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Article

Facilitating Intercultural Encounters with International Students: A Contribution to Inclusion and Social Network Formation

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Abstract
Higher education has become increasingly mobile and international, with many students taking the opportunity to study abroad during their studies. When they do so, forming and maintaining social networks is fundamental for their development of a sense of social inclusion. According to Coleman's model of concentric circles, international students can establish networks with students from their own country (inner circle), with other international students (middle circle) and with local students (outer circle). This study explores various formats of organised student encounters in these three circles which contribute to the social inclusion of international students. The article is based on desk research of 15 formats of intercultural student encounters which facilitate social network formation during a study placement abroad in six countries in Europe. The findings show that all the studied formats of organised student encounters facilitate social networks in the middle and outer circles, while those in the inner circle are established by the students themselves and through informal social interaction. Formats embedded in the curriculum are most suited to facilitating social network formation throughout the academic year. Extracurricular formats, in contrast, tend to be single occasion activities without follow-up. The study shows that universities can facilitate social network formation and assist social inclusion for international students through organised encounters in which international and local students meet. Organising such encounters does, however, require resources, evaluation, and adequate funding.

Keywords
diversity in higher education; internationalisation; social inclusion; social network formation; student encounters

Issue
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1. Introduction

Forming and maintaining social networks is fundamental for developing a sense of belonging and social inclusion. Social inclusion in higher education means maintaining relations with peers and faculty as part of university life—both inside and outside the classroom (Souza et al., 2017). International students who have friends in their host and home cultures, share accommodation with one another or join a student association report a positive influence of these social networks on their social inclusion (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). However, when focusing on the perspective of international students, "study abroad remains an ill-defined research domain, embracing related but disparate experiences" (Coleman, 2013, p. 17). Social inclusion or exclusion of international students on a study placement abroad has long informed debates about cross-cultural adaptation and student migration (Kinginger, 2013). While international students are not at risk of being excluded from higher education

as such, they are at risk of being socially excluded, for example due to language barriers. According to Coleman (2013), many such studies focus on second language acquisition during a stay abroad, and both group and individual acculturation processes have been investigated (Berry, 1994; Berry & Ward, 2016; Pitts, 2017). Social exclusion might take place because of a mixture of dimensions, such as gender, culture, language, special needs, or social background (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Haug, 2017). In the present study, we define a 'stay abroad' as a specific period of time in which a student engages in an educational activity in another country (minimum of one semester).

While the decision to study abroad is generally viewed as a voluntary act of mobility, the academic, social, and cultural transition to a different higher education institution (HEI) can be difficult for students (Schaeper, 2019). The social transition requires them to form a new social network and make new friends inside or outside their host university. HEIs can facilitate such network formation processes and assist cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001, 2005) by offering, for example, intercultural exchange or buddy programmes for international students, which allow them to experience social inclusion and build new networks. However, bringing international and local students together remains one of the main challenges for HEIs when it comes to tackling exclusion (Meier & Daniels, 2013). We use the terms 'international students' and 'local students' merely for ease of readability and not because we assume homogeneity of these groups.

This article looks at how HEIs can facilitate the social inclusion of international students. The data on intercultural student encounter formats referred to in this article is taken from the SOLVINC ("Solving Intercultural Conflicts with International Students") project, which collected corresponding data in several universities in Vienna (Austria), Paris, Orléans (both France), Mainz (Germany), Warsaw (Poland), Madrid (Spain), and Porto (Portugal). This comparative data provides insights into social network formation for international students which tackle social isolation and exclusion.

2. Cross-Cultural Adaptation in Study Placements Abroad

Study programmes have become increasingly mobile and international (Brooks & Waters, 2010; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003). Typically, international students make a conscious decision to study abroad and expose themselves to new cultural experiences. However, culture as a shared set of practices and understandings (Elder-Vass, 2011) is not always tangible or explicit, and students may find it difficult to experience and comprehend implicit gender roles in a host culture, invisible hierarchies, or a new student culture (Resch et al., 2021). We use the term 'culture' here in the broader sense of a set of beliefs, norms, and values specific to a social group and see the process of adjustment (*enculturation*) as that of engaging and interacting with cultural and social practices. The adjustment process is twofold: Students are generally expected to adapt to their new HEI, learning environment, and campus culture within a few weeks, while HE structures must also adapt to the diverse student population, for example by offering support structures:

