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# **Navigating Social Integration at University: Lived Experiences of South Asian Students in Norway**

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# Abstract

Globally, migration for higher education is a common phenomenon. South Asian students also dream of getting a better education abroad and living a quality life. While living in a new place, many international students face challenges such as loneliness, difficulty integrating, financial struggles, adjusting to a new education system, depression, et cetera. This study explores South Asian students' experiences of navigating their social integration into Norwegian universities and colleges, focusing on answering a principal research question: How do South Asian university students in Norway navigate their social integration? I employed four dimensions of social integration theory (structural, cultural, interactive, and identificational integration), as Heckmann (2005) suggested. The narrative qualitative research recruited 12 students from four South Asian countries, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. All the selected research participants for the interview are master's-level students at four universities (colleges) and three cities in Norway.

Based on students' experiences, the study identified a few influencing factors, like the COVID-19 lockdown and digital education, the weather, and different academic cultures, for their social integration. Likewise, this study noted various hindering factors for international students' social integration: mental health, cultural distances, personal perspectives, and language issues. Lastly, social bonding among students, taking part in formal and informal social activities, and connecting with informal and formal support networks were reported as ways of social integration for international students. However, this study reiterates the thin layers of social integration among Norwegian and international students.

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## Abbreviation

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
ERASMUS	European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students
EU	European Union
HDI	Human Development Index
NHH	Norwegian School of Economics
NSD	Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SAMMEN	Student Welfare Organization, Bergen,
SiA	Student samskipnaden i Agder, Kristiansand
Sikt	Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research
SiS	Studentsamskipnaden i Stavanger, Stavanger
SSB	Statistics Norway
UiB	University of Bergen
UiS	University of Stavanger

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# Chapter I: Introduction

Globally, migration for higher education is a common phenomenon. Students' preference to study university abroad is increasing (Healey, 2008); only in 2019, 6.1 million students left their national territory for tertiary education (OECD, 2021, p. 216). South Asian citizens also dream of getting a better education abroad and living a quality life. In that context, Norway is also an attractive destination for higher education, especially for Master's and Ph.D. programs. While living in the new place, international students need to interact with people from the host country and students from different parts of the world, having them adjust their attitudes, expectations, and perceptions along with the cultural differences from their home country (Chaney and Martin, 2005, as cited in Rivas et al., 2019, p. 696).

In addition to the opportunities, many students face challenges such as loneliness, difficulty integrating, financial struggles, adjusting to a new education system, depression, et cetera, during the period. However, their social, economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds constantly influence their experiences in the new environment and at the university, which demands more research about international students' social integration.

Meanwhile, international students' social integration is comparatively less studied considering their "temporary" stays and "less problematic" groups, Li and Pitkänen (2018) writes, which is not true. They further note that international students are a key target as the best and brightest in the global competition, and many countries encourage them to find a job after graduation with "train and retain" policies, which is visible in the case of Finland and Germany. Eventually, international students are considered not temporary migrants but encouraged to stay as permanent migrants (Tremblay, 2005). The study explores South Asian (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan) students' experiences navigating their social integration into Norwegian universities/college.

## 1.1 Global Context of Students Mobility and Social Integration

Around the world, the mobility of a person for studies abroad denotes various terms: students' international mobility, foreign students, mobile students, migrant students, immigrant students, et cetera. These terminologies may carry slightly different meanings according to the context, but they focus on students' lives abroad. Likewise, to accommodate the new milieu, these



international students must socialize inside and outside the university daily, where the transition for students remains throughout their tenure in the university (Barnes, 2021, p. 3). Eventually, I briefly explored the recent historical account of students' global mobility, its patterns, and the demand for social integration.

Students' mobility around the globe cannot illustrate in a particular pattern; its nature is dynamic. In the 1970s, a distinctive philosophy emerged to deal with politics and economics: Neo-Liberalism, "dedicated to the extension of the market (and market-like) forms of governance, rule, and control across – tendentially at least – all spheres of social life" (Peck & Tickell, 2006, p. 28). The impact of the neo-liberal world order also influences the marketization of higher education. As a result, international students became a source of revenue (Beech, 2018, p. 612). Likewise, the World Bank implemented the 'Structural Adjustment Policies' and, in 2009, provided loans for educational programs to increase the globalization of education in around 85 countries around the world (Moutsios, 2009, p. 470). Similarly, regional programs, such as European Union (EU) policies, and many other factors inside and outside the country play a crucial role in educational mobility.

It is visible that the massive transfer of human capital in the form of student mobility is often towards the developed countries from so-called third-world countries. In the recent past, the volume of student mobility from developing countries to the OECD was 67% (OECD, 2021, pp. 216-217). It said that migrated students are more motivated, ambitious, and risk-taking if we compare them with other peers living back in their country of origin (Porters and Rumbaut, 2014, as cited in Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2021, p. 691). Raghuram (2013, pp. 140-141) believes that students' mobility extends beyond their academic pursuits, with many also serving as activists, workers, and, in many instances, residents and family members in the host country.

Students' mobility can be seen through push and pull factors. The host country attracts with personal development, career enhancement opportunities, lower cost, cultural learning, et cetera as pull factors, and in the home country, low-quality education, political instability or security issues, lack of study places, et cetera as push factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, English-speaking countries such as the United States (16%), Australia (8%), and the United Kingdom (8%) are the major study destination for many international students' higher studies (OECD, 2021, p. 218).

By the same token, Spiering and Erickson (2006) note that all international students can enhance their perspectives on academic subjects as well as on real-world issues, personal growth, career skills, and proficiency in a foreign language through study abroad, which further offers self-exposure outside the home country, information, and experiences about the globe. Meanwhile, students choose abroad studies for various reasons; it varies from student to student in different locations. However, students' objectives to find jobs, enhance careers, and learning process is often related to the social integration among peers, professors, and university staff.

In the same manner, recipient countries have their strategies and motives for welcoming international students, such as cultural exchange, academic quality enhancement, revenue collection, fulfilling skilled workers in the job market, internationalizing home education, and many more. For example, the EU member states are focusing on making their countries attractive destinations for international students through their policies, with some nations attracting skilled students for master's and doctoral studies to fulfill the labor market shortages, and this process also supports the national economy through revenue (EMN Synthesis Report, 2012, p. 6). In line with the EU policies, Canada also introduced a new educational plan in 2014 to harness knowledge for innovation and prosperity through international students.

International students are a future source of skilled labour, as they may be eligible after graduation for permanent residence through immigration programs such as the Canadian Experience Class (introduced in 2008). International students are well positioned to immigrate to Canada as they have typically obtained Canadian credentials, are proficient in at least one official language and often have relevant Canadian work experience. (DFATD 2014, 12, as cited in Trilokekar & Masri, 2019, pp. 25-26)

Upon fulfillment of certain criteria, the new policy opened the door for international students to settle after graduation in Canada. This aspect is pivotal for international students when selecting a new destination for their studies.

Meanwhile, developed nations in Western countries are focusing on the internationalization of their domestic education and academic environment. For that reason, students' integration is considered a prerequisite to internationalizing educational institutions.

“simply having a diverse student body does not mean the education or even the campus is global in nature. What comes as an essential part of a global education is the inclusion of international students in communities and classes. Integration of all students is an elemental

factor in the expanding concept of internationalisation.” (British Council, 2014, p. 4, as cited in Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017)

However, on a personal level, the socially separated international student may have poor social and academic performance, a feeling of isolation, and a risk to personal safety (British Council, 2014), posing a challenge to the internationalization of education. In this situation, social integration among students, professors, and university staff could be supportive in mitigating this challenge.

The process of shifting to a new place as an international student is a complex endeavor where students face several challenges. A study by Gilmartin and colleagues (2021, p. 4724) in Dublin, Ireland, noted that students face three kinds of precarious experiences: economic, legal, and intimate spheres of people’s lives. A survey among Indonesian students in Germany reported that place of residence, weather, freedom, and friends circle are the pivotal factors for international students study and living conditions (Yuniarti, 2009, as cited in Syafitri et al., 2015, p. 118).

The study reported that students who work in Dublin get low-skilled jobs in security, catering, and cleaning and manage their finances for living, studies, and legal compliance (pp. 4731-4732). Likewise, on the one hand, the legal hassles related to immigration create anxiety among students (pp. 4729-4730), and on the other hand, language barriers, cultural differences, relationships, and health (p. 4729) are what push them toward their personal precarious lives. However, this current study is more focused on students' social integration experiences in a Norwegian university, which explores to understand the dimensions of university life for international students.

Another study further reveals that Indonesian students joining organizations, attending ceremonies (parties), and learning the German language were the keys to their integration, whereas failing to integrate into the new environment had negative consequences (Syafitri et al., 2015, pp. 132-134). Meanwhile, the study further shows that work experience, learning a language, and being well prepared before leaving their hometown for a foreign country provides the best inputs for integration. Eventually, learning a language, joining volunteer organizations, and ceremonies are more likely for international students in Norway, which makes their university life better.

Generally, after graduation, international students have three options: living in the host country, traveling to a third country, or returning to their country of origin for further study, work, or settlement. A study among Indonesian graduates showed they wanted to receive high-quality education and job positions abroad; in many cases, they could return and potentially contribute to their national development (Syafitri et al., 2015, p. 112). Research by Gu Schweisfurth (2015) among Chinese graduate returnees from the UK shows that they acquired attitudes, transnational skills, and connections with potential support to strengthen their professional and personal lives. This study highlights the role of social integration for students with their peers, through which they learn interpersonal skills and, importantly, could establish connections for the future. Meanwhile, international students face challenges not only abroad but also in their home country after their return. A study among Indian students shows that male students in India get more privileges than female students, but the challenges for both genders are the same abroad (Sondhi & King, 2017).

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted international students' social integration process in several ways. In the transition of the COVID-19 lockdown, online platforms became the primary medium to follow classes and connect socially. The internet-based learning platforms provide opportunities for students to learn at any time or location over access to the Internet (Shabha, 2004, as cited in Baber, 2022). Although distance education is not new, it became dominant among students and academic staff with the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ivanec, 2022, p. 2). A study by Bolig et al. (2012, p. 120) about online learning reported feelings of disconnectedness with their teachers, classmate, and course content; it highlights individualized learning experiences with minimal social interactions. A survey among cross-national students (354) and non-students (3120) in October/November 2020 shows that students experienced poorer mental health, greater loneliness, and lower well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison with the general population, and further unfolds that students who spend more time on social media also have poor mental health (Bonsaksen et al., 2022, p. 7). It indicates students' social integration during the COVID-19 pandemic was not good.

However, the pattern, historical account, and current situations about international students and the host country show the demand for social integration of students among peers, professors, and university staff. Meanwhile, to meet the international students' expectations of getting international degrees and skills for the job market and the host country's policies to

fulfill the shortage in the job market, increase diversity, and collect revenue, the need for social integration of international students at the host university is essential.

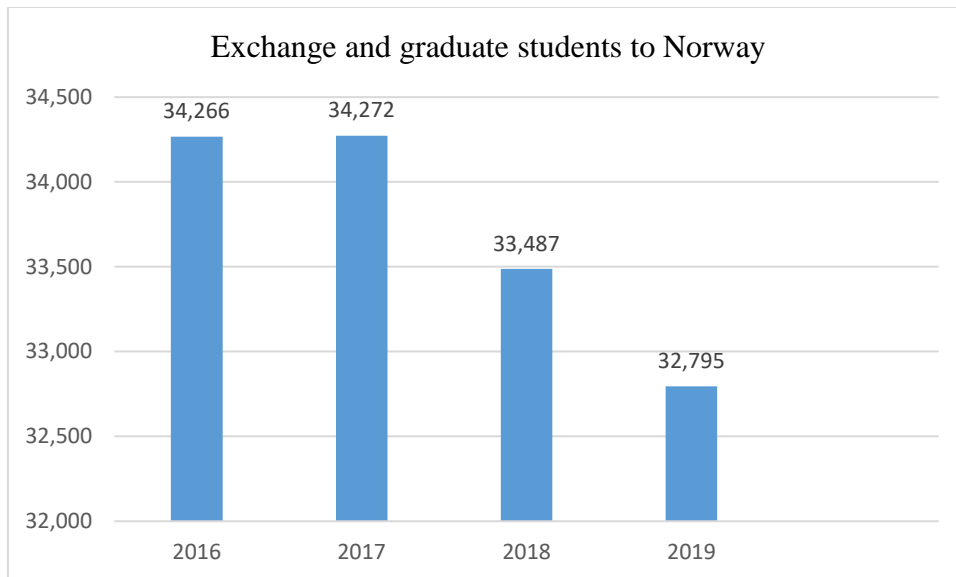
## **1.2 Students in Norwegian Higher Education Institutions**

The government of Norway has been issuing white papers to internationalize and enhance the quality of higher education. Through the whitepapers in 2009, 2014, and 2017, the government aims to internationalize education, develop a long-term plan for research and higher education, and cultivate a culture for quality higher education, respectively (Hauge & Pedersen, 2018, p. 3). Norwegian policymakers are influenced by the European Union's policy of internationalization of the higher education system (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019, p. 284). In the spirit of the Bologna declaration and as a part of the ERASMUS program, Norway is actively promoting the internationalization of higher education in the form of the academic cooperation program between developing countries, the USA, Russia, and the newer EU member countries (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019, p. 285). The concept of "internationalization at home," introduced by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2009, aims to introduce diversity in perspectives and culture by increasing student mobility (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2021, p. 702). With this background, Norwegian higher education systems attract and admit international students.

