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1 **Deconstructing transformations: Educational travellers' cross-cultural transformative**
2 **experiences**

3 **Abstract**

4 Transformative travel experiences are crucial in the next normal, given their powerful implications of
5 generating uplifting changes in travellers. These can be changes to how travellers perceive themselves
6 or other societies. This research provides insight into the transformative experiences of educational
7 travellers in Australia. Educational travellers, like international students, are significant contributors
8 to the social and economic sustainability of destinations but are often understudied and neglected due
9 to their unique positionality of being neither visitors nor migrants. Using an interpretive,
10 phenomenological paradigm, this study uses a qualitative method to uncover, deconstruct and
11 understand educational travellers' holistic transformative experiences. The findings reveal educational
12 travellers' motivations and the diverse experiences that trigger transformations. The article then
13 examines the transformative process and outcomes, highlighting how educational travellers
14 experience a knowledge transformation, whether in their personal competencies or destination
15 understanding, resulting in transformations to themselves (psychological) or in their attitudes towards
16 others (social). The findings also reveal cross-cultural differences, with Asian and Hispanic
17 educational travellers gaining more robust destination understanding and social transformations than
18 European educational travellers. Finally, the study provides theoretical and practical insight into how
19 educational travellers' experiences can be facilitated and how future research may expand the
20 exploration of educational travellers' experiences.

21 **Keywords:** educational travellers, educational travel, transformative experiences, personal
22 transformations, cross-cultural experiences

23

1 1.0 Introduction

2 Transformative travel experiences (TE) have an important role in ‘*shaping the next*
3 *normal*’, given their significant implications for people and places (Ateljevic, 2020). By
4 definition, TE are experiences that generate uplifting changes in travellers by prompting a
5 self-redefinition (Blocker & Barrios, 2015; Holland-Wade, 1998). These uplifting changes
6 are profound and involve a seismic shift in how travellers view themselves and others
7 (Sheldon, 2020). Sheldon (2020) highlights four overlapping tourism scenarios that can be
8 designed to influence inner transformation: (1) deep human connectivity in cultural contexts,
9 (2) deep environmental connectivity in natural settings, (3) self-inquiry and (4) engaged
10 tourist contribution to the destination. Accordingly, these combinations trigger
11 transformational moments leading to transformed consciousness (Sheldon, 2020). This
12 interpretation of TE appears heavily self-directed and the outcomes are self-focused (i.e.,
13 inner transformation) (Sheldon, 2020). TE is more than just a self-directed inner
14 transformation (psychological), as travellers co-create their experiences using the destination
15 as a stimulus and may have other outcomes including physical, knowledge and social
16 transformations (Teoh et al., 2021). In a cross-cultural environment, travellers may undergo
17 social transformations as they engage in deep human connectivity (Sheldon, 2020) or cross-
18 cultural comparisons (Teoh et al., 2021). Moreover, the different types of transformations
19 may be interconnected, an avenue that should be explored to better understand the
20 transformation process and outcomes.

21 This study focuses on unpacking educational travellers’ cross-cultural experiences as
22 a means for further theory development. Educational travellers can undergo either
23 psychological or social transformations. Previous literature suggests educational travellers
24 develop a sense of global citizenship due to their transformed perspectives of themselves and
25 the destination’s society (Young et al., 2017). Likewise, anecdotal evidence points to how

1 educational travel experiences create “a long-lasting, positive impact on [them] and their
2 families, friends and networks” (Pohajouw, 2021, para. 12). Thus, given these implications,
3 uncovering how diverse experiences instigate transformations within the educational travel
4 environment can assist in further comprehending TE theoretically.

5 Educational travellers like international students provide unique insights into their
6 experiences given their positionality of being both a tourist and a sojourner. The United
7 Nations’ international recommendations for tourism statistics (2008) suggest that long-term
8 international students are considered non-residents and are travellers, but an accurate
9 terminology may be complex since students may either return home temporarily or travel
10 elsewhere during their stay. Likewise, there is an increasingly blurred boundary between
11 education and tourism, since tourism is heavily embedded within modern mobilities (Tran et
12 al., 2018). By definition, educational travellers’ main objectives are to learn at the destination
13 whether through formal academic credit-bearing courses or informal self-discoveries (Falk et
14 al., 2012; McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017; Tomasi et al., 2020). Educational travellers are often
15 motivated by new experiences (Xiao et al., 2015); and, a large proportion tends to travel
16 domestically whilst living abroad (Glover, 2011). Hence, there is considerable overlap
17 between educational travellers’ mobility and tourism, but travel and tourism studies tend to
18 neglect to unpack these experiences due to conventional definitions of tourism. Yet,
19 educational travellers are very much considered a part of visitor spending in destinations like
20 Australia and account for a significant proportion of tourism spending (Austrade, 2019,
21 2021).

22 Besides educational travellers’ tourism spending, destinations rely significantly on
23 educational travellers for social and economic sustainability. These contributions can be
24 direct through living expenses, university enrolment fees and tourism experiences, or indirect
25 when friends and relatives visit (Godfrey & Hall, 2020; Grozinger & Parsons, 2020).

1 Australia relies heavily on educational travellers to supplement its labour force, which
2 became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic when global border closures significantly
3 affected the hospitality, tourism and agricultural sectors (Austrade, 2021; Murray, 2022).
4 Businesses faced closures and experienced significant distress due to their inability to cope
5 with labour shortages from the lack of educational travellers (Butler, 2022).

6 In particular, the impacts of educational travellers extend beyond their stay. Satisfied
7 educational travellers become strong advocates for the destination and educational institution,
8 which is vital for the destination's reputation and future economic sustainability (Ammigan &
9 Langton, 2018). Furthermore, educational travellers can further improve socio-cultural and
10 economic development should they immigrate after becoming integrated (Istad et al., 2021).
11 However, many educational travellers face substantial difficulties and lack support during
12 their stay in Australia (Mills, 2018; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020), undermining their
13 potential TE. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated feelings of abandonment among
14 educational travellers in Australia, who were told to 'make your way home' after losing their
15 jobs (Gallagher et al., 2020; Gibson & Moran, 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). With
16 extended border closures, educational travellers began considering other educational
17 destinations (TEQSA, 2021; Zhou, 2021). Post-pandemic, Australia faces difficulties
18 attracting educational travellers, losing out to Canada, the United States and the United
19 Kingdom for better quality education, tourism experiences and migration pathways (Duffin,
20 2022; Lawrence & Ziguras, 2021; TEQSA, 2021). Australia will require significant
21 reparation efforts to restore educational travellers' perceptions of the country as a top-quality
22 educational destination that provides exceptional experiences (Lawrence & Ziguras, 2021).
23 As such, in this study, Australia is used as a cross-cultural context for educational travel due
24 to their reliance on the international education market on the visitor economy.

