotyping and other issues related to basic needs that are potential barriers to belonging. In the final section of this chapter, language issues, academic issues, and socio-cultural issues will be discussed. Chapter 2 concludes by identifying the most pressing gaps in the literature and presenting an explanation of how the present thesis responds to these gaps.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological stance taken in the current research. Throughout the third chapter, the theoretical and practical approach taken to gathering and analysing the interview data of six SL participants is explained. The chapter then extends to a procedural description of instruments and methods used in the study to collect and analyse data, ending with a brief discussion of the potential limitations of the study design. Chapter 4 contains the findings of the study. In this chapter, the results of thematic analysis of the six participants' responses regarding their educational experiences and expectations will be presented.

The final chapter comprises the discussion of the current study's results. In Chapter 5, the key findings of the study are discussed with reference to existing literature. Finally, this chapter also offers conclusions and suggestions for further research agendas.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In the current chapter literature will be reviewed concerning international students' learning experiences, factors affecting adjustment to the host-country's society, and expectations of learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand. First, research outlining Asian international students' learning experiences abroad and in Aotearoa/New Zealand will be reported. Second, adjustment factors that constitute barriers to belonging relevant to international students will be reviewed (e.g., barriers such as English Language, academic challenges, and socio-cultural issues). Third, research specific to the expectations of Asian students studying abroad (who often come with high hopes of gaining a better qualification but frequently encounter difficulties in adjusting to their new cultural environment) will be addressed. Specifically, the International Students' Wellbeing Strategy introduced by Ministry of Education New Zealand (2017) will be reviewed in order to understand what parameters are expected to meet foreign students' needs. Finally, a summary of the chapter is presented, and the rationale for exploring SL students' learning experiences and expectations as a separate group, are set out.

### **International Students' Learning Experience**

Research on international students' learning experiences have produced numerous and unique findings such as the presence of discrimination, socio-cultural issues, stereotyping, lack of adjustment, and differences in the education system that are significantly associated with their educational backgrounds (Campbell & Li, 2008; Lee, 2010; Li, 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014; McKenzie & Schweitze, 2001; Skyrme, 2007; Zang & Brunton, 2007). Approximately 80% of Asian international students have experienced distress, with issues such as mixing of cultures (known as cultural shock) significantly influencing academic achievement (Cameron & Meade, 2002; Campbell & Li, 2008). Although SL students have a unique cultural and linguistic background, these students may experience common issues



found across Asian populations as SL students are included in the group of wider Asian ethnicities.

During the cross-cultural transition international students may experience numerous socio-emotional, academic and cultural differences which later become challenges causing students to undergo stress and suffer socio-emotional problems (Searle & Ward, 1990; Yee, 2010). On the other hand, international students' experiences have not only been challenged by the socio-cultural environment but they have also received inadequate social and university support (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Lloyd, 2003). Moreover, Lee and Rice (2007) indicated international students have high expectations of being accepted, but Asian students as a 'minority' are often discriminated against and perceive that they are portrayed negatively in the host environment. These researchers also found that in addition to injustice, hostility and intolerance, being judged by a stereotype was another significant factor influencing international students' learning experiences. Given previous research (Li, 2016; Roy, 2017) demonstrated the association between stereotyping and compromised student outcomes, it seems that discrimination and cultural issues may stand in the way of successful learning experiences of Asian and potentially SL students. Socio-cultural issues, therefore, warrant further exploration, specifically regarding how Asian international students' challenges in socio-cultural issues have impacted their education, personal growth, and relationships with local students and campus life. Literature that has explored how such challenges have been experienced in Aotearoa/New Zealand, follows.

**International students' learning experience in New Zealand.** International education is vital for the New Zealand economy and it strengthens New Zealand's cultural and educational links with the world (Ministry of Education, 2017). A survey conducted by the Ministry of Education stated that students from Asian backgrounds appeared to be generally satisfied getting good value for money with high quality education (Education

Counts, 2018). The previous research (Birt et al., 2004; Li 2016) suggested that international students and specifically Asian students' socio-cultural needs and academic needs have not been sufficiently investigated in New Zealand. Li (2016) stated that Asian students still experienced academic issues and issues with social acculturation at New Zealand universities. In addition Birt et al. (2004) and Li, Baker, and Marshall (2002) have suggested that further research is needed to investigate whether Asian students' expectations in New Zealand have been met. Therefore, this research examines whether Asian international and specifically SL students' issues found overseas are the same in New Zealand, and also further addresses this gap in research knowledge.

Education in SL is free yet only a small percentage of students are able to enter local universities (Hathiramani, 2009; University Grant Commission, 2017). Therefore, the current research is important as many students come to New Zealand with high expectations of gaining a better qualification as stated above. Further, there is a perceived need to improve the quality of education in Sri Lanka and as a result, many students travel abroad seeking quality education and better options (Hathiramani, 2009; Nandi, 2018). Thus, it could be suggested that families who can afford the cost of tertiary education often send their children abroad. It is evidenced, however, that the needs of international students at Western tertiary institutes (including those in Aotearoa/New Zealand) are often not adequately addressed and need further investigation and intervention (Birt et al., 2004; Li, 2016; Roy 2017). How barriers to belonging have affected international students' experiences are discussed next.

### **Potential Barriers to Belonging**

In order to understand barriers to integration and belonging fully, the current study will employ Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT as the theoretical lens. Each individual needs to feel a sense of belonging that they are included in the community where they live and feel respected and furthermore, this is perceived to be a fundamental human right (Hall, 2014).

Psychological needs satisfaction is crucial to every individual's wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and according to SDT, human beings have three basic psychological needs; a need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (explained in more depth, below). SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) further focuses on the extent to which human behaviour is self-directed, or controlled by outside powers. Importantly, characteristics of the social context can influence how well basic needs are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné, 2014; Osterman, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) asserted that SDT embraced the idea that if an individual is intrinsically motivated (engaging in an activity especially for fundamental satisfaction) in their environment or the activity that they are performing, they feel a sense of fulfilment upon completion of the activity.

Waters and Waters (1992) stated that some students lack competence for successful study- self-confidence, self-awareness, and ability to think critically and creatively. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2000) also suggested that among the three basic needs, competence is defined as a personal belief that one is capable of performing a task or job effectively. Moreover, if one is able to work effectively with people from different cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds, this constitutes cultural competence (Miranda, 2014). It is believed that personal competency (the ability to present one's uniqueness and importantly, to understand one's own individuality), is a much required basic need (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, each individual is encouraged to develop their personal competencies in accepting changes in life (Vathanophas, 2007). In addition, SDT purports that competence must go along with autonomy as competence only can be gained with autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Autonomy affords the power to make our own decisions without interference from others (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). It is a term used to describe a person's ability to make decisions, or speak and act on their own behalf (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy, however,

does not necessarily mean acting independently; it merely means acting with choice, so it can mean acting alone but also acting interdependently with others (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ashurova & Sali, 2015). It could be suggested that aforementioned factors, such as English language and academic issues are barriers to motivation and engagement. These factors may not only affect the academic performances of students from Non-Native English Speaking (NNES) backgrounds but also create numerous challenges and difficulties to belonging (Li, 2016). It is evident that acquiring strong English language skills is an academic challenge affecting international students' adjustment at tertiary institutions (Li, 2016). Therefore, international students' engagement with their social, institutional and cultural surroundings could be at risk of being reduced (Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, Walkinshaw, Michael, & Lobo, 2017). Duff (2010) suggested that socialisation is more than mere apprenticeship into the use of academic language, and English (being the academic language), is the product of wider contextual forces. Accordingly, students have no choice but learn the language of instruction in order to feel included (Duff, 2010). Importantly, when their basic needs are met, students are not only motivated to study but also to be more autonomously involved in such study (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

The third of the basic psychological needs, relatedness, is defined as the universal desire to interact, be connected to the person's group or culture, and experience caring for others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In order to understand how international students relate to other individuals in an unfamiliar cultural environment, their sense of social connectedness (belongingness), as established in SDT by Ryan and Deci (2000), will be explored. Ryan, Patrick, Deci, and Williams (2008) established important links between relatedness, feelings that one was respected, cared for, and accepted, and internalization of learning. In addition, studies in many life domains (e.g., health care, education, and sport) have demonstrated that the three basic psychological needs are closely interrelated the development of human beings

(Deci & Ryan, 2008). It is suggested that when the three basic needs are absent, students in host countries are likely to encounter difficulties as might have been expected with reference to SDT theory. The following section will discuss literature pertaining to implications of English language problem faced by international students.

**English language.** Among the factors affecting adjustment, acquisition of the host country's mother tongue appears to be a major issue, and in many Western countries (including Aotearoa/New Zealand) this is English. In much previous research (Andrade, 2006; Li, 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014; McKenzie & Schweitze's, 2001), findings demonstrate the first key issue that international students face, and that underpins other issues such as making friends, is that of acquiring the English language. Many international students and specifically Asian students, often struggle with academic language while learning the content and conceptual structures to meet the university requirements (Li, 2016). University administrators employ and encourage English as the medium of instruction and as a way to improve their institution's position in global university rankings (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017; Li, 2016). Language proficiency has been considered one of the main issues affecting all stages and all aspects of international students' abilities; reading, writing, listening and speaking (Holmes, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; Ward, 2001). Therefore, acquiring English language skills is considered a major factor affecting students' education from NNEs and their academic adjustment at tertiary institutions (Andrade, 2006; Butcher & McGrath, 2004). Issues in classroom interactions and activities as a consequence of struggles with English language proficiency could be a key factor in international and/or Asian students' feelings of exclusion, English proficiency poses a significant barrier to the integration of some international students into classrooms (Lin & Scherz, 2014; McKenzie & Schweitze, 2001). Supporting the association between English language and adjustment, many international students who have a strong command of English are able to be assertive and confident and, as

a result, they adjust to their new environment more easily than others who do not speak English fluently (Poyrazli et al., 2002). Many Asian students experience cultural and linguistic challenges different to those of domestic students (Arkoudis, 2006; Li, 2016; Sherry, Bhat, Beaver, & Ling, 2004). In fact, Li and Campbell (2010), and Vaccarino and Dresler-Hawke (2011) stated that NNES students find it hard to interact with domestic students due to pronunciation styles that affect their participation in academic group activities and development of social and intercultural communication skills.

Extending beyond the classroom, Birt et al. (2004) found that English language issues have had additional impact including consequent difficulty in making friends with local students. The authors further commented on negative learning experiences of international students whose mother tongue is not English and suggested that there is an expectation that international students must have the necessary linguistic ability to communicate and engage with academic studies when they are enrolled at the university (Andrade 2006; Li et al., 2002). Taken together, insufficient English proficiency could lead to frustration, stress, lack of participation and involvement in university activities and not having local friends (Andrade, 2006; Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000).

Although before their arrival to the host country, international students are expected to have required the necessary English language proficiency such as high scores in International English Language Testing System (IELTS), students of NESB, specifically Chinese students still find it challenging to meet academic demands at universities (Guan & Jones, 2011; Paltridge, Harbon, Hirsch, Shen, Stevenson, Phakiti, and Woodrow, 2009; Yenand & Kuzma, 2009). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the English language is potentially a controversial issue among the student from NESB, where English language proficiency highly demanding as the medium of academia as well as social life. Specific socio-cultural factors pertaining to language as a barrier to international students'

integration will be further discussed below. The following section reviews literature pertaining to the nature and implications of academic challenges faced by international students.

**Academic challenges.** Allard and Santoro (2006) found cultural and ethnic identities shape the way students learn. Therefore, it could be suggested that responsiveness to international students' backgrounds may be vital when considering pedagogical practices. Research demonstrates, however, that Asian international students experience a variety of challenges while studying in a different culture and trying to develop English language proficiency and, in addition, the academic disciplinary discourse (Andrade, 2006; Arkoudis, 2006; Biggs, 2003; Kwon, Kwon, & Overton-Adkins, 2014). Being an international student is an enriching experience and although many of the students do well academically in this new environment, some students still struggle and do not feel included (Lin & Scherz, 2014). The most substantial challenge that international students face is adjusting to the new academic approaches and meeting the expectations of lecturers whose learning backgrounds are not similar to their own (Andrade, 2006; Li, 2016; Ward, 2001). In addition, Zhu and Flaitz (2005) stated that international students experienced differences in writing styles, culturally driven logical thinking, and interpersonal experiences. Therefore, the issues above constitute further difficulties for international students, potentially placing them at a disadvantage relative to domestic students, and further contributing to barriers to belonging.

Pertaining to academic implications, it was observed that international students, (when compared with New Zealand students), are more accepting of theoretical information and exhibit more study diligence (Birt et al., 2004). In terms of the Business Studies context, Niehoff, Turnley, Yen and Sheu (2001) found that US students accept practical business knowledge focus rather than Taiwanese students. Thus, their potential lack of participation in classroom activities puts constraints on classroom interaction and learning. In their findings,

Birt and colleagues (2004) demonstrated that SL students prefer provision of knowledge from texts rather than from experience of practical aspects of a topic. Of particular relevance to the current study, Ward (2001) stated that SL students chose a book providing theoretical knowledge over practical experience. She also commented that in cases needing business experience, international students encountered difficulties in understanding both cultural knowledge and work experience in New Zealand (Ward, 2001). Importantly, many Asian students thought that they were disadvantaged because they did not have relevant practical experience. These attitudes and different expectations compared to local students make the international students, most specifically Asian students, feel not included and even isolated. It is suggested that as Ward (2001) stated, SL students expect more theory-based knowledge but when they work in a place where more practical knowledge is required they are naturally excluded.