> An intercultural encounter is an encounter with another person (or group of people) who is perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself….They may involve people from different countries, people from different regional, linguistic, ethnic or religious backgrounds, or… gender, social class, sexual orientation, age or generation, level of religious observance, etc….In such situations, intercultural competence is required to achieve harmonious interaction and successful dialogue. (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 16)

However, the campus climate encountered may not always be welcoming, and prejudices of local students against international students on campus are a critical factor in cross-cultural adaptation (Quinton, 2019). Some studies refer to a deficit perspective on internationalization, in which international students are criticised for not integrating with local students or vice versa (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

Forms of stress associated with adapting to a new culture have been studied at length since the 1950s, in particular for the higher education context of completing a placement abroad (Doerr, 2015; Georgiou & Savvidou, 2014; Lysgaard, 1955). Adjusting to higher education in their host country is a complex process for international students, not only from an academic perspective but also in cultural and social terms (Resch et al., 2021). This results in different levels of stress while adapting to the new student, campus or learning culture at the host university (Ward, 2001). Some international students find the personal, emotional and social adjustment processes to be demanding, while others adjust in a more straightforward way (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). International students can also experience cognitive dissonance when they encounter cultural differences that confound their previously held expectations about culture (Mitchell & Paras, 2016).

3. Conceptual Framework: Social Network Formation through Intercultural Student Encounters

Students often report difficulties in integrating with locals during their time abroad (Meier & Daniels, 2013). A study by Maiworm and Over (2013) indicates that 86% of German international students spend time with other international students in their host country, but only 51% have regular contact with local students. 65% spend time with other Germans who are also studying in the same

host country. King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003, p. 240), in turn, find that approximately 30% of international students only have contact with students from their home country, while 39% also have contact with students from the host country. According to van Mol (2011), European students tend to spend their time with other Europeans when studying abroad because they are familiar with the culture in which they were socialised. These findings are important because "the social networks a student establishes, maintains and develops while abroad are crucial to learning outcomes" (Coleman, 2013, p. 29). Learning processes are not merely of an academic nature, but also social. For international students, the adjustment to the new culture can be challenging (Souza et al., 2017). During cross-cultural adaptation phases, the capacity to facilitate relationships is essential for social inclusion (Byl et al., 2016).

By social networks, we mean 'friendship networks,' which are significant and continuous for the student, in contrast to 'familial networks' (Brooks & Waters, 2010, p. 149). These social networks give each other a sense of belonging and trust, which is the basis for academic and social learning. When it comes to explaining the dynamic socialisation patterns and social networks of international students, Coleman's (2013) model of concentric circles appears to fit well in the European context. This model seeks to explain these patterns and behaviour using three concentric circles of intercultural student encounters: engagement with students from the same country (inner circle), engagement with other international students (middle circle), and engagement with local students (outer circle). According to this model, students initially socialise with other co-nationals when they study abroad, gradually expand their social contacts to international students from countries other than their own and then finally broaden their circle to include local students as well. The circles are not mutually exclusive. Co-nationals (level 1) are likely to share the same first language, while international students (level 2) might use the host country language or another lingua franca to communicate. On level 3, the use of the target language becomes necessary (Coleman, 2015).

Empirical data for Coleman's model testifies that international students move from their initial reliance on co-nationals in level 1 to a broader social mix in levels 2 and 3 (Coleman, 2015). Close friendships and romantic relationships are more likely to stem from level 2 encounters than from those with co-nationals (Coleman & Chafer, 2010). Encouraging local students to participate in formalised student encounters with incoming international students poses a constant challenge to higher education, not least because international students have more to gain from them unless their local counterparts are pursuing linguistic objectives (Kinginger, 2013). Romantic relationships are most likely to help a student 'jump' from level 1 to level 3; they are delineated as a "short-cut" (Coleman, 2013, p. 32).