1 This study uses a broad overarching research question to assist in uncovering insight
2 into educational travellers' TE: *How does educational travellers' Australian cross-cultural*
3 *experience transform them?* A phenomenological approach provides in-depth insight into the
4 holistic cross-cultural experience. Educational travellers' triggers and outcomes are explored,
5 and nuances in these relationships are explained through a theoretical framework, which
6 extends previous research on TE and allows further insight into future research. Finally, the
7 study provides practical management insights by discussing how destination management
8 organisations can improve the facilitation of educational travellers' TE.

9 **2.0 Literature review**

10 Travel experiences are catalysts for personal transformation as they enable travellers to
11 discover meaningful places. They provide opportunities for learning that do not fit travellers'
12 existing expectations or understandings (Walker & Manyamba, 2020). Personal
13 transformation is an individualised process of 'expanding consciousness', where travellers
14 realise changes in themselves and other perspectives, old and new, and redefine themselves
15 based on these realisations (Holland-Wade, 1998). Travellers leave their familiar 'bubble'
16 and encounter 'strangeness' at the destination, engaging them in meaningful cultural
17 discoveries using cognitive, emotional and bodily processes (Tomasi et al., 2020). Returning
18 home, travellers, particularly educational travellers, may feel empowered psychologically and
19 be more socially aware of other cultures and customs (Brown, 2009). Due to their length of
20 stay, educational travellers often have deeper cross-cultural immersion and greater adaptation
21 to the destination's cultural environment (Kim, 2015). Their purpose of educational
22 experience also primes them for transformation (Nada et al., 2018).

23 The current understanding of transformative triggers, processes and outcomes is
24 convoluted due to differences in theory and context. Those observing facilitated contexts

1 such as ecotourism and voluntourism typically adopt transformative learning theory (TLT)
2 and emphasise disorienting dilemmas as a critical trigger in TE (Wolf et al., 2017).
3 Disorienting dilemmas arise from uncomfortable situations and trigger the critical reflections
4 necessary in TE (Laros, 2017). Since TLT is studied heavily in contexts of heavy facilitation,
5 the associated transformative outcomes are often the learned knowledge, skill or social
6 awareness rather than the psychological outcomes of participants such as independent
7 travellers (Teoh et al., 2021), which tend to be more organic and self-driven (Noy, 2004). The
8 existential transformation lens considers transformations triggered by peak experiences
9 (Kirillova et al., 2017), which occur through external circumstantial environments, such as
10 awe-inspiring scenery, novel cultures or meaningful connections with others (Pung et al.,
11 2020). Transformations occur when travellers interpret meaning from those peak experiences
12 (Kirillova et al., 2017). The associated outcomes are often psychological, as travellers feel
13 psychologically rejuvenated from travelling (Canavan, 2018).

14 Due to the various conceptualisations of TE, a recent review attempted to synthesise
15 the multiple elements of TE through a co-created perspective (Teoh et al., 2021). TE has
16 three dimensions: the destination experience, travellers' cognition and emotion; and, where
17 applicable, facilitators such as tour guides or educators (Teoh et al., 2021). The review
18 indicates four types of transformative outcomes – psychological, social, physical and
19 knowledge – triggered by the experience or the tourist's cognition and emotion, either *in situ*
20 or *post-experience* (Teoh et al., 2021). However, the study does not explore how specific TE
21 dimensions and elements interact to achieve co-created TE. Furthermore, the literature
22 suggests that TE can occur intentionally or serendipitously, deriving from the tourist's
23 motivations (Sheldon, 2020); and there is a lack of understanding of how motivations assist
24 in shaping transformations. Educational travellers may have myriad reasons for studying
25 abroad and uncovering these reasons will help scholars understand their TE better.

1 Within educational travel contexts, in-depth explorations of TE remain relatively
2 limited among several groups. The first group discusses the transformative potential of
3 educational experiences (Brown, 2009; Wee, 2019). The second group focuses on
4 transformative triggers, either through a specific theoretical lens (e.g. transformative
5 learning), discussing how culture shocks serve as disorienting dilemmas (Nada et al., 2018),
6 or without a theoretical lens, drawing particular trigger–outcome links from the educational
7 experience (Clapp-Smith & Wernsing, 2014). The third group identifies transformative
8 outcomes, mostly on social outcomes such as intercultural competence rather than personal
9 and psychological outcomes (Brown, 2009; Schartner, 2015). Finally, the fourth group
10 focuses on highly facilitated formal academic learning environments (Dass-Brailsford &
11 Serrano, 2011; Kronk et al., 2015) rather than self-directed learning experiences.

12 Existing studies do not adequately delineate the destination’s cross-cultural
13 experiences of educational travellers. Educational travellers encounter challenges that force
14 them to transform for survival (Kim, 2001). They may struggle with immersing themselves in
15 a new culture, learning independence or facing other unpredictable life crises (Nada et al.,
16 2018). These issues mostly describe everyday life challenges and not formal academic
17 learning challenges, which can also occur. For example, educational travellers can face
18 cultural barriers in the classroom, particularly a less didactic style of learning that requires
19 them to be self-guided (Merry et al., 2021). In addition, destination attributes appeal to
20 educational travellers, who are intrinsically motivated by leisurely travel (King et al., 2022).
21 Immersion in the destination’s culture forms a significant part of the educational traveller’s
22 experience and can trigger transformations through socio-cultural comparisons (Teoh et al.,
23 2021). However, investigations of educational travellers’ domestic travel experiences during
24 breaks remain limited. Educational travellers partake in tourism and leisure activities outside
25 of their formal learning environments, contributing to their learning (Kim & Kim, 2019;

1 Zhang et al., 2018). There is a need to explore diverse transformative outcomes triggered by
2 different cross-cultural experiences to gain a comprehensive picture of educational travel TE
3 – especially among international students.

4 A key characteristic in triggering cross-cultural transformative experiences is socio-
5 cultural comparisons. Previous literature describes how travellers would often contrast their
6 home life and the destination’s culture when in a different cultural environment (Dass-
7 Brailsford & Serrano, 2011; Country et al., 2016). This is because a destination’s culture
8 often includes different ideas, patterns, values and ways of life (Giddens et al., 2017; Kroeber
9 & Kluckhohn, 1952). Thus, when travellers encounter unfamiliar cultures, they would create
10 hierarchical oppositions between themselves and the ‘other’ to understand what they are
11 gazing upon (Bresner, 2010). Here, gazing refers to the practice of evaluating, organising and
12 interpreting the various experiences encountered, and thus, is a meaning-making process that
13 involves both cognitive and emotional processes (thinking and feeling) (Urry & Larsen,
14 2011). However, studies on transformations have yet to understand how travellers’
15 motivations interact and influence this meaning-making process in cross-cultural experiences.
16 This is particularly important given that transformations is argued to be either intentional or
17 serendipitous; and that the pre-trip state of mind is imperative for the transformative process
18 (Teoh et al., 2021).