It is proposed that in Asian cultures teachers are honoured for their profession and respected for their experience and educational qualifications. Many Asian students expect their teachers to provide answers to both academic and personal problems during their learning process, acting as second parents (Guan & Jones, 2011; House & Pinyuchon, 1998; Lee & Manning, 2001). Similarly, Chinese students expected their teacher to be an expert in the subject, and then to play the role of a parent, and act as a teacher to answer and give clear guidance (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Guan & Jones, 2011). Although Asian students prefer a close relationship between teacher and student, there is also an expectation that lessons will be well prepared by the teacher and delivered logically (Li et al., 2002; Birt et al., 2004). The domestic students surveyed by Cortazzi and Jin (1997), however, held a different view, preferring their teacher to be a facilitator, organizer, and friendly critic. The above findings are consistent with the expectation that Asian students would place greater importance on respect for university teachers and expected more deadline flexibility for assignments



compared to their New Zealand counterparts (Birt et al., 2004; Guan & Jones, 2011). Such an attitude demonstrates culturally-based differences in expectations of Asian and New Zealand students (Fisher et. al, 2002).

DalGLISH and Chan (2005) further stated that educational providers and staff members needed to be aware of the learning experience that they are offering to these students from different cultural backgrounds because international students are looking at the world from a different perspective. According to these researchers, it is vital to admit that not only content but differing learning processes, social activities, and expectations of links to potential employment needed to be considered. It could be suggested that such issues are magnified in importance with increased growth in international student numbers, highlighting concerns with assimilating international students with domestic students in classrooms, and providing appropriate teaching material so international students can maximize their learning potential.

Li et al. (2002) suggested that Asian students needed to change their attitudes towards New Zealand learning concepts and role expectations, as these are different to their own academic environments. In addition, these authors found unmatched expectations of both students and lecturers have led to many problems and misunderstandings. Given this scenario, the mismatch could have a negative impact on Asian students and their academic performances. NNES students were seen by the instructors “as lacking in independent, critical thinking skills; as plagiarizers or rote learners, speaking broken English and having awkward ways of participating in class” (Carroll & Ryan, 2005, p.6). Therefore, it could be proposed that university lecturers and administrators should be urged to understand and cater for the students from NNES backgrounds, who do not have the same language proficiency and cultural backgrounds as local students.

Further, Asian students’ style of learning is characterized by repetitive learning, memorizing, internalizing deep meaning, and reflects study diligence (Chan & Drover, 2002;

Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Ward, 2001). Further, SL students' study approach appears to align with this. Giving the example of the Australian context, Dalglish and Chan (2005) researched international students' expectations in Australia and stated that many international students may not be familiar or comfortable with the processes used to facilitate learning. According to the authors, many international students find themselves unfamiliar with the university classrooms that traditionally use a range of Western teaching and learning strategies that focus on critical analysis, oral discussion, and discussion groups that require active participation by the students.

Referring to New Zealand tertiary education, previous research stated that study diligence, respect for lecturers, accepting more theory-based information, and deadline flexibility are some of the common issues among international students (Birt et al., 2004). Another investigation of international students' learning and socio-cultural issues at New Zealand universities stated that newness with the academic norms, expectations, "conventional rules, and interpersonal communicational protocol impacted their psychological well-being" (Li, 2016, p. 52). Cameron and Meade (2002) investigated academic and social adjustment issues of international students in New Zealand and highlighted that international students (specifically South East Asians) prefer more academic assistance compared to their local counterparts. The section below will emphasize social-cultural issues with reference to self-determination theory and specifically, belonging.

**Socio-cultural issues.** Students' decisions to persist in earning a degree are largely influenced by their ability to integrate academically and socially within their educational institutions (Li et al. 2002; Tinto, 1993), further underlining the importance of belonging for international students' academic success. Of the research which has been conducted in this area, the phenomenon of the sense of belonging has been a key focus (Booker, 2006; Bosetti, Kawalilak, & Patterson, 2008; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). According to

Sedgwick and Yonge (2008), and Hall (2014), a sense of belonging has been further defined as the fundamental human need for individuals to feel a part of, and be respected and valued members of a group or community. Although achieving a sense of belonging is widely applicable to all university students, its impact may be particularly relevant for international students who come to a host country striving to earn a well-rounded education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008, Darwish, 2015). Language and academic issues, cultural differences, lack of common interest and lifestyles affect NESB students' sense of belonging, and thus affect their performance (Andrade, 2006; Butcher & McGrath, 2004). Nevertheless, insufficient research exists describing the perceived influence of social and academic integration on the decision of international students to proceed in completing their higher education. In the current research, the specific implications of experiencing (or not experiencing) acceptance for SL postgraduate students in New Zealand will be investigated.

Although students with a high-level of social connectedness form relationships with their peers and easily contribute in social groups and events, less socially connected students are more likely to separate themselves from their peers, which may lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Guan & Jones, 2011). For example, students who come from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., China, Japan, Argentina, Brazil, and India) often struggle to understand how to bond with their peers as Western culture emphasizes individualism, independence, assertiveness, and self-reliance (Li, 2007; Yang & Sligo, 2008; Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

Previous studies suggest that students from other Western backgrounds experience fewer adaptation issues than students from Asia (Dalglish & Chan, 2005; Li, 2016; Tomich, McWhirter, & Darcy, 2003), and it highlights the requirement for further investigation. Li (2016), and Mori (2000) stated Asian students in particular did not feel included as they often fail to connect with their fellow students. When students feel isolated, neglected and lonely

during their stay in the host environment this may impact their educational achievement (Li, 2016, Cameron & Meade, 2002). This suggestion is further supported by Ryan & Deci (2000) who stated that international students' academic success and wellbeing may be influenced by number of socio-cultural and academic issues presenting the absence of the three psychological needs. For instance, when students encounter the issues stated above, competence, autonomy and relatedness may be similarly lost. In addition, when the three basic needs are not met, students' sense of belonging may also be negatively influenced. The following section discusses issues such as stress, stereotyping and minority status issues that can also affect not only academic success, but also personal wellbeing.

**Stress.** Akhtar and Kröner-Herwig (2017), and Birt et al. (2004) noted that especially when living in a foreign country, there is an expectation that international students will experience stress, such as that which results from academic pressure to succeed, and difficulties of integrating into the new environment, modern teaching and learning systems in their new academic environment. Vaughn and Roesch, (2003) explained that a stressful situation is experienced by the individual as threatening, and it may interfere with physical and/or psychological well-being. Yeh and Inose (2003) discovered in their study that international students and specifically Asian international students feel significant stress associated with issues such as relationships, social support, and connections with faculty and administrative staff. A lack of self-confidence could also render international students more likely to become lonely and psychologically stressed compared to local students (Poyrazli et al., 2002). Although (as is more often the case) Asian students are associated with positive stereotypes such as 'Asians are fast learners', the anxiety of confirming a negative typecast could also cause stress (Kwon et al., 2014; Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007). One could suggest that in addition to the factors mentioned above, stress resulting from a lack of relatedness,

social competence, and autonomy, might collectively exacerbate fulfilment of SDT's three basic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and impact a sense of belonging.

**Stereotyping.** Stereotyping is a further issue faced by many students from Asian backgrounds affecting their sense of belonging and academic performance (Biggs, 1999; Lee & Rice, 2007; Levy, Osborn, & Plunkett, 2003). As such, it could be suggested that stereotyping would hold a particular importance for Asian international students. Negative stereotypes have also been levelled at other ethnic-racial groups (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Lee, 2012), and have been found to induce feelings of anxiety and threat in members of these groups. Racial inequality causes stereotype threat and this reduces the growth of members of certain racial groups in discriminatory ways (Walton, Murphy, & Ryan, 2015). In their study into international students' socio-cultural issues such as stereotyping and discrimination, Kwon et al., (2014) stated that Asian students including Indian students felt not included when they heard negative comments indicating that they were disturbing, or unsociable, and when they heard that Indians are portrayed as inferior people with less civilization (Rouse & Hanson, 1991). In addition, African American students were influenced by a threat-inducing negative stereotype which resulted in poor performance (Kwon et al., 2014; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007).

It could be suggested that individuals' performances can be impacted by both positive and negative stereotypes. Stereotype threat refers to the concern of individuals stigmatized by a negative stereotype related to their group, for example, that pinned to the intellectual abilities of a specific population (Chateignier, Dutrévis, Nugier, & Chekroun, 2009; Steele, 1997). In relation to intellectual ability and as a form of stereotyping, it was observed that French-Arab students in France experienced issues with stereotyping that negatively impacted their academic performance (Chateignier et al., 2009). It is suggested that when students are pressured either positive or negative stereotype targeting their group, it affects

their academic success. Further, international students from Asia (specifically India) and Africa have expressed notable registration of discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007; Singh, & Thuraisingam, 2007). The result of stereotype threat has been found to diminish academic success and a sense of belonging in environments where threat is cued (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012; Hanassab, 2006; Lee and Rice, 2007; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Importantly, stereotype threat has been proven to negatively affect group members when they become aware that their performance could confirm the very stereotype associated with their group (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Yeh (2002) reported that negative stereotypes labelling Asian students as unsociable, with inadequate communication skills, could lead to discriminatory situations and act as barriers to belonging. Importantly, little research has focused on the student perspective and specifically on stereotyping as regards to SL international students. Much prior research (e.g., Croizet & Claire, 1998; Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Steel, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 2012) has considered the role of stereotyping in the relationship between race and academic performance, or socio-economic status and academic performance. Therefore, the influence of stereotyping establishes further difficulties for international students and specifically Asian students, potentially contributing further to barriers to belonging.

**Minority status.** Despite being associated with positive stereotypes of diligence and ability, Asian students have faced their own struggles as a model minority, a concept explored by Kwon et al. (2014). Model minority status refers to a group which has achieved more socioeconomic success than others (Kwon et al., 2014; Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007). Woolf, Cave, Greenhalgh, and Dacre (2008) previously conducted a qualitative study on ethnic stereotypes and the underachievement of UK medical students from ethnic minorities, including SL participants. According to their findings, Asians were stereotyped as minorities

and non-whites, *as well* as hardworking, quiet, respectful of their teachers, and as having professional jobs. In addition, another study (Akrami, Ekehammar, & Araya, 2000) highlighted the presence of racial discrimination against immigrant inhabitants in Sweden. Similarly, African students remain significantly encumbered with disagreeable stereotyping that they are *noisy, less clever, and aggressive* and have a greater tendency for crime than White students (Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969). When students are stigmatized with either a negative or positive stereotype, it will likely reflect on their academic performances (Walton & Cohen, 2003). Schaller and Abeyasinghe (2006) further stated that vulnerability to threat has expected consequences for those who are stereotyped.

Thus, several factors have contributed to international students' learning experiences and sense of belonging in their host environment. How the factors mentioned above might impact the learning experiences and sense of belonging of SL international students in Aotearoa/New Zealand, however, remained to be explored. International students' expectation of learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand will be discussed next.

### **Students' Expectations of Learning in New Zealand**

International students including SL students have chosen international education for number of reasons including high quality, access to the international environment, better career opportunities (D'Souza, 2017; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007), and also the acquisition of prestige and global cultural investment (Apple, 2000; Kim, 2011). When leaving their home country, these students expect to experience an entirely new environment with different cultural practices but, they also have high expectations of being included and accepted (Li, 2016; Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007). Nevertheless, Li and colleagues (2002), and Birt and colleagues (2004) stated that there is insufficient literature on international students' learning perspectives. Further research (Andrade 2006; McClure 2007) identified the need to explore

different cultures, and improve cross-cultural knowledge and skills in order to facilitate success for international students.

Educational institutions seek the enrolment of international students because of the financial contribution these students make yet it has been suggested that these institutions do not have adequate plans to support international students and their initial adjustment period in the institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Fisher, Lee and Birt, 2002). Lee and Rice (2007) pointed out that even though American universities benefit greatly from bringing international students to their campuses, the administration at those campuses often does not consider the experiences of those students after they are enrolled. Furthermore, Asian students (specifically South Asians) have higher educational expectations than domestic students, based on their socio-cultural backgrounds (Ryan & Carroll 2005; Dalglish & Chan, 2005; Li et al., 2002). Tertiary education around the world is becoming 'internationalised', and as a result, there is an increasing mix of domestic and international students in classes (Dalglish & Chan, 2005). However, international students' expectations of education appear to be different to the reality experienced in their host country (Lee & Rice, 2007; Hudzik & Briggs, 2012 and Li et al., 2000).

Although there is a number of reports on problems faced by international students, there is little information on the perceptions of these students' academic and social needs. International students had high expectations of education outside their home country and believed that they would receive a better quality of higher education abroad (Nilsson, 2016; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Sherry et al., 2004). In addition, they expected and believed that study abroad would improve their career prospects, that they would be 'taken care of' by the host community, and that they would improve their foreign language skills, particularly English language (Hellsten, 2002; Sherry et al., 2004). Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, and Nelson (1999) corroborated these ideas stating that students expect



that tertiary education would enable them to gain a 'good job', as well as access to learning support services and quality teaching.

In terms of an expectation of being looked after, many universities offered social support systems that were designed to assist international students to integrate academically and socially (Dalglish & Chan, 2005). Typically, support services were offered and implemented by institutions to encourage social connectedness, but unfortunately, some of these services were often limited to an orientation session upon arrival and advice on immigration (Alfonso & Bailey, 2005). Furthermore, it was found that students expected discussion opportunities with their professors, but in reality this expectation was not met as the professors appeared to have busy schedules that precluded such meetings (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004). In addition, students also desired teachers with good presentation skills who delivered detailed lessons, and frequent prompt feedback (Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995; Ramsden, 1998).

