

Living closely together but in parallel

Multi-dimensional challenges to the integration of international students in a Danish 'muscle' town

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‘Recruitment of international students: challenges and opportunities’

Living closely together but in parallel: Multi-dimensional challenges to the integration of international students

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Abstract

Esbjerg is located in the Wadden Sea region and is a regional centre with approximately 72,000 inhabitants. Commercially, the city has recently ranked first among major Danish cities in the creation of jobs. However, in Denmark, it is mainly other cities that attract younger students, and Esbjerg has some of the same structural problems due to outmigration as Danish rural areas in general. It is therefore important for Esbjerg to be able to attract international students so that businesses and institutions in the region can recruit skilled employees. In this book chapter, we aim to reanalyse data from 10 semi-structured interviews with international students at higher education institutions in Esbjerg conducted in 2016. We position our empirical findings within the literature on international student integration to investigate the obstacles to international student integration into study, business and leisure life in Esbjerg and potential solutions given Esbjerg's peripheral location. The chapter thus aims to improve our understanding of cultural, work-related and everyday life challenges that are present in university town environments where international students study, mainly from the perspective of students.

Keywords:

International student integration, housing, 'stay-home culture', higher education, student jobs and internships, peripheral town

Living closely together but in parallel – how stay-home culture, segregated housing, culturally immature businesses, and mobile lifestyle multi-dimensionally challenge the integration of international students in a Danish ‘muscle’ town

Introduction

At the end of February 2020, Wadden Sea National Park held its 10th annual research meeting. Scientists from all over Denmark gathered in Esbjerg to hear about research results on the Wadden Sea area. One of the presenters discussed developments in the number of breeding birds. The birds had been monitored using systematic bird counts. The censuses showed that the number of breeding birds in the Wadden Sea is in decline. The speaker stated that it is important to know more about the conditions that make the waders come to the area and want to stay.

When one of the authors of this chapter delivered a presentation later that day about young students in the largest city in the Wadden Sea area - Esbjerg - she referred directly back to the research on waders: it is important to know more about the conditions that make *young people* want to stay in this area, just as it is important to know this information about the waders. At a recent educational conference held among actors with an interest in the educational field in Esbjerg, the CEO of one of the major local firms also emphasized the need to better understand young people's selection of a town in which to study for Esbjerg to be able to develop into a successful educational region.

Current statistical data on the net inflow of 20- to 24-year-olds in five Danish municipalities show that, compared to the other major cities in Denmark, Esbjerg is losing this population segment. In 2018, the population of 20-24-year-olds in Esbjerg decreased by 243 persons (StatBank Denmark, 2019). This decrease was in sharp contrast to the trend in larger university towns, where the yearly net inflow of persons in this age group increased to just under 2,000 (Aalborg and Odense), just over 3,000 (Aarhus) and just under 10,000 (Copenhagen) in 2018.

Table 1. Net inflow of 20- to 24-year-olds in five Danish municipalities (own original work based on StatBank Denmark, 2019)

Municipality	Net inflow 2008	Net inflow 2018
Copenhagen	7,058	9,024
Aarhus	1,085	3,352
Aalborg	736	1,795
Odense	701	1,693
Esbjerg	-186	-243

Such a development creates a population gap and is of great importance for the demographic development and tax base of Esbjerg Municipality and for opportunities to ensure that there is enough manpower for the area's businesses. Consequently, measures are being taken to attract more Danish students to Esbjerg, but initiatives have also been launched to increase benefits for international students who choose to study in Esbjerg.

Just as the wadden see birds come from far away, this chapter focuses on how university towns can work to better retain *students who come from far away*. We achieve this aim by analysing interviews with international students living in Esbjerg and by answering the following questions:

What are the obstacles to international student integration into the study, business and leisure life of Esbjerg, and what are plausible solutions given Esbjerg's peripheral location?

The chapter proceeds in the following way. First, we present international literature on the research topic. This is followed by a short context and methods section explaining the Danish and Esbjerg international student situation and the data collection procedure. Then, we present the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 10 international students. We end with a discussion and conclusions on the obstacles and solutions to improve the integration of international students in the Esbjerg region.

