

Socialisation, learning, and value co-creation: confidence to soft employability skills for international students

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Abstract

Purpose – Socialisation plays a significant role in education, especially for international students, as it helps them develop soft skills that are increasingly valued by employers in the global job market. Since value creation relies on the joint efforts of both the university and the student, these peer interactions play a crucial role in enhancing perceived value. Guided by Weidman's (1989) seminal framework, this study explores the factors that influence the student's socialisation process and examines its implications for value co-creation, as conceptualised through Vargo and Lusch's Service-Dominant Logic.

Design/methodology/approach – The post-pandemic (Covid-19) study is based on 33 in-depth interviews with international students in Australia.

Findings – By focussing on the joint creation of value between students and institutions, the study highlights that employability extends beyond the mere acquisition of skills; it involves creating value through meaningful interactions, such as normative perspectives and socialisation processes, which affect students through informal and formal exchanges. Such interactions not only contribute to students' development but also play a crucial role in building their employability confidence. The findings also highlight how socialisation contributes to understanding different personality traits among international students as they adapt to new academic and cultural environments.

Originality/value – This study offers valuable insights into the co-creation of value in higher education, particularly as it relates to the socialisation experiences of international students. By integrating the concepts of socialisation and value co-creation, the research enriches existing knowledge on student engagement and development. Additionally, this study lays the groundwork for future research.

Keywords International students, Student learning, Socialisation, Value co-creation

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Socialisation serves as a powerful catalyst in shaping educational outcomes and professional readiness. As [Olweny \(2017\)](#) notes, socialisation is a great influencer of education, extending learning beyond the confines of textbooks and classrooms. Through social interactions, collaboration, and exposure to diverse perspectives, students develop a deeper understanding of societal values, norms, and expectations. This process nurtures essential soft skills such as communication, adaptability, empathy, and teamwork, competencies that are increasingly recognised as critical for employability in an interconnected and rapidly changing world

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(Trinidad *et al.*, 2023). In today's global job markets, where technical knowledge alone is insufficient, the ability to navigate complex social and cultural dynamics has become a defining marker of professional success. Since socialisation not only complements academic learning but also equips students with the interpersonal acumen required to excel in diverse professional environments, it is essential to further explore this phenomenon to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms, contextual influences, and practical implications that influence its outcomes, particularly through value creation.

Macro-level trends shape students' transition and socialisation, as it is at this level that policies, actions, and pathways are developed and implemented (Pham and Soltani, 2021). Drawing on the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), as cited in Allen and White (2017), a framework developed through the consensus of business leaders, educators, and policymakers highlights the essential skills required for success in the modern workforce. Among the four key teaching and learning principles identified, social skills are explicitly recognised as critical for facilitating smooth transitions from education to professional environments.

The literature shows that international students transform their identities through a process of socialisation that aligns them with the evolving demands of the labour market. This transformation is facilitated by a higher education environment that cultivates career-ready individuals, equipping them to facilitate diverse social contexts and transition effectively into professional life (Soltani and Tomlinson, 2024). Authors opine that international students' transition experiences are shaped not only by macro- and meso-level institutional structures but also by the nuanced, micro-level interactions they have with peers, educators, and other social agents. These everyday, grassroots engagements play a crucial role in fostering belonging, developing social and academic skills, and navigating the complexities of their educational and broader social environments (Pham and Soltani, 2021).

Some findings suggest that international students in Australia still encounter difficulties related to social connections, isolation, and a sense of belonging, which in turn limits the institutions' capacity to offer truly cosmopolitan and globally enriching educational experiences (Arkoudis *et al.*, 2019). The findings between domestic and international students also indicate that experiences of discrimination had a direct negative impact on protective factors, such as a sense of belonging, and indirectly influenced outcomes like students' average grades and their engagement in cross-cultural interactions (Glass and Westmont, 2014). Furthermore, students from Asian countries exhibit distinct socialisation patterns compared to their domestic peers, particularly in how connectedness relates to their interactions with co-cultural groups (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2007).

Although domestic and international students engage in social interactions, stark differences in culture, language proficiency, and communication styles often act as barriers that restrict deeper socialisation among international students, requiring the need for intentional support structures to bridge these divides (Ngobia, 2011). Domestic students who reside on campus often experience challenges similar to those faced by international students, including homesickness, financial pressures, limited social support, adjustments to new routines, and academic difficulties while away from home (Omachinski, 2014). One can argue that universities can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity to strengthen intercultural competence and students' employability skills.

The study provides a rationale for understanding the differences between international and domestic students in higher education because it highlights how varying socialisation processes, cultural backgrounds, and experiences, such as language barriers, discrimination, and differing expectations, tend to influence their socialisation process, sense of belonging, and overall educational outcomes. Thus, the study aims to explore socialisation and understand how it can become an intrinsic part of a student's value-adding learning outcome for employability.

Drawing on Weidman's (1989) seminal framework, this research unpacks the factors influencing the student socialisation process through the following objectives:

- (1) To examine the differences in socialisation processes between international and domestic students, considering factors such as cultural background, language barriers, discrimination, and differing expectations, and to explore how these processes influence students' sense of belonging, engagement, and professional outcomes.
- (2) To apply [Weidman's \(1989\)](#) socialisation framework to identify the formal and informal factors shaping student socialisation within Australian higher education.
- (3) To highlight areas that support meaningful value co-creation and employability, and to provide recommendations for interventions and future research through the lens of Weidman's framework.