Although a stay abroad is a situated cultural experience, international students remain in touch with their home culture (Coleman & Chafer, 2010). Yet the use of virtual technologies to communicate regularly with family and friends at home makes social inclusion more difficult (Coleman, 2015). The broad availability of digital media means that international students are thus at risk of not having to negotiate cultural meanings with local students (level 3)—a factor which inhibits social inclusion when studying abroad (Citron, 2002). One significant factor that aids social inclusion is language, which

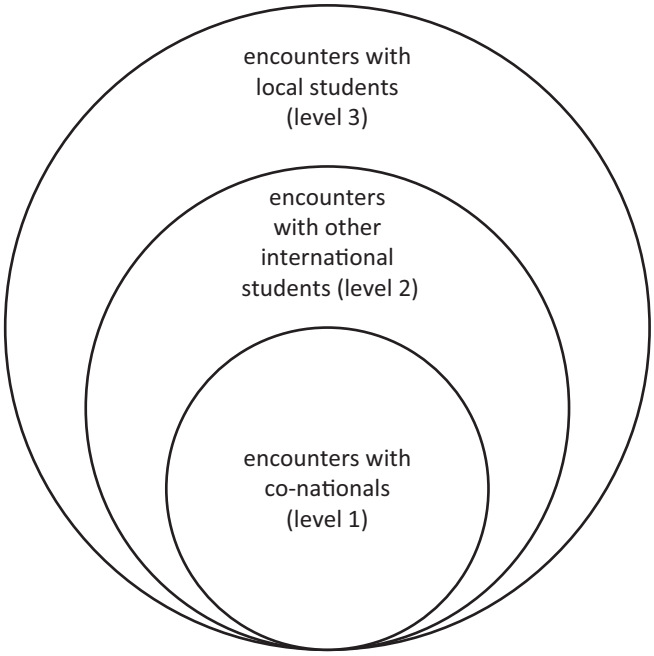

Figure 1. Levels of intercultural student encounters. Source: Adapted from Coleman (2013, p. 31).

students acquire more quickly when they interact with peer students from the outer circle (level 3). A study by Montgomery and McDowell (2009) found that there is a strong sense of academic support within international student groups (level 2). Their social networks in this sense enrich their learning processes abroad. Accordingly, Hernandez (2018) recommends that international students move out of their comfort zone as soon as possible and interact with local students.

The phenomenon of studying abroad can be looked at from various perspectives, including that of a rational choice following an individual decision process regarding costs and benefits (Lörz et al., 2016), biographically in terms of academic career coherence (Brooks & Waters, 2010; Hillmert & Jacob, 2010), or in the social networking context of exploring social capital acquired while studying abroad and maintained after returning home (Bourdieu, 1986; Granovetter, 1973). From an organisational or institutional angle, researchers can examine how student encounters can best be arranged to contribute to the social inclusion of international students.

In this article, we combine the social network formation perspective with the organisational angle, since our review of the available literature revealed only few prior studies that had researched this particular aspect of studying abroad (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). The main question we seek to answer is as follows: Which examples and practices of social inclusion in the form of organised student encounters can be found in European universities and how can their main strengths and weaknesses be reconstructed?

4. Methodology

To answer this question, we used a combination of desk and empirical research methods to collect data on intercultural student encounters from within the SOLVINC project data (Amorim et al., 2020). Student encounters were investigated in universities in Vienna (Austria), Paris, Orléans (both France), Mainz (Germany), Warsaw (Poland), Madrid (Spain), and Porto (Portugal). In internationalization research, still little attention is being paid to the complexities of intercultural student encounters and lived experiences (Trahar, 2014). We studied these lived experiences across six European countries acknowledging this gap.

4.1. Procedure

We started our desk research by conducting a keyword-led search on websites relevant to the higher education sector (university*international*students*networking*format*programs*encounters). In a next step, we identified and gathered descriptive information (*raw data*) on 26 formats of intercultural student encounters which met our inclusion criteria, i.e., (1) addressed international students explicitly, (2) were offered on a regular basis, (3) were encountered in the countries of the study, and (4) were applied mainly during the stay abroad (and not before or after). We then explored the basic criteria for each format agreed on in our study design:

- Characterisation of the target group
- Thematic focus of the activity
- Short description of the student encounter
- Degree of institutionalisation, innovation and reach throughout the university
- Major strengths and weaknesses

Formats which did not address international students, which were no longer offered, or had only been used on one occasion were ruled out. Formats used to prepare students for a stay abroad or to reflect on a stay after returning home (pre-/post departure formats) were also ruled out.

