

**The Crossroad: Experiences of non-EU/EEA
international Masters students in their last year of study
in the UK.
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Doctorate in
Counselling Psychology at London Metropolitan University

by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work submitted in this dissertation is fully the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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Abstract

Background: International students (IS) are arguably a population facing both educational and migratory challenges. These are understood within Culture Shock (CS, Oberg, 1960), a process of culture learning. Available literature on IS seems to focus mainly on the phases of CS between the arrival in the host country until adaptation, or at the later stage of returning home. The last part of the IS journey in the host country, before the possible return home, appears neglected. Research suggests that in this period, named the 'crossroad' in this study, important decisions could be made, such as whether to stay in or leave the host country.

Rationale: Internal struggles, dilemmas and uncertainty can arise due to the possible changes to self that IS can develop while abroad, and could be exacerbated by immigration laws. Thus, the crossroad can be a phase of psychological struggle, which can be of interest to mental health professionals. There is limited qualitative evidence on this sub-phase of CS on IS and this research attempts to address this gap by looking holistically at the subjective experiences of these students and letting their specific psychological needs arise.

Methodology and main findings: An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen for this research, using semi-structured interviews. Three superordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts: a) Changes to self and identity; b) Uncertainty, temporariness and emotional responses; c) Dilemmas at the crossroad. The crossroad emerged from the results as a phase dominated by uncertainty towards the future, leading to experiencing difficult emotions such as worry, anxiety and low mood. From the participants' accounts, it seemed that the limitations imposed by the UK immigration law

were the main trigger for such uncertainty, and that IS perceived their circumstances as largely out of their control. The IS' psychological and emotional responses seemed connected with having developed a sense of belongingness to the UK, resulting from a process of changes to self and identity experienced during their time abroad.

PART 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The present thesis will start with a reflexive statement, looking at the possible assumptions influencing this research and highlighting ways in which I have attempted to address these. Subsequently, I will discuss the relationship between this research and Counselling Psychology (CoP). A critical literature review (CLR) will follow, where the topic of migration and migrants will be presented to set the context of this investigation. I will then discuss the current UK immigration policy, as a factor potentially influencing IS' experiences. Then, I will introduce the phenomenon of international education alongside considerations about its impact on host countries. The focus of the CLR will then shift on IS as they are currently understood in the literature. My reasons for focusing on this population will be presented.

I will attempt to look closely at their psychological and transitional challenges within the process of CS. An outline of the limitations of current models of CS will be presented followed by the rationale for focusing on the last part of the journey of IS in the host country. I will then present and critique the available evidence on IS at this 'crossroad'. Finally, I will highlight the gaps in the literature that led me to propose the current study and will present its aims and my research question.

1.2 Reflexive Statement

Subjectivity plays an important role in any type of research (Ratner, 2002). In CoP research there is a particular attention on how the researcher's subjectivity can influence the research process. In order to limit such influence, it

is paramount to engage in a reflexive process that lets the researcher's assumptions, presuppositions and personal interests related with the research arise (Kasket, 2012). I will present here my reflexive effort, alongside my attempts to 'bracket', that is, to limit the impact of my personal material on this research (Spinelli, 2005).

Being a trainee counselling psychologist at a foreign university and having a history of crossing intra-national, and international, geographical boundaries for educational reasons, has played an important role in choosing research on IS.

I felt emotionally connected with this topic for several reasons. Firstly, because I felt that through this research I would talk a bit about myself. Since I first moved for studying from the city where I grew up, 12 years ago, I have experienced how leaving the comfort zone of your home town, where family and friends and your history lie, can be both an enriching and stressful experience. The excitement for a new adventure often alternated with feelings of alienation, isolation and hopelessness. Such feelings were particularly enhanced when I moved to the UK. Here I became, *de facto*, an international (although European) student. Once in a foreign country where you cannot speak your language, and values, traditions and social rules are different, I had the chance to experience the impact of CS. Once again, the excitement and pride for such international experience often left space to a sense of inadequateness. Today, after six years in the UK, I can feel that I have absorbed cultural values and social rules of this country, which have shaped my current identity, to the point that at times I wonder where 'home' really is and who I really am.

Secondly, conversations with fellow foreign students have highlighted how crossing international boundaries and adjusting to a foreign environment that may perceive you as a minority, can be a tough experience for IS. It may require courage and a willingness to test one's resilience and perseverance.

Thirdly, I felt a particular interest in the last phase of the journey of IS. I perceived as 'unfair' the fact that, due to immigration law, IS who have invested a large part of their life, and resources in the UK education, had to leave the country at the end of their courses. Although I have not experienced the restrictions of the law, I have witnessed the struggles and fears of people who had to abandon their friends, dreams of employment and life in the UK and had to return to their home countries. I felt powerless hearing their stories, and empathically perceived their sense of betrayal from this country.

Considering my involvement in the topic, I was aware that while approaching this research I was likely to hold biases that could affect what I decided to highlight, how I would interpret the participants' accounts and how I would present my results and discussion. Indeed, as stated by Alvesson & Skoldberg '*There is no one way street between the researcher and the object of study; rather the two affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research process*' (2000, p.39). However, reflexivity helped me reflect on the assumptions I held and contain the way in which my own position affected the development of the present research.

I believe I managed to maintain a certain distance from my feelings of unfairness towards the immigration law, because reflecting allowed the immigration issue to shift from being the object in the foreground, to a contextual factor in the experience of IS. Keeping a diary of research as I

approached and analysed the transcripts helped me continuously asking myself whether the way I was interpreting the emotions that were emerging from the participants' accounts was resulting from my own personal material. Although this reflective process helped me step away from some of my assumption, these probably have somehow impacted this research. As described by Ratner (2002), I came to terms with this reality, which is inherent to qualitative research, and accepted that in this study there is an intimate involvement of my personal subjectivity.

Furthermore, I realised that I had the assumption that the experiences of IS are somehow very similar. Specifically, that they are similar to what I believed was their experience. Such a position, I reflected, had the potential to discount the diversity among the individuals involved in such a subjective experience. I needed to be aware of not stereotyping the students' experience. I realised that the desire to 'find' that the interviewed IS had overall similar experiences and that these matched with my preconception, was a heritage of my positivist past, when, surrounded by the comfort of statistical significance, I could make clear and unchallengeable statements about the world and reality. Moving away from such a standpoint and embracing the 'wilderness' of qualitative research (and of human beings) proved at first anxiety provoking, however, as I started grasping the nuances of the participants' subjective experiences, it became truly satisfying. I felt a sense of honour and privilege in being offered to step into the participants' world, much alike I feel honoured and privileged when clients share with me their innermost feelings in therapy.

Additionally, focusing my research on the last year of IS' study in the UK, let emerge my own position towards moments of indecision, uncertainty and

lack of control towards the future. Acknowledging my expectations, anxiety, fears and in general the role that emotions can play for me in such moments, enriched my perspective on how IS may feel in similar moments. This process helped emerge and support my critique, particularly towards the literature that seemed to consider such moments as a calculation of pros and cons in the decision of staying in versus leaving the host country.

Perhaps sharing many similarities with the feelings of these IS around uncertainty, led to a self-investment as the ‘champion of justice’ of IS, arguably connected with my desire to defend those I perceive weak. Nonetheless, I believe that not being subject to the IS’ legal status was crucial in enabling me to not get ‘too close’ to the research topic which, as Kasket (2012) suggests, could cloud the research process with personal agendas.

Overall, discussing with my supervisor, reflecting on my emotional involvement and keeping a research diary, helped me maintain some distance from the topic. Reflexivity has represented to me a form of internal supervisor, a friendly super-ego, similar to the one mentioned by Casement (2014) in the context of therapy.

1.3 Relevance to Counselling Psychology (CoP)

An important relationship of mutual exchange exists between the present research and CoP. Available research on IS seems to have overlooked the experiences and subjectivity of IS in the last part of their journey, or taken for granted that the journey concludes with their return home. I feel that such a standpoint is reductionist and unfair towards IS. Thus I perceived CoP, whose awareness of subjectivity is one of its core values (Orlans & van Scoyoc, 2009),

as the means for holistically considering this overlooked phase of IS' journey and understanding their experiences in their uniqueness (DuPlock, 2010).

A CoP standpoint on IS can provide new perspectives on therapeutic practice. Such a population is peculiar as it faces both the challenges of education and immigration (Coppi, 2007). CoP, with its emphasis on the individual (Woolfe et al., 2010), has the potential to emphatically understand the complexity of IS' experiences. This offers an opportunity to therapeutically work with the human/individual rather than with the "student" or "immigrant", in a way that enables practitioners to effectively respond to the IS' subjective needs. This is crucial to the underpinning phenomenological philosophy of CoP (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2009). Additionally, the awareness that CoP has of the importance of considering cultural differences and embracing diversity, constituted a precious resource, first in doing research where culture can play an important role and second, in using the generated knowledge to inform therapeutic practice with individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, such as IS (Eleftheriadou, 2010).

Furthermore, IS are suggested to be a population exposed to several transitional challenges that have the potential to trigger psychological stress (Arthur, 2004). CoP, adopts an aptitude of 'being with', rather than 'doing to' the client, which underlies the intention of not pathologising the client's difficulties (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010); thus, it has the potential to support IS in their transitions. In the therapy room, IS can be helped to explore and reflect on their transitional issues with the result of enabling personal development, reappraisal, informed decision-making and growth (Sugarman, 2010). Furthermore, considering that student counselling services are employers for trainees and

qualified counselling psychologists, the knowledge generated by this research could be incorporated in the training of counselling psychologists through workshops, informing their clinical practice.

Finally, this research fits the CoP goal to generate and disseminate knowledge that benefits counselling psychologists and other professionals involved with a particular population, (Milton, 2010), in this case, IS. This research can inform professionals in social psychology, social anthropology, migration and diaspora studies and contribute to the knowledge regarding the psychology of human migration. It can also inform the UK government on the possible psychological impact of the current immigration law on IS. Finally, academics on post-graduate courses with a high percentage of IS, can be informed on the potential issues of IS and be sensitive to any relevant concerns such students might bring to them.

PART 2. CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Migration and Migrants

Migration has been a constant phenomenon in human history. A substantial growth in the phenomenon was registered in recent years. Between 2000-2015 international migrants increased by more than 71 million, reaching a total of 244 million international migrants worldwide (United Nations, 2015). Regarding the UK, according to the UK Office for National Statistics ([ONS], 2015), the foreign-born population in the country, rose from 3.8 million in 1993 to 8.2 million in 2014; 5.2 million of these were non-EU individuals.

In the modern era, migration is fuelled by changes in job opportunities and socio-economical situations of countries, imbalances in population and natural disasters (International Organization for Migration, 2013).

In the UK, as in other EU countries, the law filters immigration. Consequently, a substantial proportion of immigrants holding non-EU passports need to apply for a visa. According to The Migration Observatory (2016) there are four categories of immigrants in the UK, each applying for a specific visa: Workers, Students, Family Members and Asylum Applicants.

Although all immigrants share the act of migrating, immigrant groups are different in terms of the motives that bring them to the host country. Workers may want to explore new employment avenues; students may be looking for valuable educational experience; family members may wish to be reunited with their loved ones, whereas asylum seekers migrate to escape difficult circumstances such as violence, political oppression and discrimination in their home country (Summerfield, 2001).

Whatever the reasons for migrating are, all immigrants are arguably exposed to the possibility of experiencing psychological acculturation, described by Berry (1980) as a dynamic process individuals experience while adapting to a new culture. An immigrant population is not necessarily a clinical group, but it is likely to be a population that needs psychological support, regarding transitional experiences, about which, psychologically, it seems that not enough is known (APA, 2012).

All categories of immigrants could constitute an interesting focus for discussion, however this review and the following research will concentrate on IS: non-EU nationals who entered the UK through obtaining a tier-4 (study) visa.

IS are interesting for two main reasons: 1. They experience a psychological dual status of being students and immigrants; 2. Their experience is often temporary and characterised by transitional challenges (Arthur, 2004). These reasons will be discussed later.

2.1.1 UK Immigration Policy

Immigration brings both advantages and disadvantages to the host country and to the migrant (Friedberg & Hunt, 1995). The aforementioned rise of a foreign-born population in the UK led the government to issue changes to immigration law aimed at cutting net migration and, more recently, to call for an EU referendum, which ratified the intention of the UK to leave the EU.

In regards to IS, the Tier 1 visa (Post-study work) was abolished on the 5th of April 2012. Before that, this visa granted IS the possibility to work in the UK for up to two years after graduating. Consequently, since then, all IS (excluding PhD graduates who are currently granted a 1 year post study visa)

have to leave the country once their visa expires, which usually coincides with the end of their study period, unless they manage to secure a job fulfilling further visa requirements or through obtaining other types of visa, which are arguably less viable (e.g. through marriage with a UK/EU national). An employment offer has to arrive before the visa expires, from an employer licensed to sponsor Tier 2 workers, offering a salary of at least £20,800 (House of Commons, 2012).

The current immigration policy regarding IS constitutes a specific contextual factor unique to the present time, which makes particularly compelling the timing of the research that this review is aiming at informing and justifying: the experience of IS approaching the end of their studies. As the review will attempt to reveal, although the literature about IS is developing, research that looks at the last part of their journey in the host country, and specifically in the UK, seems to have been neglected. What is currently available appears to be focused mainly on the rational decision making calculations leading to the choice of staying in versus leaving the host country (Baruch et al., 2007) and also on the return home (what Christofi & Thompson, (2007) refer to as “reverse culture-shock”). However, in trying to understand the way in which IS make sense of their transitional experiences, the immigration law could play an important role by adding an unusually strong pressure for such individuals, possibly making it easier to identify their conflicts, dilemmas and tensions.

To understand better the position of IS it is useful to first contextualise it within the phenomenon of international education mobility.

2.2 The Phenomenon of International Education

IS are not only a phenomenon of recent times. Within Europe, the process of IS mobility dates back to medieval times (Barron, Baum & Conway, 2007), though it was reported that Asian students started moving around Europe and the United States more in the second half of the 19th century (Chan, 1999).

A 50% increase in the presence of IS in English speaking countries was registered in recent times (from 1 Million in 2002 to 1,5 Million in 2008, World Education Services, 2012), arguably enhanced by the globally recognised quality of western education (Barron et al., 2007).

In less than two decades the UK has experienced a sharp increase in non-UK university enrolments (from 163,717 in 1995 to 436,880 in 2015, Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2015). European Initiatives such as the ‘Bologna process’ in 1999 (European Higher Education Agency [EHEA], 2015) have increased the amount of non-UK European students moving to the UK. Simultaneously, the UK has implemented initiatives, such as the “Prime Minister’s Initiatives for International Education”, to attract non-EU IS (Barron et al., 2007). Consequently, non-EU students have steadily multiplied to the point that in 2014/15 there were 312,010 IS enrolled in higher education in the UK (HESA, 2015), making the country the second largest host of IS in the world after the United States (British Council, 2012).

An important difference exists between IS and other immigrant groups in terms of their motives for expatriating. For example, compared to refugees, who may have the need to escape their countries due to immediate threat, IS usually decide to expatriate in a self-directed fashion. Such tendency is arguably fuelled

by the wish to pursue higher standards of education, broaden career choices and increase one's quality of life (Richardson & Mallon, 2005).

High quality has been suggested as one of the main reasons students choose western countries (Western Europe, North America and Australia) for education: it is perceived as the most direct way to access a good job, higher salaries and an overall better quality of life (Yang, Noels and Saumure, 2006).

2.2.1 Impact of IS on the Host Country

Many IS are seeking the UK and other western countries' education to improve their economic prospects (Yang et al., 2006). However they also influence the host countries by providing cultural and economic benefits (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003).

The economy of the country benefits greatly: in the US, IS contribute to \$24 billion (NAFSA [National Association of Foreign Student Advisers]; Association of International Educators, 2013); in the UK to £14 billion (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013). Such economic benefits are particularly significant in the capital, with almost 40% of the total income of London universities deriving from IS fees (London First & PwC, 2015). Furthermore, IS enhance the country's organisational development through generating ideas, enriched with multicultural perspectives (Nunn, 2005). Upon finishing their studies, they add highly skilled human capital to the host country's economy (Baruch et al., 2007).

IS are also of academic benefit to universities. They are a resource of internationalisation, development of global alumni networks and future recruitment (Francis, 1993). Postgraduate students becoming academics can be

pivotal for innovation and research (Gribble, 2008). In general, IS are recognised as a great resource inside and outside the university environment (Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1994).

2.3 The Psychological and Transitional Challenges of IS

2.3.1 The Psychological Dual Status of Being an IS

IS, it has been suggested, occupy a particular place in the host society, which affects their experiences (Coppi, 2007).

Firstly, as immigrants they face separation and loss from their country of provenance and families, and acculturation to an unfamiliar cultural and social context. These factors can lead to issues such as CS (Oberg, 1960) and acculturative stress (Berry, 1997), language problems (APA, 2012), racism and discrimination (Harrel, 2000).

In a review by the APA (2012) it was highlighted that when immigrants face mental health issues many of these are related with their immigration experience. However, the migration experiences vary: it can be voluntary for some groups (e.g., workers, students) and not for others (e.g., refugees). Voluntariness of migration is linked with higher resilience (APA, 2012). Simultaneously, some groups, such as asylum seekers, older adults, and LGBT, can be particularly vulnerable and more likely to experience additional stressors affecting their mental wellbeing (APA, 2012).

There seems not to be consistent data regarding the prevalence of mental health issues among immigrants; however in the US, mood and anxiety disorders, PTSD, substance misuse and suicidal tendencies have been identified among the immigrant population (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good, & Kleinman,

1995; Duldulao, Takeuchi, & Hong, 2009). In the UK research suggests higher rates of anxiety and depression among asylum seekers and refugees as compared to both the national population and other immigrant groups (Raphaely & O'Moore, 2010)

IS, besides being immigrants, are also students facing the challenges of education. They often deal with the adjustment of post-secondary school, the pressure applied by new academic environments and the process of adaptation to the new university course and high level of study (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Stress may arise from dealing with differences in educational approaches between those IS had been used to and those adopted in the host country (Pedersen, 1991). Finally, unlike local students, IS may face the challenges of a different social and cultural environment (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). However, no specific research is available about possible differences between the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate IS.

As it seems, IS find their uniqueness in their dual status of immigrants and students, and thus appear to represent a unique population of individuals in cross-cultural transition (Pedersen, 1991). IS appear to experience cross-cultural, transitional and migration challenges combined with educational ones. It could be argued that the result of such blend is not simply the sum of different challenges, rather a complex and fluid interaction. As such, it seems that a CoP standpoint, rooted in its humanistic underpinnings, could be helpful in understanding holistically the experiences of these individuals (Woolfe et al., 2010).

Aiming at informing counselling psychologists and other professionals involved in the psychological support of IS, it seems important to better

understand the specific challenges faced by these “learners in transition” (Arthur, 2004, p. 17) as they approach the (possible) end of their stay in the host country which is, as this review will attempt to highlight, a neglected part of their transitional journey. In order to do that, it is essential that the existing research on the transitional challenges of IS is explored.

2.3.2 Transitional Challenges of IS

The period of adjustment between home and host country, experienced by all kinds of immigrants, is conceptualised in literature as CS (Oberg, 1960). Several sociocultural, environmental and physiological adjustments are involved in the CS, which may lead to psychological stress (Chen, 1999). The review will now consider the common challenges faced by IS in this period.