Model explanation

Weidman's model highlights that successful socialisation is an active, reciprocal process in which students are influenced by their academic environment. This active participation is exactly what value co-creation thrives on. Students are not just recipients of education; they engage and co-create to form the educational experience for themselves. Value co-creation positions students, universities, and industry partners as collaborative stakeholders in facilitating learning experiences that directly enhance graduate employability. For instance, researchers have used a framework grounded in Service-Dominant Logic, comprising three core elements, "resources", "interaction", and "value", to guide university-industry collaboration aimed at co-creating and enhancing engineering collaboration skills among engineers ([Hasbullah and Nordin, 2019](#), p. 30).

Referring to the body of the literature from Vygotsky's theory of social development, social behaviours are developed based on the actions of peers and other authority figures and in this process, they develop a "zone of proximal development" ([Gredler, 2012](#), p. 118). This leads to a debate about what a learner can and cannot do. While Piaget's theory ([Gallagher, 2002](#)) observes that individuals develop their social behaviour cognitively, and not from the actions of others. This connection between socialisation and education outcomes can be extended to the development of soft employability skills, as students graduate, building on their interpersonal and professional capabilities required to thrive in a diverse and dynamic workplace.

Weidman's framework also contributes to crucial perceptions of student identity development ([Weidman et al., 2014](#)). As represented in [Figure 1](#) below, the first stage suggests the student's background and characteristics, and the second reflects on the social patterns of influence that impact student socialisation. This involves organisational dimensions of the learning environment in the programs offered by universities. More centrally located are the primary socialisation experiences that involve normative contexts consisting of the socialisation processes (the interaction, integration, and learning) and the core components that involve knowledge acquisition, investment, and involvement.

[Weidman et al. \(2014\)](#) also suggest that the framework recognises the impact of the normative contexts that can influence students' academic, social and personal development on three counts, first, involving intellectual learning such as class activities, seminars, lectures and libraries. Second, the more informal settings that a student would interact with (for instance, residence halls, cafes and other services), and lastly, the setting through which collaboration, communication and co-curricular activities take place with peer and faculty members that offer intellectual services. These aspects of interactions lead to the socialisation processes that form student outcomes and experiences, which are related to outputs, such as career aspirations, value building, and other aspirations. In this research, the output considered was value co-creation which allows us to explore the relationship between how students adapt socially, how they co-create value (e.g. through collaborative learning, peer's interaction and

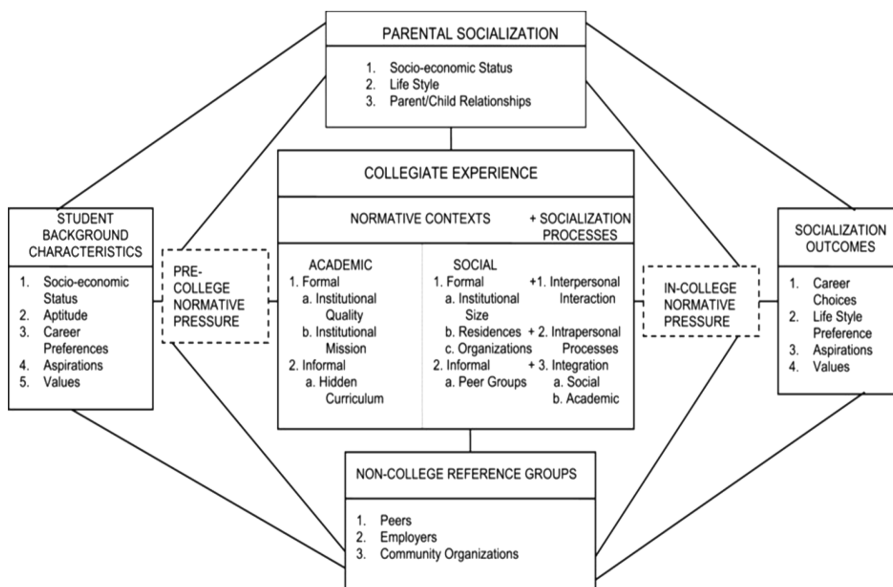


Figure 1. Weidman's framework socialisation. Source: Weidman (1989, p. 299)

extracurricular engagement), and how these experiences form essential soft skills such as communication, problem solving, adaptability, and intercultural competence that employers seek.

Socialisation serves as a critical influencer in education, shaping not only the acquisition of knowledge but also language socialisation and the development of soft employability skills essential for workforce readiness (Duff, 2017). Through interactions with peers, educators, and diverse social contexts, learners cultivate competencies such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. These soft skills, often embedded within group projects, classroom discussions, and extracurricular engagement, complement formal education and are transferable over time (Nägele and Stalder, 2016). As employers increasingly value such attributes alongside technical expertise, socialisation within educational environments emerges as a vital process for enhancing graduate employability and long-term career success.