In our original research design, either qualitative interviews or participant observation were planned in all six countries. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was only possible to conduct the qualitative interviews by shifting them to online spaces, however, the planned participant observations could not take place as planned. The seven interviews were conducted in Germany, France, Austria, and Portugal. In Poland and Spain, we were only able to rely on desk research due to Covid-19 restrictions. The interview partners were staff members (n = 6), who managed, organised or were responsible for the organised students encounters (two from Germany, one from Portugal, one from Austria, and two from France), except for one student from Germany who took part in an encounter and was also interviewed.

4.2. Data Analysis

In total, 15 formats were analysed in detail (*processed data*). For six formats, it was possible to conduct empirical research, while the other student encounters were solely based on desk research. Empirical work was carried out by contacting either the people responsible for or—in one case—a participant in the respective student encounter. Seven interviews with staff and students directly involved in the intercultural student encounters were then conducted using digital tools (video or telephone interviews). Interviews with staff members were conducted for the formats F6, F8, F9, F10, F11 and F13 and one additional interview with a student for F9. The interviews were audio-taped, selectively transcribed, and protocoled in memos by the researchers. Data was then clustered referring to the topics identified above: characterisation of the target group, thematic focus of the activity, short description of the student encounter, degree of institutionalisation, innovation and reach throughout the university, and major strengths and weaknesses of the encounter. Details, additional references or formal evaluations of the student encounter (if any) and additional comments from the researcher were noted in unstructured, open memos. Formats are

abbreviated in the data using the letter F and a number (e.g., F13 = Format 13).

5. Findings

Based on our findings, the intercultural student encounter formats analysed can be grouped into curricular and extracurricular activities in the following categories: (1) welcome, orientation and dialogue, (2) cultural diversity, (3) social networking and mentoring, (4) language learning, and (5) bilingual teaching formats (see Table 1). International students form the explicit target group of all the encounter formats studied, while most of them also target local students (13 out of 15). Staff members are included in five formats, teachers in four formats (curricular activities), the local community in two formats and other local citizens in the host country in one format.

5.1. Curricular Activities

In the category of curricular activities, four formats were identified: Orientation Day in Warsaw (F2), the Gutenberg International School Services in Mainz (F13), the International Business Bilingual Course in Warsaw (F14), and the Vienna Innovation Programme^{WU} (F15). F2, F14 and F15 facilitate level 3 intercultural student encounters between international and local students, while F13 facilitates student encounters on level 2 (i.e., only between international students). In each case, students receive credits for participation.

Orientation Day (F2) is a mandatory event for first-semester international students at the University of Social Sciences in Poland in which they network with other international students. It also includes an informal evening event where the international students get to know local students. In the International Business Bilingual Course at the University of Social Sciences in Poland (F14), local and international students in the Faculty of Management and Security Studies work together in intercultural teams on business-oriented projects. Doing so is a mandatory element in the course, and the respective teacher serves as an intercultural mediator throughout its duration. A similar approach to facilitating intercultural student encounters is used by Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU) in its Vienna Innovation Programme^{WU} (F15), where students from different cultural backgrounds solve problems in intercultural teams using innovative methods. The design for this annual course stipulates the participation of a maximum of 15 local and 30 international students. Only one format in the curricular activities category does not bring local and international students together: The Gutenberg International School at the Johannes-Gutenberg-University of Mainz in Germany (F13) regularly offers courses for international

Table 1. Formats of intercultural student encounters.

