

# Voices of resilience: narratives of immigrant academic women advocating for diversity and empowerment

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the lived experiences of three immigrant academic women with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in the field of early childhood education (ECE) education in Australia and New Zealand, focussing on how they navigate institutional structures through resilience, agency and flexibility. Using an autoethnographic approach, the research highlights their strategies for integrating cultural perspectives into academia and advocates for more inclusive and diverse higher education environments.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – This study employs a collaborative autoethnographic design to examine the lived academic experiences of three immigrant women with CALD backgrounds in the field of ECE in Australia and New Zealand. Drawing on O’Hara’s (2018) framework, participants reflected on their professional journeys and interactions within institutional settings. Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews via Zoom, allowing for in-depth personal narratives.

**Findings** – Participants’ narratives revealed how their migration journeys involved not only adapting to new academic and professional systems in Australia and New Zealand but also actively negotiating their sense of self across personal and professional domains. The findings highlight how immigrant academic women reconstruct identity and agency within institutional contexts, offering valuable insights into the lived realities of navigating higher education as culturally diverse professionals.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study highlights the need for systemic reforms in recruitment, mentoring and professional development to better support CALD academic staff. Its findings have practical implications for policymakers, academic leaders and practitioners striving to foster more equitable and inclusive institutional cultures, thereby enriching the higher education experience for all stakeholders. However, the study is limited by its small sample size, focussing on three Iranian immigrant women in ECE in Australia and New Zealand. While their in-depth narratives offer valuable insights, the findings are not intended to be broadly generalisable. Future research involving a larger and more diverse cohort, along with mixed or comparative methodologies, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and contributions of CALD academics across different disciplines and contexts.

**Originality/Value** – This study offers a unique contribution by foregrounding the lived experiences of Iranian immigrant academic women in ECE through a collaborative autoethnography. By centring personal narratives within broader organisational structures, the study not only amplifies marginalised voices but also challenges



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dominant norms in higher education, offering valuable perspectives for fostering inclusivity and cultural responsiveness in academic environments.

**Keywords** Immigrant, Women, Academic, Autoethnography, Inclusivity, Higher education

**Paper type** Research article

## Background

Higher education institutions are increasingly recognising the value of inclusivity and diversity of students within their programs; yet, the lived experiences of immigrant academics remain understudied. This research explored the personal and professional journeys of three immigrant academic women in early childhood education (ECE) to understand how their unique perspectives, challenges and contributions shape the academic landscape.

The motivation for conducting this autoethnographic study emerged in 2022 when Participants 1 and 3 connected through LinkedIn. They shared their mutual passion for ECE and reflected on their journeys as former international students, mothers and academics navigating careers in higher education. This initial conversation illuminated how their shared experiences had shaped their academic identities and how those identities influenced their teaching practices.

Later that year, Participant 1 connected with Participant 2, through LinkedIn, and their journey and motivations for promoting diversity in ECE further enriched the conversation. Together, the three participants using online platform began to reflect deeply on their personal narratives, exploring how their lived experiences as immigrant academics contributed to the professional roles and commitments in academia. Two research questions were guided this study:

- (1) How do immigrant academic women in ECE navigate their personal and professional journeys in Australia and New Zealand?
- (2) How do their experiences contribute to inclusivity and diversity for students in studies?

The following section outlines the literature review on the focussing themes, *immigrant in academia* and *acculturation*.

## Literature review

### *Immigrants in academia*

Globally, immigrant academics play a pivotal role in shaping the academic workforce. The international academics are referred as individuals born overseas, “educated and enculturated in one system of education and currently teaching and researching in another” (Walker, 2015, p. 61). In the context of Australia and New Zealand, this international dimension is particularly evident. In Australia, around 30% of employees in the Australian education sector (Australian Bureau of Statistic, 2020) and nearly 45% of academic staff at Australian universities were overseas-born (Welch, 2021). In New Zealand, while data on immigrant academics across all institutions remain limited, substantial insights emerge from early-career cohorts. Research shows that more than half of early-career academics (those within seven years of their first permanent appointment) in New Zealand universities were born overseas (Masterson and Edwards, 2022). Immigrant academics navigate a unique set of opportunities and challenges as they integrate into new academic environments. Their experiences often involve negotiating cultural differences, encountering systemic barriers and balancing professional and personal adaptation (Antoniadou and Quinlan, 2018). Despite these challenges, immigrant academics contribute significantly to higher education, bringing diverse perspectives, research innovation and intercultural knowledge to their institutions (Singh, 2021, 2024).