Importantly, Biggs (1997) argued that identifying problems was not enough. In his view, not moving beyond the gaps or problems would do little to overcome difficulties, and result in unsatisfied students who experienced issues with belonging. Considering the expectations of international students and problems they face adjusting to a new country and learning environment, it is important for educational institutions to be aware of students' needs and expectations, and take further steps to recognise, meet or exceed those perspectives which are under their control. Darwish (2015) stated that in spite of increasing numbers of international student enrolments in the United States, students' requirements seemed to remain unsatisfied. As such, to increase the chances of international students being successful in their respective university, education providers and scholars should clearly define and enhance academic support services (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Birt et al., 2004; Bolsmann & Miller, 2008). It is important to note that any international student who is away

from their country and cultural practices needs continued support and welfare, to make them feel included.

How expectations of quality learning, of being looked after, of having access to approachable teachers, and of acquiring language skills that would enhance integration with the host society might be likely to be experienced for international students in Aotearoa/New Zealand context is considered next. Whether a strategy designated to enhance international students' experiences might likely afford a solution to problems set out above, is considered. Specifically, a description of the International Students' Wellbeing Strategy introduced by the government of Aotearoa/New Zealand and aimed at supporting international students' learning environments, follows.

Recently, the New Zealand government, led by the Ministry of Education introduced a new Wellbeing Strategy (2017) for international students. The aim and the vision of this wellbeing strategy was to provide a safe and welcoming study environment for international students. The vision of this policy was stated as addressing student experience so that international students "feel welcome, safe and well, enjoy a high quality education and are valued for their contribution to New Zealand." (International Students' Wellbeing Strategy 2017, p. 4). As mentioned above, education is the fifth largest services export in the United States and New Zealand, and the third largest in Australia (Marginson, 2002). The strategy was committed to making the well-being of international students a priority and recognizing that they are appreciated for their contribution to the New Zealand economy. According to the Wellbeing Strategy (2017), four focus areas (economic wellbeing, education, health and wellbeing, and inclusion) cover the whole international student experience, inside and outside the classroom.

Previous research (Ward, 2001), has suggested that the integration of international students to Aotearoa /New Zealand, their conscientious work habits, have contributed a

positive example to the domestic students. Further, Tarling (2004) and Taurima (2003) stated that New Zealand educational providers welcome one of the fastest growing ethnically and culturally diverse international student populations in the world. Moreover, it was confirmed that there is significant growth in the SL students' enrolment in NZ tertiary education (Education Counts, 2016). However, a National Survey and Wellbeing Strategy in New Zealand suggested that research are needed to better understand the specific needs of particular international student groups, and cater appropriate support services for them (Deloitte, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2017). Thus, further reason is provided for studying whether international students' needs are considered in line with the directives of above policies and recommendations.

### **Summary**

As discussed above, Asian international students' learning experiences have been affected by many factors such as issues with belonging including the successful attainment of English language proficiency, appropriateness of academic skills, the difference in educational background, the ability to make friends, language difficulties, and cultural barriers (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Importantly, negative learning experiences and several of the aforementioned factors can impact both academic and social outcomes of international students (Andrade, 2006; McKenzie & Schweitze, 2001). Insufficient literature pertaining to SL students' learning experiences, however, further prompts the examination of factors likely to affect academic and social outcomes for this specific student group, in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Three Research Questions informed an investigation of SL international postgraduate students' learning experience, belonging, and expectations of study in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

1. What are SL international postgraduate students' studying experiences

in Aotearoa/New Zealand?

2. Are there barriers to belonging to New Zealand society for SL international postgraduates in Aotearoa/New Zealand?

3. Are SL international postgraduate students' academic expectations and expectations of learning environments in Aotearoa/New Zealand, met?

A detailed explanation of the research design and methodology underpinning the current research is presented in the following chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the research paradigm that informed the study's design and sets out the study's method. The epistemological and ontological approach that underpins the present research will be described followed by a specific explanation of the phenomenological approach that informs the study's design. Then, an outline of the study's method per se is presented. The final section describes how the data were analysed using the six-step framework for thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

#### **Research Design**

The research paradigm explains the researcher's epistemological and ontological positions. Epistemology is the study of the nature, scope of knowledge and justified belief. Therefore, it analyses the nature of knowledge and how it relates to similar notions such as truth, belief, and justification. Epistemology can also guide the investigator in the way research is piloted and how the investigator can come to know about knowledge (Creswell, 1994; Grix, 2002). Therefore, epistemologically, this research perceives deep understanding of lived experiences of individuals as there can be many realities as demarcated by individuals.

Ontology, on the other hand, is about what is true, understanding the actual world, and is concerned with identifying what kind of truths actually exist. Reality is observed as subjective and a product of how the researcher and contributors perceive it (Creswell et al., 2007; Punch, 1998). An ontological approach allows for an examination of the researcher's relationship with the reality of the phenomenon under investigation. An ontological approach, for example, takes into account whether the investigator needs to consider reality to be independent of her knowledge or whether the investigator is actively involved in the construction of that reality.

Epistemologically, this research recognises deeper understanding of individuals' lived experiences than generalisation of a phenomenon, as there can be multiple realities as demarcated by individuals. A qualitative method is employed to understand these multiple realities, and uncovering the participants' perceptions of their own lived reality or constructed meanings, is a key objective of the study (Creswell, 2003; Schuemann, 2014). The proposed research being an exploratory investigation, aims to investigate SL students' academic life experiences. Further, an exploratory study is where a researcher has an idea or has observed something and sought to understand more about it (Punch, 2009). The following section details phenomenology as the research method central to the study and then the limitations of the method are considered.

**A phenomenological methodology.** Creswell (2014) suggested a phenomenological methodology is the best approach to understand individual's lived experience and stated that phenomenology pronounces things as one experiences them. The purpose of phenomenology is described as "the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear" (Dowling, 2007, p.132) in order to understand consciousness of the individuals with the understanding that each person's social reality is unique and valid, within his or her own perception of a situation (Burns & Grove, 2001; Munhall & Boyd, 1993). In phenomenology, researchers aim to understand individual participants' lived experiences and psychological and social phenomena from the perceptions (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Punch 2009; Holloway, 1997; Welman; Kruger, 1999). As a phenomenologist, the researcher "describes what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell et al., 2007, p.252).

As a qualitative research method, phenomenology is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience (Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In this process, participants are considered as experts on their own experiences, and researchers may

have a better understanding of participants' opinions, comments, and emotional state through participants' own stories (Creswell et al., 2007). In order to incorporate the aforementioned process in the present study, six applicants were enlisted because of their expertise in the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell et al., 2007; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Although researchers in a biographical study investigate *a single individual*, researchers in a phenomenological study engage with *several individuals* about a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Grounded theory and phenomenology have similarities, but only phenomenology allows the researcher to work with the participants' specific statements and experiences rather than extracting ideas from the participants, and a model is then built from the researcher's interpretations (Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell, 1998). Although both grounded theory and phenomenology seek to understand people's lives, grounded theory seems to be challenging due to a complex process of theoretical sampling (Creswell, 1998). In phenomenology, data is often limited to interviews, but findings are reported as a rich description of the experience drawing on characteristics identified during data analysis (Holloway, 2010). Considering and comparing the main focus of phenomenology discussed above and proposed by (Creswell, 2014; Creswell et al., 2007), the proposed research has chosen the phenomenological method as the most suitable for this study

**Limitations of phenomenology.** Dudovskiy (2016), Darwish (2015) and Shi (2013) stated that though the phenomenological design is widely used in qualitative research, there are disadvantages. Firstly, among the limitations, the subjectivity of the data leads to difficulties in establishing reliability and validity of approaches and information. Secondly, it is not easy to get all the participants to be interested in the questions. Furthermore, it is difficult to prevent the researcher's unintended bias during data analysis. Additionally, issues may arise if participants misunderstand questions and show an unwillingness to disclose exact details due to embarrassment, personal reasons or other such factors. Further, because

the samples are generally very small, it is observed that phenomenology does not produce generalizable data. Notwithstanding the aforementioned potential limitations, the advantages of using phenomenology as a basis for the study design (as described above) gave confidence in proceeding with the study, as outlined below.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to choose participants for the current study. It is a technique that enables the researcher to observe a specific cultural domain by accessing experts within that field (Emmel, 2013; Welman & Kruger, 1999). In line with Greig and Taylor's (1999) specifications for following purposive sampling, all of the participants selected for the current research belonged to one particular group: SL international postgraduate students studying in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The snowball sampling method, used to expand the participant base by requesting purposive participants to recommend others for data collection purposes (Babbie, 1995), was also employed in order to find additional participants. Therefore, the initial participants (sought through purposive sampling) were encouraged to introduce other SL postgraduate students to the study.

In terms of sample size, Boyd (2001) recommended 2–10 participants for a phenomenological research, and Creswell (1994) and Morse (1994) suggested that for a long interview session in the context of a phenomenological study, 6 to 10 participants were sufficient. Thus 6 participants were confidently selected as appropriate in number. The six participants represent a balanced gender ratio (3 men and 3 women), were from different Faculties (Education, three different departments of Engineering, and Architecture), and at different levels of completing and investigating diverse research topics. All but one were PhD students.



## **Procedure**

After obtaining permission to conduct the study from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (reference 020152), participants were invited to volunteer for the project via advertisements disseminated through University Students' Association, AUSA Facebook page and University notice boards. Having sighted the advertisement, individuals who were interested in participating in the research contacted the researcher via e-mails. Respecting the formal procedure, the researcher then sought to invite their participation by replying to their emails. Copies of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Consent Form (CF) were attached to the e-mail for further information (see Appendices A for PIS and B for CF).

**Semi-structured interviews.** Individual interviews (rather than focus groups) were considered suitable as phenomenological study is restricted to small and situated samples so that “each individual can be attended to ideographically before attempting a comparative analysis of participant material” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 12). The data were thus collected using semi-structured individual interviews. Denscombe (2010) stated that the main purpose of using interviews in research was to enable the investigator to better understand the life and world of the interviewee in a particular situation. Thus, semi-structured interviews were considered suitable for yielding data for the current thesis topic. Further, Miller and Glassner (2011) also suggested that with a rigorous analysis of accounts, in-depth interviewing provides more than just information on cultural and subjective meanings. Moreover, Kyale (1996) suggested that information about the nature of phenomenon under investigation was also provided.

In relation to data-capturing in a qualitative interview, the researcher attempts to “understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples' experiences” (Kvale, 1996, p. 1–2). Groenewald (2004) stated that the researcher must

maintain a balance between descriptive notes and reflective notes, such as facial expressions, impressions and feelings. Additionally, Miles and Huberman (1984) suggested that the researchers may use these notes later for contrasting and comparing with the data. Thus, field notes were usefully employed as a secondary data storage method and notes were taken at the interview in order to remember data gathered, heeding the suggestion of Lofland and Lofland (1999) that the human mind tends to forget quickly.

Following the interview questions (see Appendix C for interview schedule), participants were asked questions relating to the phenomena under investigation. The interview questions were designed to elicit the participants' interpretations as well as learn their differences, similarities, and lived experiences regarding the research topic. As stated above, the research topic was divided in to three main parts: the learning experiences of SL students, barriers to adjustment, and whether their learning expectations were met. Therefore, the interview questions were prepared targeting these three areas. Therefore three main interview questions are designed to reflect the three aims that were stated in the introduction. The interview questions are stated below.

1. Could you please tell me a little about what is it like to be a SL postgraduate students studying in New Zealand?
2. Could you please specify any barriers to adjustment to New Zealand society you perceive for SL postgraduate students studying in New Zealand?
3. Could you tell me whether you think academic expectations and expectations of learning environments are met for SL postgraduate students studying in New Zealand?

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and each participant was allocated one hour. All the interviews were digitally recorded and conducted in English language with the

participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. As the researcher, I wanted all the participants to feel at ease and relaxed from the beginning and therefore, some informal questions were asked before carrying out the formal interview questions. Those questions were related to the phenomena of interest, for example, "How are you today, what made you to come to New Zealand?" and, "Please do tell me a little bit about your educational background?" Participation was voluntary and all participants were given the freedom to withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection and up until two weeks from the date of being sent the transcript of their interview.

**Ethical issues.** Although there was a little risk of discomfort from participating in the research, the participants were well informed that if they felt uncomfortable at any stage, they would be referred to the university counsellor at the University Health and Counselling Service. Additionally, anonymity and confidentiality was assured in that participants' identification would be concealed through the use of pseudonyms where necessary and all identifying features would be altered. According to the University code of conduct for research, participants were informed that data would be stored for 6 years and after the minimum storage time had expired, the data would be securely destroyed, and any hard copies would be shredded.

### **Data Analysis**

This following section demonstrates the processes of data analysis that assisted in bringing to light the key findings of the research. Thematic analysis was employed comprising a bottom-up or inductive analytical process that was driven by the data itself. Thematic analysis is a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 4). The thematic analysis process employed in the current study included Braun and Clark's (2006) six key stages and they are described in more detail below.

- 1) Familiarisation with the data
- 2) Coding
- 3) Searching for meanings to form themes
- 4) Reviewing themes
- 5) Defining themes and modifying it where necessary
- 6) Writing up and making a composite summary

**Familiarisation with the data.** Initially, the researcher needs to engage themselves in, and become closely familiar with the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The participants' transcribed responses were carefully reviewed, and by listening to each audio recordings of each interview, the researcher became familiar with the words of each participant, as further suggested by Holloway (1997).