	Curricular activity	Extracurricular activity
Welcome, orientation, dialogue	F2 Orientation Day (Warsaw)	**F1 Welcome Week* (Mainz)
		F3 Campus dialogue sessions (Porto)
Cultural diversity		**F4 City Tour* (Porto)
		F5 Seven Colours, Seven Continents (Warsaw)
		F6 Intercultural Cooking Workshop (Paris)
Social networking and mentoring		F7 Buddy Programme (Madrid)
		F8 ESN Buddy Programme (Vienna)
		F9 Foreigners become Friends (Mainz)
		F10 Peer Mentoring Programme (Porto)
Language learning		F11 Language Café (Orléans)
		F12 Tandem Language Learning (Vienna)
Bilingual teaching formats	**F13 Gutenberg International School—GIS* (Mainz)	
	F14 International Business Bilingual Course (Warsaw)	
	F15 Vienna Innovation Programme^{WU} (Vienna)	

Notes: * International student encounters of level 2; the remaining international and local student encounters are level 3.

students to help them improve their German language skills. These courses are targeted at those students who can study only in English due to language restrictions.

5.2. Extracurricular Activities

In the extracurricular activities category, we identified eleven formats which met our criteria: Welcome Week (F1), Campus Dialogue Sessions (F3), City Tour (F4), Seven Colours, Seven Continents (F5), Intercultural Cooking Workshop (F6), Buddy Programme (F7), ESN Buddy Programme (F8), Foreigners become Friends (F9), Peer Mentoring Programme (F10), Language Café (F11), and Tandem Language Learning (F12). Participation in these activities is voluntary, i.e., students do not receive study credits for doing so. F1 and F4 facilitate level 2 student encounters between international students only, while all other formats facilitate intercultural student encounters on level 3 between international and local students.

Welcome Week at the Johannes-Gutenberg-University of Mainz (F1) is a three-day programme for international students that covers administrative issues like enrolment, obtaining a student ID, setting up a computer account, course selection and registration. Representatives of various faculties are present throughout the event, and students receive the opportunity to network at a welcome reception and on a campus tour. The City Tour at the University of Porto (F4) is held each September and provides international students with a tour of the city, introduces them to its most iconic and historic sites, explains its history and terminates with a *Sarau Cultural*—a traditional, academic music festival. Both F1 and F4 are targeted exclusively at international students (level 2).

The Campus Dialogue Sessions at the University of Porto (F3) are held monthly during term-time, with each session focussing on a different topic. The programme is targeted at local and international students alike and is designed both to improve intercultural communication competence and to prevent intercultural conflicts. In contrast to other formats, staff members can also attend the dialogue sessions. The programme's main aim is to establish level 3 interaction between local and international students in order to reduce social isolation at the start of and during the academic year.

Once a year, students from different countries arrange a Seven Colours, Seven Continents (F5) event at Vistula University in Warsaw. The event is organized like a trade fair, with the students offering traditional national dishes and souvenirs from their home countries, wearing their national costumes, and performing traditional dances. It concludes with a party for students with music provided by the university band. The Intercultural Cooking Workshops (F6) in the Cité universitaire de Paris are organised cooking sessions for local and international students in which they share recipes linked to their home cultures. Small intercultural groups are formed in student kitchens or dorms, and the participating students then cook together with the aim of creating a new recipe that contains at least one of the ingredients in a recipe proposed by another group. The programme facilitates intercultural exchange and regular social networking between students.

Several of the formats studied focus on mentoring as a format of inclusion. In the Buddy Programme (F7) at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, local students tutor international students before and during their stay abroad. The same approach is used in the ESN Network Buddy Programme (F8) of the University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna and at other universities in Austria. In contrast to more student-led initiatives, buddies in F8 are linked to the International Offices at their universities, which can offer guidance in the event of conflict. The Foreigners become Friends (F9) programme at the Johannes-Gutenberg-University in Mainz offers international students the opportunity to get to know the local culture and host community. The Peer Mentoring Programme (F10) at the University of Porto offers support to new local and international students in an organized mentoring format. F10 is a decentralized programme that extends to all faculties, with various meetings organized between mentors and mentees throughout the academic year. International students can become mentors. The programme has four major strengths: academic support (e.g., support with learning), emotional support (e.g., being listened to, giving advice), social inclusion (e.g., common leisure activities, group integration), and support with faculty.