19 This study addresses three objectives by addressing the overall question, “How does
20 educational travellers’ Australian cross-cultural experience transform them?” First, it aims to
21 identify the various circumstantial environments in educational travellers’ cross-cultural TE.
22 It also provides a nuanced understanding of the transformative process and outcomes. The
23 triggers are explored further to identify whether they are subject to motivations, or a
24 combination triggered by the destination’s circumstantial environment. Understanding the

1 variations in triggers and processes allows us to explore diverse outcomes for educational
2 travellers.

3 **3.0 Methods**

4 We adopt a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological paradigm to explore international
5 educational travellers' cross-cultural TE. The descriptive and interpretive phenomenological
6 paradigms seek to uncover the 'essence' of a phenomenon but differ in their goals (Neubauer
7 et al., 2019). Descriptive phenomenology aims to eliminate the researcher's self, arrive at a
8 bias-free study of the phenomena and view the reality of the participant's consciousness
9 (Neubauer et al., 2019). Interpretive phenomenology is value-laden (axiology) as the
10 researcher forms the interpretive process (epistemological subjectivity) and acknowledges the
11 lived experiences of participants interacting with the world (ontology) (Wright-St Clair,
12 2015). Interpretive phenomenology allows the authors to uncover participants' lived
13 experiences in the Australian cross-cultural context and gives a voice to educational traveller
14 experiences (Tracy, 2020). We used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gain insight into
15 the complexities of TE.

16 We reveal researcher characteristics to provide background to the researchers'
17 relationship to the subject matter. Author one was born in Malaysia, resided in Australia for
18 eight years and is a final-year postgraduate student at an Australian university. His Australian
19 experiences enabled him to realise his transformations, so he developed an interest in better
20 understanding the TE. He conducted the data collection and initial analysis. Authors 2 and 3
21 had experience as educational travellers in Australia; they did not participate in data
22 collection, but were involved in the research design and cross-examined the initial analysis to
23 mitigate bias in the study, and were critical to the final analysis and interpretation.

1 This study uses Australia as a cross-cultural destination as it is one of the top
2 destinations for student mobility (King et al., 2022). Australia is famous for its authentic and
3 immersive urban and natural landscapes and is appealing to travellers who study, work and
4 travel (Austrade, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 485,000
5 international educational travellers remained onshore, equating to 80% of Australia's
6 international educational travellers (Godfrey & Hall, 2020). This study used purposive,
7 convenience and snowball sampling to recruit onshore international educational travellers,
8 combining professional and personal networks in government and private student agencies,
9 online platforms LinkedIn and Facebook, and interviewee referrals. It focuses on participants
10 studying for a higher education degree (i.e. Bachelors, Masters, PhD) or a pathway program
11 (i.e. English courses). Participants are all above 18 years old and are independent individuals
12 capable of making decisions, including about travel and leisure.

13 We provided informed consent packages before interviews and masked participants'
14 identities during transcription. We used Zoom because of statewide COVID-19 travel
15 restrictions. Online platforms also provided accessibility and convenience to a broader range
16 of participants from different locations in Australia (Gray et al., 2020). The authors
17 conducted 43 interviews, although data saturation occurred at I38 from the sequential
18 analysis between interviews. Five interviews were added to confirm that no new themes were
19 found. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours and 45 minutes, with a female-to-
20 male (30-to-13) interviewee ratio. Interviewees had lived in Australia for nine months to a
21 maximum of five years, with the locations being Queensland (27), New South Wales (6),
22 South Australia (3), Victoria (3), Australian Capital Territory (2), Tasmania (1) and Western
23 Australia (1). See Appendix A for interviewee profiles. Interviewees who arrived before
24 COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 occasionally travelled back to their home countries during

1 semester breaks. We note that gender and location spreads are limitations and caution against
2 generalisation.

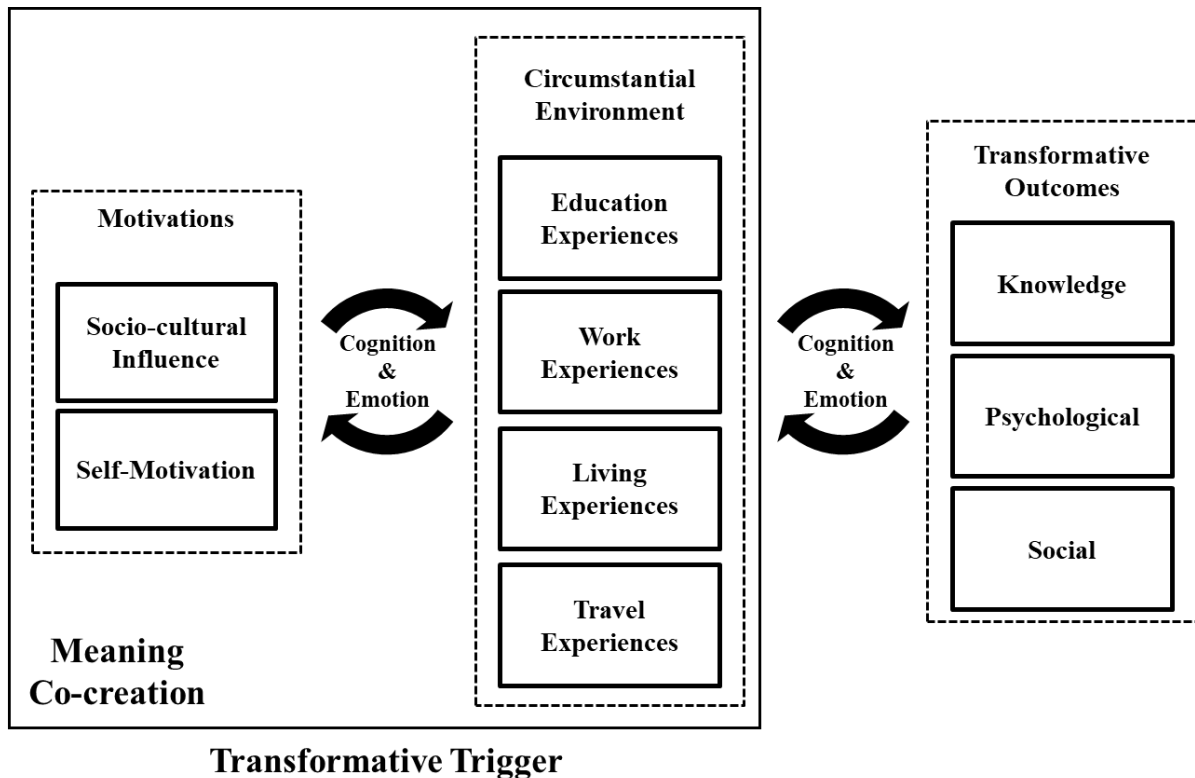
3 We used thematic analysis to find meaning patterns in interviewees' lived experiences
4 and coded the data using open, axial and selective coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss,
5 2015; Sundler et al., 2019). We first familiarised ourselves with the data by reading and re-
6 reading to understand the texts thoroughly to find meanings and themes (Sundler et al.,
7 2019). We developed specific labels (codes) for these themes through a constant comparison
8 process and contrasted them with other labels to deem them a suitable fit and materialise
9 theoretical properties (Tracy, 2020). For example, interviewees travelling abroad for 'careers'
10 or in pursuit of 'something different' are categorised as self-motivated with the description
11 'international educational travellers' intrinsic decision-making and what they desire out of
12 life'. These themes were then further compared to identify their patterns concerning their
13 transformative processes, with self-motivation and socio-cultural influence materialising
14 *motivations* that 'compel international educational travellers to travel abroad and inform their
15 decisions to come to Australia'.

