





# Students' entrepreneurial learning through an internship abroad: A cross-cultural experience



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**Background:** Cross-cultural learning provides students with the opportunity for improved self-awareness when they are placed in unfamiliar situations where their understanding of who they are and what they can do is challenged or expanded. This paper built on the concepts of experiential learning in rich contexts and self-image shocks and explored the research question on how cross-cultural learning in entrepreneurship exchange programmes offered students unique personal learning possibilities and outcomes.

**Aim:** The aim was to build new theoretical and empirical knowledge on the influence and importance of cross-cultural learning in entrepreneurship education (EE).

**Setting:** The study involved South African (SA) students taking part in an internship programme in the vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem of Bergen, Norway.

**Methods:** Adopting a longitudinal design and purposive sampling, four SA students were included in the study. Data were acquired from two reflective group sessions, on two separate instances, and a final student reflection report. The interviews were transcribed and coded along with the written reflection reports and these data sources were subjected to thematic analysis.

**Results:** Four themes were uncovered: Learning about the entrepreneurial culture triggers comparison with own culture, Embracing uncertainty and developing entrepreneurial capabilities, Transformational learning through self-image shocks, Can I become a future entrepreneur? Where am I going?

**Conclusion:** The research highlighted the importance of cross-cultural experience and foreignness as powerful triggers in stimulating students' introspection and development of self-image.

**Contribution:** The research combines two research streams, hence advancing our theoretical conceptualisation of cross-cultural learning in EE.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural learning; student internship; experiential learning; entrepreneurial self-efficacy; transformational learning; entrepreneurship education; self-Image shocks.

## Introduction

International cross-cultural experience in higher education is known to offer students unique possibilities to develop and grow as individuals (Clapp-Smith & Wernsing 2014; Pidduck 2022). This paper explores how cross-cultural learning in entrepreneurship exchange programmes can offer students unique personal learning possibilities and outcomes. The paper aims to merge insights from Morris's (2020) understanding of experiential learning in rich contexts with entrepreneurship education (EE) (Pittaway & Cope 2007; Pittaway et al. 2011; Pittaway & Thorpe 2012) and cross-cultural learning theory (Adler 1987; Adler & Aycan 2018; Pidduck 2022; Yamazaki & Kayes 2004), to empirically investigate South African students' cross-cultural experiences in an internship in Bergen, Norway.

International exchange programmes are becoming highly relevant as we are living in a globalised world (Meld.St.7 2020–2021; Pidduck 2022; Roy et al. 2019). With entrepreneurship as a strong engine of sustainable development and growth, it is of interest for universities worldwide to invest in cross-cultural experiences and equip students with adaptable skillsets to collaborate across

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borders and cultures (Caligiuri & Tarique 2012; Williams 2005). University entrepreneurship programmes that appraise entrepreneurial learning in a cross-cultural setting have therefore emerged in recent years (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017, 2018a; Pipitone & Raghavan 2017; Roy et al. 2019). This conjoins with the increasing interest in multicultural professionals in international business literature. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of cross-cultural intelligence, particularly in the driving of entrepreneurial intentions and capabilities (Pidduck 2022; Yang & Yang 2022) and born global career intentions (Pidduck & Zhang 2021).

Cross-cultural learning experiences are recognised as powerful and highly personalised learning processes, encompassing both experimental and learning-by-doing elements (Pidduck 2022; Yamazaki & Kayes 2004). In entrepreneurship exchange internship programmes, students perform entrepreneurial tasks in close interaction with an entrepreneurial team and start-up (Maaravi et al. 2021). In the EE literature, internships are seen as a specific way of experiential learning or learning-by-doing (Maaravi et al. 2021). Internships can provide students with an exceptional opportunity to practice theories and to develop skills beyond the classroom, build networks and strengthen employability (Galloway, Marks & Chillas 2014). With entrepreneurship becoming an important driver in economies worldwide, universities now strive to provide entrepreneurship programmes, whereby students are exposed to real-life entrepreneurial tasks in startup internships. Internship research indicates that students by observing and performing in startups can enhance their awareness about entrepreneurship as a career path, strengthen entrepreneurial intentions and develop entrepreneurial mindsets, skills and competences (Maaravi et al. 2021).

When immersed in an internship in a foreign country, students will additionally need to adapt their learning to the contextualised cultural norms and practices (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017, 2018b). Prior research reveals cross-cultural learning to offer transformational personal development of 'hidden' skills and expansion of the repertoire of entrepreneurial behaviours, which ultimately may inspire future entrepreneurial ambitions (Kubberød & Pettersen 2018a). A central feature that is transferable across studies is that those who overcome the ambiguity of foreign exposure can achieve meaningful learning outcomes in terms of long-term personal growth (Pidduck 2022; Yamazaki & Kayes 2004). Cross-cultural learning can therefore provide students with the opportunity for improved self-awareness when they are placed in situations where their understanding of 'who we are' and 'what we can do' (self-image) (Pidduck 2022) is challenged or expanded (Adler 1987; Adler & Aycan 2018) through a 'rich experiential learning' process (Morris 2020). For example, cultural contrasts and comparative learning can render students' own values more explicit and add a richer repertoire of entrepreneurial behaviours that could be experimented with and internalised in a future possible self

as an entrepreneur (Farmer, Yao & Kung-McIntyre 2011; Kubberød & Pettersen 2018a).