Language is also a strong factor of social inclusion: In the Language Café (F11) at the Université d'Orléans, local and international students meet in a bar in the city centre every other week to learn French. International students thus can meet local students and people from the community in Orleans and practice their language skills. In the Tandem Language Learning (F12) programme in Austria, international students are paired with German native speakers to learn each other's language. This reciprocal language learning programme is offered at different universities across the country, where it is organized by their respective student unions. Local students volunteer to participate as native German speakers, making F12 not only a convenient way to improve language skills but also increasing the likelihood of the tandem learners becoming friends by networking on a one-to-one basis.

5.3. Comparative Analysis

Our analysis of the formats for intercultural student encounters shows that most of them are organized on levels 2 or 3. In fact, our study did not identify any level 1 encounters; these would seem to be primarily informal in nature, with students left to establish contact with other students from their own country of their own accord. Social networking with co-nationals would therefore seem to adhere to different norms and values and is not considered to be the responsibility of HEIs.

Interestingly, all organized level 2 encounters take place in the first weeks after arrival at the host university (F1, F4). They are neither continued nor augmented by any activities later in the semester.

Level 3 encounters can be organized both within and outside the curriculum. Social networking and mentoring activities seem to only be organized outside the curriculum (F7, F8, F9, F10). Encounters that focus on acculturation and language learning are likewise exclusively extracurricular activities. Language learning in informal contexts such as F11 or F12 are organized by the university but take place elsewhere. Bilingual teaching formats which attract international students also promote intercultural exchange and encounters between international and local students (F13, F14, F15). Most extracurricular activity formats (10 out of 15) encourage or require the use of the host country language outside of class. They aim at bringing students with compatible personalities and interests together to participate in various activities.

The formats identified and analysed in our study reveal two main weaknesses: First, the organizers of such encounters experience frequent and recurring difficulty in involving local students on a regular basis. There are various reasons for this. Some of the encounters are organized before the international students arrive at the host university. Others fail to mobilize local students in an adequate form, making level 2 formats easier to organize (since they only involve international students) and causing level 3 activities to be pushed into the future or even dropped. The second weakness lies in the frequency of intercultural student encounters. These often take place only once a year or semester (and only allow the participation of a small number of students), which makes continuity of action difficult. Student encounters are based on social interactions, which can only really develop into relationships of trust when the participants encounter each other on more than one occasion. Hence, single-event student encounters like F1, F2 and F4 can only be viewed as initiating formats; the actual process of maintaining the relationships they initiate is ultimately left to the self-organisation of students.

A critical analysis of the main strengths of the student encounters studied shows that bilingual teaching formats (F13, F14, F15) allow more stable social interactions that are organized around common tasks within a course (e.g., having to perform a task with a company), regular course structures and work in small groups. Intercultural exchange is an explicit part of such courses. Language learning formats (F11, F12) and mentoring or buddy programmes (F7, F8, F10) also allow students to build and maintain relationships over a period of time, which—in a best-case scenario—continue for the entire duration of their stay abroad (and even beyond).

6. Discussion

Our study shows that HEIs can facilitate social network formation and alleviate the process of cross-cultural adaptation and social inclusion for international students (Kim, 2001). Despite the overall advances in organizing intercultural student encounters and preparing students for international mobility, many students still report difficulties in integrating with local students during their placement abroad (Coleman & Parker, 2001; Meier & Daniels, 2013; Trahar, 2014). This might be predetermined (partly) by the actual numbers of international students from one's home country at the host institution. In the present study, the diversity of international students varies strongly between smaller universities (e.g., both 13% at the University of Porto and Johannes-Gutenberg University of Mainz) and larger universities (e.g., 29% at the University of Vienna or 39% at the Université de Paris). At the University of Vienna, for example, around 5,000 international students originate from Germany, which means that these students would not be subjected to cultural diversity, as they speak the same language and share the same culture as local students do, whereas in 2020 only 314 students came from Poland or 29 from Colombia (University of Vienna, 2020). Thus, the actual national mix of the international communities studied here may affect international students' experiences abroad. The fewer co-nationals on campus, the fewer contacts in this category are available.

