International Students' Feeling of Belonging in Associations at the University of Twente:

An Exploratory Research on its Contributors

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Abstract

For the past decades, most European universities have thrived to internationalize their educational environment, by accepting and encouraging more international students to study their higher education abroad. One of the most culturally diverse European institutions is The Netherlands, with the influx of non-Dutch students increasing to 40% in research universities. Additionally, a big part of student life in Dutch universities are student and study associations (for Dutch and non-Dutch students). The focus of this study will be on international students in a specific research university in The Netherlands (the University of Twente). To understand what makes international students feel that they belong to the association (and facilitating their cultural and social integration), this study focuses on finding different elements involved in international students' feeling of belonging. This study took a qualitative approach based on interviews and focus groups with different groups of UT students and members of associations, as well as a thematic analysis later to code and transcribe the data. The elements found were Activism, Pressure, Cultural Diversity, Language, Social Possibilities and Physical Proximity. Some of these findings can be interpreted to the UT setting, such as the factor of alcohol, the role of an association room or the need for a more inclusive language in UT associations for a greater cultural diversity and integration. In addition, the relationship explored between Feeling of Belonging and Activism can be used in further research to help solving the lack of international students in Dutch Activism. Similarly, it would be beneficial to use a wider sample of students in further research, for a better chance of generalisation. Conclusively, the main *contributors* to *Feeling of Belongin*g are a high level of activism Social Pressure, Cultural Diversity, Language, wide Social Possibilities and Physical Proximity between members of the association.

Introduction

For the last 40 years, the European Union plans have been oriented at finding a general approach to internationalisation in universities in Europe, which has been an example for other institutions around the world (Hunter et al., 2023) A last year report by the European Association for International Education showed that the global index for international students doing their higher education in European universities in this academic year is growing, with 51% of the institutions reporting an increase in the application of international students as compared to last academic year (*S*napshot Report on International Admissions: 2023–2024).

The expansion of internationalisation is a phenomenon in most European countries, such as The Netherlands, described as one of "the world's most internationalized educational environment" (Hunter et al., 2023, p.391). During the past decade, the inflow of international students in The Netherlands has doubled its number (Statista Research Department, 2023).

According to Statistics Netherlands (2022), this inflow of non-Dutch students arriving to the Netherlands to earn their degree has increased to 40% in research universities.

International students studying abroad have to undergo a process of cultural adaptation and integration. Babiker et al., (1980) found a key factor in international students' integration, which is cultural distance. This is described as the "perceived similarities or differences between two cultures in terms or physical (e.g. climate, living conditions) and social (e.g. language, pace of life) environment" (Tan & Liu, 2014, p.184). Due to this cultural gap, there is an inconsistency between the international students' aim to get involved in the social life of the host country, and their observed capacity to create meaningful relationships with the local culture of the country/university.

In his model, Tinto (1975) focuses on the importance of *social integration* for the university student's educational commitment and decision to remain at the university. This social integration is based on the students' sources of support at the university environment, whether social or educational support (Tinto, 1975). However, this concept focused on the majority, so if applied to racial and ethics minorities, this *social integration* would require the international student to overcome a "cultural suicide" and assimilate the host country's culture replacing their own one (Braxton et al., 1997 as cited in González, 2000).

As discussed by Baker (2008), Tinto's model sees student organisations as an indicator of social support for students to socially integrate. In The Netherlands, study and student associations are a big part of student life, compared to other countries. In some universities the student life is more active and mostly focused on mainly Dutch students with the so-called: "corps" (student fraternities) while in others, the associations are typically more open than the corps (Roelofsen & Peters, 2017).

Because of the high levels of internalisation in the university (with a 33% of international students in 2022; Universiteit Twente 2022), this study will focus specifically on the University of Twente (UT) and its international students, since there are also more than 100 student associations. These associations are categorised in; Study Associations, the ones for each study and honours programme which brings members from the same faculty together and focuses on

both social and educational events, and Student Associations, which bring members of different backgrounds for the purpose of doing social events and expand their social network and skills (University of Twente, n.d). As seen in the Activism Monitor of Student Union (2023) and observed in their official website (n.d), student associations are categorised in Culture, Sports, Business, World, Social and Other. World associations represent different cultures and bring members of the same culture together (e.g Latino, African or Muslim communities), Social associations are similar to student fraternities and involve different types of events (mostly formed by Dutch students as it will be seen later) and Other encompasses "alternative" associations with different purposes, such as feminist and sustainable associations (Student Union, n.d).

Previous Research

Definitions

Even though it is a current term, the concept of Sense of Belonging has been studied in depth by various researchers in racial or ethnic minorities. This study will use Hussain and Jones' definition, referred to as "individuals' psychological sense of connection to or integration into their community" (Hussain & Jones, 2021 p.63). During this report this concept will be used to talk about students and their sense of belonging at university, focused on associations. These researchers also found that social interaction outside and within the university setting benefits the student's sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021).

Furthermore, as stated in the Student Union's Activism Monitor at the University of Twente, *Activism* is described as the organisation of extracurricular activities that students get involved into at the same time as they do their study programme (some taking a gap year), being both a committee and a board year (Student Union, 2023). In this monitor, it is stated that the number of internationals active in associations is inevitably decreasing. The work of Veidemane et al (2021), also based on the UT, investigated the indicators of social inclusion for underrepresented groups in a European context. Importantly, they referred to minority groups as "underrepresented groups", described by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG, 2020) as "those whose share among students in relation to certain characteristics (e.g., gender, age, nationality, socioeconomic background, migratory background) is lower than the share of a comparable group in the total reference population" (BFUG, 2020; as cited in Veidemane et al., 2021, p.47). Additionally, in this project, the "share of a comparable group in the total population" will be addressed as the *majority*.