Inspired by this backdrop, we set out to explore the role of cultural immersion for personal growth in terms of self-image and entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) (McGee et al. 2009) for students taking part in an internship programme across South Africa and Norway. The research adopts a longitudinal study design, using students' reflections on their learning journey over a three-month internship. We argue that the cultural dimension is often overlooked in rich experiential (entrepreneurial) learning like cross-cultural internships, which deviate substantially from the mother culture. We adopt the theoretical lens of Self-Image Shocks delineated by Pidduck (2022) to explore cross-cultural learning experiences more in-depth. This concept offers a suitable theoretical lens on 'how the temporary turbulence of experiencing foreign cultures can prompt reflection and fluidity across self-images – mental maps' (Pidduck 2022:270). By embracing the foreignness in the experiential process and rich experience, internal reflection and heightened awareness can be fueled, thereby enhancing the development of entrepreneurial capability (Pidduck 2022). The following research questions guided the research. What are the individual learning opportunities and outcomes of rich cross-cultural learning experiences for students in terms of:

- personal growth (who am I, where am I going) and
- future entrepreneurial ambitions (ESE)?

This paper seeks to build new theoretical and empirical knowledge on the influence and importance of cross-cultural learning in EE. It further seeks to provide contextual evidence to contribute towards the conceptual contributions by Morris (2020) and Pidduck (2022) to advance conceptual understanding of cross-cultural learning and its subsequent outcomes.

## Conceptual framework

### International practice as a rich context for learning opportunities

Experiential learning theory (ELT) takes a fundamentally different view of the learning process in comparison to behavioural learning theory. Experiential learning theory places life experience as a central and necessary part of the learning process, where 'knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Morris 2020:1064). Kolb's experiential learning cycle represents the most influential model in ELT in general and as the basis for entrepreneurial learning in EE (Pittaway & Cope 2007; Pittaway et al. 2011). However, cross-cultural learning represents a particular variant of experiential learning (Yamazaki & Kayes 2004) taking place in especially rich learning contexts for the student (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017, 2018a; Pipitone & Raghavan 2017; Roy et al. 2019).

From a rich experiential learning perspective (Morris 2020), new entrepreneurial knowledge is gained by a physical

placement in real-world concrete experiences of the entrepreneurial ecosystem through immersions in the start-up, the network and the industry surrounding it (Rae 2005). In this immersion, individuals must learn to decode the 'hidden dimensions' in the new culture (Hall 1973, 1976) to operate efficiently (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017). In entrepreneurship exchange internship programmes, students perform entrepreneurial tasks in close interaction with an entrepreneurial team in a start-up, in a foreign country and will need to adapt their learning to the contextualised cultural norms and practices (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017, 2018a). The richness in the experience offers multiple engagements and heightens the need for critical reflection (reflective observation), at the expense of ordinary reflection. Furthermore, Morris (2020) argues that the sensemaking (abstract conceptualisation) must be context specific, because context-indifferent sensemaking can in fact limit an individual's potential for learning and personal growth. Contextualised reflection ultimately allows for a more informed active experimentation in future concrete experiences. Deviated from Kolb (2015), Morris' (2020) model suggests that active experimentation needs to consider the conditions in which problems are situated. This challenges the learner and deliberately pushes the individual's comfort zones, which the learner must embrace, to learn efficiently from the experience and complete the learning cycle. '... [L]earners may learn to appreciate that conditions change, sometimes very discretely, across time and place' (2020:1072–1073).

### Personal growth through self-image shocks

The inspiration and most of what we know on the theme of individual effects and growth of cross-cultural experiences comes from the expatriation research field (Lorenz, Ramsey & Richey 2018; Pidduck 2022). Scholars have investigated expatriates and identified factors important for cross-cultural learning and adaptation (Adler & Aycan 2018; Li, Mobley & Kelly 2013). Cross-cultural learning is recognised as transformational and highly personalised learning processes. Such learning processes can be confusing or ambiguous in the beginning. Students will typically experience emotionally loaded encounters and critical incidents that differ from familiar settings, forcing them to behavioural experimentation, trying out new attitudes and behaviours, influencing students' entrepreneurial ambitions and self-efficacy (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions. Moreover, ESE (e.g. McGee et al. 2009) refers to the individual's belief in their ability to take on the role and tasks associated with being an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy is assumed to play an important role in determining whether an individual will engage in entrepreneurial behaviour and consider an entrepreneurial career (Chen, Greene, & Crick 1998). More, ESE is considered a critical outcome of EE and training as it has aroused as an important psychological construct that influences entrepreneurial intention and behaviour (Miao, Qian & Ma 2017) and has

therefore become increasingly relevant to educators, career researchers and policymakers (Wilson et al., 2009). Moreover, the phenomenon of ESE is in one study on students in international internships found to be 'culturally anchored and culturally sensitive' (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017:275).

A central feature that is transferable across studies is that those who overcome ambiguity of foreign exposure from shocks to the system can achieve meaningful learning outcomes in terms of long-term personal growth (Pidduck 2022). Indeed, the shocks to the system, in this context, refer to the self-image system. Culture-induced shocks to the self-image trigger sensemaking and reflection upon one-self, through heightened awareness of oneself in a foreign setting. These are not necessarily huge cultural shocks, which might explain the first step in cultural adaptation, but more small eureka insights that disturb the existing self-image, triggering one's values 'who am I' (value image) and 'where I am I going' (trajectory image) (Pidduck 2022:274). These small culture-induced pushes to the self-image thus create an opportunity to view oneself and one's potential in new ways and experiment with new behaviours because of the tensions created by cultural elements different from the mother culture, moving individuals from their original reference point of who they are and might become (Pidduck 2022). The exposure creates enhanced cognitive flexibility and behavioural experimentation, developing capabilities to absorb and utilise the experience for personal growth. Building on the argument of Pidduck (2022) that self-image shocks facilitate the development of entrepreneurial ambitions and skills, we also explore the individual development of ESE.