**Coding.** Coding is the development of defining what the data mean and this process may bring the researcher to "unforeseen areas and research questions" (Charmaz, 1996, p. 11). At this stage of analysis, the researcher coded all the data items investigated by gathering together all relevant data extracts in groups (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Searching for meanings to form themes.** A theme is chosen from the data relevant to the research question and is formed in terms of a logical and meaningful pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher aimed to distil the essence of the data within the overall topic's context by closely observing all relevant units of meaning. So, at this stage, the data collected was separated into different meaningful sections, and then carefully studied for common ideas that could reflect themes. Then, in order to uncover clusters of suitable meanings and see the comparisons and contrasts between participants' statements, the researcher carefully examined and identified the meaning of the data by re-examining the transcripts, recorded interviews and non-redundant units of meaning.

**Reviewing themes.** As the next step, the researcher investigated whether the selected themes had a connection with one another and were related to the data, following the procedure set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). Researcher then defined individual themes, and explored connections of each theme to one another. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that in this process, two themes may come together or one theme may be divided into two or more themes, or develop another. Creswell (1998) suggested that by grouping units of meaning, themes are formed. During the themes review process for the current study, data were carefully divided into groups having been examined for common themes. Thus, similar ideas and statements of participants were formed into unique groups. Through this technique units of significance (see King, 1994) were created, and the researcher created a list of themes based on their significance (the number of times a theme was expressed) and formed an understanding of the meanings of each.

**Defining and modifying themes.** At this stage, the researcher carefully observed each of the interview participants' responses and summarised all the themes elicited from them. The researcher investigated whether the themes told a story related to the research questions (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). By doing this, the topic under investigation was further understood. Following Hycner's (1999) suggestion of performing a validity check, the themes were finally put together. For an overview of the hierarchy of themes see Appendix D. After independently coding a sample of 20% of participants' responses, an independent rater reached a rater agreement of 90%.

**Writing a composite summary.** To conclude, at the writing-up stage, the investigator combined the analytic narrative and all data extracts in order to prepare the results for the reader in relation to existing literature (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, minority voices or individual perceptions and their unique experiences were also carefully examined. Those ideas are regarded as important differences or similarities with other participants'

perception to discuss the topic under investigation. However, there was a degree of intertwining of data as some themes derived from participant responses appeared to be informed by the data from other questions. This may be due to the nature of the questions that are closely related to one another: Students' learning experiences, barriers to belonging, and learning expectations.

### **Summary**

The aforementioned choice of research design, method, and analysis were explained and justified as appropriate. Thus, in order to investigate SL students' learning experiences, their barriers to belonging and whether their educational expectations were met, a phenomenological approach was employed as the most appropriate to observe individual lived experiences of people (see Moustakas, 1994). Following is the detailed description of the presentation of results that emerged from the interview questions and students' responses.

## Chapter 4: Results

This chapter outlines the results generated by the qualitative data supplied by the six SL postgraduate students interviewed. Following the thematic analysis procedure outlined in the previous chapter, a detailed summary of the findings is presented with respect to each of the interview questions in the current research. Six main themes were identified, as follows:

1. Socio-emotional and cultural factors affecting learning experiences
2. Academic factors affecting learning experiences
3. Barriers to integration
4. “I am a Sri Lankan”: The upsetting experience of being wrongly labelled
5. Resilience
6. Whether expectations of the learning environment were met

Themes 1 and 2 stressed both cultural and academic factors that may have influenced SL postgraduate students’ learning experiences. Theme 1 (Socio-emotional and cultural factors affecting learning experiences) identified issues affecting social integration and unfamiliar cultural environment in SL students’ learning experiences. Theme 2 (Academic factors affecting learning experiences) presented an understanding of participants’ specific learning experiences affecting their academic life. Themes 3 and 4 yielded perspectives on adjustment and belonging. Thus, theme 3 (Barriers to integration) informed participants’ sense of belonging in New Zealand society and theme 4 (“I am a Sri Lankan”: The upsetting experience of being wrongly labelled) revealed student sensitivities to thoughts about their ethnic identity, as most participants voiced awareness of negative stereotyping. Theme 5 (Resilience) identified that the SL postgraduate participants interviewed for the current study demonstrated the ability to recover from or adjust to the new environment regardless of their

awareness of some negative learning experiences. Finally, Theme 6 (Whether expectations of the learning environment were met) yielded common responses from participants regarding whether their expectations of study in New Zealand were satisfied.

### Summary of Participant Responses per Theme

The first interview question was, “Could you please tell me a little about what is it like to be a SL student studying in New Zealand” Following the students’ responses, two main themes emerged from the data: *Socio-emotional and cultural factors affecting learning experiences* and *academic factors affecting learning experiences*. Table 1 reports the theme and the number of participants whose responses supported the theme. The six participants are represented by coded letters (e.g., PA-Participant A).

Table 1

*Themes Informed by Data from Interview Question 1.*

Theme	PA	PB	PC	PD	PE	PF
1. Socioemotional and cultural factors affecting learning experiences	√	√	√	√	√	
2. Academic factors affecting learning experiences	√	√	√	√	√	√

The second interview question was, “Could you please specify any barriers to adjustment to NZ society you perceive for SL postgraduate students studying in New Zealand”. The question aimed at finding SL students’ difficulties to their sense of belonging. Two themes emerged in relation to students’ responses: Themes 3, *Barriers to integration*, and 4, *“I am a Sri Lankan”*: *The upsetting experience of being wrongly labelled* were both further supported by data from Interview Question 2 (see Table 2).



Table 2

*Themes Informed by Data from Interview Question 2.*

Theme	PA	PB	PC	PD	PE	PF
3. Barriers to integration	√	√	√	√	√	√
4. “I am a Sri Lankan”: The upsetting experience of being wrongly labelled	√	√	√	√	√	

The purpose of the third interview question (Could you tell me whether you think academic expectations and expectations of learning environments are met for SL postgraduate students studying in New Zealand?) was to investigate whether SL postgraduate students’ academic expectations were satisfied. Themes 5 *Resilience*, and 6 *Whether expectations of the learning environment were met* emerged from the data. (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Themes Informed by Data from Interview Question 3.*

Theme	PA	PB	PC	PD	PE	PF
5. Resilience		√	√	√	√	
6. Whether expectations of the learning environment were met	√	√	√	√	√	√

### **Theme 1. Socio-emotional and Cultural Factors Affecting Learning Experiences**

Students’ opinions, thoughts and activities may be affected by the environment in which they study (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Most participants reported that as part of their learning experience, they had not been recognized as a separate nationality, as Sri Lankan

students. In the university, they were predominantly recognised as Indians due to physical similarities. The SL students expressed their unhappiness over this issue when answering the first interview question about their learning experiences at the university or outside. In addition, the existence of a cultural gap, the experience of making local friendships, and relationships with supervisors, were other subthemes that emerged from the data to inform socio-cultural factors that had the potential to indirectly affect learning experiences.

**Identity.** Most participants reported that they were identified initially due to physical similarities, and five participants reported that they had not been recognised as Sri Lankans, but Indians. This issue is further presented under theme 4, “*I am a Sri Lankan*”: *The upsetting experience of being wrongly labelled*, in relation to barriers to belonging in general, but reported here in regard to the learning environment.

*In some situations there is a negative experience, because most of people think we are Indians. I do not like that...I do not like when people identify me as an Indian...(PC)*

*Once I had a chat with another professor who is not from SL. He thought that I am an Indian by my look... This is really annoying...(PE)*

*People recognized me as an Indian ... may be because of my appearance (PB)*

*Perhaps they have bad experience or something like that [with Indians]... they think we are Indians ...(PD)*

These examples suggest that *confusion regarding cultural identity* may have distressed SL students within their learning environments, and further there was a suspicion that SL identity could be conflated with negative impressions of Indian identity. All the participants except PF showed their awareness and disapproval of the misinterpretation of their identity as Indians.

PC further showed her dissatisfaction over the generalization between two nations, SL and Indians based on outer appearance and local people’s attitude towards other nationalities.

Moreover, she explained that cultural differences may be overlooked by a tendency for people to generalise between Indian and SL cultures.

*Our culture is totally different [from the Indian culture]. There are some good things [comparisons] here too...But, I also feel like, those are things from the surface. But, if you go in to deep, most of them are not like that... (PC)*

**Cultural gap.** International students' lack of awareness of cultural differences in the host country was studied previously. The following responses highlighted SL students' learning experiences and the differences in New Zealand culture.

PC extended her discussion about identity stating that cultural factors also may contribute to exacerbating the distinction between SL students and locals. For her, some local people were open and accepting but others were not willing to forge strong and meaningful friendships. The following example explains her disappointment in not being able to openly connect with local peers in the same way that she could with SL peers.

*Maybe because I come from a different cultural background, for instance, when SL people meet with each other we are very open, like we feel we are connected (PC)*

Similarly, PA faced challenges with coping in a different culture and her experiences reflected some negative issues during her stay in New Zealand. She had experienced local people with different attitudes towards Asian students but also changes in food customs made her feel uncomfortable. Her following comments illustrate such a clash in cultural values.

*The cultural differences, like New Zealand people's attitude on Asians because I faced the problem when we tried to rent an apartment... Also the food pattern changes as soon as we come here, SL food is not readily available [in New Zealand]...(PA)*

In the same way PD also commented on his experience at the university and said cultural differences may lead to unnecessary judgements and generalisations. He said that one of his friends from SL was identified as being rude for his use of the English language.

The following example shows certain differences between the two cultural practices. For instance, what is polite in one culture may differ from what is polite in another culture.

*[because of my friend] some locals think we are rude... when my friend from SL for instance said "Give me" instead of, "Please, Can I have?" is rude to them...local people use "Please" all the time but we don't. (PD)*

**Local friendship.** A further important factor to emerge from students' perceptions of experience in their learning environments was making local friends. Except PA, all the participants seemed to have had a good connection with their local friends regardless of cultural differences. PA claimed that she hardly had any local friends.

*I do not have local friends, not really, I've got two Indian friends only...(PA)*

Apart from her comments, other responses suggested that most SL students have fewer problems forming a friendship with local students. The following examples suggest that SL students in general did not encounter many issues with local friends in contrast to previous literature.

*I made a lot of English speaking friends. I have a lot of mates like Americans, Australians and also local kiwis... One of my American friend helped me to proofread my PhD proposal. We became very good friends (PB)*

*Most of the people talk to you and smile at you, they are generous and kind, they are willing to help you (PC)*

*[Did you have issues making friends?] No problem...I have local friends (PD)*

*[Talking about friends] I assumed, people are very friendly here (PE)*

**Approachable and friendly supervisors.** SL students come from a cultural background where a status hierarchy shapes relationships. SL students experienced an untroubled and cheerful relationship between lecturers and students in New Zealand, compared to Sri Lanka where there is a considerable status gap between the teacher and

students. Most participants seemed to appreciate this new experience and commented positively. The following examples suggested that most of these students did not maintain a pleasant relationship with their SL lecturers, but truly enjoyed the environment in New Zealand. SL students have created a close relationship with their supervisors in the New Zealand context and such a relationship appeared to have generated a valuable contribution to their learning experience, both emotionally and academically. The following examples evidence the perception that most SL postgraduate students' learning experiences have been affected in a better way.

PF appeared to refuse the status gap and criticized the unnecessary gap between lecturers and students in SL.

*Sri Lankan people [teachers] keep a distance between the supervisor and the student... giving respect is important, but giving unnecessary respect create a barrier between you and your teachers (PF)*

In the SL context, teachers are highly respected for their profession. Therefore, keeping a gap between the students and teachers seemed to be acceptable as it had been practicing customarily. When these students obtain overseas experience, they tend to compare the differences, and naturally this becomes a controversial topic. Having analysed the differences in the two countries, most participants seemed to appreciate the good practices in New Zealand. The following examples of the other participants also justified the comments made by PF above. In addition, these responses affirm that SL students were impressed by the friendly supervisors who can be approached easily and call them by their first name. In Sri Lankan context, a teacher can hardly be called by their first name due to respect and cultural values.

*In Sri Lanka most of the lecturers have an attitude and they always maintain a distance with students... but, here it is easy. For example, I can say, “Hey, James” I can ask anything from my supervisor (PE)*

*My main supervisor is like a mother to me ... she helped me to improve my writing (PB)*

*In SL, you have to say MADAM / MISS. The junior and seniority is really high, the hierarchy is really high but here we are very free to talk to our supervisors any time (PC)*

*Even though SL lecturers are committed, you cannot see that. Most of the students do not have a good relationship between their lecturers... lecturers here [New Zealand] are very friendly and approachable. (PD)*

Students coming from a SL cultural background tend to discover more differences in the New Zealand education system and outside classrooms. In relation to students and lecturers' relationships, most students appreciated the friendly learning environment and open-minded supervisors in New Zealand. The following section explores specifically academic factors that may have affected SL students' learning experience.

## **Theme 2. Academic Factors Affecting Learning Experiences**

Subthemes supporting the above theme highlighted issues associated with students' learning experience that may have directly influenced their academic life. Many participants emphasised more positive elements in the education system in New Zealand compared to Sri Lanka. It appeared that some of the positive changes in the New Zealand education system have created a satisfactory learning environment for SL students. In addition, students' responses to perceived shortcomings in the New Zealand education system were discussed. Finally how academic writing has influenced SL students' achievements in studies will be addressed.

**Positive elements in New Zealand education.** In responding to *SL students' learning experiences*, most participants shared their appreciation of valuable learning experiences in New Zealand. Comparing the New Zealand and SL education systems, the participants thoroughly enjoyed the advanced technology and educational modifications in New Zealand. The following examples evidence that five participants accepted that the elements of the tertiary education system in New Zealand were comparatively dynamic and modernized.