The higher education system in Norway comprises universities (universitet), university colleges (høgskole), specialized university institutions (vitenskapelig høgskole), and a few private institutions, however, in recent times, a series of institutions are merging to improve efficiency and competitiveness (OECD, 2018). Most of the higher education institutions in Norway are run by the government, which provides a wide range of programs in their universities and colleges without charging tuition fees (till 2022). Likewise, English-taught programs, a low crime rate, a low unemployment rate, a high-ranked human development index (HDI), investment in education, the economic welfare state, and peace are the major attractions for students to select Norway as a full-time or exchange student (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019).

In addition, the adoption of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and funding opportunities for students also promote international student mobility in Norway. Similarly, the high cost of living, climate, language issues, and a few high-ranked academic institutions are the factors that international students need to consider (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019, p. 284) when choosing Norway. However, the below Table 1 demonstrates the number of recently graduated international students in Norway, which slightly declined.

Table 1: Exchange and graduate students to Norway



*Source: NSD as cited in DIKU (29 May 2022)*

Studies show that the interaction between Norwegian and international students is low in Norwegian higher education institutions (SIU, 2016, p. 5). Interaction between domestic and international students is beneficial to students; it promotes the intercultural environment in higher education institutions. Likewise, the 2017 Norwegian National Student Survey shows that less than 20% of Norwegian students participate in activities with international students (Hauge & Pedersen, 2018, p. 7). Thus, the demand for social integration of international students in Norwegian higher education institutions is high.

The student welfare organizations directly and regularly support students during their stay in Norway. SAMMEN-Student Welfare Organization, Bergen, SiA-Student samskipnaden i Agder, Kristiansand and SiS-Studentsamskipnaden i Stavanger, Stavanger, are responsible for providing counseling services, cafeterias, housing, nurseries, and sports facilities for students in these research areas. Most international students book accommodations through these organizations before applying for a study visa. As per the needs of the students and the availability of the facilities, they allocate the housing. In general, the contract is for a year and can be extended until they have student status. In most of the housing, there are shared kitchens, though a few are separate as well. Once students start sharing a kitchen, expect to interact with their kitchen mates and maintain a tidy kitchen.

Likewise, university colleges and student welfare organizations (Sammen, SiA, and SiS) also organize a variety of events for students besides the Orientation Program and Buddy Week organized by the students' respective universities. Engagement in these social activities is also beneficial for students.

South Asian students, as is the case for any group of international students, must adjust to the university environment they encounter in Norway. As Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) advised, "personal adjustment and integration into the social fabric of campus life play a role at least as important as academic factors in student retention" (p. 286). Students have to adapt to the environment, culture, education system, housing, and market system from the beginning.

These orientation programs and Buddy Week intend to establish acquaintances and provide information about their academics and new surroundings. Several Norwegian universities and colleges offer orientation programs as part of their culture. Historically, orientation programs were largely based on previous years' experiences and reflection, with modifications about what to offer new students (Zis, 2002). These programs comprise different activities which help to create an '*esprit de corps*' (a feeling of pride and mutual loyalty shared by the members of a group) among newly arrived students (Twale, 1989 as cited in Miller et al., 2002, p. 51) and deliver the universities and colleges' expectation of appropriate behavior, civil responsibilities and importantly learning among them (Mullendore, 1992 as cited in Miller et al., 2002, p. 51).

On March 12, 2020, Norway used the first lockdown to control the social spread of the COVID-19 virus. Closed all kindergartens to universities, service industries, and cultural and sports activities; prescribed maintaining social distancing and hygiene measures along with two weeks of quarantine for the people traveling from abroad to Norway (Lappegård et al., 2022, p. 5). The government eventually opened all sectors as the number of afflicted people decreased. The changing context impacted the social integration of many international students. Those full-degree students who stayed in Norway faced economic hardship because of losing a part-time job; the government included them in the financial compensation and flexibility in financial matters (Norwegian Ministries, 2021, p. 31).

### **1.3 Motivation for this Study**

From childhood, I experienced migration not only for settlement but also to fulfill the purposes of education and work in my country and abroad. In August 2017, I left Nepal for further studies in Thailand. The exchange study program provided an opportunity to travel to Sri Lanka for another six months. In August 2021, I traveled for a study (Master's in intercultural studies) at NLA University College, Bergen, Norway.

During these periods, I observed several ups and downs in my life as a student. At the time of my stay in Sri Lanka, despite having limited friends, I faced loneliness and became almost helpless. My hardship did not end there; somebody reported me to the police, and later they raided my residence with suspicion as a Maldivian drug dealer. As a result, my academic and mental status reached the lowest point. Like me, I saw other students miserable and disturbed by inadequate social integration. Especially while living abroad, loneliness, depression, financial hardship, job insecurity, cultural gaps, language, festivals, celebrations, and recreation activities became challenging. Thus, based on my own bitter experiences and understanding of student life, I was encouraged to explore these student issues for my dissertation.

Even a classmate at NLA University College in Bergen, Norway, left her education in the first semester and returned to her home country to access a better support system. Over the past year, I have come to realize the importance of social integration for international students in the host country. Everyone finds it difficult to leave their comfort zone and go overseas, where financial, cultural, academic, linguistic, geographical, and climate newness play critical roles in a person's way of life as well as mental health. I assume many international students are still facing similar challenges. These facts immensely motivated me to dive into the root of this issue. Initially, I focused on a few Nepalese students for this study but decided later to include at least the South Asian region to explore South Asian students' perceptions and experiences, where South Asia is a territory linked by long cultural, social, and historical traditions (Social Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, 2022).

Further, I served in the Student Parliament and was a board member at NLA University College. These positions regularly encouraged me to connect with international students' issues.



## **1.4 Statement of the Research Problem**

To adapt to a new environment, many students face challenges abroad. Often, the new social, cultural, and educational system are hindering factors for international students. However, proper navigation and knowledge about the support system, social life, and resources inside the university or college play roles in students' better academic and social lives. Students with different social and cultural backgrounds from developing countries need to learn many things to integrate into the new milieu of Norwegian higher education institutions.

Norwegian higher education institutions enroll international students regularly and promote an intercultural environment in Norway. A study in the Netherlands reveals that non-Western international students are less integrated than other international students (Rienties et al., 2012, p. 686). Likewise, a study in Norway shows integration between international and Norwegian students is weak (Hauge & Pedersen, 2018, p. 9). With this background, knowing how these students navigate social integration in the Norwegian higher education system is crucial.

## **1.5 Aim of the Study**

The study aims to meet the following points:

- a. To explore the experiences of South Asian students attending universities in Norway.
- b. To identify the factors which influence the social integration process of South Asian students in Norway.
- c. To assess the degree to which non-South Asian peers play a role in the integration process of South Asian students in Norway.

## **1.6 Research Questions**

### *Principal Research Question*

How do South Asian university students in Norway navigate their social integration?

### *Secondary Questions*

- a. Which factors influence South Asian students' ability to socially integrate into Norway?

b. What role do non-South Asian peers play in the social integration of South Asian students in Norway?

## **1.7 Organization of the Study**

This research comprises five chapters. The first chapter introduced the background and existing literature about the social integration of international students, including the aims and research questions of the study. In chapter two, I elaborated on the theoretical foundation of social integration of international students; as suggested by Heckmann (2005), it explored the dimensions of social integration (structural, social, interactive, and identificational integration) as a conceptual framework.

Likewise, chapter three explained the adopted research methods in detail. The narrative qualitative research method administered interview as the primary tool; and explored 12 South Asian students' experiences of social integration in Norway. Chapter Four explored the findings and analysis of the studies, which comprise influencing factors, hindering aspects, and the main ways concerning social integration. However, the fifth discussion chapter examines the research questions based on the findings, existing literature, and theoretical outlines. This chapter further elaborates on the limitations of this study in detail. The last chapter concludes the study by exploring the border concerns of students' social integration, the contributions of the study, and potential future research.

## Chapter II: Theorizing Social Integration

A growing number of students attend universities abroad, not only from the eastern to the western parts of the world but also from the least developed to the developed countries. In order to improve the quality of education system and international students' better life experiences, it is crucial to focus not only on their academic integration, the degree of academic adaptations in their academic lifestyle (Song, 2013, p. 14) but also on social integration (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Rienties et al., 2012). The successful integration of international students is also important for the students' community, professors, staff, and the host society (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022, p. 192). As I explained in the previous chapter, international students have the potential to fulfill the need for a skilled labor market, increase diversity, and, most importantly, internationalize their home education and be a source of revenue collection in the host country. Likewise, international students also get an international education, enhance their career skills, have a global network, and have options for settlement. In line with this background, the study focuses on South Asian students' social integration experiences in Norwegian universities.

To understand the subject matter and answer the research questions of this study, I am using the social integration concept as a theoretical outline; for students in higher education, social integration perceive as the “extent to which a student feels connected to the college environment, peers, faculty, and others in college and is involved in campus activities” (Lotkowski et al., 2004 as cited in Brooman & Darwent, 2014, p. 1525). Meanwhile, the amount of time spent in a new setting, combined with students' objectives (whether they wish to stay or not in the host country), are the primary aspects that encourage or discourage their social integration process.

In this chapter, I elaborate on the concept of social integration concerning international students in universities. Thus, to fully understand various aspects of the social integration of students, I first discuss the conceptual framework of social integration, which provides a basic understanding of social integration. This section further illustrates four dimensions of social integration in a nutshell. In the same manner, the second part of this chapter explores the existing global literature concerning international students' social integration and their lives.

## 2.1 A Conceptual Framework of Social Integration

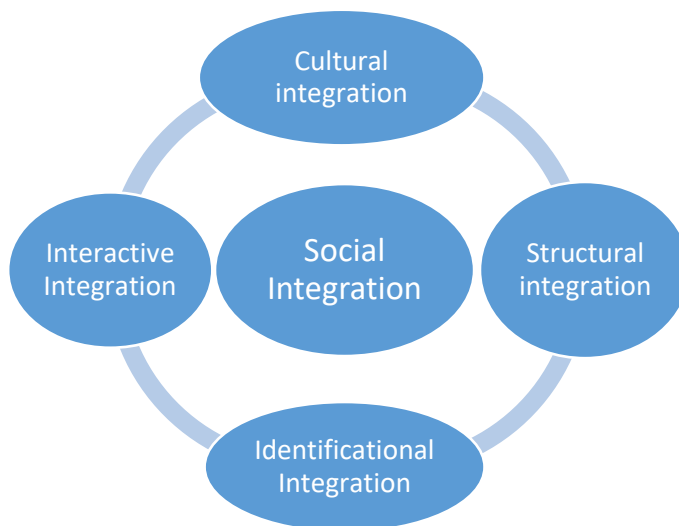
My study explores experiences of social integration among South Asian students in Norway. Before elaborating on the concept of social integration, it is prudent to note that students' social integration process at university may not be as comprehensive as that of immigrants and refugees. The concept of social integration is more often discussed concerning immigrants and refugees in terms of their settlement/adjustment in new places, whereas students' social integration is related to short-term or during their study periods only. To fully understand social integration, I want to elaborate on the concept of integration at the beginning.

The concept of integration is widely used; due to its multiple interpretations, in most instances, it is regarded as a "fuzzy concept" (Grillo, 2011, p. 266). Often, the concept of integration is widespread in dealing with immigrant and refugee settlements, which could be understood as contextual, individualized, and contested (Robinson, 1998, p. 118). In this context, the concept of integration typically refers to the process of interaction and settlement within the host society from their arrival towards a situation where they obtain at least formally a citizenship status and the same official rights as the majority (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008, p. 309). To receive equal status in the host society, the migrants need all kinds of facilities, such as access to paid work, school, health facilities, residence, et cetera, and, in addition, social and cultural recognition. Integration is a long process, which may often take not only a person's lifetime but also three generations (Heckmann, 2005, p. 17). Whereas it is a two-way process between immigrants and host communities with mutual accommodation and social connection (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 177), and also a mutual responsibility to "becoming an accepted part of society" (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016, p. 14). Although the integration process may be quite challenging, Rytter (2019) writes, "There are always new fences to climb and new stones to roll up the mountain" (p. 688).

Now, I explain the social integration of immigrants from a border viewpoint, which is eventually relevant to international students' cases. Concerning the immigrants and host society, social integration could be understood as the acceptance and inclusion into the core institutions, positions, and relationships in the host society. And established as an interactive process between the host society and immigrants where the host society will open the institutions and provide equal opportunities to the immigrants (although the host society has more power and influence). On the other hand, the immigrants will acquire rights and obligations,

access to social positions and status, learn a new culture, build personal relations with the members of the host society, and cultivate the feeling of belonging, et cetera (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006, p. 11). The process of social integration of international students is not uniform; it is an interactive process (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006, p. 14), which could vary according to the time, location, and need.

Eventually, to better understand the ongoing and diversified nature of social integration, Heckmann (2005) suggests exploring the following four dimensions: structural integration, cultural integration, interactive integration, and identificational integration in the context of immigrants, but it is also relevant to explore international students social integration into universities. Thus, I use these four dimensions of social integration (see below Figure 1) as a conceptual framework for the discussion chapter in this study.



*Figure 1: Four dimensions of social integration (Based on the concept of Heckmann, 2005)*

### **Structural Integration:**

Structural integration refers to “the acquisition of rights and the access to positions and membership statuses in the core institutions of the immigration society: economy and labor market, education and qualification systems, housing system, welfare state institutions including the health system, and citizenship as membership in the political community” (Heckmann, 2005, p. 15). Access to the core institutions helps to determine the social and economic status of immigrants in the host society. In this study, students’ rights and access to

positions (decision-making), economic, educational, and welfare access will elaborate under structural integration in a Norwegian university. Further, Kisar Koramaz (2014, p. 50) elaborates on structural integration more precisely: shared values, welfare distribution, organizational forms, and social rules vary the level of integration that shapes individuals' activities in society.