2.3.2.1 Preparation and Financial Issues

IS may experience a series of challenges connected to preparing to move abroad. Major investments can be involved in such a decision and pressure and anxiety may arise from the process of obtaining a visa, and preparing to separate from family and friends (Arthur, 2004). Financial concerns can be an issue: often the cost of life in the host country is higher than that in the home country, and such issue can particularly impact those who experience a sharper change in living standards between home and host country (Akande, 1994).

2.3.2.2 Sense of loss at Arrival

Separation from their home can be a substantial stressor that can cause a deep sense of loss (Sandhu, 1994). Students may suddenly become strangers in a

foreign land. Using critical incident methodology, Pedersen (1991) noted that IS overnight may lose their familiar cues and shared identity with the people and places of their home country. In a review of the most common issues experienced by IS, Hayes & Lin (1994) suggested that the initial contact with the host country can be very stressful for students, particularly if they had never previously visited the host country.

2.3.2.3 Status Loss

Arriving in the host country can represent, for IS, the first time in which they experience a status of cultural, ethnical and socio-economical minority (Pedersen, 1991). It has been hypothesised that for students who used to belong to the dominant ethnical group in their home country, the consequences of being the target of racial discrimination in the host country can be more negative than for other minorities living already in the host country, because such racial discrimination might not have been predicted (Yoon & Portman, 2004). The results of a qualitative study by Sinacore and Lerner (2013) seem to support this hypothesis showing that foreign students felt marginalised and were cautious when approaching the locals. Finally, besides the low self-esteem and self-confidence that may derive from feeling discriminated against (Chen, 1999), a sense of inferiority may arise from the status change (Sandhu, 1994). As suggested by Alexander, Workneh, Klein & Miller (1976), this happens because students may feel suddenly vulnerable to several adjustment issues that are somehow incompatible with their previous potentially privileged lives in their home country.

From a clinical perspective, it has been suggested that the stress of feeling the prejudice of the dominant cultural group may lead to anger, helplessness and even reverse racial prejudice (Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991).

2.3.2.4 Academic Challenges

For some students, academic adjustment is their first priority (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983). The arguably major investment involved in the decision to pursue foreign education may lead IS to feel under pressure about performing well academically and, as a possible consequence, may experience exam-anxiety. Additionally, a possible further difficulty for IS can be constituted by having to adjust to a different educational system (Chen, 1999).

2.3.2.5 Language and Communication

The challenge of dealing with a foreign language can generate psychological stress that may become anxiety (Chen, 1999).

Language barrier has been suggested as a ubiquitous challenge for IS whose first language is not English and can produce several negative consequences (Mori, 2000; Shih and Brown, 2000). It may affect their academic performance and generate feelings of inadequateness (Collingridge, 1999). Additionally, in a focus group study on the barriers of international master students in Australia and the UK, Gilligan and Outram (2012) suggested that language was a major barrier to students' adaptation and to future employability in the host country.

Language issues can be connected to social adjustment problems, which in turn may lead to social isolation (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Pedersen, 1991). It has been suggested that many IS cope with language and adjustment problems by

spending time with students with a similar socio-cultural background, which in turn can negatively affect their integration (Shih & Brown, 2000).

When providing counselling to IS, language issues can be a challenge to therapeutic outcomes. Clients may have a limited vocabulary to express themselves, their emotions and explain their difficulties, leading to anxiety and embarrassment in the therapy room (Arthur, 2004). This is consistent with the IS' tendency to be reluctant to visiting counselling services and highlighting a very high no-show rate after the initial session (Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1994). However, it seems that practitioners that show a genuine concern about IS' issues and actively contribute to the effectiveness of the exchanges in the therapy room, may help overcome language barriers (Hayes & Lin, 1994)

2.3.2.6 Lack of Social support

Moving to another country may mean having to face the loss of direct contact with family, friends and other sources of social support. (Sandhu, 1994)

Additionally, even when students get in touch with families and friends, these might not be able to understand their experiences (Khoo, Abu-Rasain & Hornby, 2002).

A review on IS' issues by Chen (1999) suggested that lack of social connectedness is one of their main challenges. Social support is an important resource for people under stress and particularly for those engaged in transitional experiences (Schlossberg, 1984). It has been suggested that social support may have a direct positive effect on psychological adjustment when individuals attempt to cope with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Using critical incident methodology, Pedersen (1991) highlighted that, in the absence of close friends and relatives, IS tend to create sub-groups within the

university to utilise as their main source of support.

Providing social support to IS has been proposed as an effective way to diminish the negative effects of many of the challenges faced by such population (Arthur, 2004).

As discussed, IS may face several challenges connected with their transitional experiences abroad. Nevertheless, evidence does not exist to suggest that all IS will encounter all such challenges, nor that they will react to them in the same way. However, the above challenges, potentially existing within the process of CS, can generate psychological stress that in turn can lead to mental health issues (Berry, 1997). Indeed, it has been suggested that CS is conceptualised as a complex syndrome of stress (Arthur 2004).

It seems important, at this stage, to make sense of the link existing between challenges and stress, as conceptualised in the literature.

2.3.3 Challenges, Stress and Cognitive Appraisal

According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), psychological stress takes place when people perceive that a harm, threat or challenge is near that they might not have the resources to cope with, and can be associated with life events and changes.

Stress does not necessarily arise from an external event, such as an illness or living in a different country, rather, stress is suggested to arise from the relationship between the individual and the environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, the characteristics of individuals can influence how they interpret, and thus experience the nature of an external event, challenge or change.

The interpretational nature of stress reflects the concept of Cognitive Appraisal: an evaluative process focused on the meanings and significance of an event for the individual that is necessary in order to gain psychological understanding of external events (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Given its interpretational and thus, subjective nature, stress is neither a static nor a stimulus-response process; rather, it involves subjective appraisal and mediating activities to cope with the interaction between an event and a person's response (Chen, 1999).

Thus, when talking about stress, generalisations are not encouraged. Individuals, even within the same group, may respond to the same challenge (or stressor) with a variety of different reactions, such as anger, depression, anxiety or guilt (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984)

In light of the above, it seems reasonable, psychologically, to assert that IS, due to the numerous transitional challenges they encounter, experience a high potential for stress and mental health problems. The next section, which concludes this introduction, will look at what the literature tells us about the relationship between stress responses and IS' psychological struggle.

2.3.4 Stress, CS, and IS Psychological Struggle

The effects of the different stressors that CS provides to IS can manifest in a variety of psychological symptoms. Fatigue, irritability and anxiety have been reported by a study using critical incident methodology (Pedersen, 1995). Depression, isolation, hostility towards members of the host culture, and somatic reaction were also highlighted (Winkelman, 1994). A study by Nilsson and colleagues (2004) among IS in US universities seems to suggest that IS mainly

seek help for depression, lack of assertiveness, academic issues and anxiety. However, these data cannot be entirely representative of the IS population, firstly, because they do not account for mental health issues of those who do not seek psychological help, and secondly, because they come from studies that only take into account US universities. Additionally, the psychological impact of CS can manifest differently depending on the culture: for instance, Yoo and Skovholt (2001) suggested that Korean students reported higher incidence of somatic symptoms than local American students.

2.4 Critique of CS, Adjustment and Adaptation Literature

As discussed above, the transitional journey of IS appears to be filled with cross-cultural and academic challenges that may lead to psychological stress. Such journey has been conceptualised in literature with CS, the quasi-inevitable process of culture learning that seems necessary when people are crossing cultures (Berry, 1997). CS is a complex and fluid process that involves dealing with the loss of familiar cues while becoming familiar with the host culture (McKinlay, Pattison & Gross, 1996). In the literature it has been proposed that CS characterises the period of adjustment within the transition between home and host culture (Oberg, 1960; Thomas & Althen, 1989).

After having looked at how CS can impact IS, I will now consider the theoretical conceptualisations of such process that, as it appears, seems to neglect the last part of the journey of IS.

2.4.1 Models of CS

Several authors have proposed conceptualisations of CS after the initial

model proposed by Oberg (1960), in an effort to outline the process of adaptation of individuals in cross-cultural transition (Lysgaard, 1955; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Livingstone, 1960; Thomas & Althern, 1989). Common to all such approaches, is the division in different phases of the process.

Two ‘curves’ models followed the initial conceptualisation of CS by Oberg (1960): the U-curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) and the W-curve. (Gullahorn & Gullahorn 1963). According to these, the initial excitement of individuals arriving in a new culture is followed by the challenges posed by the different environment, which may negatively influence their experience. Through negotiating with the new environment, adaptation is achieved with consequent improvement of the individuals’ mood. A thorough review rejected these approaches by proposing that the ‘curves’ cannot account for cases in which the phases do not happen in order, and that such phases were rarely backed up by evidence (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). Additionally, Arthur (2004) pointed out that these early models appear to fail to capture, and disregard, the individual experiences of expatriates: a point that seems reasonable considering the aforementioned subjective, idiographic, nature of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Newer models of CS have been proposed (Pedersen, 1995; Winkelman, 1994). They share several similarities and include four cyclical and consequential phases: tourist, crises, adjustment and adaptation. I will now look at these models with relevance to IS, as reviewed by Arthur (2004).

2.4.1.1 The Pedersen (1995) and Winkelman (1994) Models of CS

In the tourist phase, lasting from some days to a few weeks, it is argued

that the person is excited about the new experience and feels charmed by the host country culture. Positive expectations are fed (Pedersen, 1995).

In the crisis phase, the individual may face a negative appraisal of the cultural differences that can result, for some, to reject the host culture (Arthur, 2004). Berry (1980) proposed that in this phase IS, being entangled between home and host culture, are negotiating their identity. If this phase persists, IS might decide for an early return to their home country, potentially leading to additional negative consequences on them (e.g., a sense of failure), and their families (e.g., regret for wrong investment) (Arthur, 2004).

In the adjustment phase, IS are thought to have a chance to wield their coping strategies and deal with the differences that destabilised them and simultaneously, to become enculturated with the host country (Pedersen, 1995). According to Arthur (2004), this is a crucial phase: the challenges of the crisis phase are arguably not all gone, but IS can now develop their ability to negotiate the cultural differences and find their place in the host country. Awareness of cultural differences can be crucial in providing psychological support to students at this stage (Arthur, 2004).

In the last phase, adaptation, disentanglement from the challenges faced earlier can be achieved. It is proposed that IS at this phase are able to feel less foreign and recognise both positives and negatives of the home and host culture (Arthur, 2004).

2.4.1.2 Limitations of Current Models of CS Applied to IS

These more recent models seem to hold several advantages over older ones: they appear to grasp the experience of migrants in a more comprehensive

way and do not look at the phases as discrete (Zhou et. al., 2008). However, although arguably more complex and dynamic, these 4-phased modern models of CS still hold limitations, particularly when applied to IS.

Firstly, they do not account for the temporary status that IS hold as opposed to other immigrant groups: IS may not commit as much as other immigrants to their adaptation as they might hold on to a view to return to their countries at the end of their studies (Arthur, 2004). Secondly, they still seem incapable of grasping the effects of individual differences in the experience of cross-cultural transition (Zhou et al., 2008). As proposed by Berry in his model of acculturation, an extension of the models of CS (1980, 2005), the way in which individuals adapt to different cultures varies. Individual differences can play an important role in determining the style of adaptation adopted by individuals in cross-cultural transition and, consequently, on the possible psychological impact of such transition.

Furthermore, current models of CS seem to not sufficiently capture the experience of IS after reaching the adaptation phase, in the period that characterises the end of their journey. Thus, they neglect factors that such a moment can involve (e.g., transitioning from education to employment, the choice of whether to remain in the host country or return home, and possible immigration restrictions) (Baruch et al., 2007). Indeed, much of the research on IS has concentrated on the period leading to adaptation and on the phase of their return home (Arthur 2007; Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

To summarise, the available research on IS appears to have a tendency to describe their transitional experiences as a journey of CS that starts with the arrival in the host country, continues with the challenges of adaptation and ends

with the return home and the Reverse CS (Arthur 2004; Christofi & Thompson, 2007). Very little research is available regarding their experiences at the end of their educational and adaptation cycle (Arthur & Flynn, 2011), arguably a moment where students are likely to have adjusted to the host country and face a new phase of their journey, possibly involving further transitional challenges. This will be the focus of the suggested 'crossroad' sub-phase, critically reviewed in the next section.

2.5 The Crossroad: a Sub-Phase in the Transition of IS

2.5.1 Making a Case for the Crossroad Sub-Phase

Approaching the end of their international education may represent for many students the moment of transition from school to work, and, as noted by Arthur (2007), such a moment may also imply having to make a crucial decision, that is both a life and a career one, concerning whether to stay in or leaving the host country. This could arguably be the second biggest life decision that IS have to face after the one that led them to study abroad. As suggested by Arthur & Flynn (2011), it should not be assumed that IS will return home, or wish to, at the end of their studies, and even if they do so, it may be a difficult process. The process of CS leading to adaptation that they have negotiated may produce a shift in their perception of self and cultural identity (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). Life and career plans upon entry in the host country may not be well consolidated (Singaravelu et al., 2005) or may become unrealistic in light of the experience abroad. IS can experience dilemmas and struggles for the widening of their future options (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). As emerged from a case study by Arthur & Popadiuk, (2010) students may develop new views on self and the world that

may be incompatible with their previous plans, home culture values and family commitments. Such inconsistencies may create tension, confusion and struggle regarding which direction to take. However such evidence was limited to the case of a 21-year-old Muslim student at a Canadian university. In an interpretative phenomenological study, Christofi and Thompson (2007) suggested that IS did not feel the same once they had returned to their home countries as their values and identities were shaped within a foreign culture.

For these reasons it seems important to focus on this particular moment, or phase, in the journey of IS that is situated towards the end of their educational path, arguably during their last year of study. Within the CS framework, such period, apparently neglected by existing literature, may represent a sub-phase within the adaptation phase, immediately preceding the possible phase of return home.

2.5.2 Critique on the Available Literature on the ‘Crossroad’ Sub-Phase

Literature available on IS in the last year of their studies seems to be mainly focused on the decision-making process leading to the choice of staying in versus leaving the host country. Two studies, one quantitative and one qualitative, will be now discussed and critiqued.

A quantitative study, involving 949 self-reported measures of international Master’s students in the UK and US, attempted to explore the factors that may lead students to decide whether to stay or leave the host country (Baruch et al., 2007). The authors hypothesised that enacting such a decision is related with the students’ inclination to do so, which is in turn informed by

attitudes towards several ‘push-pull’ factors: adjustment level, strength of family ties, perceived support, perception of labour market, etc. The results suggested that a smooth adjustment was the most influential factor in the choice of staying in the host country, followed by family ties and labour market perspective. In general, the authors suggested that foreign students tended to perceive a better labour market in the UK and US than in their home country. Overall, the study highlighted that only 30% of the participants desired to return home after their studies (Baruch et al., 2007).

Although this study shed some light on a very limited literature area it holds several limitations. Firstly, it seems that the researchers have overlooked the potential role played by immigration laws. As suggested, the current UK legislation requires IS to leave the country at the end of their studies (House of Commons, 2012). This factor may add pressure to their decision making process by possibly limiting their freedom of choice, perception of control over their choice and providing little time to secure employment. Additionally, the rational and quantitative focus of the study seems to provide a very limited understanding of how emotions are experienced in the process of choice.

Arthur and Flynn (2011) provided a qualitative approach, using Critical Incident Technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) with semi-structured interviews. Their study looked at the reasons why IS in the last year of study in Canada wanted to settle in the country after graduating. The 19 participants, undergraduate and post-graduate IS from several countries, had spent between six months to six years in Canada. Participants had to choose an outstanding experience connected with the decision of pursuing permanent immigration or employment in Canada. Subsequently, they were asked open-ended questions such as: “What stands out

for you about this situation?”, “How do you relate your situation to your plans and decision making to stay in Canada?”. The results suggested that the main reason for wanting to stay in Canada was its higher quality of life, whereas their main fear was the possibility of not getting a job. The authors concluded suggesting that IS at the end of their studies may benefit from career counselling to make sense of their new identities and options available.

Some limitations can be highlighted. Firstly, even in this study, little importance is given to the immigration law as a factor in the participants’ decisions. However, in Canada this might be less relevant as IS can obtain a post-graduation work permit. Secondly, the methodology of CIT focuses on the understanding of a particular life event (Chell, 1998), thus, providing an arguably narrow perspective on the individuals’ experience. Moreover, such choice by Arthur and Flynn appears quite directive: participants were specifically asked to think about their reasons for staying in Canada, thus not allowing them to open-up, and explore holistically their experiences as IS at the end of their studies. Thirdly, participants included IS that had spent between six months and 6 years in Canada. This sampling might hold strong variation, as the experiences of students that have spent six months in the host country are likely to be different from those of students who have spent 6 years in terms of their adaptation to the host culture.

The two critiqued studies have contributed in gaining an initial understanding of the place occupied by IS in the last part of their journey, a moment which I called “crossroad”. Such studies also point towards interesting directions for future research. Building upon previous literature on IS they have tried to fill the existing gap in the last phase of their journey and suggested us

that this phase can be a moment of great indecision. Nonetheless, questions regarding the way in which IS negotiate the possible dilemmas and internal conflicts of their crossroad remained unanswered.

2.6 CLR Summary and Proposal of a Research Question

Current models of CS (Pedersen, 1995; Winkelman, 1994), seem to be unable to inform us of what happens to IS between their adaptation and the possible return home, and very little research is available on such a moment.

This sub-phase within the adaptation phase may involve challenges and decisions related to transitioning from education to employment, including staying in or leaving the host country. IS at this stage may have experienced a shift in their perception of self and the world (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010), as their values and identity may have been shaped within the host country (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). Students at this psychological “crossroad” may experience dilemmas, as their new views may be incompatible with their previous plans, home culture and family commitments. Such inconsistencies may create tension, confusion and struggle regarding which direction to take (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). Thus, this phase may have the potential to be one of struggle, uncertainty and internal conflict, which can lead to psychological stress (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Arthur & Flynn, 2011).

The available research in this sub-phase has focused on career and settlement attitudes of foreign students and the rational push-pull factors, leading to a decision to stay in or leave the host country (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Baruch, Budhwar & Khatri, 2007; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Questions remained as to how IS negotiate the challenges of this sub-phase, particularly in the current UK

context, where the restrictions of immigration law may add additional pressure on IS.

No literature examines qualitatively the complexity of IS' experiences in this sub-phase, under a holistic perspective; a less directive and more exploratory qualitative psychological research seemed necessary in such a minimally researched field (Lyons & Coyle, 2007).

With the present qualitative study, looking at how international masters students in the UK make sense of their transitional experiences at the end of their educational journey, I hoped to fill such gaps in the literature through aiming at three main objectives.

First, to generate further knowledge around the experience of IS in the period that elapses between the adaptation phase and the (possible) return home, and highlighting whether the "crossroad" sub-phase, deserves a place in the current models that conceptualise IS' experiences.

Second, to generate research that attempts to grasp a holistic understanding of IS' experiences through a qualitative lens. By doing so, I aimed to uncover the role of emotions and the way in which these are experienced in the IS' decision-making process. I hoped that such qualitative approach would allow IS to open up and give a comprehensive account of their experiences, without limiting their voices by focusing on a particular life event, as done by Arthur and Flynn (2011).

