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In loving memory of my late brother Patrick and my late cousin Didier.

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## 1 Introduction:

My full name is Martine Umutesi Vanderheyden, although I usually introduce myself as Martine. I tell you this because when you first read my name, you would not expect me to be as mixed as I am. Martine is a Latin name and Vanderheyden is as Dutch as McIntosh is Scottish. That being said, I happen to be a bit Dutch and German from my father's side and Rwandan from my mother's side. But, most of all, I am Belgian; I speak French as a mother tongue and I am pleased that people are unable to decide whether I come from Brazil or not the first time they meet me.

Since I was a little girl, I have always hated school and I have always been convinced that one day, I would travel a lot. This is why I enjoyed to learn English, and gradually became interested in other school systems than the Belgian one, such as the Dutch and the Scandinavian ones. After 1001 failures, I finally became a French and Religion teacher. During my last year of study, I got the opportunity to study in Norway, at the University of Stavanger, for three months, as an Erasmus student. There, I was introduced to the "*Special Needs Education program*", which does not exist in Belgium. I was so impressed that I decided to come back as soon as possible. So I did and with high expectations. I could not speak a word of Norwegian and knew nothing about the culture, but I decided to study for a master degree in Special Needs Education in Norway.

There are different types of International students at a Norwegian university: those who study in English and have English as their mother tongue; those who study in English and master this language almost as well as their own language; those who have lived in Norway for a while and are thus pretty good in the language but still have to take the program of Norwegian language and culture for a year before being allowed to study a bachelor/master taught in Norwegian; and those who never heard a word of Norwegian before and will take the program of "Norwegian language and culture" as beginners for a year before taking their bachelor/master in Norwegian.

Through my master thesis, I have investigated the latter's experiences within a Norwegian academic system. My focus is on how this experience might have changed their identity from being a student back home, who studies in his/her mother tongue, culture, and academic system, to becoming a student in Norway and learning in Norwegian, with just a year to

understand the language, culture, and academic system. In others words, my research question is: “How do International students experience their studies in a Norwegian academic system”?

I believe this research can be of interest for the field of Inclusive Education as it also includes research on higher education. Being a higher education student abroad is not only a geographic journey, it is also an intimate one, where one goes through different emotions - such as joy, deception, excitement, despair, loneliness, homesickness, etc- and human experiences that one may never have experienced back home.

Through my investigation, I hope to have developed knowledge and understanding about these International students’ situation and with this is mind, to point out possible support and/or facilities which could help them through this challenging but exciting journey.

## 2 Theoretical framework and central concept:

The research question “*How do international students experience their studies in a Norwegian academic system?*” is framed within Wenger’s concept of “*community of practice*” (Wenger, 2008, p.7). His view on what it is like to be a member of such a community helps us to understand the International students’ experiences in a deeper and more interesting way and has guided my analysis on how the International students’ participation in a Norwegian academic community has affected their identity.

In addition and in order to illuminate various aspects of the International students’ experiences, I will draw upon earlier research on this subject.

For Etienne Wenger (2008), identity is not something which is on stand-by. It is something which is in perpetual evolution and revolution. In our life, we are going to learn in different kinds of communities: family, friends, school, university, parenthood, etc. These communities will ask of us active participation and some inner changes too.

To summarize Wenger’s *Social theory of learning* (2008, p.5) is simply impossible because his work is huge and complex. However, I have used aspects of his work in order to understand International students’ learning within a new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008) that is a Norwegian university. I have therefore used Wenger’s *components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory* (2008, p.5) Although Wenger defines the community here, as “(...) *a way of talking about the social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth of pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence (...)*” (Wenger, 2008, p.5), I have transferred this definition of community to the community that is a Norwegian academy. I have tried to find out whether or not the International students have had this feeling of belonging to this university and in which ways they can say they have participated in its life and/or in which ways they feel or felt their participation worthy. In other words: how do they talk about their participation at a Norwegian university? Have they been invited to participate? What have they done/ not done and why? Has there been any consequences on their student’s social life, for example?

Those reflections will lead us to the central concept of *identity*, which Wenger defines as: “(...) *a way of talking about who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities (...)*” (Wenger, 2008, p.5).

Since our identity is perpetually moving, it will be interesting to hear International students talk about their own identity, how they feel they have changed since they have studied or are still studying in a totally different university to which they were used to, back home. Have they experienced their host university as a *fortress or an open door*? And what consequences has that been for them?

Wenger's *social theory of learning* (Wenger, 2008, p.5) comprises four components and their type of learning:

1. Community and learning as belonging
2. Identity and learning as becoming
3. Meaning and learning as experience
4. Practice and learning as doing

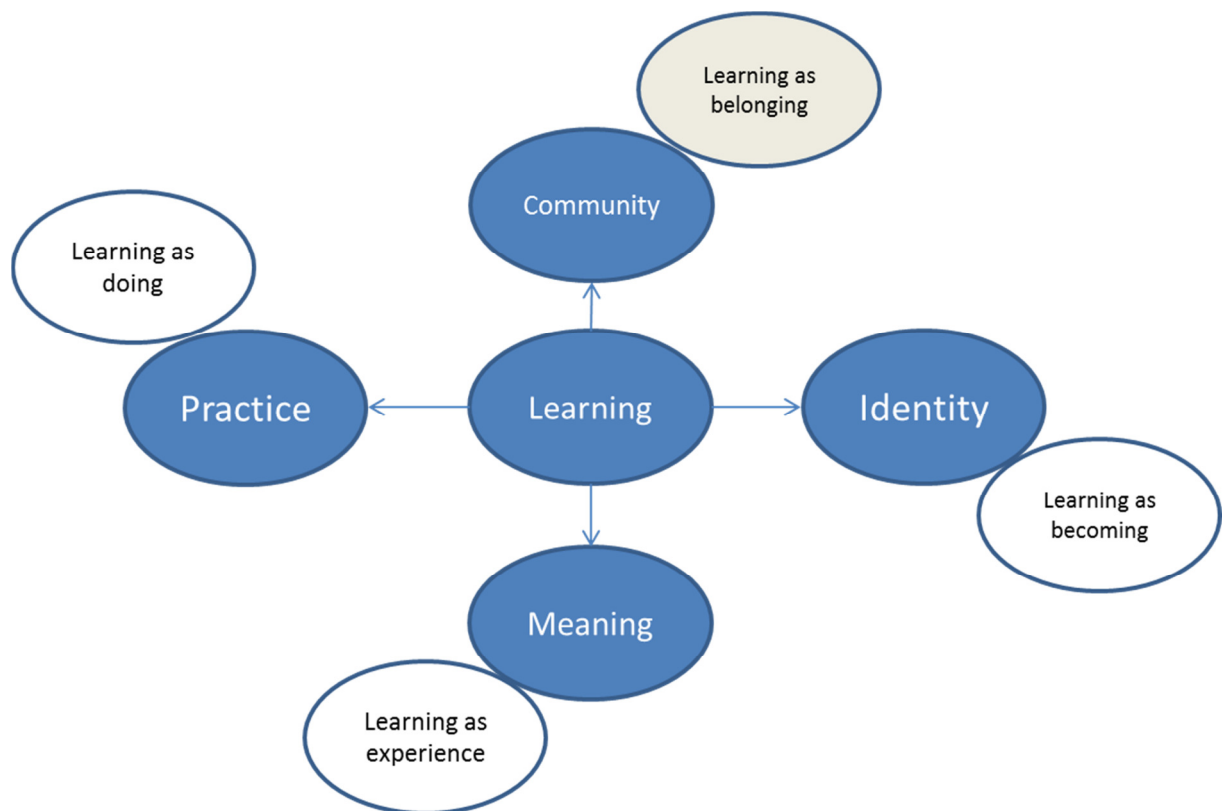


Figure 2.1 Components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory (Wenger, 2008, p.5)



As we can see in this schema, “learning” is situated in the middle because it is not something immutable. According to Wenger, each component could change its place within this schema. This just might be showing us that learning is the centre of one’s experience within a community. We learn all the time, wherever we are and with whom ever we happen to be. And the fact of the matter has consequences for us, on our identity and on the meaning we can find in our learning. So it is for the four International students I met through my research.

I tried to go through all of these components by asking the participants questions about their background, their prior experiences, in order to see if the latter have been taken into consideration within their new community and/or help them finding a *meaning* in their *learning* at a Norwegian university. And also because, as we shall see later, *learning as experience* and *learning as becoming* (Wenger, 2008) are linked not only in Wenger’s schema but also in International students’ experiences at a Norwegian university. I also tried to find out whether or not they have been considered as legitimate members of their new community of practice, because, as Wenger puts it, (...) *membership is what defines a community* (...). (Wenger, 2008, p.73) Also, for one to be a legitimate member of a community of practice gives one the opportunity to *learn as belonging* and to give *meaning* to one’s learning (Wenger, 2008). But in order to be, or become, a member might need the help of insiders in order to be integrated. I enquired about that also.

As I said earlier, I also went through earlier research on the subject of what it is to be an International student. That research lead me to ask questions about language and how this has been a facilitator and/or a barrier for them? I was also curious to find out whether the International students I met have experienced *rejection*, or *homesickness*. If so, how they coped with it. And last but not least, I tried to find out if their identity had changed that much that they could think of any cultural shock if they decide to go back home?

In relation to my research question, here is how Wenger’s *social theory of learning* (Wenger, 2008, p.5) and the earlier research on this subject are interlinked:

*Community and learning as belonging:*

As Wenger argues, (...) *membership is what defines community* (...)(Wenger, 2008:p.73) and since a (...) *community of practice can become a very tight node of interpersonal relationships, it should not be romanticized: it can reproduce counterproductive patterns, injustices, prejudices, racism, sexism, and abuses of all kinds. They are a fact of social life.*

*They are important places of negotiation, learning, meaning and identity”* (Wenger, 2008, p.76, 132-133)

In other words, a community of practice is not the easiest place for one to find one’s self. In fact, Wenger argues that it actually demands three types of work: *the work of engagement, the work of imagination and the work of alignment*. (Wenger, 2008, p.184-186). The first is about building a community together, where everyone takes his/her part of the responsibility in order to make this community a fair place of conversation and discussions and where every single participant is seen and considered as a member of it. The second is not about fantasy in a creative way, though the idea might not be that far away from that. *The work of imagination* demands the ability of self-criticism. As Wenger puts it: “(...) *to move back and look at our engagement through the eyes of an outsider (...)*” (Wenger, 2008, p.185). And the last one is not about agreeing about everything in order to avoid conflicts. It is about being able to put the energy together in order to reach the same meaningful goal.

In the specific case of International students at a Norwegian university, I would like to point out *the work of imagination* (Wenger, 2008, p.185) which is full of sense in a homogenous community. Before the arrival of new comers, the community might have find its way of working, its main goal and how to put everyone’s energy and differences in a positive and energetic action. One may not have thought of the pertinence of self-criticism. Fair enough: if everything is working well, why bother? Why should one think about hypothetical *outsiders* (Wenger, 2008)?

But here they come: from their previous community of practice, with their own language and culture, as well as their expectations. How would they become members of this new community? Since, once again, and according to Wenger, *membership is what defines community* (Wenger, 2008, p.73).

In her study, which aims to propose a Japanese *point of view of the cross-cultural adaptation of the International students*, Zhang, among several interesting topics, points out some difficulties International students may face while studying abroad, such as the *academic adaptation* and the *language skills* (Zhang, 2009). She also cites Dunn’s *Academic Adjustment Model*; the latter describes some struggles International students might go through, such as *the pre-departure stress, the housing, peer relations, the interactions with faculty, professors, lectures and administration* (Zhang, 2009).

The *academic adaptation*, as well as the previous *stressors*, are not something easy to cope with. International students do arrive at a Norwegian university with their background and their previous habits and ways of studying. Any university is different in its organization, demands, structure, and its culture.

The *language skills* can turn to become a real handicap for International students, for instance. Here, at a Norwegian university, they have just a year in order to learn the Norwegian language. In the best case, they will be able to communicate on a daily basis: talk about themselves, their family back home, the Norwegian food, and the weather. They will then attend a brand new community where almost everyone, not to say everyone, speaks Norwegian as their mother tongue. They will attend a brand new community with its own practice, rhythm, demands and inner culture. Well... here they come. Maybe they were expecting to be integrated right away, or at least, to catch this community's peculiarities at once, but the reality might be truly different. How would they possibly become members of it if their language skills are poor? How would they properly communicate on the subject matter with their new peers and professors, when their linguistic spectrum is limited? And how would they become *members* of this community if *the work of imagination* (Wenger, 2008, p.185) never legitimately took place in anyone's mind?

Well, ideally, those questions could find their solution in the two other works suggested by Wenger: *the work of engagement* and *the work of alignment* (Wenger, 2008, p.184). Ideally, the best would be to build a new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.186) with every single student: the natives and the International. Everyone could share his/her experiences and expectations, while the professors in charge would be there to guide, organize and structure the ideas within a clear program and expected demands. While sharing ideas, the different members would find out not only that the cultures are different, but the *language skills* (Zhang, 2009) could be something to be worked out together. Yes, it would be fantastic, it would be the ultimate ideal. To work together, hand in hand, towards the same meaningful goal! But once again, in a homogeneous *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008), why should anyone legitimately bother? As we can imagine, learning as belonging for any outsider in a new community of practice, might seem out of reach. This is why I asked International students who participated in my research questions about their language skills in Norwegian, if they believed that this has played any role in their integration in their new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7)? If they have meet peers who cared about them, explaining to them how things actually worked in order for them to integrate and understand their new

community's demands? I asked them how it was for them how they used to study in their own language and culture, and then to learn Norwegian in English for a year, before finally study their bachelor/master in Norwegian; and how this might have challenged their student's identity and self-esteem? I asked them about that, because in their study, C.J Yeh and M. Inose show a sincere interest for International students who have to learn in English in American universities. Whilst I would never underestimate the efforts such a challenge must demand, I have to say that the International students' linguistic situation at a Norwegian university strikes me as even more challenging. One knows that not only do they have to struggle with two languages, but three: they have only one year to learn a third language and to learn this in a language that is not their mother tongue, before actually studying in this third language that is Norwegian. Also, I asked them to relate their experience within an International *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) where they studied Norwegian together with International students, with the *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008) they attended right after: how could they describe their *belongingness* in both of them? Were they *members* of any of them?

*Identity and learning as becoming:*

Wenger argues that “(...) *a community can strengthen the identity of participation of its members in two related ways: by letting its members what they have been, what they have done, and what they know contribute to the constitution of its practice. And by opening trajectories of participation that place engagement in its practice in the context of a valued future (...)*” (Wenger, 2008, p.215).