The ideas of self-image in the cross-cultural learning literature cohere well with theories about entrepreneurial identities, aspirational self-images and possible selves (Farmer et al. 2011). Students' personal identity aspirations can have a major impact on how they see the future and their interest in becoming an entrepreneur. Possible selves represent what the individual should become and can be perceived as a counterpart of the current selves as signified by what the individual is. The possible selves manifest cognitively in enduring aspirations, goals, motives, threats and fears (Farmer et al. 2011).

The key elements of our approach are summarised into a conceptual model where we illustrate a cycle of personal growth through cross-culturally rich experiential learning. The model is inspired by Morris' 'rich' experiential cycle of learning (2020) and Pidduck's (2022) conceptualisation of self-image shocks in cross-cultural learning (see Figure 1).

## Research methods and design

Interpretivism, a research philosophy that pursues richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts, is adopted for this study. Interpretivism emphasises that humans create 'meanings' and that such 'meanings' need to be studied (Saunders et al. 2019). Differences in meaning result from different social realities and can arise

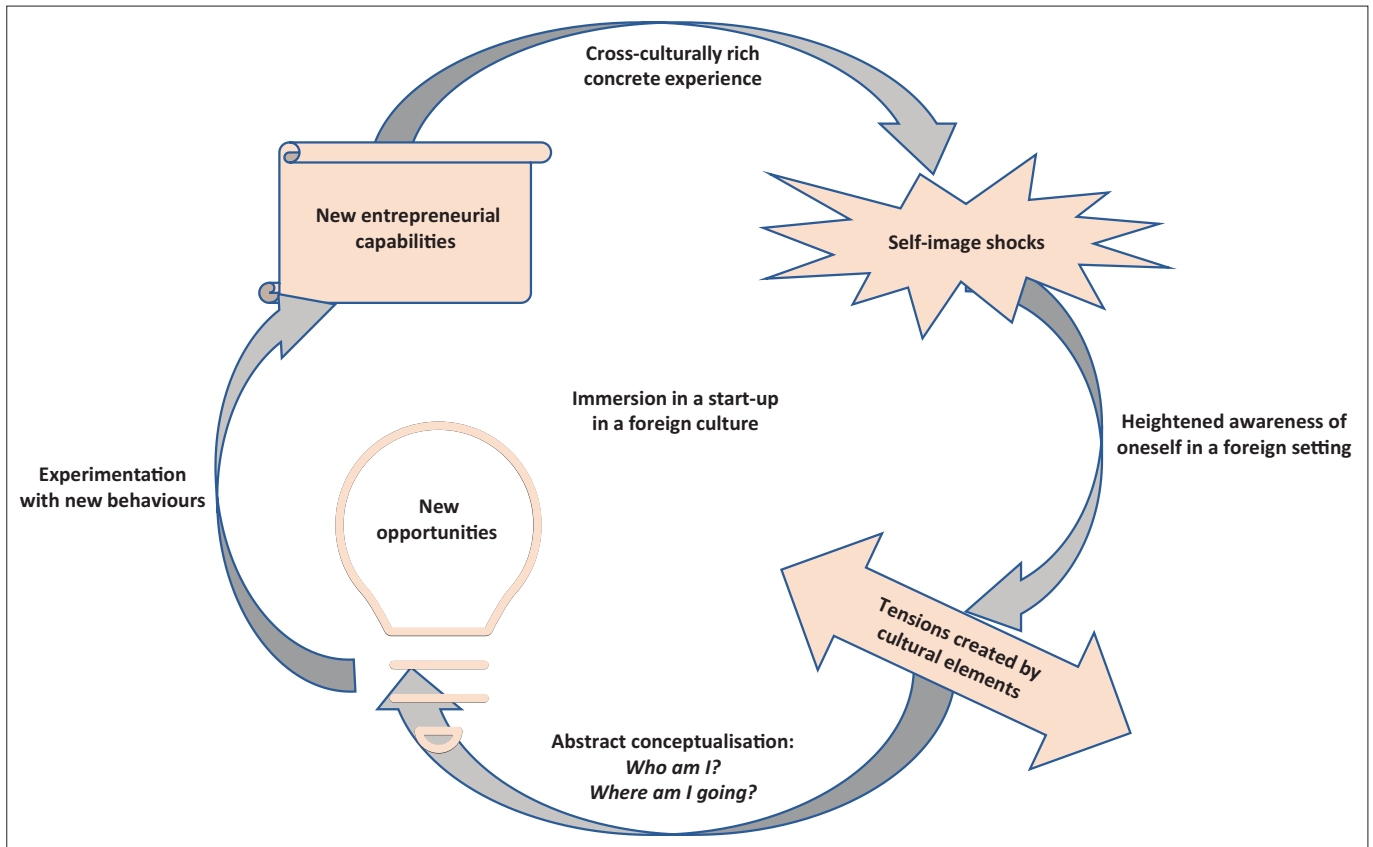


FIGURE 1: Conceptual model.

when comparing different experiences, people of different cultural backgrounds, under different circumstances and at different times. The research approach phenomenology, a strand of interpretivism, which focuses on participants' lived experiences, is followed, whereby the recollections and interpretations of the lived experiences of the participants in the internship programme are studied.