### **Cultural Integration:**

A person's attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive change refers to cultural integration (acculturation), which only not relates to immigrants and their descendants but also to the host society (Heckmann, 2005). Heckmann further writes that immigrant groups do not necessarily give up their culture; it will be an asset (bicultural competencies and personalities) for both the individual and the host society (p. 16).

In other words, Berry (as cited in Rienties et al., 2012, p. 688) writes the challenges faced by students in new cultures as acculturation "the process of cultural change that results when two (or more) cultural groups come into contact with each other; the changes occur in both groups, but usually one (the dominant group) changes less than the other(s)." For example, learning a language and interacting with the host society is beneficial for both. Despite this, it would be wise to integrate culturally into the host society when seeking rights or status. Cultural integration of students discusses in this study to explore changes in students' behavior, cognition, and attitudinal, including influences of domestic language.

### **Interactive Integration:**

To explain the meaning of interactive integration, Heckmann (2005) write, "acceptance and inclusion of immigrants into the primary relationships and social networks of the host society" (p. 17), which relates to private relations and close groups. It is relevant to the person who integrates into society to understand the social relations, ties, networks, membership of organizations, and how it works in that place.

Additionally, for interactive integration, it is believed that communicative competencies (the core elements of cultural integration) are preconditions (p. 17). Learning cultural competence is key to embedding in the host society. Nevertheless, in the context of

international students, their social network and friendships will discuss with the framework of interactive integration.

### **Identificational Integration:**

Identificational integration shows “feelings of belonging to, and identification with, groups, particularly in ethnic, regional, local and/or national identification,” Heckmann (2005) further writes, “inclusion will be at the subjective level” (p. 17). The purpose is to highlight emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of belongings, with the aspiration of “we-feelings.” The study explores students’ belongings (groups, ethnic, regional, local, and national identification) within the framework of identificational integration.

Universities can play a role in developing a sense of belonging for students. Students' perceptions and past experiences are important to cultivate a sense of belonging, Tinto (2015) writes, a sense of belonging is shaped by “a complex array of forces not the least of which are the person’s own perceptual frame that is a product of past experience and their perception of how others in the environment perceive them” (p. 8). The role of staff, faculties, administration, and other environments are pivotal to creating the ground for belongings.

Meanwhile, students perceived social support on campus is “a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). To increase the social integration of students in the university, the sense of belonging among students, staff, and faculties eventually plays a role. In this study, the perspective of belonging is relevant in the discussion chapter when I elaborate on identificational integration and how students' background (ethnic, regional, national) keeps them closer at university.

All four dimensions—structural, cultural, interactive, and identificational—of social integration are contextualized to explore international students’ experiences in Norway. Moreover, the four dimensions of social integration are intertwined and difficult to deal with in isolation. However, affecting factors such as weather, personal backgrounds, income, and much more directly or indirectly influence the social integration of students. Students' experiences are explored according to the themes in the discussion chapter within the four dimensions of social integration.

Meanwhile, to reduce the vagueness and ambivalence of the concept of social integration of international students at universities, I draw a definition for this research: meaning of students' social integration is a way of social life in a university environment where students feel connected with peers, faculties or professors, activities, and other interactive aspects and form a new community to learn together, collaborate, build a team, and create safe feelings.

## **2.2 Social Integration of International Students: A Review of Research**

Students in university/college integrate socially and academically; for both integration processes, they follow formal and informal paths (Severiens & Wolff, 2008, p. 254). Severiens and Wolff explain that contacting other students for academic activities is considered formal social integration, and maintaining social contacts outside the educational contexts and with student activities is informal social integration. Students' social integration ultimately supports the students to form their new communities where they "learn from one another, collaborate, feel safe to experiment, and be prepared for a workplace that is increasingly more team based" (Cullen et al., 2012, p. 65).

Further, concerning international students' presence in a foreign land, a concept of acculturation has been used, which refers to "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). As we discussed in the first chapter, students face difficulties and stress in a new place, while dealing with the social integration of students' acculturation is also considered. As Bosswick and Heckmann (2006, p. 10) write, acculturation is part of cultural integration; I use this concept in the research framework to discuss changes in South Asian students' behavior.

For students' social integration among peers, teachers, and staff, their backgrounds and previous experiences also play a role. In a study, Rienties and colleagues (2012, p. 688) proposed five additional factors for successful social integration for international students: a) perception of the faculty by the social network of students; b) ethnic background; c) social life; d) financial support; and e) social support by friends and family. In recent times, to raise the reputation of their faculties and differentiate from other institutes, higher educational institutions have focused not only on academics but also on non-academic facilities (Rienties



et al., 2012, p. 688), which eventually shows that the non-academic facilities are supporting the social integration of students.

Meanwhile, in recent studies, scholars have unfolded various aspects of the social integration of international students. For example, relations between student, faculties and academic advising support for students (Mamiseishvili, 2012), participation in the activities organized by universities (Zhou & Zhang, 2014), peer-group relations support from social networks (Zhou et al., 2008), social life outside the academic environment, sharing accommodations, joining sports (Rienties et al., 2012), et cetera, plays a role for international students' social integration. This study also intended to elaborate on students' social bonding, support network, formal and informal activities, mental health, religious aspects, and the affecting factors of social integration of international students.

International students' integration into the host country is beneficial for them to reduce personal hardship as well as prevent wasting human capital (Syafitri et al., 2015, p. 111). But, the students from the newer EU countries to Denmark show that students work low-skilled jobs to become eligible to receive grants and sustain themselves, and the study shows these students loosely connected with Danish society (Wilken & Dahlberg, 2017, p. 1359). The issue of jobs and connections to society for international students is more likely in the Norwegian context.

Similarly, social integration could conceive as the size and density of a social "network" writes Schwarzer and Leppin (1991), or even as the "quantity of social relationships" (p. 100). Bochner et al. (1977, as cited in Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022, p. 194), moreover, specify the following components as relevant for understanding the social networks of international students: a) Host-national network (friendships with students from the host country, help them to adjust to a new setting and succeed at the university), b) Co-national network (friendship with students from the same country who have high cultural and ethnic compatibility), and c) Multi-national networks (friendships with students from other countries who are basically for recreational activities by providing companionship).

Social integration is also about social support. For a better university life experience, social support is of uttermost importance. Based on the personal relationship, the function of social support can be viewed as, social integration, an opportunity for nurturance, attachment, a sense of reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, and the obtaining of guidance (Weiss, 1974 as cited in Wilcox et al., 2006, p. 708). The closer the relationship with all students, professors, and

staff, the easier it is to ask for the support they need. Meanwhile, this perspective mainly supports later to discuss the interactive integration dimension of social integration of South Asian students' experiences.

Likewise, in other words, the process of integration of international students could be understood as "intermixing; personal adaptation; synthesizing, mutual adjustment and change; and a sense of belonging" (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2014, p. 9). In the case of international students, integration is crucial for their better life and study environment at the university or college. However, students' social way of life (Rienties et al., 2012, p. 686) is diverse among universities around the world. Through the literature, we can assume that universities are trying to implement social integration programs for international students.

For example, the CQUniversity, Australia, implemented social integration program for international students in four different locations (Brisbane, Gold Coast, Melbourne, and Sydney campuses) of their colleges (Owens & Loomes, 2010). The university organizes events from the arrival of students, which comprises: an orientation program, social activities, guest speakers from community police officers, health fund representatives including sporting activities, social activities, community activities, communication activities, work-related activities, welfare activities, enrollment of them in many committees and forums in campus, year around events to promote inclusion, a sense of belonging, and empowerment of these students.

A recent research on immigrant students in an international program in education studies at the University of Iceland shows that diverse teaching methods for diverse student groups are empowering and play an important role in creating a positive learning environment for international students (Ragnarsdóttir and Blöndal, 2014 as cited in Hama et al., 2020, p. 48). The positive environment contributes to students' social integration with peers, professors, and university staff.

Likewise, researchers found that 41% of international students out of 979 who lived in Australia experienced significant stress due to cultural shock, homesickness, or perceived discrimination (Russell et al., 2010). International students' social networks, especially friends and family members, are far from their home country; in that situation, social integration in a new place is very demanding. Similarly, a student who receives a homely environment, connects with teachers and students, and participates in extra-curricular activities is more

inclined toward their studies (Severiens & Wolff, 2008, pp. 553-254). Professors believe that in the Australian context, English language proficiency is reported as the main challenge, along with cultural diversity, the new education system in the host country (unfamiliarity), and ways of instruction (Robertson et al., 2000 as cited in Martirosyan et al., 2019, p. 177). Likewise, in another study by Ramsay and colleagues (2007, p. 259), Australia reported that if students get better support they can adjust easily:

“friends were the main source of emotional, practical, and social companionship support for all groups of students. While professional staff provided most informational support, friends were also an important source of information. Together, these results indicate the key role of friendships in first year university.”

For working on assignment students search their “own people” with four types of reasons of preferences: cultural-emotional connectedness; pragmatism, language; and negative stereotypes (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 11). Similarly, after interview with 162 students among various Asian, the USA and the UK students in London, Sovic (2009) disclosed that Asian students “stick together”, mostly with students from their home country. She further illustrates the different backgrounds and schooling, language, shyness, and openness/interest are the major cause of not integrating with other.

Similarly, cultural distances also play vital roles in international students’ social integration abroad. Cross-cultural research by Pana and Wong (2011) compared Chinese students in Hong Kong and Australia and, concluded that it is more difficult for these students to adapt who are living in the host society with a vast cultural distance from their hometown. In line with the study, another study by Rienties and Tempelaar (2013) in the Netherlands reveals that a few Asian (Taiwan, China, and Vietnam) students experienced difficulties adjusting to social life. They highlighted cultural distance as a challenge to social integration among international and domestic students.

Likewise, proficiency in foreign languages is noted as an integral part of cultural integration. A study about the German language proficiency among international students reported that these students have negative impacts from acculturational stress (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015). Another study in Belgium among international students found that these students' social adaptation and connectedness were mediated by both local and English language skills (Meng et al., 2017). The importance of the local language among international

students is crucial for a better integrated life with local students. Similarly, concerning international students, the situation of cultural distance and learning the local language in the Norwegian context is most likely.

To conclude this section, the statement by Rienties and colleagues (2012, p. 686) is noticeable: the student's social integration at the higher education institution means understanding the social ways of life. The student's short- or long-term stay in the host society often determines the dominant aspects of the student's social integration.

## **2.3 Chapter Conclusion**

This study adopted social integration as a theoretical model. Social integration of students at the university refers to creating a community where students learn, collaborate, participate, and feel safe among their peers, professors, and staff. A study in Norway shows that integration between international and Norwegian students is weak (Hauge & Pedersen, 2018, p. 9). Likewise, various existing studies (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Rienties et al., 2012) also highlighted the importance and role of language, social networks, cultural distances, and many other dimensions as critical aspects of international students' social integration.

Meanwhile, for further analysis of the participants' experiences according to the research questions, this study used four dimensions of social integration as suggested by Heckmann (2005). These dimensions, structural integration, cultural integration, interactive integration, and identificational integration (see Figure 1, Section 2.1) use to illustrate international students' experiences of social integration at university. Thus, the findings, analysis, and discussion of this entire research are guided by and focused on social integration theory. In the next chapter, I will describe the research methodology used in this research.

## **Chapter III: Research Methodology**

This chapter elaborates on the chosen methodological details to achieve the objective of this study. It comprises research design, the procedures of research participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, the researcher's position, reliability and validity, limitation, and ethical considerations concerning the study.

### **3.1 Qualitative Research Design**

The qualitative study focuses on the narrative inquiry approach, which follows a critical paradigm within social constructionism. It assumes the meaning of students' experiences already exists and that new knowledge will be or is produced by political, social, economic, and cultural values mediated over time (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130). While unpacking the lived experiences of international students, the critical paradigm advises that "narratives do not spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations" (Smith & Sparkes, 2005, p. 1097). Meanwhile, Clandinin and Connelly (2000, as cited in Bruce et al., 2016) write of narrative inquiry as "the study of experience as story and a way of thinking— through storying" (p. 2); in this research context, stories refer as students experiences.

The qualitative research methodology, however, supports a better understanding of the experiences of international students across time and place (Dewart et al., 2019). The study focuses on students "natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

### **3.2 Population**

The target population of this study consists of international students from South Asian countries Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan to Norway for their master's studies. Those who completed at least six months of education with experience in Norwegian higher education institutions also fall under the category of the population of this study. Moreover, this study focuses particularly on students from Bergen, Kristiansand, and Stavanger-based universities/colleges. Thus, all the South Asian master's students residing and studying in this area are potential participants in this study.

### 3.3 Sample and Sampling Strategies

Small samples with wide-reaching data are the focus of qualitative studies. As Coyne (1997, p. 623) notes, “In qualitative research sample selection has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of the research”. Thus, it is far better to have rich data from a limited number of respondents than to have superficial data from many.

The experiences of 12 South Asian students studying and living in Norway are the core participants of this research. As per the convenience and ability of the research participants, I administered nonprobability (convenience sampling) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 212) and snowball sampling. Similarly, while selecting these participants, I tried to maintain the balance for gender, different universities/colleges, geographical representation, and academic disciplines.

Table 2: Inclusion criteria for research participants

Inclusion Criteria
1. Students from South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan
2. The student should have enrolled in a master’s program in Norway.
3. At least six months of studies were completed.
4. Living in Norway at the time of the interview.

As per the plan, I couldn’t find sufficient participants in Bergen and Kristiansand, so I need adaptive management in my research plan. I wanted to do all the interviews in person because it offers the opportunity to interpret non-verbal signals through observation of facial expression, eye contact, and body language, which helps to understand what is being said or explore hidden meaning through a probe (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 310). Similarly, I wanted to make participation inclusive in terms of gender, faculties, and universities. As planned among my network group, I visited Kristiansand, but except for one participant, I did not get time from others. Then I chose a participant from Stavanger. In the end, I successfully found 10 participants from Bergen and one each from Kristiansand and Stavanger.