Employability, soft skills and socialisation

Employability depends more on other skills. There is a strong link between employability and soft skills such as socialisation. These skills are often developed and demonstrated as part of the process within social contexts. Through socialisation, such as teamwork for instance, individuals naturally practice and refine their soft skills. Robles (2012) identifies social skills as one of the ten key interpersonal abilities that constitute soft skills, often regarded as forms of tacit knowledge transmitted through shared experiences (Marosi, 2014). Research grounded in Occupational Socialisation Theory illustrates how such socialisation processes influence the ways physical educators interpret and apply pedagogical models (Richards and Gordon, 2017). In the context of higher education, universities and training programs deliberately embed employability outcomes through group projects, presentations, peer feedback, networking activities, and industry engagement. Importantly, professional socialisation is not uniform; it is shaped by students' prior experiences, their capacity for reflection, and the values and beliefs promoted within the curriculum (Howkins and Ewens, 1999). These

activities should not be dismissed as routine academic tasks. Rather, they represent critical socialisation processes through which students develop, refine, and internalise the employability-related soft skills that employers increasingly demand.

Weidman's framework extends beyond academic development to include affective outcomes such as career choices, aspirations, values, and lifestyle preferences. Crucially, it also highlights the potential to examine how socialisation shapes cognitive outcomes and employability. By positioning employability within this framework, future research can more effectively capture the ways in which socialisation processes influence not only what students know, but also who they become as professionals. This makes Weidman's model a powerful tool for understanding how higher education prepares students for meaningful careers.

Method

The research uses a qualitative approach to get the best outcome for interpretive research, where respondents freely talk about their experiences. After obtaining ethics approval, and before conducting the interviews, a focus group pilot study was undertaken to enhance the validity and relevance of the research design and interview protocol, and questions. Interviews were conducted over six months using Zoom Video Communications Inc. (Zoom), and each was scheduled for an hour, but time was not restricted (Gray *et al.*, 2020). The findings of the focus groups pilot study and some items from the literature (Matthews *et al.*, 2019a, b; Slaten *et al.*, 2018) guided the study apart from other general questions. Questions regarding students' self-reflectiveness were asked, which refers to the ability to observe and evaluate one's own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Through this process, individuals develop a clearer self-identity, an understanding of who they are, what they value, and how they relate to the world. As people engage in self-reflection, they begin to recognise consistent patterns in their preferences, energy levels, and social behaviours. These patterns can be aligned with personality traits such as introversion and extroversion.

Methodological triangulation was used by comparing what was said in the interviews and the focus group pilot study. The study employed a triangulation method to strengthen the credibility and depth of the findings by integrating multiple perspectives. This involved systematically analysing various viewpoints to identify recurring themes, keywords, and categories, ensuring that interpretations were not biased by a single perspective. In addition, investigator triangulation was applied by sharing the researcher's observations with other researchers and by collecting data at different stages of the study. These multiple sources of observation and data were then compared and cross-validated, providing a robust mechanism to confirm patterns, reduce subjectivity, and enhance both the reliability and trustworthiness of the results. This rigorous approach ensured that the findings reflect a comprehensive and well-substantiated understanding of the phenomena under investigation. To maintain anonymity, each participant was assigned a unique identification number, and no personally identifiable information was recorded in the dataset.

To increase reliability, the researcher documented the procedures undertaken during the research (Mustafa, 2021), checked transcripts for apparent errors, and confirmed code definitions did not "drift", to enable all material within a code to be accurately related. Reflexivity was established through which participants were asked to confirm their answers after the interviewer had either prompted them by asking them to repeat their position or the researcher restated their position and asked if this was their claim (Dodgson, 2019). Anonymity of the participants was observed by assigning numbers to each participant. NVivo was used to analyse the data. Patterns within the data obtained were developed to assist better understanding of the results; both direct interpretations of the responses of the participants and collective responses were used to express the results (Allsop *et al.*, 2022). The qualitative data analysis was coded using three stages, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, the researcher analysed each script line by line. Sentences or paragraphs of interest were highlighted and then coded using an open coding tool.

Australian students constitute a significant portion of the higher education population, while international recruitment remains a strategic priority for both universities and the government, supported by positive engagement outcomes in 27 of 30 Australian studies surveyed (Harris *et al.*, 2017). The sample was recruited from four major Melbourne universities through emails sent to international student cohorts. Initially, 18 participants were selected to allow an in-depth exploration of experiences while keeping the dataset manageable for qualitative analysis. As the study progressed, 15 additional participants were included to enrich the data, broaden perspectives, confirm recurring themes, and ensure data saturation (Creswell, 2009). This approach enabled the capture of both common and less frequent experiences, avoiding overgeneralisation while providing a nuanced understanding of international students' socialisation and learning journeys. The final sample was diverse across degree programs and disciplines, strengthening the credibility, transferability, and applicability of the findings (see Appendix). Participants were acknowledged with a \$50 shopping voucher as a token of appreciation for their time.

Findings

The findings from the interviews can be seen through the lens of Weidman's framework. The outcomes relate to the student expectations and value co-creation, which is important for universities as service providers to support. Each of these themes is outlined below.

Anticipatory and normative challenges influencing course selection

Parental socialisation is one component of the socialisation process in the model, which determines the lifestyles, higher socio-economic status and parent/child relationships, which seem to be the obvious support for many UG international students. International students' university choices and how they socialise with agents and their peers are two areas that would fall under the reference group's socialisation. Anticipatory socialisation is construed as "the acquisition of values and orientations found in statuses and groups in which one is not yet engaged but which one is likely to enter" (Merton, 1968, p. 438). According to the proposed framework by Weidman, normative pressure, such as reference groups, includes an anticipatory dimension (pre-college or university) that is likely to influence the character of a student's experience. It suggests that support from the reference group for socialisation is seen as important (Cruz *et al.*, 2024), and so is course attraction and information.