### The internship programme and learning context

The internship programme is situated in Bergen, the second-largest city in Norway. The internship programme is run by Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Campus Bergen, in close collaboration with entrepreneurial ecosystem actors, incubators and cluster organisations. The internship programme places approximately 50 Norwegian students and a few international students in internships, mainly startups. The city is well known for its dynamic and rich startup ecosystems as well as the coexistence of many globally oriented industry clusters in areas such as ocean technology, seafood and aquaculture, renewable technologies, maritime tech and media technologies (marineholmen.com). The internship programme is part of the INTPART programme (forskningsradet.no), which is a partnership between three Norwegian and two South African universities.

The internship programme enrolls master students with diverse educational backgrounds (engineers and business administration). The main content is a three-month internship

in a startup firm/innovative organisation. During the internship, the students interact closely with the entrepreneurial team and perform entrepreneurial tasks: market research, investor analysis, pitching for investors, prototyping and business model development, etc. Through practice-based learning, the students experience real entrepreneurial tasks and commercialisation of technology and as such develop entrepreneurial competences and skills. In parallel with the internships, students also attend afternoon innovation seminars with guest lecturers from industry, closely organised with the regional clusters.

The internship programme provides internships and a special programme for international students, including seminars on entrepreneurial learning, clusters, Norwegian history and institutional trust, as well as three innovation seminars together with the Norwegian students. During 2022, four South African students and one Polish master student were enrolled. Each international student is placed with a Norwegian intern. The students are assigned entrepreneurial tasks, which they perform in close interaction with the entrepreneurial team. The students are exposed to a wider entrepreneurial ecosystem, involving encounters with entrepreneurs, industry, universities, investors and others. Students will therefore need to adapt their learning to the entrepreneurial team and wider entrepreneurial ecosystem (Shwetzzer, Maritz & Nguyen 2019). We conceptualise that students' learning is culturally anchored on several levels (in interaction with the entrepreneurial team and the wider

ecosystem) and scrutinise how this interaction may influence their personal growth and ESE.

### Sampling strategy and student cohort

Purposive sampling was employed whereby data from the four South African (SA) students were used for analysis purposes (Harsh 2011). The logic of the sampling is selecting information-rich cases. The learning journey from these four students provided rich data revealing their cross-cultural experience and reflections of it. We purposely choose to explore the learning of only SA students because of the high cultural distance between South Africa and Norway. The students came from two different universities and had varied backgrounds regarding education, work-life experience and prior international cultural exposure. See information in Table 1, describing the students background and internships and tasks.

### Cultural distance between Norway and South Africa, enabling cross-cultural experience

Pidduck (2022) argues the cultural distance between the countries needs to be moderate and sufficiently large: 'to temporarily remove someone from their normative reference point' stimulating cross-cultural comparisons and new patterns. Roy et al. (2019) do also suggest the same (2019:1641): '... [S]tudents may develop greater cultural awareness and adaptability where there is a greater cultural distance between home and host culture'. We describe the cross-cultural experience to be moderately complex, with respect to breadth, depth and type (Pidduck 2022:276–277), incorporating work in internships, leisure time and university education over 3 months.

The cultural distance between Norway and South Africa is found to be significant according to Hall's classification of low- and high-context cultures, where Norway is classified as low context. South Africa has a complex culture and has a high-context culture predominant among the black community, whereas white South Africans have a low-context culture. In low-context cultures, the communication style is explicit, straightforward and relies mainly on verbal and written messages (Cardon 2008).

Norway has a relatively homogeneous culture with two official languages, whereas South Africa represents a more diverse culture with 11 official languages and a population with various ethnic groups. Although South Africa is one of the leading economies in Africa, it is a developing country with various social-economic challenges and rates relatively low on the global innovation index with a position of 61 compared to Norway on 20 out of 132 countries (WIPO 2021). Hence, we see the country-level difference, the perceived cultural distance or psychic distance between Norway and South Africa as sufficiently large.

### Reflective sessions as pedagogy, research design and data collection

The students participated in two reflective sessions as a group and critically reflected on their entrepreneurial learning and cross-cultural experiences. Three of the authors did also participate actively in the reflective sessions. The questions in the reflective sessions were inspired by the experiential learning cycle (Morris 2020) and grounded in entrepreneurial learning literature (Pittaway & Cope 2007; Pittaway & Thorpe 2012). The reflective sessions aimed to