As we saw earlier, International students who arrived at a Norwegian university, have their own background, hopes and expectations. Maybe they believe they would become members of their new *community of practice*, but sometimes, when *the work of imagination* (Wenger, 2008, p.185) is not on their new peers and professors' mind, the reality might be less bright. In their article based on a social identity theory called *the rejection identification model* (Schmitt, Spears, Branscombe, 2003), Schmitt, Spears and Branscombe argue that, basically, human beings need to feel included. When one feels excluded and discriminated by the mainstream, one tends to turn to people who seem not integrated either, in order to fulfill the human need that is “(...) *a sense of belongingness and attachment (...)*” (Schmitt, Spears, Branscombe, 2003). In order to argue their theory, the authors have focused their research on a group of International students at an American university. Their loneliness and feeling of

being excluded by the mainstream left them no choice but to turn to the other International students. Because they did not have the same mother tongue, culture, or religion, what brought them together was this feeling of rejection. The authors found that “(...) *identification with International students was the only form of identification that mediated a self-protective response to perceived discrimination (...)*” (Schmitt, Spears, Branscombe, 2003). On this background, the question is: what happened to the International students at a Norwegian university who did not feel included within their *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7)? Did they create a new identity together with others International students? Have they ever felt like legitimate members in their studies? Throughout the interview, I also tried to find out what kind of host students they were back home, towards the International students. And if they could relate their own experiences here with what International students at their home university might have been through. Did they and their community of practice make the International students feel that their former experiences were valuable for the community of practice’s present and future? In which ways could they relate those questions to their reality now?

For Wenger, *identity* is something in perpetual movement. We are not the same person for the rest of our lives: we continually *renegotiate* who we are in “(...) *a learning process that incorporates both past and future into the meaning of the present (...)*” (Wenger, 2008, p.154-155). And this has its importance in the context of International students at a Norwegian university, who not only learn new academic knowledge, but also get acquainted with a different culture than their own. Their specific experiences might be related to Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s *U- curve hypothesis* and *Reacculturation process* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

Indeed, with the *U-curve hypothesis*, the authors focus on the *acculturation phase*, the *adjustment process* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) one has to go through while in a host society. They explore what it is like to travel to a new society with expectations, to get to know this society, and to have to face deceptions and others delusions. When one faces those difficulties, one is supposed to readjust oneself in order to integrate the new values and ways of life. This phase is then followed by the *modus Vivendi* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) one has achieved.

But this *U-curve hypothesis* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) is not all. The authors argue that when one has integrated into his/her new society and has to go back home, things might be complicated. In fact, as Gullahorn & Gullahorn put it, they might “(...) *undergo a*

*reacculturation process in their home environments similar to that they experienced abroad (...)*” (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Since the participants in this study were at a Norwegian university for a few years, I was interested to find out whether or not those theories might sound familiar to them. Did they go through something similar? Have they found their *modus Vivendi* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) within their new community? They might have been through some challenges and cultural shock, but in the end, do they believe it was worth it? Did their experiences change them in any way? Could they see themselves living in Norway after they graduate? And, if yes, would it be because those changes have been beneficial to them, on a human level?

Also, whether they found their *modus Vivendi* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) or not, could they imagine that the changes they have been through might have consequences when they go home, if they decide to go? In other words: do they believe they could go through what Gullahorn and Gullahorn call the *reacculturation process* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963)? Once back home, would they have to *renegotiate* who they might have become at a Norwegian university in order to live their new present and upcoming future in a meaning way?

#### Practice and learning as doing:

According to Wenger, “(...) *when we come in contact with new practice, we venture into unfamiliar territory. The boundaries of our communities manifest as a lack of competence along the three dimensions that are the mutuality of engagement, the accountability to an enterprise and the negotiability of a repertoire (...). We do not quite know how to engage with others. We do not understand the subtleties of the enterprise as the community has defined it. We lack the shared references that participants use. Our non-membership shapes our identity through our confrontation with the unfamiliar (...)*” (Wenger, 2008, p.153).

I will briefly draw upon the two first competences that are expected from every member of a community of practice:

a) *The mutuality of engagement* (Wenger, 2008, p.152):

This mutuality occurs when members of a community can engage with who they are, how they understand their community and its demands, with the other members of this community.

b) *The accountability to an enterprise* (Wenger, 2008, p.152):

This accountability occurs when every member in a community understands its meaning with respect to his/her own personality and values. Which make his/her interventions an enrichment for the other members and the community itself.

But what about the International students' situation at a Norwegian university? The year of Norwegian language and culture they took for a year was actually their first *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) at a Norwegian university. They understood its demands and were on the same level as the other members. The majority of them did not have English as a mother tongue and the acquisition of Norwegian was no doubt their key to their further higher education, as they were told before they even attended this program.

The *boundaries* (Wenger, 2008, p.103, 119) International students might face in their *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008) that will follow the present one have almost nothing in common. The present one, the one year program of Norwegian language and culture, is really something special. And the apparent *boundaries* (Wenger 2008, p.103, 119) that are the acquisition of a new language taught in another language than their own, as well as the new way of teaching, are soon overcome. Pretty quickly, the participants realize that everything is new and unknown for each of them. And, nevertheless, the professor in charge of this program is well aware of this reality.

So, little after little, step by step, the professor and the participants will create their own *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) with a common aim: to succeed this year in order to get the chance to study their higher education taught in Norwegian the following year. Not only will they create their own community, but every member of it will interact, engage in and improve it with his/her own personality and comprehension of this *community of practice*. Every member will not only improve his/her competences in Norwegian, but also what Wenger calls their very own *mutuality of engagement* and *accountability to an enterprise* (Wenger, 2008, p.152).

Right after this one year program of Norwegian language and culture, the International students at a Norwegian university will face the totally *unfamiliar*: their brand new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) where they happen to be the minority. Here, the chances of being together with professors and Norwegian peers, who might not be in the habit of studying and working with International students who have a very low level of Norwegian, are high.

Very quickly, the International students will find out that their poor proficiency in Norwegian will make their interactions with their professors, their peers and, the subject matter complicated and almost out of reach. The *mutuality of engagement* and the *accountability to an enterprise* (Wenger, 2008, p.152) thus appear to be quite jeopardized. Not only is that important for one to be able to interact within ones *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) with his/her own views and experiences, but the saddest thing is if one cannot enjoy such a positive and meaningful experience, one could underestimate oneself. And in the case of International students at a Norwegian university, such a negative experience can lead to the risk of the rejection of the host community as well as a possible resignation of their studies, when they were sincerely willing to succeed.

Through the interview, I asked the four participants how they could describe their year of Norwegian language and culture in relation to their studies within a Norwegian community of practice. How they experienced both of them, what were the differences and how they believed things could be improved for newcomers?

*Meaning and learning as experience:*

c) *Negotiability of a repertoire* (Wenger, 2008, p.153):

As we have seen above, the dimensions that Wenger calls the *mutuality of engagement*, the *accountability to an enterprise* and the *negotiability of a repertoire* (Wenger, 2008, p.153) show our ability to be an active and meaningful member in a *new community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7); while the lack of these competences show that the *new community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) failed to integrate us as such. Because, in order to understand a new community, its demands and practice, one should be told how this works. How his/her own experiences can actually be a plus. Of course, the potential new member has to show a genuine interest and curiosity, but this openness has to be shared by the others members towards him/her, in order to make this community a place of exciting exchanges and learning. The *negotiability of a repertoire* (Wenger, 2008, p.153) seems to fit into the component *meaning and learning as experience* (Wenger, 2008, p.5) because it appears to be the sum of the success of the two first dimensions. When a member of a community has been able to understand it, to positively involve him/herself and the others in it, he/she then becomes wiser and richer for everything he/she has learned. As Wenger prettily puts it: “(...) *we can make use of that history because we have been part of it and it is now part of us (...)*” (Wenger, 2008, p.153). That, I would say, would be the best answer I could get from any International



student I met through my research. When asked how they could describe their higher education at a Norwegian university, how wonderful it would be if they could say: “You know, it was fantastic! I have been a part of it and now these studies and my experience at a Norwegian university are a part of me and I cannot wait to share and use it”.

But in the case of International students, studying abroad can have a less successful turn, as S. Poyrazli and M.D Lopez argue in their study. The authors show their concern about the International students at an American university who have to deal with homesickness. Homesickness is defined by Pedersen, Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets and Van Heck, as *a longing and a desire for familiar environment that can sometimes take the form of depressive symptoms* (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

While the *negotiability of a repertoire* can be seen as the potential success of the dimensions that are the *mutuality of engagement* and the *accountability to an enterprise* (Wenger, 2008, p.152-153), the failure of these two dimensions could also lead some International students to experience aspects such as the rejection of the host community, the possible resignation of their studies and homesickness. They might be *longing a familiar environment* (Pedersen, Van Tilburg and Van Heck, 2007) but what about the fact they might simply be longing for their previous academic success when they studied in their culture, their language, their community of practice? Experiencing failures, experiencing impossibility to understand the meaning of their learning in their *new community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7), while they know for sure that they are brilliant, can certainly be disturbing and distressing.

Maybe they were hoping to share their experiences back home and with potential new comers? And if their experiences turn out to be something different than they expected, what are they going to do, to say?

M. Olivas and C.S Li argue the importance for International students of getting support. In order to do so, they urge *college counselors* to have an effective and clever formation about *their own culturally learned assumptions* (Olivas & Li, 2006). According to the authors, once International students get the effective support they need, they will then be able to cope with *adjustment issues, language challenges, and the new educational system* (Olivas & Li, 2006).

I asked the International students I met about whether or not they experienced homesickness during their studies at a Norwegian university and how they coped with it. Whether or not

they got the support they hoped to get, the main point was to find out if this experience has formed their ability of empathy.

As we have seen, learning here in the case of International students at a Norwegian university, does not seem to be a calm journey. They might have experienced cultural shock, loneliness and misunderstanding on several levels when it comes to their new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008). Maybe more than someone who has evolved in a very different community than his/her own, International students might have experienced changes in their identity. But above all, I want to believe that they have experienced and embraced empathy. And that is why, one day, others people might need their experiences in order to be genuinely supported and understood.

Based on the theoretical framework and the mentioned questions, I asked the International students the interview questions as follows:

#### INTERVIEW GUIDE

- A.
1. In few words, can you tell me about your background? Why did you decide to study at a Norwegian university?
  2. What are your experiences regarding your studies back home? Would you say what you experience here in Norway is different? If so, in which ways? Can you give some examples?
  3. Would you say that you feel like a legitimate member of your class at your university here? Can you explain?
  4. Based on your experiences in Norway and back home, would you say that it takes other kinds of effort in order to succeed? Did you have to change the way you studied back home in order to succeed here, for example? Have you experienced that your previous knowledge has been taken into consideration here? If yes, can you give some examples? If not, would you have liked to have been given this opportunity?
  5. Would you say that to learn at a Norwegian university has changed your student identity from before? If yes, in which ways and could you give some examples? If not, can you elaborate?
- B.
1. In order to study your bachelor/master, you had to study Norwegian in English for a year. What do you think about this experience?
  2. Has it been easy for you to make new friends among your international peers? Would you say that English, the language you all had in common, was a facilitator or a barrier? Can you give some examples?

3. You began to study your bachelor/master in Norwegian right after the year of Norwegian. How would you describe this experience in relation to the “Norwegian language and culture” program?
  4. Did you meet people who helped you among your Norwegian classmates and/or professors? Has it been easy for you to make new friends? Can you explain?
  5. If you have studied together with another International student, would you say that this has helped your integration and acquisition of the Norwegian language and the subject matter? Whether it is yes or no, can you explain and give some examples?
  6. If you have been or are the only International student in your bachelor/master class, would you say that another International student in your class would have helped or jeopardized your integration and the acquisition of the Norwegian language and the subject matter? Can you elaborate?
  7. Do you think that your level of integration has something to do with the relatively poor Norwegian you had when you started your bachelor/master? Whether it is yes or no, can you explain?
- C.
1. Have you ever experienced a difference between your “facility” to learn in your mother tongue and in Norwegian? If so, has it damaged your self-esteem in one way or another? Have you ever feel stupid, discouraged? If yes, can you explain and give some examples? If not, what and/or who have helped you not to feel that way?
  2. How would you describe your experience with the Norwegian curriculum, teaching and learning approaches? Has it been easy for you to integrate? If yes, can you explain and give some examples? If not, have you ever felt stressed because of that? Can you explain and give some examples?
- D.
1. During your studies, would you say that you felt or feel like you truly belong in you classroom and/or you university? Can you explain with a few examples?
  2. Have you ever felt or feel rejected? If yes, can you explain? How did you cope with it? Did you turn to other International students for instance?
  3. Now that you know what it is to be an International student, did you help those who were at your university back home? Can you elaborate?
- E.
1. According to the “U-CURVE” and the “Reacculturation process” (Gullahorn & Gullahorn), it is usual for one who lives abroad to experience ups and downs due to the fact that his/her expectations can be different from the reality of the host country. After a while though, he/she becomes able to readjust him/herself since he/she has found ways to cope with that and becomes aware of the new reality he/she is in.  
The “Reacculturation process” happens to those who, after they lived and integrated themselves in a host country, will have to reintegrate the codes of their home country. Could you make a parallel between these theories and your experience as an International student?

2. Are you planning to stay in Norway after your bachelor/master? Would it be reasonable to think that the whole experience has given you another perspectives about who you are and therefore are you planning to stay? Can you elaborate?
  3. If you are planning to go back home, do you believe you will go through the “Reacculturation process”? If yes, would you say that it might be because your experiences as an International student have changed you? If you have changed, in which ways would you describe these changes? Is that positive, negative? Do you think you would have changed that much if you had not studied abroad? Can you explain?
  4. If you are planning to go back home and do not believe you would go through the “Reacculturation process”, would you say that it might be because your experiences as an International student have not changed you? If so, could it be because you mostly have been among fellow countrymen?
  5. Now that you know what it is to be an International student, would you recommend others to study abroad too? How would you introduce this possibility?
- F.
1. Through the whole process of your integration, have you ever felt lonely and homesick? Did you get some support? Can you explain? If you did not get the support you wished, what do you think could have helped you? Can you give some examples? If you happen to meet an International student who struggles like you used to, what would you do in order to support him/her? Can you give some examples?
  2. Could you think about how International students could really feel supported throughout their studies? What do you think could be done at a Norwegian university in order to do so?
  3. What do you think about this research and this interview? Would you like to add anything?

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Qualitative research:

Because the main objective of this study is to find out how International students at a Norwegian university have experienced their studies in Norwegian after just a year of learning the language and the culture, appears to be a personal reality and a personal truth which will find no place either in norms nor in numbers, the qualitative research appears to be the best strategy to find out and to understand “(...) *things in their natural settings, to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them(...)*” (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007, p.31)

#### 3.2 The case study:

According to Gall, Gall and Borg, “(...) *The case study research (can be) defined as the in-depth of one or more instances of phenomena in its real-life context that reflects the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon (...)*” (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007, p.447). The *case study* here is the International students’ experience at a Norwegian university. In order to contact them, I used the professor who was in charge of the one year program “Norwegian language and culture” for beginners as a “door opener”. I told her about my project and she contacted several International students who might be interested in participating in the study. I received the e-mail addresses to the International students that were interested and gave a positive response, I introduced myself in few words and asked them if they would be interested in telling me about their experiences as an International student at a Norwegian university. In order to reflect what perspectives we can get from such an experience, they wrote a one-page memory, inspired by Haug’s *Minnearbeid* (Winderberg, 2001, p.40) about their studies and talked about that during the interview that followed. This is called the “in-depth” or, in others words, the “get to know” part of the case study. Their memories and the interview served and helped me greatly for my research and its analysis.

The *real life* context is thus a Norwegian university where their experiences took place, though the interview was held in a neutral place which was chosen by the participants.

As suggested by Gall, Gall and Borg, the “(...) *researchers generally do case studies for one or three purposes: to produce detailed descriptions of a phenomenon, to develop possible explanations of it, or to evaluate the phenomenon (...)*” (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007, p.451-453).