16 **4.0 Results**

17 ***4.1 Co-creating transformations: Motivations and circumstantial environment***

18 As summarised in Figure 1, interviewees' *motivations* and the destination's *circumstantial*
19 *environment* co-create the meaning necessary to trigger transformations. *Motivations* compel
20 interviewees to travel abroad and inform their decisions to come to Australia – whether for
21 education, work or travel. More importantly, the motivations prime interviewees for
22 transformation, allowing them to draw meaning from the destination's circumstantial
23 environments. The destination holds important external stimuli, including nature, the cultural
24 landscape and meaningful socio-cultural interactions. Interviewees encounter these external

1 stimuli through four circumstantial environments – travel, living, work and education –
 2 transforming their knowledge, psychology and social perspectives. Interviewees’ cognition
 3 and emotions play a back-and-forth looping role, as interviewees reflect on what they think
 4 and feel in the entire transformation process. These transformative outcomes have nuanced
 5 interconnected relationships, elaborated in section 4.2.



6 **Transformative Trigger**
 7 **Figure 1.** A holistic view of international educational travellers’ transformative triggers and
 8 outcomes.

9 *4.1.1 Motivations: Socio-cultural influence and self-motivation*

10 *Socio-cultural influence* refers to interviewees’ home socio-cultural environmental impacts
 11 on their decision-making and experiences in Australia. Asian and Hispanic interviewees tend
 12 to be more strongly influenced by their socio-cultural environments than European
 13 interviewees. Interviewees with strong socio-cultural influence also heavily draw on cross-
 14 cultural differences when reflecting on their experiences. Socio-cultural influences diverge

1 into two categories: *adherence* and *opposition*. Adherence refers to conforming to what is
2 considered normal in their family or society. For example, Interviewee 4 (I4, Female, India)
3 believed she would travel overseas since most of her extended family lives abroad.
4 Interviewees also travel abroad to resist and escape (*oppose*) socio-cultural norms. I26 (Male,
5 South Korea) explained that he did not like his home culture, as the competitive job market
6 influences how people treat one another: ‘It’s almost like a caste system for jobs.’

7 *Self-motivation* is the interviewees’ intrinsic decision-making and what they desire
8 from life. Self-motivated interviewees often describe ‘happiness’ as a goal leading them to
9 pursue a better life by upskilling. European interviewees were more autonomous and self-
10 motivated when deciding to travel abroad, and their reflections often did not detail cross-
11 cultural differences but rather what they could gain in Australia. I34 (Female, Germany)
12 arrived on a working holiday visa but decided to stay on for her studies after ‘enjoying the
13 lifestyle ... rather than just extending my working holiday, I decided to study as I haven’t
14 done so back in Germany.’

15 *4.1.2 Destination Australia and four circumstantial environments*

16 Interviewees choose Australia for many reasons, including working holiday visas and cheaper
17 visa options, Australia’s natural landscapes, high-quality educational institutions with diverse
18 degrees, and being a liveable destination. I43 (Male, Indonesia) chose Australia to pursue his
19 doctorate with a reputable supervisor, Australia’s geographical proximity to Indonesia and
20 financial support. Most importantly, I43 stresses the ‘everyday living experience’ as he wants
21 to enrol his daughters in an Australian school while having the support of his Indonesian
22 community. I43 finds “seeing [his] daughters’ English and confidence improve” as
23 meaningful – and meaning is necessary for co-creating transformation. Transformations can
24 occur anytime, and some interviewees said their experiences transformed them early in their

1 time in Australia, while for others it occurred later. These transformations are knowledge,
2 psychological or social. In some cases, some returned to Australia as international
3 educational travellers because of prior transformative experiences. I23 (Male, South Korea)
4 explains: “I first came in 2015 on a working holiday visa ... I returned in 2018 as I saw my
5 future here.”

6 Education, work, living and travel experiences are four circumstantial environments
7 allowing interviewees to engage and create meaning with nature, cultural landscape and
8 socio-cultural interactions. Education is the core experience, while work, living and travel are
9 peripheral. Interviewees first transform their knowledge through better destination
10 understanding and personal competencies, and a further reflection on knowledge leads to
11 psychological or social transformation.

12 *Education experiences* include universities, vocational educational training institutes
13 and campus experiences, and external educational supporting agents. Interviewees emphasise
14 the support, facilities and networks provided by their educational experiences. I17 (Female,
15 Taiwan) exhibits a knowledge transformation as her English competency improves. I17’s
16 university career development centre suggested joining clubs and professional associations,
17 leading to her psychological transformation into a confident person: ‘I used to be shy to share
18 my opinion and afraid of making mistakes.’

19 *Work experiences* involve interviewees’ work placements, whether as part of their
20 degree curriculum, to gain professional development experience or to financially support
21 themselves in Australia. These experiences allow interviewees to understand Australian
22 workplace culture. I20 (Female, South Korea) explains her knowledge transformation,
23 specifically her destination understanding of Australia, citing how ‘nurses here help each
24 other and patiently teach us if we need help’, whereas back home, she dropped out of her

1 nursing degree from bullying. I20 feels like a different person, as she has gained confidence
2 (psychological transformation).