### 3.4 Characteristics of Participants

Out of the 12 participants, 5 were female and 7 were male, from different faculties and universities in the study. Similarly, there were three students from each country. All three students from India were male, one female, and two males from Pakistan, whereas Bangladeshi and Nepali students were one male and two females each. Similarly, most of the students started

their education in August of their academic year, except one. Due to COVID-19 lockdown, she started a special course in January 2021.

Table 3: Background information on participants ( $N = 12$ ).

	Gender	Age (Years)	Level of Study	Faculty enrolled with	University/College	Academic Year
Students	Male:7	24-44	Master's	Economics & Business	NHH: 2	Aug 2019-21: 1
	Female:5	(< 24: 1		Administration: 2	NLA:1	Aug 2020-22: 2
25-29: 7		Global Journalism: 1	UiB: 8	Jan 2021-23: 1		
30-34: 2		Public Administration: 1	UiS: 1	Aug 2021-23: 8		
> 40: 2)		Sustainable Development: 1				
		Global Health: 2				
	Bio-medical Science: 2					
	Linguistic: 1					
	System Dynamics: 1					
	Computer Science: 1					

NHH: Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen, NLA: NLA University College, Kristiansand, UiB: University of Bergen, Bergen UiS: University of Stavanger, Stavanger

### 3.5 Research Site and Gaining Access

Norway was a geographical area, and a few of the Norwegian higher education institutes were chosen for this research. The study was limited to three cities in Norway: Bergen, Kristiansand, and Stavanger. The research participants were from the following four institutions: in Bergen, the University of Bergen (UiB) and Norwegian School of Economics (NHH), Kristiansand, NLA University College, and in Stavanger, the University of Stavanger (UiS).

I used all my public relations to get participants from these university colleges. I asked every potential individual who could provide information about my research participants. I visited many events and places where students participate; Fantoft club, volunteering organizations, libraries, student housing, and social media for direct communication. Meanwhile, I initiated rapport-building through volunteering and participating in the event from the beginning of my first year. Mostly, I prepared short messages and sent them to find and recruit the participant. In these short messages, I disclose who I am, why, and what I expect from the study. I received responses from many people as available or unavailable. I sincerely send thanks messages to all whom I approached for an interview.

## **3.6 Data Collection**

The study mostly comprised primary data. The interviews with the participants were the primary sources of data collection, and publicly available documents- articles, government reports, bilateral organizations report, et cetera- were the secondary data. I was open to accepting unexpected descriptions from the participants. I tried separating my preconceived beliefs and thoughts from myself before and during the interviews. I prepared mentally, physically, and logistically to administer these data collection methods. Likewise, I emphasized becoming acquainted with and building relations of truth in a possible peaceful environment.

### **3.6.1 Interview**

To conduct interviews with students, I choose a phenomenological orientation, which is helpful to explore students' experiences, "the meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2017, p. 57). I collect data from the experienced person about the phenomenon and produces a combined description of the essence of individual's experiences (Creswell, 2017, p. 58). Meanwhile, the description comprises "how" and 'what' they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Further, phenomenological orientation helps to know the grounded social reality through people's experiences, "phenomenology insists that we must lay aside our prevailing understanding of phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them in order that new meanings may emerge" (Gray, 2004, p. 22).

The interview was the primary source of data collection in this research. The face-to-face interview followed the semi-structured interview guides. The exchange of expression of opinion, beliefs, and information is a significant part of face-to-face verbal interviews (Maccoby & Maccoby, 1954, p. 449). Kvale and Brinkmann write a semi-structured interview, "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (2008, p. 3, as cited in Brinkmann, 2013, p. 21). The semi-structured interview helps to avoid asking abstract and reflective questions and supports focusing on research questions (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 22). Similarly, as Carter and Little (2007) said, the interview guide follows open-ended questionnaires it allows informants to express their experiences, which ultimately enriches the quality of the research.

When I met the participants before commencing the interview, I tried to make them comfortable. I initiated the conversation by asking about day-to-day issues about a current



event, their studies, friends, home country, and current affairs. When they felt comfortable mentally and physically in a chair, I explained the purpose and research in detail. After knowing about the research project, their rights to decline, and ethical considerations, I asked them to sign the consent form. Having these things in advance, I started the interview with a leading question: "How would you describe your experience as an international student here in Bergen (or Kristiansand or Stavanger)?" In case of need, I used the interview guide to probe them. For example, I encouraged them to speak if they missed any important aspects of social integration, such as language, the friendship-making process, going hiking or to a café, searching for jobs, et cetera.

The environment chosen for conducting a face-to-face interview is critical for both physical and online interviews (Kazmer & Xie, 2008, p. 264). Except for three participants, I took the interviews in the students' places (shared kitchen place and study rooms). The person who joined online was also in his room/kitchen. One participant among them frequently rescheduled the interview, so I decided to go with him. I waited until he finished his hairdressing, and then I completed his interview in a mall. According to their available time, I conducted interviews at different times (see below Table 4). I realized a peaceful or less distractive environment is crucial for deeper or friendlier conversation. After I found the repetition of information, I decided to stop doing more interviews.

Table 4: Interview time, duration, place, mode of interview, and language

<b>Time of interview</b>	<b>Duration of Interview</b>	<b>Place of interview</b>	<b>Mode of interview</b>	<b>Interview language</b>
Morning: 1	Minimum: 27	Students common	Physical, face-to-	English: 9
Afternoon/Evening: 10	minutes and	kitchen/room: 3	face: 11	Nepali: 3
After 20:00: 1	Maximum: 1 hour	Mall/restaurant: 2	Online, face-to-	
	and 27 minutes	Common study room: 7	face: 1	

Many participants shared their experiences fluently and chronologically, but a few need much probing. I used English as the language of the interview, but as I am from Nepal and my mother tongue is Nepali, I conducted interviews in Nepali with three participants. I maintained the necessary notes and audio records of the interview. I used a recorder, ZOOM H1n, for all the interviews. In the beginning, I felt it was difficult to understand the functions of the device, but later it felt more comfortable and handier. I transcribed all the interviews. As many people believe, transcribing is a tedious process, and I took a lot of time for it. Listening to the conversation at 0.75 speed for a while and pushing the audio and writing, repeating the process

several times. Because of accents, getting the correct terminologies of what they said can be difficult at times. People from different countries have their own accents. Lately, I realized that revisiting the transcription draft after a few days helps with further clarification of the words. For the Nepali language, I transcribed and translated myself.

### **3.6.2 Secondary Data**

Similarly, to access the secondary data, I relied on publicly available documents produced by the Norwegian government, global or South Asian agencies, and other concerned institutions working for international students. Similarly, I gathered data from credible books, articles, news, reports, journals, and social media to enrich my study. The publicly available data helps strengthen the primary data to perceive its meaning, which is generated and scrutinized by larger groups of experts and researchers for a long time (Walliman, 2011, p. 78). In many instances, I used secondary data for the literature review and to support primary findings.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

According to the emerging thematic issues, I presented the interpretation and analysis of the available information. As Rabiee (2004, p. 657) writes, the data analysis process "begins during the data collection, by skilfully facilitating the discussion and generating rich data from the interview, complementing them with the observational notes, and typing the recorded information," and followed to familiarizing the data, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, and charting, which reduces the data by comparing and contrasting and cutting and pasting similar quotes together (Rabiee, 2004, pp. 657-658). I transcribed (and three Nepali interviews translated to English) the interview audio recording into text records.

The process of data analysis started with inductive coding methods, but subsequently, I used deductive methods too. In Proudfoot's (2022) words, the combine use of inductive and deductive approaches are the hybrid methods of data analysis which ensure the research participants voices are valued and "allowing for more theory-led analysis" (p. 2). As the inductive approach suggests, I read the first interview transcription and identified a few codes, for example, making food and sharing, involuntary confinement at home, et cetera. Meanwhile, most of the codes were generated by reading the transcription. In addition to that, as per the theoretical guidance and the research questions, I chose a few codes, for example, "we feeling", cold climate, sharing emotions, et cetera, from the deductive approach. Along with relevant

codes formulation through inductive and deductive approaches, I draw possible categories, themes, and titles as shown in Table 5 (see Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis). Likewise, I tried to include all the participants' voices while presenting the analysis of my data.

### **3.8 Researcher's Positionality**

Regarding the positionality of the researcher, Kezar (2002, p. 96) writes, “people have multiple overlapping identities. Thus, people make meaning from various aspects of their identity....,” the multiple identities may be gender, social, ethnicity, culture, age, status, and many context-based identities. So, it is important to identify the potential bias of the researcher or self-reflection in the overall study. As Savin-Baden and Howell-Major (2013, pp. 71-73) suggested, I explore three researchers approaches to positionality: a) As an international student from South Asia with similar attributes and almost same circumstances of the research participants, I am an insider for this research, whereas in term of country and university or location of participants, I do not belongs to the many participants group (except from Nepal) and remained as outsider (Braun and Clarke, 2013 as cited in Bukamal, 2022, p. 232). Being an insider is beneficial for getting the trust of the research participants. Likewise, as a student and being acquainted with many aspects of students, unknowingly, I may generalize or make the issues complex.

Similarly, I am a student representative in the student parliament and university board, which may influence me to be biased because I see certain things differently. For instance, sometimes students may perceive me as part of the institution, as closer to the leaders than the students. b) I see all the research participants as individual students from the South Asian region with different subjective experiences. But as a male researcher, doing research among students with highly religious or male-dominated backgrounds may impact the research. For example, a female research participant from Bangladesh or Pakistan may not feel comfortable sharing what they feel. And c) all the research processes have been completed in the existing settings. Moreover, I tried to be alert and neutral to not influence the research. I believe this reflection on positionality enriches the trustworthiness of this study.

### **3.9 Reliability and Validity**

I focused on enhancing the reliability of my study and continuously verifying the findings. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry-based studies, transferability (detailed description of participants), credibility (frequent member checking following participants' responses), confirmability (gathering participants' contextual factors through analytics memos and field notes), and dependability (audit trail to ascertain findings) need to be examined (Gavidia & Adu, 2022, p. 2). I wrote observations and personal notes while conducting interviews with the participants.

Similarly, I recorded the details precisely to ensure the accuracy and quality of the data. And I summarized immediately, which provided instant realization and the main highlights of the interview. Likewise, all three Nepali participants can speak English too, but we chose Nepali for the conversation, which helped them express themselves in their mother tongue. The selected secondary sources verification remained until the end of the thesis writing process. Additionally, to increase trustworthiness and transparency, as well as organize and analyze the data, I used tables and figures in this study (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021).

### **3.10 Ethical Consideration**

This research carefully followed the ethical considerations concerning fundamental values and norms of research ethics. Substantially, this research is based on Norway because "The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities" (NESH)'s guidelines for "Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law, and Theology," 2016, are the fundamental source of ethical guidance. Eventually, the nature of the research carries potentially low harm because it tends to focus on the process rather than any implementation plan. To get consent from the research participants for an interview, voice recording, and note-taking, I shared the research aim, research questions, methods, and consequences in advance. Upon understanding the written text of the consent form, all the participants ask to sign it. Importantly, I did not take photographs or videos of the research participants.

Maintaining the confidentiality of research participants is a crucial aspect of any research project. Considering the notion of "not harming the respondents" I kept the anonymity of all participants. I gave them pseudonyms and did not record their real names anywhere. The ethical

issues were carefully taken thoroughly from the beginning of the fieldwork to the end of the study. Likewise, the collected personal information of all participants will be protected and destroyed as per the guidelines of the Personal Data Act of Norway.

### **3.11 Limitations of the Study in Brief**

The research presents South Asian students' experiences of socially integrating into Norwegian higher education institutions. While doing the study, I realized there are several potential limitations to this study:

- a. Limited number of research participants: I interviewed 12 students; this is a high number for a typical master's qualitative thesis; however, there is always the limitation that my sample might not represent all international students.
- b. Selection of University or College: I only sampled four universities from Bergen (mostly), Kristiansand, and Stavanger; therefore, I cannot generalize the context throughout Norway.
- c. Financial and time constrain: As a self-financed student, I wanted to complete my study quickly and economically.
- d. Documents available in Norwegian: Many relevant documents are available in Norwegian, which limits my access to them.
- e. Use of additional research tools: To extract the various dimensions of the subject matter and to avoid the potential personal discomfort of a research participant, it could be better to administer a focus group discussion, survey, or questionnaire method.
- f. Language ability: Speaking in English could be an issue because English is the second language of all research participants.

Nonetheless, I discuss these limitations in detail in the discussion chapter later.

## Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis

South Asian students shared their experiences of navigating social integration at universities in Norway. They explained that social integration with Norwegian and international students, professors, university staff, and even the local community is important for them. While sharing their experiences, they also highlighted a few influencing and hindering factors that impacted their social integration at the university.

In this chapter, I present and analyze my empirical findings about South Asian students' social integration in Norway. The COVID-19 pandemic that hit in March 2020 and onwards resulted in additional hardships for some participants, which is more contemporary and contextual to explore. In the first part of the following sections, I explore the influencing factors that directly or indirectly impact students' social integration. In the second part, I elaborate on how international students navigate social integration at university in Norway, which includes social bonding, formal and informal social support, and activities. Likewise, in the last section, I explore mental health, cultural distance/ religion, personal perception, and language are discussed as hindering factors of students' social integration. Similarly, I presented the findings of the study (Emergent theme title, themes, categories, and relevant codes) in the below Table.