This case study has been chosen in order to understand which consequences, such as *homesickness* (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), or *the feeling of rejection* (Schmitt, Spears, Branscombe, 2003), and, whether, the identity's issues might be unknown by the mainstream who might have a romantic picture of International students who travel, learn languages, new cultures, and therefore make themselves humanly richer for all those experiences.

### 3.3 The research site:

Because, according to Gall, Gall and Borg, *gaining entry* is fundamental when it comes to *identifying sites and working with “gatekeepers” to obtain necessary permissions* (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007:p.458), is for the good conduct of a research, I used the professor in charge of the year long program of “Norwegian language and culture” for beginners, as my “door opener”. As I said earlier, she helped me get in contact with the potential participants in my research.

As suggested by Gall, Gall and Borg, and in order to explain the aim of my research, I paid her a *personal visit* (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007, p.458) and pointed out that the whole project would be guided by a meticulous sense of *deontological ethics*, as David Flinders puts it (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007). The *deontological ethics* (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007, p.459) is a strict respect of values such as honesty, respect, total anonymity of the participants, justice, fairness and respect of others.

### 3.4 The semi-structured interview:

Once I received the e-mail addresses of the International students who showed their interest for this project, I sent them an e-mail in which I introduced myself briefly and gave them the *contract of confidentiality*, in which I explained that their anonymity will be totally respected, their participation risk-free which they needed to sign it. I then asked them to write a minimum one page memory in which they describe their experiences as an International student at a Norwegian university who only had a year of Norwegian before studying a bachelor/master taught in that language.

As mentioned earlier, this exercise is based on F. Haugs' "*Minnearbeid*" (Winderberg, 2001, p.40). The International students were urged not to analyze their writing, to simply tell their experience as they recall it. There were neither expectations nor preconceived ideas from my part: only a sincere and respectful interest for what they had to say.

As suggested by M. Miles, I summarized each memory, "*its contents, its ideas*", (Winderberg, 2001, p.101) in order to see what could be reached during the interview that followed.

As mentioned above, the interview was actually a "*semi-structured interview*" because, according to Gall, Gall and Borg, it "(...) *involves asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply with open-form questions to obtain additional information (...)*" (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007, p.246). For the authors, this kind of interview is usually used within a quantitative research. But its use was relevant here since the participants were asked the same structured questions as well as additional ones, in order for them to clarify their meaning.

Also, even though this interview took place in a relaxed atmosphere and a neutral place, the "*open-ended*" part of it is not insignificant, as Gall, Gall and Borg urge that "(...) *a predetermined sequence and wording of the same set of questions will be asked to each respondent, in order to minimize the possibility bias (...)*". (Gall, Gall, Borg, 2007, p.247)

### **3.5 The participants:**

Whether they have finished their studies or are still studying a bachelor/master taught in Norwegian, the four participants who took part in this research followed the one year program of "Norwegian language and culture" at a Norwegian university without having lived in Norway or having any knowledge of Norwegian from before. I would like to add that English is the second language for all of them. Their proficiency in English varied in the prose of their memory, as well as their interview. This being said, this also shows the difficulty to express oneself in a language that is not one's mother tongue and the effort that it takes.

### **3.6 Analysis process:**

I have chosen to frame my research within Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (2008) and will use his schema of *Social theory of Learning* (Wenger, 2008) in order to analyze the information I got from the participants. This schema underlines four important components

when it comes to learning as an active participant: the *meaning*, the *practice*, the *community* and the *identity* (Wenger, 2008) In the case of the four International students who took part in my research, these components will tell whether or not they have found their studies meaningful, if the experience to study abroad made sense in their life as an International student, if it is or was worth it? When it comes to the *practice*, (Wenger, 2008, p.149, 151) did they get the chance to share their background and new learning actively with their Norwegian peers? As for the *community*, (Wenger, 2008, p.149, 151) did they feel like they were seen and integrated as valuable members? And, did this experience have had any impact on their *identity*? (Wenger, 2008, p.149, 151) Did this experience change their previous student identity and how?

Even though Wengers's *Social theory of learning* (Wenger, 2008, p.5) is my main reference, I must say that Corbin and Strauss' book *Basic of Qualitative Research, 2007*, has been a real inspiration to me. I have learned many relevant and useful terms and concepts, ways of thinking and working. As a novice researcher, this book has been a gold mine for me.

The *microanalysis process* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) is one example among many. According to Corbin and Strauss, this process, used at the very beginning of this research, enables the researcher not to jump too quickly into any conclusion while analyzing what a participant says. While some words might appear unclear at first, a deeper look at them can show that they are actually useful, unexpectedly relevant. This leads the researcher to rethink his/her assumptions and to use his/her imagination in order to include the new information within his/her research. This is what I have tried to do in my analysis.

Once again, and even though Etienne Wenger's schema *Social theory of learning* (Wenger, 2008, p.5) is the main frame, Strauss and Corbin's *Grounded theory* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) taught me a lot and helped me to understand and analyze the International students' experience at a Norwegian university. Indeed, inspired by them, I classified students' words such as joy, sadness, deception, success, friendship, etc into similar *concepts* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), that would be, here, *homesickness* (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), *the feeling of rejection/ the rejection identification model* (Schmitz et.al, 2003), *the U-Curve* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), *the academic adjustment model* (Dunn, 2009).

I also used what Strauss and Corbin call *microanalysis* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in order to go deeper in to what participants said which appeared unclear though interesting. This process also prevents the researcher to jump too quickly into any conclusion.



### 3.7 Research ethics, reflection and choice:

Before I could even start interviewing potential International students, I had to write to the *NSD (Norwegian Social Science Data Services)* in order to describe my research and thus have their agreement. This means that NSD had to be sure that my research would not hurt the participants feelings, identity, origins or compromise their anonymity. Once I showed them that my research was safe for anyone who would like to take part in it, they gave me their support.

The International students who took part in my research had to sign a *contract of confidentiality* in which I assured them of their anonymity and that everything they have written and said, as well as their names, studies and origins, will remain strictly confidential. That anything that could hurt their feelings will be avoided and that they will have the right to withdraw from the project whenever they wish, without having to justify themselves. They also have been assured of my total discretion and respect. This is of the highest importance, since all this project is about their own personal experiences.

I would like to add that none of the International students who took part in my research understood why they were not allowed to say their names or their origins, since all of them were really happy to get the chance to say what was in their minds and heart. There is thus no need to say that none of them withdrew themselves at any time. I will always be thankful for the time and the quality of the testimonial they generously and kindly gave me.

### 3.8 The researcher:

To write about International students' experiences at a Norwegian university was actually not my first choice. But since I had been one myself and could notice major changes in my identity, I finally decided to investigate whether those changes were my own or if they were shared, in some extent, by other International students.

By major changes, I mean that this experience to study in Norwegian at a Norwegian university has been challenging. Before I came here, I could not speak a word of Norwegian. And even though my NOMSA year brought me a priceless experience, that is to learn a new

language in a new country, together with students from all over the world, it did not prepare me to face the demands of a master taught in Norwegian. And it did not prepare me to face the rejection I would experience the year after within my new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) either.

As I said earlier, I came in Norway with high expectations. As a teacher, I believe in a school for everyone and that my master in Special Needs Education can help me to make a difference. I knew language would be a challenge, but I did not expect this experience to be that challenging. Back home, I had good grades and I was pretty confident in my abilities. I was a French native speaker student who studied to become a French and Religion teacher in French, and in my country. I am not saying that my studies were easy, but language was not something I had to deal with. I succeeded brilliantly.

When I started my master taught in Norwegian, I thought I could overcome the language and cultural barriers. I succeeded my year of “Norwegian language and culture” and I had been quite good in making new friends among my International peers. There was no way I could think things could be different with my Norwegian peers. And especially not in a master that teaches us how to integrate everyone. But my lack of Norwegian obviously made me unable to understand the subject matter and to interact with the others students, who were not keen to speak in English with me. I was the only International student in my master and was quickly left on my own. There was no place for me in workshops and no time to answer my questions either. The curriculum and the way it was taught were completely unfamiliar to me.

Little after little, I lost my self-esteem and experienced major changes in my identity, as I said earlier. From sociable and voluble, I became withdrawn and silent. I was angry and sad. I did not understand what was happening to me and why this experience turned out to be so humanely demanding. And on the top of everything, people back home could not understand what I was going through, because they were all blinded by the French film “*L’auberge espagnole*” (Cedric Klapisch, France, 2002) and were convinced I had nothing to complain about. In this film, Xavier, a young French man, goes to Spain in order to learn Spanish as an Erasmus student. There, he met new friends from all over Europe and experienced “once in a life time” adventures that will change him forever. The film is witty, positive and had a huge success in France, Belgium and other European countries. But I am not Xavier and my experience as an International student at a Norwegian university was not a movie.

And this is because I was facing incomprehension both in my new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) and back home that I finally decided to investigate what was really going on for International students who just had a year of Norwegian before they started their bachelor or master taught in Norwegian. I was keen to find out if they were going through similar challenges? If they had experience any changes in their identity? Or if it was just me who was being so overwhelmed? And if they happened to experience such challenges, what could I do? What changes could I make in order for newcomers not to go through such challenges? Or, at the very least, how could my research be useful for them in order to ease their studies at a Norwegian university?

In order to do so while trying my best to be the most “objective” possible, it was therefore fundamental to develop a broad theoretical frame in order to focus my research and its results on the participants’ very own experience and not mine.

#### 4: Analysis:

Through this analysis, I will call the four participants by the following names: Julie, Lucie, Sophie and Paul. We shall see how their accounts will find their place within the theoretical frame.

Here is what they have to say in connection with the component *Community and learning as belonging* (Wenger, 2008, p.5)

Julie recalls that:

*“(...) In 2009, I started to attend my bachelor. At first, I was a little bit afraid. Everybody there apart me was Norwegian. I emphasized that I have been reading Norwegian just for one year and it can be difficult for me. But it seemed that neither students nor teachers were prepared to have an International student in their community (...) Maybe I didn’t put much effort into this, maybe it’s normal in Norwegian universities, but communication between me and the others students was about zero. Should I say that I didn’t like to attend the university?(...) I think they should have understood that I came from another country and that I didn’t speak Norwegian as well as they do. But maybe they didn’t want to get any kind of troubles like they will have to help me with my study?(...)At home, students were taking care of by the teachers. They would tell you what you have to learn, what you have to know then. How you should prepare, how you can find the information. Here, they just give you tests. Then you just have to solve it. And at the beginning, I was really stressed. I really didn’t know how to manage. Here, it is the student who has to educate himself and I thought it was actually teachers who had to do that (...)*

*There was also one professor who tried to help me all the time, but I don't know (...). He looked all the time like: "Girl, I don't understand what you are doing here? It's going to be so tough for you!" It made me feel so stupid I tried to avoid him (...)"*

Lucie explains that:

*"It is just not easy to make new friends. I have seen tones of Norwegian students in my class, but I got only one or two I can talk more with. The rest, they are just not interested in communicate more. Why is this so hard to communicate with Norwegians? I have no idea. Maybe it is just me who has a K face or maybe it is just Norwegian people who are too conservative and too spoiled? And it takes more efforts to make connection with them. Sometimes, I have no problem with that, sometimes, I don't like to take shit from them because of their proud attitude. I think this is quite a simple fact (...). Maybe they don't know you and maybe they think that you are aggressive. I think it's a cultural problem. They are really quiet (...). I asked for help once and I didn't get it. This is why I did not ask a second time. I'm that kind of person. The first time I ask you and you don't give a shit, I won't ask you again. Because I don't want to rely on you. I don't want to feel that maybe you can give me something and if you don't, I still can reach the aim (...). In Canada, good professors are 8 out of 10, while here, there are 2 out of 10. They just give you the book or copy it and it's exactly the same thing. You don't feel the passion to go to class. I think here it's not that bad, but they can try to push the students a little bit harder (...). I would like teachers to make examples when they explain something, like in Canada. For example in Canada, the teachers say: "How do you apply this in reality?" and I immediately connect. But here, if you need examples, you go home and try to find examples yourself. But then you are alone and the teacher is not there to help you, to answer your questions. That's the bad part (...). In my faculty, the teachers they always say: "Yeah, you can ask after the class". But there are only 15 minutes and so many students who have questions, so you don't get a chance. After that, they are too busy. So you have to make a phone call or write an e-mail. Sometimes, you don't get a reply (...)"*

While Sophie elaborates that she:

*"(...) studied with students who have the same mother tongue than me and who had finished their secondary school here and who are really good in Norwegian. So, if I had problems, they could understand it and helped me. It helps a lot, really (...). Here, there is no really a distance between professors and students. We can drink coffee at the cafeteria, you can ask questions if you are worried about something. It's like: "How, you are welcome! Where do you come from?" (...). It was a risk for me to get this one year "conversion program" (the bachelor program taught in Norwegian that she took this year) because I should pass all the exams this year in order to get a master's place. And I was together with Norwegians students and it is like competition as well (...). This is why I should only have the best of the best (...). They said: "There will be many applications this year". And normally, they should have C grades. But I did between B and A (...)"*

Well, those accounts tell us different things about the component *community and learning as belonging*.

First, the Language skills:

Argued by Zhang in her study (2009), this topic appears to be prominent for three International students I met through my research. Here, for instance, it seems to have handicapped two of them in their will to communicate with their Norwegian peers. And, as we shall see later, this fact amongst others, lead Julie not to want to attend the university anymore. She “*emphasized*” that the Norwegian she learned for one year might not have been enough, but she did not expect her poor linguistic level to be such a disadvantage for her within her new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7)

Interestingly, Sophie has been surrounded and helped by peers who happen to have the same mother tongue as her and who happen to have lived and studied long enough in Norway to master the language and, may I add, the Norwegian school system. So not only did she get the help she needed, but she got it from people who understood what she was going through when it comes to the linguistic and cultural barriers. Thus, she received full support, while the reality of the other International students I met is quite different.

Still, a question remains: since she apparently received help from other International students, what about her Norwegian peers? What does it tell us about this *community of practice* in particular? We will see that later.

#### Second, the *Academic Adjustment Model*:

Here, two of the several components argued by Dunn appear clearly (Zhang, 2009):

- *The peer relations:*

For two of the participants, relations they had with their Norwegian peers were pretty nonexistent. They lived with a total disinterest from those toward them. Maybe this is due to their poor fluency in Norwegian? If so, why did neither of them communicate in English instead? Why, as we shall see later, were the Norwegian peers of the participants not keen to take this opportunity? Are we all the same when it comes to speaking another language when we are in our own country?

However, this situation of non-communication clearly hurt the feelings of two International students. As we saw earlier, Julie “*did not like to attend the university*”, while the other became more and more irritated towards her Norwegian peers, refusing to “*take shit from them because of their proud attitude.*”

So far, the third International student appears to have two distinct types of relation with her peers: the one she has with her International peers who speak her mother tongue is friendly, warm, supportive. While the one she seems to have with her Norwegian peers appears to be competitive. But can we consider it a relationship when it is based on competition?

- *The interactions with professors and lectures:*

Whilst one of the participants is rather enthusiast about her professors at a Norwegian university and how easy it has been for her to get help from them, the two others seem much more disappointed, not to say completely lost, regarding their curriculum.