Trahar's research in Malaysia for instance found that local students are even reluctant to interacting with other local students, who might hold identities different from their own, e.g., Chinese or Indian (Trahar, 2014). The experienced reluctance of local students to interact with each other, and consequently also with international students, cannot be explained merely by student distribution numbers. Possible explanations may be distant cultural norms and values, complex cross-cultural adjustment processes, language barriers, or cultural stereotypes (Kim, 2001; Quinton, 2019). Interestingly, research from the United Kingdom—in contrast to other knowledge produced in this field of research—suggests that non-reciprocal relationships or lose connections international students may have with local students (level 3) may not be a disadvantage. On the contrary, their purposeful connectedness to international students may provide them with a supportive learning environment (level 2; see Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). The authors go even further and add a more resource-driven perspective to the field by reporting on high positions of international students in class, offering academic support to others and achieving the best grades. Similar studies could in the future contribute to antiquating the deficit model in social network formation in study abroad research. We believe that organized intercultural student encounters—as shown in this study—can accordingly be an effective answer to the promotion of social inclusion in higher education. Organized intercultural student encounters are a way of replacing social networks which are lost in the transition to the host university, both inside (connected to academic learning) and outside the curriculum (connected to social learning). This

implies that students become active participants in organized student encounters.

Previous studies recommend advising students to sign up for language courses, engage with families from the host culture or take courses with local students to help them form social networks (Dewey et al., 2013). As our study shows, formalised or institutionalised student encounters can also help with social network formation. Such encounters can introduce students to the local culture, lifestyle or region and provide them with valuable emotional support. While some students might find that their interests overlap more with those of other international students than local citizens without academic relation, city tours or other formats that allow them to encounter local people from their host city or community are considered helpful, especially for cross-cultural adaptation (Pitts, 2017). Accordingly, listening to international and local students and finding out more about their experiences, needs and suggestions for intercultural policies and practices should be a priority for HEIs in their efforts to provide organised student encounters. Indeed, study abroad programmes which include accommodation for international and local students, club memberships or other activities to promote student encounters are assessed positively by students (Dewey et al., 2013). Situational and spatial factors can likewise have an influence on social network formation. Accommodation close to the university campus might facilitate social interaction between different student groups, especially in countries where students tend to live on campus. Living near the city centre, shops or activities in town might help students establish regular contact with local residents.

Friendships between students and ties outside the family have become more fragmented through digitalisation, with young people experiencing weaker ties to the communities in which they live (Brooks & Waters, 2010). It is still unclear whether social interaction with local students or faculty is more beneficial to international students than interaction with locals outside the university (Dewey et al., 2013). Furthermore, little is known, as of yet, about level 1 activities with co-nationals during a stay abroad. These are predominantly informal in nature and were not included in our study. However, we do know that it is common nowadays for international students to maintain long distance relationships via digital media with their friends at home (Brooks & Waters, 2010), thus giving them a sense of (digital) social inclusion during a stay abroad (Coleman & Chafer, 2010).

The tendency of international students to live in homogenous circles of friends and peers (levels 1 and 2) has long been observed. Service facilities for international students at universities have recognised the need for corresponding action by organising mixed student encounters to facilitate social inclusion. To contribute to the common goal of international student inclusion, it is crucial that these student encounter formats are promoted in an organized form within the HEI. Organising and facilitating student encounters also requires adequate funding and resources. Since the extracurricular activities analysed in our study take place in informal settings, they allow students to establish friendships, exchange experiences, thus contributing to their overall well-being, in some cases without any need for resources from the university. To further promote and facilitate the social inclusion of international students, HEIs should endeavour to augment their level 2 welcome encounter formats with activities which are repeated over time, thus providing students with interaction options that are available throughout their entire stay and are not just restricted to the first week or a single event. Such an extension to the whole academic year would naturally also require additional effort, staff, and resources.

The aim of exploring social inclusion practices in the form of organised student encounters also draws our attention to the topic of organisational responsibility. Many student encounters rely on student initiatives and volunteering, some are initiated by the students themselves, by student associations/networks or—in a more formalised manner—by the International Offices in HEI. This raises the question of institutional responsibility for the social inclusion of students. Universities could make student partnerships more explicit and welcome in this area (Hughes, 2015). Several studies indicate positive effects between student volunteering and academic success in terms of grades, continuation to higher level degrees as well as the formation of an academic and professional identity (Zhang et al., 2015). Student volunteering also enhances the social and cultural capital of the participating students (Campbell, 2000; Print & Coleman, 2003) and raises awareness for diverse community needs and social problems (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). Most of the organised encounter activities analysed in the present study still lack—and might benefit from—an evaluation.