Primarily, PD admitted that his learning experience in New Zealand was a new adventure and pleasing. He admitted that practical knowledge he gained from his university in New Zealand was enviable and was not available in SL. As a PhD student he was confident, and appreciated the unlimited resources that his department had provided to all the students. Following is his response about his academic experience which highlighted positive elements in the New Zealand education system.

*I haven't done some of those courses in Sri Lanka...meaning those [sic] knowledge and courses were not available in Sri Lanka. For example, I wanted to learn computational fluid dynamics, but in our universities back home, they didn't provide the practical knowledge. But, here everything is available for your practical knowledge, like so many softwares are associated...(PD)*

Comparatively, PC, PB, PE and PF recognised that the education system in New Zealand is better and created an adaptive learning environment. They seemed to approve the advantages of the New Zealand education system compared to SL and vouched similarly for these expanding their knowledge. Most of their compliments referred to a friendly, student-focused learning environment, less stress related to workload, and modern techniques.

*[New Zealand]... creates an environment which is focused on students. It is based on students. I find this is as a different learning experience when compared to my country (PB)*

*Coming here and seeing how the academic environment is set and how the lecturers build up the rapport with students, I feel like I can learn many things from them (PC)*

*In Sri Lanka we are more stressed than here. The way they [lecturers] see and assess a paper in Sri Lanka is much tougher than here.... (PE)*

*Sri Lankan education system is not outdated, but New Zealand system is more relevant to the latest improvements, and state-of-the-art techniques... (PF)*

Furthermore, participants made further statements about the advanced techniques in classrooms, online learning systems and support, and the availability of practical knowledge compared to theory-based lessons in SL. The SL students admired unlimited resources they received from their university in New Zealand. It is suggested that these facilities available in New Zealand universities encouraged them to learn well. None of the participants criticised the SL education system but suggested that in comparison to New Zealand, some modern techniques and facilities at their disposal were not available in Sri Lanka. The following examples summarise the positive responses made by the participants.

*I like the technological involvement. Because, everything related to the course is available online [through the university's own online learning system] specially the lecture recordings which is very useful....Also, submissions... can do via this online system.(PA)*

*If you have the interest and dedication, there is a lot to discover and learn... For instance you have the access to read all the articles, books, good network of libraries, digital data and everything whereas in our country we do not access to all these. (PB)*

*I work with two supervisors and I like the supervision process.... These are things I can apply in my country and how to deal with new students as an academic as well as teaching...(PC)*

*When I have positive environment and support, it is always good and it is been great experience (PD)*



*First thing is the resources. Every document, book or journal is available in the library. The second one is the environment. There are so many well educated people here...(PF)*

**Shortcomings.** Apart from the compliments made by these students, certain limitations of lecturers also were highlighted. The following participants stated that either one of their supervisors or some of their colleagues' supervisors were unfriendly and unsupportive, creating problems in their academic life.

*Some of my friends say that their supervisors are not supportive or friendly, do not support and do not provide any feedback properly..(PC)*

*My co-supervisor wasn't that helpful... whenever there's a meeting with the two supervisors, sometimes it was stressful... (PB)*

PA, for example, had a bad experience with her lecturers who did not treat her well when she needed their guidance and understanding, and expressed her unhappiness over lecturers in general. She had to join the university three weeks later due to a delay in the administrative process, yet she had to complete an assessment having had no knowledge of the previous lessons. PA specifically cited that students were not given sufficient time to talk with their lecturers. For instance referring to her own experience, she said a lack of opportunities to meet lecturers made her unhappy. In fact, her perception towards the relationship with supervisors is different from other participants. Being the only Master's student, her involvement with lecturers seemed to be disappointing and discouraging. It seems that she did not appreciate her learning experiences in New Zealand.

*The problem was, I had to submit one of my assignments in the same week (the 3rd week which I started) due to the enrolment issue but I didn't get any additional time for that...when I want to ask questions about my assignment, or when I want to talk to them [lecturers] or something like that, they are not ready to answer...(PA)*

*I found the major problem is lack of opportunities, to discuss subject matters with lecturers... (PA)*

Moreover, PE seemed to have not impressed by the facilities and options available in New Zealand compared to England, where she completed her master's degree. Although she was generally satisfied and had no major concerns regarding her academic experience in New Zealand, she observed that certain issues such as research topics and lab equipment need further improvement compared to England.

*Research topics are not new...Less lab equipment [was] available for our research group [compared to UK]. The research topics among our research group are completely in different areas. Therefore the university can't afford to buy different lab equipment targeting for each student. (PE)*

**Academic writing.** Academic writing is widely studied as a barrier to integration. Similarly, for some SL students, formal writing is still challenging. Although most of the participants come from an academic background, their academic writing was affirmed as needing improvement. In the New Zealand context, academic writing is considered a very important element in one's studies and lecturers expect all students to learn it correctly (Campbell & Li, 2008; Li, 2016). The following examples of the participants further extended the idea that some SL students experience difficulties in their academic writing.

*Whenever we had meetings with my supervisors, I was good at explaining my ideas/concepts...but I had difficulties with writing in English. As a non-native English speaking student, that was my major challenge.... (PB)*

*Both of my supervisors are native speakers. So the quality they expect in report writing is higher. So I am finding it more challenging...(PE)*

*Especially in writing, I cannot give that punch, I cannot emphasize it well. Sometimes I write easily, when I do my research, writing is very important. Some of the words that I*

*use, do not imply the meaning I want to say... For instance, if I use right words, people could have understood it better. If I need to emphasize on something, I need a good set of words to explain that. (PD)*

It is proposed that expectations in academic writing were different from supervisor to supervisor and this introduced an ambiguity in the consistent standard. For instance, PE shared her concern regarding the expectation of supervisors whose first language is English. According to her, expectations of native supervisors were more demanding than non-native supervisors in the same university.

*There is a difference between the supervisors whose first language is English and other supervisors. So the quality they expect in Report Writing or etc, is completely different. So sometimes I feel little bit difficult. But my friends who are working under non-native supervisors, for them they are not struggling that much. For example those lectures do not make it that perfect. But the native speakers, English being their first language, the standard they expect is completely different... (PE)*

PD also stated that native supervisors are very particular about international students' academic writing standard regardless of their language proficiency.

*She said that I had to improve my writing skills. If you are writing for a native English speaker, there is a different way of writing, which we are not very much familiar or used to do in our own countries, I think this is because English is our second language...(PD)*

Most SL students shared their viewpoints on differences in the two languages (their own and English) which resulted a poor performance in their writing. PB and PD admitted that their academic writing skills were insufficient in expressing the exact meaning that they had in mind, thus they produced unsatisfactory written work.

*...but whenever I am writing a chapter for my supervisor, I had difficulties with writing in English...I think when we are writing in English we write a lot. My supervisor mentioned me that I overwrite, and I repeat a lot..(PB)*

*[When] I talk about the writing...for instance if I compare my writing with a local student, my writing needs to improve. I have seen that...(PD)*

However some of these students agreed to upgrade the knowledge through recommended courses by their supervisors. SL students with non-native English-speaking backgrounds seemed to have realised that their academic writing need more improvement as expected in the New Zealand context. Although these students possessed good results from International English Language Testing System (IELTS), they were asked to complete a compulsory English language course again. Few participants had concerns regarding lecturers' high quality expectations in academic writing, but most of students in general appeared to accept their insufficient expression in academic writing. In fact, some students willingly participated in those recommended courses such as DELNA and appreciated the advantages of those courses and recommended them.

*In terms of [commenting] language wise, whenever I talk to my supervisor, she told me my speaking is good and communication was clear.... I had to attend the DELNA programme. The university recommends to undertake this programme for all non-native speaking students. (PB)*

*I need to improve my academic language...I remember ...my supervisors asked me to improve my academic language...Yes. There are plenty of help available.*

*So there is DELNA assessment, you have to go through that. If you need improvement, they will recommend you for further courses...[Researcher: Did you do that?].... yes, everyone has to do that. After the assessment if you do not comply with the requirements, you have to do more courses to develop your English knowledge. They are free of charge. (PF)*

### Theme 3. Barriers to Integration

In terms of factors that affect belonging, most of the SL participants stated that stereotyped as Indians was a concern, but, the issues of identity or stereotyping will be separately addressed under Theme 4 below. Other barriers such as understanding local students' accent and feeling lonely were discussed below and it could be suggested that these problems could affect integration into New Zealand society.

**New Zealand slang and accent.** It is difficult to master another language when you were not brought up in that culture (Elega & Özad, 2017; Tanaka, 2007). It appeared that understanding linguistic quirks was another possible challenge for some of the SL students who came from a different cultural background. Although English is one of the official languages in SL and it is widely being used, many people in SL still find it hard to fully understand its cultural connotations.

*... because it may be the way we were brought up our lives, things we talked, songs listened, movies watched, etc... and also may be the speed and the responses, I mean sometimes, everyone has their own cultural slangs [sic], so if we don't have knowledge about these common things, it is a bit hard to move with people (PB)*

*Also some of the words they use are different... Compared to our vocabulary that we use in our daily life, it is different to what they use here. The communication is one barrier (PC)*

*The cultural background was different. The way they talk is different from how we used to talk in our country. So, it takes time to understand. Also they use different words (PD)*

PB and PF, for instance, mentioned that the same culture cannot be expected in another country and therefore people need to change according to the place where they chose to study or live. Although PB and PF acknowledged that there were few negative issues

which may affect their learning and sense of belonging, they still stated that students need to be more open to other cultural differences.

*Because we were grown up in a county which has a great cultural heritage and everyone recognizes that. But we cannot expect the same life style and culture that we used to have in our country...(PB)*

*Students need to change their mindset to the new place. Because this is the correct system and you have to change your mindset (PF)*

In addition, understanding the rapid delivery and English accent of the New Zealand students or supervisors was one of the barriers pointed by some SL participants (PA, PB, PC, PD and PF). The students' difficulties in understanding Kiwi pronunciation were explained in different contexts.

*They are some language problems like accent, different terms of application... (PA)*

*[The] New Zealand accent was quite difficult to understand especially when we speak to someone over the phone ....I could not understand half of the conversation which was very frustrating. (PB)*

PC said that although she came from an academic background where she worked as a senior lecturer, she still encountered some trouble in understanding the New Zealand accent. She stated that it was a challenge only at the initial stage of her stay.

*I come from an academic background so my journey is little bit easier than the other students...but at the very beginning, I could not understand what they are saying, because their accent is different... (PC)*

Two participants mentioned that their English knowledge was adequate for communicating with others, understanding native speakers' English was still a challenge in New Zealand society.

*I had issues. Especially language problems. Even though you know English language, their accent was an issues. You could not adjust to that environment. The cultural background was different...(PD)*

*When you are talking with your supervisor or having a group discussion, then you realize the accent is a concern. They speak very fast...(PF)*

**Loneliness.** In relation to barriers to integration, feeling of loneliness emerged from four participants' (PA, PB, PC and PF) responses. These participants said that initially they felt lonely not having anything in common with peers.

*I didn't have friends to talk...I felt lonely (PA)*

*I actually felt, lonely. Especially at the beginning. I and my friend... are like that... I feel that she also feels not fit in here. (PC)*

*I feel like there is not much common things that we can talk about when we meet together...sometimes this is stressful. Everyone talks, but I felt... I was not included (PB)*

*Apart from education, the main barrier is that it takes sometimes to adjust to the situation or the place, so you do not feel home immediately. Because your friends and family, they are in Sri Lanka so naturally when you come here it is not easy to adjust to the new place. It takes time to find friends and other people...(PF)*

PF expressed his views and agreed that barriers such as isolation and difficulties with the new culture and the English accent are expected barriers, but, he also suggested that these were unavoidable circumstances when living in a host country away from home.

*When settling at a new place, culture shock is unavoidable, especially for Sri Lankan students. They are differences in etiquettes and common behaviours, which they have to be used to it. English fluency is another important factor (PF)*

Considering barriers to belonging, and analysing the above responses from the six participants, stereotyping or negative misinformed identity emerged as an important concern.

In relation to Interview Question two, many participants had troubling concerns for their SL identity which was not correctly recognised by the local people. Therefore, this issue was treated as a separated theme depending on the number of participants who valued their own identity. The followings are the results emerged from the students' replies.

**Theme 4. “I am a Sri Lankan”: The Upsetting Experience of Being Wrongly Labelled**

Participants reported that they were disappointed about not been recognised as a separate nationality and as Sri Lankans. When answering Interview Question two, most students stated that they were largely perceived and treated as Indians. The afore-mentioned subtheme, *Identity* also emerged from students' responses to Interview Question one. It appeared that being perceived as Indian was a disturbing concern for most of the SL students both as a learning experience and factor contributing to belonging. Stereotyping could play a role in misidentification.

**Stereotyping.** PB identified negative stereotyping, and indicated that the first impression by New Zealanders of SL students was incorrect. He perceived that that some local people's perceptions of Indian students may not take into account SL students' unique identity. For instance, PB mentioned that appearance may be misleading.

*Every time whenever I go to do something, people recognised me as an Indian ...they initially recognise me as an Indian, may be because of my appearance...(PB)*

PC also observed that some people are judgmental about other ethnic groups and people of colour regardless of cultural individualities that may exist within this group. Furthermore, this general mode of grouping separates people unnecessarily.

*I think the COLOUR. The colour is a barrier because, they are White and we are brown. So I think this is a kind of a barrier (PC)*



Similarly, PE and PD also emphasised their own personal but distressing concern related to misconceptions regarding cultural identity, and further, overt negativism could be associated with these.

*Normally everyone assumes that I am an Indian. We were just chatting. Then he asked me some questions assuming that I am an Indian. Then I said no I am not from India but from Sri Lanka.... (PE)*

*One of my friend went to a bar and some people called him "Indian cunt" ...(PD)*

In response to misunderstanding of SL students' identity, PB and PD cited stereotyping occurred due to misconceptions of local people against other ethnic groups.