Existing literature

Existing research has demonstrated that culturally underrepreseted groups feel at home in their study significantly less than the group belonging to the dominant culture. What Meeuwisse et al., (2010) mainly found in their study were significant differences between the minority and majority's social interactions and sense of belonging. These groups also differed in what made them feel at home, as it was found that formal interactions made underrepresented group of students feel more at home while informal interactions worked more for the dominant culture (Meeuwisse et al., 2010). Closely connected to the current study, a report focused on the University of Groningen found factors in the university contributing to students' Social Belonging to the university (Beukema et al., 2020). This study found that language was both a glue that clustered (Dutch) students and an inhibitor for foreign students' participation. Other factors found were the advantages Dutch students have over non-Dutch, because of their nation (like having a wider social network outside university). This study did not however focus on student and study associations specifically.

Finally, in November 2022, the Shaping Expert Group (SEG) Inclusion, composed by several staff members, students and alumni at the University of Twente, published a report about the university's sense of belonging that was carried out for two years in order to improve the university's inclusiveness and awareness (Vargas & Sools, 2022). This qualitative study focused on six underrepresented groups (Internationals; Disability and Neurodiversity; First Generation: Ethnicity, Religion and Race; Gender Identity, Expression and Sexual Orientation; and Women's Equity). In their results, they found that the participants' account varied greatly between and within the groups interviewed. One of their most important findings was the relevance of creating connections in-group to create a sense of belonging, and of creating connections outside the group to improve the university's diversity (Vargas & Sools, 2022).

The current study will be based on the former project, as it will also focus on the inclusion and diversity at the UT and was initially proposed by one of the leaders of the Shaping2030 and SEG Inclusion. However, this will consist of a smaller-scale study, as it narrows down to students' sense of belonging at student and study associations and focuses mainly on the international students' experiences (while accounting for the majority).

To understand what encourages students to participate in student and study associations at the University of Twente, this study aims to identify the contributors to Sense of Belonging

in student and study associations at the UT [1] by focusing mainly on the experiences of international Students in a Dutch University, while considering the majority's perspective to answer the research question and increase the inclusion at the UT.

Methods

Research Design

This study relied on the experiences and accounts of different university students, thus consisting of a qualitative research based on primary interviews and focus groups. This type of study was chosen to have a thoroughly account of students' perspective, where participants were free to expand on their experiences. In addition, this was an exploratory study, as it focused on investigating the elements involved in making the students feel as part of the association.

Study setting

Due to the proximity and the familiarization of the researcher with the institution, the University of Twente was chosen as the study setting of this project. This means that the sample was narrowed to UT students, and the research was conducted in a specific UT building. In addition, the study and student associations that were used for the research pertained to the UT, and are formed by UT students.

In addition, the UT was selected as the study site for other reasons. For instance, as stated in the *Shaping2030* and *SEG Inclusion report*, increase internalisation at the UT is one of the current goals of the university, that has not yet been completely achieved by now. Moreover, as Student Union well showed in their *Activism Monitor 2023*, activism is not increasing in associations as expected, and for some it is even becoming a problem in numbers. The UT is also a relevant setting for the study because it has over 100 associations and the student life is one of the main social components of the university, and one of the reasons why students choose to study and stay at this university. Finally, as explained in the introduction, it offers a very international environment, which enhances and encourages cultural diversity (Universiteit Twente 2022).

Participants

The sample for this project was predominantly focused on UT students and members of UT study and student associations (Table 1). The sample in both focus groups and interviews

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[1] Along this study the terms *sense* and *feeling* of belonging will be used interchangeably

consisted of internationals and Dutch students, in order to focus on the *underrepresented group*s' point of view, while also considering the majority's perspective. The recruitment of all participants was based on convenience sampling, due to the proximity to the university and to the difficulty to access completely unknown participants.

Firstly, in the focus groups a purposive sample was used to recruit seven international students and six Dutch students (n=13), randomly assigned to three different groups (the inclusion criteria for the focus groups were mainly the nationality and gender of the participants). The international students chosen for this sample were from Europe and other continents, and average age is 23 years old (with the youngest person 20 and the oldest 34). In addition, four of the participants of the sample were five (cis)men, seven (cis)women and one non-binary person. Study-wise, three of the participants belonged to a psychology programme, two to Technical Computer Science, two to Industrial Engineering and Management, two to Creative Technology, one to Educational Science, one student taking a gap year and another one who recently graduated.

On the other hand, the interviews were carried out with seven UT Board members from each type of UT association explained in the introduction. The sample included both internationals and Dutch students, with a higher representation of Dutch students (5/7), the average age was also 23 years old. In addition, the gender ratio was three men and four women, so almost 50/50. The inclusion criteria for this sample were to be members of the Board of a UT association and that were currently studying or that have studied at the UT, (either Bachelors or Masters).

Table 1

Participants' Number and Information

Participant nr.	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Association	Activism	Interview (I) or Focus Groups (FG)
1	22	Spanish, White	Male	Study	Active member, former Board	FG

2	24	German, White	Female	Culture and Study	Active member in Culture, former Board	FG
3	23	Polish, White	Male	Sports	Active Member	FG
4	22	Dutch, White	Non-Binary	Culture and Study	Active member and former Board in Culture	FG
5	26	Dutch, Black	Female	Culture	NA	FG
6	21	Sri Lankan Black	Male	Study	Active member	FG
7	20	Dutch, White	Male	Study and Sports	Former board member	FG
8	22	Dutch, White	Female	Culture	Active Member and former board in Culture	FG
9	21	Croatian, White	Female	Study and Other	Board member in Other	FG
10	23	Dutch, White	Male	Study	Fromer active member	FG

11	20	German, White	Female	Study and Sports	Former active member	FG
12	20	Dutch, White	Female	Social	NA	FG
13	34	Greek, White	Female	Study, Student Team	Former board member and current member	FG
14	25	Dutch, White	Male	Culture	Board member	I
15	21	German, White	Female	Sports	Board member	I
16	22	Dutch, White	Male	Business	Board member	I
17	22	Dutch, White	Female	Study	Board member	I
18	20	Dutch, White	Female	Social	Board member	I
19	22	Finnish, White	Female	Other	Board member	I
20	27	Indian, White	Male	World	Board member	I

Materials

This study used the Microsoft Teams App to voice record the participants' responses. For both the interviews and the focus groups a semi-structural set of open-ended questions was constructed, so the interview followed some kind of structure, but was flexible enough to include some additional questions that spontaneously appeared. For the focus groups, this was more open and briefer, as the questions asked were not as many, to facilitate the flow of discussion (Appendix A). To develop the best interview guide for the study, a supervisor researcher was consulted in constructing the guides. The topics covered for the interviews and the focus groups were similar, as seen in Appendix A and B. For the interviews, the questions

were more oriented to the Board's perspective of their members' integration and for the focus groups were more oriented to the perspective and experiences of the members themselves.