Obstacles observed in the international literature

A wide range of literature addresses the retention of students during their study period, but for regions such as Esbjerg, the retention of students in the region *after* graduation and integration in the regional job market is also important. This is of course also related to international students' experience, learning and creation of networks during their study time. We thus present literature from both inside and outside the classroom but exclude literature that addresses the initial recruitment of international students and the role of international agents in recruitment strategies to attract the best international students in a globalized competition. Importantly, much of the international student literature is from contexts other than Denmark, such as the US, Australia, the UK and Canada, because of the high numbers of international students in these countries. There is also a large amount of literature focusing on students from Asian and Middle Eastern countries, as the largest number of international students come from these countries.

Insufficient cultural mixing and the need for a more responsive study environment among academic faculty, counsellors and students

Taha and Cox (2016) investigated international student networks through a case study in a UK university. They noted that international student research has been approached from mainly two perspectives – an 'adjustment to the home context' perspective and a 'diversity'/'multicultural' perspective – with both perspectives focusing on the within-class context. They described friend and work networks, with 'work networks' referring to networks associated with study work in class. Taha and Cox observed Haythornthwaite's (2008) four types of networks (work, friendship, advice, and support networks) among international students as well as changing clusters of relationships over time. They stated that the literature shows that co-nationals (those with the same language and culture) are the first preferred network for both international students and home students when working in class, which constitutes a 'failure of cultural mixing' (185). In addition, Taha and Cox (2016) identified other factors, for example, the 'programme of study and learning motives and time' (188). They also highlighted the existence of so-called invisible but important outside class networks, noting, 'Only work and

friendship networks were based on others in the classroom. Personal support and advice networks showed continuity with pre-existing networks' (191). Overall, Taha and Cox's study indicates the importance of proactively and continuously working with integration dynamics in class.

In a study with students from Alberta, Canada, Nunes and Arthur (2013) interviewed 16 graduate students after graduation and 'explored the transition experiences of international students living their 1st-year after degree completion in Canada' (36). Nunes and Arthur (2013) found that these students did not note the importance of networks for jobs until after they had graduated and had difficulties entering the job market. The authors wrote, 'In hindsight, they recognized the importance of building networks and work experience as soon as possible' (41). Generally, the international students they interviewed emphasized a need for employers to be more open-minded and open to diversity and to try to better value their international experience or different experience. The authors also suggested that career services personnel at higher education institutions should be more focused on graduate students and their acquisition of work experience and networks before graduation. Regarding incoming students themselves, the interviewees recommended that they should use time to become acquainted with Canadian culture and people and the work environment. One specific interviewee recommended that international students 'do more volunteer work', develop their 'English language proficiency', 'find resources and information' and 'be brave' (40). Concrete suggestions from Nunes and Arthur included the establishment of a database of companies interested in hiring and workshops to help students increase their skills and build their networks. According to Nunes and Arthur, counselling services should also to some degree cover international graduate student immigration and familial aspirations. The interviewees proposed peer mentoring programmes with the involvement of current international students to help incoming students focus on learning about the language, culture and work environment (42).

Arthur (2017) indicated the importance of readiness to socially integrate international students among academic faculty, counsellors, and local students. Academic faculty can facilitate international students' adjustment to the learning environment, provide an international curriculum, react when they observe international students having difficulties thriving, and provide networking opportunities and discuss questions related to post-graduate work experience (888-889). Counsellors should be aware of the diversity of international

students and help international students in relation to both cross-cultural adjustment and culture shock through culturally responsive interventions. They should also help students who are suffering from acculturation stress and who lack social support to overcome barriers to engaging in the local community (889-891). Arthur (2017) stated that international students 'are often far more motivated for cross-cultural peer interactions than local students' (891). Arthur referred to Kashima and Loh (2006) when he noted that consequently, 'friendship development may occur more frequently with co-nationals or other international students than with local students'. Despite a lack of a need to socialize with others beyond one's friends and family, the positioning of international students as others, an aversion to the exploration of diversity, different cultural norms regarding active and passive learning participation, etc., local students should, according to Arthur, therefore try not to isolate and discriminate international students academically and socially. Instead, local students should see interaction with international students as an opportunity to enhance their global knowledge locally, and opportunities on campus for interactions between international and local students should be fostered. As Arthur stated, 'Becoming an international student is more than a geographical transition; all students are international learners when they actively seek opportunities to learn from the diversity found in educational contexts' (892). Although Arthur concluded that there are many macro, family, institutional and personal processes affecting the decision to become an international student, the international study experience itself, and the decision to stay or leave after graduation, his article concentrated on reviewing literature concerning the study period. However, Arthur also concluded that the emphasis on the recruitment of international student must be coordinated with resources that create supportive academic and interpersonal experiences for international students specifically as well as for locals to move away from a 'them joining us' approach because 'all students gain from a careful preparation of the campus community, including curriculum content, pedagogical practices, and support services required for internationalization' (Arthur, 2017, 892). Arthur stated that 'international students are a relatively untapped source of learning about an increasingly connected and global society' (892-993).