Lemish (2022) found that immigrant academics' prior experiences often enable them to foster intercultural understanding among both students and colleagues. Drawing on interviewees with 81 academic immigrants worldwide, the results showed that immigrant scholars contribute significant value to higher education by integrating diverse cultural perspectives into teaching and research, promoting global citizenship and enhancing sensitivities to diversity and inclusion. Similarly, Sawir (2013) argued that immigrant academics enrich their institutions by integrating global perspectives into teaching and research, which is increasingly important in a globalised academic landscape. Furthermore, immigrant academics' ability to navigate different cultural contexts can serve as a model for students and colleagues alike, promoting diversity and inclusion within academia.

Institutional support plays a significant role in fostering the success and integration of immigrant academics within higher education (Goldman and Eiduson, 2021). Mentorship programs, professional development opportunities and inclusive workplace policies can help mitigate many of the challenges immigrant academics encounter, enabling them to thrive (Lawless and Chen, 2015). Such support not only benefits individual academics but also enhances the overall diversity and academic excellence of institutions (Singh *et al.*, 2009; Tadi *et al.*, 2022). Yet these initiatives are often inconsistently implemented or insufficiently resourced.

One of the challenges that immigrant academics may face is navigating cultural adjustment within academic institutions. Immigrant academics may encounter discrepancies between their cultural and educational values and those of their host institutions (Guo, 2015). These differences can lead to challenges in teaching styles, communication and interaction with colleagues and students (Lewis *et al.*, 2022). Lynch *et al.* (2022) explained that cultural similarity – such as shared language and social connections – is a key factor in the smooth adjustment of immigrant to host countries. Therefore, academics from Western cultural backgrounds, for instance, may experience a smoother transition and a fewer challenges due to shared norms of academic practice and communication in Western societies. Moreover, cultural stereotyping and biases can exacerbate feelings of isolation and marginalisation in academic settings (Basit and Tomlinson, 2012), leading to difficulties in feeling belonging in higher education.

Another challenge immigrant academics often encounter is the professional challenges, such as recognition of qualifications and overseas experiences (Glass *et al.*, 2021). Such challenges not only hinder career progression but also result in underemployment or confinement to temporary or lower-ranking positions, despite substantial qualifications and expertise (Kolapo, 2009). The concept of “brain waste” captures this phenomenon, where highly skilled immigrant academics find their credentials undervalued, leading to occupational downgrading (Bauder, 2012). In addition, restrictive immigration policies further exacerbate employment precarity for international scholars (Song and Kim, 2025).

While immigrants have the potential to transfer knowledge from one context to another as boundary spanners and knowledge spill-over agents (Shan, 2020), the mobility of that knowledge can also present significant challenges. The expertise and skills acquired in their home country are not necessarily lost upon migration; however, they may be undervalued or overlooked in the new environment. This lack of acknowledgement can limit opportunities for career advancement, despite their qualifications and experience, especially for highly skilled migrants (Lazarova *et al.*, 2025).

To overcome these challenges and to strengthen their physical and mental health and overall wellbeing, research indicates that migrants often rely on social connections across interpersonal, familial and community spheres (Finch and Vega, 2003; Martino *et al.*, 2015; Umberson and Karas Montez, 2010). While social support has consistently been shown to have positive effects on immigrant health and wellbeing (Bekteshi and Kang, 2020; Puyat, 2013), little is known about the specific adjustment processes of academic immigrants. In particular, the ways in which social connectedness shapes their experiences in academia

remain underexplored. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of social connectedness in the lives of three academics.

### Acculturation

The concept of acculturation is essential for analysing the opportunities and challenges faced by immigrants. Acculturation refers to the cultural modification of an individual, group or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Originally conceptualised by anthropologists as a group-level phenomenon, it involves cultural change and adaptation (Boas, 1888). Acculturation necessitates with accepting culture and language of the host country. It is a process of sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Berry, 1997) or adjustment (Taylor *et al.*, 2021) initiated by the initial intercultural interaction between immigrants (minority ethnocultural groups) and the dominant culture of the host society. Berry's (1997) foundational acculturation theory emphasises behavioural changes in the minority group, involving cultural acquisition and shedding, to align more closely with the mainstream culture.