Procedure

Both focus groups and interviews were carried out in English. The interviews with the board members lasted around 20-45 minutes and the focus groups approx. 1h each. Before every interview and discussion, participants were informed about the topic of the study and were asked to fill in a consent form (Appendix C to F). In order to facilitate the flow of discussion between participants, the chairs were placed in a circle, with everyone looking at each other easily. Moreover, an objective perspective was taken by asking close and open-ended questions (with flexibility) and receiving diverse answers so no subjective opinion or comments were shared at any point of the interviews or focus groups.

Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed via Teams App and coded via the Atlas.ti Software (version 24) through thematic analysis. This framework allowed to analyse the transcriptions through patters of meaning differing from each participant. The thematic analysis used was Braun and Clarke's version (2006), based on empirical or qualitative studies; whose goal is to identify and interpret participants' responses (within and across data) through codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These authors propose a six-step plan to develop thematic analysis: First, the transcriptions were analysed and familiarised with, and after that the first codes started being created from different quotes containing similar topics. When all codes were created, they were grouped in a few categories and later reviewed in order to find the themes and subthemes appropriate for the data. Afterwards these themes were defined and named; to differentiate it from others and finally the main findings were shared (Byrne, 2021).

In addition, this study took a hybrid approach to thematic analysis. This means that there was a pre-stated conceptual framework before the data collection took place, but at the same time there was freedom for the data to create most findings (Proudfoot, 2023). In this case, the framework was about the role of Activism in associations, which was reflected in the questions asked, but allowed the data to still flow within the analysis.

Results

Firstly, two overarching themes were found, around which the rest of the themes revolve (as visualized in Figure 1). The research question of this report focused on identifying the

contributors of students' feeling of belonging, so each of the following themes described will represent a different element that contributes to making students feel part of the association.

Figure 1:

Visualization of the two overarching and the rest of themes
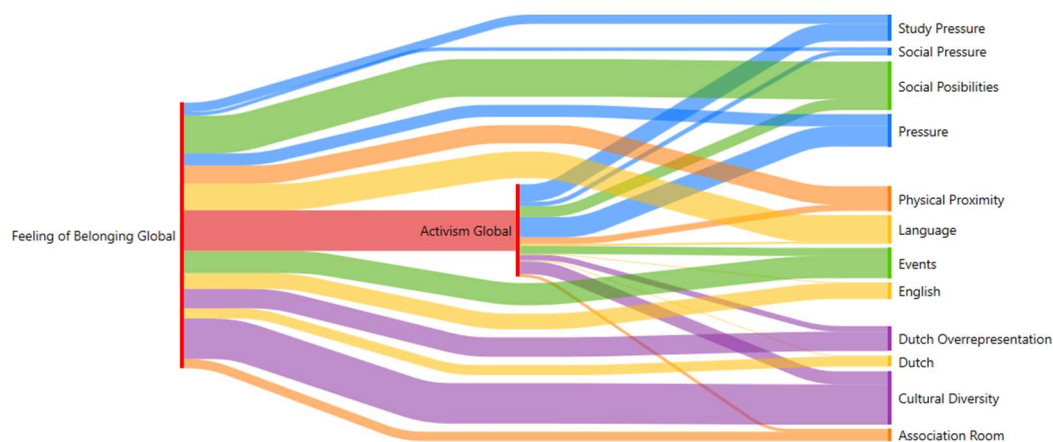
Note. This table shows the co-occurrences of codes in the central theme (Feeling of Belonging) with the elements involved in it (based on students' experiences). The element of Activism is in the middle of the figure to show its relevance in regard to *Feeling of Belonging* and the rest of the elements (each color per theme and subtheme; Activism in red, Pressure and its subthemes in blue, Social Possibilities in green, Physical Proximity in orange and Cultural Diversity in purple.

1. *Feeling of Belonging*

This refers to the extent to which the student feels as an integral member of the community in the association. This theme is defined by two organising concepts, namely *Connection* and *Integration,* also part of the definition of Feeling of Belonging addressed in the introduction of the study (Hussain & Jones, 2021).

1.1. Connection

This organising concept defines the students' connectedness within their community in the university and association. This connection is strengthened with the component of the *people* that members met in the association, and how close they felt to them. For instance, when asked about participants' *feeling at home* in the associations, several participants mentioned how these social connections helped with this feeling: "Well, I think at this point it's just the people that you've met, the friends that you've made and I think that makes me feel like I'm

home, like I belong to the association"[2] (Participant 1). Interestingly, this connection grew with the number of social interactions between the members. Another determinant that connects them to the association and to other members is to have *similar interests.* In some associations, such as Sports or Culture, the interest connects people to a greater extent than others, as can be seen in Participant 8's experience: "I would say because within my study session, I never had a bond with any and within Apollo it's really easy because everyone, yeah, you are already in a niche. I think it helps. We're all in a niche of culture and then all in our own niche. But yeah, yeah. If you're on a niche, you easier bond I think".

1.2 Cultural Integration

There have been two main types of integration mentioned in the data, Social and Cultural. Due to the focus on international students, this theme is mainly defined as the cultural integration of international students in Dutch- majority associations. This refers to adapting to a different culture other than their original one. A way of culturally integrate internationals is to acknowledge the cultural gap, as explained by Participant 4: "I think that sometimes there's like a culture gap between what people from different cultures expect from what it means to be in an association, and just talking about that or just, understanding each other about that would be nice". International students talked about multiple experiences that caused them an imminent cultural shock in associations, as it can be seen in the following quote: "I you say you don't drink. They're just gonna ask you a few questions and they also say you don't have to answer, but then they're really, they're curious. Some of my friends would always make sure they get the alcohol free beer" (Participant 6). In this quote is reflected how integration plays a role in acknowledging and normalising a specific culture shock for international students who are not used to the Dutch drinking culture.