Financial, internship-related and work-related obstacles due to a nonresponsive labour market

In the American context, Rubin (2014) reported that students often feel turned away by companies and institutions when trying to enter the local labour market through internships and jobs. She stated that in regions relying on international students, it is important to have specific organizations working to connect international students to internships and post-graduation employment and help international offices in their attempts to achieve the same objective. Rubin (2014, 33) cited a director of international programmes and services who emphasized that a high retention rate indicates success regarding the ‘institution’s level of internationalization or level of accommodating cultural difference’. Interestingly, Rubin referred to a large survey on student retention in educational institutions, which generated responses from 480 educational professionals and 517 international students from 100 institutions; the survey showed that students mainly noted financial and internship/job-related obstacles to retention, while a large number of responses from educational professionals noted the school reputation, finances and academics.

Blackmore and Rahmini (2019) interviewed 34 Australian employers in multinational, medium and small firms and found that despite a common discourse on workforce diversity in relation to gender, cultural and linguistic capital, unconscious biases existed in recruitment practices. These biases reproduced a monocultural environment in organizations, which ‘screened out’ rather than included people without proper ‘Western worker habitus’, thus undermining diversity and promoting specific cultural norms of the organization. The authors described this screening out process as being based on a ‘best fit’ rationale. Even though the employers emphasized that graduates must be able to ‘think outside of the box’, ‘different forms of cultural and linguistic capital were not considered to lead to innovation or new perspectives’ (442). Blackmore and Rahmini explained that international graduate applicants especially had difficulties being accepted into small firms due to concerns that they would not fit in and would not be ready to work with clients or in groups (443). The authors stated that few international graduates were directly recruited into the most popular workplaces, and the ‘...few who were recruited had either gone through a rigorous selection process which (...) effectively excluded most international graduates or had undertaken significant long-term strategic planning – such as returning to their home country to gain work experience, being fluent in English prior to coming to Australia, and working in

jobs out of their specialism and moving horizontally and cross-nationally, thus acquiring those forms of social capital that led to achieving their desired employment destination’.

Context and methods

The Danish and Esbjerg policy context

Esbjerg developed around the harbour located in the northern part of the Wadden Sea region, first, as a fishing port and then as an export harbour for agricultural products. This development was followed by extensive offshore oil activities. Today, the Esbjerg region has succeeded in its green transition, becoming a leading town in this area, for example, through its large wind energy industry. Recently, Esbjerg was among the leading Danish cities in the creation of jobs (OECD, 2016).

In Esbjerg, the recruitment of international students is a responsibility that is divided between higher education institutions, which market their educational services to international students and help with their housing situations; the municipality, which aids students in practical matters and acts as host; and businesses, which provide job and apprenticeship opportunities. At the national Danish level, international student integration is a political issue, too. Recently, a matter of national political concern has been that $\frac{1}{4}$ of students from English-language graduate programmes have left Denmark within two years after completing their education and that only about one in three continue to work in Denmark after two years (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2018). The concern stems from the fact that English-speaking students receive an education and that some also receive funding from the Danish student grants and loans scheme (abbreviated ‘SU’ in Danish) paid by Danish taxpayers. Calculations have been made that show that the presence of international students at higher education institutions in Denmark *can* result in economic gains for Danish society. However, so-called ‘dimensioning’ initiatives to reduce the number of international students at specific institutions have been especially targeted at institutions with large proportions of international students. For institutions to avoid being affected by ‘dimensioning’, they must show that their students manage to obtain a job.