Thirdly, to investigate not only the employment and settlement attitudes of IS in the last phase of their journey (Arthur & Flynn, 2011), but crucially how this population makes sense of their possible psychological struggles and internal conflicts regarding their new challenges, including the potential impact of UK

immigration restrictions. The hope is that this qualitative research, building upon the humanistic lens of CoP (Woolfe at al., 2010), focusing on the individual's subjective experience, gives voice to IS' needs and desires in their unique and complex position at the end of their studies in the UK. This knowledge can inform the greater community and therapeutic practice with IS by enabling therapists to work more effectively with their subjective needs, a crucial characteristic of the philosophy, and practice of CoP (Orleans & Van Scoyoc, 2009).

PART 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this section the methodology chosen for the present study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be discussed with a closer look at its philosophical underpinning and the way these guided the research process. The reasons for choosing IPA over other qualitative approaches will also be discussed, alongside presenting a reflection on my personal ontology and epistemology. Finally, I will look in details at the methods of the research, including recruitment, interviews, and the analytic process. I will conclude with some ethical considerations.

3.2 Choosing a Qualitative Methodology

The choice of a qualitative approach was guided by both the critique on the existing literature on the topic and the nature of the phenomenon I wished to study.

I felt that quantitative research could not capture the essence of the current enquiry, as this was not aimed at finding cause-effect processes in a positivist fashion (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, I had critiqued the current understanding of IS approaching the end of their studies as largely limited to looking at push-pull factors in the students' decisions to stay or leave the UK. Thus, I felt that my interest was to look instead at the complexities and nuances of the individual subjective accounts of my participants' lived experiences, with a particular focus on the role of emotions in it. This pointed towards a qualitative lens as an instrument and a perspective that could allow me to step into the participants' world (Willig, 2013).

Furthermore, a qualitative approach appeared suitable in a research area in need of exploration, and able to provide a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Attempting to understand the internal emotional world of IS also mirrored my interest to generate research that could be useful to CoP, which shares with qualitative perspectives the desire to understand the meanings that certain situations have for an individual experiencing them (McLeod, 2001). Finally, qualitative research seemed appropriate to attempt understanding the IS' individual subjective needs with a view to use this knowledge to inform the practice of counselling psychologists and other professionals providing support to IS approaching their crossroad (Orleans & Van Scoyoc, 2009).

3.3 Reflexivity on Epistemology and Ontology

Choosing a qualitative lens for this research also represented the result of a shift that I have experienced both in my epistemology, that is my own position on what can be known and how, and ontology, that is the way I see the world. I will now reflect on this process of change in relation to my personal and professional development and how such changes are reflected into, and can influence, the way one conducts research.

Since the beginning of my formal training in psychology a strong attention was placed on numerical data and measuring variables when approaching research. Lectures and textbooks highlighted the importance of gathering information to cluster individuals in diagnostic categories. The environment I encountered when I first approached mental health services was a highly medicalised one, where it felt that medications and the containment of

symptoms were the focus of care. Although I recognise these experiences as highly formative, I felt that the value of the individual experience of people in distress was being somewhat overlooked. This early negative impression of a south-Italian mental health world, although not necessarily reflecting the reality of the entire country or region, led me to take a detour from the clinical setting and to focus on other psychological avenues. Nonetheless, my educational pathway continued to be constellated by contexts which favoured a positivist approach to research leading me to feel that 'scientific' meant to be able to measure and control variables to discover reality, reflecting an epistemology of 'naïve realism' which sees reality as fully graspable through generating knowledge in a aseptic fashion (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). That was a time when the limited knowledge I possessed around qualitative research mirrored a perception of it as being 'too vague', 'imprecise', and 'chaotic'. However, things changed. My perspective broadened by experiencing living and studying first in other parts of Italy and eventually in the UK. I was exposed to continuously different and diverse social and cultural contexts. This fostered the development in me of a greater open-mindedness, acceptance and seeking of diversity. This journey of discovery, happening while I was maturing as an individual in my late twenties, made me realise and embrace the fact that vagueness, impreciseness and chaos are essentially what the world and humans are about.

While approaching my training in CoP, such realisation allowed me to face the separation anxiety deriving from leaving the comfortable positivist-empiricist framework, which I now find inadequate to use as a perspective to look at the world and as a tool to attempt to understand it in research. I currently embrace a position drawing from critical-realism and a phenomenological

epistemology. While adhering to critical-realism I do believe that a reality can exist independently of our consciousness (Finlay, 2006), I believe that an understanding of such a reality can only be attempted through looking at the accounts of the individual consciously experiencing it, thus in a phenomenological fashion (Giorgi, 1994).

Abandoning a quantitative approach, which at times I still feel attracted to for the ‘safety’ that it conveys through its controllability, was for me the result of a negotiation with the part of me who was scared of the unpredictability and disorder of this world, which statistical analysis promised to reveal and fix. Resorting to my adult self, through an honest reflection, let arise an acceptance of such unpredictability, and the realisation that only through getting close to, embracing and navigating the complexities of human beings, in their very unpredictability, a chance exists to understand phenomena and the people experiencing them.

3.4 Rationale for IPA

Consistently with my epistemological alignment I chose an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) methodology to investigate the way in which IS make sense of their dilemmas and struggles as they approach this particular crossroad in their life.

Jonathan Smith introduced IPA in 1996 as a new approach to qualitatively analyse data in health psychology. Since then, IPA has gained increased popularity within clinical and counselling psychology (Smith, 2010). IPA seemed a good fit for this research for it provides the possibility to look at, and understand how individuals make sense of their personal world (Smith &

Osborn, 2003). Furthermore, IPA's interest in the subjective experience of the participants matched my desire to give justice to the internal emotional worlds of these IS, which I feel had been so far overlooked by research. This quality of IPA also matches the CoP's mission to empathically understand how individuals make sense of their experiences. Simultaneously, IPA sits well with a therapeutic stance by recognising the research process as dynamic and happening within a researcher-participant dyad (Smith, 1996). As highlighted by Dallos and Draper (2000), doing qualitative research also means to embrace the idea that the researcher, their ideology and background will become part, and thus alter, the investigated phenomenon, which is something that IPA can accommodate. Finally, IPA's phenomenological emphasis represents an important fit with my own epistemological position, and such a match is often recommended in research (Willig, 2001).

3.5 Characteristics of IPA

The main goal of IPA is to grasp the nuances of an individuals' subjective experience as understood and interpreted by them (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

Smith (2004), describes IPA as holding onto three theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

Its phenomenological emphasis rejects the idea of an 'objective' reality and drives IPA towards looking at an individual's account of an event or situation in order to grasp the essence of such experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Furthermore, an idiographic stance means that IPA does not seek generalisable findings to generate knowledge around objective phenomena,

rather, embraces an investigation aimed at looking at the subjectivity of individual cases (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). This grants IPA the advantage of allowing the researcher to make specific statements about the participants involved in a study, while simultaneously learning something about generic themes in the analysis (Smith, 1996, 2004).

IPA's hermeneutic stance, points at its interpretative nature. To access knowledge around how individuals make sense of their experience, the researcher has to interpret the participants' accounts. However a double hermeneutic is in place, as the individual's experience that the researcher attempts to interpret has already been interpreted by the participant who experienced it (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

3.6 IPA and Other Qualitative Approaches

I had considered other qualitative approaches before making the decision of adopting IPA, which appeared to best suit both the research question and my personal epistemological position.

Grounded Theory (GT), emerging in sociology as developed by Glaser and Straus (1967), holds several similarities with IPA, such as the aim to highlight a group's or person's worldview while identifying themes and organising and categorising them into higher order items to attempt capturing the essence of a phenomenon. However, while GT looks more closely at social processes with a view of creating a theory based on the understanding of a phenomenon (Payne, 2007), IPA holds the advantage of being more suitable to look at an individual's inner psychological world, which was in line with the aims of this research and my desire to look at the experiences of IS alone.

Narrative Analysis (NA) was also considering as an approach that shares with IPA a phenomenological epistemology. Both approaches assume a link between language and the experiencing self (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). NA was excluded for its attention on how people talk about a topic, their narrative and stories and for looking at the lived experiences of particular traumas or incidents (Crossley, 2000), which did not reflect my aims.

Finally, Discourse Analysis, focusing on the role of discourse in understanding reality (Potter, 2012), was another methodology not considered as fit for this study. Focusing on group dynamics and utilizing a focus group for the data collection would have made it harder to focus on the individual meaning-making (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Moreover, focus groups appear to provide a very limited understanding of individual experiences (Hollander, 2004).

3.7 Design

3.7.1 Data Collection and Recruitment

The recruitment process involved producing flyers (see Appendix A), which were distributed in several London universities. Interested individuals were invited to register their interest through a web based electronic form (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) or to make contact via email whereby they could have a chance to ask for more information about the study. The prospective participants who made contact and confirmed their interest were sent a participant information sheet (see Appendix B). Subsequently, they were invited to complete an online version of the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001; see Appendix C) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams,

& Lowe, 2006; see Appendix C). Upon completion of these, perspective participants' scores were checked and those who resulted eligible were invited for an interview. Before this begun participants were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix D).

3.7.2 Participants

The study involved non-EU/EEA international masters students in the UK that had also undertaken undergraduate studies in the UK and held a tier-4 student visa. Therefore, they were aware that they were expected to leave the country shortly after the end of their courses. This aspect could potentially add pressure on the students' experiences by providing them with little time available to find employment, if they wished to stay in the UK.

In light of previous research (Arthur & Flynn, 2011), I selected participants who had spent from three to five years in the UK: a time range considered sufficient to add homogeneity to their life circumstances. This time range was also a fit with my interest to interview IS who had gone through their process of CS in the UK, because they are expected to have experienced a shift in their sense of self and cultural identity (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). Therefore, they were more likely to be living a moment of turmoil and indecision regarding their future at the time of investigation.

Finally, participants were from any country whose citizens need a visa to enter the UK, in line with other existing qualitative studies on IS not focusing on a specific nationality or world region (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

As IPA is conducted with relatively small sample sizes (Smith & Eatough, 2007), I recruited six participants (see table 1 for participants' demographics).

*Table 1. Participants' demographic information
(Pseudonyms have been used to preserve anonymity)*

Participant	Gender	Age	Country	Years in UK
1. Lyn	F	23	Singapore	4
2. Lee	M	23	China	4
3. Jennifer	F	24	USA	5
4. Hakim	M	25	Palestine	5
5. Sam	M	23	Singapore	4
6. Arlinda	F	24	Albania	5

3.7.3 Interviews

The aim of the research was to grasp the subjective experience of the participants through the emergence of rich accounts, thus the format chosen for data collection was semi-structured interviews (Smith, 1995). These, at the cost of reduced control over the interview process, allow for a broad freedom of exploration, consistent with the phenomenological nature of IPA (Smith, 1996). Furthermore, this method of investigation is in accordance with humanistic psychology, which emphasises the centrality of the individual (Graham, 1986). The interview lasted one-hour circa and included a set of questions (see Appendix E) which arose from the critique of the general literature on IS in the last year of studies. However, rather than forcing the process of account giving, the set questions deriving from the rationale for the study constituted a guide for a conversation between two individuals (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

3.7.4 Analysis

The analytic process followed the directions outlined by Smith and Eatough (2007). Transcribing the interviews constituted the first step. A detailed reading and rereading of the transcripts and listening of the audiotapes, which allowed for an immersion within the participants' accounts, followed. Subsequently, initial hand-written/digital notes on the transcripts' right hand margin were taken to reflect salient and significant ideas, issues and topics I considered interesting (see Appendix F for a section of one transcript with accompanying notes). The following stage included a return to the transcripts using the left-hand margin to translate the initial notes into abstractions and psychological concepts. This stage represented the first interpretative act in the analysis and caution was needed in trying not to lose the link existing between my interpretations and the participants' accounts, (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

In the following stage, I clustered themes for similarity using an imaginary 'magnet' that pulled some of them together, creating a list of themes for each participant (see Appendix G). The final stage involved a cross-case comparison with subsequent creation of a table of master themes and the writing up of a narrative account that reflected the relation between the participants' accounts and my interpretative effort (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

In an attempt to ensure a certain level of validity to the analysis, I invited two participants to make a validation of the emerged themes.

It was important at all stages to 'bracket' some of the assumptions that could have influenced my interpretation of the participants' accounts, thus potentially affecting its genuineness. In order to safeguard that, I kept a reflexive diary to highlight the details of the nature of any interpretation as advised by

Biggerstaff & Thompson (2008). Specifically, considering my personal involvement with the topic, I needed to stay alert for possible biases that could have affected my interpretations. For example, I felt the need to bracket my expectations that these students were facing a crucial and stressful turning point in their life. Additionally, I had to bracket my expectations that IS would see the immigration law as ‘unfair’, which was indeed my personal opinion.

3.7.5 Ethical Considerations

3.7.5.1 Ethical Standards

Ethical approval for this research was granted through the University’s ethics committee (see Appendix H), which deliberated that the required high ethical standards were met. Throughout the research process I attempted to maintain an ethical attitude in line with the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009).

3.7.5.2 Monitoring Distress

Participants’ wellbeing was explored before the interviews via the collection of PHQ-9 and GAD-7. All of the recruited participants scored lower than 15 and 10 respectively. These were considered as cut-off points beyond which the participant would have been excluded. Nonetheless, participants’ level of distress was monitored during the entire interview process and verbal and non-verbal communication was observed to evaluate it. Although distress did not arise during the interviews, a distress protocol (Appendix I) was prepared which I would have appropriately followed if needed.

3.7.5.3 Confidentiality

I highlighted the importance of confidentiality to the participants during recruitment, via direct communication with me and as outlined in the information sheet, and at the interview stage. I made the participants aware that all identifying information would have been removed from the transcripts and that the use of pseudonym would have been deployed to guarantee anonymity.

3.7.5.4 Data Protection

To ensure data protection, all electronic data was stored in a password protected PC. All hard copies of the research materials, including transcripts and notes, were locked in a filing cabinet I only had access to. The participants were made aware that, for publication purposes, all the research materials, including digital ones, would be kept secure for 5 years after which they would be destroyed. However, participants had the possibility to withdraw their consent and have all materials destroyed immediately.

PART 4. ANALYSIS & RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the findings emerging from the in-depth analysis of six interview transcripts. Before presenting the results it seems important to make two premises about the fact that a temporal sequence emerged from the analysis and also about the acknowledgement of uncertainty as a dominating/overarching theme across all participants' transcripts. These premises are discussed below.

4.1.1 Temporal Sequence

A temporal sequence seemed to emerge from the analysis, which is reflected in the present results and particularly between the first superordinate theme and the following two. The former looks at the changes to self and identity that the participants have gone through during their process of CS in the UK, whereas the following two superordinate themes are mainly focused on the challenges of the crossroad and how these impacted on the IS. Such temporal sequence can arguably provide a first general level of interpretation of the results. As I will suggest, it is arguably in light of those changes to self and identity (superordinate theme 1) that the participants made sense of their experiences at the crossroad (superordinate themes 2 and 3).

4.1.2 Overarching 'Uncertainty' and its Impact

While analysing the transcripts and looking at the results, the theme of 'uncertainty' emerged as an overarching and dominating presence across all participants' transcripts. Uncertainty seemed to infiltrate almost every aspect of

the experience of these IS. The presence of uncertainty scattered in the participants' accounts generated uncertainty and anxiety in me and let arise dilemmas, indecisions and struggles in the decision making process leading up to the organisation of the present results. Nonetheless, experiencing anxiety and uncertainty represented an opportunity to gain more closeness and empathise with the participants' lived experiences of their own uncertainty, struggles and dilemmas.

Many discussions with my supervisor took place to choose a meaningful way to organise the themes that would give justice to the experience of the participants. Therefore, the present organisation of superordinate themes and subthemes results from multiple revisions, and represents one possible way to make sense of the participants' accounts, from my personal perspective.

4.1.3 Themes

Three superordinate themes and nine subthemes emerged from the analysis (see table 2). The key quotes presented were selected according to how they effectively captured a theme's essence and/or would give voice to all participants.

Table 2. Superordinate themes and subthemes with key quotes

Superordinate Themes	Subthemes	Key Quotes
Changes to Self and Identity	Changes to Self	<i>“And certainly there's like, I tried to be an adult here, because when I was in China even after being 18 years old I still, everything, every decision making influenced by my parents, but now here I can make my own decisions.”</i> (Lee; 495-499)
	Identity	<i>“Albania seems like home but for many other things England seems like home. Albania seems more like my childhood home whereas as an adult, I can relate myself much more with this environment”</i> (Arlinda; 741-746)
Uncertainty, Temporariness & Emotional Responses	Transition Education to Employment	<i>“I've seen a lot of people go through it, my brother and friends, sometimes I get this feelings of excitement but it's put down by the idea of having to leave here, it's very much tied to staying here or not”</i> (Hakim; 552-557)
	Impact of Uncertainty & Lack of control	<i>“It has started having a lot of effects physically. Physical effects. Since its making me feel more anxious, you know I've started not feeling very good physically, and having anxiety attacks, panic attacks.”</i> (Arlinda; 456-462)
	Coping Attempts	<i>“...that reassurance of God being in control and not you, and not so much that ehm; whatever I do can have dire consequences for the rest of my life because whatever the case I have the reassurance that God is in control. So there's, I think there's so much potential to find comfort in that.”</i> (Sam; 988-995)
	Feelings towards visa regulation	<i>“Now it's not like I'm here bumming around on benefits, I'm here contributing so much to society and, well the economy, and now I get put in the same boat as the people that come in illegally and don't have skills.”</i> (Jennifer; 371-375)
Dilemmas at the Crossroad	Finding a Job	<i>“Not only I have to find a job that lets me stay in the UK otherwise I would have to leave, but also determines, what kind of career I would go for, because it would force me [] pick a job which is not what I want to do. And that definitely doesn't make me happy but is a cost that I would have to pay if I want to stay here.”</i> (Arlinda; 400-409)
	Staying vs. Leaving the UK	<i>“I feel like London is more like my home, you know every time that I come back to London doesn't matter from China or from other countries I feel like I come home.”</i> (Lee; 78-81)
	The marriage solution	<i>“Even if we just went to the courthouse and just got married for the hell of [], you're still married, and I think that just puts so much pressure on something that does not need to have pressure on ehm. But yeah it's kind of like catch-22 it's like well if I get sent back to the states we'll probably break up.”</i> (Jennifer; 498-504)

4.2 Superordinate Theme 1: Changes to Self and Identity

All participants, upon reflecting on their time in the UK, reported feeling a number of changes and developments in their sense of self that they perceived had taken place due to the impact of living abroad. This process of change and development contributed to their overall view of themselves, that is, to their present identity.

4.2.1 Subtheme: Change to Self

Although all participants spoke about experiencing change, their country of origin, and in general their previous experiences emerged as a factor that differentiated the type of impact the UK experience had on them.

In general, their time in the UK as IS emerges for all the participants as one of personal growth and maturation, accompanied by a sensation of becoming independent. Lee expresses an example of this in the following excerpt:

“And certainly...I tried to be an adult here, because when I was in China even after being 18 years old I still, everything, every decision- making influenced by my parents, but now here I can make my own decisions.” (Lee; 495-499).

For Lee, who expresses the feeling of having become an ‘adult’ in the UK, living abroad, away from his parents, and therefore being responsible for his own decisions appears to have given him a sense of agency. Something that, he seems to recognise, he would not have experienced had he remained in China.