Another part of Integration is the initiative from the *majority* to include members of the culturally underrepresented groups. This consists of how Dutch or senior members (who have been long in the association) choose to approach members of different cultures or new members to include them in the association and make them feel part of it as explained by Participant 15 "The people itself I think are really welcoming so I when I went to the association as a as

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[2] from this quote onwards all quotes were grammatically corrected by deleting filler words assessed to not having any added value or adding words to facilitate context for the reader using these symbols: []

international who didn't speak Dutch at that point, people just took you by the hand and showed you around and it also includes you immediately in the conversation".

2. *Activism*

This overarching theme refers to the degree of involvement of the student in the respective association (ranging from high to low), from joining events often, to becoming part of the Board or the committees.

This element has been found as an overarching theme because of its high relevance in terms of Feeling of Belonging and other themes (as seen in Appendix G) On the one hand, many of the participants shared that once they became active in the association, they felt more at home and connected to it, as their social interactions also appeared to grow; seen in quotes like: "In my study association I don't feel really at home, but with my student association I do because especially I'm in the board, I know the people and then we meet each other every single week" (Participant 10).

On the other hand, multiple participants also stated that feeling connected to the association and its members also made them more involved, joining events or committees. For instance, many students started to become active because of their social surroundings and connections, as Participant 3 shared when asked about his reason for becoming active in his sports association: "I think I joined the committee because like a lot of friends I had in the association joined and I wanted to join, so I think it's more fun if you organise all the events with your friends, people you already know". However, if students do not feel part of the association, they will be less likely to participate actively in it, as Participant 10 continues to narrate "(...) then I'm trying to talk to them and we have this little chitchat and they just turn around and talk to the rest of the people. So genuinely that really annoyed me and that's why I also became less and less active because at one point you're just not meeting people anymore".

Size of Association

The first organising concept in Activism refers to how big the association is in terms of members. Generally, the findings suggest that small associations struggle more with making people active in the association, and thus find it harder than big association to organise events and social activities. However, due to the small size, the connection between the members is also very strong, and the group cohesion is enhanced, something that big associations struggle with. This appears to facilitate involvement in the association, as Participant 12 describes: "In

my association, some part of what makes you feel very connected is that it's also quite a small association so everyone knows each other in a way, which I think helps a lot and that's actually reason why there's more activism than in my sports association, which is quite a big association".

COVID-19 Pandemic

The second organising concept observed in Activism was *COVID-10 Pandemic*. During and after the period of the COVID-19 lockdown, it was more difficult to meet people as compared to before. During that period and after, most university lessons were online, so it was a struggle to meet new people at university. In addition, not only lessons were online but also the meetings of the active members within the associations, which made it difficult for the association to thrive. For instance, Participant 2 reflects on this on his experience when he did his minor at the UT: "I had different courses. All of them were like online lectures still, so they were very small groups, and I didn't get the chance to connect with any of those people, really". For some participants, the reason why they decided to join or become more involved in the association was this need for social connections that the period after-COVID brought.

Elements of Feeling of Belonging

1. Pressure

One of the elements found is *Pressure,* identified as an inhibitor and contributor to students' activism and connectedness to the association. There are three types of pressure here which correspond to different subthemes.

1.1 Study Pressure

This pressure related to the student's study program is an impediment for the students for the student to fully participate in the association as they wished, like Participant 9 reflected in response to low activism in her culture association: "Yeah, I think for a lot of students, the workload is so much in their head that they feel like they don't have free time". For most students, this pressure is due to their study workload or the pressure to pass the Binding Study Advice in the 1st year or graduate in the last one (so student generation is a determinant in this subtheme). This appears to affect internationals to a higher extent, as some of them pay a higher tuition fee and make the effort to live away from their home to adapt to a new culture. Some of the participants shared that if they had more time, they would increase their involvement within

their associations (most former and current board members became more involved in the association because they had enough or too much free time in their studies).

1.2 Social Pressure

However, pressure can also work as a contributor to students' involvement in associations when one looks at implicit social and peer pressure, where social connections appear to push students to increase their activism. Especially if the student was formerly active, they are more likely to be offered more involvement than students who were never active, like Participant 1 described in his experiences: "If you do more, than you're more connected to the association, you get to know more people and then maybe if you do something you always get asked if you want to do more". Specifically, in one sports association, Participant 7 explained that the social pressure in his association is implicit, because there is such high cohesion that the members always want to be active: "[...] So if it's pressure [like social pressure], it's not very explicit. It's also want to be part of it, so might be social pressure if you don't do it against your will. So [...] there's an incentive for you to do it".

2. *Cultural Diversity*

While there was one more than one type of diversity discussed in the data, the experiences highlighted *Cultural Diversity* as the most relevant one. This is the representation of students from different cultures, and it contributes to international students' feeling of belonging in associations and make them feel more at home.

In order to facilitate cultural diversity, associations need a w*elcoming environment,* consisting of a comfortable and safe space for their members. In addition, it refers to having an accepting and inclusive atmosphere for non-Dutch students and not only leaving one's own cultural cluster, but also being curious about the cultural gap and differences with others. This can be applied to social events open for everyone or in daily comments and actions, as Participant 17 explains: "I think as Dutch members we could ask non-Dutch students small questions like how does this go in your culture? Or for example my Spanish friends is bringing in foods of many types for lunch, and then I ask him what he made today, just to show interest to both sides".

2.1 Dutch Overrepresentation

This cultural diversity appears to be low in most associations, due to the overrepresentation of Dutch students as compared to internationals, only a few of the

associations were 50/50 in terms of Dutch and Internationals of all the ones discussed. This has mostly been seen in terms of the level of activism Dutch students participate in as compared to Internationals. For instance, this can be seen in Participant 14's accounts about the lack of cultural diversity when it comes to students' activism in his culture association: "We wanted to have a diverse association with people want to have the diversity in there, but what I've also noticed during the GMA[3], there's maybe only one international so there's also not really a a voice". This overrepresentation also influences international students' cultural integration, as Participant 10 shared that in her study association it was significantly easier for Dutch women to integrate within the association in comparison with non-Dutch women, suggesting that the latter had to make double effort to be integrated to the same extent (this way touching upon intersectionality).