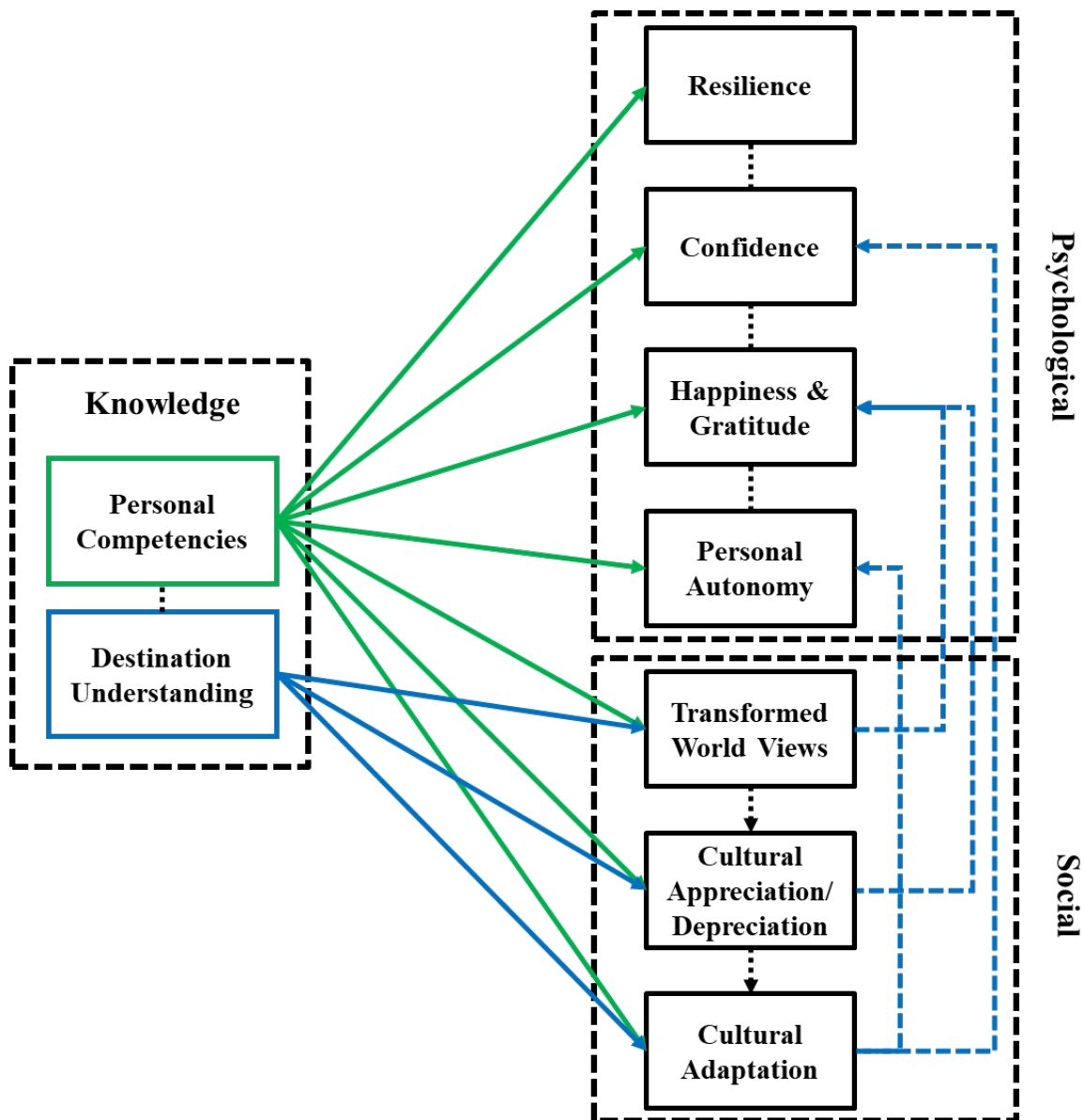
3 *Living experiences* involve interviewees' off-campus experiences and daily lives
4 away from work or studies, providing ample opportunities to explore and better understand
5 Australia. I11 (Female, Ecuador) explains how she came to see Australia as a destination that
6 protects wildlife (knowledge transformation) from seeing 'kangaroos hopping around
7 together everywhere' outside her home. I11 also begins showing cultural appreciation (social
8 transformation) as she describes how '[Australians] have nice parks and houses, people live
9 alongside wildlife. [Australians] have a nice balance.'

10 *Travel experiences* involve interviewees exploring various parts of Australia, chosen
11 for its sun, sea and beaches, and unique flora and fauna. I37 (Female, Sweden) contrasts
12 Australia with Sweden, stating how she 'loves the sun and ocean' in Australia compared with
13 the 'cold, dark, rainy, snowy life [in Sweden]'. During the height of the COVID-19
14 pandemic, many avoided travelling due to government-imposed restrictions and lockdowns.
15 However, when possible, travelling was an essential coping mechanism. I39 (Female,
16 Pakistan) cites her resilience and confidence (psychological transformation) from travelling
17 with other backpackers to cope with isolation: 'I travelled with other backpackers when the
18 first lockdown lifted. I made more friends as I travelled ... I returned from my first solo trip
19 to Darwin and learned so much (knowledge transformation). I'm different now.'

20 ***4.2 Holistic self-transformation: Interconnected knowledge, psychological and social*** 21 ***outcomes***

22 Three interrelated transformative outcomes identified were knowledge, and psychological
23 and social transformations; these outcomes represent interviewees' holistic self-
24 transformation. While some interviewees acknowledged their transformations outright, citing

1 feeling 'changed', others noted personal 'growth' or career 'development'. However, most
2 interviewees acknowledged transformations since arriving in Australia, saying the research
3 prompted this realisation. Figure 2 summarises the connections between knowledge,
4 psychological and social outcomes. Interviewees with less destination cultural familiarity,
5 such as Asians and Hispanics, tend to emphasise cross-cultural differences when describing
6 their experiences, and highlight more robust destination understanding and social
7 transformations, transforming them psychologically. Those with more cultural familiarity
8 focused more on their competencies and psychological transformations with a weaker
9 emphasis on social transformation.



1

2 **Figure 2.** Interconnection between knowledge, psychological and social transformations

3 *4.2.1 Knowledge transformation: Personal competencies and destination understanding*

4 *Knowledge transformation* includes information, skills, awareness and familiarity with

5 situations, enabling interviewees to practise their knowledge through physical actions or

6 mental reflection. Knowledge is the first transformational point, including personal

7 competencies and destination understanding. *Personal competencies* have a self-focus,

8 including life skills, career skills and personal awareness, which are the learned self-

9 capabilities for interviewees to achieve their goals. *Destination understanding* has a social

1 focus, referring to the interviewees' learned perceptions about the destination's culture and
2 society. They interrelate since interviewees need some destination understanding (through
3 experiencing Australia) in developing competencies.

4 *Life skills* are essential abilities for daily life. Interviewees may not develop essential
5 life skills until they live abroad, away from their friends, families and society. For example,
6 in observing the healthy lifestyles of many Australians, I42 (Male, Italy) describes how
7 Australian culture is 'laid back' and more 'relaxed', with a better work-life balance. I42
8 observes people exercising outdoors during COVID-19, and joins them to improve his health
9 and cope with social isolation. I42 realises that his interpersonal skills improved because 'it's
10 easier to talk to strangers and make friends'.

11 *Career skills* are the technical and professional abilities that assist interviewees' future
12 employability. They developed soft skills, such as diligence, critical thinking and
13 interpersonal communication or more technical knowledge, such as English or subject-
14 specific proficiency. I6 (Female, China) cites difficulties with obscure work and personal life
15 boundaries at home. However, in Australia, where she perceives Australian culture to value
16 privacy (destination understanding), she became less worried about interpersonal conflicts
17 with her colleagues and more confident about taking charge of her PhD project. I19 (Female,
18 South Korea) started becoming proactive and now 'thinks critically'; she was initially afraid
19 to voice her opinions due to cultural differences.

20 *Personal awareness* is the interviewees' realisation of what is essential in their lives
21 (values). Most interviewees identified what they needed to achieve happiness, often through
22 prioritising family or a stable career, especially during the pandemic. I22 (Male, Iran)
23 observes the socio-economic and political differences and cites wanting stability and
24 happiness with his wife.