While unidirectional transformation often suggests assimilation as an outcome (Gans, 1992), Berry (2005) later proposed three adaptation strategies – assimilation, integration and separation – with integration being the favoured approach due to its bicultural orientation. Although Berry's model has received empirical support (Segal *et al.*, 2011) and practical application (Meca *et al.*, 2017), it has also faced significant criticism. Bowskill *et al.* (2007) and Lewis (2021) questioned whether Berry's (2005) integration approach disguises assimilation, Bhatia and Ram (2009) critiqued its universal applicability and others highlighted the bidirectional influence between host and minority cultures (Bourhis *et al.*, 1997; Leong and Yang, 2014), rather than a purely unidirectional impact on minority groups.

Acculturation is also associated with social learning through intercultural interaction (Ward and Geeraert, 2016; Ward and Leong, 2006). Increasingly, the role of personality traits (Kosic, 2006) and contextual factors (Schwartz *et al.*, 2010) are being recognised in acculturation theory. Changing contexts often lead individuals to re-evaluate their self-identity and ethnic identity (Brettell and Hollifield, 2022; Lewis *et al.*, 2022), which could result in a blended bicultural identity or multiple identities (Stuart and Ward, 2011). Phinney (1989) contended that while ethnic identity concerns may relate to acculturation theory, they should not be assumed. Consequently, Schwartz *et al.* (2010) advocated for acknowledging a more nuanced, multidimensional perspective on biculturalism rather than relying on a singular, universal acculturation framework. It is important to accept and respect the host country's culture for effective acculturation, and this is evident in a study conducted by Yu and Wright (2024), who highlighted that the limited interaction with local students can hinder the acceptance of host country's culture.

Longer residence in the host country, higher language (English) proficiency and lower levels of perceived discrimination are associated with lower acculturative stress for both men and women (Xiao, 2019). Acculturative stress refers to the psychological strain and difficulties individuals experience while adapting to a new cultural environment (Bender, 2022). However, additional gender-specific predictors highlight distinct resilience pathways. For instance, factors such as age at immigration, marital status, family cohesion and social position appear to be particularly salient for men, while women's experiences are often shaped by shifting social roles, barriers to help-seeking and strategies of positive adaptation (Childress *et al.*, 2024). While structural and linguistic integration benefits all, resilience is also mediated by gendered experiences of adaptation.

Further evidence underscores how acculturation involves role transformations that shape both stress and resilience. Immigrant women, for example, often confront marginalisation and “othering” in academic and professional spaces; yet, many respond with agency and bicultural competence to persist and thrive (Wu and Wu, 2015). Gendered expectations – such as the dual demands of academic productivity and motherhood – further complicate these trajectories

(Dickson, 2018). Nevertheless, immigrant academic mothers frequently reframe these challenges as meaningful sources of joy and accomplishment, illustrating the nuanced ways gender mediates both obstacles and opportunities in the acculturation process (Gadzekpo, 2025).

The journey of immigrant academics remains insufficiently acknowledged in the existing literature, which often focuses primarily on issues of professional recognition while overlooking the equally critical process of acculturation – namely how scholars navigate new academic cultures while upholding their own identities. To address this gap, this study examines the experiences of three academic migrants who reflect on how migration shapes both their personal and professional lives, influencing their sense of belonging, career trajectories and contributions to knowledge across diverse academic spaces.

## Research methods

### *Participants and procedure*

The participants of this autoethnographic study were three academic women from Iran, each with differing levels of experience and time spent in higher education in Australia and New Zealand. Autoethnography is the systematic exploration and writing of lived experiences, serving as a valid scientific method for contextualising personal narratives within cultural, social, political, and historical frameworks (Sparkes, 2024). To engage in the autoethnographic process and effectively capture lived experiences, we adopted O'Hara's (2018) five of the six-step approach. We opted not to complete the sixth step which is "disseminating work with supportive drawings", as we believed that the richness of the interview data would provide a comprehensive perspective to address our research questions. This approach has been applied in other autoethnographic studies (White *et al.*, 2025; Bailey and Harris, 2021; Sambrook, 2020), as they explained O'Hara's steps help them to engage in the research process to capturing lived experiences of the participants.