Within the following themes, two sub-themes emerged as follows – Course attraction and information. Course attraction was fundamentally the most important for the anticipatory and preparation role of the student (Sithole *et al.*, 2017). It was based on one of the following factors, namely *future job prospects, previous course/continuation, course subjects, close friends and family members' influence, and pursuing a different field of study*.

The following quotes demonstrate the views of the participants: P10: *I think it's because this university XXX on the course has the science component and also the management component. But I feel that it's good to be able to pursue these two . . . - in terms of expanding my knowledge. Not just in science. But in various [unclear] management and science, as well making me more employable.* . Course attractiveness plays a crucial role in students' anticipatory and preparatory decisions, with more marketable courses consistently driving higher enrolments (Sithole *et al.*, 2017).

University of choice and location were also considered equally important. Research shows that international students pay importance to three areas: what the city has to offer, social life, and academics (Perez-Encinas *et al.*, 2020). P2 chose XXX university because of the better course structure offered by the university compared to other universities in Victoria, as it was less complicated, compared to other universities with more employability options. According to P2, fees were not a major difference in choosing the universities. Data following the fee increase indicated that the main motivation for pursuing higher education was the career prospects linked to obtaining a degree (Kaye and Bates, 2017).

Course Information on the other hand showed, external socialisation influences regarding information were also considered to be important. This idea is also recognised by Johnson (2011) and Davis *et al.* (2019). The participants mentioned different types of methods to obtain information regarding their courses. Course information strategies include *internet search, close family and friends, education agents, and university open day/open week*. The internet search involves analysing different university websites and choosing the best university based on individual/personal reasons, such as access, friends/family, location, employability opportunities, and course. Some participants (P2, P5, P10) relied on education agents, who support students in selecting programs, securing scholarships, and choosing universities (Kern *et al.*, 2019). Interaction with peers, agents, and faculty enhances the socialisation process, while the quality and appeal of courses directly influence students' preparedness for employability (Storen and Aamodt, 2010).

Normative context of academic assimilation influences socialisation

The socialisation of individuals in an organisational environment is twofold. One relates to social interaction, that is, the interpersonal processes by which individuals are socialised, the other refers to the organisational structure. This indicates the characteristics of the service provider that would exert socialisation influences on students. Weidman *et al.* (2014) also suggest that the framework (1989) recognises the impact of normative contexts that can influence students' academic, social and personal development on three counts: one, involving intellectual learning such as class activities seminars, lectures, libraries; two, the more informal settings that a student would interact with (residence halls, cafes and other services) and lastly the setting through which collaboration, communication and cocurricular activities that take place with the faculty members. Researchers have also found that sustained dialogue is a conditional requirement for student learning (Meschitti, 2019). These are factors that help develop students.

Academic assimilation involves socialisation processes such as interaction, integration, and learning, along with core components like knowledge acquisition, investment, and involvement. These occur within both formal and informal contexts, where students form attachments to people and environments, leading to outcomes like skills development, institutional commitment, and personal identity formation (Spott *et al.*, 2021; Weidman *et al.*, 2014). Socialisation in this context can be viewed in two ways: first, through interpersonal relationships involving belonging, learning, and cultural integration; and second, through institutional structures such as curriculum design, internships, fieldwork, and work experience. These are discussed below:

Interpersonal interaction effects on the socialisation process. A crucial part of the socialisation process in higher education involves not just formal learning, but also the emotional connections and feelings students develop concerning others. These emotional aspects, including sentiments, feelings, and a sense of attachment, deeply influence how well students adjust and engage. On a personal (intrapersonal) level, students reflect on and evaluate their own experiences. This could involve how satisfied they feel with the university, their perception of the institution, and whether it aligns with their personal goals and values (Weidman and Krus, 1979). Moreover, research has shown that a strong sense of belonging, the feeling that one fits in and is accepted, is especially important. This supports the idea that positive socialisation experiences, those that make students feel connected and supported, are key to their engagement and success in higher education, as also indicated by Hakkola and colleagues (2020).

Sense of belonging. A sense of belonging has been positively linked to international students' academic success (Strayhorn, 2012). While some scholars argue that a sense of belonging is fundamental to the socialisation process and contributes to success in higher education and personal development (Mwangi, 2016), others view it as an outcome of socialisation (Jeong *et al.*, 2020). Strayhorn (2012) offers a more nuanced definition, suggesting that a strong sense of belonging can lead to positive outcomes for students.

Participants in the study reported feeling a sense of belonging, which was facilitated through *being welcomed, joining social or spiritual groups, and building and maintaining relationships*. Many students emphasised the importance of being warmly received by the university community, particularly during the challenging context of the pandemic. The services provided by the university to international students upon their arrival on the campus form a sense of welcome. P8 highlighted that despite the availability of a transport system from the airport to campus, he experienced feelings of loneliness and a lack of welcome—demonstrating that initial impressions significantly shape a student’s sense of belonging. International students, in particular, represent a distinct category of sojourners (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2007), for whom these early experiences are critical in fostering engagement and integration.

Furthermore, student organisations play a significant role in facilitating a sense of welcome for newcomers to the university environment. In some cases, universities or student clubs organise welcome events and offer small gifts to help international students feel acknowledged and included as they transition into their new academic and social settings.