One of them appears to have had the habit of getting all the information she needed in order to get prepared for exams or tests. Or basically, in order to understand the subject matter. In her idea, it is “*teachers who have to educate the students*”, not “*the student who has to educate himself*”. Yet, her experience at a Norwegian university seems to have been quite distressful: “*Here, they just give you tests. Then you have to solve it. And at the beginning, I was really stressed. I really did not know how to manage*”, she explains.

Things got worse for her when one of her professors thought he was helping her by pitying her. She felt even more “*stupid and tried to avoid him*”.

One could object and argues that at least, one professor paid attention to her. Well, I would ask this question then: as a human being gifted with intelligence, how many of us enjoy being pitied while facing a difficulty? Helping someone should be about showing the person she is able to overcome the difficulty by showing her new and adequate ways to do so. And pity is definitely not one of those ways.

The comments of Lucie, who compares professors at a Canadian and a Norwegian university, counting “*8 out of 10 good professors*” at the first one and “*2 out of 10 good professors*” at the second one, can seem harsh. But as we saw earlier and as we shall see later, when she is recalling her experiences at a Norwegian university, severe and hard comments are legion. In French, we would have said: « *ses propos sont à la hauteur de son chagrin* ». Which could be translated as: her comments reflect her pain.

When it comes to the curriculum, this participant is apparently used to putting into practice what she has been taught. She says that her professors at a Canadian university encourage them to “*apply this -the theory- in reality*”, which helps her “*to connect*”. The use of this expression, *to connect*, is interesting. Especially in relation to how she experiences classes and professors at a Norwegian university. While teachers at her Canadian university apparently helped her to understand the subject matter in a concrete way, her teachers here do not give examples, appear to be busy and unavailable and leave her pretty much on her own when it comes to understanding the subject matter. As she puts it: “*Here, if you need examples, you go home and try to find examples yourself. But then you are alone and the teacher is not there to help you, to answer your questions. That’s the bad part...*” And when you have to do it on your own in a language that is not your own, connection may seem really out of reach...

Third, *The work of engagement* (Wenger, 2008, p.184):

As we saw earlier, *the work of engagement* (Wenger, 2008, p.184) for Wenger is our ability to build together a community where everyone takes her/his responsibility in order to make this community a place where each person is seen and considered as a legitimate member of it.

Well, clearly, two of the three participants we have mainly talked about so far are not seen or considered as legitimate members of their *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008) It would have been pretty difficult for them to take a part in any responsibility in the building of their community since the latter was obviously already created for members who speak the same cultural and academic language. When those International students tried to communicate, they received no answer. It is therefore pretty difficult to think of any *work of engagement* (Wenger, 2008, p.184) here.

Concerning Sophie, she certainly has been seen and considered as a legitimate member of her *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7). But not the *community of practice* she attended together with her Norwegian peers. No. The *community of practice* within *the community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) she and her friends who speak the same mother tongue, consciously or not, built together. The majority of them master the Norwegian language and school system and they seem to have integrated her into that. They have supported her and

helped her understand how it works. So far, neither the Norwegian students nor her professors seem to have been involved in this process of integration.

Fourth, *The work of imagination* (Wenger, 2008, p.185):

For Wenger, the *work of imagination* is our ability to be self-critical, *to move back and look at our engagement through the eyes of an outsider* (Wenger, 2008, p.185) Earlier I argued that, to me, the *work of imagination* (Wenger, 2008, p.185) was actually the most important, because it forces us not to take the way we think and function within our *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) for granted. Always, we should be open to the fact that a surprise, like the arrival of a new member, can bump into our certainties.

Sadly and obviously, no *work of imagination* (Wenger, 2008, p.185) has been done within the *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) of two International students so far. When they asked for help, they received pity or disinterest. None of the members tried to see their community through the eyes of those outsiders. And then again, even though Sophie was pleased by the fact that her professors were apparently always prompt to help her and answer her questions, it still appears difficult to see how and when she actually was integrated into the main *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7). Not the one created by her friends and her, the one that was already there before she came.

Fifth, *The work of alignment*: (Wenger, 2008, p.186)

Did any of those *communities of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) put their energy together in order to reach the same aim of success for every participant? No.

A *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) within the main *community of practice* has done that for one participant who happened to share the same mother tongue as its members. The two other International students were left on their own. And one of them, as we shall see later, finally abandoned her bachelor.

Wenger says that “(...) *membership is what defines a community (...). And since a (...) community of practice can become a very tight node of interpersonal relationships, it should not be romanticized: it can reproduce counterproductive patterns, injustices, prejudices, racism, and abuses of all kinds. They are a fact of social life. They are important places of negotiation, learning, meaning and identity (...)*”. (Wenger, 2008, p.132-133)



More clearly and more often than the other participants, Lucie expressed that she definitely was not a member of her *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) Expressions she used such as “*Maybe it is just me who has a K face*”, “*Sometimes I don’t like to take shit from them because of their proud attitude*”, “*I think this is a cultural problem*”, or “*They are really quiet*” question and touch me a lot. I have no idea of what is a “*K face*” but I can imagine it has something to do with her origins. She seems so angry and so sad, and I cannot help but think that she might have experienced all this non-communication and disinterest as a form of racism. And that hurts. She appears to respond to that by judging her Norwegian peers back. But at the end of the day, none of them really know each other. How could we humanly and wisely get out of this negative spiral?

*Practice and learning as doing:*

Through these upcoming accounts, the four participants recall their experiences within their first *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) that was their year of “Norwegian language and culture” (NOMSA) and their second *community of practice* that was their bachelor/master taught in Norwegian. We shall see how the language has been a facilitator in one community, while it has been a barrier in the other, and how this has compromised *the mutuality of engagement* and *the accountability to an enterprise* (Wenger, 2008, p.152) urged by Wenger.

Here is what Paul has to say:

*“(...) I had never heard the Norwegian language before I started NOMSA. It did not seem a very difficult language as it actually is, because it has a lot of English words and a simple grammatical structure. As far as I think that NOMSA was helpful for me in order to interact with people in a daily routine within my new environment, the technical studies in Norwegian are not that easy. In NOMSA, we got used to the pronunciation of a single teacher for one year and understood what she says. But in my studies, listening the whole day to numbers of teachers who have different pronunciation style creates a problem in order to understand what is being taught in lectures. Secondly, the technical terminologies for the specific subjects are also creating problems as we need to spend double time: first to understand the terms, and then to memorize them (...).*

*NOMSA was very good. I learned a lot about the language. I can understand a basic conversation but the technical studies are totally different and I had a lot of problems. That year of “Norwegian language and culture” was not supportive in that aspect actually. Because of the technical terminology I have, I had to learn everything from “scratch” and it took a lot of time for me and still, I am learning completely (...).*

*English was a facilitator among the International students. It was something else in order to make Norwegian friends (...). I don't know if it was just for me or for others International students, but I think it is really hard to be "social" with Norwegian students (...)*

While Julie recalls that:

*"(...) NOMSA was quite easy, quite nice, quite funny, but I think it wasn't enough. Now I think it wasn't enough. It could be better if they give us more of the dialect or something like this because it was really tough to start speaking like this (...). It was much more difficult to study in Norwegian than to learn Norwegian. Because even though you succeed a little bit in Norwegian language, you are "cool". Teacher can say: "Du er flink!"(both laugh).*

*But in my bachelor, it didn't matter at all. It was not about the language, it was about what you have to know about the subject. And while I was struggling to understand what the teachers said, the others students were trying to solve the problem. So I was pretty happy of myself when I understood what they were saying and I didn't have energy left in order to solve the problem (...)*

*English was a facilitator among International students (...). There were a lot of students who were good in English and a lot of students who were not that good in English. We just found a new language, something in between, in order to understand each other (both laugh). It was funny! (...) Sometimes, I cannot explain what I mean, then I find another way and it works all the time with International students. It was cool! (Her voice deepened as her face gets somber): I thought that Norwegians were the same... (...)*

Sophie explains that:

*"(...) NOMSA was a really nice time because we spent a lot of time in museums, so we were familiar with the town, the Norwegian culture and different people. Not just classes and books. But of course, the main difference between the Norwegian students and me is that I needed more time to prepare for example. Especially during the first semester: it was stressful. I really could not feel good because I thought I could not pass my exams (...).*

*I knew about the fact that Norwegians are distant (...). We communicated of course with them, but I cannot say it was 100% friendship. It was just a good relation in class (...). I think that not all Norwegians can communicate with foreigners (...)"*

And Lucie says that:

*"Over all comments, I will give the NOMSA year a positive thought because I think it's good to know Norwegian (...) because of course you live in this country. At some point, it helps you to know things and to understand the culture (...).*

*It's easy to speak English with International students, don't you think so? Because the limitation is less. We have something in common because we are International. We come from completely different lands. We are a sample of the human being (...)*

*I think that Norwegian people just start to open because Norwegian is such a dominant in this country. It is the dominant group. In Canada not -this participant is not originally from Canada, but she lived and studied there for about seven years just before she came in Norway-: everybody is from everywhere. I think this could change your way of seeing things (...). Nobody is actually from the dominant group but anybody is.*

*So in a way, some Norwegian people, students in my class, they think that foreigners come here to steal their jobs, their money, their social welfare (...).*

*At a Norwegian university, it is common that teachers give notes or exams in new Norwegian (nynorsk). It is quite a challenge for me since I do not master Norwegian in a high level, even in bokmål. This does add more heavy feelings when I am on exams because I need to understand it fully in order to answer correctly. I was panicking during the first semester because I had a teacher who was really special. Even the Norwegian students had difficulties to understand her (...). She was speaking a really, really different dialect and she didn't articulate. So we didn't know what she was talking about! I needed to ask questions and Norwegians too, but they decided not to attend the class anymore. They said: "What's the point? We don't understand." And I said: "No. I have to go there and copy the notes." This was the panicking part (...).*

When asked to elaborate on this subject, Lucie interestingly said that

*"(...) I don't know you, but when you see people talking French (which is my mother tongue), you feel much more at ease to start a conversation. I think this is one reason they do not integrate you. It's because they cannot be in the same level with you than with people who speak the same language. I would say that this is the main point why you were rejected, why I (she insists on this word) was being rejected. Because if you don't speak Norwegian, they have to make more time to communicate with you when you are doing a project, and they don't want to take more time. Their schedule is busy. It can be many reasons I believe. But I think language should be the first. That is how it feels (...).*

*The mutuality of engagement (Wenger, 2008, p.152):*

As we can see, every participant has enjoyed the NOMSA year. Not only because it has opened them to a whole new culture and language, but also because they were together with other International students who were there for the same reason and were all beginners.

Some of them did not even speak English well, but, as Julie puts it: *"We just found a new language, something in between, in order to understand each other"*. The barrier of language was soon overcome. The focus was somewhere else: on the acquisition of the Norwegian language, and more than that, the success of everyone in order to get the possibility to study their upcoming bachelor/master in Norwegian.

The participants totally understood their community of practice and its demands. But I need to add that this could not have been possible without the teacher in charge: she has played a significant role in this success. She is the one who has been able to explain to everyone the meaning and the importance of that year of Norwegian language and culture. And, nevertheless, she is the one who has been able to make everyone feel valuable and capable, no matter what their level of English was at the beginning. The mutuality of engagement was totally fulfilled here.

Of course, one year is not enough. And even though their professor has done the best she could, the International students soon found out that they did not learn enough Norwegian in order to understand their new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7).

Pretty quickly after they attended their bachelor/master, they have been confronted by challenges they did not expect, such as the use of different *pronunciation styles, dialects* and linguistics: nynorsk. During the NOMSA year, International students are introduced to *bokmål*, which is, together with nynorsk, the two proper Norwegian languages. When they are finished with their year of Norwegian, they know nothing about the latter, which has totally different writing and pronunciation.

So, when it comes to understanding exams or tests, their life as students becomes pretty challenging. They have been taught a basic bokmål Norwegian and then they are supposed to understand a specific jargon far from anything they have been taught until now. No wonder some of them have experienced negative feelings such as stress and *panic*, as Lucie said.

We can imagine that a warm and supportive relationship with their Norwegian peers could have helped them overcome some difficulties, as they did when they were together with other International students, but, as can be noted, that did not happen either. It is therefore needless to say that *mutuality of engagement* (Wenger, 2008, p.152) has not happened within the four participants' new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7).

*The accountability to an enterprise (Wenger, 2008, p.152):*

As we understand it through their own account of their NOMSA year, the participants have been able to understand the meaning of their *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7)

whilst their own personality, culture and values have been enriched by the others members' personality, culture and values.

Of course, one can argue that this is the meaning of such a year, where everyone comes from all over the world. Or, as Lucie prettily puts it: where everyone is "*a sample of the human being*". But aren't we all *a sample of the human being* anyway? And why should all these apparent efforts of integration not be the rule in every single *community of practice*? (Wenger, 2008, p.7)

Could this have something to do with what Lucie calls the "*dominant*" factor then? That when one attends a *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) as a minority, one has to integrate it, no matter how different and difficult to understand this community can be for the outsider?

As we can see, the teacher in charge of the NOMSA year for beginners has apparently been able to integrate every single member in this particular community. Members who, in return, have been able to understand and embrace their community and its cultural treasures.

So why did International students not get the chance to experience this success within their new *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7)? The Norwegian language and its complexities is certainly an answer. But beyond all their differences, Norwegian and International students have a language in common: English. Why do the latter appear to be a barrier and not a facilitator? Here again, no *accountability to an enterprise* (Wenger, 2008, p.152) has happened either.

To paraphrase Wenger, when the International students I met through my research went from their first *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008) that was the NOMSA year, to their new *community of practice*, they *ventured into unfamiliar territory* (Wenger, 2008, p.153). The *boundaries of their community* (Wenger, 2008) that were the different pronunciation, dialects, nynorsk, specific jargon and absence of friendly relationships with their Norwegian peers, *manifested as a lack of competence along the dimensions that are the mutuality of engagement and the accountability to an enterprise* (Wenger, 2008, p.153).