Table 5: Emergent theme title, themes, categories, and relevant codes.

Themes Title	Themes	Categories	Relevant codes
<b>Influencing Factors for Students Social Integration</b>	COVID-19 Lockdowns and Digital Education: “We were stuck into our rooms.”		Late arrival Involuntary confinement into home Online class (from home country) Difficult to know cultural, social-economic life
	Tackling the Weather: “Depressing not to see the Sunlight.”		Voluntary confinement into home Cold climate
	Adopting to a Different Academic Culture		Different academic culture
<b>Navigating Social Integration: Students Experiences</b>		Orientation Program and Buddy Week	Orientation program Buddy Week Introduction program
		Interpersonal Skills to Integrate with Students’	Approaches to socialize with students
	Social Bonding among Students (Cliques): A Path to Social Integration	Sticking with same Nationality	Comfortable to talk with the same nationality.
		Sharing Emotions: A Symbol of Social Integration	Sharing emotions Maintaining friends
		Making Food and Communicating with Kitchen Mates.	Making food and sharing
	Connecting with Formal Support Networks		Support from professors/university staff Support from Student Welfare Organization/facilities Helping hands
	Connecting with Informal Support Networks	Dependence on Same Nationality: Support as Give-and-Take Relationship	Support from same nationality Support from neighboring countries students Support from students same social and economic situation We feelings
	Support /Communication among Students	Support and contact with Norwegian and international students	
	Taking Part in Formal and Informal Social Activities		Participation in the events organized by Students Welfare Organization Events organized by same nationality. Events organized by students. Recreation
<b>Hindering Factors of International Students Social Integration</b>	Mental Health and Social Integration		Counseling Mental status
	Cultural Distance and Return to Religion		Cultural distance Religious attachment
	Personal Perception of Being Together	Individualistic Life Pattern	Western lifestyle Collectivist ways of thinking Personal choice
		Experiences of Discrimination	Discrimination
	A Key of Social Integration in Norway: Language	Demand of Local Language for a Desirable Skilled Job	Language skill Learning language
		Isolation and Discrimination Because of not Speaking the Language	Discrimination because of language Isolation because of not having language skill

## **4.1 Influencing Factors for Students' Social Integration**

The factors that often subtly impacted students' social integration considered as influencing factors in this research. As per the research participants' experiences, I explore how students adapted to and coped with the following influencing factors: COVID-19 lockdown, digital education, the weather, and different academic cultures. Meanwhile, subsequent influencing factors are also implicitly discussed in other sections and their connections are shown in Figure 2 (see Section 4.4).

### **4.1.1 COVID-19 Lockdowns and Digital Education: “We were stuck into our rooms.”**

As I elaborated in the background section, the COVID-19 lockdowns and the move to digital learning had a significant impact on students' ability to socially integrate. Most research participants did not join the beginning physical class due to visa, flight, and quarantine issues. Several participants in this study shared that they offered digital rather than face-to-face education. The pandemic, moreover, hindered their social gathering. For those students who arrived in the autumn of 2020 and 2021, it was difficult to get a visa on time, which delayed their time of arrival and forced them to start their stay in Norway in quarantine for a certain number of days which delayed or limited to connect with support network at the time of need. Sadly, it was difficult for the concerned authorities to function, which prevented students from receiving documents on time. A few research participants did not join the academic program for a semester/year after getting admission and joined the course later, but this option applied only to a few students in certain departments. The process of delaying joining the course helped these few students to prepare to navigate during COVID-19 lockdowns.

A few research participants joined the online courses from their home countries, and many of them, in Norway, confined themselves to their residences; joined the online course for a semester or up to a year. An interview excerpt of Neelam also reflects the situation:

And most of the first semester was online and we did not meet any class fellows. We did not meet any of the teachers [physical meetings]. Like no welcome parties, no, like get together. So, it was kind of very boring and tough. Like we were stuck into our rooms and there was like no kind of social gatherings. (Neelam, Female student, 44)



Students' social connection is limited because of online studies; as a result, they are deprived from knowing each other and getting feedback on their thoughts and issues. Further, students face difficulties making friends and maintaining existing friendships.

Also, the COVID-19 lockdown had varied effects on both the fresher and second year students. Mostly master's second year who are supposed to continue their field work for thesis data collection have to postpone or amend their project; as a result, they must work differently or delay results or unexpected results. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, many exchange students returned home and started taking online courses. The threats of COVID-19 impact, mental distress, confined self-isolation, and missing jobs were the main difficulties for all students. Similarly, due to a lack of face-to-face social communication during the pandemic, students usually feel lonely (Labrague et al., 2021, p. 1581), which is a source of stress for them (Son et al., 2020). Khalida (Female student, 33) remembers the time when she was spending her life alone because of COVID-19 restrictions in student housing, "I could not meet people, it was very difficult that time. ... And nothing is happening outside, so it was really difficult." Loneliness often impacted to increase negative thinking, stress, and eventually mental health issues. Spending time alone in social isolation was very tough for other research participants. Further, it is discussed in Mental Health and Social Integration section later.

Additionally, the condition of the fresher students was vulnerable because of not getting into circles of friends, the job market, the new system, and the surroundings. During this period, students need more support from circles of friends and other formal supports. Meanwhile, studies show the COVID-19 lockdown students negatively impacted students' mental health and social networks (Elmer et al., 2022, p. 18). Eventually, the COVID-19 pandemic hindered students' social integration not only with their peers but also with a formal and informal support system.

#### **4.1.2 Tackling the Weather: "Depressing not to see the Sunlight."**

Several participants in this study talked about the weather challenge. In Norway, the weather is often cold, windy, and rainy; in each city, the temperature varies. Except for the summer, many research participants felt the climate in Norway is challenging for them, which reduces the frequency of meeting with other students. A study by Alberto et al. (2021) reported that extreme temperatures can temporarily reduce students' attendance in class, and their ability to study independently. The reduction of students' attendance in class also minimizes the chances

of socialization with peer students. As a result, the probability of social integration among peers and professors will limit. Due to the weather (after COVID-19 restrictions), students miss physical classes, reducing their chances of interacting with students, professors, and staff.

Rekha (Female student, 26) shared her feeling when she arrived in Norway in September 2021. "..., I found a weather challenge. At that time, we could not see the sunlight; it was a depressing moment." Like Rekha, Ali also indicates that the rain is exceedingly difficult for him: "we are restricted on to our rooms because we don't feel like going out in the rain. So that's a major hurdle for people living in Bergen. Almost raining every day." Mostly South Asian students came from almost warmer places than Norway. It could be harder for them in the beginning days.

Whereas, after the end of the Covid-19 restrictions to avoid going out in the cold weather, a few students shared that they deliberately chose online classes to spend time at the apartment. Bipin (Male student, 25) said, "I joined the classes in September, but in October and November, it was cold for me. At the same time, the classes are almost Six hours long. ... Afterward, I decided to join online classes." It seems weather could be a barrier to international students' socialization with classmates, especially those who are from tropical and semi-tropical regions. The limited socialization impacts students' social integration. A few students voluntarily lived in isolation to escape the cold climate, and some lived in forced isolation because of the COVID-19 restrictions. These students impeded social integration with Norwegian and international students, professors, and university staff. Eventually, they forfeit the opportunity to understand new people in universities or outside.

Studies show that pleasant weather may bring a good mood and broaden the perception of people (Keller et al., 2005, p. 730). Meanwhile, the cold weather with rain and snow does not necessarily restrict people in a home. It is relevant to understand a Norwegian proverb: "There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing." It requires the appropriate equipment, the right skills, and an outgoing culture to deal with the weather.

A few research participants complained about not getting access to the physical class because of forced isolation during COVID-19, whereas another fraction of students did not attend college voluntarily because of access cold for them. This contradiction is subjective according to students' nature; some students want to integrate with friends, professors, and university staff, and some want to wait for a favorable climate. Thus, it could be said that

weather also influences students' social integration with the university, domestic and international students.

### **4.1.3 Adopting a Different Academic Culture**

The majority of the research participants reported that Norway has a different academic culture than their homeland. As a part of the custom to respect, not criticize, listen, or not challenge professors, and follow or obey them with consideration as “*Guru*,” derived from a Sanskrit word meaning “honorable” or “weighty” in South Asian region (Marambe et al., 2012, pp. 302-303). While most of the research participants agreed that they address their professors as "Sir" or "Madam" in South Asia, whereas in Norway, they commonly refer to them by their first names. There is an apparent sense of equality and mutual respect between professors and students in Norway. It can assume that the sense of hierarchy less culture creates more constructive environment for international students and promote social integration among professors, university staff, and students.

University professors and staff’s friendly behavior, encouragement, and support make the academic life of South Asian students very comfortable. Kamal explains the contrast in the educational culture between the South Asian region and the Norwegian:

Like they encourage you to get involved in the class activities. It's not that they will force you, they will not pester, or they will not keep on nagging you. ... at the same time, they try to encourage you to be involved in the activities. ... I did my bachelors and master’s ... from South Asian country. So, the teaching culture is completely different. It's like teachers are gods. We can't even talk to them freely, here it's so friendly that they don't consider you are just as a student rather than they consider you as a friend, give you guidance, you can be free with them. They're really friendly. (Kamal, Male student, 40)

The relations with university staff and professors play an immense role in students’ socially integrated life; students could learn cultural values from the professors and staff in the university and campuses. Neelam (Female student, 44), an experienced college lecturer from Pakistan, praised the culture of openness and eagerness to help students by professors: “...here they are like very casual. They don't make things complicated for students and they don't stress you out. And, whenever you like the administration, like my program coordinator and like advisor, they always help you.” Most professors acknowledge that international students face different kinds of challenges than domestic students (Martirosyan et al., 2019, p. 177).

Similarly, in the case of this research participants, professors' behavior and academic culture contributed to a positive impact. This behavior of professors encourages students to be cordial with domestic and international students and university staff, it stimulates social integration among them. The friendlier environment created by professors attracts students not to leave the class and join the group work among students. Also, it became a key platform for students' social integration.

The beginning days were difficult for many respondents as students from different academic systems. A student, Khalida (Female student, 33) explores her beginning experience with the education pattern: "Then later I got to know that the system that I have to write it very descriptively. I write it only two, three lines, I have to elaborate it, but I got to know it later...." She learned descriptive ways of writing. But, among the twelve participants, she is the one who is facing this kind of issue regarding the writing pattern. In the same way, Rekha (Female student, 26) found the teaching methods entirely new for her: "The methods of teaching are completely new here. Previously, I trained to follow a book, but here most of the things are based on reading research papers." Asian international students are familiar with teacher-centered or a so-called "spoon-feeding" style of the learning environment (Wong, 2004, p. 165).

Meanwhile, they are trying to adapt to a new pattern of study, which helps them to be resilient for her better education with a broader understanding. Similarly, Bipin (Male student, 25) has expressed his discontent with his current academic program in Norway. He was unfamiliar with the software used in his academic program. He expects extra classes to learn the software, but the program coordinator replied that all the schedules are fixed for this year, and there are no chances of arranging more classes. Students are supposed to have sufficient knowledge about their course requirements before enrolling in the program, and the department assumes students are well qualified to pursue their new courses. The experience of Rekha seems she is positive toward university and feels more integrated with the professors and students, whereas Khalida and Bipin are less inclined for social integration with the professors and staff.

Similarly, a few students experienced professional behavior from all professors. The approaches and perceptions of professors and staff vary according to their professional norms. Keki (Female student, 27) found her professors more professional: "They helped if we email them. It's more professional relations." Professional relations further contribute to learning

professionalism. Due to their positive communication with faculty and staff, students enjoy a supportive environment where they can express their thoughts and concerns in detail; this process ended with social integration among them. The positive responses create a conducive environment of social integration among professors, staff, and students at the university.

A few research participants visit the library occasionally, and those whose studies practical oriented subjects spend most of their time in the laboratory. Spending time in the library and laboratory helps students connect with domestic and international students. Ironically, reading in library culture among native students is fascinating for a few South Asian students, but they don't spend time in the library. Several Norwegian and international students devote time to reading and completing their assignments in libraries. Reading in libraries gradually supports socializing with other students and contributes to their study and social integration. Often to escape from the cold climate, for work (or rest after work), (volunteer or language course), many of the South Asian research participants spend their time at apartment rather than visiting the library. Meanwhile, it can assume that the students from the collectivist society want friends in the form of a catalyst (peer pressure/effects) to go to the library.

Furthermore, most of these research participants shared their pleasant experiences with professors and staff. Professors' friendly and supportive behavior plays a role in students familiarizing themselves with the updated educational pattern and raising confidence to socialize with students, professors, and staff.

## **4.2 Navigating Social Integration: Students Experiences.**

This section endeavors to present and analyze in small parts how the international students navigate social integration at university in Norway according to different themes. Based on students' experiences, I elaborate on the main issues related to students' social integration in Norwegian universities, social bonding among students, taking part in formal and informal social activities, connecting with informal and formal support networks hereunder. Furthermore, Figure 2 (see Section 4.4) illustrates the main findings and their connections concerning the research question.

### **4.2.1 Social Bonding among Students (Cliques): A Path to Social Integration**

Through the initiation of the Orientation Program and Buddy Week, the process of social integration among students begins, and they make friends and form groups. Many research participants believe sharing, caring, and spending time together are the basic features of friendship and groups. In this study, it is significant that friendship support students' social integration at university (Tinto, 1975, p. 107), whereas understanding the process of making a friend is crucial to unfold the dynamics of friendship among international students. However, the process is a reciprocal gesture that always demands an amalgamation of various characteristics between students. It takes time to make close friends and cultivate the "We-feeling." A lack of close friends and social contact could bring mental difficulties of loneliness, a cognitive awareness that impacts our brain, produces feelings of isolation, emptiness, and sadness, and tear away emotional well-being (Marano, 2016).