*[locals think] Like Indians are arrogant and SL are friendly and soft and soft-spoken. I think local people have a different attitude for us...(PB)*

*I think, the locals think most Indians are arrogant and rude or not polite. I am not judging them like that. This is the perception of some local people (PD)*

*We were just chatting. Then he asked me some questions assuming that I am an Indian. Then I said no I am not from India but from Sri Lanka. Then he said, "Oh Wow, you are from Sri Lanka. Thank God India has not invaded you" (PE)*

**A positive perception of Sri Lankans.** In contrast to students' disappointment regarding the wrong identity, another significant concept emerged from students' responses. When SL students were identified as uniquely Sri Lankan they gained respect and acceptance. Being Sri Lankan was associated with a positive reputation. The previous subtopic, *Stereotyping* demonstrated SL students' disappointment over local people's perceptions but the following responses demonstrate that SL students also became aware of local people's positive attitudes towards Sri Lankans.

*When they initially recognize me as an Indian, ...but when I correct them saying I am Sri Lankan, they apologise for it and show a different attitude after all...when people*

*recognized me that I come from Sri Lanka, I have a feeling that there is a lot of [positive] recognition for us (PB)*

*For instance, some may say, “Ah, yes, I have heard about Sri Lanka and it is a beautiful country”. So, they show a good connection and ... if you say you are a Sri Lankan, there is a positive approach with us, than if you say you were an Indian. (PC)*

*Sometimes they call us, Indians... I straight away tell them “Sorry, I am a Sri Lankan” ... they say, “Oh are you from Sri Lanka?” [I can see] naturally many local people like Sri Lankans ... (PD)*

Most participants expressed reasons for the positive characteristics associated with SL identity, and reported how they felt respected when they were recognised as a separate nationality, as “Sri Lankans”. Students were found to be happy and grateful for their own identity and all SL students felt encouraged to maintain the reputation.

*...there is a very good reputation for Sri Lankan students. That is mainly developed from the excellent performance from the past Sri Lankan students. (PE)*

*The approach is very different [positive] when you say we are from Sri Lanka... (PD)*

*Being a Sri Lankan ...people have different perceptions about Sri Lankans compared to Indians. (PC)*

Themes 3 and 4 were closely related in contributing to barriers to belonging. Language and culture could present an obstacle to integration, and invisibility as regards cultural identity could also prevent a sense of belonging. However, participants’ responses also highlighted their flexibility in the face of such issues. The following theme *Resilience* specifically emerged from SL students’ responses, suggesting their ability to overcome adversity in the host country to overcome barriers to integration.

## Theme 5. Resilience

Students' responses conveyed that many SL students seemed to have flexible minds in relation to their learning experiences and did not feel significantly disadvantaged by the aforementioned obstacles. The following quotes from the SL participants reflected their autonomy, relatedness and competence, and ability of accept challenges.

*I think it all depends on you and your personality. If you are confident to do things that you feel challenging, and if you understand that it is a challenge and if you improve it, it won't be a challenge anymore...You need to have faith and mental satisfaction with everything, background, social status. Otherwise ...you need to know the risk of settling in another country and you need to be ready...Also, when there is the opportunity, you need to grab the opportunity and then you can be successful...(PB)*

PC stated that SL students possess skills for their own survival. She stated that SL students were confident as well as strong, thus easily able to adjust to any circumstance.

*I felt like SL are bit more forward than others, also I felt SL are more confident than others. They can really stand well in front of other people....first I felt lonely and then I felt ok. (PC)*

*I had to do few courses in the beginning to cover [bring] my knowledge up to the standard.....Other than that I did not have any issues...I think when you go to another English speaking country, we have to have an idea of how to interact with people in that country. (PD)*

*There is obviously a difference between first and second language, so that barrier needs to be overcome by your own effort....(PF)*

The section above displayed SL students' quality of resilience and flexibility to adjust to the environment. The following is the final theme that emerged from the data in response to the third Interview Question.

## **Theme 6. Whether Expectations of the Learning Environment Were Met**

All six participants had expressed their perceptions and expectations of their academic environment in New Zealand. In general their answers conveyed a positive response that most of their learning objectives were achieved, but still there were few other concerns on their academic expectations. As Table 3 displays, the majority of participants offered responses contributing to the final theme. Among the perceptions and expectations, *having a good supervisor, motivation to become independent researchers or self-learners, and unmet targets* were listed. Additionally, many participants expressed positive thoughts about progressive elements of the New Zealand education system that consequently helped them meet their expectations.

**Role of a good supervisor.** In contrast to the existing literature, which stated that most students find lecturers in New Zealand do not understand students' expectations (Birt et al., 2004; Ward, 2001), some SL postgraduate students' responses appeared to be opposite. For these participants, New Zealand supervisors played a great role in their academic life. These students have received satisfactory feedback and prompt responses. In addition, their commitment and guidance were admired. In fact, SL students seemed to admire these supervisors and their supervision process in New Zealand which eventually made them independent researchers compared to the SL education system where students highly relied on teachers' notes.

*Especially my main supervisor, she helped me to improve my writing... She loves me a lot and I am so glad I have them [her]'. (PB)*

*I like the supervision process...also my supervisor always responds to me promptly... You are close with your teacher like a friend. (PC)*

*They show their commitment...I used to call my supervisor, "Sir". So he said I do not have to call him Sir, and asked me to call him by his first name ... (PD)*

*...a good supervisor, who can guide through your research and everything, here it is easy. For example ...I can ask anything from my supervisor (PF)*

**Motivation to become independent researchers.** Another significant expectation was becoming independent researchers or self-learners and this highlighted an important component of the New Zealand education system. Most SL students expected a progressive change through studying for their educational qualification. In contrast to their experience in Sri Lanka (where students were accustomed to depending on the lectures and their notes), the SL postgraduate students admitted that they gained the skill to become independent researchers in the New Zealand context and under New Zealand supervisors.

*For me having a very good academic environment where you can think independently and you are encouraged to study as a self-learner. These were my expectations (PC)*

*He directs me to the proper path. That is one of the quality [sic] of a best supervisor. But may be in the short-run, it is hard for you, but in the long-run, you will be able to solve your own problems...(PF)*

On the other hand, PB criticised his co-supervisor's critical feedback and unfriendly approach, but later he realised that those comments allowed him to be more critical and independent in his studies. He got used to the new system and became a self-learner. He found it positive towards the end of his studies.

*...it took a while to understand the role of my co-supervisor. He was criticising about what I was doing but at the same time help me think of what should I do by myself. Finally I found out it was really helpful because, you go home and think about the comments. (PB)*

*So they have given the opportunity to think what they need to explore independently..... I think they are helping students to develop their thinking abilities by themselves. Therefore, students become independent and can make decisions by themselves. (PB)*

Moreover, PD also agreed that he became more confident and independent within the New Zealand education system and was appreciative.

*Here, it is good for the character building. If I think of my character, I can meet different people more confidently, I can participate in conferences and travel more independently...(PD)*

**Unmet expectations.** In contrast to the above perceptions of academic expectations and achievements in New Zealand, some participants appeared to have not met their objectives at different levels of their academic life.

*...my basic objective was to upgrade my knowledge with a post graduate qualification...*

*[However]I was not well informed by the university that I had an enrolment problem, they did not properly guide me, before I entered to the university... student support is very limited, it is limited to Asian students...Actually, I got unsuccessful in that course, and then, I had to do two more additional semesters to complete my MScEn (PA)*

Further, the expectation of value for money was not met for this participant.

*When compared with the chargers, they charge high for international students, but, finally if I think of the gain of the course, I do not think it's worth the amount spent..(PA)*

Student support could be poor and this ultimately reduced academic effectiveness.

*I had to keep asking the building manager about my office and after 6 months I got my office and then I could concentrate well... I got access to a computer but I had to share it with a master student for 6 months which is about half of my provisional year... It was so noisy with 35 students in the lab. I was sitting in one of the computers. I could not concentrate and I wasn't really been helped by the department for 6 months. (PB)*

Furthermore, PB stated that initially he was not happy with the amount of academic support that he received from his department and the administrative staff. He said he was frustrated not having the usual privileges other PhD students were enjoying.

*As a PhD student, the department did not provide me enough assistance, in terms of academic wise[dom]. They are not seeking what problems we have as PhD students. I was frustrated and annoyed about it...(PB)*

Furthermore, a student participant compared New Zealand facilities unfavourably with those of the UK.

*In New Zealand compared to UK people are less updated in terms of technology...The research UK is doing are resent topics, here [New Zealand] facilities are less compared to UK...(PE)*

Additionally, a concern was expressed regarding supervisors who were experts in the subject leaving New Zealand for better prospects, and thus the loss of valuable professionals.

*But here most well-known people/ scientists migrate to other places. I think... But Sri Lanka also, have the same problem previously but now there is a trend that educated people come back to Sri Lanka to develop their education...I think here also [sic], lots of educated people leave the country for better prospects... (PF)*

Responding to Interview Question three, (Could you tell me whether you think academic expectations and expectations of learning environments are met for SL students studying in New Zealand?) however, most participants agreed that apart from few shortfalls, their major academic targets were achieved. They also talked about the advancement in knowledge as another important expectation.

*I wanted to do my PhD in a country where English is the main language, other than my PhD qualification, I thought I can improve my English Language skills. (PB)*

*...coming here for PhD is a good thing. I felt, it is better than in SL (PC)*

*First thing I found out was the gap. So I had to fill that gap of knowledge...(PD)*

*I had done my higher education in the UK and I expected more or similar here (PE)*

*I wanted to study in a more advanced and technological environment and it is  
available here (PF)*



## Chapter 5: Discussion

This current phenomenological study sought to identify viewpoints of SL students' perspectives of how students experience and understand their learning experiences in New Zealand. Six themes were derived from the data and these are explained and discussed below. An examination of previous literature revealed that the perception of a sense of belonging among international students (especially SL postgraduate students) had been generally unexplored. In view of that point, the present study further explored the relationship between socio-cultural and academic factors and the sense of belonging that may have affected SL students. Therefore, findings of the current research allowed the researcher to discover specific issues related to SL international students' sense of belonging. The first theme, *Socio-emotional and cultural factors affecting learning experiences* was further illustrated by subthemes pertaining to identity, cultural gap, local friends and approachable and friendly supervisors. Then, positive elements of New Zealand education, as well as shortcomings, and academic writing were developed from the second theme (*Academic factors affecting learning experiences*).

In Theme 3, *Barriers to integration*, New Zealand slang and accent, and loneliness were perceived as barriers to integration, and hence belonging. As Theme 4 "*I am a Sri Lankan*": *The upsetting experience of being wrongly labelled*, suggested, SL participants expressed an awareness of negative stereotypes mistakenly applied to SL students. Stereotyping as Indians ranked highest among the complications cited by five of the SL international students. In contrast to stereotyping as Indians, however, a positive perception of SL students was also noted. Although Theme 5, *Resilience* revealed SL students' strategies to overcome socio-cultural issues such as stereotyping and loneliness, Theme 6 *Whether expectations of the learning environment were met* revealed that certain expectations

of these participants were not met due to multiple reasons such as lecturers' expectations, misunderstandings, and false promises of university administration. A discussion of the key findings of the research with reference to the three components of the research topic (the learning experience of SL postgraduate students, barriers to their adjustment, and whether participants' learning expectations were met) and existing literature follows.

### **Key Findings**

In terms of the first key finding (*Socio-emotional and cultural factors affecting learning experiences*), the importance of identity, a cultural gap, and successful relationships for learning experiences, was cemented. One of the most significant findings of the current study is the perceived importance of *identity* for success and wellbeing. Results from the data also informed the participants' sense of belonging in the New Zealand society. The data showed that most SL students were disappointed and felt disrespected for being mislabelled as Indians. Further, participants' frustration with mislabelling acted to exacerbate negative learning experiences and barriers to integration, and with implications for a loss of academic success and wellbeing. Since SL international postgraduate students' learning experiences and their perceptions were studied insufficiently, SL student participants' awareness of their identity and threats to it add an important contribution to the existing literature.

In relation to the effect of a *cultural gap* between international students' culture and that of the host country, (Campbell & Li, 2008; Lee & Rice, 2007) suggested that an insufficient knowledge of English language, adapting to a new culture, economic problems, and lack of knowledge in Western culture, held implications for learning success. The SL participants' learning experiences appeared to have been affected by the different cultural styles in New Zealand compared to what they had been used to in SL. For instance, the participating students perceived that they were expected to master the necessary requirements both academically and socially in order to feel integrated. However, it is noted that the

expectations of complete success in mastering cross-cultural practices could only be met with difficulty during a short stay. Li et al. (2002) and Li (2016) stated that international students specifically NESB students were confronted by both environmental and situational demands which could also challenge their own preconceptions, beliefs and values. Therefore students who come to a new setting with inadequate cultural knowledge may feel less confident or not included, and this idea is supported by the evidence that some SL participants still had difficulties with adjusting to the new culture.

The current data show, however, that in relation to forming *local friendships* SL students in general have fewer concerns. In contrast, the existing literature suggested that many Asian students found it hard to make local friends and this affected their social integration (Li, 2016; Yang & Sligo, 2008; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). It could be suggested that for participants in the current study who found difficulty in making local friends within the host learning environment, there may have been personal reasons or the possession of less adaptive attitudes compared to other students. It was suggested, for example, that students with a high-level of social connectedness form relationships easily compared to students with less adept social skills, and that a lack of social connectedness may lead to anxiety and depression (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Guan & Jones, 2011). Students who come from different cultural backgrounds, however, found it hard to bond with their peers and this made integration even more of a challenge (Li, 2016; Yang & Sligo, 2008; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Given the aforementioned literature, it could be proposed that self-confidence and self-reliance may not be improved for international students who have difficulty forging friendships in host learning environments, compared to more socially competent others.