*Identity and learning as becoming* (Wenger, 2008, p.5):

As Wenger argues: "(...) *a community can strengthen the identity of participation of its members in two related ways: by letting its members what they have been, what they have done and what they know contribute to the constitution of its practice. And by opening*

*trajectories of participation that place engagement in its practice in the context of a valued future (...)*". (Wenger, 2008, p.215)

The *trajectories of participation* (Wenger, 2008, p.215) will here be the workshops the participants have experienced within their *community of practice*. As we shall see, rejection from their peers was an obvious common denominator for three of them. We are also going to discover what type of host students they were back home, and what they have to say about topics such as Gullahorn and Gullahorn's *U-curve hypothesis* and *Reacculturation process*: (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963)

*About the workshops:*

Julie recalls that:

*"(...) Communication between me and the others students was about zero. Should I say that I didn't like to attend the university? That's how the first semester passed. Later on, I got the opportunity to spend the half year abroad and that had nothing to do with my studies. I understood it clearly: if I go, I would have to stop studying for one year. But at the time, I just wanted to get a break and realized the reason of the problem: without good relations with my group mates, I could not do my studies since the work we were doing was mainly group work.*

*When I was abroad, I was reading books and doing exercises I could do on my own. At the time of the project, I came back for one month in Norway. We were supposed to make a group ourselves but I wasn't welcomed in any of the groups. After that fiasco, I decided to leave my studies (...). That time, when I really needed help to be a part of one group, no one wanted me. They just refused me, everybody (...). It was not only the language (here, she is trying not to cry), it was also when they spoke to me. I felt so stupid. You know this feeling? (I actually do). I didn't cope with it (...). I was rejected when we had those projects. They did not allow me to be part of a group (...)."*

While Lucie explains that:

*"(...) I asked Norwegian students if they wanted to be a group and nobody answered me (...). There were two African students who came to me and asked me if I wanted to be with them and I said yes and we are still good friends (...).*

*There was a Norwegian girl in my class I did an experiment with. She was nice during the experiment but then after, she does not know you anymore. So I said "hi!" to her and she didn't answer me. So I went directly to her face and said "hi! hi!" (she is smiling and waving with her hand as she explains the scene). And there is a point where you can't say that you didn't see me. You saw me, right? Directly. I know it's probably a bit aggressive, but people knew me. So why should they do that? (...) She (the Norwegian girl) said "Hi! Hi! I didn't see you!" I said: "no problem!" I don't know (...). If you are not in the mood to talk, that's fine for me. But don't try to pretend to say that you didn't see me when you did. Why are you so fake like that? When you needed a report or something like that from me, you were always so kind.*

*This is what I meant. I never push further. I just want to give them a lesson. It's ok to say "Hi!" You don't need to talk after. But don't pretend you didn't see me. Maybe this is why some people don't like me because I can be aggressive. I cannot just hold things. I am not like a dog you feed. I shake all the way: I am that kind of dog! (Both laugh).*

*(...) After class, when I need some answers and ask, the Norwegian students do not help me. This is why I go for International students. They have studied here since secondary school and they are really willing to help you. When I ask Norwegian students they say: "Jeg vet ikke". "Jeg vet ikke" is the common phrase. Even though I made the step to connect, it is always the answer I get, so... (her voice gets deeper and sounds sorry about that)".*

Paul recalls that:

*"(...) At the university, I haven't been in touch with Norwegian students. In my class, there are some students who asked me how it went for my exams for example. But it never goes further since I cannot speak more Norwegian than that and that they are not keen to speak English with me. We are not closed (...). It is much more easy to get social with the Norwegians outside of the University. If I hadn't met those Norwegians in my dorms, I would never have thought that Norwegians could actually be social people. They don't make it easy to speak in English.*

*Socially, I didn't belong to my classroom. I felt alone and not supported (...). Sometimes, we had subjects in common with others classes and there were others International students. We helped each other to prepare the exams for example. While I had to get prepare mostly on my own the rest of the time in my class, even though I had my friend (a fellow countryman who grew up in Norway). He had to get prepared too. He could not help me all the time either. So I think if it would have been others International students in my class, it would have been much more supportive. I think. Yes (...)"*

And Sophie:

*"(...) did a laboratory task with two other Norwegian students and I think we did our job very well. The teacher helped us and they were all very kind. They-(the two Norwegian students- said all the time "Hi!" to my Russian friends and they -her Russian friends- could ask some questions as well. We were not distant, we could help each other (...). About another Russian girl who studied with me, she told me: "Oh! They (the Norwegian students) said "hi!" to us, they asked questions about us. What happened to them?" They were being friendly because they knew we could communicate together -after what happened in the laboratory- (...) But I can say that they were always together in the same groups (...) I just mean that I communicate the most with Russian speaking students but not usually with Norwegian students because of those groups (...) There are students from Russian speaking countries and there are 15 countries now. And we were born in the same country. It's easier for us to communicate, so we spend free time together (...)"*

About the host students the four participants were back home:

Paul quite honestly recalls that:

*“(...) when I was studying back home, there were International students and we guys, we were hanging out together and we didn’t care about them (...) because they were in their own groups and we were in our own groups (...). I didn’t realize before I was here on my own. Ok, in my country, we were having that thing, so how could I expect others to accept us? I think it’s like that everywhere. Not only at a Norwegian university (...)”*

While Julie states that:

*“The International students back home were not “mixed”. They were studying separately. So they were together and we were together. We did not have an opportunity to communicate with them. We would just go to them and asked if they were ok or what. But it didn’t seem like they needed contact since they were all the time together (...)”*

Sophie explains that:

*“(...) We had for example a student from China who studied chemistry with us. And you know, I thought: “Oh my God! Chinese or students from different African countries they study Russian maybe in one year, two years. But Russian is a really difficult language!” So I thought it was crazy to be an International student in my country! (both laugh). We communicated very well but it was my country, so... (...)”*

And Lucie declares that

*“(...)of course -I helped International students back home-! (both laugh) This is why I don’t understand that now that this is my turn, no one does. It was not like that in Canada. Actually, I feel really comfortable there. I didn’t feel that rejected when I was in Canada. I don’t know: people were more friendly. They answered your questions. And even the first week, there were already Canadians who said: “Hi! What about studying together?” “No problem!” This is why I was really shocked when I first came here. It was the same thing back home: we were pretty good to integrate them-the International students-. Here, nobody invites me so far (she smiles in a “sorry” way). But it’s ok, that’s the way they are (...) But why people reject me that much, I don’t understand. I really don’t (...)”.*

#### The rejection identification model:

According to Schmitt, Spears and Branscombe (2003), International students who experience the rejection from mainstream students and the academic structure tend to create their own identity together with other International students who also feel rejected. When things turn out that way, there is no more nationality, nor culture, neither religion that matters: they are together. This reaction is perfectly understandable since none of us enjoy such a negative experience and when we have to face something harsh and difficult to bear, to be supported is not a luxury.



Not only was I interested by this study, but I wanted to find out whether or not the participants in my research did experience anything like that at a Norwegian university. And since I am well aware that I was going to deal with brilliant young people, I was keen to know which kind of host students they were back home towards the International students.

I chose to focus on workshops because all of the participants talked about them and because I believe that they are a perfect microcosm of students' behavior. During workshops, students tend to show their ability to integrate with newcomers or not. They have the choice to stick with their best mates or to show some sensitivity towards those who do not seem to be integrated in any of the groups.

As we can see, Julie *has not been allowed to be a part of any groups, "they just refused me, everybody"*, as she says. While two others were rescued by other International students, the first one could not bear such another affront and decided to quit her studies. Rejection is terrible and can really destroy someone's self-esteem.

Sophie did work together with two other Norwegian students, but does not say if those groups were spontaneous or decided by their professor. The sad thing is that, even though this successful experience did open the doors to communication between the Norwegian students she was working with and her own friends, it did not last. And I just do not get it. If they realized that working together not only have a positive impact on their grades but also on their multicultural relationships, why did they not continue? Afterwards, everyone went back to their groups: the Norwegian one and the International students' one.

If I had decided to stop my questions there, we could have felt really sorry for at least three of the participants at a Norwegian university. But as I saw, for three of them, when they were home, they were exactly the same towards the International students. And, except for Paul who is genuine about that, I am sad to see that two of them are just totally unable to think about the way they were. While Paul understood pretty quickly that when he was in the same situation, he could see why his Norwegian peers were not too keen to integrate with him. He could see why they were more into their own friends than him because he was exactly the same. He could also feel how lonely and *"not supported"*, as he often says, the International students back home might have felt. He just gets it. He gets that it is not fair but maybe not purposely mean either. Julie, who decided to quit her studies because she could not stand the pain of the rejection anymore, seems to be unable to relate her experience to the International students who were at her university and were probably in the same situation as her. And

Sophie could see that International students' situation at her university might have been quite challenging but did not try to go further, because, as she says, "*she was in her country, so...*" So, this being said by a brilliant young person who states that "*Norwegians are not good to make friendship with foreigners*" disturbs me.

About the incident related by one International student who worked together with a Norwegian peer and then has been pretty shocked that the latter ignored her afterwards, Strauss proposed a brilliant point of view:

*"An unkind critic may say that the justification is an after-thought, a rationalization, a set of plausible reasons to satisfy others who might ask "why did you act as you did?". Often the reasons that you will give are not those that you know to be true. You are making a distinction between the explanation you give the public and the explanation you give yourself. Such a public avowal is equivalent to misnaming the act deliberately (...). It involves an "estimation of the consequence of one's acts and an evaluation of these effects". (Strauss, 2008,p.53)*

In others words, her Norwegian peer could clearly have ignored her after they worked together and was pretty aware of that. The International student felt that too, even going to say "*hi*" right to her face, so she could not say she did not see her. However, the Norwegian student said that she did not see her, because, what would have been the consequences if she admitted that she really had actually ignored her?

This being said, at the end of the day, even if two of the International students happened to worked together with Norwegian peers, all of them found comfort and support with other International students. Lucie said that she had been integrative when she was at home and integrated when she was in Canada does not understand why she is being rejected. Even if she is the only one who says it clearly, the reality is the same for the four of them: they all "*go for International students*", to paraphrase her.

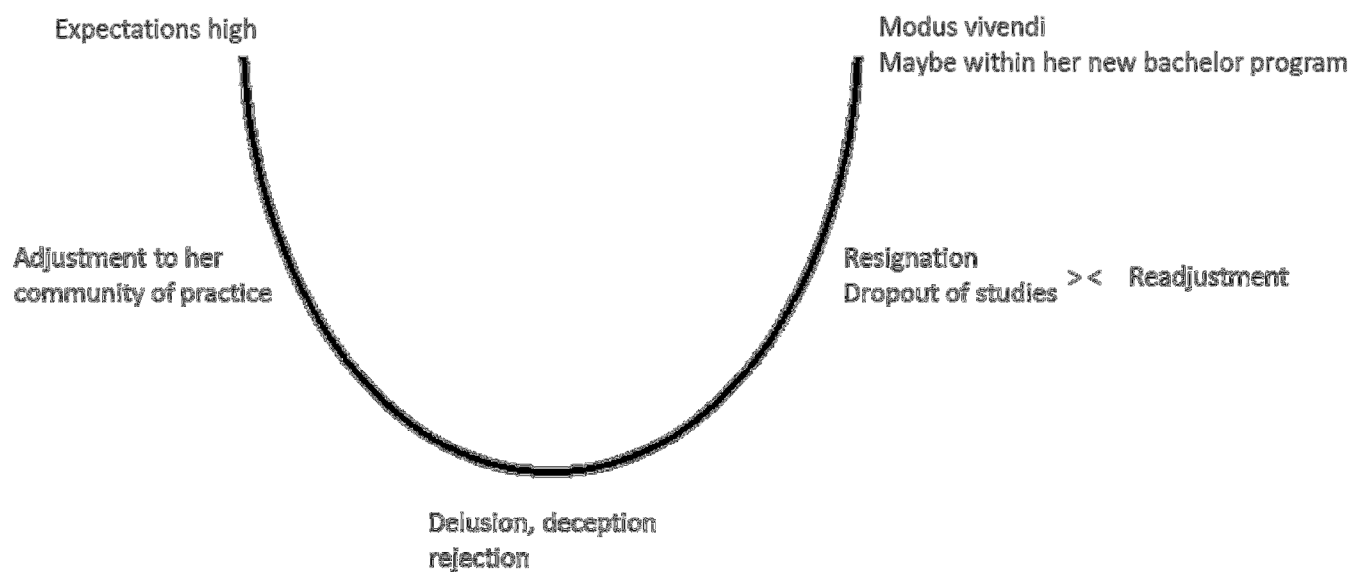
#### *The U-Curve Hypothesis (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963):*

The International students I met came to Norway with different expectations. High or low, their experiences at a Norwegian university could be compared to a curve with its ups and downs. Here is what they have to say and how they explain it:

Julie recalls that:

*“(...) “I got a place at a Norwegian university! First, I will study the language and then, I will study my bachelor in Norwegian. No doubt: I am going to have a great time there!” That is how I was thinking two years ago, before I left for Norway. I was pretty sure that there was nothing difficult to study in a foreign language. Especially an easy one like Norwegian (...). Being an International student during the introduction week is great! During five days, you meet lots of students from all over the world who are eager to get as many friends as possible. Nice and helpful people from the organizing committee arrange parties and trips: nobody is left behind (...). So I really was on the top! Then, it goes down, down, down. I think either during the first semester or a bit later when I was rejected from the project. I was on the bottom (...). I think I’m going up now because I am going to take another program (...).”*

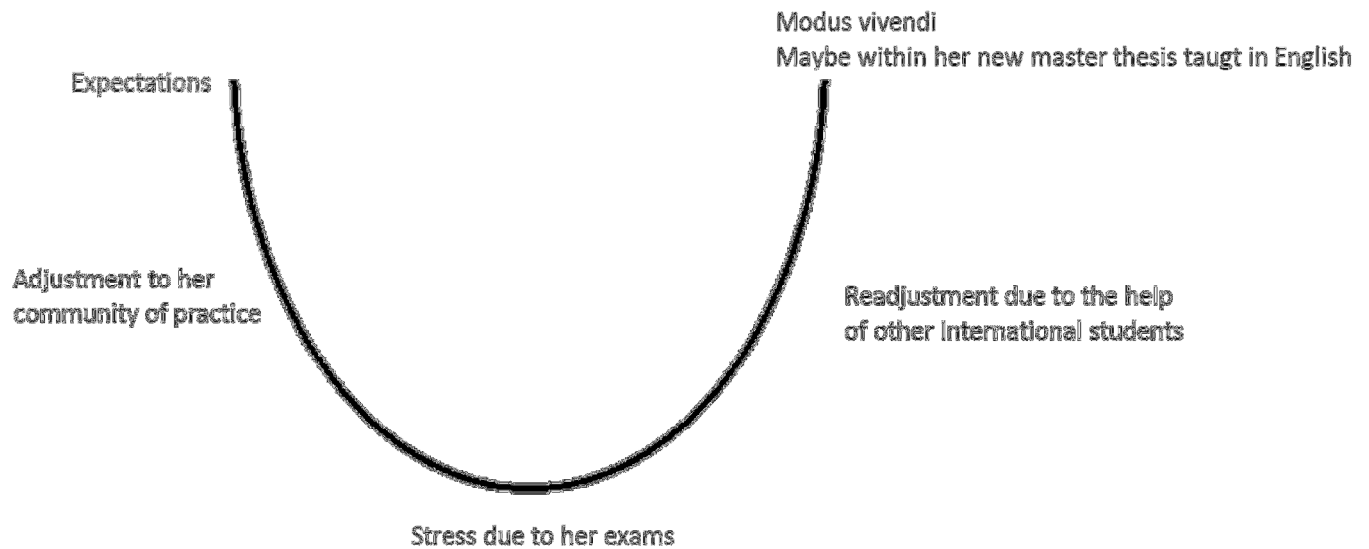
Figure 4,1 Julie’s U-Curve



While Sophie says that:

*“(...) It was in October. I didn’t sleep very well. I didn’t sleep at all. I think it was a hard time for me. But now, all these exams and applications are behind me, so I can say: “Yes!” (both laugh) Life is wonderful!”*