This difference in representation between Dutch and non-Dutch students appears to create cultural clusters created in the associations. The nature of these clusters has seen to differ per type of association. In most culture associations there are official Dutch and International practices, so students are segregated mainly because of the language. In addition, it has also been seen within sports associations, after practices, where the members have a drink together, thus affecting their social integration, as explained by Participant 7: "On [ ] we have a [ ] practise first, which is a lot of internationals. And then after that directly after the [ ] training, which is mostly Dutch people. Usually when we get to the sports cantine after our practise, there are still people from the recreational teams which also creates that exclusion, not only within the teams but also between the teams". In the previous it becomes apparent than even when the two groups are together, the mingling of cultures appears to be very little. Moreover, the cultural cluster is observed as well in the study associations, where these members have shown to influence each other.

For instance, Participant 1 shared that the cultural representation of the board plays a role on the cultural clusters formed in the members within the association: "In my study association, the board is mostly Dutch girls and I think now they are attracting more Dutch people and last year maybe it was more international because they were more international

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[3] The GMA is the General Members Assembly, where the most important decisions for the association are proposed and discussed with members.

Board members. So, if you see a lot of Dutch people as an international student, then you'll feel like you're not as welcome and if you see more internationality then it feels different".

3. *Language*

The third element found in this dataset is *Language.* This theme is central to students' feeling of belonging in associations, and it can be defined as both a contributor and an inhibitor to students' cultural integration. This could be assessed as a subtheme of Diversity, as it is a determinant to the cultural diversity of the association, but because of the significant results in this topic, it has been chosen to work better as a theme, highly relevant to students' *Feeling of Belonging.*

3.1 English

Firstly, international students shared that they appreciate when Dutch students abandon their habit of speaking Dutch to adapt to the international students or when English is directly used as the main language in environments where there is at least one international present. For instance, participants shared that some initiatives to integrate international students is using English for the social media group chats with the members and the promotion for events, so everyone feels included. This can be seen in participants' experiences such as Participant 2's: "I think from me it's inside of the association there's a focus on integration and most members also automatically like switch to English when you just join their group or something so they're very aware of that and when they talk Dutch that they automatically switch when they know you don't talk Dutch".

3.2 Dutch

As discussed before, language can play a detrimental role for international students' feeling of belonging in the association, mostly when Dutch language is present (creating a feeling of exclusion). This has been described as making students feel like they are not welcome in the association, as described by Participant 4, while describing international students' experiences in their associations: "It differs per cultural association, some culture associations have Dutch and international groups. In the Dutch groups they mostly speak Dutch of course and in the international groups there is some Dutch people that speak Dutch, which makes international people feel left out".

Sometimes, the underrepresentation of international students can make students conform with the language exclusion and participate in the social interactions or events as an outsider rather than a close member integrated in the association. This can be seen in several experiences from international students such as the one from Participant 2: "It's just sometimes when there's a big group and you're the only international then it feels a bit weird to ask to switch to English for me because then it feels like you're a bit of an intruder". This experience shows how Dutch students are not aware of their impact, but they speak Dutch because they are used to it. Finally, this element has also been shown to force international students to translate everything when Dutch language is used in the association, such as the documents or the GMAs, forcing them to employ more time and effort in the association.

4. Social Possibilities

This theme works as a contributor, as it refers to the extent to which the student can expand their social network and create social connections within the association. These opportunities are thoroughly described as events. It has been shown that if the student engages and participates in these social opportunities within the association, they will get closer to each other and improve their connection with the association. This can be observed in Participant 3's explanation to how the UT associations had influenced his life: "Personally I also think I open up to a lot of people when opportunities, a lot of new like type of events that we didn't do before, so I feel a lot more social"

An organising concept that seizes the core of this theme is *social interactions,* as members showed it is very important for them to interact with other members during and before the lessons. The physical closeness of the members in terms of physical environment has shown to play an important role on the level of social interactions within the associations. Additionally, it has been found that having a scheduled time in which they meet in the week forces the members to socially interact more with other members. These happens mostly in culture and sports associations ,where the lesson or practice can be seen as a social opportunity for members to socialise with each other.

Another organising concept relevant to students' social possibilities is *alcohol*. This can be defined as a contributor and an inhibitor of students engaging in the social opportunities within the association. Multiple participants shared the same views of how *alcohol* acted as a facilitator for socially interacting with people they would not typically talk when sober. In

addition, participants mentioned it was used to encourage members join the activities, as experienced by Participant 10: "In my study association the beer also is used as a stress relief because we have a Tuesday afternoon drinks and then every single week in the newsletter like it's usually when they're advertising the activities they're like: oh, are you stressed come and drink". The findings showed that the role of alcohol differed per association. For example, in the culture associations alcohol did not have such high role when compared to the sports associations, even if the teachers encouraged students to have a beer together after practice, most of the members did not drink. However, in sports association this was seen as a key factor in social activities and events, which could inhibit their integration when encountering students who do not drink as they might feel excluded from events or activities involving drinking, or socially pressured to do so.

4.1 Events

This subtheme refers to the activities organised by the active members of the association, with scheduled dates rather than spontaneous plans. According to the findings, diversity in events is beneficial for the students' involvement. For instance, there are social events (connecting members to each other over food, drinks or social activities such as going to parties or playing games), educational (a particular topic that connects the member together like giving a lecture) or external (focuses on connecting members from different associations and studies). When asked about increasing cultural integration, board members also stated that having more cultural events would make international students more integrated into the association, where different cultures can mingle and learn about it each other.

As discussed by various participants, sometimes it is easier to join events when they have already formed the connections, to strengthen these bonds; as explained by Participant's 19 in her experience with low involvement of members in her association: "I think one thing is like if you know people, it's easier to come to events with someone. So then when they know each other, they would have like a lower threshold of joining an event". The participation of members in events has also shown to increase their level of activism in the association, perhaps due to those connections previously formed, seen in different experiences such as participant's 20 personal account on how he became active: "Because I attended their events and then I got to know about them, and then I decided to volunteer as an active member".