I elaborate in this section on how the participants begin and proceed with their social integration process at universities in Norway. In this study, social integration among students seems to evolve in nature. The making friends process is a foundation for understanding the conditions and patterns of social integration among students. The process begins with the orientation programs and buddy week and different ways of the group formation (Cliques) processes and their role in the social integration of South Asian students in Norway.

#### 4.2.1.1 Orientation Program and Buddy Week: Beginning of Social Integration

Participants in the study realized that Orientation Programs and Buddy Week intended to establish acquaintances and provide information about their social and academic life as well as about new surroundings.

With the official start of studies, the orientation program serves as an icebreaker. Many of the research participants joined the online orientation program. A smaller number went to the physical, and a few students did not attend the orientation. In 2020 and 2021, most orientation programs were online because of the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions. In August 2021, Kamal received an opportunity to attend the orientation program, which he found informative and interesting. The program helps students to know Norway, especially the people, culture, overall academic plans, and many more. Besides that, students gathered knowledge about their rights and duties, including information regarding police appointment and registration to move to Norway, et cetera. This basic information guides students to adjust to the new place and navigate social integration. To be precise, it helps students to get an overview and to increase positivity to set the background to integrate with potential friends and the university system.

Likewise, another crucial subsequent part of the orientation program is *fadderuke*, (Buddy Week), which helps new students to know each other batch-mates through various events such as parties, Barbeque, hiking, joining clubs and different events to explore the place. Two of the research participants only participate in the buddy week. Take, for example, Ali (Male student, 25) attended the program, “That's nice that's quite international, you bring in everyone that's why international. At the events, you participate in rafting and boating. So that's a fun part.” Many of these research participants missed the program mostly because of COVID-19 restrictions.

By participating in these events, students meet new students, which helps them create the foundation of social integration among students. From the experiences of the research participants, those who miss the opening events and classes have difficulty joining groups. A student Bipin (Male student, 25), missed all the introductory program, reached the class lately and saw most of his classmates formed their groups; “And attended the physical class quite late after the completion of quarantine; most of the students formed their groups. They choose their friend circle.” Many students formed their groups with like-minded students during or immediate after the Orientation Program and Buddy Week. The initial influence through these

events in the new place helps be friends quickly and lays down a background for social integration.

#### **4.2.1.2 Interpersonal Skills to Integrate with Students'**

Research participants shared their ways and struggles while integrating with friends. The friend-making process or entering a group also depends on one's personal attitude. According to Picton et al. (2023, p. 2), four psychological constructs are likely to deepen student engagement in the educational interface: well-being, self-efficacy, emotion, and belonging. Exploration and engagement with these psychological aspects make it easy to make friends. Meanwhile, trust, supportiveness, and honesty are the basic features to attract individuals (Porberts-Griffin, 2011, p. 1) but it could take a long period for many. A few research participants put extra effort into mingling with these groups, whereas a fraction among them acquired new friends of different nationalities. The ways of the friends-making process are not identical to each other. The process could be self-initiated or facilitated by the circumstances, such as sports, laboratory work, group assignments, clubs, et cetera.

Another valuable factor for making friends is the right timing and patience; on many occasions, we cannot make friends immediately. While working in a group, for example, on assignments or lab work, encourages a few research participants to get to know each other. Whereas a few research participants changed their perspectives after observing the nature of other students and finally accepted them as friends.

Interestingly, some participants with extensive travel experience shared that they were not shy about making friends. A student Kamal (Male student, 40) had been traveling to various parts of the world before joining his course in Bergen and shared that it is not challenging to make friends. His approach to making friends is, "I just approached them, I just smile at them and approach them and then they start talking to me. Smile now, yeah. For me, I feel that approaching someone or a stranger is not that difficult." It indicates that it sometimes takes more effort to make friends regardless of language, religion, race, or other behavioral aspects.

Many research participants who left their country for the first time struggled to make friends. As a result of their limited exposure, they are shy and hesitant to approach other students to become friends or have some difficulties mingling with them. Whatever the case,



this transition will end very soon because they are already in the system and trying to learn voluntarily or involuntarily.

Similarly, a few research participants said it is difficult to connect with Norwegian students. Norwegian students' way of life, entertainment, and socialization process is different from the research participants, and importantly, they have their existing circle of friends and relatives in place.

Based on his close observation of Norwegian students, Bipin concluded that Norwegian students speak after drinking. But in regular life, they don't want to start a conversation. Bipin is not happy to ask them to speak out again and again. Conversation is always a two ways process. Like Bipin, Rekha further distinguishes the difference between native Norwegian peers and other international students concerning activities and socialization.

I realized other international students [non-Norwegian students] are friendlier and have commonalities in ideas, but Norwegian students are like their own kind. They do have their own activities, solely personal things. While working in a group, they are okay but besides that other activity in societies, not all actively participated. Most of them prefer their own groups, which means they prefer a person with the Norwegian language. ...\_I am not biased, a few of them are very helpful when needed but not in social activities. Most Norwegian students are more active in party-related activities. ... I went to a party twice they are very open after drinks, and we are always open, but we feel odd in the group because I realized that person is totally different and new. When we meet the very next day, they don't speak and remain silent. Then after I decided not to go with them. (Rekha, Female student, 26)

Through her experience, it is understandable that Norwegian students already have their own friends circle and ways of entertainment. As she experienced, hiking and drinking are popular activities among Norwegian students. Her understanding also helps to find ways to make friends with native students. It eventually supports learning the culture and language of Norway.

Similarly, Ali tried to make friends to learn Norwegian culture, but it was challenging for him to interact with Norwegian students.

They're [Norwegian students] not inclined to social; I mean they're reluctant, they're hesitant, especially towards brown people or Asian people I would say. So that was one aspect that took me back because I was at the forefront. I wanted to interact ... to make friends ... to know more

about this culture. But Norwegians, they are more restricted to their own people. They want to talk, they will. They only make groups. We don't want people. They only interact with the people of their own, so, one thing when it comes to the classroom, I did not even get a chance to interact with them from the people of Norway, ... (Ali, Male student, 25)

But making friends and learning about a completely foreign culture takes time. However, for local students too' it takes time to familiarize themselves with international students. Kamal (Male student, 40) experienced that persistent effort is crucial to communicate with students. "People are friendly though they are a bit cold, and it takes them some time. I just go to them and introduce myself. And if I feel that they are cold, I give them time. So, the second day when they see, I smile and then they also start smiling at me." In many instances, Mahesh (Male student, 23) realized that these students need personal space; "Don't think that Norwegians are cold and reserved [he means Norwegian students do not want to start a conversation easily]. They are like that to everyone. So, don't feel bad, they are alone with you or anyone. It's just people want their personal space and it's better that you give that to them." People spend time privately in different ways. It varies from person to person in different cultural settings. Realizing the differences eventually helps us understand the situation.

Once students understood the pattern of social behavior and the culture of a society, their perceptions of that society changed. Mahesh, a participant in this research, gradually realized how common it is for people to sit apart on public transportation in Norway. He is from a crowded place in India and initially expected the same.

So, on the bus, let's just say you're sitting next to the door. People will come and sit next to you. If you're sitting next to the door and there is an empty space, they won't go and sit in the back, even though there is space, they will come and sit next to you. So, I thought, all the Western countries would be the same, but Norway is not. I was thinking like, am I being avoided or ignored or, being for people are being resistant stuff. Then I figured out, Norwegians, it's fine. And can't like the privacy also because it's raining here. And let's just say a person who got the instant rain comes and sits next to me. ...But I kind of felt bad, and once I knew that it is happening for everyone, and it is common over here, then it's totally fine. (Mahesh, Male student, 23)

Personal space for people is equally important as social space. Through the research participants' experiences, in Norway, people are conscious about their personal space in many

possible areas. It seems different in the beginning days when students come from collectivist social settings, but gradually they realize the common practice in Norway.

Mahesh has his reflection and experience on his friends. His impression was not good in the beginning, but he later found these friends welcoming:

But the third time when I went, they all became friends, and those people are basically Norwegians. They are quite good, they're welcoming also, but the thing is that when I first saw them on the first day of the class, it looked like a separate group who doesn't want to talk to other people, but then once I met them through my friend..., they all are very welcoming. (Mahesh, Male student, 23)

Many research participants mentioned that Norwegian students are more reserved than international students, which makes it challenging to become friends with them. Mahesh and a few students shared that they have a unique experience of becoming friends with Norwegian students: believing that becoming friends requires patience and constant communication because they have an existing friends' circle. Being judgmental is harmful because opinions, habits, and cultural background (sometimes geography) shape a person's attitude and activate at an appropriate time to make friends. Acceptance and recognition of other students is the beginning phase of social integration among students. However, with the identification of patterns of behavior and the cultural aspects of the host society, students do not feel excluded and discriminated against; as a result, they are more inclined to social integration with the locals and other international students.

#### **4.2.1.3 Sticking with the same Nationality Resulted in Passive Social Integration**

Making friends from the same region, nationality, or race is common among research participants. It seems they are inclined to socialize with each other rather than integrate with Norwegian and international students. To further explain this scenario, Volet and Ang (1998) write, "When students are from the same country and ethnic background, cultural-emotional connectedness enables them to maintain a sense of identity in a foreign country. In the absence of peers from the same country and ethnic background, cultural-emotional connectedness is naturally extended to the next closest culture" (p. 11). The late arrival of Bipin to the physical class after his quarantine posed a challenge for him to join the students' group:

I saw many students sitting in the beginning rows of the classroom. So, I moved almost to the end of the rows. ... the class is diversely divided into groups of different nationalities and backgrounds such as Norwegian, Ukrainian, and Nigerian. I don't see mixed group members in the classroom. (Bipin, Male student, 25)

The pattern of group formation among students also shows that social identity helped to cultivate a sense of belonging to a group based on race, religion, gender, ethnicity, social class, et cetera. The context in the university and college is the key to activating the social identity (Brown, 2000, as cited in Byrd, 2014, p. 267). According to the research participants, it seems usual to choose the same nationality or ethnic background or students from neighboring countries for friendship in the early days in Norway.

Making friends is a chance to learn new things, expand knowledge and social network, develop intellectual skills, and socially integrate. But, if students restricted themselves to simply friends from their community, they would not be able to make additional international friends. For example, Rekha (Female student, 26) focused primarily on her community members and was unable to make new friends: "I was expecting to make many international and Norwegian friends, but I found difficulties, and not possible. Maybe because I have been interacting most of the time with my own community [people from her country including new students], ... it could be my weakness [She realized she stuck with her community and not mingling with Norwegian and international students]." In case of failing to make friends or spending more time with existing friends (former friends, boyfriends/girlfriends) are likely to be homesick and increase the frequency of visiting home (Mackie, 1998 as cited in Wilcox et al., 2006, p. 714). The result will be a lack of social integration with students from other parts of the world.

Meanwhile, some South Asian students have biases when choosing friends. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) also highlighted that international students often set social relationships according to the closeness of their culture, ethnic, religious, or national backgrounds. Khalida, a research participant, speaks up about her preferences for acquaintances from South Asia:

... but I feel like I only can merge only with my South Asian people more. I need them because I am not that kind of a person... For me it's like I do not go to this like I do not go to this program on like most of them are like Europeans, so they are Erasmus students, they their lifestyle is quite different than us. They like to go hiking and clubbing and I do not like to go to the clubs actually. (Khalida, Female student, 33)

Her perception towards international students and limiting herself with south Asian students only restricting her social integration with Norwegian and international students. Likewise, a few people believe “friends are not made, they happen.” Riaz conceived the friends-making process as an automatic process: it happens. Likewise, some students want to keep their friend relationships solely on a professional level. However, making friends in a new place - some of whom may last a lifetime - helping one another out is essential. Everyone has different ways of making friends according to their needs, timing, and efficiency, which plays a role in their faster or slower social integration.

#### **4.2.1.4 Sharing Emotions: A Symbol of Social Integration**

Likewise, sharing emotions among students shows the range of students' social integration. A few participants in this study believe that when friends talk about their feelings, it helps to strengthen their relationship. Sharing among students' groups helps them take care of and explore each other. An interview excerpt of an introverted person Mahesh shows how his circle of friends is enabling him to unfold himself:

We all share our personal stuff, about what happened, something funny what happening, something which was saddened, romantic and stuff. We do share - not only “Hi” or “bye”- about having a bad day. Let's stay together and then talk about it. Let's solve things also.  
(Mahesh, Male student, 23)

Sharing emotions among students not only helps them to engage each other but also solving their problems improves their relationship.

In friendship, sharing emotions and problems with students is a powerful indication of social integration. The favorable environment only encourages people to share their emotions. Kamal feels comfortable sharing his opinions with most of his classmates.

I have very good Norwegian friends, I even share my personal issues with them, and they also shared with me. They're so close to me and nice. Not only Norwegian friends, even other nationalities. Yeah, friends in my class whom I can share anything with and they to share things with me. (Kamal, Male student, 40)

Concerning sharing, it is valuable for students to have reciprocal relationships between them. It keeps them connected, supportive, and mentally healthy, which helps them concentrate on

their schoolwork and appreciate one another.

The extent of relationships between students can be measured by understanding "with whom" and "to what extent" they share their thoughts, which shows the ranges of social integration among them. Students can maintain relationships with all their friends but not necessarily share their emotions; the foundations are assurances of confidentiality, comfortability, and cooperation. Interestingly, many research participants felt at ease sharing their emotions with people of similar social and economic status.