### *Step 1: selecting an approach*

The first author sent an online scheduling assistant to determine the availability of the other researchers. We all agreed on a time to meet via Zoom to discuss our approach and refine our research question. Through this discussion, we explored various methodological approaches to ensure alignment with our collective interests and objectives and ultimately agreed to conduct a collaborative autoethnographic (CA) study. CA is a "simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic" study (Change *et al.*, 2013, p. 17) that fosters a dynamic interplay of voices and creates a rich and collective understanding that goes beyond what individual inquiry can achieve (Pretorius *et al.* (2022), contributing to a deeper insight into social and cultural contexts. Using CA approach in this study allowed us to critically examine our personal experiences and positionalities within the research context while engaging in reflective and dialogic inquiry (Pretorius and Cutri, 2019). By adopting this method, we aimed to generate rich, nuanced insights that contributed to the broader discourse of immigrant academics, emphasising the interplay between personal narratives and scholarly analysis.

### *Step 2: ensuring ethical responsibility*

Ethical considerations were central to our approach throughout this autoethnographic study, ensuring that our interactions were grounded in transparency, respect and accountability. Following the principles of relational ethics outlined by Adams *et al.* (2015), we prioritised mutual respect, fostering open and ethical relationships between us constantly during data collection and analysis. We also embraced situational ethics by obtaining verbal consent and regularly checking in to ensure we felt comfortable with how our experiences were being represented. Ongoing dialogue allowed us to navigate ethical complexities with care and sensitivity, ensuring that our voices were portrayed accurately and respectfully.

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Throughout this process, communication has taken place via Zoom calls, emails and Google Docs for document sharing.

### *Step 3: selecting theoretical underpinnings*

In shaping our autoethnographic study, we chose grounded theory – as outlined by [Charmaz \(2006\)](#) and [Creswell \(2009\)](#) – as the guiding theoretical framework because of its alignment with our investigative approach and personal experiences. Grounded theory offered a structured yet flexible methodology for analysing lived experiences, allowing patterns and meanings to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed by predetermined theoretical assumptions ([Charmaz, 2006](#); [Creswell, 2009](#)). [Pace \(2012, p. 13\)](#) stated, “Grounded theory analytic strategies can be used successfully within ethnographic studies, that is, when researchers treat them as a flexible strategies rather than as a set of prescriptive procedures and rules”. This approach resonated deeply with us, as the research was rooted in real-world lived experiences, and grounded theory therefore aligned with our desire to understand complex social phenomena as they naturally unfolded.

The constant comparative method, which involved breaking down data into significant concepts through open coding, provided a rigorous yet adaptable framework for making sense of personal narratives and shared experiences ([Pace, 2012](#)). This methodology was particularly relevant to our work, as it supports an analytical approach to autoethnography while preserving the authenticity of lived experiences. By adopting grounded theory, we could critically engage with our own experiences while constructing a broader theoretical understanding that connects three collaborative narratives to larger social, cultural and institutional contexts.

### *Step 4: assembling and gathering data*

To collect data, we set up an online Zoom meeting and shared the questions one week in advance so that each of us could prepare notes to discuss our experiences in response to the following questions.

- (1) What motivated you to leave Iran and settle in Australia or New Zealand? Describe the key events, circumstances or aspirations that influenced your decision (personal journey and motivation).
- (2) How did your background and experiences shape your expectations and hopes for your new life? (Personal journey and motivation)
- (3) How did you experience the cultural transition upon arriving in your new country? Reflect on the challenges and opportunities you faced in adapting to a new cultural environment. How did you navigate differences in language, customs, values and social norms? (Cultural adaptation)
- (4) What led you to pursue a career in academia? (Impact/Identity)
- (5) What challenges and opportunities have shaped your academic identity? (Shaping identity)
- (6) How do you believe your past experiences have influenced your current role? (Shaping identity)

### *Step 5: reflecting and analysing*

As we reflected on our work and our personal experiences with the research topic, we engaged in a rigorous process of qualitative analysis to ensure the trustworthiness of our findings. Following the guidelines outlined by [Polit and Beck \(2018\)](#), we focused on establishing

credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in our study. To achieve this, inductive thematic analysis was used, allowing patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data without imposing preconceived notions or theoretical biases (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using NVivo version 12. This approach ensured that our findings were deeply rooted in participants' lived experiences, enhancing the authenticity and richness of our interpretations. Credibility was maintained through reflexivity and peer debriefing, while transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions that allow readers to relate findings to their own contexts. Dependability was ensured through a systematic and transparent coding process, and confirmability was reinforced by maintaining an audit trail of decisions made throughout the analysis. By adhering to these qualitative research standards, we aimed to produce findings that are both meaningful and methodologically sound, which are outlined later.