Lyn and Sam, coming from the same country, provide similar accounts about experiencing independence in the UK:

“Definitely I am a lot more independent...because you have no parents to wash the dishes and the laundry and we have to like look for houses ourselves, so it is like getting into touch with these adult things” (Lyn; 204-208)

“The most obvious because...I'm forced to be independent here, I have to do my own laundry, cook meals, nobody is going to force me to do work, everything is really on your own. I think it was a huge, huge learning experience” (Sam; 124-129)

Both Lyn and Sam seem to feel a similar sense of independence and agency through having to be responsible for their every day self-management while living on their own in the UK. This sense of agency seems to be experienced as an achievement, possibly deriving from the fact that they were both coming from a background of low independence back home.

Furthermore, there seems to be a sense of gratefulness in Sam's words, which appears to suggest recognition of the UK as a sort of developmental object granting an important learning experience.

For Hakim and Jennifer, living in the UK was not the first experience away from home and parents. For Hakim it appeared that the biggest vehicle for change was the very different local culture he had adapted to in the UK:

“In Palestine we were much more free to do things, and then I went to Qatar and then here it was quite a relief...So it was easier to meet people, exposed to a lot of different stuff in Colchester, like alcohol even drugs. Conception of relationships change, the conception of sex changed”
(Hakim; 326-333)

Along with gaining independence, which Hakim mentioned elsewhere in his transcript, other changes seemed to have taken place for him, such as the adoption of different, and broader perspectives and more accepting attitudes towards difference and diversity while in the UK. These changes seem to have arisen for him as a result of having been exposed, and adapted to, the UK culture, which he seems to perceive as very different from the culture of the countries he had been living in before. Specifically, from his words it seems that he perceived these as less accepting of diversity and homogeneous.

Arlinda provides a similar position:

“Living in London has made me a much more accepting person of different cultures. Now it’s not anymore about simply accepting differences and diversity, but rather, diversity being a very important part of your life without which I can’t imagine my life. I can’t imagine myself living in a city or country where there is no diversity” (Arlinda; 161-169)

Arlinda, who came from a small country with a very homogenous population and thus arguably hosting a very different cultural setting, seems to have developed a sense of greater sensitivity and empathy towards others.

Diversity now appears to be for her an important part of the self, something presumably made possible by her exposure to the international community she encountered in London.

Although all participants experienced change, Jennifer appeared to have done so to a lesser degree:

“I think I guess I have become a bit more British. I think growing up in an international school definitely shaped me...just being aware of different cultures and different people” (Jennifer; 121-124)

Although she does seem to express the perception of having changed through the internalisation of some British traits, it seems that she felt more of a ‘local’ than a foreigner in the UK. Jennifer seemed to have started her journey in the UK from a position of greater familiarity with the local culture and a greater acceptance of and habituation to diversity than any other participant. This is arguably due to both, having grown up with American parents, and thus having been exposed to a culture not very different from a British one, and also due to her extensive international exposure gained through attending an international school while living in Europe for most of her life. Through this ‘shaping’ experience, which she seems very grateful of, she arguably grew more accustomed to the British culture before arriving in the UK and was also already used to openness and acceptance towards different ethnicities and cultures.

4.2.2 Subtheme: Identity

The prolonged experience of living in the UK changed the participants and influenced the way they see themselves today. In this subtheme the focus is on the consequences on their identity of such changes.

Lyn's maturation and entrance into adulthood, together with experiencing independence, through her years and the adjustment to the UK environment, seems to have created, for her, a dual identity: a Singaporean and a UK one. Several times during her interview, Lyn talked about how she felt 'a bit of both' as highlighted below:

"Sometimes I am stressed and look at these people [the British] and I feel like "Yea I should focus on my life", and then when I think I am too laid back I look at my Singaporean friends and I say "Yeah I should focus on my studies" (Lyn; 298-302)

Lyn appears to be happy about carrying within her a coexistence of both a British and a 'home' identity. She seems to see her 'dual identity' as a resource that she can 'draw' upon depending on the circumstances. From her words she also seems to differentiate the roles of the two identities, one – the home one - appearing to be more fitting her academic and professional ambitions, consistently with her Singaporean cultural values, and a British one which seems to fit more a socially oriented side of the self. Overall her experience of a dual identity appears to be one of enrichment.

The feeling of a dual identity is something that also Lee seems to have experienced, although apparently with confusion:

“It's very strange I talked to my friends and they think maybe it's because I made it all by myself, you know I found a house I moved home all by myself so it made me more like home, even when I come back to London from China you know, when I leave my family but still when I am at arrivals at Heathrow airport I feel like, wow I come home! It's very strange yeah” (Lee; 81-88)

For Lee, a dual identity appears to have sprouted out of his newly found sense of agency and independence in the UK, arguably something that he was not used to back home and which seems to have been the main driver for his ‘UK’ or ‘Adult’ identity. He appears to be very attached to this new, empowered identity. However, surprise and confusion seem to emerge for him when exposed to events, such as returning to the UK from his home country, which highlights for him a sense of belongingness to the UK, perceived now as ‘home’.

Living in a country with a very unfamiliar culture, at a young age and for several years seems to trigger major changes in the identity of individuals, as it is the case for Arlinda who seems to make a clear differentiation between her identity back home and her new identity in the UK:

“Albania seems like home but for many other things England seems like home. Albania seems more like my childhood home whereas as an adult, I can relate myself much more with this environment” (Arlinda; 741-746)

For Arlinda, who arrived in the UK aged seventeen, her experience as an IS appears as a strongly developmental one. It seems that being exposed to and

absorbing the UK culture at a young age triggered a process of separation-individuation (from the old Albanian identity), resulting also for her in a greater sense of belongingness to the UK environment.

Both Hakim and Jennifer, the only participants who had already been in international education before arriving in the UK, seem to have negotiated their respective changes to their sense of self with the emergence of an IS identity:

“Ehm, I actually moved to the UK when I was 6 from the US for 3 and a half years and then ehm, so when I was young I lived in the UK as well, and then I spent my entire life as an IS” (Jennifer; 7-10)

For Jennifer, it seems that an identity emerged that was not necessarily tied to a specific native culture, but more influenced by a broader international exposure. Having been in international education for 18 years, she seems to have ‘grown up’ as an IS, and seems to feel her belongingness to an IS identity.

On the other hand, Hakim seems to still feel strong ties with his national identity:

“I’m Palestinian, and since you are young you are taught you’re Palestinian, you’re different and you should love it” (Hakim; 118-120)

Feeling ‘different’ appears to be something that is strongly rooted within his native culture and that he seems to feel a strong tie with. Nonetheless, feeling

different appeared to have been for Hakim a resource helping him to appreciate his belongingness to a student population rather than an immigrant one:

“it's been a fantastic experience and I'm coming from a privileged position 'couse I'm a student I'm not an immigrant so it would be completely different.” (Hakim; 45-49)

Hakim seems to make a clear differentiation between his identity as an IS as opposed to an immigrant one. From his words a sense of gratefulness for his status seems to emerge, arguably pointing at the fewer opportunities he perceived he would have had, had he been ‘only’ an immigrant.

4.3 Superordinate Theme 2: Uncertainty, Temporariness and Emotional Responses

All participants made reference to how being IS in their last year of study is a moment of transition and great uncertainty towards the future. This uncertainty seemed to mainly derive from the participants’ desire to continue their lives in the UK, which appeared thwarted by the immigration laws that make IS effectively temporary. Uncertainty emerged as a pervasive presence across all participants’ experiences, even when, for one participant, a clear decision to return home after finishing his studies had been made. Participants’ emotions towards the temporariness imposed by their legal status together with their attempts to cope with the challenges of this phase are included in this superordinate theme.

4.3.1 Subtheme: Transition Education to Employment

Most of the participants highlighted that the transition between education and employment triggered mixed emotions:

“Going to work and being self-sufficient. So this is probably what excites me but at the same time makes me nervous because you have to figure out what you have to do with your life, what kind of jobs. I never knew in my life what I wanted to do when I graduate, so it makes me quite nervous having to think about...what kind of role etc. etc. And it’s also quite unsettling because of the whole pressure of remaining in the UK.”
(Arlinda; 253-263)

“I’ve seen a lot of people go through it...sometimes I get this feelings of excitement but it’s put down by the idea of having to leave here, it’s very much tied to staying here or not. So, sometimes I find myself thinking like I’m really excited to start working but it’s like when it gets to the idea of where is it gonna be or what is it gonna be that’s when it’s like put down.” (Hakim; 552-562)

From both Arlinda’s and Hakim’s words, their mixed emotions seem to emerge as a dualism where their drive towards self-actualization in a work environment and excitement for achieving more independence appears to be thwarted by feeling uncertain about the future. Not knowing whether they will be able to continue their lives in the UK seems to limit their ability to feel free agents in choosing a work path for themselves.

A similar thwarted sense of agency seems to emerge for Jennifer:

“I am quite done with education now, because yeah it's been long and I want to sort of get going and I'm 24 now and most people have proper jobs by then, but yeah I was thinking about this this morning, I was like maybe I should just do another Masters and then I can prolong my visa.”

(Jennifer; 259-264)

Jennifer appears to feel the pressure of her peers and society in general as an additional force fuelling her desires to enter the working world. Nonetheless, there seems to be indecision in her words as her desires might have to be put aside by the need to find a way to continue staying in the UK (i.e. by continuing education), which similarly to Hakim and Arlinda seems to be limiting her agency. Continuing education appears to be an unwanted option that, although seems inconsistent with her current wishes, she would be willing to consider in order to stay in the UK.

Lee's experience of this moment of transition seems to be entirely dominated by uncertainty:

“I am nervous yes. Because I think first thing I finish my degree, because it's like you face a choice to stay here or go back, yes, but I know like the choice is no choice because here it's very difficult now. Not many opportunities ehm, I'm nervous I think because I think I'm not very prepared to go back to China, but also the fact is that it is very hard to find a job here or to stay here.” (Lee; 229-237)

For Lee, who perhaps experiences the strongest impact of uncertainty, this moment of transition does not appear to leave space for excitement and a positive anticipation for his next life stage; rather it seems to be filled with dread and anxiety for the unwanted possibility of a forced return home. Sadness and powerlessness seem to emerge as the accompanying feelings triggered by his uncertainty.

Uncertainty seems to invest even Sam, who had decided to return home after university:

“The only thing I can think of is uncertainty. Because, ehm, so for one there's leaving this comfortable environment and going back and I am not sure how, how reconnecting with friends will be, how adjusting back to the local climate and, of course the most important will be how adjusting to the work environment” (Sam; 517-525)

Although compared to the other participants Sam knows where he will be living and working following his studies, the feeling of uncertainty seems to affect him too. From his words, his uncertainty seems to be triggered by the thought of how negative things could turn out once he returned home.

4.3.2 Subtheme: Impact of Uncertainty & Lack of Control

Uncertainty and the perception of lack of control over future events seem to negatively impact the participants' wellbeing, bringing low mood, anxiety and worries. Although to different extents, all participants seemed to experience

psychological or physiological consequences deriving from living with uncertainty.

Lee describes these in the following excerpts:

“It's terrible for me, and also ehm, I think it influenced my diet maybe. Because I, sometimes when I am very depressed I wouldn't, I wouldn't like to eat, no.” (Lee; 448-451)

“The feeling is just un-peaceful, uneven and physically I got the gray hairs, it's very bothering because, because I don't like that you know” (Lee; 428-430)

Through analysing the transcripts, it seemed to emerge that Lee was the participant experiencing the strongest impact of uncertainty. The hardest part for Lee appeared to be the fact of perceiving an intense lack of control, which seemed to trigger both psychological and physiological consequences. From his words it appears that Lee is experiencing a difficult internal struggle towards which he feels powerless and disorientated.

All participants, when talking about their experience of uncertainty, mentioned experiencing worry or anxiety. Arlinda talks about this in the following excerpt:

“It has started having a lot of effects physically. Physical effects. Since it's making me feel more anxious, you know I've started not feeling very

good physically, and having anxiety attacks, panic attacks.” (Arlinda; 456-462)

From her words it seems that for Arlinda dealing with uncertainty was very difficult. It appears that over time, presumably as the end of her studies approached, the anxiety and worry triggered by the uncertainty gradually increased up to the point of provoking more serious mental health issues such as what she defines as ‘panic attacks’.

Jennifer expresses a similar reaction to uncertainty in the following excerpt:

“Yeah it's kind of stressful at the moment 'cos now we're getting to the end of the year and I just, I don't know what I'm going to do, and it's quite scary because, while I can plan in advance there's only so much that's in my control, it could be in January that I just have to go back to the States” (Jennifer; 159-164)

Similarly to Arlinda, Jennifer’s anxiety seems to be building up as time passes. The more she gets close to the end of her studies, the stronger her need to find a solution to stay in the UK is. It seems that she feels a sense of disempowerment and lack of control over the situation. Fear, desperation and disorientation appear to emerge as the main feelings describing her experience of thinking about the idea of having to return home.

A characteristic of living in a state of uncertainty, alongside the worry about what the future holds, seems to be the fear of making wrong decisions, as described in the following excerpt by Hakim:

“I think about it all the time, I'm stressed; I keep talking about it all the time, until it's over and it softens. But whenever I reflect on these periods it's like a black spot” (Hakim; 772-776)

For Hakim the consequences of living with uncertainty are defined as ‘black spots’, arguably a situation of deep lack of clarity that seems to provoke incessant and overwhelming worry. He appears to perceive himself as powerless and lacking the agency to deal with such a situation that he seems to only be able to surrender to.

Lyn vocalizes the sensation of powerlessness and helplessness felt by all participants in dealing with the uncertainty and lack of control as something that hits her as a ‘nervous feeling in my heart’:

“So it's quite anxious and nervous feeling in my heart...it's that kind of feeling of like 'why it isn't everything fixed?' it's not an ideal situation to be in definitely.” (Lyn; 620-623)

Even for Sam, who has chosen to go back home at the end of his studies, his uncertainty seems to have a strong impact:

“As much as I try to manage my expectations these things which are out of my control or even things that are in my control or things I cannot anticipate have the potential to be quite huge disappointment for me, which will have implications for how I view my job, people, my capabilities, that sort of things” (Sam; 1092-1100)

Sam has somewhat less doubts about his future than the other participants, as he is aware that he will move back home where he has a job waiting for him. However, his uncertainty about his life after the UK seems to provoke a ‘freeze’ response, caused arguably by the powerlessness involved in perceiving an external locus of control on matters that seem to be of great importance for him, such as the readjustment back home and his high career expectations.

4.3.3 Subtheme: Coping Attempts

This subtheme looks at the participants’ attempts at coping with their challenges, including their psychological struggle. The extent to which a particular challenge was perceived within the participants’ control seemed somewhat related to their perceived success at coping with such issue.

Social support, in the form of friends and partners, was identified as a main resource for coping with difficult emotions, as discussed by Arlinda:

“I speak to my boyfriend about it who has been very supportive about it throughout all this thing. I speak to my friends who are in the same situation because you know I have other Albanian friends who are in the

same situation and sort of share the same anxiety with me which is very helpful because you know that you are not alone.” (Arlinda; 511-516)

Feeling the support of a significant person in her life and sharing her feelings with friends in the same circumstances seems to have a containing and arguably diluting effect on Arlinda’s emotions of anxiety. This is perhaps due to the effect of venting emotions to people that represent a source of support. If on one hand her partner can offer consolation and a sense of safety due to the emotional closeness between them, her friends that are experiencing issues similar to Arlinda’s are more likely to offer empathy and understanding resulting in making her feel less ‘lonely’ in her circumstances. A similar experience was shared by Jennifer:

“I wouldn’t be able to distract myself and I would just keep being stressed but having just people to vent about it to it’s like you’ve put it on the table and you’re taking your time and like you’ve spoken about it and now it’s ok, I can step back from it now...if I didn’t have that I’d probably just sit in my room and stay stressed for an entire day, I think probably just sad, it would be worry and anxiety” (Jennifer; 703-712)

For Jennifer, who came across as an outgoing and sociable person, sharing her struggle deriving from the uncertainty with others, seems to have a soothing and calming effect that she appears to be very grateful for. Her friends appeared to be offering her a space where she felt listened to and cared for. Resorting to her network’s support presumably allowed her to take distance from

her negative emotions and avoid getting caught into a vicious cycle where her constant worry and anxiety would lead to sadness and loneliness.

Coping for Lee appears to be very difficult:

“I don’t know how to cope with that. I chatted to friends and also I do meditate, but I don’t think it has really helped but, but after finally, after two or three days there will be something to make your day, to cheer you up and to make you forget what depressed you” (Lee; 347-352)

Lee struck me for how he appeared so overwhelmed with his worries and anxiety. From his words it seemed that most of his coping attempts failed to help him deal with his emotions. He appeared to be at the mercy of these.

Unlike Arlinda and Jennifer, Lee’s network, arguably smaller, seemed to be of little help and so was too his attempt to practice meditation. Having unsuccessfully tried to cope with his negative feelings in multiple ways a sense of hopelessness seemed to emerge for him. Lee appears left to wait for something external to take place and affect positively his mood, which perhaps may suggest his general disposition of a low perceived internal control.

The sense of agency that participants perceived in dealing with their challenges seems to be linked to the type of coping mechanism deployed.

Lyn speaks out this differentiation in the following excerpt:

“I think there’s two main things that I do, is either to tackle a problem or to avoid a problem. So tackling would be like applying for more jobs and things like that. Avoiding is just like going to a restaurant to eat, just to

forget about these things, because like, I don't know, food makes me happy (laughs). Just like forgetting about everything" (Lyn; 516-522)

From her words it appears that as long as Lyn perceives some control when dealing with her challenges, pro-activeness and, more generally, a 'fight' response, is activated. Conversely, when it's about dealing with difficult emotions, such as those triggered by the uncertainty, where a sense of control is less available, distraction, avoidance and a general 'flight' response, is instead used.

A similar response appears to emerge for Hakim:

"Two type of stresses let's say...The academic one...I get just calmer and I can understand information better. The other stress is the opposite...I can meditate, but I really don't know how, I cannot take it away from me. When it's about life decisions I am thinking of it all the time I don't think I cope with it." (Hakim; 762-772)

Hakim seems to make a clear differentiation between dealing with stressors perceived in and out of control. It seems like he knows what to do and is proactive when the stressors are perceived within the boundaries of his control, or capabilities. Conversely, when such sense of agency is lacking, for instance when he has to deal with the uncertainty surrounding his future, he appears powerless and unable to cope and seems to surrender to his constant and overwhelming worry.

Even Sam, in the following excerpt, seems to highlight the importance of reaching some form of perceived control to manage difficult emotions when dealing with uncertainty:

“...that reassurance of God being in control and not you, and not so much that...whatever I do can have dire consequences for the rest of my life because whatever the case I have the reassurance that God is in control...I think there’s so much potential to find comfort in that.” (Sam; 988-995)

For Sam, resorting to religion seems to represent the most effective form of coping with his uncertainty. During our interview, I perceived Sam’s tone of voice becoming calmer when talking about God, which conveyed a sensation of safety and peace. Thinking about God appears to represent for him an opportunity to delegate the responsibility of the outcomes of his uncertain future to an external entity that is perceived somehow as ‘being in control’.

4.3.4 Subtheme: Feelings towards Visa Regulation and Temporariness

The visa regulation emerged as an important factor in the background responsible for a good amount of the uncertainty experienced by the participants. All but one participant felt very strongly, and negatively, about it, as imposing on them an inherent state of temporariness that seemed to limit their agency in making decisions about their future.