In a further key finding, the present research data highlighted both positive and negative comments regarding *relationships with supervisors*. For some SL students, New Zealand supervisors are friendly and easy to approach compared to lecturers in Sri Lanka

where a hierarchical relationship was encouraged by SL culture. This close relationship was highly appreciated by most participants as a part of their learning experience. Having a supervisor who is friendly and open-minded is of great assistance to students in general (Birt et al., 2004; Li et al., 2002; Ramos-Sánchez, Esnil, Goodwin, Riggs, Touster, Wright, Ratanasiripong & Rodolfa, 2002). Notably, the participants highlighted the independent research skills they gained through the supervision. For instance, most participants agreed that they were motivated to become self-learners and this satisfied their expectations of learning in New Zealand. Such a finding supports the idea that New Zealand lecturers focus on critical thinking and independent learning styles rather than purely being facilitators (see Birt et al., 2004; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997).

However, not all aspects of the supervisor-student relationship were reported as positive. It has been reported that many lecturers were too busy to offer extra support, did not understand international students' language difficulties, and expected an academic writing standard equal to local students (Li, 2016; Li et al., 2002; Birt et al., 2004), and this was confirmed by the responses and experiences of some participants in the current study. For instance, responses from the current participants pertained also to less desirable experiences with supervisors including not understanding them, insufficient feedback, and no extra time to meet students and offer support. Birt et al. (2004) stated that according to their findings international students found that teachers in New Zealand did not understand students' problems or did not make an effort to do so. Participants who encountered negative experiences with lecturers thought that lecturers were unfriendly and did not recognise students' needs. Therefore, while the current study's findings bring a novel perception about New Zealand lecturers who motivate students to be independent learners, some of the data also support previous findings that there is still a gap between teachers and students' expectations. In short, although hopeful results were revealed in the current data, findings

also evidence that work may still need to be done on improving supervisors' relationships with their international postgraduate students.

In terms of *academic factors affecting learning experiences*, international students bring learning practices from their own countries and then find changes in the host country challenging in achieving their academic success (Carol & Ryan 2005). It could be suggested that many SL students were used to depending on the lecturers and their prepared lessons, but when they came to New Zealand, they found it fairly challenging to cope with differences in the education system. Further, Asian students including SL students prefer more theoretical work than independent studies, and expected more theoretical work from the teachers (Birt et al., 2004; Ward, 2001). But, the current data only partially matched with previous research as many SL participants acknowledged the new concept of being an independent researcher than depending on teachers' materials. This shows a positive change of attitudes of SL students towards academic achievement and research excellence.

English language and specifically *academic writing* was identified as an academic factor that could affect learning experience, and also could comprise a barrier to SL students' integration. In addition, the previous literature indicated many students from NESB struggle following having an insufficient command of the English language both orally and in writing (Andrade, 2006; Li, 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014; McKenzie & Schweitze's, 2001). In partial support of the aforementioned statement, SL participants in general claimed that their communication skills were up to the expected level and they hardly had issues expressing themselves verbally. However, associated with the latter half of the statement, the present research data evidenced that academic writing appears to be a concern for some of the SL participants. Academic writing is widely researched as an educational issue, but some SL participants thought expectations were too demanding, while some participants accepted it as a personal weakness which needs further improvement. For instance, a few participants were

not happy with lecturers' high expectations in the academic writing and stated that only local supervisors whose first language is English were firm and consistent. These unmatched expectations appeared to create negative and powerful attitudes towards the expectations of supervisors. Li et al. (2002) and Li (2016) proposed that international students including NESB students must meet the same standards as local students.

Therefore, students' concern over academic language expectations seemed to be a source of tension for them. Previous research suggested that a lack of mastery of the host country's language could cause students to feel uncomfortable and not included unless they were supported by the community (e.g., Elega & Özad, 2017; Tanaka, 2007). In addition, in an academic setting, when NESB students are confronted with a collection of "academic tribes and territories," (O'Regan & Johnston, 2001, p. 233) these students can be unaware of conventions and learning strategies, and their interpretations and expressions may not be explicitly articulated. This is a critical situation where understanding and acceptance by local people is needed. If students feel that they are not recognised, they may not only lose their language competency but also their sense of belonging. As supervisors play a major role in the students' lives, it could be suggested that they have both a responsibility and a duty to make international students feel more connected and included to the academic environment while students themselves also try to change their attitudes and find their own strategies for successful attainment. In this regard, it was proposed that university lecturers could follow the *middle way*, where cultural differences and language difficulties of students from NESB would be fairly considered (Li, 2016). For instance, if these students' academic expectations are not met or their voices are not being heard, they might feel that they are not part of society but merely strangers. Therefore, as suggested previously, social connectedness plays a significant role in increasing students' language proficiency and responsiveness

to cultures as psychological belonging comprises “feelings of well-being and satisfaction”, (Searle & Ward, 1990, p. 450).

The experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for a sense of belongingness and consequently for student academic success and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008) is therefore underpinned by successful relationships with peers and supervisors. Students’ learning experiences are complex and directly affect academic success and levels of happiness (Hall, 2014). Previous literature has explicitly suggested that these three basic needs must be met in order to feel a sense of fulfilment upon completion of an activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné, 2014; Osterman, 2000). Specifically Asian students, whose cultural practices are different from Western cultures, have struggled in adjusting to their host country’s culture, and in this case loneliness was accepted only at the initial stage (Li, 2016, Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Although students are expected to experience differences between the host country and their own culture, loneliness may have led to diminished student wellbeing and academic success. Some SL participants in the current study, for example, stated that they felt lonely and isolated not having common interests among other students. Andrade (2006), Pritchard and Skinner (2002) and Li and Kaye (1998) reported that international students frequently encounter negative learning experiences such as unsuccessful cultural integration, stereotyping, cultural isolation, and language differences. Importantly, well over a decade later, such issues persist (Li, 2016; Roy, 2017). As investigated previously, these issues highlighted the fact that the cultural gap is a major concern for SL students.

In relation to Theme 3, and as the second aim of the research, *barriers to integration* were highlighted. As a further finding, SL students reported that they experienced several barriers to integration. New Zealand slang and accents, loneliness and stereotyping were identified in this regard. For instance, a number of students have highlighted in the results

chapter that they were confronted by New Zealand slang and accent and it resulted in not feeling included in the society. As stated by previous studies, local teachers and students also could make an attempt to allow these students to adjust to the society slowly (Birt et al., 2004; Li., 2016). In addition, it is also recommended that while respecting their own cultures, both locals and students coming from different cultural backgrounds must make a special effort to welcome changes in the host country and accept other cultures.

The present research suggests that each individual and nationality is unique and therefore cannot be generalized to subsume other unique identities without detrimental effect. Further, the act of being *wrongly labelled* caused frustration. Most participants disapproved of misplaced generalization between two nations (SL and India) based on outer physical appearance and/or local people's attitudes towards those nationalities. Such findings underline the idea that each individual needs to feel that they are included in the community where they live and feel respected, supporting the idea that belonging is perceived to be a fundamental human right (Hall, 2014).

Indeed, misplaced stereotyping, in the current case, may have led to reduced student wellbeing and academic success. Steele (2011) suggested that negative stereotypes may produce a lifelong effect that may harm the psychological welfare of those who endure them. One might suggest that if the negative stereotype was connected to a misplaced identity (as evidenced in the current findings), the effect could be even more harmful. Previous findings suggested that negative stereotyping is often associated with Asian students and such stereotyping has itself been associated with threat (Cheryan & Bodenhausen 2000; Lee, 2012). Furthermore in terms of discrimination, racial inequality creates stereotype threat and also compromises the performance, health, and wellbeing of threatened group members (Erman & Walton, 2015). Kwon, Kwon and Overton-Adkins (2014) stated that Asian students including Indian students were aware of negative stereotypes associated with them,



and felt excluded as a result. The current data strongly support SL postgraduate students' awareness of the negative stereotyping against their (misplaced) ethnicity that it is associated with Indians. Specifically, disappointment was raised when SL students also were aware of the fact that their own cultural group was associated with generally positive ones and then naturally they were despondent at being wrongly connected with an ethnic group to whom negative stereotypes were levelled. Adding novel findings, this research also suggested that a positive perception of Sri Lankans as a separate nation exists in New Zealand but only when they were uniquely and accurately identified as SL students.

It could be suggested that SL students' ability to cope with situations or quality of *resilience* to adjust to any given circumstance would have assisted them to ignore the negative stereotyping that could have affected their education. Von Hippel, Von Hippel, Conway, Preacher, Schooler, and Radvansky (2005) stated that stereotype denial is an individual strategy which helps students to improve self-integrity by rejecting the self-relevance of a stereotype. Therefore, it could be mentioned that SL students may have applied stereotype denial as a mechanism to reject negative stereotypes against them and it may have helped them to concentrate on their studies. Self-affirmation theory, however, comprises the idea that in order to protect the self, each individual is encouraged to maintain self-integrity, allowing individuals to respond more confidently to potentially challenging situations (Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993). In the current study, it could also be suggested that SL students may likely have self-affirmed some of the positive stereotypes associated with their culture and ethnicity to engender resilience.

Finally, the third aim of the current thesis was informed by Theme 6, *whether the expectations of learning have been met*. SL students' expression of unmet expectations highlighted the idea that in spite of positive elements of New Zealand education, SL participants' still registered a lack of satisfaction that all their expectations were met.

Importantly, universities and administrative officials (including those who promote international education) have a responsibility for enhancing international students' academic success and physiological wellbeing. It could be suggested that an induction period to welcome international students should not be limited to a short period and students' wellbeing must not be ignored. Therefore, ongoing interactive programmes can be encouraged to make sure that these students are well taken care of and issues such as stereotyping are regularly attended. Li et al. (2002) and Birt et al. (2004) suggested that most importantly, international students come to study to an unknown place leaving behind their close ones and cultural practices and naturally they are committed and have higher expectations to be successful in their studies. However, if the students feel that their sense of belonging is not satisfied, or that they are not encouraged to fit in, their personal happiness and wellbeing will be affected as well.

Li et al. (2002) stated that the host country [New Zealand] must respect international students' needs as much as local students' priorities. In addition, the host country is also responsible for preparing local students to engage themselves in a *global village* where they respect and accept other students from different cultures (Li et al., 2002). Tarling (2004), and Taurima (2003) stated that New Zealand welcomes one of the fastest growing and diverse international student population in the world. Yet, the existing literature suggests that students are still encountering a number of academic and social issues (no less important among them persistent negative stereotypes associated with some racial ethnic groups, for example, Indians). It could be suggested that these may affect not only students' wellbeing but also the country's reputation as an educational provider.

Given the above key findings, it could be suggested that implications for the academic success and wellbeing of SL postgraduate students may be applicable to other international students. Further, students' voices need to be heard as they are supported to adjust to the host

country or university expectations and to develop the economy of the country. For international education to be fully supported within Aotearoa/New Zealand's economy then, awareness of international students' needs and cultural issues needs to be raised, most especially regarding NESB students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limiting factors specific to phenomenological investigations were found in the current study. Difficulties in accessing a large number of SL participants may have limited the range of participant responses yielded. In order to attract further participants, the researcher could have offered greater incentives and engaged in more assertive advertising techniques (see Birnholtz, Horn, Finholt & Bae, 2004). In addition, a possible confounding factor of varying lengths of participants' stay in the host country and varying postgraduate courses may have been encountered. Nevertheless, the relative consistency of the reported lived experiences of the participants indicates that no meaningful confound occurred. The current data showed that while results from such a small and qualitative sample cannot truly be generalised to other populations, they can still offer valid comments on implications (such as stereotyping, cultural gap, loneliness, shortcomings of the education system, academic writing and unmet expectations) for the integration into New Zealand learning environments for SL students.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the main objectives of the present research is to investigate SL postgraduate students' learning experiences in New Zealand. Following SL students' perceptions of learning environments and experiences in New Zealand, the researcher expected to pave the way for university administrations to review policies to provide a better academic experiences to postgraduate students in New Zealand. Recently, the Ministry of Education introduced "International students' Wellbeing Strategy" (Ministry of Education, 2017). The

strategy prioritised the well-being of international students and acknowledged that these students are valued for their contribution to the New Zealand economy. In spite of these policies and awareness, it is unfortunate that the majority of SL postgraduate students who were interviewed still feel uncomfortable as a separate ethnic group. Therefore, further research is recommended to investigate specifically SL students' learning experiences, and whether there is an improvement in time, with these new policies and strategies.

Although the present thesis aimed at investigating SL students' learning experiences, future studies should consider these students' strategies to adopt to the host country. For instance, ways in which a better educational environment for international students' integration to New Zealand society can be further investigated. Having analysed the responses of PhD students and a fee-paying Master's student, it is proposed that different degree levels (undergraduates, Masters and PhD students) may have had diverse learning experiences. Therefore this aspect raised the prospect of further investigation. For instance, the question of whether fee-paying master students may experience more complications and difficulties than PhD students who come with scholarships, was raised. With more time allocated, future research could therefore involve selection of a wider range of postgraduate SL students in terms of scholarship holders, fee-paying students, those engaged in a range of postgraduate degree courses, and those who have been studying in New Zealand for varying lengths of time.