### Findings

Three major themes emerged from data analysis, including, adjusting to the new culture, shaping academic identity and developing resilience. In the following sections, each theme is discussed in detail with examples drawn from the quotations of the participants.

#### *Theme 1: adjusting to the new culture*

The academic and professional trajectories of the participants in this study were shaped by a combination of prior qualifications, career aspirations, and the willingness to adapt to new educational and professional landscapes. All participants shared their experiences of pursuing further education in Australia/New Zealand despite holding advanced qualifications in their home countries. The narratives highlight the motivations, challenges, and strategic decisions involved in acquiring additional degrees to enhance their academic and professional opportunities. In addition, the participants demonstrated strong openness to learning about a new culture and integrating into the host society. Participant 3 has a Master's in Early Childhood Education from her country of origin stated: "I quickly learnt and understood about early childhood education in New Zealand and how different early childhood was in practice from my own country". This statement indicated a proactive approach to establishing herself in the new environment.

Despite having a professional job with master's degree qualification in her country of origin, Participant 2 also sought to further enhance her academic credentials by obtaining an additional master's degree before commencing her PhD in education in Australia.

... the main motivation [for me to come to Australia] was to pursue higher education. So, I decided to study a second Masters degree. And then my journey of early childhood education started after I completed my degree ... I think[despite challenges] ... I was very lucky to be able to work with really fantastic people in my journey, particularly, my experience with children and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Australia shaped my perspective and became a motivation for pursuing my PhD research.

Similarly, participant 1 also exhibited a willingness to adapt. While she held a master's degree from her country of origin and had one year work experience as a lecturer in Iran and two years' experience of working as an educator assistant in early childhood service in Sydney, she continued education. She shared:

I knew that I'm going to live in a very different country, and I was ready to accept all these changes ... during that time I learned a lot about Australian childhood Education, and it made me a shock that I was thinking how different teaching is in Australia compared to Iran.

Learning the language of the host country was identified by all participants as essential for acculturation as it served as a critical tool for communication, cultural understanding and social integration (Ager and Strang, 2008). Language is more than a means of exchanging information; it reflects the cultural values, norms and social practices of a society. Proficiency in the local language enables individuals to access educational and professional opportunities,

form meaningful relationships and navigate everyday life in their new environment. It fosters a sense of belonging by bridging cultural differences. However, as mentioned by participant 3, the assumptions surrounding language could be a barrier as well:

English was not my main barrier, but the assumption everywhere around me. It was not about language itself. Whenever I wanted to speak or ask something, I was met with reactions that implied I didn't know – simply because language was assumed to be a barrier.

Proficiency in the local language enables individuals to access educational and professional opportunities, form meaningful relationships and navigate everyday life in their new environment. It fosters a sense of belonging by bridging the gap between cultural differences (Neumann *et al.*, 2023).

All three participants emphasised the importance of the host language for effective communication, career advancement and social integration, as the term *language* was counted 30 times by NVivo. Participant 2 highlighted this point more strongly, stating

... It's not only the language helps to integrate and understand the cultural differences, but because of this big difference between our culture and Western culture which I think all of the issues [challenges] arise from this, language plays a major role.

Participant 3 emphasised that knowing the language is one aspect, but another crucial factor is understanding the everyday conversations within the cultural context, which she referred to as *Mohaver rozmarh/محاوره روزمره*: “Or understanding their jokes or maybe, you know, just the everyday talk, what we call it Mohaver rozmareh”. Mohaver rozmareh was identified as an important element of acculturation within a country.

This is further reflected in parenting experience as stated by Participant 3. She highlights how parenting in migration requires continuous learning and adaptation, shaping not only her personal life but also her academic journey. Her experience illustrates how acculturation, identity, and resilience are deeply interconnected:

As a parent, there were many unknowns for me. My experience of navigating those uncertainties, adapting to a new way of living, and learning how to integrate into this new environment has, in many ways ... I can say that my academic identity is deeply intertwined with my personal experience as a parent ... if step outside my role as an educator, and instead view things purely as a parent, I gain a whole new perspective.