University student support services play a major role in welcoming new students. According to P9, student support “includes aspects such as language, a new environment (living area), banking services requirements, and contact details (such as a new telephone number and electronic mail). Student organisations/clubs also contribute to a sense of belonging”. P5 mentioned that the “student organisations/clubs were friendly and very welcoming which enabled the formation of a sense of belonging. Although some students did not participate in orientation or welcoming week, they felt welcomed into the university due to forming and maintaining relationships with their peers”. However, P4 observed that joining forums, groups, or clubs contributes meaningfully to creating a sense of belonging among students. For example, P6 joined a Christian club despite not identifying as Christian and reported feeling welcomed and included as a member, which initiated a strong sense of belonging. Many of these groups are accessible through social media platforms such as Facebook and WeChat (commonly used by Chinese students). Cultural clubs, such as the Malaysian Society, Chinese Society, and Traditional Asian Art Society, help students who may feel homesick or overwhelmed by the overseas lifestyle. During the pandemic, only a few groups remained active online, including the Malaysian Society. P18 noted that “students are new, and through personal interactions, they realised they were making mistakes,” highlighting how such engagement also facilitates informal learning and adaptation to the new environment.

Learning from mistakes is a valuable soft skill that enhances employability and serves as a crucial asset in the workplace (Kwok and Kwong, 2022). The experience of making mistakes, followed by self-reflection and corrective action, supports the development of resilience, adaptability, and effective problem-solving abilities in students.

Staff, mentors, and tutors’ support also plays a significant role in developing a sense of welcome. P13 joined a mentoring program. In this program, four to five first-year students are connected (paired together) with a senior student who becomes a mentor. P13 mentioned that the mentor was helpful and took care of them and also answered all the questions that enabled them to settle well into a new environment. Other participants reported mixed experiences with student and staff support. Although there is often a misalignment between the internship goals of businesses and educational institutions, many students do not actively seek to bridge this gap (Zehr and Korte, 2020).

Knowledge acquisition, investment, and involvement. Student engagement is widely recognised as a critical factor for academic and professional success. Identity plays a crucial mediating role in shaping how higher education influences future employment outcomes (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). The socialisation process through knowledge acquisition, personal investment, and active participation supports the development of this identity. Peer relationships are particularly influential in this process, as they help students form and affirm their emerging identities (Brunton and Buckley, 2020). According to Weidman and Krus (1979), commitment to a new identity is strengthened through interactions with peers and

faculty, guidance from mentors, and the internalisation of professional roles. Thus, socialisation is not only vital for academic integration but also plays a foundational role in the development of a student's professional and personal identity (Perry and Abruzzo, 2020).

The research shows that the sense of identity was formed through *cultural attachments, emotional intelligence, goal-oriented learning, leadership skills and self-reflectiveness*. An implicit sharing of knowledge culture occurs that increases research and teaching activities (Veer-Ramjeawon and Rowley, 2020). A sense of identity is formed through participating in programs such as goal oriented. P2 participated in an industry mentorship program. Although several students did not participate in *goal-oriented* programs, P8 and P11 mentioned the importance of participating in the goal-oriented program. With the current restrictions in place, P13 participated in an online *goal-oriented program*, however, it wasn't as effective compared to the face-to-face program.

The students mentioned how they participated in *emotional intelligence*. Emotional intelligence was formed through attending group and professional counselling sessions. In terms of *self-reflectiveness*, P13 described participating in the "Road Runner" program, where students share challenges and gain peer perspectives. Many noted that cultural awareness activities, such as those offered by clubs like Asian Art, strengthen their sense of identity. Students also use art and social media to stay connected with both their home and host cultures, helping them retain and express their cultural identity (Gomes et al., 2014).

Cultural integration. Other participants, P14, P2, and P3 had different views concerning participation in culturally integrated activities. Their sense of Identity-leadership skills is formed through doing group assignments, leadership programs, student clubs, and organisations. Other participants reported mixed experiences with student leadership skills. The analysis above clearly shows that the absence of interpersonal interaction affects the socialisation process.

Distinguishing between formal and informal socialisation within key processes such as acculturation and professional or organisational socialisation has a significant impact on how individuals adapt and integrate (Pisova, 2013). Formal socialisation involves structured and deliberate methods like training sessions and official orientations, which provide clear guidelines and consistent expectations. In contrast, informal socialisation occurs through everyday interactions and relationships, helping students grasp unwritten norms and cultural subtleties that formal processes might overlook. Recognising the importance of both types of socialisation enables universities to support students more effectively, facilitating a smoother and more comprehensive adjustment to new cultural or professional environments. Neglecting either aspect can result in misunderstandings, slower adaptation, or incomplete integration.

Normative Institutional contexts – academic quality and curriculum

Socialisation outcomes of Weidman's model led to career paths, aspirations, lifestyles, and values. According to Weidman (1989), students' subjective assessments, such as their willingness to engage and their perceptions of suitable career paths, play a critical role in aligning with the broader occupational structure of society. He also emphasised that normative institutional contexts, such as prescribed curricula and formal support systems, are designed to guide students toward career advancement. Implicit in Weidman's (1989) framework is the recognition of the interrelated nature of environmental factors, such as internships, which are essential components of the student experience and contribute significantly to developmental outcomes.