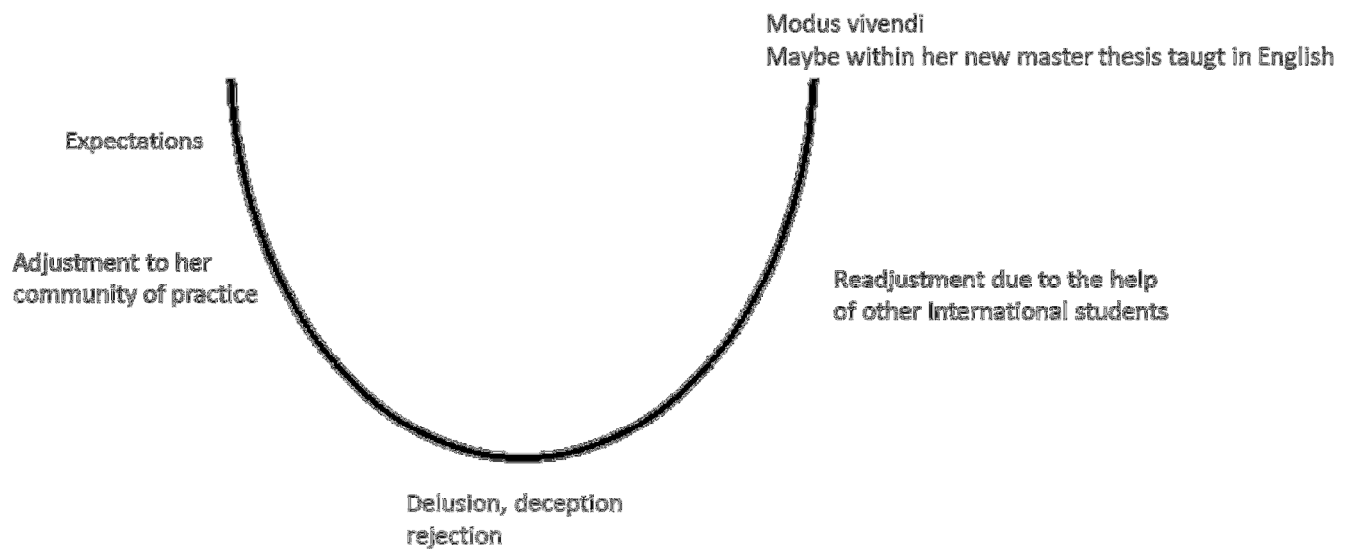
Figure 4.2 Sophie's U-Curve



As Lucie goes:

*"(...) I did not come here with high expectations. I came here in a sense of "I must" because my partner lives here. But then I got rejected -she is referring to her community of practice at a Norwegian university, not her partner-. The system was really different. I didn't like it. I was popular at a Canadian university but here, no one wanted me. They don't care. After that, I met International students and I was back on track, getting A and B grades! (...) I got admitted in a master for next year - which is taught in English-. And I feel like: "Finally, life is fair!"*

Figure 4.3 Lucie's U-Curve

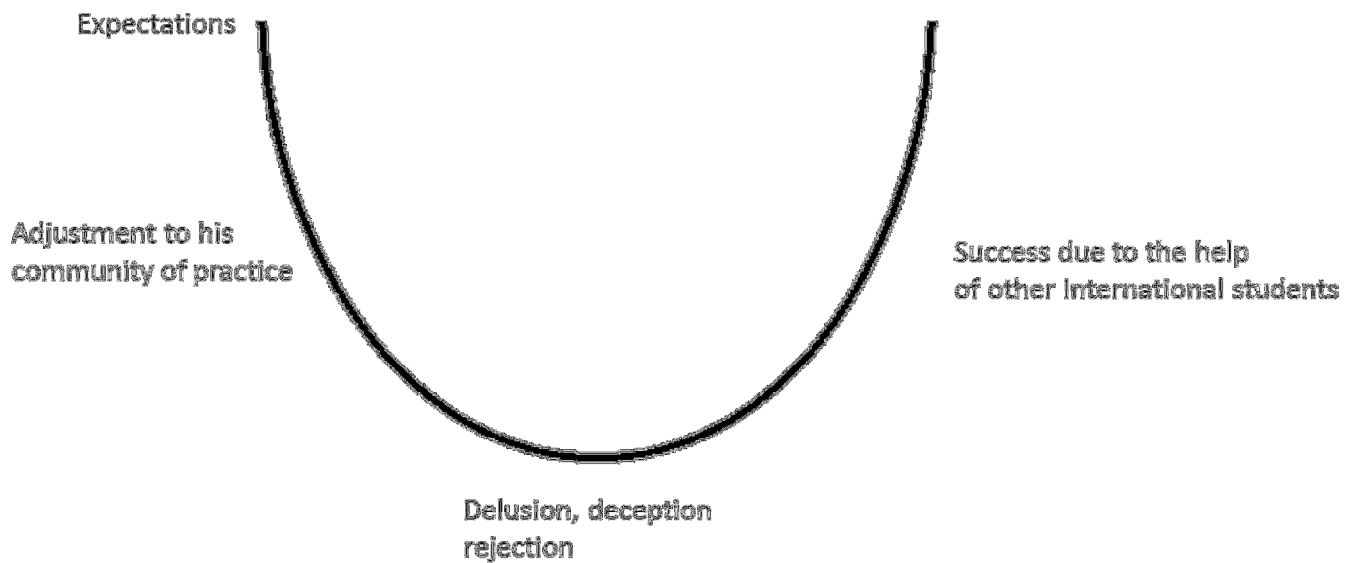


While Paul states that:

*“(...) I am still on that curve! (He laughs). So I really don't know when it will stop and when it will end! (He laughs)”*

Julie came here with high expectations and did not fear any challenges. Her experience of rejection made her feel at the bottom while the perspective of taking a new program taught in English cheers her up. This change of program from one taught in Norwegian to a program taught in English, is also in the cards for Lucie and has exactly the same cheerful effect on her. We can see then the support of other International students, as well as the end of exams and other applications, have played a relieving role for three of them. So yes, all of them, even though Paul is still “on” it, can relate their experiences to this *U-Curve hypothesis* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

Figure 4.4 Paul's U-Curve



The reaccluturation process (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963):

Will some of the International students I met go home after their studies here or will they stay here? If they go home, do they believe they will have to go through the same kind of acculturation process they have been through in Norway? Do they believe their experience here have changed their identity? Here is what they have to say:

Julie states that:

*"(...) First of all, I don't think I am going back home because my husband doesn't come from my country and he's not going to learn my mother tongue. And it's really difficult to live in my country without talking the language. But I'm not sure I want to move there. So, either way we stay here-that's the easiest-, or we go somewhere else. I don't really see us going back home. I am trying to convince him that Norway is not the best place, but it's a lie –she laughs-*

*Norway is a really good place for family, for job opportunities, for everything (...)"*

While Lucie explains that :

*"(...) I will stay because my partner lives here (...). Unfortunately –she laughs- because I love Canada and I really feel free to live in Canada (...). You feel free because even when you are not good in English, you don't get rejected like here. It's very different. When you go for a job here, it depends on your color, your appearance, and your friends' connections. Do you feel free for that? No, I don't (...). In relation to back home, I would have to reintegrate the rhythm. Back home, everything goes fast and is really noisy. I went back home lately and I couldn't stand that anymore! In relation to Canada, (...) I wouldn't have to go through this process (...) because Canada is the place I feel home (...)"*

Paul says that:

*“(...) Well, it’s not up to me. It depends if I get any job here. If I get a job, I’ll stay here. If not, I’ll go back home. I actually want to stay and get experience in the Norwegian engineering since I have studied that. I would like to put my studies in practice. But it’s ok if I get any job... (...) There are cultural differences. I wouldn’t say I have changed. I would say I got used to these things: the system, the people and everything. I couldn’t say I have changed. I say I get used to these things, yes. Because, when I came here, I was expecting lots of changes. I knew I was going to live something totally different. Geographically, culturally, religiously, economically. Everything. But of course, everyone is not expecting these things. People who are living here do not expect those changes. Maybe this is why they don’t accept us as part of their society sometimes. If there are religious differences for example, it is not their fault and it is not my fault either. It just happens. People have to accept those differences. Both Norwegians and people who come to Norway (...)”*

And Sophie declares that:

*“(...) I would like to stay in Norway or in another country in order to get a job using my education (...). I can say that my country is in Eastern Europe and we are not in the European Union. We don’t have oil, gas. I cannot say we have big problems in my country, but when you visit another country, you understand that you would like to be out of your country. It’s not like I am not a patriot of my country, but I feel like I can try to find my own country (...)”*

As we can see, there are several reasons for an International student not to go back home when he/she has completed his/her studies abroad. Some people might be too quick to believe that once they have their degree, International students will fly back to their home countries.

Here, for instance, two of them are committed to their partners who live and have a comfortable situation here. Julie prettily says that she is lying when she tries to convince her partner to move to another place, because Norway is just the best when it comes to family and job opportunities. I think this is a warm conclusion in regard to all the pain she has been through within her *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7). It means she can look forward and that is what matters. For Lucie, her heart is indeed here together with her partner, but her freedom is in Canada. And while she does believe she will have to go through a *reacculturation process* (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) in her home country, this will never happen in the country she loves over all: Canada. I like that she says that because it says a lot about her identity. Canadian does not appear as her nationality on her passport but it is clearly engraved in her flesh.

Paul and Sophie would stay here if they find a job related to their studies. But they elaborate their answer in a very touching way. Paul insists that he has not changed but got used to all those differences that are cultural and religious. Whether it is about his *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) or the Norwegian community he lives in, he really gives me the impression that he takes the time to observe what is going on around him and inside him. And because he does take this time, he can declare that he has not changed. However, because he got used to it does not mean that he has integrated it. But he is aware of all these differences. He is aware that those differences are no one's fault but everyone's responsibility to accept them. He is aware that he is still on his curve. And I would be happy to talk again with him when this curve has stopped.

Sophie will possibly stay in Norway if she finds a job related to her studies, or maybe she will find her "own country". She has travelled and she has seen that her country, even if she is a patriot, is not the one where she will spread her wings. Isn't that the point to travelling? To open our eyes and see other possibilities?

*Meaning and learning as experience (Wenger, 2008, p.5):*

Through their experiences within their *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) at a Norwegian university, have the four International students I met been able to be meaningful and active members, as Wenger argues in his *negotiability of a repertoire* (Wenger, 2008, p.152)? And whether or not they have experienced homesickness, can they say of their experiences, as Wenger puts it, that they *can make use of that history because they have been part of it and it is now part of them* (Wenger, 2008, p.152)?

This is what we are going to find out, as Julie explains that:

*"(...) You are at the university during the day and then to work afterwards, and then you have to read when you are back home and you don't see the point (...). I am not saying that it is easier to study back home. They just give you more useful information. Now I feel that I liked it (...). I was rejected when we had those projects. They did not allow me to be part of a group. No, I didn't manage to cope with it – she is getting emotional in her voice- (...) How would that have been back home? Back home, they would have integrated you anyway (...).*

*I changed a lot. I'm trying to convince myself that I haven't but I see that I have. Before, I was getting A grades all the time. Sometimes B, but mostly A. I was partying a lot and I had friends that I really love – she becomes emotional-. I really love them*



*and miss them. I love my family and everything was going so cool. Now, I'm calm. I don't like to party that much. I don't know (...)*"

Lucie says that:

*"(...) I love Canada and I really feel free to live in Canada. I never feel homesick when I am in Canada. I feel homesick for Canada when I'm here (...) The moment I arrived in Canada, I felt free (...)"*

While Paul elaborates:

*"(...) In Asian countries, we also have political problems: there are a lot of troubles and instability. Sometimes, we have to stop studying and this kind of thing. While here, it's peaceful and calm. You can study as much as you want (...). I am used to living on my own, apart from my family. I chat with them for a few hours every day through skype. I think it's more difficult for my mum though, because she is like other mothers –he smiles-: she is worried for her child (...)"*

And Sophie explains that:

*"(...) Actually, I visit my country twice a year. But after few days, I will feel like :” I'm back home” but I will not meet people I know. I will be at home with my mother and my father. We have different culture (...). People back home are so different. In Norway as well, but in my country, you feel the difference even more. I don't feel good when I see that other people can get a better life and you cannot do anything. I don't like this picture (...).*

*When I go back to my country for vacation, that's a real cultural shock (...)! Maybe it's not the studies. But it's a new part of my life's experience. I change myself anyway. So of course, it's another way here in Norway (...). It's life's experience because I'm not like 18 (...).*

*It takes time to communicate the same way because if you are six months in a different culture and then you come back, it's difficult to explain because we have a really different culture (...). I have a good communication with my family because of skype – both laugh-. But they are distant, to be honest. They are embarrassed that I am here and they could not understand my problems very well. And I didn't tell them some of the problems I got, so... (...)*

*I think it is really important to get support from people who are around you. These Russian students, they say: “Everything will be OK. Because everyone did it, we can do it too!” (...)"*

Even though it does not appear clearly here, except for one International student who recalls her rejection's experience within her *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7), the International students who participated in this research did not really get the opportunities to be active and meaningful members of their *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) They have faced rejection and misunderstanding of their *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7)

because they did not have the linguistic level or the welcome they needed in order to do so. Most of them were left on their own and when they did receive help, it was from non Norwegian members. Some of the members who helped one of the participants were members of their own community, not the main one. In that case, there were two distinct groups: theirs and the Norwegian's one. Both of these groups appear to co-exist but do not collaborate in order to reach the same successful goal for everyone.

When it comes to homesickness, Julie and Lucie actually experienced it. While for Julie, homesickness is related to her family, her friends and the grades she used to get back home, Lucie is not homesick for her home country but for the country that adopted her and that she adopted back. She is homesick of her freedom, of the warm welcoming she used to get there.

Paul and Sophie also have a pretty interesting relationship to their home country. Neither of them actually misses home. And this, for several reasons, I never thought of when I started my master thesis.

Of course, Paul is used to living on his own. But maybe for the first time in his life, here in Norway, he has experienced peace. He has experienced political stability and the fact that he does not have to stop studying for a while because of instability. He does not seem happy with his experience within his *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008, p.7) but in comparison to the treasure that is peace and calm, it does not seem that important to him.

By touchingly mentioning his mum and how difficult it is for her to cope with his absence, he reminds us that International students are not alone: they have a family back home. And, whilst in this case, the absence of the child, the brother, the sister, can be difficult to cope with, the separation also turned out to be problematic, as we shall see with Sophie.

The latter is apparently struggling with some complex issues: the cultural shock and the misunderstanding with her family. When one could legitimately expect that some International students experience cultural shock while abroad, this student is actually experiencing this with her family and her country.

When she says that she "*communicates well*" with her family, she is referring to the fact that they talk often through skype, not that they actually understand each other. They are "*distant*", "*embarrassed*", they do not understand why she is here and what she is doing. And this is not a language matter. As she says herself, this is a cultural shock. A cultural shock reinforced by the fact that each time she goes back home, she sees how powerless she is to

help people get a better life. No wonder she *feels that she can find her own country*, as she says.

When I asked the four International students what could be done for the newcomers at a Norwegian university, none of them told me about any *counselor*, as interestingly argued by M. Olivas and C.S Li (Olivas & Li, 2006).

While one of them said that if she happens to have Norwegian friends, she will do anything to integrate the newcomers within her multicultural group, all of them agreed to say that the help newcomers should receive should start during their year of “Norwegian language and culture”. They argue that they should be introduced to bokmål, nynorsk and dialects as soon as possible. And in order to do so, it would be great to get the help of Norwegian students who would voluntarily take part in common and regular conversations. One of the International students also insisted that no English should be allowed during those sessions.

The same student also argued that a sponsorship should definitely be a part of the program. Former International students should help newcomers with their upcoming studies taught in Norwegian. They should introduce them to the jargon and, why not, their own experiences.