Participant 3's reflection emphasises how lived experiences not only influence academic inquiry but also provide a unique lens through which knowledge is constructed. Her journey as an immigrant parent has directly informed her research, demonstrating how personal adaptation processes can shape professional and scholarly perspectives (Gadzekpo, 2025).

### *Theme 2: shaping academic identity*

For the participants, shaping an academic identity was profoundly influenced by the women in their families. All three participants shared inspiration for their academic lives from the women who surrounded them in their homelands, including mothers, grandmothers and aunts. For example, Participant 1 explained: “My mom, she loved to be a surgeon one day in her life, but she never got to finish her diploma because she had to get married”. Similarly, Participant 2 reflected:

My grandmother, who recently passed away, was a school principal and teacher. You know, for women in Iran at that time, how difficult and rare it was to be a principal. She was a very powerful woman and inspired me all my life.

Likewise, Participant 3 shared: “I always thought of teaching. I come from a teaching background – my mother, my aunts, and even family friends. So it's kind of just something that maybe is in my genes”.

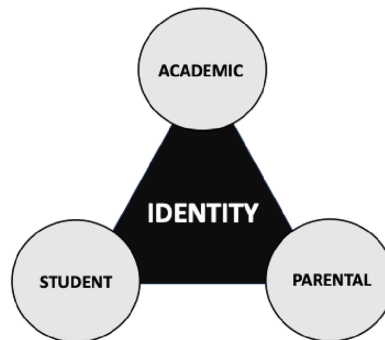
They also shared common experiences of how their identities evolved as they navigated the challenges of establishing themselves in a new country and a new workplace. They distinguished between their academic, student and community identities, with two participants also navigating a parental identity. The three participants explained how they shaped two separate identities (student and academic) when they decided to leave the place where they were studying for their PhD and move to another place where they were needed to seek employment. Participant 3 moved countries but later moved locations to begin a new job. They stated, "... it was one of the challenges for me to shape my identity in the university ... Transitioning or moving to a new city for shaping my academic identity was kind of mini immigration again". This transition involves navigating a new life while simultaneously shaping identity by expanding community relationships. It is important to note that Participant 1 and 3 moved to a new city during the COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdowns, which significantly impacted their abilities to establish social and professional connections. This period posed challenges in maintaining academic identity and adapting to a new environment under unprecedented circumstances. Participant 1 stated:

That's where I did my PhD and my house was there, my children born there, but I thought it's no way that I can have a permanent job, so then that make us to move from that place, it was a different identity shaped there.

Personal experiences of the participants shaped who they are as academics. Building the student and academic identity is empowering diversity and help the inclusion as the Participant 3 stated:

One of the main things, especially when I am interacting with international students. It's about that how I am going to reassure that they are not experiencing, one of the things that I have experienced [during my student time], no assumption or judgment.

This interprets how personal experiences of marginalisation and misunderstanding shape academic practices, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic environment. When immigrant academics bring their unique perspectives into their interactions, they challenge assumptions and biases, ensuring that students and colleagues feel heard, valued and supported. Their lived experiences become a driving force for advocacy, influencing how they teach, mentor and engage with diverse communities. By actively shaping their academic practice through empathy, awareness and inclusivity, they contribute to a more equitable and culturally responsive academic landscape. Three participants reported different identities, as shown in [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1.** Three identities shaped by participants in the host country. **Source:** Authors' own work

### Theme 3: developing resilience

The participants shared their challenging experiences of adapting to life in a new country and how they developed resilience to overcome these difficulties. Their narratives highlight the ways in which resilience is shaped by both personal struggles and professional growth.

For instance, Participant 1 reflected on how migration has broadened their perspective, enabling them to approach challenges with a more global outlook:

I think I bring a global perspective to my role, especially now. This perspective allows me to approach problems with a broader viewpoint and consider diverse solutions to them.

Similarly, Participant 2 emphasised the emotional complexity of their experiences, acknowledging both the joys and hardships of migration while underscoring the role of resilience in personal growth:

We go through different experiences – some joyful, some painful, and sometimes deeply challenging. But in the end, it's about resilience and how we grow through it.