5. Physical Proximity

The UT campus enables students to easily meet with other members of the association. For instance, students that have classes in the morning are "forced" to be on campus, which often makes them want to join social activities within their association without any extra effort, such as described by Participant 10's personal experience: "I had to be on campus every single day [...] and because of that, I just stayed afterwards and go to my study association, to the drinks". Additionally, seeing people from the association around the campus, also creates a sense of familiarity around the university, the students and the associations themselves, as seen in Participant 7's response to what made them feel at home in their association: "Honestly just seeing people on campus, people that you know from the association, talk to them, those kind of things and then see, you know later again through practise that's really feel like a group".

5.1 Association Room

One of the most influential places on campus where members form meaningful connections is the *association room* of the association. In the participants' experiences, the association room was the place to be with people members felt *comfortable* around, and saw often. Several participants said that these rooms made them *feel at home* most of the time also because they offered snacks and beverages to their members, as well as house furniture such as fridges or couches. In addition, most association rooms ought to have *a welcoming environment*, to ensure the comfortableness of the members.

Discussion

Summarising the key findings

Central to the research question, the most important findings of this study are the six themes identified to contribute to the students' feeling of belonging. The two overarching themes are Feeling of Belonging and Activism, and the rest of the regular themes are Pressure, Diversity, Language, Social Possibilities and Physical Proximity.

The overarching theme of Feeling of Belonging was found to be formed by two organising concepts, connection and integration, Inside the topic of Feeling of Belonging, a cultural shock due to the language and student culture was found to inhibit internationals' (cultural) integration and their level of involvement in the association. In addition, Activism,

has shown to have a reciprocal relationship with *Feeling of Belonging,* and specifically *Connection.* Within *Activism*, the effect of COVID-19 Pandemic was discussed.

The first theme is pressure, categorised in study and social pressure and could be both an inhibitor and a contributor in students' feeling of belonging (revolving around Activism). Secondly, the theme of Cultural Diversity showed that the overrepresentation of Dutch students hindered students' sense of belonging and that a welcoming environment was seen as a contributor for students social and cultural integration.

The third element is the Language used in the associations. To most students, speaking English inside the association is a way of integration and making everyone feel welcome. In contrast, there were findings related to how Dutch language worked as a way (purposely or not) to socially exclude internationals, where the speaking habit of Dutch students was explored.

Another element found to contribute students' sense of belonging are the possibilities the association offers members to socializing, which are events. In this element there was a significant finding which was the presence of alcohol and its impact on both events and social interactions (as a facilitator and inhibitor to socialising).

The fifth and last element is the physical proximity of members. Within this element it has been found that the UT campus was used as a socialising point, and places like the association room made members more connected to the association (where members do things together, socially interact and share moments of the day).

Implications

There are several implications from these findings contributing to the gap in previous research explained before. Firstly, this study found support for Tinto's view of social integration for continuing at the university. In several experiences it was observed that cultural adaptation to the host country was found required for students to socially integrate in the Dutch Culture, so this loss of culture was not as extreme as Tinto explains but still seemed to occur when applied to ethnic and racial minorities.

In addition, this framework used Hussain and Jone's (2021) definition of sense of belonging, by defining it as integration and connection to a community. These researchers also stressed the importance of social peer interactions for reducing discrimination towards people from racial minorities and improving their feeling of belonging. The present study found that

social interactions are important for not only racial minorities but also internationals' sense of belonging. This could be supported by observing the relevance of social interactions between the members of associations to make them feel connected and integrated. In addition, the present study focused on the diversity in associations, also explored in Hussain and Jones' study regarding the benefits of diverse peer interaction.

Additionally, as Activism was shown to be relevant to students' sense of belonging, this study can also contribute to the Activism Monitor 2023 from Student Union at the UT. This was done by finding what Activism means for students and how internationals experience it and supporting the underrepresentation of internationals in Activism. In addition, the Activism Monitor found that the size of the association was a relevant factor for the level of students' involvement in associations, and that most people involved in association committees were third or senior years. Both of these findings can be supported by the current study, where size of association was an organising concept for Activism and where student generation showed to play a role in students' level of involvement due to the pressure.

Similarly, Meeuwise et al (2010)'s findings can be supported by the present study's awareness of the struggle for internationals to feel at home. This study did not only find a difficulty for feeling at home but also aimed to discover what would make internationals more at home (such as an *association room*). Furthermore, Meeuwise's study highlights the relevance of sense of belonging in student's connection to the university and suggests to study it qualitatively in further research.

Finally, the present study is based on a bigger scale plan made by the UT Shaping Expert Group (2022). This project had the same aim as the current study, to understand students' feeling of belonging more deeply by focusing on each underrepresented group separately. This large-scale project had some similar results as this one, such as the importance of creating connections within a group to form a sense of belonging, which the current study found relevant in order to feel like members of a community.

Interpreting the findings

During this section of the report the findings will be interpreted in terms of what they mean for the UT and its student and association body.

For instance, the fact that alcohol was found to have such a big impact on students' social behaviour shows how many associations at UT associate having fun with drinking. For

most students, drinking was a way of let go of the culture or social barrier and create bonds with people they would not typically talk when sober. This can infer that when there is no alcohol involved, it is harder for students (internationals mostly), to overcome that cultural barrier and socialise with different people. In addition, it could be argued that because of this struggle for social integration, international students would be more likely to drink to break this gap.

Additionally, the level of students' involvement in the association is determined by their meaningful connections inside the association. This means that UT associations are clear points for social contact and interactions between students. Once the students feel connected enough with members in the association, they start joining more events with people they know and they somewhat feel the association is giving them so much that they have to give something in exchange, and this is when involvement and activism appears. This means that if UT associations aim to get more members involved, they could focus on strengthening the bonds among members.

Another finding in relation to activism in associations is the culture barrier in associations. Cultural diversity showed to require a welcoming environment for international students. This infers that the UT associations with low level of cultural diversity might not promote their welcoming environment or do not encourage non-Dutch students sufficiently. Similarly, it was found that it was harder to feel integrated for internationals when Dutch was the main language, which shows the relevance of speaking English for sense of belonging. Something that participants discussed as a way of increasing cultural integration is the organisation of cultural events, what that appears be insufficient in most UT associations.