Hence, in advancing the framework for career path development, two key areas emerged. The first is the importance of internships, fieldwork, and work experience, which allow students to engage with industry at a deeper level. Many students emphasised the value of internships in enhancing career adaptability (Inceoglu et al., 2019), as well as experiences such as work-integrated learning, student exchanges, and study tours. These opportunities are critical in preparing students for personal and professional growth in a highly competitive and

constantly evolving job market. Within this context, the assignment of social roles, a vital aspect of student socialisation, is influenced and reinforced by both internal (university-led) and external (industry and societal) influences.

Internships and fieldwork placements play a vital role in enabling universities to attract students and fulfil strategic goals, such as delivering education that aligns with the future needs of individuals. To support this, many universities offer career hubs that assist students with internship applications and career planning. However, the availability and relevance of these opportunities often depend on the specific course in which a student is enrolled. Some participants noted a lack of work opportunities within their programs, while others felt that existing placements or internships were not aligned with the content or focus of their studies. Additionally, several participants shared mixed experiences regarding how well these opportunities prepared them for future employment.

Student expectations and value co-creation

How can universities more effectively support international students? One powerful approach lies in embracing value co-creation. Co-creation represents an innovative pedagogical strategy aimed at enriching teaching and learning experiences in higher education (Omland *et al.*, 2025). Universities, as service providers, follow a service-dominant logic (SDL), where value emerges not from delivery alone but through active co-creation, continuous interaction, and shared effort (Zarandi *et al.*, 2024).

According to Vargo and Lusch (2004), service-dominant logic emphasises the joint creation of value known as “value co-creation,” shifting the focus from a passive customer to an active participant or “actor” in the educational ecosystem (Polese *et al.*, 2017). Authors have identified dialogue, positioning, agency, and voice as primary concepts to describe interactions for co-creation as a foundational element (Omland *et al.*, 2025). This positions socialisation as a key concept within co-creation. As such, co-creation is embedded in social practices, which are a central focus of sociocultural theories of learning and development (Matthews *et al.*, 2019a, b). Furthermore, co-creation occurs when students’ knowledge, skills, and resources combine with the university’s academic and organisational assets, enabling activities and interactions that drive innovation and engagement (Oliveira *et al.*, 2024). This collaborative approach produces more unified and enhanced learning outcomes than if either party attempted to satisfy needs independently (Frow *et al.*, 2015). One key aspect of value is the customer experience and how it shapes perceived value (Lusch *et al.*, 2008). In higher education, this concept translates to students’ experiences, which are influenced by factors such as university reputation, faculty competence, administrative support, information technology systems, and student-to-student interactions. These factors encourage student co-creation behaviours and are closely linked to overall satisfaction with the university experience (Frow *et al.*, 2015).

Within a Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) framework, students’ expectations are a critical driver of value co-creation, shaping how they interact with institutional resources and services (Cruz *et al.*, 2024). By recognising and responding to student expectations, institutions not only enhance perceived value and satisfaction but also support the development of soft skills and employability, ensuring that learning outcomes emerge through collaboration rather than unilateral delivery (Zarandi *et al.*, 2024; Geurts *et al.*, 2024). Expectations are discussed below:

- (1) *Expectation of teacher quality:* Teacher quality, including experience, interaction, and qualifications—was highlighted as critical by participants P19, P28, and P30. Its perceived value, however, is influenced by factors such as technical issues during online classes and responsiveness in staff communication (e.g. delays in email replies, P31). From a Service-Dominant Logic perspective, the value of teacher quality is co-created through the dynamic interaction between teachers’ capabilities and students’ engagement, with both contributing to the overall effectiveness of the learning experience.

- (2) *Expectations of Online facilities and E-servicescapes*: Online facilities and services were identified as a key channel for providing students with timely information and learning support. Participant P8 noted that these platforms offered additional learning materials, enabling students to revisit lectures as needed, while accessibility and prompt delivery of information were highlighted as key indicators of value. Despite these benefits, communication and engagement remain challenges in online education (Afrouz and Crisp, 2021). Online learning often involves asynchronous interactions, though instruction can shift between asynchronous and synchronous modes. Participants P3, P10, P23, and P28 reported mixed experiences with post-pandemic program changes, noting that the transition from face-to-face to online blended learning appeared more effective for introverted students, whereas extroverted students, accustomed to interactive classroom engagement, experienced varied outcomes. From an SDL perspective, the value of online learning is co-created as students actively engage with digital resources, shaping the effectiveness and perceived benefit of the educational experience.
- (3) *Learning expectations influencing socialisation and adaptation*: During the pandemic, Participant 4 reported limited gains in communication and teamwork skills from group assignments. Cohorts and team-based activities are central to the socialisation process and students' learning journeys (Jones, 2018), yet these opportunities were often lacking online. While collaborative projects fell short in developing conflict resolution and active listening skills, students gained problem-solving experience by leveraging diverse perspectives to find creative solutions. Some participants reported low motivation and feelings of depression (P6), highlighting the need for structured support. Despite these challenges, most students found socialisation rewarding, enhancing adaptability, communication, and intercultural competence. From an SDL perspective, students' expectations and active engagement shape the co-creation of value in learning, with diverse interactions and collaboration determining the quality of the educational and socialisation experience.

Our research showed that through value co-creation, students contributed their feedback, perspectives, skills, and personal attributes, which, when combined with institutional resources, attempt to generate benefits for both students and the university (Dollinger *et al.*, 2018). This indicates that, rather than organisations providing value unilaterally, value emerges through a joint process in which students actively participate to achieve mutually desired outcomes.