Participant 3 addressed the nuanced challenge of cultural understanding, explaining that while language itself was not a barrier, the struggle to be fully understood within a new and completely different cultural context remained:

Sometimes, I had to search for answers on my own, to find the information I needed. It's about how we transform the pressure of migration into resilience and, ultimately, into the people we become.

This experience echoes [Lynch et al. \(2022\)](#), who emphasise that cultural similarity – including shared language and social connections – is a key factor in supporting the smooth adjustment of immigrants to host countries. In the absence of such cultural familiarity, even proficient language skills may not guarantee a sense of being understood.

For all three participants, developing resilience emerged as both a coping mechanism and a tool for navigating their daily lives across multiple dimensions of identity. Through their experiences, they discovered a strength greater than they had initially anticipated, recognising how their personal endurance shaped their academic identities. Yet, this process of resilience-building was often unconscious at the time, only becoming evident as they reflected on their journeys.

## Discussion

The findings of this autoethnographic study highlight the lived experiences of three immigrant academic women who share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds and work in the same academic field in Australia and New Zealand. The findings emphasised the critical role that culture, identity and resilience played in shaping their experiences, adapting to a new educational and professional environment, offering important insights into how immigrant academics navigate cultural transitions and redefine their professional trajectories.

The participants demonstrated a high degree of adaptability and willingness to integrate into the host country's educational and professional environments. Their narratives reflect a progressive approach to learning about the cultural and institutional expectations of Australia and New Zealand, demonstrating how acculturation is a proactive process rather than a passive adjustment. This aligns with existing research, highlighting the role of cultural adaptation in shaping successful transitions for international students and professionals ([Yu and Wright, 2024](#)). In addition, the findings reinforce previous research by demonstrating that how participants' strong sense of connection operated as a critical source of mutual support and empowerment ([Martino et al., 2015](#)).

Language is the primary means of interaction ([Ager and Strang, 2008](#)), facilitating acculturation and serving as a bridge between ([Neumann et al., 2023](#)). However, for highly educated immigrants in academic and professional positions, the primary challenge extends beyond language proficiency to encompass an understanding cultural context, accents and

everyday jargon. While the participants were required to demonstrate language proficiency as part of the immigration process, all three participants emphasised the authentic integration demands more than formal language skills alone. Although acquiring the language itself did not present a major challenge, the participants found that adapting to the nuances of everyday communication was essential for authentic integration into the host culture.

In addition to language acquisition, the development of an academic identity was a key aspect of participants' cultural adaptation journey. The participants' experiences demonstrate the complex nature of identity formation, particularly in the context of transitioning between roles as students, academics and professionals. The participants described how their identities transformed as they navigated different academic environments, maintaining the demands of their studies with their career aspirations. For instance, Participant 3 mentioned that relocating within New Zealand for academic and professional reasons represented a form of "mini immigration" in which she had to re-establish her identity and build new connections. This was both challenging and progressive, as it required them to negotiate their existing expertise with the expectations of their new academic and professional contexts. This aligns with existing literature which suggests that academic identity is shaped by ongoing interactions with institutional and societal structures (Lewis *et al.*, 2022). For the participants of this study, shaping academic identity was a process involved active engagement in inclusive and diverse academic spaces.

The accounts of Participant 1 and Participant 3 demonstrate how motherhood, often framed as a constraint in academic discourse, was instead redefined as a source of agency in shaping their educational goals. This finding aligns with Gadzekpo (2025) and Dickson (2018), who found that immigrant academic mothers frequently reinterpret parenting challenges as sources of fulfilment and achievement, highlighting the complex ways gender shapes both barriers and opportunities in the acculturation process. Equally important, the participants described drawing inspiration from the women who surrounded them in childhood, framing gender as a positive force that fostered resilience and strengthened their academic identities.

The autoethnographic reflections underscored the critical role of resilience in facilitating the cultural adaptation of the participant. By sharing their lived experiences, struggles and aspirations, they not only developed coping strategies but also experienced a form of catharsis that enabled them to reframe challenges as opportunities for growth. This process strengthened their resilience and professional identity, highlighting how such connections can serve as a powerful tool for empowerment and, potentially, for fostering integration in new contexts. This was also evident in previous studies (Finch and Vega, 2003; Martino *et al.*, 2015; Umberson and Karas Montez, 2010), highlighting that migrants often rely on social connections across interpersonal, familial and community spheres. Such social support has consistently been found to have positive effects on immigrant health and wellbeing, a pattern also reflected in this study.