Lyn expresses her disappointment towards the regulation in the following excerpt:

“I think it's quite a sad thing because it feels as though like the country doesn't really care about us but then again the country usually puts their citizens first so, I think it's something as IS we might have to, have to just accept it, but it would be nice if they didn't have such kind of regulation which is quite bad” (Lyn; 849-856)

Being faced with a forced choice of finding appropriate employment or having to leave the UK seems to provoke sadness for Lyn. This arguably derives from feeling rejected and devalued by the UK where, due to having spent the last 4 years, she appears to feel a sense of attachment to. Simultaneously, she appears to be trying to make sense of her emotions by attempting to rationalise the regulation as something that cannot be changed and perhaps that IS should ‘move on’ from.

The feeling of being rejected by the UK emerged from several participants’ accounts. Hakim and Jennifer speak it out in the following excerpts:

“The feeling is like, I've been here for 5 years, I've contributed to this country, I wanna stay here, I'm never gonna come and stay on benefit here ‘cos I'd rather live poor in my country than live poor in a foreign country, that's a very stupid idea. So it's more a disappointment but at the same time is some anger towards the population here in England.” (Hakim; 1125-1133)

“Everyone is about oh we need to cut down on immigration, it's Britain's biggest problem, the rules need to be stricter but I don't think, I've been here for 5 years now and contributed, I've paid international fees which are so much more expensive, in Scotland they go free and I paid 15 grand a year and still now it's not like I'm here bumming around on benefits, I'm here contributing so much to society and, well the economy, and now I get put in the same boat as the people that come in illegally and don't have skills.” (Jennifer; 366-375)

Hakim and Jennifer, like Lyn, seem to interpret the visa regulation as evidence that the UK is rejecting them. Intense emotions of anger and frustration seem to emerge for them in response to facing a forced choice. From their words it appears to be emerging a deeper sense of feeling undervalued and generally being seen more as a liability than as a resource. Their anger seems to be triggered particularly by feeling like the country does not make a differentiation that gives justice to their belongingness to an IS population as opposed to one of an illegal immigrant, which is a group seen as generally not contributing to society and to ‘get rid’ of.

This sense of wishing to reclaim her rights, that are ‘different’ than that of an illegal immigrant, seems to emerge from Jennifer as she points her finger at the high fees that IS like her have to pay to study in the UK, arguably providing further evidence to support her anger towards a country that does not seem to recognise her contribution to its society.

Arlinda too seems to express a similar feeling of having been financially exploited:

“It doesn’t make me feel well. It makes you feel in a way used that you come to this country, you pay a lot of money for the education...and then you are forced to leave. You feel that you are not, that you don’t have rights, that the government or whatever, doesn’t respect you.” (Arlinda; 912-919)

From her words Arlinda appears to feel like the UK has financially exploited her as, through the visa regulation, is currently ignoring her needs and rights to make a decision about her future, which she seems to feel entitled to. Even for her, anger and frustration seem to emerge as the most prevalent emotions.

Arlinda points out the different impact that such a forced choice has on someone who has spent several years in the UK as opposed to someone who spent a more limited time in the following excerpt:

“I don’t think is right...Maybe if you are here for a year than it’s different. But if you’ve been here for the past 4 years or 5 years and you’ve come in a very young age and you are fully formed in this country than you cannot be seen as a temporary sojourner because you have a lot of links with this country and this country is part of your life. And you need to have a bigger say in being able to stay here or not.” (Arlinda; 867-877)

For Arlinda, feeling unwanted, undervalued and exploited due to the visa regulation are emotions that are presumably connected with the attachment that she has formed towards the UK, which, as it emerged earlier, seems to have represented for her an object of growth and development. From her words, Arlinda seems to express the painful disappointment for feeling betrayed by the UK, a country where she got ‘fully formed’ and that she seems to feel is now pushing her away.

Lee appears to react similarly:

“And I think the visa, this country gave me the feelings like a home, and also very much security, everything is good, but my future is very uncertain and is very not a secured one. So it's also very strange feelings you know, I love this country but I am disappointed in this country as well because they can't give me a future.” (Lee; 685-691)

From his words a deep sense of disappointment seems to emerge for Lee. He appears to highlight conflicting emotions in response to the temporariness imposed by the visa regulation. These seem somewhat similar to those experienced by a child whose relationship with his caregiver let emerge an insecure-ambivalent attachment. That is, one in which the source of safety, is also one of anxiety, resulting in a general sense of disorientation.

4.4 Superordinate Theme 3: Dilemmas at the Crossroad

All participants reported experiencing a number of dilemmas they were facing while approaching the end of their studies. A close link appeared to exist between the dilemmas and experiencing uncertainty. The most impacting dilemma appeared to be the one about staying in or leaving the UK, which appeared strongly linked to the dilemma of finding a job and also of considering the idea of getting married, which materialised for three participants as a last resort attempt to continue their lives in the UK.

4.4.1 Subtheme: Finding a Job

Finding a job has multiple meanings as not only it represents the preferable way to obtain a ticket to remain in the UK, but it also arguably influences the participants' future professional direction. Their unsuccessful job hunt emerged as a struggling endeavor, constellated with failures and rejections, and provoking difficult feelings arguably affecting the participants' self-confidence and self-esteem.

Lyn, who had started her hunt for a job one year before the time of our interview, talks about only receiving rejections in the following excerpt:

“Had many applications and got just rejected straightaway, I tried really hard and I got at the last stage and then I failed it at the last stage and I felt like it was like very close, almost getting it, and it was like a dream job. So I was very sad for a few days wondering is it like my fault or it is just because it was discriminatory but I will never really know, so I was very depressed.” (Lyn; 369-376)

From her words, feelings of disappointment and sadness for her failures seem to emerge alongside a sense of disorientation, which appears to be triggered by the uncertainty regarding the reasons for being rejected. This specific type of uncertainty appears to be triggering anger and frustration, as, due to having a limited time to find a job, obtaining a feedback about the received refusals would perhaps represent a chance to improve her future applications and interview preparation.

Lee speaks out how having been through several failures seems to have provoked a loss in self-confidence:

“So this year I didn't start yet to apply for jobs because I am not very confident, because I am also graduating soon, I should, I should have started, I didn't because I am not very confident now because I've been through failures, every company just refused me, they say just sorry we can't consider.” (Lee; 249-255)

From Lee's words it seems that facing failures had the potential to lower his motivation and self-esteem, these in turn seem to emerge from his account as provoking a vicious cycle where he appears to procrastinate on applying for more jobs in order to avoid the anxiety provoked by fearing further failures.

An interesting factor emerging from the interviews is the willingness of Lee, Arlinda and Jennifer to accept any job in order to be able to continue their lives in the UK. Securing a job seemed to assume a primary importance and

represent a major source of pressure in the lives of these participants at their 'crossroad'.

Arlinda offers an example of this in the following excerpt:

“Not only I have to find a job that lets me stay in the UK otherwise I would have to leave, but also determines, what kind of career I would go for, because it would force me...pick a job which is not what I want to do. And that definitely doesn't make me happy but is a cost that I would have to pay if I want to stay here.” (Arlinda; 400-409)

Her choice to accept any jobs in order to stay in the UK, seems to represent a sacrifice limiting Arlinda's professional attitudes and desires.

She seemed to feel sad, dissatisfied and frustrated for feeling like she cannot unleash her potential as she lacks the agency to choose a job on the basis of her wishes, due to the pressure of the visa regulation.

Jennifer seems to experience similar feelings:

“So it's hard, and especially for like being business psychology stuff most of the companies are like small consultancy companies so they don't really have much scope to sponsor, ehm, so yeah, I'm kind of looking at big organisations and maybe just doing HR or recruitment for a year just to get the job ad get the visa and just sort of stick it out and to suck it up and do something that I don't really want to do...But yeah it's quite frustrating.” (Jennifer; 205-214)

From her words frustration and disappointment seem to emerge at the idea of having to accept a job position that she would not choose for herself but that she feels forced to in order to continue her life in the UK. Her willingness to just ‘stick it out and suck it up’, seems to further highlight the importance of remaining in the UK in this moment of her life.

A slightly different approach emerges for Hakim, who is attempting to secure a PhD post:

“Looking for jobs in the future after coming back, energising idea, I will have to think about it and I will have to act on it. But the thing is while I’m telling you I’m not gonna think about it I’m gonna be applying to different jobs, and working on my PhD proposal, so that’s gonna be stressful but also very energetic” (Hakim; 726-731)

Hakim’s attempts to pursue a PhD seem to also represent his main strategy to secure a visa to remain in the UK. Perhaps it is in light of this that he seems to procrastinate looking for jobs to later in the year as the end of his studies approaches. Such procrastination emerges presumably as an attempt to avoid the struggle and anxiety linked with the ‘job hunting’ and the uncertainty about where his future will lie. There seems to also be a good level of motivation in the enthusiasm that Hakim seems to express. I wonder whether such enthusiasm was fuelled by not having started looking for jobs yet and thus not having experienced refusals like other participants did.

4.4.2 Subtheme: Staying vs. Leaving the UK

All the participants expressed their concerns and struggles regarding whether continuing or not their lives in the UK after the end of their studies. All but one participant expressed their desire to remain in the UK, thus their dilemma seemed to be more connected with their perception of a limited control in realising such desire, rather than with making a decision on where they would prefer to live. It seemed that their desire to stay in the UK was largely responsible for generating the struggle to find a sponsoring employer (the job dilemma) and, as we shall see soon, even thinking about alternative routes such as getting married to obtain a visa (the marriage dilemma).

Both the participants' expectations on the world back in their home countries, and what they felt they would leave behind in the UK, seemed responsible for the struggle provoked by the thought of an unwanted return home. The fear of losing their gained independence and 'adult' identity, seems to be expressed by the majority of the participants as the most anxiety-provoking event they anticipate as they think about the possibility of returning home. Lyn provides an example of this in the following excerpt:

“I think if I go back to Singapore I will have to readjust back to the life there, readjust to the fact of having my parents with me because like, no more freedom, no more like heading out until two, so I think at the end I will have to go through adjustment” (Lyn; 928-932)

For Lyn, who comes from a culture arguably exalting adherence to family values and strict rules, the thought of returning home seems to let arise worries about readjusting to a life with her parents. This prospect seems to be

inconsistent with the life that for four years she experienced in the UK: living on her own, taking care of herself and feeling independent, which seemed to trigger a sense of empowerment and agency that she does not want to lose.

Jennifer, who left home when she was six years old, speaks out her preoccupation at the thought of returning home in the following excerpt:

“I would have no idea where to even start getting a job there, and it's crazy, I'd have to go back and live with my parents and since I don't know anyone there I wouldn't be able to afford a place to live with a friend...I'd have to live with strangers so I'd have to live with my parents first, get some sort of waitressing job or something to even save up money to be able to move out.” (Jennifer; 289-295)

From her words a strong anticipatory dread seems to emerge at the thought of returning to her childhood home. Jennifer, who lived across Europe for the past eighteen years, seems to experience a sense of homelessness. Where for other participants ‘home’ is a place where a network of people still exists and represents the place they grew up before moving to the UK, for Jennifer returning home feels like a transplant to a context that has not belonged to her for most of her life. Such a perspective arguably triggers a dread for feeling like returning home means not only losing her current independence, but resetting her life altogether and losing most of her familiar cues. Arlinda seems to experience a similar fear of ‘resetting’ her life by returning home:

“I would have to start everything from scratch. It [London] generally feels like home. For many things Albania seems like home but for many other things England seems like home. Albania seems more like my childhood home whereas as an adult, I can relate myself much more with this environment” (Arlinda; 739-746)

Arlinda’s fears of returning home seem to derive from perceiving it as a sort of regression in her development. Indeed, Arlinda expressed how proud she felt of having become an open and accepting person, attached to the diversity she was exposed to in the UK, to the point of not being able to imagine her life in any other place. Thus, the prospect of returning home seems to hold the significance of a step back to a context that arguably cannot match her current needs, beliefs and attitudes and is thus seen as highly undesirable. In the following excerpt, Lee seems to react with a similar fear of regression to the idea of an unwanted return:

“[in the UK] I can do everything I want to do...,so it makes me feel like I want to stay here...And even when I think about going back, because three years ago I went back to China and even that time I was already grown up but when I come back home I am still like a baby you know, my family that look after me all the time, they do everything for me, so it's very different.” (Lee; 500-507)

Lee seems to fear the loss of that ‘adult’ identity that appears to have emerged for him during his time in the UK. Specifically, he seems to make a

differentiation between an adult self in the UK and a child one back home, by identifying the latter as a 'baby'. Possibly exacerbated by the fact that his home culture does not foster independence in children, he seems to experience sadness and worry as a reaction to anticipating the loss of his sense of agency and empowerment belonging to his adult self. Consistently, Lee had highlighted his acquired independence as one of the biggest conquests in his journey of maturation in the UK.

Hakim speaks out his frustration at the idea of returning home in the following excerpt:

“Let's say I wear my piercing right now and walk on the street there [back home], unless they think I'm European, which they won't, I'd hear so much shit, and the treatment would be different just for the piercing.”
(Hakim; 921-926)

Hakim's worry about returning home seems to let arise frustration and anger which appear to be linked with an anticipation of facing a loss of freedom should he return to his home country. During the years in the UK he seems to have grown attached to the freedom of expression that the country allowed him to cultivate. Returning home, to a place that he perceives as unwelcoming, less tolerant, and with a more rigid and traditional society than the UK one, seems to be perceived as a thought which is inconsistent with his current persona.

Most of the participants appeared to express their perception of the UK, and particularly London, as their 'home' now. This factor seemed to strongly influence their desire to remain in the country.

Lee expresses this sense of belongingness in the following excerpt:

“I feel like London is more like my home, you know every time that I come back to London doesn't matter from China or from other countries I feel like I come home” (Lee; 78-81)

Arlinda expresses a similar feeling:

“In these years I've come to love England and I've come to love living here. So, I cannot see myself at this moment going back home. I have created a lot of relationships in this country like friends etc. I have been in a relationship for two years with someone I really love and therefore I would not want this visa problem to come in the way of us being together.” (Arlinda; 691-700)

An emotional attachment to her life in England seems to emerge for Arlinda. Such an attachment, probably linked with feeling like she has been ‘shaped’ by the UK, seems to be further strengthened by the relationships that she has created during her time in the country. Her relationships seem to assume a particular importance for her and the thought of having to leave the UK appears to trigger for Arlinda a fear of losing the support and understanding that, including her romantic partner, her network provides her.

Jennifer’s position appears to echo Arlinda’s in the following excerpt:

“It’s hard because I feel like it’s [the UK] my home, all my friends live here, my boyfriend, I live with my boyfriend, we’ve been together for 5 years, and he’s English, so it’s like my entire life’s here, my best friends live in the UK, ehm, and when I go back to the States, given the culture and the way that people talk and I don’t feel like I want to live there, now at least.” (Jennifer; 189-195)

Continuing their life in the UK seems to represent for the majority of the participants the most natural direction to take at this stage of their lives, one that seems consistent with their current identities, attitudes and desires.

This appears to apply, to an extent, even to Sam, who has made the choice to return home:

“[In the Future] I might have a family, other considerations. Whereas now I am just living my life and there’s a lot more freedom to do what I want to do now. Yeah so, I think the predominant emotion would be disappointment and general sadness but it’s managed quite a lot” (Sam; 705-712)

Sam, projecting himself in the future, seems to fear experiencing disappointment and regret for having chosen to return home. Such a choice, which as it emerged from his interview was strongly related with his attachment to his family back home, appears to leave Sam with the feeling of having missed an opportunity for professional development. Working in the UK in this moment of his life seems to be perceived by Sam as ideal due to the lack of constraints and

responsibilities that he is experiencing. Nonetheless, Sam, who came across pragmatic, appears to have negotiated his mixed feelings and reached a position of acceptance about the idea of returning home.

4.4.3 Subtheme: The Marriage Solution

Three participants talked about the possibility of adopting an alternative route to cope with their thwarted desire to remain in the UK: getting married with their UK/EU partner.

Jennifer, Hakim and Arlinda were all involved in romantic relationships that they seemed to be emotionally attached to. However, for all three of them, getting married emerged as a possible last resort option to obtain a visa and continue their lives in the UK if all else failed. Overall, all three participants seemed to perceive the possibility of getting married as unwanted. Jennifer provides an example of this:

“Even if we just went to the courthouse and just got married for the hell of it...you still think it, you're still married, and I think that just puts so much pressure on something that does not need to have pressure on ehm. But yeah it's kind of like catch-22 it's like well if I get sent back to the states we'll probably break up.” (Jennifer; 498-504)

For Jennifer, the marriage possibility seems to emerge as a very negative one. She seems to express worry at the idea of marrying her partner as she feels it would add unnecessary pressure to her relationship, putting it at risk. Jennifer seems to see marriage as something that signifies the beginning of a different,

more committed, life phase, possibly connected with starting a family of her own. This is not something that she appears to be ready for at this time and thus the idea of marriage emerges as a possible source of discomfort, preoccupation and threat.

However, I also sensed sadness, hopelessness and a sense of ‘being stuck’ emerging from her words. She seems to feel that for her relationship there would be dire consequences with or without marriage, as in the latter case, returning home would trigger a distance relationship between two different continents, which she perceived would be destined to end.

The idea of marriage seems to evoke frustration in the participants, as it emerges from the following excerpt by Hakim:

“It would definitely put pressure on something, the idea that you cannot be separated from each other 6 months, I don't want to be separated for six months, if you tell me now I wanna be with her in the next 6 months, but it's just the idea that you're supposed to, you have to. So all these things, putting everyone around, my friends and me under like kind of an investigation...have they really been together? All these things push me away from it.” (Hakim; 615-627)

Although, like in the case of Jennifer, Hakim seems to feel that a marriage would put unnecessary pressure on his relationship, he appears to be more worried about the consequences that a marriage would legally have on his freedom, which is something that Hakim seemed to strongly care about. He appeared to express frustration at the idea that getting married would impose

limitations on his freedom of movement. Simultaneously, although he seems to be in a genuine relationship, he appears to be anxious about the possibility that a marriage would put him and his friends under the government's scrutiny, which I interpreted as something that seemed to make him feel like an impostor trying to 'rig' the system.

The struggle felt by the participants who are investigating every avenue to attempt to continue their lives in the UK seems to lead them to be willing to compromise some of their most strongly held beliefs and values. In the following excerpt Arlinda, who admitted to be concretely exploring the possibility of marriage, expresses her frustration for feeling almost forced in adopting the marriage solution to be able to stay in the UK:

"I don't feel particularly well because it's not a choice of...it's the same as leaving the country. That you have to leave the country because you are forced to. So even in this case it's a forced choice that you wouldn't take in different circumstances. And every time you are forced in taking a specific action, its... you don't feel good. Because it doesn't feel naturally." (Arlinda; 608-617)

From her words it seems that the idea of getting married is seen as inconsistent with her desires and values, and unnatural at this time. Similarly to how she perceived the visa regulation, even the possibility of getting married seems to be perceived as a forced choice. Marriage appears as an unwanted last resort she is willing to accept to continue her life in the UK should everything else fail.

PART 5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction & Outline

In this chapter, the findings from the IPA analysis are discussed, linked to and compared with existing literature. Reference will be made to the key original aims and objective. Being aware that the subjective lens through which I looked at and interpreted the data, impregnated with my personal involvement with the topic, will inevitably influence this discussion, I will attempt to let my observations, reflections and interpretations, accompany the discussion of the results hand in hand.

In the conclusion section, I will include the limitations of this research alongside pointing at possible avenues for future research. Implication for practice and the wider community will be also presented.