Methods

Ten semi-structured interviews with international students were conducted from April to September 2016 as part of a larger study on young students' experience of moving to Esbjerg; in this larger study, interviews were conducted with 30 students in total. The interviews were transcribed and coded in the computer program NVivo 11 as part of writing of a previous report, which made it easy to revisit the data to write this chapter focusing only on the group of international students. The international students mainly came from other European countries. The participants did not receive any payment or gifts for their participation, and we talked to them in their own study environment, which supported the reliability of the results. The rationale for the use of a qualitative approach stemmed from our objective to gain a thorough understanding of international students' everyday challenges and goals.

Results

A good welcome from higher education institutions and the municipality

The international students have experienced a good reception in Esbjerg, including practical assistance for housing from higher education institutions, which have often found homes for them. This has helped make the decision to relocate easier and helped the students feel more secure:

‘Yeah, that was important. When you are moving abroad and this service at the university says, “Oh, we will look for accommodation for you”, then it is more okay. (...) That is an important part of saying “Okay, I’m doing it!”’.

The students note that the reception from educational institutions, from both administrative staff and teachers and from the Study City of Esbjerg, which is a collaboration between the educational institutions and the Esbjerg Business Development organization, has been good. However, some students emphasize that a more intense effort could be made in the initial days of international students' arrival, when there is an opportunity for deeper integration because everyone is in a seeking phase.

In general, the interviewees are satisfied with their opportunities to create networks at educational institutions.

For example, one interviewee says,

‘When I was coming (...), I was completely alone, so I was [like], “Oh, I’ll never meet other people”. But everyone here came with the same kind of situation, so we just met in the common areas and wanted to socialize together. So, it was not a problem in the end at all’.

Another foreign student describes being impressed by the amount of introductory aid given and notes that he is not sure if Danish students receive the same help. He says,

‘...This welcome day and this teaching [us] all the things in the university, how it works... Perhaps it is because we are foreigners and they also do this in [my country] with the foreigners, I’m not sure. But when I started university, I was eighteen, and everything was completely new, and you did not have any idea [about] what should I do, who should I talk to if I have a problem... Here, they told us exactly where to go and what to do. I think the welcome from the university is perfect; they showed us the building, [and] we had a barbeque to welcome everybody. No complaints about that, completely the opposite...’.

A third international student confirms that the international students are given substantial help from the educational institution:

‘...Everything I manage through the university, the international office from (...) the university was guiding us all the time and helping us with all the personal matters and the guidance we were seeking’.

A fourth international student similarly states that it was easy to create networks after arrival. She says,

‘It was actually surprisingly easy. (...) I had really good flat mates in the house, [and] they introduced me to everyone, to their friends... And then I think my classmates are really open-minded, so I think I know enough people, and also I am attending Danish classes, and there I

met some girls who I found out was living in the place where I am living, so I have a bunch of friends, and it is really nice’.

Several of the foreign students mention that an app provided by the municipality, ‘Esbjerg live’; the annual welcome meeting with the mayor; and the welcome pack for newcomers from Esbjerg Municipality are good resources, and some students also compare these resources to those provided in other Danish municipalities where they have lived. Regarding the municipal welcome package, one student says,

‘I remember we got some free tickets for newcomers; it was pretty nice to go, like to the swimming pool and the aquarium with seals and some museums around, so it was kind of to introduce myself the city and to get an idea of what are the options’.

Another aspect that students cite as beneficial but that also highlights culture differences and presents students with an initial obstacle is the variety of learning styles that international students encounter in Denmark. One student states,

‘The university (...) was quite a shock for me because I am used to universities with thousands of students, and this is more familiar, and the way of education [here] is different from what I am used to because we can talk to each other, and we are working in groups, and we can talk to the teachers if we have some problems...’.

One student describes not being accustomed to taking oral exams, which involve people listening to you, while another student positively remarks on ‘the way the educational system is working here in Denmark, where you have projects with the companies and every semester you have another project’.

Studying together but living apart

Regarding negative aspects of the housing situation in Esbjerg, it is most often mentioned in the interviews that foreign students live by themselves, and thus, there is a tendency for their networks including both international and Danish student to not to be particularly developed. While some interviewees do not perceive this

to be particularly problematic, others note that it can be a challenge to interact with Danes and to try to learn the language.