## 5: Discussion:

### 5.1 Theoretical discussion:

#### *When a given classroom's codes become closed doors for newcomers:*

A university is a community that includes several communities, and a given classroom is one of them. It has its own cultural and academic codes, depending on who is a part of it. The classroom and its atmosphere are made and built by those who attend it: professors and students. Not that they decide the academic demands but, unconsciously or not, they might influence the chances for one to successfully achieve those demands.

By academic codes, I mean the way lectures are given: is there any interaction between the professor and the students? Is it based on the reading of books and/or different articles? How is the use of power point? Does the professor encourage workshops for students to understand the curriculum by themselves? How are those workshops guided and thought by the professor?

The cultural codes would then be how do the students are used to work within their classroom. Are they used to work together within groups of work and integrate new students and new groups as well? Are they used to fight for their own success or do they care about those who might struggle? And anyway, how is this capacity of empathy encouraged within their studies? Do they receive good grades for their capacity to reproduce the curriculum during exams as well as their capacity to integrate new students and new workshops? How does this work?

Where is the place for International students in this whole picture? Julie said that she had the feeling that no one in her studies was prepared to integrate any International student within their dynamic. Norwegian professors and students were used to work together in their own codes and on their own rhythm. This being said, the International students who attend a Norwegian curriculum have integrated their own academic and cultural codes and are not used to the ones they are facing within a Norwegian university.

For instance, Lucie was pretty disappointed that she could not experience the interaction subject matter-reality she was used too in Canada. She expected her Norwegian professors not only to be available to explain her things she did not understand, but to give her the possibility to understand them concretely, by asking her and her peers how they could use the theory in

practice for example. This lack of concrete made her studies taught in Norwegian even more difficult for her to understand. Not only she did not have the linguistic skills that could have helped her to understand the subject matters, but she did not even have the opportunity to grab the little she could within concrete examples.

This research shows us that when the codes were decided, International students were not there physically and culturally talking. No one apparently thought that they might attend their Norwegian classroom and curriculum and therefore no one thought about the fact that their very own codes were unreadable for those who were not used to them.

Julie explained that the only time a professor tried to help her, he obviously mixed up pity with empathy. He gave Julie the impression that she had nothing to do in the curriculum, instead of opening the door to his pedagogical practice. If he really was interested in integrating her in the curriculum, he might have talked to her about the way she used to study, the way she used to be taught. And find, together with her, ways to understand the subject matter.

But the door stayed closed. She had to integrate the codes right away or find another place. She quit her studies because she could not cope with such a challenge on her own.

A genuine open door would certainly have helped her to carry on. And by open door, I mean that professors in this case could have shown the example to their Norwegian students. By integrating her in their curriculum and their ways of teaching, they might have encouraged their Norwegian students to do the same. It would have been a win-win situation of learning.

This research also shows us that the International students who succeeded in their studies taught in Norwegian did not succeed because they were integrated in their classroom's codes and culture. They succeeded because they happened to study together with other International students that had lived long enough in Norway to master the language and the academic codes and demands. And, in the case of Sophie and Paul, the International students who helped them also have the same mother tongue as them.

### ***The lack of Norwegian skills:***

Language skills is the key of communication and understanding between people who share the same cultural references and especially among people who do not share any cultural

references. In the case of the International students at a Norwegian university, one could have believed that the one year program of Norwegian language and culture would have helped the International students to communicate efficiently with their Norwegian peers in their new community of practice. But, as we saw throughout this study, the reality has not been that positive.

Indeed, the lack of a genuine linguistic knowledge led, for instance, Julie to give up on her studies because she was lost, not integrated and did not see how to cope with the challenges she was facing. However and interestingly, she did not choose to go back home in her familiar environment in order to continue studying in her own language. No, she did pursue her studies in another language that is English. Sophie and Lucie, who both succeeded a year of a bachelor program taught in Norwegian did not chose to continue that program either. They are now studying a program that is taught in English.

Again, and against all odds, none of the participants chose to go back home and study in their mother tongue. Which could reflect the fact that language, and for instance English, was and is not a barrier for them to learn. The International students who participated in this research were obviously brilliant in English and therefore able to study their higher education in the latter. But it is their third language, Norwegian, that became a barrier to their “human” achievement. And when I say human, one should understand that all of the four participants were really keen to get to know their Norwegian peers and become friends with them, but they never get the chance to experience this. Obviously discouraged by what appears to be the rejection or, at the very least, lack of interest towards them from their Norwegian peers, Sophie and Lucie chose to continue their curriculum in English together with other International students.

And while several researches are focusing on English as a barrier for the International students in any university worldwide, this one may show that it is not English that might be a challenge, but the genuine acquisition of a third language and how the lack of it can lead to the rejection from and of the new community of practice.

It is not that English is the easiest foreign language to study for one who is a novice: every single language has its own treasures, history and grammar. It goes without saying. But it appears to be really difficult not to have heard this language previously: the cinema industry, international politics, the fashion industry, the music industry, almost everything in our society of consummation is branded by the English language.

Can we say the same about the Norwegian language? I do not think so. And while International students who happen to have German or Dutch as a mother tongue can more easily find similitude with their mother tongue and Norwegian, those who do not have German or Dutch as a mother tongue cannot do.

I, of course, doubt that a year of Norwegian for beginners would prepare International students well enough in order to complete their higher education without any kind of linguistic struggling. But if those novices happen to study together with other International students and English becomes their common language, the support and the empathy they will need through their journey seems to be something which will be much more natural in such a context.

While the International students who happened to be on their own in a Norwegian environment have not experienced this. Some of them, like Julie, had to face their linguistic struggle on their own because speaking English in order to help the International students understand the academic codes, or simply being sensitive to the fact that speaking Norwegian could be a struggling for those who do not have it as a mother tongue. Immersed in their very own environment and language, it might just not have been natural for them to think of it and try to figure out how they could have integrated the International students who attended their lectures.

This is why it made me realize that instead of being a plus, being or trying to become multilingual for those International students became more disabling than anything. Their struggles made them unfit within their academic environment. And, as we saw, some of them finally quit because they felt this challenge was just unbearable for them.

Not only was I surprised to note that in the very specific case of the participants to this research, the acquisition and the use of their third language, Norwegian became, disabling instead of rewarding. But that this fact led them to give up the idea to get Norwegian friends and enjoy to be together with other International students who obviously understand what they were going through and made communication easier by speaking English, even though this is not the mother tongue of any of them. Once rejected, one tends to find support and comfort with others who might experience the same thing.

I was keen to see if the participants might have experienced rejection and I have been sorry to note that that had been the case. After the NOMSA year, they did not have the linguistic keys

and knowledge in order to study higher education taught in Norwegian. This simple fact was enough to make their studies even more challenging, but they happen to be rejected by the system itself.

It certainly takes some time for a native to get to know the rhythm and the demands of an academic way of life, and I would say especially for those who arrive right from their secondary school. Even though everyone speaks your language, university and the subject matters have their own codes one must understand in order to succeed.

In the case of International students, this challenge has been spiced by the fact they did not even master the language itself. Indeed, what is a year in comparison to a life time or several years in the host country?

Even though the NOMSA year has been created for the International students to be able to understand the new society they decided to join, as well as their upcoming studies within a Norwegian university, the Norwegian they have been taught does not obviously help them to integrate into the system. One could think that this should not be a problem, that they will certainly meet someone, whether a peer and/or a professor who will help them catch the meaning of their studies, or some facilities that will help them understand the subject matters, but one has to see that this has not been on the cards for the four participants in this research.

I do not believe this had anything to do with their personality and/or origins. The Norwegian university they attended is multicultural and has several connections with other universities in Europe. This is not the first time and it is far from the last time that International students will attend.

No, the very reason why they have been rejected by their Norwegian peers and the system itself resides in the fact that they did not master the Norwegian language and dialects. They were not prepared to understand it and their attempts to ask for help as well as being a part of a group have been a fiasco. Paul did enjoy the NOMSA year, but he also says that the fact he had one teacher who spoke bokmål with own pronunciation did not prepare him to face his technical studies, taught by several professors that happen to have different dialects. He tried to ask for help from his Norwegian peers but never got it because he says his Norwegian was too poor and they were not keen to speak in English with him. He then turned to other International students and finally succeeded with his master taught in Norwegian. Lucie also thinks that the NOMSA year was really positive but did not prepare her to study a bachelor



taught in Norwegian. She found it challenging to understand the different dialects and did not get the help she was asking for from her Norwegian peers. Since she has also been an International student at a Canadian university, Lucie could compare her two experiences and clearly misses the way things were back in Canada. She believes that the Norwegian university is not used to integrating newcomers because, as she says, *Norwegian is such a dominant in this country. While in Canada everybody is from everywhere.* In others words, she suggested that a Canadian university might be used to integrating everyone since a lot of its students come from everywhere.

Also, the clear lack of linguistic skills of the participants might have frightened their Norwegian peers: maybe they saw their International peers as a threat for their grades? But if one would like to take International students' perspective, how could they possibly experience this rejection? Of course they understood quite quickly that their poor level of Norwegian was not helping them get on socially with the other Norwegian students, but they can speak English and so do the Norwegian students. So, how could they possibly have been that rejected when English could have been one of the solutions to their integration? Even though the rejection was clearly a lack of interest from the Norwegian students towards them, because it would have asked them to make the effort to stop speaking their own language in order to integrate the International students, one could understand that this unpleasant and hurtful experience has been seen as racism for some International students.

In effect, in this ever changing and moving world where more and more young people will study abroad for some time, it is difficult to understand such a lack of clever curiosity for the other, the newcomer.

So, because no place has been made for them, they did turn to other International students at a Norwegian university. Sophie, Lucie and Paul succeeded in their program taught in Norwegian because they had the chance to study together with others International students who understood the Norwegian academic system and what they were going through. But Julie did not have this luck and was compelled to give up on her studies due to her poor linguistic skills that led her to be rejected by her Norwegian peers and the system. She is now studying a program taught in English.

***Expectations, delusions, failure and success:***

The International students who took part in this research have been through several challenges during their studies at a Norwegian university. The more challenging parts certainly being the fact that they had to integrate a brand new academic environment without having all the linguistic keys they needed in order to understand it.

They all have been through ups and downs at different levels. Julie, for instance, arrived at a Norwegian university with high expectations. Her brother has lived here for some years now and she had an idyllic picture of Norway. She thought that her experience as an International student at a Norwegian university was going to be like the experience she had as a tourist on vacation at her brother's place. And while she was aware that the language matter could be a challenge, she did not think that it would actually cause her to abandon her studies a few months later. As she faced more and more failures in her higher education program taught in Norwegian, her self-esteem went really low and she never found either the force nor the help she needed in order to come back on track. From very high her unfortunate experience made her fall to very low.

On the other hand, Sophie and Lucie did not attend a Norwegian university with high expectations. They did face challenges and unpleasant experiences in their studies due to their low level of Norwegian that made them feel really low in their self esteem too, but unlike Julie, the help they got from other International students who happened to study together with them, helped them to come back on track and to succeed.

For Paul, things were a bit different. He did finally succeed in his higher education program taught in Norwegian, but because the help he received from other International students was more sporadic, he has experienced his studies at a Norwegian university as a roller-coaster. It was like he could never really be in peace, never really be a hundred percent sure he could succeed.

The four participants have experienced ups and downs. And some downs might have been harder on Julie as she had high expectations. And while one could expect people to finally feel a way of understanding and living in peace within their new environment after they have understood and confronted their expectations to their new reality, none of the four International students have experienced this. None of them have decided to continue their curriculum in Norwegian, choosing instead to attend programs taught in English and together

with other International students. If they really get the opportunities to be supported through their studies taught in Norwegian by Norwegian peers for example, I believe it could be reasonable to think that they might have chosen to continue. And, moreover, they would have found their own “Norwegian way” to understand, embrace, and enjoy their new environment, no matter what challenges they might have faced before.

I was also really looking forward to hear what the International students I met had to say about that and I was surprised to hear that none of them were actually planning to go back home, and, de facto, to undergo a “cultural chock”.

They have been through not always pleasant experiences during their studies at a Norwegian university, but it appears that this is not a reason for them to go back to what they knew from before. So, do they like Norway better than their home country? Their stories showed me that the answer is much more complex than it seems.

Lucie came here by love and she is planning to stay for the very same reason. Julie came here by “ideal” and finally found love. She does not see why she should leave Norway, even though her first academic experience here did not turn out to be really fun for her. She and her husband have a life to build and to live together here. Paul finally has the opportunity to enjoy peace and job opportunities, while Sophie might have found what she could call home here, even though she is open to the fact that she might find home in another place too. But for now, she is enjoying her life here and the fact that she really feels understood among a “new” family.

When one decides to move away from home, one might take the risk or the chance to never come back. Not because one fears to face a new “cultural chock”, but because the journey, as challenging as it may be, can just turn out to be the chance of a life time.

### ***Homesickness and gradesickness:***

Since the main focus in my master thesis was to find out how International students at a Norwegian university experienced their higher education taught in Norwegian after just a year of Norwegian, I was keen to hear if they went through homesickness or not. They are far away from home and everything they knew until now, so for them to experience sadness seemed perfectly understandable and natural. I was also interested to find out how the International students had experienced the challenge that is to learn in a third language and the impact that that might have on their grades. They were certainly brilliant back home, but how

does it feel not to be able to show how brilliant one can be because of the language barrier? This is what I call gradesick. Due to the fact that the linguistic challenges they might go through could make them unable to be as good as they were back home. They could therefore feel angry, frustrated, even sad, as their self-esteem might become lower and lower.

Julie felt particularly homesick and gradesick as she longed for her family, her friends and her previous grades. She used to be really brilliant in her mother tongue and never really had to study hard in order to get good grades. As I said earlier, she did not expect her studies in Norwegian to be that challenging both humanely and academically talking. She felt really low and decided to give up on her bachelor program taught in Norwegian.

Lucie felt homesick not from her home country but her host country that is Canada. She explained several times that it is in that country that she finally felt herself free. She had lots of friends, was very popular and was very active within her community. Although she did not have high expectations before attending a Norwegian university, she certainly did not expect to feel that lonely within her new community of practice. She of course made new friends among the International students, but she never found the opportunity to be her outgoing and committed self as she used to. She was homesick for all of that.

Sophie and Paul did not feel homesick nor gradesick. The relation they seem to have with their home country appears to be so complex that, as I said for Paul, the fact to enjoy peace is more than enough not to have the time to simply think about homesickness. And Sophie seems to find it difficult to go back home because the distress she sees there does not give her the feeling to want to stay there or to go back there. On the contrary, she feels so powerless and sad not to be understood by her own family that there is no place for her to feel homesick.

Because of them, I have learned that the history we all have from before can be so complex and unique that there is no way we are all going to go through the same experiences at the same level, even if we share the same experience at the same time. Some events have influenced us so deeply that question such as homesickness might appear really shallow. It does not mean that is superficial to ask. It just shows us that the question itself never even occurs in such a strong identity.

5.2 **Practical discussion:** what can be done at a Norwegian university in order to help International students who experience linguistic struggle to succeed?

*The Nomsa year:*

As the four International students' accounts went on, it clearly appeared that they have genuinely enjoyed this year of Norwegian language and culture. They have felt they were totally part of it and that the way of teaching was aimed for everyone to succeed, no matter what their mother tongue and academic background.

Very soon in their higher education program taught in Norwegian though, they realized that as nice as the previous year had been, they clearly were not prepared to follow a Norwegian academic curriculum. Not only their Norwegian linguistic skills were too low, but they never heard nynorsk and the several Norwegian dialects that are currently in use in their new environment before. They were lost.