This discussion will follow the temporal sequence that emerged from the analysis highlighted earlier. This can be seen as a journey that starts with the changes to self and identity experienced by the IS during their time in the UK. It then continues with them attempting to make sense of their uncertainty as deriving from their decision to remain in the UK, limited by the immigration law and their sentiments towards that. The psychological and emotional impact of uncertainty and lack of control will be discussed, followed by looking at the participants' attempts to cope with such psychological and emotional struggle. Finally I will look at IS' practical steps to attempt fulfilling their desires as translated in their job hunt and, in some cases, the marriage solution.

5.2 Changes to Self and Identity

In order to attempt reaching the aim of understanding the experience of IS at the end of their studies, it was important to look at participants' possible shifts in the perception of self and identity taking place during their stay in the UK. These changes, if incompatible with the IS' previous plans for the future, and with family and home cultural values, had been suggested in previous research as potentially able to generate struggles and dilemmas about the future (Christofi and Thompson, 2007; Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010).

Therefore, this section will look at how identities and values of the interviewed IS have been shaped by their experience of living in the UK, an important factor in understanding the lens through which they made sense of the challenges of the crossroad.

5.2.1 Independence and Passing of Age

All the participants reported feeling changed by the experience of living and studying in the UK. Particularly, they felt that living abroad made them more independent and gave them a sense of greater agency. Although acknowledging that the independence and self-management involved in living on their own was at times difficult, they all tended to see this as an accomplishment and were grateful for having lived such an experience which appeared to have made them feel more 'adults'.

These results appear consistent with the literature about psychological development between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2001). Arnett (2000) suggested that the period between 18 and 25 years old could be a crucial developmental age for individuals, as representing the transition between

adolescence and adulthood. Such a period named as ‘emerging adulthood’ is suggested to be characterised by an increased sense of independence and agency, assuming responsibility for one’s self and in general one of self-individuation (Arnett, 2000; Greene et al., 1992; Scheer et al., 1996). It was indeed my impression that from the participants’ words a sense of having ‘grown up’ emerged. Simultaneously, it is possible that seeing the results from this perspective was fostered because of my own experience of studying abroad being a formative and self-individuating one.

5.2.2 Openness towards Diversity and Cultural Environment

Most of the participants talked about feeling a sense of greater openness towards diversity and a widening of their perspectives towards others. This data is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that studying abroad may increase the individual’s level of openness to diversity (Wortman, 2002). After having spent 4 to 5 years in the UK, the IS felt not only more tolerant and curious towards diversity, but they also showed a tendency to seek such features in their social interactions. Arlinda, who came from a home environment characterised by a largely closed and homogeneous society, felt a sense of enrichment by seeking diversity.

Such a result appears consistent with the literature around CS and the process of acculturation, which suggests that all immigrants experience, to different extents, an absorption of the values of the host country’s society (Berry, 1997). The results seem to confirm the suggestion by Arthur and Popadiuk (2010) that adapting to a different culture can have for IS the effect of widening one’s perspective towards self and others.

5.2.3 Socio-cultural Significance of Environment on Identity development

Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) suggested that students might experience challenges to their development and identity because of ageing, as well as sociocultural and environmental influences. Following this line, although the changes the participants experienced seem inevitably related to age, it is a crucial factor that such changes took place in the particular social and cultural context of the UK, and have probably been influenced by having negotiated the challenges of CS and becoming adapted (Pedersen, 1995). Thus for these IS, it could be argued that the process of CS and acculturation which they have gone through, assumed a greater significance in terms of its impact on their view of self and others *because* they faced such a process at a crucial developmental age. This is consistent with what Christofi and Thompson (2007) suggested, which is that IS are exposed to the possibility of experiencing a shaping of their identity and self-view by living and studying abroad.

5.2.4 The Impact of the Culture of Provenance

Some interesting variations of these results emerged based on the degree of similarity of the participant's native culture and that of the UK. Although participants were experiencing the same UK cultural context, their culture of provenance was different. The three participants coming from an East or South-East Asian background seemed to have felt more strongly the impact of becoming independent. This could be because acquiring independence somewhat collided with the values that they grew up with in their native country. Indeed, as

suggested by Kramer and colleagues (2002), due to the great importance that family values have in the Asian culture, individuation, and thus gaining independence, is not seen as an important developmental stepping stone. Thus for these Asian participants, becoming self-managing and gaining a sense of own agency, led to a greater sense of individuation, which presumably assumed a particularly impactful role.

For Hakim and Arlinda the experience of self-individuation and of becoming more independent was seen as somewhat less surprising. I made this interpretation as the way they talked about their families and family values seemed to suggest that the context in which they grew up was westernised, and thus similar to the one found in the UK. Although they did feel a sense of greater agency and self-responsibility, they seemed to have felt more the impact of the experience of the UK as resulting in their greater openness towards, and pursuit of difference and diversity in their lives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jennifer, the only participant with a native western culture, highlighted the slightest degree of changes to self. Jennifer had already been exposed to international education and living away from her parents extensively throughout her life. Perhaps the value of difference and diversity among cultures and ethnicities, for her, had already been absorbed through her previous international education. As suggested by Coodman (1994) the greater the understanding of a host culture, the greater the ability of an individual to adapt to it. In line with this, it seems that for someone like Jennifer, who was already aligned to the UK culture and an international environment, her journey as an IS in the UK emerged as one requiring a minimal effort to becoming adapted.

5.3 Thwarted Decision Making in the Dilemma Staying vs. Leaving the UK.

After having looked at the possible changes that the participants have gone through during their time in the UK I will now discuss the emerged results regarding their dilemma between staying and leaving the UK after graduation. This constitutes an attempt at addressing another major aim of this research, that is, to look at the role that emotions might play in such decision making process.

5.3.1 A Choice Already Made

As it emerged from the subtheme ‘Dilemma staying versus leaving’, all the participants had already made their decision regarding whether or not to continue their lives in the UK after graduation, with five out of the six participants expressing their choice to stay in the UK, in line with existing research (Baruch et al., 2007; Oosterbeek & Webbink, 2011)

At the root of such a decision appeared to be a sense of belongingness to the UK that these IS had developed during their journey on one hand, and the fears that were triggered by the thought of returning home on the other.

5.3.2 Sense of Belongingness

Arlinda, Lee, Lyn, Jennifer and Hakim expressed such feeling of belongingness by explicitly calling London their ‘home’, with Sam being the only exception. Experiencing a sense of belongingness for IS was proposed as fostering and supporting cross-cultural relationships, which are important for individuals in cross cultural transition (Wang and Mallinckrodt, 2006), and is seen in social psychology as a “*pervasive drive to form and maintain a minimum*

quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships”
(Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.497).

I interpreted the results of the present study as suggesting that the sense of belongingness that IS were perceiving was deriving from: 1) Feeling like the UK would represent their ‘adult’ identity, resulting from the process of maturation and acculturation they had gone through, and thus, their desire to continue their lives in the UK would grant them the possibility of continuing with such an identity; and 2) Feeling that the UK environment contained the most significant relationships in their lives at the time of interview, which the participants did not feel they wanted to separate themselves from.

These IS, changed and shaped by the experience of studying abroad at a critically developmental age arguably felt such feelings of belongingness due to their present identity, values, desires and attitudes on self and the world being more aligned to, and consistent with, the UK environment. In general, the participants saw the UK as a place where they could cultivate both their personal and professional aspirations and where they could continue to seek difference and diversity of ethnicities and cultures among their friends and future colleagues. Lee and Arlinda openly expressed how they perceived the UK as representing their ‘Adult’ self as opposed to their home country, representing their ‘child’ self.

Together with a consistency to their present identity, the UK also represented the place where the most important relationships in their lives lain. All participants highlighted the importance of their networks and half of them talked about their attachment to a romantic partner. Hakim spoke about how

London represents his home because for him *'it feels home where the people [of his life] are'* (Hakim; 1245)

5.3.3 A Cognitive Dissonance Perspective

Psychologically, the IS' desire to stay in the UK can perhaps be understood under the lens of the principle of cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957). In his theory of Cognitive Dissonance, Festinger proposed that human beings strive to maintain a state of cognitive balance among their cognitions; when thoughts arise that appear inconsistent with our beliefs we tend to experience a state of tension (i.e., of cognitive dissonance). It could be argued that the IS' cognitions, beliefs and values at the time of the interview, which had been influenced by their experience in the UK, were consistent with the thought of continuing their lives there. These IS were possibly experiencing cognitive dissonance when thinking about the prospect of returning home, as the cognitions arising from it were considered somewhat inconsistent with the beliefs and values of the present. For example, this seems to emerge for Arlinda when she says: *"Albania seems more like my childhood home whereas as an adult, I can relate myself much more with this environment"* (Arlinda; 741-746). Such cognitive dissonance is believed to be able to trigger discomfort and negative emotions (Elliot & Devine, 1994). In line with this, participants in general expressed anxiety at the thought of returning home and having to face a process of re-adaptation to their home country, which for some was seen as 'resetting' one's life (Jennifer; 298-295). These students feared returning home because their home country was not perceived as being able to 'live up to' the standards of personal and professional opportunities that they had grown accustomed to in the UK. Thus, the thought of

returning to their native environment presumably represented a clash (i.e. a cognitive dissonance) with their current needs, beliefs, values and more generally, their identities. Arlinda and Lee felt that doing so would signify a sort of ‘regression’ back in time (Lee; 504; Arlinda; 763), referring to an anticipation of loss of independence and freedom. The loss of those as well as that of their personal network in the UK were perceived as the most important losses the participants were anxious about.

Even Sam, the only participant who had made the decision to return home where a secured job was waiting for him, seemed to experience a fear for restarting his life, and was particularly concerned about the loss of the relationships he had formed in the UK. The fears triggered by the thought of returning home, arguably creating cognitive dissonance, can be seen as the basis for possibly experiencing, once actually returned home, the ‘reverse CS’, that is the process of re-adaptation to their home country (Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

5.3.4 Temporariness & the Visa Regulation

An interesting observation triggered by the analysis was that the IS’ struggle provoked by the thought of returning home, seemed to be strongly influenced by the immigration law.

I interpreted the visa regulation as a factor limiting the IS’ agency to enact their choice. This emerged as a factor that seemed to decrease the IS’ perceived control over carrying out their desire to stay and enacting their choice.

Bracketing, and later on validity checks, were very important when interpreting the IS’ accounts on the visa regulation in order to rein my own

negative attitude and assumptions on the matter. Although my standpoint may have affected the way I looked at, and interpreted, the data, my closeness to the topic arguably also proved an added value fostering an empathic understanding of the participants' experience.

All but one participant felt impacted by the visa regulation. They expressed anger and frustration towards it, which subsequently extended to the UK government and, for Hakim and Jennifer, also the British people. These IS seemed to feel a sense of unfairness, perceiving the regulation as an obstacle preventing them from fulfilling their desire to stay in the UK.

Their anger appeared to be fuelled by feelings of powerlessness. Sadness and disappointment also emerged, with the majority of the participants sharing the perception that the law represented a message from the UK that they were no longer welcome.

Lee, Arlinda, Jennifer and Hakim felt treated like illegal immigrants, betrayed and financially exploited by the UK. They initially felt welcomed and adopted by the country, but now perceived being seen as a liability.

In light of what I discussed earlier regarding the IS' developed attachment to the UK, psychologically, the negative affect provoked by feeling rejected, can perhaps be seen as resulting from a violation of their need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need of belongingness was recognised by Abraham Maslow, who included it as part of his hierarchy of needs (1968) immediately after the basic/physiological needs and the need for safety, conceptualising belongingness as one of the most important needs of humans. Later on, Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that all individuals' emotions and behaviours are affected by an underlying desire to seek acceptance and avoid

rejection from others, something that is considered paramount in reaching psychophysical wellbeing. For the participants, who felt a sense of belongingness to the UK, the immigration law could be representing a threat to such a need; their reaction of anger and frustration can be seen as an attempt to cope with their internal psychological struggle triggering sadness for feeling abandoned/rejected. This is consistent with the suggestion that experiencing rejection may stimulate the emergence of a state of deprivation triggering difficult cognitions and emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

These results seem to suggest that IS reaching their crossroad are indeed faced with a decision regarding whether to stay in or leave the UK. However, it seems that this cannot be captured by simple rational models of decision making and a broader view on such process seems more appropriate to give justice to the IS' experience because as emerged here: 1) Emotions, and particularly belongingness, may play an important role as they link the desire/attitude/wish to stay in the UK to the new IS' identities; and 2) Understanding such a dilemma cannot be achieved without acknowledging the potential determinant role that the law may play in limiting the ability of IS to enact their desires.

The next section will look at the experience of uncertainty for the participants, which seemed largely connected with the threat to their need to belong discussed above.

5.4 Experiencing Uncertainty

When asked about their feelings in their transitional phase between education and employment, the participants expressed mixed emotions. The excitement for approaching a new life phase represented by the professional

world appeared thwarted by their uncertainty regarding the future, which seemed to reflect a psychological threat to their need to belong. Uncertainty emerged as a dominating factor in the IS' experience arguably due to its interconnectedness to the challenges faced by these students at their crossroad. From the originating challenge, to their ability to remain in the UK, represented by the visa regulation, the IS' uncertainty seemed to extend towards the process of finding a job, and also for some, towards the consideration to obtain a visa through marriage.

A key factor contributing to the IS' uncertainty seemed to be a general lack of perceived control over the possible events of their future. This situation appeared to provoke psychological and emotional struggles, which I will discuss in the following section.

5.4.1 The Psychological Impact of Uncertainty and Lack of Control

As it seemed to emerge, the main originating factor for the IS' uncertainty and perceived lack of control, was the visa regulation law. Even for Sam, who was not directly affected by it, having decided to return home, uncertainty and lack of control emerged as an important presence.

The sense of perceived control has been, for a long time, the object of enquiry in psychological and sociological studies (Keeton, Perry-Jenkins & Sayer, 2008).

This can take several forms such as: mastery, locus of control, personal autonomy and self-efficacy (Ross & Sastry, 1999). However, in the present context what is meant by control is the extent to which an individual '*can and does master, control, and shape one's own life*' (Keeton, Perry-Jenkins & Sayer,

2008. p.1). The IS in this study seemed to experience that very lack of control in shaping they own lives at the crossroad.

The impact of uncertainty and lack of control seemed to emerge as impacting on all participants. It was suggested that a high sense of control is linked with positive psychological consequences, such as experiencing positive emotions and feeling healthy (Mirowsky & Ross, 1990). However, lack of control has been largely documented as being able to trigger psychological struggle, which may lead to distress such as anxiety and depression (Benassi, Sweeny & Charles, 1988). In line with the literature, the participants expressed anxiety, worry and depression deriving from a general sense of powerlessness over their circumstances. Mirowsky and Ross (1986) proposed that powerlessness, deriving from the inability of an individual to fulfill their wishes due to insufficient opportunity and restrictedness of alternatives and resources, could result in depression or other type of distress (Mirowsky & Ross, 1986). Lee's powerlessness, which appeared to drive his depression and anxiety, was also accompanied by psychosomatic manifestations, such as changes in diet and, as he said, greying of his hair overnight (Lee; 120-121).

It was also suggested that anxiety is closely linked with experiencing a lack of control over the events in one's life (Chorpita, & Barlow 1998). Anxiety for Arlinda spiked to the point of reaching the form of panic attacks. Also Sam seemed to experience powerlessness although not connected with a desire to stay in the UK. Sam' worries seemed to arise from the fear that his high expectations on his future job could be disappointed. This would generate for him an anticipation of regrets for having made the choice to return.

Overall, it seems that for these IS the crossroad phase was indeed one of emotional struggles, characterised by a sense of uncertainty and lack of control, which had the potential to generate psychological distress. At an existential level, I felt that the threat of having to return home would trigger in the IS a fear of having their current worlds and realities shattered, which, being connected with the meaning of their lives, seemed to describe an existential crisis (Yalom, 1980).

The following section will look at the participants' attempts to cope with their emotional and psychological struggle.

5.4.2 Coping Attempts

As previously mentioned, participants' distress appeared to be linked to their perception of lack of control. It was proposed that in situations that are not perceived as amenable to change and that are of significant importance to individuals, a typical coping strategy is attempting to contain and soothe difficult emotions (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Thus, the individuals do not actively deal with their challenges, rather, with the emotional and psychological consequences of these. Conversely, when individuals perceive they have the ability to overcome their challenges they tend to use a more problem-focused approach, aimed at changing the situation by attempting to overcome their issues. This differentiation seemed to emerge from the participants' accounts.

Lyn and Hakim explained that to deal with educational challenges (e.g. exams) they would deploy a rational and problem-focused approach, reflecting their perception of such challenges as being within their control. When instead they spoke about their uncertainties about the future and desire to stay in the country, they seemed to resort mainly to avoidance and emotion-focused

strategies, aimed at containing their internal struggle and arguably reflecting their perception of their challenge as out of their control.

Thus, it was arguably due to the specific nature of their distress, that is the threat of facing a forced return home, that a large part of the participants' coping strategies seemed to be aimed at dealing with their internal psychological and emotional struggle, by deploying emotion-focused coping strategies (Parkes, 1984).

This involved avoiding thinking about their issues and, more often, seeking the support of friends or partners, if available. In the literature, the suggestion that social support can help reduce distress is widespread (Ross & Mirowsky, 1989; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Consistently, social support appeared to be one of the most important available resources of resilience. It offered the IS the possibility of feeling understood and to vent their negative emotions. Arlinda, for example, talked about seeking the understanding of friends living with similar life dilemmas, as helping soothe and contain her struggle.

However, these effects appeared to be only temporary, as most of the participants discussed how eventually their negative emotions would return. An emotion-focused approach could not eliminate the original threat generating their distress (Parker, 1984).

Nonetheless, as emerged from interpreting Jennifer's and Hakim's accounts, resorting to their social network at least partially represented a problem-focused coping approach too. For them, talking to friends would spark new ideas regarding what practically they could do to stay in the UK. This suggests a dual function of social support, suggested by Heaney and Israel

(2008), as able to provide both emotional containment and soothing, as well as practical resources and opportunities to identify and overcome issues.

The latter function, seems connected with the practical steps, or direct-coping, that the IS enacted in order to attempt overcoming their issue around remaining in the UK, such as finding a suitable job or obtaining a visa through marriage.

These direct strategies arguably represented the only way participants perceived they could apply some control over their circumstances.

Lack of control seemed also responsible for the worries and fears of Sam. The uncertainty about whether, once home, his high expectations regarding work would not be fulfilled, compounded by his sadness for abandoning his network in the UK could generate a psychological struggle. He felt powerless in front of such challenges over which he felt little control; however resorting to religion seemed a successful coping mechanism. By thinking of God, and delegating to him the responsibility of the outcomes of future events in his life, Sam probably felt like re-obtaining some form of imagined control over his circumstances which, consistently with the literature (Mirowsky & Ross, 1990), reduced his level of distress.

Overall these IS at their crossroad seemed mainly preoccupied with dealing with the emotional and psychological consequences of their challenges. They tried to contain their struggles by resorting to social support for understanding or otherwise attempting to avoid their issues. These types of responses seemed to reflect their evaluation of their challenges as largely out of their control. However, most of the participants did feel at least some level of control, which translated into attempting to overcome the challenge around

staying in the UK through, for example, looking for a job or PhD or considering marriage. It seems reasonable to say that these avenues constituted the participants' direct-coping attempts, where they would deploy a more problem-focused approach aimed at practically overcoming their challenges. As I will discuss in the following section, this form of direct-coping emerged as responsible for generating additional uncertainty and dilemmas for these students

5.4.3 Moving to Action - Job and Marriage Dilemmas

Finding a job appeared to carry several meanings. As it emerged from the subtheme 'finding a job', it seemed that it represented for students a chance to start a professional career, and to gain an even higher level of independence (Ros et al., 1999). Simultaneously, finding a job also represented a direct-coping mechanism to overcome their challenge around staying in the UK. For these reasons, finding a job seemed to be considered as one of the most important and stressful challenges for these IS at their crossroad, absorbing much of their time and resources.