Bipin (Male student, 25) shared that the economic background of the student's home country is also a factor that helps to keep students closer and share thoughts: "We are connecting with each other, not because of Asian and Nigerian .... We had experienced similar kinds of problems [social and economic issues of the home country], so we reacted to each other." His statement could relate to the social and economic backgrounds of students in a broad sense which is "a measure of students' access to family resources (financial capital, social capital, cultural capital, and human capital) and the social position of the student's family/household" (OECD et al., 2009). Similar social and economic backgrounds enable them to relate to emotions more closely. It could be a usual way when students are newly admitted to university; it is not universal. In years to come, students' performance and interests in studies, sports, and issues gradually change the circle of friends they have and the emotions they share with them. The trend of closeness contributes to students' social integration without boundaries.

However, making friends and sharing their experiences is a basic indicator of social integration for students. The beginning of the close friendship leads them to learn about new cultures, languages, and ways of life in the host country and globally.

#### **4.2.1.5 Making Food and Communicating with Kitchen Mates: A Way of Bonding.**

Many research participants living in student housing share their kitchens. It is a common place to interact with other students in regular life. Cooking is not only a skill but also an art. Students can share food and learn new recipes from each other. Through interaction in the kitchen, students gradually learn about the people and cultures of different countries. In an interview, a female student from Nepal, Keki, said the kitchen is not only confined to making food but also learning different cultures.

A few participants in this study reported that they often spend time in a small group for entertainment, where cooking food is very common. For example, Mahesh is a male student who wants to spend time with friends at their places with delightful talks and cooked food rather than joining parties. But many male students find it challenging to prepare meals due to their lack of kitchen experience in their hometowns. Riaz, a Bangladeshi male student, shared his socio-economic as well as cooking challenges in the following words:

I will say it is how the socio-economic challenge has, like the social economic challenges hinder, hinders us because we are back. Because we know that Norway is quite expensive, and then somehow, we have to manage our livings and things, we think in that way and then we start working at the same time also. There's another challenge in South Asian students that I would say that because, at least the boys, I can say that they are not quite used to cooking things. (Riaz, Male student, 27)

Traditionally, in most South Asian cultures, cooking is often considered a woman's role. "In the overwhelming majority of societies," Sherry Ortner (1974) writes, "cooking is the woman's work" (p. 80) in the South Asian context. The given education for women promotes them for cooking, "the material aspect of womanhood (such as cooking, sewing, cleaning, account-keeping) as well as its nonmaterial aspect (such as care of husband, tending him, pleasing him)" (Amin, 1996, as cited in Kumar & Sanyal, 2020, p. 10). Similarly, women's engagement in domestic cooking was confined not only because of the religious emphasis (Kumar & Sanyal, 2020, p. 14) but also because of patriarchal oppression (Sengupta, 2020, p. 56). Apart from that, the trend of cooking is gradually changing. However, all the male research participants are reluctant to cook because they cannot always afford cooked meals, find food with the same taste as their hometown, and importantly, the preconception about the gender role of cooking food or not having experiences of cooking at home.

As a positive result, many male students shared that they were gradually learning to cook with the help of friends, YouTube, and consulting with family members. Cooking provides an opportunity to eat fresh food, sharpens their cooking skills, and, most importantly, allows them to socialize with other students in their residences. Nevertheless, none of the female students said any problems cooking the food themselves.

Moreover, each kitchen mate must tolerate, cooperate, and respect each other when they share the kitchen. According to their culture and tradition, students have different habits and

trends in cooking. Sharing the kitchen is also part of the fun and a platform to talk about their problems and experiences. Keki, a female student from Nepal, gets support from her kitchen mates through what she learns about the new culture and people in Norway and around the globe:

All of my kitchen mates tried to push me [encourage/support me]. They all are very nice people. Most of them were excited to meet me as the first Nepali for them at our housing. We don't understand people because of coveted and conservative society, we judge people, I also think in the way, in the beginning days [She believes she is from a conservative society, and initially, the transition was difficult.]. (Keki, Female student, 27)

The majority of South Asian students live in student housing and share kitchens, and they prepare their meals, which provides an opportunity for them to communicate with kitchen mates. Sharing a kitchen offers the chance to cook and eat together. Also, get insights about diverse people, religions, cultures, and locations. The trend of sharing and learning from each other creates an environment of respect and bonding between students which gradually supports their social integration.

#### **4.2.2 Connecting with Formal Support Networks**

Now, I explore the formal support network for students in Norway; their support plays a role in social integration with institutions and among students. Many research participants said they expect assistance settling into an unfamiliar location, which is necessary in many ways. Transitioning from their country of origin to their country of destination is a complex process. The initial support for students helps not only to adjust to the new setting but also to the beginning without mental stress. For students to adjust successfully to university life, they must have access to an appropriate environment for getting support. The role of tutors, parents, and peers play significant roles in their lives (Tao et al., 2000, p. 124). However, having proper support and interesting events helps South Asian students' social integration with other students.

Support from the university and other formal institutions promotes students' social integration among native and international students in Norway. In general, formal support is organized, structured, and administered under existing norms and laws, including a variety of professional supports and specialized programs such as international officers, educational



counselors, and relevant organizations within the university (Hama et al., 2020, p. 48). Most of these research participants rely on student welfare organizations for most of their support and then university in their everyday lives. These student welfare organizations are responsible for providing counseling services, cafeterias, housing, nurseries, and sports facilities for students. I have discussed a few representative experiences of students in this section and other various sections which set the background for the social integration of students.

Students require assistance after arriving at the airport and settling into their apartment; later, shopping, assignments, sports, recreational activities, job searching, et cetera. Many students get support from their friends, community, and networks. The initial support in Norway for students is essential, which may lay the groundwork for social integration with the support network. A few universities and colleges offer basic receiving assistance to first-year students. A Pakistani student, Imran, who came to Norway in 2021, said that a staff of the International Office of his University College received him:

... they took from a bus stop and then took home. And they explained a little bit. Then other journey start because no one is going to like to help you in every step. Then you have to do it on your own. Then I know it's like for my first day, I didn't know where to go for grocery. And I walk around like kilometers and then I have a lot of bags. And then again back to home. So then, but now eventually I know which is the like close shop and stuff and how can I buy.  
(Imran, Male student, 26)

The quality and the range of beginning support by the institutions may play a positive role in students' social integration with the institution. Students must adjust to the host society to fit in, where many institutions can provide information based on the types of information and engagement students want. This information could help to set the milestones for the future social integration of students.

Regular documentation for immigration and tax is always stressful for many research participants. During times of mental stress, the support from the institutions could make them positive towards the institution. For example, the role of professors and staff in providing relevant documents is crucial.

when we want to renew our visa, for second year, so we must get some documents of the university, that I have in my progress, like our progress report, how many credits we have

completed or not, things like that. So before even asking her, she sent it to us, to the international student. (Riaz, Male student, 27)

The proactiveness of the administration makes Riaz happy and positive toward the institutions. It seems very easy, but the documentation process and the support from the departments at the right time are fundamental. Likewise, Rekha (Female student, 26) also shared that her department at the university supported her by producing a correct document for her visa renewal in response to her email. She was worried about submitting the documents on time because the police asked for some credentials. She received the documents on time; this cooperation made her positive toward the institutions. The environment of positivity towards the university gradually leads to the social integration of students. Likewise, it could adversely affect students' mental health and socialization ability.

### **4.2.3 Connecting with Informal Support Networks**

Besides the formal support system, students try to get in contact with an informal support network from the beginning days. Often when students are unaware of the quantity and quality of provided institutional support, they prefer to be supported by their friends, peers, or other community members (Hama et al., 2020, p. 46). Likewise, informal events such as picnics, volunteer work, dancing activities, visiting galleries and museums, and sports are effective for all students to integrate into a new context (Sovic, 2009, p. 759). The networking and support from friends make international students' life easy and socially integrated.

#### **4.2.3.1 Dependence on Same Nationality: Support as Give-and-Take Relationship**

Most participants in this research relied on the students from their home country for support and entertainment, which promotes bonding between them and plays a passive role in helping them integrate with Norwegian and international students. Regarding students' desire to remain in the same social group as their country of origin, after rigorous literature studies, Aydin (2020) writes that lack of language ability, cultural distance, and personality trait variations stand as barriers between international and local students (p. 386). Aydin's concluding observation is implacable in many instances among the South Asian students' cases in Norway.

Many South Asian students try to find other students or known persons from their home country before arriving in Norway. They help each other to receive from airports, celebrations,

job searches, and other events. For example, a student named Khalida (Female, 33), an active member of her Bangladeshi community said: “And there is one from that like community brother. He comes and picks us up from the airport. Then they help me in many ways, and I'm very involved with my community.” The first assistance in a new location from people from the same country, often speaking the same native language, is a lucky break for these students. It gives students a sense of safety in a new environment, a sense of belonging to their home country, and the assurance of future support, among other things. On this occasion, most South Asian research participants ask about the practical aspects of adjusting to the new place. Jaya has also had the same experience:

When I just came in Bergen, me and my friend, she's also teacher in a public university, Bangladesh and she is also a scholarship student. We both came together. So, when we reach Bergen, we got support from a Bangladeshi brother, older brother, he took us shopping center and just he introduces us how to buy bus tickets, how to do grocery... (Jaya, Female student, 32)

The support from the same nationality at the beginning remains a tie of belonging for longer. It is common to gravitate toward their own ethnic group and maintain the connection; as a result, in many instances, they may not feel obligated to integrate with domestic and international students in Norway. Likewise, the community members often help by organizing events, gathering, and providing direct and indirect guidance. This support and engagement with people from the same community helps social integration among their community and partially supports setting a background for native and international students.

The person who received support as a newcomer last year also helps the new students. It is a give-and-take relationship. As per the conversation with a few research participants, they aim to eliminate or minimize the challenges they face as new students. Imran received support from his Pakistani students for his job, and he also supported new students from Pakistan. This is a cycle of voluntary work, which keeps their ties to social integration stronger.

Like we have a Pakistani student group (informal group who are studying in Kristiansand and meets frequently), if we need something and we have any difficulties, we help each other. When I came here, those students had already helped me to find a job, to do something. And now so now I'm helping new students to explore. And I explored with them to see the city. I like to help them like this is how we like, you know, offices and stuff. So, this is the students' network is very helpful. (Imran, Male student, 26)

The bigger the cities in Norway, the higher the chances of getting students and people from the same country. In larger cities, students can find organized student and community groups; formally registered with the metropolitan office or loosely formed. For example, Nepali students and community members gather through the Nepali Bergen Society, Bergen, registered in Bergen *Kommune* (Metropolitan City). They organize different events. However, most students form informal groups; whenever they are free, they meet in their housing and open spaces.

But that does not mean all members of the same country will always support or accept new students. For instance, Ali, a Pakistani student who had an unpleasant experience with a Pakistani residence in Norway:

I found my job on my own, but I'm also someone who's is part of the circle. If talking about Pakistani students' society or Pakistan students who are studying. We help each other a lot, but we do not receive any help from the people in Pakistan is living here or neither from any other students. (Ali, Male student, 25)

Ali is not the only one who did not get support from the existing community people; other nationalities also have this experience. As Ali believes, the sense of communal feeling abroad remains as vivid as in the home country, and as a result, students expect more support from the community. New students and already settled people in the community are divided by their social and economic lifestyles. Students and residents of the community have separate ways of living. Those established people must care for their families, manage properties, and remain connected to their regular networks. In contrast, students' objectives and leisure time are different. They can, however, advise students based on their own experiences. But when students did not get support from the residents of the same community in Norway, inversely, the stronger bonding between students formed. However, the previous years' students helped the new students set up networks, get to know the place, and connect with people, which ultimately helped with social integration.

As mentioned in a previous section, international students tend to gravitate towards members of their own nationality and culture, which is common among research participants in this study. The support from the beginning days, easy ways of communication, and cultural similarities keep them attached. This process increases the social integration among the same

nationalities but plays a passive role in integrating domestic and international students in Norway.

#### **4.2.3.2 Support and Communication among Students**

By providing mutual support, students gradually develop their ability to create an environment conducive to their social integration with native and international students. Meanwhile, students get support from non-South Asian students in diverse ways. Minor information or initiators can sometimes be helpful. Sharing kitchens, social media groups, and laboratories are beneficial for helping and establishing close relations. For example, an interview excerpt from Neelam beautifully explains the relationships with other students:

The Norwegian friends that I know, are very reserved. They don't talk to you easily. They don't open up easily. But once you start understanding them, they. But for me, they are still very reserved. But the other European friends that I had, liked to help me with everything, I wanted some participants for my experiment in the last semester and it was like I needed some Norwegian speakers, and I didn't know anyone but my flat mates, my German friend, my Norwegian friends, they helped me complete that project. They sent their friends to the university lab, and they helped me with that because without their help my project was a failure. (Neelam, Female student, 44)

She is shy and introverted by nature, but she received support from her kitchen mates when she expressed herself. It suggests that she is in a location where domestic and international students also want to help and establish relations with her. While sharing their problems with fellow students, they also feel the responsibility to help needy people. As a result, the sense of responsibility toward others gradually creates an environment of social integration.

Meanwhile, the reciprocity of support among international and domestic students gradually set the relationship for social integration. Mahesh initially refused to join the native Norwegian and international friends circle, but when they frequently approached him, he began to spend time with them. Eventually, they helped him go shopping, play, and visit places. It is a significant example of evolving relations between students to foster social integration.

We sometimes meet up somewhere and go to restaurants or go for a hike. ... Somewhere two weeks before we all went to Askey, then to Ramsey and then in a place with beach. So, we went there, and we all played volleyball. That was a good experience. And they helped me

when I was buying stuff from IKEA [a shopping complex in Bergen]. (Mahesh, Male student, 23)

The support of peers is beneficial for students because they are in an almost similar situation, have similar needs, and have much more in common; as a result, they understand each other better and provide more effective support. Mahesh gets help from his peers as per his requirements. Recognition of students by fellow students and their support of each other promote social integration among them.