The tendency for international students and Danish students to form their own respective networks is mentioned by an international student who, when asked, if he has succeeded in creating a network in Esbjerg, answers,

‘Yeah, I think so. But mostly with international students’.

However, some of the international students say that they are trying to form connections with Danes. One student attends gymnastics classes, but she has only ‘accidentally’ talked to someone in this context. Other students are more positive and say they interact with Danes by going to the swimming pool and by engaging in Danish teaching. Another interviewee hopes she will interact with Danes in a creative course that she has recently signed up to attend in her spare time. Nevertheless, a majority of students note the separation between Danish and foreign students, as stated in the following student’s comment:

‘I have Danish friends, but they are only my colleagues; we study together. They are my only Danish friends, actually. I do not have any Danish friends outside [the university]. But among international students, I have many friends, because we are living together’.

One of the foreign students stands out due to her deliberate attempts to engage in the local community by establishing new sports classes in Esbjerg that she will coach; meanwhile, another student has not yet made such attempts. The following quotes illustrate their distinct approaches:

‘... Sometimes it can be difficult to be part of a community, so I wanted to give something back, and what I did was, I started [sports] classes as an instructor (...), where I meet people. It is like fitness. I was a fitness instructor, so I just had to meet people... The fact that I try to do some work to be part of the community is what created this, that I feel some kind of belonging. Still, I think that me not speaking Danish is a barrier, not that everybody speaks Danish (...), but I still feel that this language barrier somehow exists for me to be a fully accepted member... (...). I think that if I learn the language, it would be much easier and more productive somehow’.

‘It is like, I am living in the university, not in Esbjerg, that is my feeling’.

As an international student in a non-English-speaking country, integrating is a challenge that is not facilitated by the residential segregation between Danish and international students. While distributing Danish and international students among the same residential locations may seem like an easy solution, it is not necessarily easy because of the different price levels of possible student accommodation: it is stressed in the interviews that the residences where international students live are less expensive than Danish student residences and have shared kitchens, while Danish students have better economic situations, want their own kitchens, etc.

Little focus on settling among free-flying young people in transition

Foreign students generally seem undecided regarding whether they will ultimately settle in Esbjerg, somewhere else in Denmark, their home country, or somewhere else entirely. One student says that being an international student in the Erasmus Programmes involves staying only one year in the host country, and another student says that his continued presence in Esbjerg depends on whether the people he knows will also be staying:

‘... If the people are here, then I will feel like staying here, but if they move, I would probably do that as well’.

When asked if she feels a connection with Esbjerg, another interviewer says,

‘I basically don’t feel a sense of belonging anywhere, which I think can be explained by the fact that I left my country when I was like really, I was around eighteen years old, and before that, I was in a neighbouring country (...) since I was fifteen, which kind of ... I have been travelling and working in different places after that, which kind of takes the sense of belonging away ... for me, because if I had a sense of belonging somewhere, it would mean that every time I go to a new place, it will be painful, so I don’t feel that sense anywhere, not even in my home country, when I go back (...), I feel like I am a foreigner there...’.

However, the same student answers positively to the question of whether she wants to associate herself with Esbjerg, partly due to the welcome the city gave her. She says,

‘I think mostly, if I want to settle, like my mind comes to the idea that I want to settle, then I could do that here in Esbjerg, especially with the community newcomer service here, I kind of have the feeling (...) that here, the municipality of Esbjerg and the people around are trying to welcome foreigners, and I think I could find my place here if I decided to. The thing is, I’m not sure if I want to’.

Another foreign student, however, claims a strong connection to his home area by virtue of the networks built over many years and says,

‘You always miss your country. I have friends there I have known for 16-17 years, of course I miss them. When I talk to them, I share my experiences here, and they tell me what they are doing (...)’.

Thus, there are challenges associated with foreign students’ possession of networks in several places or development of a very mobile lifestyle.

The game-changing potential of internships and jobs

Generally, the interviewed international students are positive about securing an internship or job in Esbjerg. One student was even informed before moving to Esbjerg that ‘in Esbjerg, there would be more job opportunities and internship opportunities than in other cities in Jutland... (...)’. However, this student has not succeeded in finding a job and says ‘...I do not know if it is my bad luck (...) that I do not have (...) a student job or that I did not find an internship’. Others mention that international students have problems approaching firms, which makes them leave Esbjerg after graduation:

‘... Internships are quite difficult. I applied many companies and still didn’t get any positive response, and many of them didn’t reply (...), so I am still looking. I guess the school should help more about the internship, because nobody found one’.