During the analysis, I interpreted finding a job and getting married as two major dilemmas for the IS. These appeared as difficult avenues to undertake, and seemed invested with great significance as they could represent a form of 'liberation' from the difficulties deriving from the lack of control experienced by the participants.

'Finding a job' emerged for all participants, except Sam, as a very difficult task constellated by failures and refusals: none of the participants had managed to find a suitable position at the time of interview. Due to the law, IS could only apply for job positions sponsoring a working visa, thus limiting their

opportunities. For Arlinda and Jennifer, signing up for a Masters course emerged as a choice largely influenced by the need to continue staying in the UK, having failed to find a job during their last year of Bachelor's studies.

The main response to the continuous failures seemed to be a growing sense of anxiety and worry as the expiration date of their student visa approached. These emotions appeared to contribute to, and exacerbate, the struggle related with the IS' uncertainty regarding their future, which was discussed earlier. From a psychological perspective it seemed that their unsuccessful job hunt would trigger a self-defeating vicious cycle (Dryden & Branch, 2011), whereby encountering failures would prompt lower self-esteem and less motivation to continue applying for jobs, which in turn triggered anxiety for anticipating further failures. This eventually would trigger avoidance of future applications in the form of procrastination, presumably to cope with their anxiety, which ultimately lowered their possibility of reaching their original aim. Feelings of sadness, worry and guilt seemed to accompany such a cycle.

These results appear consistent with the literature on self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) describes the concept as the extent to which one perceives to be able to carry out a behaviour that would produce their desired outcome. Within this framework, a vicious cycle, like the one showed by most of the interviewed IS, would be triggered by a perception that failures at securing a job derived from the IS' own inadequacy to perform such task, leading to a lower self-efficacy and higher fear of further failures, which would lead them to perform less optimally than they could (Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, the IS' tendency to attempt avoiding further failure through procrastinating was suggested to reduce both self-esteem and self-efficacy (Burka & Yuen, 1983; Ellis & Knaus, 1977).

Finally, the low self-esteem and self-efficacy, harboring negative beliefs about oneself, arguably informed the consequent low mood that they seemed to highlight, consistently with the suggestion that negative self-beliefs may result in pessimism and depression (Beck, 1993).

It is important to remember that these emotions experienced in relation to their job dilemma were also conceivably highly influenced, and arguably inflated, by the effect of the general uncertainty surrounding their circumstances and the significance of finding a job as a ‘ticket to stay’ in the UK.

These results included some variations. Specifically, it seemed that the higher the desire to stay in the UK was for the participant, the higher the struggle evoked by failing at securing a job. This was arguably reflected by a crucial difference that emerged for Lyn, as opposed to all other IS who desired to stay in the UK. All others expressed their willingness to accept *any* job position that would grant them a visa, including some that they would not have chosen otherwise. Such a position, appearing to highlight these IS’ readiness to compromise, generated frustration. For example, Arlinda and Jennifer seemed disappointed by the idea of not being able to apply for jobs that they felt were consistent with their professional aspirations and desires.

Such a strong willingness to compromise, which I interpreted as constituting further evidence for the importance that these students placed in remaining in the UK, seemed to be mirrored in the ‘the marriage solution’ dilemma.

For Jennifer, Hakim and Arlinda, getting married with their UK/EU partners, represented an additional opportunity to continue their lives in the UK, if their job hunt failed.

However, none of these participants would welcome the idea of getting married, as it seemed to trigger additional cognitive dissonance. They seemed to perceive marriage as an avenue that they would not have adopted in other, 'normal' circumstances, and for this reason it was interpreted as another of the dilemmas that these IS were facing at their crossroad.

Getting married is largely seen as one of the most important events in the life of an individual, usually signalling the entrance in a new life phase where a new family is formed through a publicly made commitment (Arnett, 2000). Consistently, Jennifer appeared scared that getting married at her age (24) would add unnecessary pressure to her relationship. According to Rindfuss (1991), in a western society marriage can arguably be seen as premature at the IS' age, between 23 and 25 years old, an age conceived as one of continuous change and exploration. Marriage and settling into more long-term adult roles, at least in western society, seem to take place towards the late-twenties (Arnett, 1998). Nonetheless, Jennifer, as well as Arlinda and Hakim, felt that marriage could become almost a forced choice; a last resort to attempt to remain in the UK, but also to continue her relationship with her partner. Marriage becomes thus an important dilemma for these IS that felt, as Jennifer described, that getting married would represent '*kind of like [a] catch-22 [situation]*' (Jennifer; 503), that is a situation where no matter what choice an individual makes, the result will be some sort of loss (Winkler, 2008).

I empathically felt the hardship that these students were enduring, and interpreted the marriage dilemma, as highlighting the magnitude of the importance attached to continue their lives in the UK.

5.5 A final Consideration

Before moving to the conclusion it seems important to make room for a final consideration around the role of the visa regulation.

This appeared to emerge as a determinant factor in the IS' experience of uncertainty, informing the way they interpreted and faced their challenges and dilemmas, and thus their psychological struggle. In this section I explore the possibility of whether other factors could exist that played a role in these students' experience of being at their crossroad.

The literature around students, not strictly IS, at the end of their studies seems to suggest that they are likely to encounter psychological difficulties due to transitioning between education and employment (Lane, 2014).

Transitions can bring changes impacting on the students' autonomy, social networks, and the perception of self, which can result in self-doubt and uncertainty, leading to psychological distress (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Vickio, 1990). Particularly, transitioning from education to employment was suggested as a period of potential turmoil: students are leaving the more leisure-oriented university life (Raymore, Barber, Eccles & Godbey, 1999) and moving towards a professional life, which they might not yet feel prepared for (Lane, 2013). Students at this stage might feel a lack of direction about their next life phase (Allen & Taylor, 2006). Anxiety and uncertainty can be triggered while approaching graduation due to envisioning the changes that such an event would trigger, such as starting to financially provide for themselves, losing friendships and social support, and the process of looking for a job (Pistilli, Taub & Bennett, 2003; Overton-Healy, 2010).

In light of this, we could speculate that also the students in this study were experiencing difficult emotions related to transitioning to a new chapter of their lives. Part of the anxiety and worry emerging from their accounts is likely to be linked with the changes that, as suggested by the literature, all students can encounter during this transition. Nonetheless, the IS in this study experienced very particular circumstances as compared to non-international, local students. As discussed, they had gone through a process of CS alongside one of maturation through ageing, and experienced the limitation posed by their visas.

Perhaps it is due to these circumstances that some of the issues that have been suggested to be common to many students, including a general anxiety and worry for transitioning to a new life phase, emerged only partially from their accounts. This is perhaps because such anxiety and worry became part of, and was absorbed by the difficult emotions they linked with their legal status.

It is possible that for these IS, the anxiety and uncertainty deriving from their legal status was so dominant and pressing that they were only partially conscious of these other 'general' factors arguably influencing their experience (e.g., the uncertainty around what profession to choose). Thus, although it is likely that these IS did experience a psychological struggle similar to that of other non-IS, the challenges informing such struggle did not emerge strongly from the participants' account as more tangible issues, such as the visa regulation were more pressing for them, perhaps more easily identifiable.

It could be argued that the visa regulation, although de facto constituting a difficult obstacle, assumed for these students the significance of a symbol of their struggle. As such, the impact of the visa regulation could indeed be encapsulating the impact of all their transitional challenges, arguably explaining

the difficult emotions, including worry, anxiety, sadness and anger that the participants let emerge in this study.

5.6 Conclusion

5.6.1 Limitations and Future Research Avenues

This research has several limitations, which will now be discussed alongside possible avenues for future research.

Firstly, this study suggested that immigration law may represent a serious obstacle to the IS' desire to stay in the UK at the end of their studies, and trigger a cascade of negative psychological consequences. A limitation related to this was my previous knowledge on the experience of IS at the end of their studies deriving from my personal experience of friends being affected by such a law and my negative beliefs about the visa regulation, existing prior to starting this study. However, in order to prevent these from constituting a bias, I continuously reflected on my personal stance using a research diary, and I crosschecked my notes and themes thoroughly. Furthermore, having several discussions with my supervisor and peers helped me maintain distance from the data. Finally, two participants verified the themes emerged and found them consistent with their experiences.

Nonetheless, I cannot avoid looking at the results of this study in light of the recent events about the 'Brexit', determining the choice of the UK to exit within the next few years from the EU. Although I could only speculate on the effect such an event could have had on the participants' accounts had they been interviewed after the referendum, the visa immigration law could soon constitute a barrier also to EU students in the UK who desire to continue their lives in the

country at the end of their studies. It would be interesting for future research to look at how these students negotiate the challenges at their crossroad, as they represent a very large proportion of the non-UK student population.

Another limitation was that the participants had arrived in the UK prior to the introduction, in 2012, of the current visa regulation. Before then, IS could request, and easily obtain, a 2-years post-study VISA. It would be interesting for future research to look at whether students who started their journey after the new regulation formed similar or different attitudes with regards to staying in or leaving the UK. It could be possible, for instance, that an *a priori* awareness of the regulation might prevent IS from developing a sense of belongingness as the one developed by most of the students in this study. This factor could protect IS from the psychological challenges highlighted here by lowering their general level of uncertainty towards the future. The struggle of the IS in this study could be exacerbated by having arrived in the UK with the expectation of continuing their lives there, which then the new regulation disappointed.

Furthermore, this research suggested that the crossroad, that is, the period between adaptation and possible return home could deserve to be looked at as a sub-phase in the CS model. As it emerged, such a sub-phase may be one of internal struggle and uncertainty for these students and can lead to psychological distress. However, the present research has suggested these results in the limited and specific social, cultural and political context of the UK. Further research might look at IS students experience at the crossroad in other countries other than the UK, such as US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, where the law might, or might not, constitute an obstacle to their wishes. Such research would be able to further highlight the role of immigration laws, and might shed some light on

the difference that living in a specific country might have on the development of the IS identity and sense of belongingness.

5.6.2 Implications for Practice, CoP and the Greater Community.

5.6.2.1 Providing Adequate First Contact and Support

This study suggested that the crossroad can be a stage of internal struggle and uncertainty able to result in psychological distress. This information highlights that more attention should be placed on IS' psychological and emotional needs throughout their stay in the UK until their possible return home. Besides facing uncertainty, IS at their crossroad are arguably dealing with dissertations and exams, whose outcomes could be negatively influenced by the turmoil they may experience.

IS should be made aware of the possible challenges and dilemmas that they might encounter as they approach their crossroad. This, through seminars or open sessions, should be a proactive approach, aimed at preventing the more severe psychological consequences that could be triggered at their crossroad. Universities and student unions, in collaboration with GPs could represent the first contact and a source of information, prompting IS to seek psychological help if required. This approach could normalise the experiences of IS, while simultaneously improving the likelihood of IS asking for professional help from counselling services, or their GPs.

5.6.2.2 Informing Therapeutic Practice

IS at their crossroad would benefit from receiving care from professionals who are aware of their possible challenges and internal struggles, as suggested

here. Such awareness could help assessors when choosing the modality or length of the therapeutic contract. For instance, an existential approach could be appropriate when the students' distress is linked with perceiving their current worlds and realities shattered, thus, besides addressing their specific symptoms (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem or depression), this approach could offer a more holistic perspective addressing their specific needs (Van Deurzen, 2012). Additionally, being aware of developmental and cultural dynamics appears equally crucial to professionals dealing with an IS population whose identities may be shaped by the UK cultural context at a crucial developmental age. Counselling psychologists are particularly well suited to addressing such issues given their humanistic underpinnings and focus on the lived experience of the individuals in their own specific developmental and cultural contexts (Jones Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016).

From a CBT perspective, these students could potentially benefit from cognitive restructuring techniques aimed at increasing their perception of control over their circumstances. Doing so could increase their mental wellbeing by decreasing anxiety and depression (Kohn & Schooler, 1982; Mirowsky and Ross, 1983, 1986; Turner and Noh, 1983). Enhancing IS' perception of control could also increase their tendency to adopt problem-focused coping strategies aimed at practically overcoming their challenges (Keeton, Perry-Jenkins & Sayer, 2008). Thought balancing techniques could be used to reframe their failures at securing a job as not due to their inadequacies, which in turn could protect IS' self-esteem and self-efficacy and reduce procrastination (McKay, Davis & Fanning, 2011)

When practicing with these IS, an important aim could be to work on increasing these students' tolerance of uncertainty. Consistently with the

literature around worry (Koerner & Dugas, 2006), the anxiety triggered by their several ‘what ifs’ connected with their dilemmas (e.g., returning home, finding a job, getting married, etc.) could be eased by both a problem solving approach and a process of habituation through imagery (Robichaud & Dugas, 2006).

5.6.2.3 The Government and the Law

The visa regulation emerged as a major obstacle triggering uncertainty and psychological struggle. While being mindful of my own negative views on the current regulation, briefly considering it in light of this research appears important. Even though immigration laws might allow the UK government to contain net migration, getting rid of the precious skills of highly educated individuals, trained in the UK, could represent a worse settlement for the country, reducing UK market competitiveness and productivity. Although containing immigration is important, the current regulation on IS appears a ‘one size fit all’ measure rather than a policy based upon a rational cost-benefit analysis. A need exists to address differences upon immigrant students with a more rational and sustainable law. For instance, such a regulation could discriminate between clusters of immigrant students based, for example, upon variables such as the age of arrival in the UK and the length of stay in the country.

It is my true hope that this research would allow some space for decision makers to reflect on the adequacy and the short and long term consequences of the current regulation regarding IS. Nonetheless, in light of what this research suggested in terms of the psychological struggle of these IS, it appears to be a duty for both the UK government and society and its educational institutions –

greatly benefiting from the presence of these immigrants - to provide an adequate support to IS approaching their crossroad.

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APPENDIX A

Flyer advertising the study

ARE YOU A TIER-4 VISA STUDENT?

***HAVE YOU GOT A UK BACHELOR'S DEGREE
AND ARE CURRENTLY ON A MASTERS?***

***HAVE YOU BEEN IN THE UK FOR NO MORE
THAN 5 YEARS?***

If YES, then you could volunteer for my study!

I am a researcher working on my doctoral thesis about the experiences of international masters students in the UK. If you agree to participate you will be invited to an interview where you will talk about your experiences as an international student since your arrival in the UK, and also discuss your plans for the future. Through your participation you will have a chance to be listened to while contributing to the generation of new knowledge and support fellow international students in the future! Travel expenses will be covered, and cake, coffee and tea will accompany our conversation.

Please register your interest at:

www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC

or send an email to RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk
and I'll get back to you. Thank you!

This study has been reviewed and approved by the
Research Ethics Review Panel, London Metropolitan University

IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk	IMS Study: www.surveymonkey.com/R/M7JYTXC Contact: RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk
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APPENDIX B

Participant Information Sheet

To whom it may concern,

I am a trainee counselling psychologist at London Metropolitan University and I am currently carrying out research to discover more about international students' experiences in the last year of their study in the UK.

Very little is known about the topic and student services and or the health services are not aware of the experience of these students in the transition from education to employment. My hope is that by carrying out this research we will be able to gain a better understanding of how international students, holding a tier-4 visa expiring soon after the end of their university course, experience the last phase of their educational journey in the UK.

I am writing in the hope that you will be interested in helping me in this endeavour and share your experience as an international student by participating in an interview. The interview would last approximately 1 hour and will be audio-recorded. Data from your interview will be used for my Doctoral level counselling psychology project.

Participation is entirely voluntary. Interviews will be audio-recorded and strictly confidential. If you choose to participate you are free to withdraw up to four weeks post-interview without question and all the data (including audio-recordings) will be destroyed along with all completed forms. For the purposes of possible publication, all the data (including audio-recordings) will be kept securely for 5 years after which they will be destroyed by the researcher. This measure will allow the data to be available for examination and checking if necessary by scientific journals or other researchers.

Before you decide to participate it is important that you understand that the interview will be discussing sensitive topics and therefore may evoke some distressing and difficult feelings for you. Therefore please take your time in deciding whether or not you wish to take part. You will have the opportunity to discuss any feelings evoked at length post interview with the researcher. Additionally, in case you feel distressed at the time of the interview, a list of organizations and their contact details can be found on the other side of this form. However, keep in mind to consider contacting your GP when you are in need of support.

Thank you so much for your time, if you have any further queries please do not hesitate to ask either by phone: *07848376204* or email: *RAA0926@my.londonmet.ac.uk*

I look forward to hopefully hearing from you soon. Yours Sincerely,

Raffaello Antonino

APPENDIX C

Patient Health Questionnaire-9 & Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7

PATIENT NAME: _____ DATE: _____

PHQ-9

Over the last 2 weeks , how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?		Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1	Little interest or pleasure in doing things	0	1	2	3
2	Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	0	1	2	3
3	Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much	0	1	2	3
4	Feeling tired or having little energy	0	1	2	3
5	Poor appetite or overeating	0	1	2	3
6	Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down	0	1	2	3
7	Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television	0	1	2	3
8	Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual	0	1	2	3
9	Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way	0	1	2	3
		PHQ9 total score:			

Q6 CORE10	I made plans to end my life in the last 2 weeks	NO	YES
--------------	---	----	-----

GAD-7

Over the last 2 weeks , how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?		Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1	Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	0	1	2	3
2	Not being able to stop or control worrying	0	1	2	3
3	Worrying too much about different things	0	1	2	3
4	Trouble relaxing	0	1	2	3
5	Being so restless that it is hard to sit still	0	1	2	3
6	Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	0	1	2	3
7	Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen	0	1	2	3
		GAD7 total score:			

From the Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders Patient Health Questionnaire (PRIME-MD PHQ). The PHQ was developed by Drs. Robert L. Spitzer, Janet B.W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke and colleagues. For research information, contact Dr. Spitzer at rls8@columbia.edu. PRIME-MD® is a trademark of Pfizer Inc. Copyright© 1999 Pfizer Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission

From the Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders Patient Health Questionnaire (PRIME-MD PHQ). The PHQ was developed by Drs. Robert L. Spitzer, Janet B.W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke and colleagues. For research information, contact Dr. Spitzer at rls8@columbia.edu. PRIME-MD® is a trademark of Pfizer Inc. Copyright© 1999 Pfizer Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

The crossroad: experiences of non-EU/EEA international masters students in their last year of a study in the UK. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

I have read the information sheet and have been given a copy to keep. I have also been given the opportunity to discuss and ask questions about his research project and my involvement in it. I understand that there will be a de-briefing in which I will have the opportunity to ask any further questions about this study. I understand that all the data collected for this study is strictly confidential and I will not be identifiable in any report of this study, including any publication in academic journals. I also understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time up to four weeks post-interview without question.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study, which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up to four weeks post-interview without question and disadvantage to myself.

If I withdraw up to four weeks from today, all the data (including the interview transcript and audio recordings) and completed forms will be destroyed. If I request to withdraw later than four weeks from today's date, I understand that my anonymous data will be used in the write-up of the study and may be used for further analysis.