**TABLE 1:** The students background, internships and tasks.

Student	Startup description	Tasks	Micro contextual factors	Macro contextual factors
George	A non-profit innovation centre operating in the fields of life science, ocean, energy and technology. Consists of a technology transfer office and start up office responsible for establishment and management of startup incubators.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Startup and accelerator programme assistant</li> <li>Co-run the startup idea-testing programme</li> <li>Organising events</li> <li>Introduction of alumni programme</li> <li>Marketing duties</li> <li>Administrative duties.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior knowledge of host country and organization relatively poor</li> <li>Internship seen as valuable for career</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Struggled with cultural differences</li> <li>Experienced workplace as embracing</li> <li>High trust</li> <li>Privacy valued</li> </ul>
Lori	A property technology company offering a Software as a Service (SaaS) platform that enables fast, easy and consolidated building maintenance tasks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Market research</li> <li>Creating business roadmap</li> <li>Meetings – observant</li> <li>Testing of SaaS platform</li> <li>Product development suggestions</li> <li>Product roadmap</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior knowledge of host country and organization relatively poor</li> <li>Internship seen as valuable mainly for knowledge building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Used to cultural diversity in background</li> <li>Experienced workplace as 'socialistic'</li> <li>High trust</li> <li>Safety – psychological</li> </ul>
Magda	This institute focuses on value additions of waste material with aim to develop various products that are 100% natural and subsequently create spin-offs for each product.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Market research</li> <li>Membership offerings</li> <li>Website analysis</li> <li>Terms &amp; conditions of institute</li> <li>Data capturing</li> <li>Product innovation, IPR protecting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior knowledge of host country and organization relatively poor</li> <li>Internship seen as valuable for career</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Used to cultural diversity in upbringing</li> <li>Workplace has collaborative style</li> <li>Privacy respected</li> </ul>
Zandile	Startup that use green technology and energy to produce CNFs from carbon dioxide as a feedstock and found new applications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Office administrative duties</li> <li>Market research into new potential uses and applications</li> <li>Identify potential customers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior knowledge of host country and organization relatively poor</li> <li>Internship seen as valuable for career</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Used to cultural diversity in home country</li> <li>Flat structure in workplace compared to hierarchy at home</li> <li>More relaxed working environment</li> </ul>

function as a supportive pedagogy (Neergaard, Robinson & Jones 2020) to enhance students' entrepreneurial learning experience, inducing students' critical reflective observations, abstract conceptualisation and their narratives about their experiences and behavioural experimentation. The assessment at the end of the internship is a reflection report about their entrepreneurial and cross-cultural journey.

Adopting a longitudinal study design, whereby a phenomenon is studied over an extended period (Saunders et al. 2019), we collected data via two reflective sessions with the students (in group) and a written (individual) reflection report, to understand each student's entrepreneurial cross-cultural experience, their personal growth and entrepreneurial learning and gained capabilities. The reflective sessions functioned also as a semi-structured interview with research-based questions as an interview guide. To ensure consistency in the data collection approach, the guide was based on a theoretical approach capturing entrepreneurial learning and cross-cultural experience. The first interview or reflective session took place within a month after starting the internship, where early cultural difference encounters as well as work tasks and experiences were captured. The second interview focused on personal growth through mastery and ESE, entrepreneurial learning that took place plus a review of any critical incidents that challenged them to respond and act. The reflective report required the students to reflect on the learning experience, lessons learnt, their individual entrepreneurial cross-cultural experiences, their personal growth and entrepreneurial capabilities gained and relating the experience to theory.

Each interview lasted about 2 h and was recorded with the consent of the respondent and transcribed. The transcribed data were shared for coding and thematic analysis. Prior to reporting the results, student names were removed and substituted with fictitious references, to protect the identity of the participant in accordance with the institutional ethical conditions governing the research process. By collectively engaging in multiple interviews and reflective engagement, the researchers established validity and claimed that the data collection process and analysis have accurately captured the participants' realities of the social phenomenon (Creswell & Miller 2000).

### Data analysis process

We conducted a thematic analysis inspired by a phenomenological approach (Smith, Jarman & Osborn 1999). Two reflective sessions were the primary source of data. As mentioned, the questions in the reflective sessions were research based and reflected central concepts in the literature. The first coding of data was mainly deductive coding, combined with inductive coding, as new themes were discovered in the analysis process. We initially analysed each student separately to develop intra-case themes of individual

students' learning journey. Thereafter, we analysed across students to develop inter-case themes. The last step involved an iterative and comparative process of tacking back and forth, coming up with the four central themes structuring the analysis chapter. The inductive research process stimulated the authors to search for new literature/concepts explaining the data, such as Pidduck (2022). The four authors separately read the data scripts and developed initial themes. The authors then together completed a final analysis, based on discussion of the material and emerging themes, which enhanced inter-rater reliability and research validity. Three authors followed the students learning process to varying degrees, allowing for several encounters and observations, cross-validating the findings.

In addition to data from the reflective sessions/reports, we also validated students' accounts with data from other perspectives, such as faculty and internship mentors who observed the students' learning and performance, to avoid the biases of using only students' self-reported data. See the triangulation of data and respondents in Table 2.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Faculty Committee for Research Ethics and Integrity (No. EBIT/74/2020).

### Results

Four overarching themes were uncovered from the thematic analysis. Below, we elaborate on these with selected quotes from the students.

**TABLE 2:** Triangulation – Other data sources/perspectives.

Type of data	Respondents
Observations and conversations at lectures and seminars in the internship programme in Bergen	<p><b>Faculty</b></p> <p>2 course responsible for the internship programme</p> <p>3 faculty giving seminars in the programme for SA students.</p> <p>2 faculty with special responsibility for the 4 SA students, lecture about entrepreneurial learning, reflective sessions and supervision of reflection report, &amp; communication and encounters throughout the internship period.</p> <p>2 faculty (Norwegian and South African) were examiner for oral exam and reflection report.</p>
Written references for the 4 students about performed tasks and work effort	Internship mentors/entrepreneurs
Research interviews with two internship mentors (conducted in a related research about the company perspective of having student interns)	Internship mentors/entrepreneurs for 2 SA students
The 4 SA students presented their learning experiences (oral accounts and discussions) at the Ecosystem seminar, and informal encounters during the visit and after students returned to SA.	South African delegation of faculty, Tech Transfer Offices, incubators visiting Bergen in an Ecosystem Seminar in May 2022
Presentation at a national conference on student mobility, of the experience of having a SA student intern	Internship mentor/entrepreneur to 1 SA student