Finally, for those participants with an association room, the UT felt closer to them as home, because for them it was a place to share parts of the day with similar others. This could mean that for those associations at the UT with a room, the students' connections are stronger, as the social interaction between the members increases. This could also lead to students expressing the desire to be more active in associations, as they are already connected with the members and the place, which makes it easier to take a step further in their involvement. This will also perhaps make them feel as they are not a minority anymore, as there are multiple other cultures involved in the event, association and university.

Limitations of the study

The first limitation of this study is that the focus groups were culturally heterogeneous. This could have caused members to be more hesitant on sharing their full experiences with some people that could not understand them or relate to them. If the groups were to be homogeneous, the members would feel closer to each other and thus disclose more relevant information (Acocella, 2011)

The focus groups in themselves could also be considered a limitation, as it is forcing the student to talk in a group of people, and they might not want to share private information with people they do not know as much (even when safe space was ensured). Because it was a sensitive topic it felt like they would have disclosed more if there were no risk of judgement from other participants (so individual interviews).

Additionally, it was attempted for the sample to be as diverse as possible but there was not that much access to every underrepresented group aimed to be included in the sample, so it turned out to be diverse only in terms of gender and nationality. For instance, as observed in the participants' table, there were only four out of twenty participants BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour; Ijoma et al., 2021), and one participant with neurodiversity (none with physical impairments). Perhaps there were participants that could have a hidden disability, but none of the participants talked about it or mentioned it during the discussion. This lack of diversity was due to the inability to reach out such diverse people, which can also serve as a representation in the associations. In addition, there was an underrepresentation of non-active members and students from first generations (so 1st or 2nd year).

The convenience sample method could also be considered as a limitation, mainly due to the lack of applicability to the bigger field because of the bias between the researcher and the participants or the participants themselves. This generalizability also decreased because of the low sample size due to the inability to reach out more participants and schedule timeslots with more participants (Emerson 2021).

Recommendations for further research

For further research in this topic of feeling of belonging for international students in associations, the researcher could try recruiting a bigger sample, this way increasing the diversity of the participants and allowing for more generalization. For instance, a survey could be done about these topics and be shared around a wider and more diverse part of society.

In addition, upcoming research papers about this topic could focus on the strategies to implement in the associations by using this study's elements as a base to tackle internalisation. For example, creating more spaces in the university in the association where members of the association can meet and interact or focusing on stablishing a welcoming environment from the beginning of students' introduction into the association (by making cultural events and acknowledging the cultural gap). Furthermore, it would be beneficial for this field of study to focus more on the relationship between Activism and Feeling of Belonging, because of current struggle to find (international) students highly involved in study or student associations (Student Union, 2023). Thus, if more studies would focus on how connection and integration is related to activism in associations, there could be more done about it.

Conclusion

All in all, this study has succeeded in answering the research question of what elements contribute to international students' Feeling of Belonging in student and study associations by taking the perspectives of both the *underrepresented groups* and the *majority*. These contributors were identified by carrying out several focus groups with members of associations and interviews with board members. In order to have a better exploration of the elements, most themes were analysed in terms of inhibitors and contributors to students' sense of belonging.

As the research question was aimed at finding contributors, the main elements to keep in mind as the conclusion to the study are the following: a high level of activism in the association, an implicit social pressure that encourages students to be more involved, a culturally diverse environment, an inclusive language, and social possibilities and physical proximity in the association to bring members closer together. These findings can be applied in the UT student environment in various ways (such as promoting the use of shared spaces or controlling the use of alcohol for socialising) and can lead to further research in associations at this university. If this research develops further, scholars will not only have the understanding of students' sense of belonging in associations but also at the University of Twente, thus creating a more inclusive environment and increasing cultural diversity in a Dutch University.

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Appendix A (Interview Guide for Focus Groups)

1. Brief introduction
   a. Nationality
   b. Study
   c. Gender
2. UT:
   a. How long have you been studying at the UT?
   b. How connected do you feel to the UT? (to compare levels of connexion and belonging of student members of associations and non-members)
      i. Do you feel totally at home/included? ii.
         Why, why not?
   c. How has the UT influenced your life? **Discuss**

3. Are you part of any association at the UT?

- Which one(s)

- Since when

- Why did you join

4. What is your level of **activism** at the association: **Discuss**

- How involved are you in the association

- Do you help organise activities **-**   Join events often?

- Has participating actively (what I explained before about joining often to events and helping in organising) in the association made you closer to others and association?

- Is there a pattern of activism in your association?

    o Type of student that always joins the committees/board ▪   Gender, Nationality, Race...

    o Why do you think that is the case?

5. Have you encountered (social) obstacles or limitations in the association(s) for being/expressing yourself or feeling included? **Discuss**

    - Not to talk badly about the association but rather tell an experience

        o Try to describe negative elements specifically

6. To what extent do you feel at home in this association(s)/Do you feel connected within the group? **Discuss**

- What makes you feel at home?

- Language of the association(s)?

- Try to be specific with elements that help with this inclusion

- What would make you feel (more) at home?

    o Try to be specific with elements that help with this inclusion **-** Have you felt like this since the beginning?

- What do you think can be changed (if you could do everything you wanted and had all the power/money in the world)

- Do you see a lot of differences between types of associations?

- Final thoughts?

Appendix B (Interview Guide for Board Members)

1. Brief introductiono Nationality o Gender o Study

   o Association

2. How long have you been studying at the UT?

3. How long have you been in (name of association)?

   a. Why did you join?

4. How long have you been board?

   a. Why did you decide to become board

   b. How has it influenced your connection to association/ the UT?

5. How is the activism in your association? (so apart from the board members, are there active members or committees involved in the association?)

   a. Do you think there is enough activism?

   b. Do you notice a pattern of the student participating actively? (most involved in the association, or joining the Board)

      I. Is it always the same students joining the active members or is there diversity in them?(e.g: always students from a particular nationality or country/region/gender/studies)

      II. As a Board Member, what do you think could increase this diversity?

   c. How would you suggest to increase activism and participation in your association?