### Significance of the study

This study is particularly significant as it explores the impact of Australia and New Zealand policies on multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion within higher education institutions (Elias and Mansouri, 2023; Jakubowicz and Ho, 2014). By examining the lived experiences of three immigrant academic women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, the research offers valuable insights into the cultural, professional and systemic challenges faced by scholars in a superdiverse academic environment. Their narratives expose gaps in existing policies and practices, highlighting areas for improvement in promoting equity and inclusion within higher education.

The findings contribute to strengthening inclusive policies and practices by identifying strategies to address the unique barriers faced by immigrant academic women. These challenges include cultural adaptation, recognition of international qualifications and integration into academic communities (Baxter, 2025; Kolapo, 2009). By addressing these

issues, higher education institutions can create more supportive environments that harness the diverse knowledge and expertise of immigrant scholars, thereby enriching teaching, research and community engagement.

Furthermore, this study underscores the broader role of immigrant academics in advancing Australia and New Zealand's multicultural agenda within an increasingly superdiverse society. Three academic immigrants' contributions enhance intercultural understanding, innovation and collaboration, reinforcing national commitments to diversity and inclusion (Singh, 2021; 2024), which specifically these lived experience influenced their teaching in higher education. Their insights are vital for academic leadership and management, offering evidence-based guidance on fostering an inclusive and equitable work environment. The study advocates for systemic changes in recruitment, mentoring and professional development practices to better support CALD staff, ultimately enriching the educational experience for all stakeholders. The study's implications extend to policymakers, academic leaders and practitioners working to cultivate more equitable and inclusive academic spaces, ultimately benefiting the entire higher education sector.

Although this study is limited by its small sample size, focussing on only three participants from Iran, this narrow scope allowed for an in-depth ethnographic exploration of their lived experiences. While the findings provide important insights into the experiences of immigrant academic women in Australia and New Zealand, the limited diversity restricts the generalisability of the results. Future research with a broader participant pool and diverse methodological approaches could build on these findings to capture variations in coping strategies, empowerment and integration processes across different cultural groups. Further research could also critically examine how cultural similarity to Western academic norms – alongside the influence of dominant Western traditions in academia – shapes different pathways of integration for scholars from Western and non-Western backgrounds.

### Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of three immigrant academic women and the way in which they navigated personal and professional challenges in Australia and New Zealand. The participants' lived experiences challenge established norms, advance inclusivity and strengthen cross-cultural understanding within academic communities. Within the broader context of internationalisation of higher education, acknowledging the contributions of immigrant academics is vital to creating inclusive and culturally diverse academic environments. Such recognition supports individuals in their academic journeys and strengthens the collective fabric of academia.

### About the authors

Dr Somayeh Ba Akhlagh is a dedicated researcher with a passion for inclusive education and the advancement of cultural diversity in early childhood education. Somayeh has over 20 years' experience as an early childhood educator in Australia and Iran. As a senior lecturer in early childhood education, her work not only contributes to academic discourse but also directly influences the practical aspects of early childhood education as she imparts her expertise in the field to future educators. Somayeh extends her impact by conducting workshops for early childhood teachers nationally and internationally. She has received several scholarships and awards for teaching and research, including the recent Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) paper presentation award.

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Dr Parisa Tadi is an educator and researcher with over 20 years of experience in early childhood, primary and tertiary education across diverse international settings, including Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. Her work focuses on supporting refugee and immigrant communities, advocating for children's rights and promoting literacy as a tool for empowerment. At Auckland University of Technology (AUT), she leads the BEd ECE programme and teaches Initial Teacher Education courses. As a member of the AUT Migrant and Refugee Research Centre, LitPlus and OMEP Aotearoa New Zealand, Parisa engages in projects that enhance educational opportunities for diverse communities, with a focus on migrant and refugee families. She is a lead researcher on children's rights in initial teacher education and reading for pleasure in refugee resettlement programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand. Through her research and advocacy, she works to create meaningful change, ensuring education functions as a bridge to belonging and social justice.

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