## Learning about the entrepreneurial culture triggers comparison with own culture

The students were welcomed and rapidly integrated in the entrepreneurial startup team and immersed in the ecosystem culture, as reflected in the following quote:

'What I have most enjoyed is how the cofounders have transferred their passion of the start-up to the rest of the organisation. We all come together as a team for the general wellbeing of the organisation. Right after this meeting – I'm attending the career fair and I'm not attending it as a student, but as a representative of the company.' (Zandile, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

Through observations, interaction and performance of entrepreneurial tasks, as well as through several encounters and eye-opening incidents, they experienced how foreignness pushed them towards behavioural experimentation, leading to new attitudes and behaviours (Kubberød & Pettersen 2017, 2018a), reflected in the following quotes, when George and Magda understand that their perspectives and contributions are expected at the office:

'In terms of cultural differences, in South Africa, it's a lot more of discipline structure, rigidity and I think old fashioned KPs. Whereas here it's a lot more open and creative space. I guess it is an industry that allows and encourage bringing new ideas to the table. To bring your own perspective to management is often not very favorable or seen as a very good thing until now in South Africa. But here they encourage anyone to sort of speak up – which is quite nice. I do enjoy the culture and the atmosphere in the office. Like I don't find anything like that in South Africa.' (George, male, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

'Regarding the cultural differences that I saw – there's a lot of autonomy in the workspace. They delegate a lot, which I like. Observing the attitudes, they trust the employees a lot and there is a lot of collaboration.' (Magda, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

The immediate cultural and entrepreneurial immersion allowed the students to perform entrepreneurial task in close interaction with the team, which induced critical reflective observation about the ecosystem culture and cross-cultural learning. The experience of foreignness induced various degrees of small self-image shocks, with the resulting introspection of own self-image and identity, comparing with own culture and society:

'They sit together in an open floor, engaging in a lot of open communication, which I was warmly welcome to cheer. I'm sitting next to the project manager, whom I'm communicating instantly. It's a way more trusting culture and I think that carries through accountability and responsibility, I think it originates from a collective culture. And my perspective, at least South Africans, are way more individualistic.' (Lori, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

These accounts reveal that the students experienced heightened awareness of oneself in a foreign setting, induced by the situated uncertainty and ambiguity associated with being abroad. The small cultural self-image shocks of having a lot of autonomy and also being responsible as a trusted team member were stimulating and challenging.

## Embracing uncertainty and developing entrepreneurial capabilities

The SA students were all given challenging and novel tasks developing their knowledge base. They worked both independently and interactive in teams, having mentors and team members available for questions and emotional support:

'They work tasks are characterized by uncertainty, but I can cope because I have the team support. Embracing uncertainty, forces you to go a little bit out of your comfort zone and I think I learn so much more. Sometimes we would get tasks and I don't really know what I'm supposed to do, but then we just end up jumping in – and then once we started it becomes clearer, like what direction are we supposed to go. And this is when you can also bring in your creativity and develop new skills.' (Magda, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

The close collaboration and team spirit in the internships lowered the negative emotions of handling uncertainty and ambiguity in the entrepreneurial process. However, the expectations from the start-up also challenged the students in new ways that they have never experienced in their home culture:

'The work tasks are definitely new. I've never been allocated to marketing and sales or doing business development tasks, so for me, it's a big shift. I'm more of an introvert, but this has required me to step outside of my introversion and being allocated to contact potential customers personally. So, part of my work is building the need for this product in industry using green technology, by creating the market demand and selling it. I must be able to make them realize the need and benefits, which has been the most uncertain and risky part – to channel my thinking into something innovative.' (Zandile, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

Over time, the students gradually developed an entrepreneurial mindset of working agile as this learning account reveals:

'To summarize my business environment – everything is fast paced, but that's great for me. Having new problems thrown at you every day, is barely stimulating. I've also found that the complete interaction absolutely fuels me. As well as running this early startup development program, we are problem solvers. If anything comes up, we solve it. I have a background with finance, marketing, and management strategy and get to employ each one of those parts of myself every single day. It's constantly unusual, and I like to be challenged.' (George, male, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

For Lori, the entrepreneurial aspect was at some point in the learning process more challenging than she could handle, reflected in this quote:

'The task of helping the company to expand to an international market, was challenging because it's very entrepreneurial. Thinking of how they could expand? That was very difficult for me. I didn't even know what to look for. I was assigned somebody to assist me, a helpful and nice guy, but unfortunately, he was very busy. I overcame by doing market research to try and find out what is the best option from Google. I felt a heavy responsibility, the company isn't a big company. This is a big deal for them – and could have a significant impact.' (Lori, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

The students performed challenging entrepreneurial tasks individually and together with the team constantly overcoming personal barriers. New and unfamiliar situations induced by cultural differences enhanced their repertoire of behaviours creating new possibilities to learn more about one's potential but also limits.