Following the results of the current thesis, it is recommended that further investigation should be conducted in order to find ways to prevent discrimination and other negative learning factors that may affect international students' learning experiences and sense of belonging. Although international education remains one of New Zealand's export classification and is still growing (Joyce 2013; McPherson, 2016), there appears to be no parallel effort to reduce international students' issues and increase their level of happiness

and wellbeing. There is much awareness and promotion to attract international students, but similar effort should be evident to enhance these students' social wellbeing and academic success.

Importantly, Li et al. (2002) suggested that international students' issues are taken for granted and not given due attention. The present research suggests that indeed, after many years of investigation, issues impacting the lived experiences of international students (specifically SL postgraduate students) remain the same. Nevertheless, the present research shows also that student agency (via resilience) can play a part in overcoming barriers to integration for SL postgraduate students. Further research could investigate how international students in general find inclusion in the society where they live and study abroad (Andrade, 2006; Birt et al., 2004; Li, 2016), and could possibly augment qualitative research with quantitative methods.

## **Conclusion**

The current research sought to investigate three main areas: SL postgraduate students' learning experiences, their barriers to integration and whether these students' academic expectations were met in New Zealand. Moreover, there were two main reasons for choosing this research topic. Firstly being a SL student, the researcher felt compelled to investigate whether SL students' learning experiences were the same as other Asian students or unique. Secondly the researcher identified a gap in the literature in relation to SL students' learning experience as a separate group. In conclusion, the current findings suggested that SL students' unique awareness of their cultural identity not being acknowledged as distinct from Indian cultural identity, was acutely felt. In addition other factors loneliness, a cultural gap between SL and host country peers and teachers, were suggested to have potential implications for the SL students' sense of belonging. Certain issues, such as academic writing skills, lack of cultural knowledge of nuanced aspects of the English language (such as

slang and accents) were experienced in common with other Asian postgraduate international student groups. The present study, however, contributed to addressing the gap in the previous literature where SL students' learning experiences were inadequately investigated. The findings of the current study suggest that resilience contributed to the ability of many SL students to address adversity where it was experienced, by engaging in self-affirmation with positive aspects of their cultural identity. The findings of the present research inform factors that will shape future SL students' learning experiences in New Zealand and will also inform the participants, and enlighten the researcher.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Example of Participant Information Sheet

Appendix B: Example of Consent Form

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Appendix D: Themes and sub-themes for final coding

## Appendix A: Example of Participant Information Sheet



## EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WORK

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### Participant Information Sheet

**Title:** Sri Lankan postgraduate students' learning perspectives, experiences and expectations of academic qualifications in New Zealand.

**To: Prospective Participants**

My name is Sudheera Nanayakkara and I am conducting this research to fulfil the requirements for a Master of Education, at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, the University of Auckland. My research is conducted under the supervision of Dr Penelope Watson. I am writing this Participant Information Sheet (PIS) to cordially invite you to participate in my research project.

**The purpose of the research?**

My research aims to investigate the personal learning perspectives, experiences and expectations of Sri Lankan (SL) postgraduate students in New Zealand. It will examine their learning expectations, and challenges such as discrimination, stereotyping and other issues of basic needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) that are barriers to belonging. In this research, I will investigate the implications of experiencing (or not experiencing) acceptance,

for SL postgraduate students. I also aim to explore whether SL postgraduate students' expectations of academic qualification or the learning environment have been met.

### **Data Collection: Procedure and Future Use**

In order to collect data for the research, I will conduct a semi structured interview comprising a series of pre-designed questions. The interview sessions will run for 45-60 minutes and be carried out on University of Auckland premises (in a pre-arranged room). Participants will receive snacks during the interview and a double movie voucher. Upon your consent, responses to each question will be audio recorded and transcribed later. Your willingness to participate could be confirmed by signing the Consent Form and send it back to me (at my mail below) with your signature.

The data will be used for the purpose of my research thesis as well as for conference presentations and publication.

### **Right to Withdraw**

Your participation is voluntary and you may feel free to withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection and up until two weeks from the date of being sent your transcript. You will be sent a transcript of your interview and you will be able to review and / or edit to the transcription and return the amended transcript within two weeks from the date of being sent. After this time, changes cannot be made to the transcript.

### **Discomfort and Risks**

Although we consider there is little risk of discomfort from participating in the research, if you do feel uncomfortable at any stage, you will be referred to the University Health and Counselling Service. The university counsellor would be available (phone number: 09 923 7681) for your assistance. Your identity will be kept strictly confidential to others within and outside your university and your privacy and confidentiality will be maintained throughout. Please note that your relationship with your university **will not be affected** in any way by your decision either to participate in this research, or not to participate, or if you wish to withdraw later. If interviews reveal that persons such as staff or others have demonstrated discrimination, their identity will not be revealed, but action will be followed up appropriately, discretely, and anonymously via the University or Faculty Equity committee.

### **The Benefits of Participation**

Prior research has shown that there have been learning challenges for Asian students, such as the negative effects of stereotype threat, disappointment, and other issues of frustration. My aim in conducting this research is, to understand whether/how SL postgraduate students have shared similar experiences. Once the data has been collated and analyzed, you as a participant may benefit by gaining insight into the phenomena under investigation as you will have the option of receiving a summary report of the results. Additionally, the final report will be informative for other SL students who would like to explore the learning experiences of previous students.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Neither your identity, nor the identity of The University of Auckland, nor anyone identified during the course of the study will be disclosed to anyone within or outside the university, and will not be published in the research thesis or resulting presentations. Further, your identification will be concealed through the use of pseudonyms where necessary and all identifying features will be altered. **In addition, any student of the principal supervisor and myself will be excluded from the research and will not be able to participate.** If the information you provide is published, you will not be identifiable. However, since there are a limited number of SL postgraduate students who are attending the particular university in New Zealand, there may be a slight chance of identification. Nevertheless, all attempts will be made to conceal identification through the use of pseudonyms where necessary. Your participation or non-participation in this study will have no effect on your grades or relationship with the university and that you may contact your HoD should you feel that this assurance has not been met.

### **Data Storage and Retention, Destruction**

All electronic data will be stored on my supervisor's password-protected computer at the University of Auckland and hard copies will be stored in a locked cabinet in her office. After 6 years and all data and records will be destroyed.

### **Results of the Research**

The findings of the research will be presented in my thesis and possibly in future conference presentations, and publications. The thesis will be placed at the University of

Auckland library, and a copy will be made available for you to read if you wish. As well, you will receive a summary of the findings if you request one via the Consent Form.

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: [ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz).

The researcher or her supervisor, whose contact details is listed below, may be contacted if you have further questions about the research.

**Contact details:**

Student Researcher name and contact details	Supervisor name and contact details	Head of Department/School name and contact details
Sudheera Nanayakkara <a href="mailto:knan585@aucklanduni.ac.nz">knan585@aucklanduni.ac.nz</a>	Dr Penelope Watson <i>School of Learning Development and Professional Practice</i> <i>Faculty of Education and Social Work</i> <a href="mailto:p.watson@auckland.ac.nz">p.watson@auckland.ac.nz</a> <i>Phone: +649 3737 599</i> <i>ext 46424</i>	Associate Professor Richard Hamilton <i>School of Learning Development and Professional Practice</i> <i>Faculty of Education and Social Work</i> <i>Phone: +649 3737 599</i> <i>ext 85619</i>

**Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 05<sup>th</sup> of December 2017 for three years, Reference Number 020152.**

## Appendix B: Example of Consent Form



## EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WORK

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**SCHOOL OF  
LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT, &  
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**  
Te Kura  
Whakatairanga i te Ako Ngaio  
me te Whanaketanga

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**The University of**

**Auckland**

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Auckland 1135  
New Zealand

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### Consent to Participate in Research To be held for a period of six years

**Title: Learning perspectives and experiences of Sri Lankan international postgraduate students in New Zealand.**

**Researcher:** Sudheera Nanayakkara

**Researcher Principal:** Dr Penelope Watson

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) provided to me earlier.
- I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interview and that they will also be audio recorded and transcribed for data collection and completion purposes.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to the completion of data collection (30<sup>th</sup> December, 2017).
- I understand that my participation/non-participation, or withdrawal (prior to completion of data collection) will not affect my relationship with my University in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information, including audio recordings and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.



- I understand that I may withdraw without giving a reason.
- I understand that neither my identity, nor the identity of The University of Auckland, nor anyone identified during the course of the study will be disclosed to anyone within or outside the university, and will not be published in the research thesis or resulting presentations.
- I understand that I will be given the opportunity to review and modify the interview transcript.
- I understand that the findings may be used for publication and conference presentations.
- I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research: Yes /No

**I agree to participate in the research.**

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I wish to receive a summary of findings, which can be emailed to me at this email address:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee  
on 05<sup>th</sup> of December 2017 for three years, Reference Number 020152.**

## Appendix C: Interview Schedule

### Interview Schedule

1. Could you please tell me a little about what is it like to be a SL student studying in New Zealand (NZ)?

(more questions and probes will be asked based on the response from the participant and they are as follows)

- Can you tell me more about that or can you elaborate it a little more?
- Could you please give me an example for that?
- How did you find that situation or why did you feel like that?
- Do you think other SL students would find that too?

2. Could you please specify any barriers to adjustment to NZ society you perceive for SL students studying in NZ?

- As a SL international student what do you think are your major learning challenges and experiences at the University?
- Have you ever being judged by a stereotype? If yes, would you be able to describe that situation and how it made you feel?
- Have you ever experienced being discriminated against? If yes, would you be able to describe that experience and your feelings about it?

3. Could you tell me whether you think academic expectations and expectations of learning environments are met for SL students studying in NZ?

- What are some positive aspects of learning at university in NZ?
- Have you ever had a/any negative learning experience/s at university in NZ?
- How do you think that affected your performance?

**Appendix D: Themes and Sub-themes for Final Coding**

Interview Questions	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Could you please tell me a little about what is it like to be a SL student studying in New Zealand (NZ)?	<p>Socio-emotional and Cultural Factors Affecting Learning Experiences,</p> <p>Identity, Local Friendship, Cultural gap,</p> <p>Academic Factors Affecting Learning Experiences</p> <p>Shortcomings,</p>	<p>Socio-emotional and Cultural Factors Affecting Learning Experiences,</p> <p>Identity, Local Friendship Cultural gap, Approachable and friendly supervisors</p> <p>Academic Factors Affecting Learning Experiences</p> <p>Shortcomings, Positive elements in NZ education, Academic writing</p>	<p>Socio-emotional and Cultural Factors Affecting Learning Experiences,</p> <p>Identity, Local Friendship Cultural gap, Approachable and friendly supervisors</p> <p>Academic Factors Affecting Learning Experiences</p> <p>Shortcomings, Positive elements in NZ education, Academic writing</p>	<p>Identity, Local Friendship Cultural gap, Approachable and friendly supervisors</p> <p>Academic Factors Affecting Learning Experiences</p> <p>Positive elements in NZ education, Academic writing</p>	<p>Socio-emotional and Cultural Factors Affecting Learning Experiences,</p> <p>Identity, Local Friendship Cultural gap, Approachable and friendly supervisors</p> <p>Academic Factors Affecting Learning Experiences</p> <p>Shortcomings, Positive elements in NZ education, Academic writing</p>	<p>Local Friendship, Cultural gap, Approachable and friendly supervisors</p> <p>Academic Factors Affecting Learning Experiences</p> <p>Shortcomings, Positive elements in NZ education, Academic writing</p>

Interview Questions	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Could you please specify any barriers to adjustment to NZ society you perceive for SL students studying in NZ?	Barriers to Integration.  New Zealand slang & accent, Loneliness,	Barriers to Integration.  New Zealand slang & accent, Loneliness,	Barriers to Integration.  New Zealand slang & accent, Loneliness,	Barriers to Integration.  New Zealand slang & accent, Loneliness,	Barriers to Integration.  New Zealand slang & accent, Loneliness,	New Zealand slang & accent, Loneliness,
Have you ever being judged by a stereotype? If yes, would you be able to describe that situation and how it made you feel?	“I am a Sri Lankan”: The Upsetting Experience of Being Wrongly Labelled.  Stereotyping	“I am a Sri Lankan”: The Upsetting Experience of Being Wrongly Labelled.  Stereotyping	“I am a Sri Lankan”: The Upsetting Experience of Being Wrongly Labelled.  Stereotyping	“I am a Sri Lankan”: The Upsetting Experience of Being Wrongly Labelled.  Stereotyping	“I am a Sri Lankan”: The Upsetting Experience of Being Wrongly Labelled.  Stereotyping	
Have you ever experienced being discriminated against? If yes, would you be able to describe that experience and your feelings about it?	Stereotyping,	Stereotyping,  Resilience	Stereotyping,  Resilience	Stereotyping,  Resilience	Stereotyping,  Resilience	Resilience,

Interview Questions	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Could you tell me whether you think academic expectations and expectations of learning environments are met for SL students studying in NZ?	Whether expectations of learning the learning environment were met	Whether expectations of learning the learning environment were met	Whether expectations of learning the learning environment were met	Whether expectations of learning the learning environment were met	Whether expectations of learning the learning environment were met	Whether expectations of learning the learning environment were met
What are some positive aspects of learning at university in NZ?	Role of a good supervisor, Motivation to become independent researchers	Role of a good supervisor, Motivation to become independent researchers, Positive elements of NZ education	Role of a good supervisor, Motivation to become independent researchers, Positive elements of NZ education	Role of a good supervisor, Motivation to become independent researchers, Positive elements of NZ education	Role of a good supervisor, Motivation to become independent researchers,	Motivation to become independent researcher, Academic writing style
How do you think that affected your performance?	Unmet expectations Unmet expectations	Unmet expectations Unmet expectations			Unmet expectations Unmet expectations	