Concluding from this study, intercultural student encounters between local and international students, which take place in the curriculum are most suited to facilitating social network formation because students get acquainted with each other on a regular basis as they achieve tasks together throughout the academic year. This implies strengthening the role of higher education lecturers in facilitating intercultural student encounters through their courses. Curricula can contain opportunities for meaningful intercultural learning, also for local students. During the course, there is enough time to build relationships between teachers, local and international students, while this may make readjustments to lecturers' syllabi, learning objectives, assignments, or feedback processes necessary (Clayton et al., 2013). There might also be opportunities for lecturers to offer local students the chance for alternative credits by encouraging them to engage in a mentoring or buddy programme with international students within the framework of their course. From the present study, we also conclude the essential role of lecturers as distributors of

information—e.g., making it possible for students to promote existing formats of intercultural student encounters in class by distributing flyers or giving time slots for short presentations of engaged students to attract more local students to different encounters. Further, lecturers could be asked systemically at the beginning of each semester to offer bilingual teaching formats in order to enable intercultural encounters within the curriculum. These measures could lead to an increase in opportunities for intercultural encounters, while lecturers might be able and willing to offer continuous guidance of students' individual learning and networking processes and thus contribute to more self-organised learning (Zinger, 2020). The challenge for lecturers might be to design coursework, which contributes to intercultural encounters on various levels: academic learning, social networking, and personal growth at the same time. However, lecturers need to balance both their personal resources for teaching with higher objectives of institutional diversity and internationalisation.

Limitations: We would first like to stress the methodological limitations of our study. Empirical research would have been at the core of our original study design, conducting qualitative interviews and participant observations in all six countries. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, this plan had to be adapted in order to complete the study within the framework of the co-funded project (which ended during the third lockdown in 2020). Still, it was possible to conduct interviews online in Germany, France, Austria, and Portugal, however, the planned participant observation of student encounters had to be dropped from the original study design and the methodology was therefore partly restricted in its range due to Covid-19. Funding conditions in the EU-project prevented us from postponing the study to a later date after the Covid-19 pandemic. Our desk research was limited to intercultural student encounters in six countries in Europe, which does not give a full picture of the possible student encounter formats in an internationally comparable dimension. Second, from a theoretical point of view, Coleman's model of concentric circles—like any other model—oversimplifies the complex and multifaceted aspects of student life while studying abroad and might not represent individual patterns of experience (Coleman, 2013). We want to stress the fact that findings cannot be generalized as 'international students' cannot be assumed to be a homogeneous group. However, Coleman's model does help to identify 'typical' levels of encounters of international students and their peers. Further studies might apply different methodologies, e.g., participant observation or ethnographical research to provide a more complete picture of the nature of student social networks.

Nonetheless, our overall findings still indicate potential fields of action for universities in order to make the higher education sector more inclusive for international and local students, by creating windows of opportunities within and outside the curriculum for intercultural student encounters. Internationalization means to ensure a learning environment that is vibrant, reciprocal, celebratory of diversity and inclusive (Trahar, 2017). From the experience of this study, we conclude that formats embedded in the curriculum are most suited to facilitating social network formation throughout the academic year. Extracurricular formats, in contrast, tend to be single occasion activities without follow-up. Inclusive practices are likely to require change, and this means shedding light on questions of inclusive leadership in higher education (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). This study thus contributes to organizational development and organizational pedagogy of HEIs. It shows that universities can facilitate social network formation and assist social inclusion for international students through organised encounters in which international and local students meet. Organising such encounters does, however, require resources, evaluation, and adequate funding to strengthen the capacities of HEIs to reach out to all students (Ainscow, 2016).

7. Conclusion

The study connects social inclusion, diversity and internationalization by applying a social networking theory and placing formats of intercultural student encounters at the centre of the study. These formats of organized student encounters between local and international students bring added value to the discourse of social inclusion, diversity and internationalization by an underlying understanding of shared responsibility of students, lecturers, and departments at universities concerned with internationalization.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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