### Transformational learning through self-image shocks

All students faced to varying degrees 'self-image shocks' and went through a transformative learning experience during the internships in Bergen, Norway. The cross-cultural experience of immersing themselves in a foreign environment hence triggered a personally transformational experience, which Pidduck (2022) denotes; 'shocks to the system', assumed to trigger reflection and change in self-image. This push stimulated a critical introspection about themselves, increasing self-awareness and developing an understanding of how things work, what they could do (capabilities, ESE) and who they were as a person or had transformed to be (self-image), through how Zandile reflects on the new perspectives she obtained from contrasting and embracing two cultures:

'My internship has also made me more conscious of my culture and my background. I've been able to recognize my own culture as well as knowing the Norwegian culture and being able to embrace both. I've also grown in embracing that I can keep learning – no one can ever know everything at any point. And it's just a matter of you keeping that consistent mindset – that in any situation that I find myself in, I need to open myself even more to learning and just finding opportunity and challenges. I think working in the internship has been that highlight to say – how do we convert what other people perceive as challenges into opportunities? So that's been my personal growth.' (Zandile, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

The personal growth and transformation related to very deep personal reflections about their personal identity, 'Who am I' (value image) and 'Where am I going' (trajectory image). The experience did also transformed them as an entrepreneurial person, being capable of working entrepreneurially, developing self-efficacy in new and unexpected areas:

'I think I have grown, particularly in the situation of teamwork. I've learned to be a bit more of a team player, which – in retrospect – I needed to. I often consider myself a little bit of a Lone Wolf. I have run off with tasks by myself or felt I work better on my own. Sitting down with everyone and speak – would frustrate me in the past, slowing down the process as I could do things faster – just by myself. In SA I've been taught all my life that it's you alone and you got to run with it. No one's going to support you. Now, I have learned to sit with people and really consider their perspectives, I've learned to be part of a team.' (George, male, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

Going through the process also opens for new discoveries about oneself as a citizen not only in SA but in the world and how transformational this process can be in terms of personal development, which this account pinpoints:

'I have grown personally. It is strange coming from South Africa with all the various cultures and diverse perceptions there. But you

kind of grew up with it. So just realizing, there are other people and systems out there, my stay here did help me to see the value of being even more open minded about perceptions. What I learned in terms of entrepreneurial activity, and society I learned the value of informal collaboration, stepping outside of your boundaries, being creative. I received very positive feedback, and that was very encouraging for the general confidence. I became more confident.' (Lori, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

### Can I become a future entrepreneur? Where am I going?

Being immersed and being capable of performing entrepreneurially in a vibrant and competitive entrepreneurial ecosystem in a foreign country did also stimulate to reflections about becoming an entrepreneur in the future. The observations of others and themselves, as active participants in high-performing innovative startups – enhanced their confidence of being capable of establishing a company in the future. Experiencing, understanding and coping with the uncertainties inherent in a startup venture did also reinforce their beliefs of own entrepreneurial capability:

'I have developed confidence of my skills and knowledge in the entrepreneurial environment, which I really appreciate, and have become accustomed to uncertainty and risk. I can deal with uncertainty a bit more now and can rather just go with the flow and learn to identify what risks and uncertainties are acceptable and which risks and uncertainties need to be addressed. After this internship I've realized that I would and can undertake an entrepreneurial venture in the future, perhaps not only by myself, but with other people as well.' (Lori, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

The internship experience did also spur their motivation and passion for entrepreneurship. In the quote below, Zandile reflects about 'Where am I going'? And do they see themselves as entrepreneurs in the future (trajectory image), as Zandile's account reveals:

'Initially I started my master's to grow in my professional career as an x engineer, but I have now learned to apply theory and analysis tools from my master's in an entrepreneurial setting. And I have learned to cope in terms of risks and uncertainty. I've always had business ideas, but always shied away from exploring them. But now I can see myself as an entrepreneur. From this experience I have more zeal dealing with uncertainty and risk.' (Zandile, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

Not all trajectory images are entrepreneurial, and entrepreneurial experiences can have the opposite effect and spur alternative career aspirations:

'I see myself less as an entrepreneur now. I see myself more as a manager. I can see the entrepreneurs' vision, but I'm not creative and I hate risk. If you're entrepreneur, you should be creative. You should be taking risk and coming up with crazy ideas and I don't do that. But I can take an idea, a vision, analyze the process and help with implementation. So, ESE went down the drain, but managerial self-efficiency has been strengthened.' (Lori, female, intern, Masters in Management related programme)

Being part of an entrepreneurial environment had all in all a positive effect on the students' aspirations, whether they were more clearly entrepreneurially oriented or not. Still,



the last account really pinpoints other aspirations for future support and manager roles that are valuable in the innovation ecosystem.

## Discussion

This study explored students' learning opportunities and outcomes of rich cross-cultural learning experiences for students, firstly in terms of personal growth (who I am and where I am going to) and secondly students' ESE and future entrepreneurial ambitions. The South African students were immediately immersed in a contextually rich learning setting, working in internships in a vibrant ecosystem, imbued with foreignness in terms of cultures, language, histories and economies. Through this immersion, the students experienced new concepts, worldviews and systems – referred to as the big Cs (Pidduck 2022) and more specifically phenomena such as institutional trust (Martela et al. 2020), industry clusters (Kuah 2002), social norms motivating collaboration and innovation and teamwork.

Although the differences were experienced as an adventure with time, comparison between the homegrown well-known country and unknown of a foreign country started to take place from start, resulting further in introspection of identity and self-image.