Although international students may initially have limited agency due to language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with institutional norms, value co-creation remains a critical component of their educational experience. Guided participation through mentorship, collaborative projects, and structured engagement allows these students to gradually contribute to and shape their learning environments. Even when they are not fully active actors, interactions with peers, faculty, and institutional resources enable incremental participation that fosters socialisation, a sense of belonging, and the development of essential soft skills. By facilitating these co-creation opportunities, universities can enhance employability outcomes and support international students in navigating the transition from education to professional contexts, aligning with the relational and normative dimensions emphasised in Weidman's socialisation framework.

Employability implications through the lens of Weidman's framework

The research uses Weidman's framework to address the conceptual framework and seeks to explain how and why co-creating value is important based on Vargo and Lusch's SDL. It provides an understanding of the functional anticipator and normative challenges that are needed for the socialisation process to address. Course attraction, the university of their choice,

and how they achieved the information that comprised peers, education agents, and institution web promotion were all critical influencers for pre-normative pressure. This type of information helps with choices.

Our data showed that international students heavily relied on interactions and communication with agents, particularly when it came to understanding career pathways and employability prospects. This communication is not just about providing information, it reflects a deeper, trust-based relationship that helps influence students' expectations and confidence in their future careers (Duck, 1994). By creating strong, transparent communication with agents and other third parties, universities can actively influence how employability opportunities are presented, ensuring students have realistic, well-informed career expectations. Strengthening these relationships is critical, as students' perceptions of their employability play a key role in their decision to choose and remain committed to a university. It is recommended that Universities should strengthen trust-based partnerships with education agents and enhance pre-arrival information through multiple channels to support informed course and career decisions. Leveraging peer networks and co-creating learning and employability experiences can deepen engagement, align expectations, and ensure students have realistic, well-supported career pathways, ultimately enhancing satisfaction and outcomes. In line with this, international students were also attracted to courses that facilitated interaction with peers, highlighting the importance of social connections in forming their educational experience. Since value creation relies on the joint efforts of both the university and the student, these peer interactions play a crucial role in enhancing perceived value. Universities as service providers need to optimise these opportunities by building a good rapport with reference groups and peers.

Student characteristics showed comparative differences in the socialisation impact. International students should be treated differently based on the personality segments they represent. As one size does not fit all. The research found two distinct personality types, introverts and extroverts, and each experienced the socialisation process at university in markedly different ways. Extroverted international students actively sought and thrived on frequent social interactions, engaging readily with peers, faculty, and extracurricular activities. These social experiences not only enhanced their sense of belonging but also expanded their professional networks, boosting their confidence in future employability. In contrast, introverted students were more selective in their interactions, often preferring smaller, more familiar groups or one-on-one communication. While they may have participated less visibly in broader social settings, their socialisation still played a critical role in forming their academic and career-related experiences. Recognising these differences allows universities to design inclusive social and career development opportunities that cater to both personality types, ensuring all students, regardless of their social comfort levels, can effectively build the skills and networks essential for their future careers.

While this study identified clear differences between introverted and extroverted students in their socialisation experiences, personality theory was not formally adopted as a framework. Upon reflection, the decision was intentional to maintain the study's focus on students' lived experiences rather than categorising them through predefined psychological constructs. Using personality theory could have limited the exploration by imposing rigid classifications, whereas a more flexible, inductive approach allowed students to express their behaviours, preferences, and challenges in their own terms.

However, the emergence of personality-related patterns through self-reported behaviours and preferences suggests that integrating personality theory in future research may provide additional explanatory power, especially in designing tailored support strategies for diverse student populations. We recommend integrating personality-aware support and encouraging students to co-create their learning and social experiences, institutions can enhance engagement, strengthen networks, and boost confidence in employability outcomes for all international students. Regarding normative influences, several themes highlighted the socialisation process. A sense of belonging is a key outcome of socialisation (Jeong *et al.*, 2020), yet some students experienced a reduced sense of belonging depending on the context.

Mentor and tutor support, however, played a crucial role in fostering interaction and reinforcing belonging. In line with Weidman's framework, our findings confirm the importance of belonging in socialisation (Strayhorn, 2012). Strategies such as dedicated campus spaces or online engagement opportunities can further support social interaction, particularly when traditional settings are limited (Pak, 2018).

Socialisation is widely recognised as a key process in the development of student identity (Perry and Abruzzo, 2020). The updated framework by Weidman and De (2020) incorporates perspectives on human agency (Archer, 2007), highlighting individuals' capacity to reshape influences by navigating and restructuring the social environment. Many theorists regard this agency as central to understanding the impact of higher education on students (Archer, 2007). Our findings indicate that student identity plays a crucial role in successful socialisation, with a sense of identity emerging through cultural attachments, emotional intelligence, goal-oriented learning, leadership skills, and self-reflection. Since identity formation is shaped by experiences and relationships, particularly bonding with peers, faculty, and mentors, future research should explore innovative ways to engage peers and faculty in supporting students' identity development.