What can be done?

First of all, and as a participant suggested, Norwegian students who would like to take an active part in this year as tutor, should definitely get the opportunity to do so. And in order to make this offer even more attractive, why not present it as job? They would work a few hours a week -to suit their own timetable- and get paid by the university for that.

In exchange for what they will commit themselves to take an active part in the Norwegian classes by speaking their own dialect with the International students and help them with the different exercises and other works they will have to do. Of course, both Norwegian and International students would only be allowed to speak Norwegian together, not English. The ideal would be that every International student would get a Norwegian tutor who is studying or planning to study the same program they will attend after this NOMSA year. But the simple fact to be in regular and active contacts with Norwegian students would help International students to get to know and understand the academic culture and language from the inside. And this would be really positive for Norwegian students too because it will open their mind to those International students who are more and more common at a Norwegian

university every year. It will give them a brand new point of view and see that International students are actually not a possible threat but a fantastic open and lively door to the world.

It goes without saying that this would be a wonderful help for the teacher in charge of this Norwegian language and program: she will not be left alone with such a huge work that is to teach Norwegian to numerous International students in just one year.

Talking of which, this sponsorship should continue throughout the International students' curriculum at a Norwegian university. Or at least, during the time they will need it.

***The classroom: a place of success for everyone:***

As this research shows, it has been a real challenge for the International students to understand their subject matter's codes because of their very low skills in Norwegian. As this research shows as well, the International students have been rejected by their Norwegian peers because of that, which has had negative consequences such as the loss of their self-esteem and/or the resignation of their studies. What can be done in order to improve this situation?

First of all, I believe that a collaboration between the teacher in charge of the NOMSA year and the teachers in charge of the programs that International students are planning to take after their NOMSA year could be sensible.

The teachers in charge of those programs could be invited to the NOMSA class and introduce themselves as well as their subject matters. They could meet afterwards with their future International students and get to know each other a little bit.

As International students will attend their higher education program taught in Norwegian, the teacher in charge could think about a way to introduce them to their Norwegian peers. Also, I believe this is the teacher's duty to decide how the workshops will be held and evaluated. Since it appears to have been a real issue for International students to be integrated within workshops, I believe that something can be done in order to improve this situation.

Students could be evaluated on their capacity to integrate newcomers. And if there are several International students who attend the same program, they could be evaluated on their capacity to integrate Norwegian groups. I believe those groups should be interchanging. Students

should be encouraged to work together with different students each time. And I would say that this is the teacher's decision.

Also, some programs such as nursing, teaching, etc. have to be taught in Norwegian. Some International students decide to attend them because they cannot afford to study back home – even though they have to pay 10 000 euro every year when they are not European citizens, this is way less expensive than in their country, because some programs such as economics are known to be of a high quality at a Norwegian university, or because certain programs do not exist in their country.

Anyway, even though some programs are and have to be taught in Norwegian, International students who choose to attend them are aware of this challenge and are ready to take it on. This does not mean that a year of preparation is enough. And even though they are motivated, I believe motivation is not always enough.

I would suggest that International students who attend a program taught in Norwegian should have the possibility to get every single compendium in Bokmål and in English. That way, they will continue their Norwegian acquisition while not being discouraged since they will read everything they need to know in English. And while they will be allowed to write their essays and others work in English, no English will be allowed during oral presentation within their workshops.

That way, they will feel secure enough in their abilities to understand the subject matters and their codes, while they will have to speak the Norwegian they can with their Norwegian peers. In an ideal world, these latter would become, in a way, the tutors International students used to have the year before and everyone will win.

***Avoid the disenchantments:***

As we saw earlier, some International students come here with high expectations and a rosy picture of Norway. They believe that everything will be fun and the fact of not mastering the language will not be a big deal. Well, as things are for the moment, this is actually a big deal.

Not only do the International students who are planning to take the NOMSA year in order to study their higher education in Norwegian need to be informed that this is going to be challenging and demanding, I strongly believe that some activities that are held at a

Norwegian university in order to introduce Norway to International students, as well as International students' home countries to Norwegian need to be improved.

Indeed, instead of presenting the studies at a Norwegian university as a nice postcard-with the beautiful nature and exciting upcoming trips- International students need to know that they will of course learn and see many exciting things. They are surely going to need some psychological strength too during their curriculum. Not only because of the weather, but certainly because everything is new, different and taught in Norwegian. They need to get the right information about the university codes and demands.

Of course, we are talking about brilliant young people, but there is a huge gap between being brilliant in a well known environment, culture and language than in a total alien structure. It does not ask the same amount of energy and self reflection.

Also, as I said earlier, the few Norwegian-International activities that are being held at a Norwegian university need to take a deeper perspective than the nice postcards and flavorful exotic meals. Those events are really nice for people on holidays that are not planning to stay in the country, but I strongly believe this is not helping Norwegian and International students who are going to study together and experience real cultural differences during the few upcoming years of their curriculum.

***How a Norwegian university could be inspired by other universities:***

Lucie said several times that she felt home in Canada and at a Canadian university. She felt there were no differences between the students because everyone was from everywhere. Maybe a Norwegian university could be inspired by some of the International students' university? Maybe some pedagogic collaboration could be created in order for a Norwegian university to learn more about how to integrate International students? What are the tools that are used within other academies? Maybe a Norwegian university could use International students as ambassadors for their home country and then as ambassadors for the Norwegian university?



## 6: Conclusion:

Even if they put it in different words and perspectives, the International students who took part in this research have been changed by their experiences at a Norwegian university. And even though they have been through challenging times, I believe this has made them even more interesting human beings than they were before they came here.

With this experience, some of them even thought about the way they were back home and understand now how distressing such an experience might have been for the International students who studied at their university.

To study abroad is not something neutral, like a holiday we would take and then get back to our routine. To study abroad is not something mainly intellectual either. Insofar, as we put ourselves in a situation where no one speaks our language, where all our codes are turned upside down, we are signing up for a journey that will change us forever. And I believe for the better.

I would like to end up with some Strauss wise words and how they resonate in relation with the four participants' experiences at a Norwegian university: *"Identity as a concept is fully as elusive as everyone's sense of his personal identity. But whatever else it may be, identity is connected with the fateful appraisals made of oneself and by others. Everyone presents himself to the others and to himself, and sees himself in the mirrors of their judgments. The masks he then and thereafter presents to the world and its citizens are fashioned upon his anticipations of their judgments. The others present themselves too; they wear their own brands of mask and they get appraised in turn"* (Strauss, 2008; p.11)

For very personal reasons that she explained to me and I chose not to reveal in this research, Lucie has deeply enjoyed her identity when she was an International student in Canada. As she said several times during the interview, she felt free there. The fact that she felt she could be herself with others helped her to be confident and involved in several students organizations. That made her very popular among both Canadian and International students. Her experiences here at a Norwegian university have been very different: she does not seem to get the *appraisals* (Strauss, 2008) from her Norwegian peers she used to get from her Canadian and International peers.

While the image she received from her Canadian and International students peers appeared to be non judgmental and open, the reflection she get from her Norwegian peers seemed less encouraging. In the incident she related earlier, she said she even had to say hi to her Norwegian peer's face in order to be seen –after they worked together on a project-. Not to mention that when she asked her Norwegian peers for help, she received no answer. From a very popular International student, she became almost an invisible one. The cheerful *mask* (Strauss, 2008) that was hers at a Canadian university became an aggressive one at a Norwegian university. Lucie has since applied to a master that is taught in English.

Julie's experience at a Norwegian university appears to be similar to Lucie in several ways. Back home, Julie was a cheerful and popular student who had good grades and many friends. While here, her relationship to her Norwegian peers became quickly nonexistent. She came here with high expectations and was keen to get to know Norwegian people: hadn't she heard so many positive things about them and their school system? While her mask seemed to be engaged to embrace her new status as an International student in a Norwegian *community of practice* (Wenger, 2008), her peers and professors seemed to have been turned off by her poor linguistic skills. Their masks thus became unwelcoming towards her. The reflection Julie saw on their *mirrors* (Strauss, 2008) made her feel, as she related it, not allowed to be there any longer. She then decided to give up on her studies and applied for a bachelor where, she told me, there is going to be many International students.

It appears that Sophie might have shown two types of *masks* (Strauss, 2008): one cheerful and friendly for her International friends and one maybe more competitive for her Norwegian peers. Not that she deliberately chose to be competitive with them, but the system warned her and her Norwegian peers that there was not going to be enough places for everyone. Therefore, they had to show how motivated and talented they were. And as I pointed out earlier, it seems pretty difficult then to have a friendly relationship while competition is so prevalent.

The reflection Sophie received from her International friends who happen to speak the same mother tongue as her and had been in the Norwegian system long enough to understand the challenges she was going through, was a reflection of empathy and support. They could identify with her and she could rely on them.

She received a reflection of respect from the Norwegian peers she once successfully worked together with. They recognized her talents and she recognized their talents too. Their

reflection had an impact on her other International friends too: suddenly, her Norwegian peers were keen to know a bit more about Sophie's entourage. It did not last though. But here, we can see that *mirrors* (Strauss, 2008) can have several faces and reflections. Our relationships with people can have as impact on others as well as us.

Even though Paul studied together with another fellow countryman who was born in Norway and mastered the Norwegian language and system, he, as he explained it, was mostly on his own during his studies at a Norwegian university. He tried to communicate with his Norwegian peers but found out really soon that his Norwegian skills were too low to go any further with them. And they, in return, seemed not to be keen to speak in English with him and thus made the communication easier. Paul might have reflected some insecurity toward his Norwegian peers, while their own reflection seemed not to have been that engaging in return.

Paul interestingly said that he was relieved to meet others Norwegians outside the university. Otherwise, he would not have thought that Norwegian people could actually be nice and friendly towards him.

According to Lucie, Julie and Paul, they have tried to show interest towards their Norwegian peers while, in return, they did not receive a warmth feedback to their attempt. To paraphrase Strauss and Wenger, *the masks they then and thereafter present to (Strauss, 2008) their community of practice and their members (Wenger, 2008) were fashioned upon their anticipation of their judgments (Strauss, 2008)*. They were keen to show a friendly face in order to be judged as interesting and nice newcomers. While *the others present themselves too; they wear their own brand of mask and they get appraised in turn (Strauss, 2008)*.

They certainly get appraised by their peers who shared the same codes of culture and behavior, but based on the four participants very own accounts they did not get appraised by them.

It appears to me that genuine communication and exchanges between the new International students who take the NOMSA year as beginners, their teacher, the teachers of their upcoming bachelor/master and, of course, Norwegian students who would like to volunteer for such an experience, is required and will help everyone involved to be keen to wear his/her best mask and get appraised in return.

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## Appendices:

*a) Covering e-mail sent to the participants who showed their interest after receiving an e-mail sent by the door opener:*

Hi!

Thank you so much for your interest in my master thesis! My name is Martine Vanderheyden and I have been a NOMSA student myself.

I am writing my master thesis about International students who have just one year of Norwegian before they study a bachelor/master taught in Norwegian. Since I have been in that place myself, I would like to find out how this experience has been for other International students. And, moreover, I want to make the mainstream aware that even though this experience is fantastic, the challenges inherent to that must be taken with consideration.

In order to do so, I would like you to read the document attached to this e-mail: you will find a letter that describes the process of my master thesis and a contract of confidentiality. It is really important that you read through it and sign it.

Also, I would like you to:

- Write a “memory” (minimum one page) in which you describe your experience as an International student who just had one year of Norwegian before you study a bachelor/master taught in Norwegian. Your background, why you came here, etc. This “memory” should be spontaneous since it is your really own. There is no “good” or “bad” answers. I have no expectations. Just a real and sincere interest for your experience.
- To pick up a place where we can meet and talk about your “memory”. This conversation will be taped (Dictaphone, not video). Everything you will write and say will be erased as soon as I am finished with my master thesis. See the document attached.

If you have any questions, please let me know. It will be my pleasure to answer you! I hope to meet you soon! Kind regards, Martine

PS: Could you please answer me as soon as possible so we can meet by the end of June?

Thank you so much!

***b) Covering letter sent to the Nasjonal Forskningsetikk Komite for Humaniora og Samfunnsfag (NESH) and to the participants:***

Martine Vanderheyden

27.04.10

**Prosjektnr: 23903. "International students at a Norwegian university"**

Hi,

As you requested, here is how I plan the interview of the international students who are going to participate in my master thesis. First of all, I will ask the professor who is in charge of the "Norwegian language and culture program" to be my "door opener".

I will then send an e-mail to the international students who will be interested in taking part in my master thesis. I will introduce myself and tell them about my research in a few words. I have been an international student at a Norwegian university myself and, like them, I just had one year of "Norwegian language and culture" before I started my master in Special Needs Education, which is taught in Norwegian.

I would like to find out how other International students have coped with the difficulties inherent in that specific experience, that is to study in a different language and culture, and how this experience might have changed their identity.

I will send them a copy of the interview and ask them to write one page about their experience as an international student at a Norwegian university who studies in Norwegian after a year of "Norwegian language and culture".

They will be informed that everything that they write and tell will be erased as soon as I will be done with my master thesis. All the information they give me will be transcribed on my private computer, which is not linked to the university network.

They will also be informed that I will tape the interview. This interview will take place in a neutral place they will decide and this tape will also be erased as soon as my master thesis is finished.

They will be informed that they have the right to withdraw themselves whenever they wish and without having to justify themselves. If they do so, everything they have told will of course be erased. Their names and studies will be changed: everything will be totally anonymous.

A copy of the letter which explains the whole process of the interview and how I will respect their anonymity and everything they will tell me, will be sent to them as well as at the professor who will serve as my “door-opener”. All of them will be asked to sign this letter.

Kind regards,

Martine Vanderheyden

**Title of the project:** *“International students at a Norwegian university”*

**Informed consent:** International students who study a bachelor/master in Norwegian after the one year program “Norwegian language and culture”

**Investigator:** Martine Vanderheyden

**Adviser:** Anne Nevøy

The study seeks to learn how the International students who had just a year of Norwegian before their bachelor/master in Norwegian, struggle with the difficulties inherent in such a challenge.

Data collecting will be to write a “memory” (one page minimum) and to take part in an interview.

In participating in this study, I agree to allow the following data collection to take place. These will include writing a “memory” (minimum one page), and a semi-structured interview with me.

In the interview, I will be asked to reflect upon how I struggle with my bachelor/master in Norwegian after just a year of Norwegian, and how I believe this specific any experience might have changed my identity.

The interview will last for 45 minutes to an hour, and it will be taped.

I understand that:

- A) The possible risks of this study are minimal. The researcher anticipates no negative effects of taking part to this study.
- B) My sharing for the study may help others to better understand International students and enable them to be more attentive to their situation
- C) I may refuse to participate or may withdrawal from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time.

- D) Any questions I may have concerning my participation in this study will be answered by Martine Vanderheyden.
- E) No information that identifies me will be released. All the identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. All data (information) will be erased as soon as the project is finished, no later than November 2010. If the study design or the use of data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.
- F) I understand that if I have any questions, comments or concerns about the study, or the informed consent process, I may write or call Martine Vanderheyden.
- G) I have read the above and understand it, and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

**Signature of Participant or Responsible Party**

**Date**

**Signature of Investigator**