1 4.2.2 *Psychological and social transformations: Personal and social implications*

2 *Psychological transformation* comprises self-perspectives and emotional outcomes, including
3 resilience, confidence, happiness or gratitude, and personal autonomy. *Social transformation*
4 refers to perspectives towards cultural others. These can be prosocial (positive) or undesirable
5 (negative) attitudes and behaviours, with interviewees achieving transformations in different
6 stages, often beginning with transformed world-views, cultural appreciation and adaptation.,
7 Personal competencies directly link to interviewees' psychological transformations, whereas
8 destination understanding indirectly affects psychological transformation through
9 interviewees' social transformation.

10 *Resilience* refers to interviewees feeling mentally equipped to face future adversity
11 and comfortable coping with life difficulties. It is self-focused and does not appear linked to
12 social transformations, as interviewees overcome personal struggles to become resilient. I31
13 (Male, India) describes how he 'hit rock-bottom once, after failing two courses equating
14 \$3,700' because he was elated to find a job during COVID-19 and 'lost sight of what I [sic]
15 came here for – to study'. I31 described his resilience in overcoming this situation: 'I decided
16 to put in the effort in my studies and scored higher than ever with two distinctions. I've
17 gained a different perspective in life' (personal competency).

18 *Confidence* is internal empowerment, having a sense of self-belief and being more
19 self-expressive and unafraid of others' opinions. Confidence stems from personal
20 competency and cultural adaptation. For example, I25 (Female, India) describes how
21 'Australia's fitness culture is certainly strong', which prompted her to improve her fitness
22 (cultural adaptation) and her confidence. She explains: 'I feel happier, energetic, and
23 confident with myself and my body ... it's ... the internal confidence I've gained.'

1 *Happiness/gratitude* is feeling appreciation and joy by acknowledging what they have
2 in their life, and feeling more content and fulfilled by their experiences. Personal competency
3 and cultural appreciation lead to happiness/gratitude. I26 (Male, South Korea) describes his
4 gratitude after recently moving to the Gold Coast and completing his vocational automobile
5 mechanic training in Bundaberg, noting that he's content living in Australia and appreciates
6 the healthy work–life balance: 'My dream? I already got it. My dream was to work on the
7 Gold Coast to surf all weekend.'

8 *Personal autonomy* describes interviewees feeling unrestricted or controlled by their
9 environment, giving them the flexibility and ability to be their person (maintaining their
10 independence). Interviewees are more self-directed and feel a sense of psychological
11 freedom. Personal autonomy derives from competency and cultural adaptation. I11 (Female,
12 Ecuador) describes how 'traditional culture governs her life in Ecuador'. She explains:

13 You grow up, go to school, then college, find a husband, get married, start a family,
14 have kids, have some mortgage, and that's a happy ending for you ... People back
15 home don't accept gays or lesbians ... Coming to Australia was perfect, travelling and
16 experiencing life for myself. For my friends, it was freedom from social norms.

17 *Transformed world views* are interviewees' expanding knowledge and understanding of how
18 different societies function and the various ways of life, becoming more evaluative, whether
19 critical of or susceptible to different perspectives and lifestyles. P24 (Female, China) describes
20 how she and her homestay father often argue when discussing politics; she recalled how one
21 incident became highly heated. I24 eventually learned a valuable lesson when reconciling
22 with her homestay father, explaining: 'I used to get angry when someone disagrees with me.
23 Now, I'm okay with it and accept different voices and ideas.' There are instances where
24 conflict situations can lead to undesirable transformed world-views. I21 (Female, Lithuania)

1 notes how her Asian friends and partner experienced increased racism during COVID-19 and
2 said ‘Australia is a really racist country ... where being racist is okay and never weighted
3 out’.

4 *Cultural appreciation/depreciation* is the next progression of social transformation; it
5 is feeling a sense of connection or disconnection to the destination’s culture upon recognising
6 differences in perspectives and behaviours. I7 (Female, South Korea) describes her negative
7 social transformation. While initially feeling comfortable in Australia and seeing it as
8 multicultural, after experiencing several race-based physical assaults, I7 now feels Australia
9 is racist and has lost her sense of connection. Cultural depreciation also inhibits social
10 transformation from progressing further into adaptation. For I36 (Female, Indonesia), coming
11 to Australia allowed her to see a different culture with less hierarchy and gender inequality
12 (broadened world views). I36 explained how she understood Australia as ‘caring about our
13 culture and are very inclusive’. I36 describes that as a female international student:

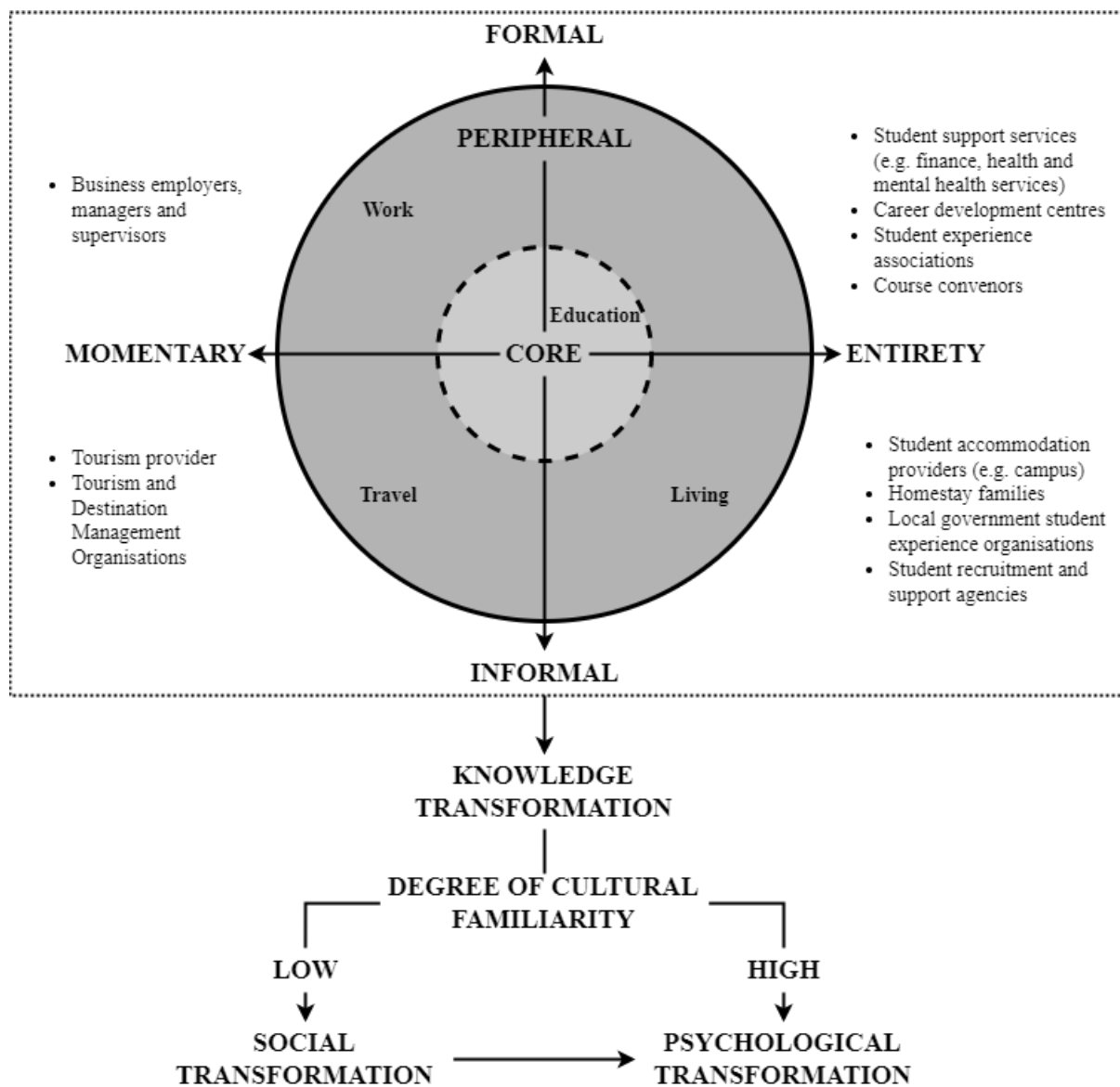
14 As a woman from Indonesia, I feel empowered here in Australia. They appreciate our
15 voices and what women say or do. When I meet a professor here, they are
16 knowledgeable and of higher rank, but they respect our opinion. Australian people
17 care about our culture ... they even have prayer rooms on campus ... (cultural
18 appreciation).