‘...On the other hand, there are some good jobs, which are mostly for the engineers. I think that is a huge problem and people are struggling financially. Because if you have the SU and a job, it is really easy, but I do not know many who have a steady job here; that is a problem in Esbjerg, I would say’.

‘Maybe that is one area that the municipality can think about and do better, to attract and keep people in the city, because after I graduate, if I cannot find a job, then there is no point for me to stay here’.

‘I feel like I have a good profile, and I have experience in my domain. But I know that a big part of the internship and study jobs is networking, and as a foreigner, my networking is not that great’.

One interviewee suggests that firms should be more open to international students and mentions an example of a large company where the interviewee applied for a position at a graduate programme in English that ultimately hired seven Danes, which made the student wonder why the firm called the graduate programme an international programme and emphasized the discovery of different and new markets. Interviewees also recommend that small firms in particular should be assisted in overcoming barriers to employing international students so that small firms can also gain from new perspectives that are introduced by international students. Generally, the interviewees offer many recommendations regarding what the municipality and educational institutions can do to improve the integration of international students:

‘Share experiences about in which companies students have previously had internships, if they have any relations because if they personally could help you, then... maybe some event that tells you how to write your CVs, how to apply internships, (...), and some contacts to companies... we just go on the internet and look randomly’.

‘...Most people, when they go to the university, they do that because they want to find a job related to their studies, so if the university in cooperation with the municipality and the local businesses try to find a way to ensure that more people are getting some kind of experience with internships, that could help’.

Due to international students’ financial situations, it is suggested that they should have the possibility of having paid internships. In addition, because international students face more obstacles to integration into the job market than local students, it is recommended that they have the opportunity to stay slightly longer in their student accommodations and perhaps be provided with additional help to enter the local job market during this period.

Discussion and conclusion

This chapter aimed to explore the obstacles to international student integration into study, business and leisure life in Esbjerg and plausible solutions given Esbjerg’s peripheral location. The literature has highlighted a variety of challenges to and solutions for improving the integration of international students, which we have compiled in Table 2 along with the content of the empirical data from Esbjerg. Both the literature and the empirical data indicate that international students often have very few location-specific insider advantages, which is a term that Fischer and Malmberg (2001) use to refer to place-bound advantages accumulating over time, such as a large social network in a specific town or knowledge about job or housing markets in a region. International students’ ‘outsider advantages’ *could* include their diversity and global outlook, but this diversity is not often capitalized and thus ultimately is viewed as a disadvantage.

Table 2. Comparing obstacles and recommendations from the literature with the Esbjerg case (own original work)

CHALLENGES (LITERATURE)	CHALLENGES IN ESBJERG (INTERVIEWS)
Co-nationals are the favoured network for both int. and local students	The initial good introduction of international students does not continue throughout the semester
Personal support and advice networks maintain pre-existing networks	Int. students and local students do not live in the same places
Int. students realize too late that they should build networks and work experience	Int. students mainly form friendships with other international students
Local students are not interested in cross-cultural interactions and position int. students as others	Lack of open café facilities in the educational institutions in the afternoons/evenings/weekends leads to a closed ‘stay-home culture’