Regarding learning expectations, including online delivery and value co-creation, our findings show that students were willing to adapt, embracing the socialisation process while becoming more independent learners. They found e-servicescapes and online platforms convenient and effective, highlighting the success of hybrid delivery. Accordingly, universities should continue to enhance hybrid learning to support flexible, engaging, and independent student experiences while designing programs that actively foster socialisation and value co-creation. Integrating socialisation with internships and work-integrated learning can further strengthen employability, and future research should examine factors influencing socialisation and career outcomes across diverse contexts.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the small sample size, which warrants caution in generalising the findings beyond the specific context. Data were drawn from only four universities, and participation may have been influenced by incentives provided as a gesture of appreciation for sharing personal insights. Future research should investigate the nuanced factors shaping socialisation during times of change, as these are likely to affect student value creation and employability outcomes. In particular, examining how socialisation motivates internship conversion (Hurst *et al.*, 2012) and how it can be integrated within a universal work-integrated learning (WIL) framework (Dorland *et al.*, 2020) could expand opportunities and enhance career readiness for all students.

To strengthen the value co-creation theme, it is crucial to further investigate how co-creation specifically influences employability outcomes across diverse contexts. Future research could examine its role in developing less tangible employability attributes, such as resilience, ethical decision-making, and leadership in multicultural environments. Comparative studies of international and domestic students may also reveal whether co-creation processes differentially shape employability trajectories. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable to trace how skills gained through co-creation in universities translate into workplace performance and career progression. Expanding research in these directions can offer deeper insights into how value co-creation functions not only as an educational strategy but also as a key driver of career readiness in the global knowledge economy.

Conclusions

Socialisation plays a critical role in higher education, particularly for international students, by fostering soft skills, confidence, and networks increasingly valued in the global job market.

Since value creation depends on the joint efforts of students and universities, peer interactions are central to enhancing perceived value. Guided by Weidman's (1989) seminal framework, this study explores the factors influencing students' socialisation processes and examines their implications for value co-creation, based on interviews with 33 international students in Australia. The study highlights that employability extends beyond technical skills to include meaningful interactions shaped by normative perspectives and socialisation processes, occurring through both formal and informal exchanges. These interactions support personal growth, intercultural competence, and adaptability while helping students navigate diverse academic and cultural environments. Socialisation also enables understanding of different personality traits, enhancing engagement and collaboration.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that socialisation is a central mechanism through which international students develop the skills, confidence, and networks necessary for successful academic and professional outcomes. By applying Weidman's (1989) framework alongside Vargo and Lusch's Service-Dominant Logic, the research highlights that value in higher education is not delivered unilaterally but co-created through meaningful interactions between students, peers, faculty, and institutional structures. Employability extends beyond technical skill acquisition, encompassing soft skills, intercultural competence, and adaptive capabilities that emerge through both formal and informal exchanges. The findings underscore the importance of providing supportive resources, fostering inclusive social networks, and aligning institutional practices with students' expectations to enhance engagement and satisfaction. While limited by a relatively small sample, this study offers one of the first empirical insights into the intersection of socialisation and value co-creation for international students, providing a foundation for future research aimed at optimising learning experiences, socialisation, and employability outcomes in diverse higher education contexts.

Ethical approval

Our ethics approval number is HEC20299 from La Trobe University, Australia.

(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Table A1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Participant	Age	Gender	Course	University	Country of origin
1	25	Female	Master of Management	Uni Melbourne	China
2	26	Female	Master of Marketing	La Trobe	Malaysia
3	26	Female	Master of Bus Info Tech	RMIT	China
4	25	Male	Master of Info Systems	Uni Melbourne	China
5	25	Female	Master of Int Business	La Trobe	China
6	23	Female	Master of Prof Accounting	La Trobe	China
7	24	Male	Bachelor of Physio	La Trobe	Singapore
8	25	Male	Master of Bio Tech	La Trobe	Malaysia
9	25	Female	Master of info Mgt	La Trobe	China
10	24	Female	Master of Bio Mgt	La Trobe	Malaysia
11	25	Female	Bachelor of Commerce	Deakin	Malaysia
12	21	Female	Bachelor of Science	Uni Melbourne	Malaysia
13	21	Female	Bachelor of Science	Uni Melbourne	Singapore
14	21	Female	Bachelor of Commerce	Uni Melbourne	Malaysia
15	28	Male	Master of Marketing	Deakin	China
16	23	Female	Bachelor of Sports Mgt	La Trobe	Malaysia
17	22	Female	Bachelor of Commerce	Deakin	China
18	22	Female	Bachelor of Business	RMIT	Singapore
19	20	Male	Bachelor of Business	La Trobe	Japan
20	21	Male	Bachelor of Commerce	La Trobe	China
21	22	Female	Bachelor of Commerce	La Trobe	Malaysia
22	23	Male	Bachelor of Info Tech	Deakin	Nepal
23	23	Male	Bachelor of Commerce	Deakin	Japan
24	22	Female	Bachelor of Info Tech	RMIT	Nepal
25	21	Male	Bachelor of Economics	Deakin	China
26	22	Female	Bach of Communication	Deakin	China
27	23	Female	Bachelor of Laws	La Trobe	Japan
28	22	Male	Bachelor of HRM	Deakin	India
29	21	Female	Bachelor of Science	RMIT	India
30	21	Female	Bachelor of Science	RMIT	India
31	21	Female	Bachelor of Sport Dev	DEAKIN	China
32	20	Male	Bachelor of Commerce	La Trobe	India
33	18	Female	Bachelor of Info Tech	RMIT	India

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