19 *Cultural adaptation* is when international students feel comfortable and integrated within the
20 new cultural environment, and is the final phase of positive social transformation. As they
21 become accustomed, they may begin to embrace the destination’s way of life. I5 (Female,
22 China) describes how she has become more adaptable since arriving in Australia. She now
23 ‘sees things from different perspectives and became more adaptable’. I5 describes ‘[judging]

1 people from what they wear because you must dress well in China. Now, I accept what other
2 people think and do not care what they do.’

3 **5.0 Discussion and Conclusion**

4 This study set out to understand international educational travellers’ cross-cultural TE.
5 Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, it has developed contextual, theoretical and
6 practical insights into educational traveller’s TE and bridged the nexus between travel and
7 learning, contributing heavily to the under-researched field of travel, learning and
8 transformations (Falk et al., 2012). Several contributions to the literature are identified,
9 including (1) understanding educational travellers’ cross-cultural TE; (2) building a better
10 understanding of educational travel TE; (3) uncovering transformative triggers; (4)
11 highlighting nuances in transformative trigger–outcome relationships; and (5) examining how
12 different facilitators can facilitate educational travellers’ TE. Figure 3 provides an interpretive
13 model of how educational travellers’ cross-cultural TE can be facilitated.



1

2 **Figure 3.** *Educational travellers' transformative experience facilitation model.*

3 The findings reveal diversification in educational travellers' cross-cultural TE and add
 4 value to current education travel literature by expanding education travel's formal and
 5 informal learning divide in cross-cultural contexts (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017). Four
 6 circumstantial environments represent the educational traveller's holistic experience:
 7 education, work, travel and living experiences. They are conducive to transformations, with
 8 temporal aspects ranging from momentary to the entirety, formal to informal learning, and
 9 core and periphery spatial aspects. These experiences have diverse facilitation potential with

1 education and living having a greater frequency (entirety), while work and travel are more
2 sporadic and have short-term frequencies (momentary). Moreover, work and education
3 provide formal learning environments with higher levels of facilitation in students'
4 experiences than the informal (lower facilitation) learning of travel and living. Spatially,
5 education experiences are core for educational travellers, since all educational travellers must
6 enrol in an educational program during their stay due to visa regulations. The remaining
7 facilitators sit on the periphery, relying on educational travellers' choice in seeking these
8 experiences. These findings solidify how educational travellers intersect visitors and migrants
9 and play a role socially and economically in the destination through their participation in
10 diverse experiences.

11 The findings also observe educational travellers undergoing two transformative
12 phases, leading to different interrelated outcomes; this expands on the past literature, which
13 broadly discusses outcomes and draws particular trigger–outcome links (Brown, 2009;
14 Clapp-Smith & Wernsing, 2014). The first phase involves students acquiring information,
15 awareness or skills, thus developing better destination understanding or personal
16 competencies (knowledge transformation). The second phase occurs as educational travellers
17 reflect on their knowledge transformation, and achieve psychological and social
18 transformations. The study found that personal competencies initiate psychological and social
19 transformations, whereas destination understanding initiates social transformations, further
20 impacting educational travellers' psychological transformations. This complexity explains
21 why some educational travellers find confidence in their personal and professional
22 development, while others indicate becoming confident from their transformed world-views
23 or cultural adaptation. Broadly, these findings reflect how travel provides opportunities for
24 visitors to learn about themselves and other people and places (Falk et al., 2012).

1 This study also identifies how educational travellers' transformations are co-created
2 between the motivations and circumstantial environments of educational travel. Whether
3 socio-cultural influence or self-motivation, motivations are crucial in generating meaning in
4 the circumstantial environment. Transformations can be 'serendipitous' (Kirillova et al.,
5 2017), but *how* they occur is usually intentional. There are also differences in which
6 educational travellers generate meaning, and socio-cultural influence appears more dominant
7 for those of Asian and Hispanic backgrounds. This finding brings new insight into how
8 culture shapes transformations. A possible explanation is that Asians and Latinx travellers
9 tend to prioritise family and in-group, affecting how they interpret their experiences (Zhou et
10 al., 2021). These students' reflections draw on cross-cultural differences, especially compared
11 with the largely Anglo-Saxon-based individualist Australian culture (Smolicz et al., 2001).
12 Hence, they were more likely to have a more robust destination understanding and a pattern
13 of social transformations alongside psychological transformation. However, these are
14 inductive observations and we propose future research to test whether the observed patterns
15 are valid through quantitative methods.

16 Educational travellers of European descent were more autonomous and independent
17 in their decision-making, drawing less on cross-cultural comparisons and more focused on
18 their competencies. Their outcomes tend to be psychological, with a weaker link to social
19 transformation. These divergent outcomes can be explained by cultural familiarity, with those
20 of Asian and Hispanic backgrounds (low cultural familiarity) being less familiar with
21 Australian culture and drawing on cross-cultural comparisons to facilitate their meaning-
22 making. However, these are broad patterns, and there were individual differences in the level
23 of socio-cultural influence and self-motivation for each interviewee. Future research could
24 explore variances in socio-cultural influence and self-motivation for specific groups of
25 educational travellers.