There are diverse norms regarding active/passive participation in learning activities Financial sacrifices are involved in studying abroad	There is not much integration with people in the local community people Int. students can stay only 3 months in their student residences after graduation and travel home after failing the first job search There is an impression of too few activities taking place and low actual use
Students feel turned away by companies/institutions when entering the labour market for internships/jobs A 'best fit rationale' reproduces a monocultural environment in organizations and workplaces There is a lack of valuation of different cultural and linguistic capital Small firms in particular are not open to diversity	There are no possibilities for paid internships due to national educational rules Int. students have difficulties finding internships and study-related jobs, especially in small firms There is a lack of knowledge of career advice personnel at educational institutions but good knowledge of electronic job portals
SOLUTIONS (LITERATURE)	SOLUTIONS IN ESBJERG (INTERVIEWS)
Integration dynamics should be addressed in class Int. students should seek knowledge on the local culture, volunteer, learn English, and 'be brave' Local students should not isolate and discriminate against int. students academically and socially – int. students can provide local students with an opportunity to enhance their global knowledge locally Peer mentoring programmes with current int. students should be established for incoming students Acad. faculty should provide international curriculum, react when int. students do not thrive, and include post-graduate work-related topics in class Counsellors should address cross-cultural adjustments through culturally responsive interventions and, to some degree, address int. students' immigration and familial aspirations Specific organizations should work to connect int. students to internships and post-graduation employment Workshops should be held to market int. student's skills and provide networking opportunities A database of companies interested in hiring int. students should be established and maintained	Local people should show int. students around and help them build their networks The initial welcoming activities should be repeated to ensure that int. students stay connected to more than just other int. students The fact that everyone is actively seeking integration in the beginning should be used actively to promote community integration outside university Int. students should engage more in sports; creative hobbies; nonprofit organizations; and trips to nature, surrounding towns and cultural attractions Academic staff should proactively profit more from the opportunities from an active pedagogical approach and group work for integration between int. students and local students Int. students should have the opportunity to learn the language Better housing situations during the post-graduate period should be secured to encourage free-flying young people to settle Paid internships should be provided, and electronic job portals should be used to market internships and jobs in English explicitly to int. students Educational services in Esbjerg should be marketed more – e.g., green energy activities, group work and active and participative learning environment

It seems, however, that a large part of the introductory procedures arranged by educational institutions and the municipality of Esbjerg generally work very well. Thus, a formal structure for welcoming procedures has been established, which facilitates the initial period when international students must build location-specific insider advantages. In this period, public institutions assume the role of host and provide support in a neoliberal worldwide economy in which international students are a factor of production in line with other goods. However, some barriers can also be identified in the reception of international students. In particular, two aspects indicate that further change is needed for Esbjerg to become a successful location for international student integration. First, the fact that international students often do not live in the same accommodations as Danish students fundamentally diminishes the possibility of out-of-class integration and thus accentuates the challenges of the insufficient cultural mixing of international and national students that has been proposed in the literature. Second, the 'stay-home culture' among Danes makes the integration of international students difficult and reduces the effect of the efforts of municipal and educational institutions. This stay-home culture, together with the

status of Esbjerg as a young university town that has not yet built up the characteristics of university towns, such as collective cultural values of and demand for knowledge-intensive labour in firms other than purely private and business-oriented firms, means that some of the solutions for integration of international students must be found in this cultural field. Thus, even though host institutions work to reduce the initial challenges of international students, additional agency from international students is required if they are to be integrated and remain, as neither businesses nor locals adequately facilitate this integration. The town of Esbjerg bears the image of being a ‘muscle’ town with many jobs in the energy sector, but even students within environmental and energy fields of study state that they struggle to find apprenticeships and student jobs. This is evidence that cultural and language barriers to integration play a key role in challenging the integration of international students.

As the empirical data show, integration also does not occur easily when the mindset of international students is considered. International students in Esbjerg are basically free-flying, very mobile young people who, in order to decide to stay, must be restrained by something. The restraints imposed by the crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic could provide an opportunity for international students to obtain a job in the Esbjerg area. Young southern Europeans face the prospect of the job markets in their home countries, where it will be difficult to gain a foothold because of the second economic crisis in 10 years. However, proper retention requires the further merging of gown and town (Martin et al., 2005), involving ordinary ‘educational knowledge-resistant’ people in Esbjerg and the entire base of small businesses in the local area.

Almost all the literature emphasizes what different actors should do individually and in groups. However, solutions will be found through collaborative innovation rather than reliance on single partners since all challenges and solutions are interrelated in the wicked problem of international student integration. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions to the integration of international students. The overcoming of ‘invisible walls’ must include many different initiatives. (Martin et al., 2005: 13). Esbjerg has the chance to build a new culture with equal amounts of input from the university, businesses, the local government and the local community. International student integration is an internationally acknowledged and researched issue. The literature has indicated the following solutions to international student integration: international student agency + mentoring

among the community, national students and international students + firm openness. We identified additional specific challenging aspects of international student integration and thereby identified causes of the suboptimal international student integration, which we add to this literature; these aspects must be considered in future research: stay-home culture + knowledge economy-resistant culture + segregated housing + invisible walls (constructed by firms and the local community).

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