The South African students came from different backgrounds, different ethnic groups and culture within South Africa. Whereas Hofstede's culture refers to elements that are collectively shared by members of a particular group (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2005), Ghauri and Usunier (eds. 2003) found that cultural programming is limited by the distinct nature of individuals as they have different ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting. However, despite the differences in ethnical backgrounds of the South African students, all of them were captivated by the culture of trust and openness within the Norwegian startups.

The students experienced power distance, one of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, by how the startup individuals perceived power to be distributed among employees even to the newly joined students and interns. This also draws onto Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension. The collectivism, exemplified by teamwork and collaborative norms, experienced in the work environment by the students contributed to building their self-esteem by overcoming uncertainty and ambiguity in the entrepreneurial process. The sense of being worth and becoming more confident in the foreign startup enhanced their entrepreneurial learning capabilities. Moreover, the students performed challenging entrepreneurial tasks individually and together with the team, stimulating their own creativity and skills. Personal growth further took place by embracing both the Norwegian and South African cultures and identifying new opportunities by building on the students' diverse background.

The personal growth achieved by overcoming the initial uncertainties and fears resulting from working in a foreign

environment and tasked with novel assignments increased the ESE of the students. Being part of an entrepreneurial environment within the startup did also have a positive effect on the students' entrepreneurial identity aspirations.

This article contributes to the criticism raised against Kolb's conceptualisation of experiential learning (Morris 2020) with regard to Kolb's failure to stipulate that learning is situated in context (fluidity of place and time) and the failure to consider the social context of learning. Moreover, the research highlights that the cross-cultural experience and foreignness can represent a powerful situated learning arena stimulating to students' introspection of self-image and the building of an entrepreneurial identity. Our research, therefore, contributes to research emphasising identity-based motivation for entrepreneurial behaviours (Donnellon, Ollila & Middleton 2014; Farmer et al. 2011; Middleton 2013), by highlighting cross-cultural experiences to be particularly powerful in inducing identity developments and aspirations.

The research also impacts by combining two research streams: the revised experiential learning cycle (Morris 2020) and cross-cultural learning through self-image shocks (Pidduck 2022), showing how students in internships abroad can grow and develop their ESE. The international and cross-cultural dimension in EE is to our knowledge overlooked and hence neglected as a rich situated learning context to develop entrepreneurial mindsets, skills and competences, as well as entrepreneurial identities and aspirations. Furthermore, the cross-cultural experience is found to be powerful in inducing personal growth and self-awareness, as well as cognitive complexity and cross-cultural skills for students in international internships, adding to existing research on expatriates/managers (Adler & Aycan 2018; Pidduck 2022; Yamazaki & Kayes 2004).

The research specifically investigates students in one internship programme in startups that explicitly aims to build entrepreneurial learning and capabilities. Hence, the relationship between foreignness and entrepreneurship is evident, referring to Pidduck (2020) and assumptions about the connection between the cross-cultural experience and entrepreneurial capabilities. Besides, this study confirmed that critical reflective observation was an essential component of the experiential learning process, whereby students realise through critical reflection, the learning that took place (Morris 2020). Yet, the reflective sessions, as a pedagogic tool, did also assumingly spur and strengthen students' reflections and hence the experiential learning. Scholars in EE have also demonstrated the usefulness of pedagogic tools supporting students' entrepreneurial and transformational learning (e.g. Neergard et al. 2021).

This article discusses the experiential learning of South African students during an internship experience in Norway. In many ways, the students' experiences are in alignment with established theory, and the degree of contrast was more an enlightening experience, as opposed to a cultural shock, and the experiences were generally positive, given the high level of engagement from an early stage, the support and

mentoring and recognition of the contribution the interns could make. Hence, the research underscores the high value and learning effects for students going abroad in internships, equipping students with critical competences in a globalised world (Pidduck 2020).

The research has several limitations. It is generally challenging for universities to organise and provide high-quality internships (Maaravi et al. 2021), and extra challenging in countries lacking a culture for appreciating student internships in companies and startups (Meld.St.7 2020–2021). Therefore, one research limitation could be that the findings are difficult to generalise as rich cross-cultural learning contexts in internships are difficult to replicate. Universities may also have varying experience and resources to provide such a learning experience (Maaravi et al. 2021). Besides, it can be challenging globally to find vibrant and appreciating entrepreneurial ecosystems willing to integrate student interns in their teams and startup environment.

The research only investigated the cross-cultural entrepreneurial learning of four South African students in one internship programme in Norway, which limits the external validity of the findings. Scholars also assume cross-cultural entrepreneurial learning to be highly individual, powerful and emotional (Kubberød & Pettersen 2018a, 2018b). Students therefore may cope differently with the cross-cultural entrepreneurial experience. Moreover, it is difficult for educators to facilitate/design for individual students' development of entrepreneurial capabilities and personal growth.

## Contribution

To further test the assumptions and findings in this research, it is recommended to conduct similar studies in other countries and with different nationalities, comparing the international experiences of interns from different countries, to better understand the nature of culture shocks and cross-cultural experiences, assuming also that the cultural distance between countries may impact the learning outcomes of students (Pidduck 2022; Roy et al. 2019). Most research on student mobility is done on American and European students (Roy et al. 2019). Our research therefore adds to existing studies, by investigating South African students in an international internship in Norway.

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### Authors' contributions

I.B.P., E.K., E.v.d.L. and A.C.N., all contributed towards the conceptualisation, methodology, analysis, visualisation, writing review and editing of the article, with the first two

authors focusing on the original draft of the introduction and conceptual section of the paper.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.N., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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