      I. Language?

6. What do you think your members need from the association to make them feel at home, (as internationals)? (environment, events, opportunities...)

   a. What elements of your association contribute to this connection?

   b. Would you like to implement other elements to increase this feeling? (Think big in terms or association elements, realistically or not)

7. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your student/study association and its members?

Appendix C: Information prior the Consent Form for Focus Groups

- o Safe space

- o Shared experiences with each other

- o If want to disclose something personal don't have to feel forced, can always tell me later

- o Relevant to be as honest as possible o No judgement

- o No information will be disclosed outside the room

    - Agreed in the consent form to not talk about others' accounts o

Sometimes just answering the questions, other times you can discuss!

- Anonymity

- Everyone has a turn, and whenever one wants to talk you can raise your hand o You can also talk when is not your turn if you want to make a comment about something, but respect when the other person is talking

Appendix D: Information prior the Consent Form for Board Members

- Anonymity

    - o No harm of reputation because name will not be shared with anyone

- Safe space

- Right to withdraw when needed

Appendix E: Consent form Focus Groups

Informed consent form template for research with human participants

Consent Form for Students' Feeling of Belonging in Student & Study Associations at the UT, an Intersectional Approach

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking part in the study		
I have read and understood the study information dated [____/____/_____], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	O	O
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	O	O
I understand that taking part in the study involves an audio-recorded interview which will be later transcribed for analysis purposes. After the research is over, the recordings will be destroyed.	O	O
Use of the information in the study		
I understand that information I provide will be used for a Bachelor Assignment that will be published after its approval.	O	O
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or the name of my study/student association will not be shared beyond the study team.	O	O
I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs	O	O
I agree that my nationality may be used for the research	O	O
I agree to be audio/video recorded	O	O
Future use and reuse of the information by others		
I give permission for the interview transcriptions that I provide to be archived in research private storages so it can be used for future research and learning. The data will be anonymised as explained in the information sheet by not sharing any given names.	O	O

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

I give the researchers permission to keep my contact information and to contact me for future   O   O
research projects.

Signatures

_____

Name of participant [printed]

_____   _____

              Signature   Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best
of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

_Lucia Canora Flores_____   _____

Researcher name [printed]   Signature   Date

Study contact details for further information: [_Lucia Canora Flores, lucy.canora@gmail.com_]

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Appendix F: Consent form for Interviews

Informed consent form template for research with human participants

Consent Form for Students' Feeling of Belonging in Student & Study Associations at the UT, an Intersectional Approach YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking part in the study		
I have read and understood the study information dated [____/____/_____], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	O	O
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	O	O
I understand that taking part in the study involves an audio-recorded interview which will be later transcribed for analysis purposes. After the research is over, the recordings will be destroyed.	O	O
Risks associated with participating in the study		
I understand that taking part in the study involves the following risks: possible mental discomfort if I decide to share negative experiences in study/student associations with the researcher and with others, which will be taken into account and accepted as a valid and relevant feeling.	O	O
Use of the information in the study		
I understand that information I provide will be used for a Bachelor Assignment that will be published after its approval.	O	O
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or the name of the association I talk about will not be shared beyond the study team.	O	O
I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs	O	O
I agree that my nationality will be used for the research	O	O
I agree that, when relevant for the research, additional personal characteristics or identities may be shared in the study to analyse data using an intersectional framework (e.g: gender (identity), sexuality and/or physical or mental (dis)ability).	O	O
Consent to be Audio/video Recorded		
I agree to be audio/video recorded. Yes/no	O	O

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Appendix G: Vizualitation of Actvisim in regard to Sense of Belonging
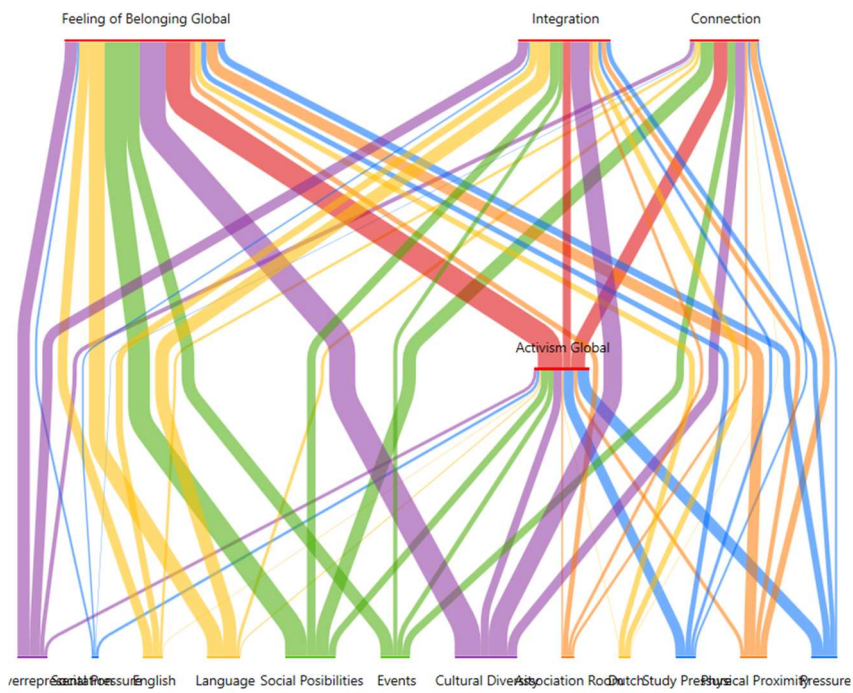
Note. This figure is the same one as Figure 1 but with the addition of Integration and Connection to better understand the relationship with Activism.

I give the researchers permission to keep my contact information and to contact me for future   O   O
research projects.

Signatures

_____   _____   _____
Name of participant [printed]   Signature   Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best
of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

Lucia Canora Flores
_____   _____   _____
Researcher name [printed]   Signature   Date

Study contact details for further information: [*Lucía Canora Flores, lucy.canora@gmail.com*]

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