Finally, I also acknowledge that for the purposes of possible publication, all the data (including audio-recordings) will be kept securely for 5 years after which they will be destroyed by the researcher.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature

Date

Participant's

Researcher's statement

I have informed the above named participant of the nature and purpose of this study and have sought to answer their questions to the best of my ability. I have read, understood and agree to abide by the British Psychological Society's Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles and Guidelines for conducting research with human participants.

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature

Date

Researcher's

APPENDIX E

Interview Schedule

Asking the listed prompts will depend on the answers given; these are potential prompts and may be altered or not asked if already answered elsewhere.

1- Can you tell me about your experience of living in the UK as an international student?

Prompt: *How do you think the years that you have spent so far living in the UK have influenced you? Have you gone through any changes? What are these?*

2- Can you tell me what it is like to be an international student now that you are at the end of your current educational journey in the UK?

Prompt: *Can you tell me about your transitional experience from education to possible employment?*

3- Are there any decisions or dilemmas that you feel you are faced with at this stage of your journey? If so what (decisions/dilemmas) feel the most important?

Prompt: *How do you feel about them? What impact they had or are having on you (emotionally, on your wellbeing)?*

4- Do you think the changes you have gone through during your stay in the UK influence your decision-making at this specific moment of your life? If so, how?

Prompt: *Can you tell me about what are the most important things that come to mind for you in your decision whether to stay or leave the UK?*

5- Can you tell me how you feel about being faced with the choice of finding immediate employment or leaving the UK due to your student visa conditions?

Prompt: *Has this forced choice influenced you? How (coping)? How is it like for you to be a temporary sojourner (emotionally)?*

APPENDIX F

Section of one transcript with notes

Arlinda

<p>Education to Employment</p> <p>Anxiety about becoming self-sufficient (mixed feelings). Uncertainties for new life</p> <p>VISA: Anxiety for uncertainty of finding sponsoring job</p> <p>VISA: unsettling/anxiety provoking</p> <p>Coping w VISA: adopting pragmatism (masters vs work)</p> <p>Emotions: Overwhelmed by lack of control (ExLoC stress)</p>	<p>271 I: Ok. So, how is it for you this transition?</p> <p>272 At a personal level, from this 20 years old</p> <p>273 you said, since you were 7 years old, until</p> <p>274 now, from stopping education and</p> <p>275 starting to get employed. In general how</p> <p>276 is it for you?</p> <p>277 <i>Transition Education to Employment</i></p> <p>278 R: I think, it <u>puts me a lot of anxiety and</u></p> <p>279 <u>pressure because it's something</u></p> <p>280 <u>completely new.</u> It makes me <u>anxious</u></p> <p>281 <u>about what I want to do first of all, and</u></p> <p>282 <u>also how would I fit in a working</u></p> <p>283 <u>environment, having to start earning</u></p> <p>284 <u>money and being self sufficient.</u> But I</p> <p>285 think what made me even <u>more anxious</u></p> <p>286 is not the fact of transition to a work</p> <p>287 context but mainly the <u>pressure of finding</u></p> <p>288 <u>a job that allows me to stay in the</u></p> <p>289 <u>country.</u> So I think this little element has</p> <p>290 made the thing <u>much more unsettling and</u></p> <p>291 <u>made me more anxious in the last year.</u></p> <p>292 And also, to be <u>honest, I decided to do</u></p> <p>293 <u>the master to extend my time in the UK.</u> I</p> <p>294 <u>would have liked to start working after</u></p> <p>295 <u>university but I had to extend my stay so I</u></p> <p>296 <u>decided to do a master, which maybe</u></p> <p>297 <u>would offer me more opportunities to find</u></p> <p>298 <u>a job afterwards.</u> So now that the master</p> <p>299 is approaching the end I <u>start feeling in</u></p> <p>300 <u>the same way as I felt a year ago, but a</u></p> <p>301 <u>year ago I had the option of always doing</u></p> <p>302 <u>a master.</u> Whereas <u>now I feel like I'm</u></p> <p>303 <u>running out of time, which makes the</u></p> <p>304 <u>whole experience very nerve wrecking.</u></p> <p>305 I: so you have tried to find a job even last</p> <p>306 year during your third year of uni?</p> <p>307 R: Yes I have tried but I think I should</p> <p>308 have tried more. In general I'm quite a</p> <p>309 lazy person. <u>Also, since at the back of my</u></p>	<p>Education to Employment Transition</p> <p>Feels this challenge is more anxiety provoking and more negative feelings than the previous one, maybe because there's more about becoming self-sufficient. Worried about fitting in, earning money...</p> <p>Strongest anxiety trigger is having to find a sponsoring job (Visa impact)</p> <p>Feels the VISA pressure is the most unsettling and anxiety provoking factor</p> <p>Already coped with this in past changing personal wishes (working) to continue staying in UK (chosen a master).</p> <p>Feels at the same point of last year but now more pressure, less control due to lack of another masters option. Overwhelming experience now.</p>
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<p>Education to Employment</p>		<p>Education to Employment Transition (finding a job-VISA)</p>
<p>(challenge of finding job)</p>	<p>310 <u>mind was always the master thing so I</u> 311 <u>think I did not put as much effort as I</u> 312 <u>should have had.</u> So since I didn't get 313 anything I decided to go for the masters.</p>	
<p>Past Coping with uncertainty for job: procrastination due to lack of control, guilt</p>	<p>314 I: So you are feeling very anxious now? 315 R: yeah I definitely am. Because I <u>cant</u> 316 <u>imagine myself at this point leaving the</u> 317 <u>UK. And I know that is a must to find a</u> 318 <u>job that allows me to stay here.</u></p>	<p>Previous time coped with finding an alternative and procrastinating on finding a job (felt out of control?)</p>
<p>Cognitive dissonance - >Extreme anxiety at thought of having to leave,</p>	<p>319 I: you talked about being anxious and nervous about this moment. But also excited about starting something new. Even if you are working and you start a new work is always exciting but also..</p>	<p>Very anxiety provoking, against own attitude, cannot even imagine leaving and feels duty to find a job to stay.</p>
	<p>324 R: yes change is always exciting.. 325 I: but at the same time, also scary you know, because you enter a new context. Hmm what else do you think are the challenges you think you are faced with now? 326 327 328 329</p>	
<p>Challenges Now</p>	<p>330 R: First of all, <u>I need to do well in my</u> 331 <u>masters, so that's a challenge.</u> You know, 332 <u>keeping up with the studying and doing</u> 333 <u>well, while at the same time, looking for a</u> 334 <u>job.</u> So I think that's definitely a challenge 335 because I think that at the end of the day 336 <u>you want to take good marks</u> and do well 337 in this academic year. Secondly, the 338 <u>biggest challenge is finding a job that</u> 339 <u>allows you...</u>Because if you think about it, 340 I decided to do a masters to get a job. So 341 at the end of the day, if I do not get a job 342 is going to seem a little bit pointless doing 343 the masters.</p>	<p>Challenges now Most important thing for her is to do well in uni now and simultaneously looking for jobs</p>
<p>Pressure for multiple challenges (jobs/exams)</p>		
<p>Fear of failure/pressure in job challenge</p>	<p>344 I: yeah. Do you think in this moment, 345 staying again in the present, thinking 346 about mind, do you think there is any</p>	<p>Finding a job experienced as the biggest challenge. Not finding it would feel like a failure as last year's choices were based on this.</p>

Dilemmas/Decisions Now		Decisions/Dilemmas Now
	345 particular decision or dilemma that you 346 are faced with?	
	347 <i>Decisions or Dilemma right now</i>	
Dilemma Stay/leave: Feels unwanted forced dilemma towards future- > uncertainty	348 R: Yes I am. I <u>am faced with going back</u> 349 <u>home or starting to look for something</u> 350 <u>else that is not the UK or staying in the</u> 351 <u>UK. The biggest dilemma is staying or</u> 352 <u>leaving but then is something that is</u> 353 <u>conditioned because if you asked me, I</u> 354 <u>want to stay.</u> If I was to leave, then the 355 <u>dilemma is where would I go, would I go</u> 356 <u>back home or try and go in a different</u> 357 <u>country. If I were to go home, what would</u> 358 <u>I do back home.</u>	Greatest dilemma is where to go, where life is going to be. UK or elsewhere, and if elsewhere, where. Personal wish self- consistent is to stay in UK.
Worry at prospect of going home	359 I: tell me a little bit about it. How is it to be 360 in such a dilemma?	Worried about what would do back home if forced to go.
Emotional consq. of dilemma: Pressure and powerlessness (ExLoC stress)	361 R: I mean <u>it's not good.</u> You know it's a 362 <u>lot of pressure because it's a forced</u> 363 <u>choice. Because going back home its not</u> 364 <u>a choice that I would take voluntarily.</u> If I 365 have to leave I'm gonna be <u>forced to</u> 366 <u>leave,</u> so that makes the whole 367 thing...that <u>makes me much more</u> 368 <u>nervous and anxious than I would have</u> 369 <u>been if I had the opportunity to stay in the</u> 370 <u>UK but decided to go back home for</u> 371 <u>other reasons.</u> So, I think <u>psychologically</u> 372 <u>it puts me in a lot of pressure</u>	Feels dilemma gives lot of pressure because out of control (ExLoC). Involuntary choice.
Lack of control triggers anxiety/nervous-ism	373 can understand that. How is it today for 374 you? 375 R: I think..	Feels greater anxiety/nervous comes from not having opportunity to choose, lack of agency. Lots of pressure psychologically (uncertainty?)
	376 I: You said you are trying to find a job 377 also because you don't know where you 378 are going to be. But where you're going 379 to be depends very much on whether you 380 find a job. So how is it for you in this	

Challenge of finding job	383 384	situation, of having to find a job? How are you finding it?	Challenge of finding a job
Pessimism (little opportunities) for limited choice for IS	385 386 387	R: I mean its not great because at this moment <u>finding a job as an international student is very very tough also because</u>	Feels very difficult for lack of opportunities for IS, limiting choice and chances.
Willingness to compromise personal attitudes for sponsoring job (proactiveness)?	388 389 390 391 392 393 394	<u>you can't apply anywhere, which also limits your choice and forces you to do things that you wouldn't necessary like</u> to do. Like for example, in my case, you know, <u>banking or financial services are the institutions that offer more opportunities</u> for international students in terms of working permits. So <u>that's why I've been looking at these institutions even though they are not really my favourite and its not a workplace I really see myself in.</u> so, this puts me in a <u>lot of pressure because not only I have to find a job that lets me stay in the uk otherwise I would have to leave, but also determines, what kind of career I would go for, because it would force me at the end of the day pick a job which is not what I want to do.</u> And that <u>definitely doesn't make me happy but is a cost that I would have to pay if I want to stay here.</u>	Feels again it's like being forced to apply for things she might not like, lack of agency again
Feels dwarthing of organic self-expression in career (conditioning in job appl)	395 396 397 398 399	<u>So that's why I've been looking at these institutions even though they are not really my favourite and its not a workplace I really see myself in.</u> so, this puts me in a <u>lot of pressure because not only I have to find a job that lets me stay in the uk otherwise I would have to leave, but also determines, what kind of career I would go for, because it would force me at the end of the day pick a job which is not what I want to do.</u> And that <u>definitely doesn't make me happy but is a cost that I would have to pay if I want to stay here.</u>	Not interested in institution which give more opportunities but doing it for the sake of staying, adapting to it, coping with it, dwarthing her wishes.
Frustration/uncertainty towards career future	400 401 402 403 404 405 406 407 408 409	<u>so, this puts me in a lot of pressure because not only I have to find a job that lets me stay in the uk otherwise I would have to leave, but also determines, what kind of career I would go for, because it would force me at the end of the day pick a job which is not what I want to do.</u> And that <u>definitely doesn't make me happy but is a cost that I would have to pay if I want to stay here.</u>	Frustrated and uncertain for long term consequences of current choice of career. Feels wouldn't do a job she doesn't like.
Willingness to prioritize attachment to UK over job wishes	410 411 412 413	I: And how is it to be in this situation of applying and doing you know all of these things while at the same time coping with your exams?	For that she's sad, but rationalizes it as the cost to pay for staying in UK.
Challenge of study and looking for jobs	414 415 416 417 418 419 420 421 422	R: It's it's <u>really annoying.</u> It's very frustrating. It's a lot of pressure. <u>Applying for jobs in the UK in this moment is like a full time job so having to do that and my studies at the same time is very time consuming.</u> And <u>the more you get refusals the more you feel bad, and you start doubting yourself and your capabilities and what you can do.</u>	Juggling applications and studies
Anger and frustration for effort needed in jobs search, jeopardizing studies.	414 415 416 417 418 419 420 421 422	R: It's it's <u>really annoying.</u> It's very frustrating. It's a lot of pressure. <u>Applying for jobs in the UK in this moment is like a full time job so having to do that and my studies at the same time is very time consuming.</u> And <u>the more you get refusals the more you feel bad, and you start doubting yourself and your capabilities and what you can do.</u>	Feels annoyed and frustrated. Job application seems like a job in itself taking time from studies (which is important to her).
Feelings of failure following refusals, self-doubt, low-confidence	421 422	<u>the more you get refusals the more you feel bad, and you start doubting yourself and your capabilities and what you can do.</u>	Feels like getting refusal is starting to demotivate her, feeling like a failure, doubting self

Challenge of study and looking for jobs		Juggling applications and studies
Struck by experiencing lack of confidence	423 I've usually been very confident person in 424 my life and never had problems. Always 425 done good in academics. Always 426 excelled. And now for the first time in my	First time facing lack of confidence in life
Self-doubt, negative beliefs of being inadequate	427 life I've started doubting myself and my 428 capabilities because since I've gotten a lot 429 of rejections I've started doubting whether 430 I'm good enough or not. And that puts me 431 in a lot of pressure	Unsettling and new feeling of being not good enough. Probably triggering low mood/anxiety.
	432 I: and how is it for you to juggle between 433 doing that. Well I don't know, do you think 434 you are juggling between doing that and 435 your exams because you said that that's 436 also very important and you know, just 437 wondering.	
Stuck in vicious cycle of anxiety, loss of focus on exams	438 R: Yeah, I think so because the more I'm 439 upset and anxious about the job thing, the 440 more I cant focus and concentrate less on 441 other things like for example my studies. 442 And of course the whole job thing is all 443 the time at the back of my mind and that 444 affects first my studies. It affects my	Describes a vicious cycle of applying and being anxious which prevents good focus on exams
Constant worry over job issue	445 personal life. Because you know I'm 446 constantly anxious about this thing. I don't	Job issue always in her mind, constant worry/anxiety
Isolation, loss of interest in sociality	447 feel like engaging in a lot of activities. 448 Every time for example I want to go out 449 and have some fun with friends, I always	Does not enjoy going out and started isolating
Feelings of guilt towards self	450 feel guilty for not being there and applying 451 for jobs. Not being that determined and 452 focused. So even if I'm involved in other	When goes out feels guilty for not having spent time applying. Difficult conflict.
Anxiety/worry impacting all areas of life	453 activities I still have this job thing at the 454 back of my mind which doesn't make me 455 enjoy myself as much as I would in 456 different circumstances. And I think that it	Feels worry/anxiety preventing from enjoying life
Anxiety attacks/panic: failure to regulate emotions	457 has started having a lot of effects 458 physically. Physical effects. Since its 459 making me feel more anxious, you know 460 I've started not feeling very good 461 physically, and having anxiety attacks, 462 panic attacks.	Experiencing anxiety attack due to this.

APPENDIX G

Preliminary superordinate themes and subthemes

Arlinda

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
Arrival in the UK and CS	1- Initial impact 2- Integration & Adaptation
Changes to self and Identity	1- Open mindedness 2- Attraction to diversity 3- Feeling adult 4- Greater independence 5- Separation-Individuation
Uncertainty & Challenges	1- Transition education to employment (mixed emotions) 2- Impact of uncertainty 3- Emotions towards visa and temporariness 4- Coping with negative emotions
Dilemmas & Indecisions	1- Staying vs. leaving the UK (belongingness vs. fear) 2- Finding a Job 3- Getting married

APPENDIX H

London Metropolitan University Ethical Approval



London Metropolitan University,
School of Psychology,
Research Ethics Review Panel

I can confirm that the following project has received ethical approval by one anonymous Reviewer, the Head of School of Psychology and the Dean of the FLSC to proceed with the following research study (Professional doctorate):

Title: The Crossroad: Experiences of non-EU/EEA international Masters students in their last year of study in the UK. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.
Revised proposal dated 8th December, 2014 (resubmission date)

Student: **Mr Raffaello Antonino**

Supervisor: *Dr. Angela Loulopoulou*

Ethical clearance to proceed has been granted providing that the study follows the most recent Ethical guidelines to dated used by the School of Psychology and British Psychological Society, and follows the above proposal in detail.

The researcher and her supervisor are responsible for conducting the research and should inform the Ethics panel if there are any substantive changes to the project that could affect its ethical dimensions, and re-submit the proposal if it is deemed necessary.

Signed: 

Date: 9 February 2015

Prof Dr Chris Lange-Küttner
(Chair - School of Psychology Research Ethics Review Panel)

Email c.langekueetner@londonmet.ac.uk

APPENDIX I

Distress Protocol

Protocol to follow if participants become distressed during participation:

This protocol has been devised to deal with the possibility that some participants may become distressed and/or agitated during their involvement in the present research study on the experiences of international masters students in their last year of a study in the UK. Although participants do not necessarily belong to a clinical population, they might experience psychological distress due to the nature of the topics discussed in the interview.

The researcher is a trainee counselling psychologist at London Metropolitan University and has experience in managing situations where distress occurs because of his clinical training in counseling psychology. There follows below a three-step protocol detailing signs of distress that the researcher will look out for, as well as action to take at each stage. It is not expected that extreme distress will occur, or that the relevant action will become necessary.

Mild distress:

Signs to look out for:

- 1) Tearfulness
- 2) Voice becomes choked with emotion/ difficulty speaking
- 3) Participant becomes distracted/ restless

Action to take:

- . 1) Ask participant if they are happy to continue
- . 2) Offer them time to pause and compose themselves
- . 3) Remind them they can stop at any time they wish if they become too distressed

Severe distress:

Signs to look out for:

1. Uncontrolled crying/ wailing, inability to talk coherently
2. Panic attack- e.g. hyperventilation, shaking, fear of impending heart attack
3. Intrusive thoughts of any traumatic event

Action to take:

1. The researcher will intervene to terminate the interview/experiment.

2. The debrief will begin immediately
3. Relaxation techniques will be suggested to regulate breathing/ reduce agitation
4. The researcher will recognize participants' distress, and reassure that their reaction to distress is normal, understandable and manageable
5. If any unresolved issues arise during the interview, accept and validate their distress, but suggest that they discuss with mental health professionals and remind participants that this is not designed as a therapeutic interaction
6. Details of counselling/therapeutic services available will be offered to participants

Extreme distress

Signs to look out for:

1. Severe agitation and possible verbal or physical aggression
2. In very extreme cases - possible psychotic breakdown where the participant loses touch with reality

Action to take:

1. Maintain safety of participant and researcher
2. If the researcher has concerns for the participant's or others' safety, he will inform them that he has a duty to inform any existing contacts they have with mental health services, such as a IAPT or their GP.
3. If the researcher believes that either the participant or someone else is in immediate danger, then he will suggest that they present themselves to the local A&E Department and ask for the on-call psychiatric liaison team.
4. If the participant is unwilling to seek immediate help and becomes violent, then the Police will be called and asked to use their powers under the Mental Health Act to detain someone and take them to a place of safety pending psychiatric assessment. (This last option would only be used in an extreme emergency)