1 The study provides practical insight into four environments to support educational
2 travellers within the educational travel context. Destinations can play more active roles in
3 facilitating educational travellers' transformations. While educational institutions actively
4 support educational travellers (Kim et al., 2019), the other facilitators are less compelled.
5 Given that education institutions better understand educational travellers' needs and wants,
6 they can collaborate with other facilitators to support educational travellers. Educational
7 institutions can work with tour operators to develop experiential travel experiences to foster
8 positive TE in educational travellers. Likewise, tourism operators' existing strengths in
9 creating TE are also suitable for providing consultations to educational institutions regarding
10 how to facilitate TE (Soulard et al., 2019).

11 Educational institutions can better facilitate TE by actively embedding cultural
12 materials in the curriculum; this is more likely to trigger transformations than existing formal
13 learning in classrooms. Educators can bring educational travellers to different parts of a
14 destination and provide assignments that critically reflect on the significance of visited
15 places, thus creating new opportunities for collaboration and cooperation between different
16 facilitators within the destination. There are opportunities for peripheral facilitators to assist
17 student experiences – for example, educational travellers arrive in Australia through private
18 education agents, who can work with tourism providers to provide transformational tourism
19 experiences. These agents have a chance to shape educational travellers' TE by facilitating
20 visits to natural and cultural landscapes and creating meaningful socio-cultural interactions
21 with locals through different cross-cultural activities.

22 Tourism providers can also facilitate TE in educational travellers. Educational
23 travellers are known to travel during their semester breaks or for shorter trips during long
24 weekends. As such, this is an opportunity for tourism providers to market their offerings by
25 collaborating with educational institutions and providing special promotions or discounts.

1 Broadly speaking, tourism providers could cater their offerings and style of delivery based on
2 whether the educational traveller has high or low cultural familiarity with the destination. For
3 example, if the educational traveller has less familiarity with the destination, then it would be
4 wise for the tourism provider to focus on providing more authentic experiences on the local
5 customs, culture or attractions. Delivering the local interpretation of the culture, including
6 values, beliefs and way of life would assist in the meaning-making and destination
7 understanding of those with less cultural familiarity. Contrary, for those with high cultural
8 familiarity, tourism providers could suggest more specific and highly unique experiences for
9 respite and personal competency development (i.e. yoga retreats). Given that each
10 educational traveller has individualised motivations, it would be recommended that tourism
11 providers conduct a pre-trip survey to identify what the educational traveller is expecting out
12 of their travels.

13 The study offers implications beyond the educational traveller sector. There is
14 untapped potential in exploring the transformative experiences of other traveller types, such
15 as working holiday travellers, who have similar circumstantial environments to students, with
16 their core comprising work instead of education. This study does have limitations, however.
17 Methodologically, gender and location spread skew in this study, and future studies should
18 explore educational travellers' gender-based transformative outcomes in greater detail (Pung
19 et al., 2019). Future research should also examine how different spaces and places (e.g. urban
20 vs rural) affect educational travellers' TE, since some locations may be less welcoming of
21 foreigners (Radford, 2017). Likewise, this study did not uncover transformative barriers and
22 provided only a small insight into negative transformations, particularly social
23 transformations. Future research should explore whether educational travellers
24 psychologically transform when encountering racism, if at all (Mills, 2018). This study
25 covered knowledge, psychological and social transformations as well as their

1 interrelationships but did not explore physical transformations as identified by Teoh et al.
2 2021. Future research can explore whether educational travellers undergo physical
3 transformations (such as occupational-related skills, i.e., coffee or cocktail making in
4 hospitality) and whether this can psychologically or socially transform them. Finally, this
5 study uncovered various facilitators based on four circumstantial environments but did not
6 explore these facilitators in depth. Future research could explore whether encountering
7 workplace exploitation or abusive management affects the TE of educational travellers
8 (Clibborn, 2021). Future research should explore how informal learning through travel and
9 tourism activities can be blended with formal learning to facilitate transformations in
10 educational travellers.

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13

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1 **Appendix A: Interviewees' profile summary**

Interviewee	Degree	Major	State	Employed	Length in Australia
I1	Diploma	Nursing	Queensland	Casual	2 years
I2	Master's	International Tourism and Hotel Management	Queensland	Self-employed	9 months
I3	Certificate	English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students	Queensland	Casual	2 years
I4	Master's	Pharmacy	Queensland	Part-time	2 years 3 months
I5	Master's	International Tourism and Hotel Management	Queensland	Part-time	2 years
I6	PhD	Chemistry	Queensland	No	4 years
I7	PhD	Psychology	Queensland	Casual	2 years 6 months
I8	Master's	Business Administration	Queensland	Part-time	2 years
I9	PhD	Psychology	Queensland	No	1 year 6 months
I10	Bachelor's	Medical Science	Queensland	No	5 years
I11	PhD	Medical Science	Queensland	No	2 years
I12	PhD	Linguistics	Queensland	No	2 years 6 months
I13	Bachelor's	Social Work	Queensland	Full-time	4 years
I14	Master's	Business	Queensland	Part-time	1 year 3 months
I15	Master's	Social Work	Queensland	No	1 year 10 months
I16	Bachelor's	Computer Science	Queensland	Part-time	3 years
I17	Master's	Construction Practice and Project Management	Queensland	No	2 years 6 months
I18	PhD	Information and Communications Technology	Queensland	No	2 years
I19	Bachelor's	Nursing	Queensland	Casual	1 year 6 months
I20	Bachelor's	Nursing	Queensland	Casual	1 year 6 months
I21	PhD	Criminology	Queensland	Casual	2 years 2 months
I22	PhD	Tourism	South Australia	No	3 years 6 months
I23	Bachelor's	Nursing	Queensland	Part-time	3 years

I24	Master's	Financial Management	Australian Capital Territory	No	4 years 6 months
I25	Master's	Engineering Project Management	Queensland	No	2 years
I26	Certificate	Automotive	Queensland	Full-time	4 years 6 months
I27	Bachelor's	Advanced Computing with Honours	Australian Capital Territory	Casual	4 years
I28	PhD	Business	South Australia	No	1 year 5 months
I29	PhD	Business	South Australia	Casual	4 years
I30	MD	Doctor of Medicine	Queensland	Casual	2 years
I31	Master's	Engineering	Western Australia	Casual	2 years
I32	Master's	Teaching	Victoria	No	5 years
I33	Bachelor's	Business Hospitality	New South Wales	Part-time	2 years 8 months
I34	Bachelor's	Business	New South Wales	Part-time	3 years
I35	PhD	Government	Tasmania	No	1 year 6 months
I36	PhD	Humanities and Social Sciences	Victoria	No	2 years
I37	Bachelor's	Communication	New South Wales	Casual	2 years 6 months
I38	Certificate	Early Childhood Education	Queensland	Part-time	2 years 6 months
I39	PhD	Management	New South Wales	Part-time	2 years 6 months
I40	Diploma	Early Childhood Education and Care	Queensland	Part-time	4 years
I41	Certificate	English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students	New South Wales	Casual	1 year 4 months
I42	Bachelor's	Business and Marketing	New South Wales	Part-time	1 year 8 months
I43	PhD	Higher Education Policy	Victoria	Casual	2 years