The use of social media for communication and entertainment with international students of and same nationality is common among most research participants; it bridges students' social integration. As Giles (2010, as cited in Eikenberry, 2010) writes, these new social networking sites "are changing the way people communicate, work and play" (p. 449). As an alternative to physical meetings or to run according to the time, students rely on social networks, which eventually contribute to the social integration of students. Some research participants utilize social networking sites and social media applications (Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, et cetera) via the World Wide Web for their communication. In addition to fun activities, they use them to solve problems and inform each other.

A few students are forming their virtual community by using social media networks with international students. This process gradually supports the social integration among all students. Jaya uses social media for communication with her classmates; they keep posting their problems and receive advice from other friends:

We have a text Messenger group of our classmates, we posted there, so anyone answered from them. This is how we communicate like, we don't have such kind of documents we need it, so we posted in our Messenger group, and anyone reply in, almost I think, everyone replies. So, this is how we communicate and during the coursework. (Jaya, Female student, 32)

Through the participants' experiences, it can be said that social media is increasingly used by students to ask for assistance, plan an event, complete group assignments, distribute information, et cetera. International students and students from the same community use social media for communication. Khalida (Female, 33) said, "We have a big group, a Facebook group," they use these social media groups to organize events and other relevant information circulation. Students have different social media groups as per their objectives among their

nationalities too. Importantly, students are connected to each other and solve or assist themselves. The process directly plays a role in social integration among them.

However, the distraction from studies caused by the inappropriate use of social media is challenging. A study by Henry (2012) reports that “students who experience psychological stressors are using technology and social media to waste time or procrastinate” (p. 22). The use of social media increases connectivity among university students, but it could also be harmful to students if they do not limit themselves to its inappropriate use. Meanwhile, none of the research participants reported that they experienced negative impacts of using social media. However, it can be concluded from students' experiences that the accessibility and use of social media among students' circle contributes to their social integration.

#### **4.2.4 Taking Part in Formal and Informal Social Activities**

Making friends, learning about different cultures, tolerance, cooperation, humanism, and many other skills could be learned through extracurricular activities. Students participate in formal and informally organized events. International students' participation in social activities significantly impacted students' better social integration. In this section, I elaborate on the formally organized social events, especially by the student welfare organization and university departments. Likewise, I also explore students' work lives to balance their finance rather than participating in formal events; as a result, often, most South Asian students are missing activities.

Apart from the Covid-19 restriction, paid work, and the weather, almost all research participants tried to spend time with their friends. Mostly like-minded students gather when they are free or want to spend time in a group. These gatherings vary from student to student in terms of their nature, setting, and goals. Through the experiences of research participants, the primary drives of the frequency and number of social gatherings among students include their age group, interests, affordability, regionality, occasion, et cetera.

Many research participants are able to follow at least a few events organized by student welfare organizations. Student welfare organizations organize many events throughout the year, such as hiking, city tours, and seasonal outdoor activities. Besides indoor activities, most of their activities focus on nature. Students can participate in different organizations with different purposes in addition to the student welfare organization. For example, a few nature

lover groups organize hiking and public awareness events. A few research participants benefit from these events too.

The free events organized by Sammen are popular among research participants in Bergen. Bipin (Male student, 25) has been joining events organized by Sammen, "...student housing plays a role to organize various events. I felt the outdoor activities provided by Sammen, such as hiking, cabin trips, etc., were extremely fruitful. I also went on a nice cabin trip." Through participating in these events, students get exposure to interact with Norwegian and international students regardless of their educational program and other backgrounds. This process helps to learn about a different culture, history, current socio-political situation, and many more things about the new place and people. There is also the probability of learning bad things too. However, it is up to the students to decide what they want to learn and explore, but it provides the space for social integration among a diverse group of students.

Ali noted that through the events organized by Sammen, he got the opportunity to meet international students: "we do initially go to the event. Sammen is doing a great job bringing the international buddy and the students together through different events that they organized like the cinema night." Participating in the events helps to meet domestic and international students. It gives a sense of mutual respect and togetherness. For Prabhas, living in Stavanger, these events are ideal for meeting new people:

...[student welfare organization] that organizes the event for Student Association, and most of them are free, so we had a hiking trip to Preikestolen, a kayaking trip, and other events. So those were really nice and that was also a good time to meet new people and talk with them.  
(Prabhas, Male student, 25)

There are sports facilities in most of the student housing complexes, which promotes student engagement and cooperation. Participation in the provided sports facilities promotes social equality and integration where students learn mutual respect and consideration, a concern similar to the notion of solidarity, community, and fraternity; also, it establishes respect for ethnic diversity, sexual orientation, gender equality, and access to goods and opportunities (Lacerda-Magalhães & Almeida, 2018, p. 7). Although, oppression, hierarchy, and exclusion are some barriers (Sen, 2000, as cited in Lacerda-Magalhães & Almeida, 2018, p. 9) to the inclusive environment in these sports facilities, none of the research participants reported such barriers in this research.



Meanwhile, a few students do not like all kinds of events organized by student welfare organizations. Students are free to choose these events at their convenience and interest. A few research participants do not join the outdoor activities because of their health issues and lack of interest. Among all research participants, Neelam does not like mass gatherings, so she wants to spend her time on peaceful walks among limited friends:

So, because of my job I am sometimes restricted by my work and study. So, because of obviously my social anxiety, I don't go to many social gatherings where there is a crowd or where there's a lot of noise. But I still go with one or two friends, go to some park or some lake and some maybe a mountain. Once or twice, I went because very peaceful places I enjoy here in Norway. (Neelam, Female student, 44)

Similarly, a few students shared that they enjoy themselves within a limited number of students (two, three); there is no universal method of socializing or spending time, which restrains the integration process among Norwegian and international students. Perhaps there are cultural and personal factors that play a role in that. It can be assumed that students who participate in the events and socialize have a high chance of social integration with diverse student groups. Limiting themselves to a tiny friends' circle will not support social integration with Norwegian and international students, that forces to remain in the same circle.

A couple of participants in this research also compare the organized events by their department. It is also common for students of different departments or universities to compare the events organized by their respective departments when they meet. Bipin (Male student, 25) mentioned his department did not organize activities besides education: "My university experience is limited; it's just reading and returning. I don't see events in the university, especially in our faculty, we don't have any events." Like Bipin, Rekha (Female student, 26) also expects more events in her department: "Our department, we don't have a cultural night or similar kinds of activities. We have to rely on the student union for other activities." She wants to engage in the event organized by her department. Each student has their expectations. But it could assume that such kind of events may provide the floors to integrate with fellow classmates.

Conversely, students can socialize with one another through university-based club events and activities, not just events organized by the department. Ali experienced that events and activities at the university-based clubs are helpful to interact among students:

... but there's a platform that you need to interact with them. So, sports I think was one platform from my where I saw that I made friends with the people from Norway and so they opened up when we started socializing at parties and events. (Ali, Male student, 25)

A student's interest and exploration of the university's platform leads them to find the appropriate events and people with similar interests. In the future, these engagements could be helpful to connect with future work, study, or activities and ultimately promote social integration.

Having to earn money rather than taking part in recreational activities was the common experience of the many research participants. The majority of South Asian students handle their finances themselves while doing their studies. In Norway, managing high living expenses is a main challenge for international students (Wiers-Jenssen, 2020, p. X). Among the twelve research participants, one received a substantial stipend that one could live on; the other students had to handle their finances personally. Mahesh from India is not working regularly, he manages his finances from his savings and works on various university projects. Meanwhile, besides Prabhas (working a skilled job in the Information Technology sector), nine participants in this research are working in unskilled jobs.

Financial help from the family has low value because the Norwegian market price is high compared to the value of South Asian currencies. As a result, the participants in this study said they had to work on the weekends, while many of their co-students' joined clubs, bars, or other recreational activities on weekends. Riaz, a generous student from Bangladesh, shared his experience of having to work:

... takes a definitely, a lot of time from us which doesn't allow us to go us in the social events, mostly because the students usually working Friday and Saturdays and most on sometimes on Saturday, Sunday as well. This is Saturday and Sundays are the off days. What actual people hang out and go somewhere and do something funny or crazy but [we] must work. (Riaz, Male student, 27)

The majority of the research participants held unskilled jobs, mainly in restaurants, cleaning, kitchen support, and other sectors. Most found their jobs through friends from the same country (mostly previous-year students), and a few approached employers directly through physical meetings and applied online. It is common for these industries to work on weekends. However, most of the research participants worked on weekends, and the majority

of their peers' enjoyed weekends; as a result, the social integration process among the research participants and other students became slow.

Likewise, socialization among students is limited because of the available leisure. As explored students' experiences of managing their finance themselves, in addition to that, the price hikes in the market also enforces students to earn more; as a result, they want to work up to their working hour limit. In addition to working to maintain finance, assignment, work (for a few students' volunteer work and language learning) impeded their social life. Jaya, a scholarship student, said that many of her friends work longer hours on the weekends, which limits their socializing time with her. Eventually, these students' experiences in this research highlighted that the demanding work schedule reduces social integration with other students in Norway. However, despite her interest, Jaya limits herself to gathering with students; because she knows everyone is busy and does not want to disturb students. Meanwhile, self-sabotaging is not common among the research participants.

I do socialize in my country. I like and I am a very extrovert person, but since here everyone is so busy, so I am, I feel hesitant to ask. I feel hesitant if I ask someone to go out with me or hang out with me. I just fear that if he or she rejected me, I would feel hurt or I would feel bad. So, I don't want to feel bad about myself. So, I just restricted myself from asking because whenever I came, I saw the pattern. (Jaya, Female student, 32)

Not disturbing others could be a way of respecting them, but self-sabotaging is a negative behavior that prevents engaging with other students (Zhang, 2022, p. 2). However, humans are social beings who want to be social. Not connecting with friends could impact their mental health, academic progress, and perception of their friends. In the case of Jaya, she is avoiding only physical meetings with friends, but she is active on social media. She posts her problems and opinions among her peers.

As discussed above, South Asian students have limitations (finance, language courses, et cetera) and can only attend a few events at their university and in other organizations. Most research participants are happy to join these events, especially those organized by student welfare organizations. On the other hand, a few research participants expect more events in their departments because they can reach other students. Meanwhile, most of the research participants cannot attend all the events because they have to manage their finances and need to work weekends when other peers enjoy themselves at clubs and parties. However, how many

events they attended, these activities support enhancing students' ability to integrate socially with domestic and international students in Norway.

## **4.3 Hindering Factors of Social Integration**

This section explores hindering factors for South Asian students' social integration. Based on research participants' experiences, mental health, cultural distances, personal perspectives, and language issues are seen as hindering factors. I summarized the findings of this study and their connections in Figure 2 (see Section 4.4) to demonstrate how South Asian students navigate their social integration at university.

### **4.3.1 Mental Health and Social Integration**

To the experiences of the research participants, when it comes to integrating with other students, students with good mental health are more likely to do so efficiently. Student life could be stressful when they are in a new context; a study shows that, in contrast to non-university students of the same age, university students are significantly more vulnerable to high levels of distress (Stallman & Schochet, 2009). Whereas mental health perceives as “our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices” (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021, p. 4). Some students of this research also suffered more mental distress.

Research participants face challenges in this new setting with a diversified system. Besides maintaining the academic program, students often work to manage their finances, learn the language, do volunteer work, et cetera. Study participants who plan on working or living in Norway believe learning the language will help them adjust to their new environment more easily. Likewise, mature students must face pressure about family responsibilities (Woodley et al., 1987, as cited in Lowe & Gayle, 2007, p. 227). Those who are above 30 years shared that they have social pressure from home to get married and have children. Similarly, because of the age difference, a few South Asian students are systematically isolating themselves; they do not live, think, or join clubs like their younger classmates. Khalida, (Female student, 33), was facing challenging time herself, “I feel like it's very difficult to cope up with the age gap (Difference in age, she is 33 years old, and her classmates were mostly 21-25 years) and like the culture suddenly.” As a result of the situation just mentioned, South Asian students participated in counseling sessions.

Students Welfare Organizations provide different types of facilities to students, mental counseling is one of them. After the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, keeping students mentally healthy was difficult. Riaz remembers that Sammen frequently contacted him during the Covid period:

when there was COVID-19 because these students were isolated and locked in their house. So, they continuously published like circulated the mail saying that if you feel lonely, come and talk to us, meet us or if you need counseling, don't have anything to do it. They're always available. (Riaz, Male student, 27)

Likewise, Neelam (Female student, 44) herself was mentally sick for a long time, and she has been consulting with doctors very often: “So, whenever you want to talk, you need somebody to talk soon can simply call it their number, and you can get help. I'm, using the therapist here....” Neelam feels very comfortable while following the doctor. She feels more secure about her ability to obtain counseling and medication.

Kamal found the mental health clinic very efficient and helpful for him. When he was facing a difficult time with assignments, financial management, and Norwegian language learning, he could not cope with the situation and took 15 counseling sessions:

... I had certain periods where I was so depressed because of the stress of the course and the language and the difficulty in finding the job because relevant to my field, because of the language barrier, I called them and when I, they understood my situation, they immediately gave me an appointment. (Kamal, Male student, 40)

Meanwhile, how the student presents their problems is more vital to receive appropriate advice from the counselor. Kamal feels he is more mentally healthy after the counseling sessions.

Nevertheless, students' mental health is important for their social integration, or sometimes social integration helps to heal their mental issues, Cassidy (2004) writes that “the development of social networks at university tends to eventually provide an alternative source of social support which takes the place of family and past friends. One might expect that social support would be closely related to a sense of community, belonging, or identification with the university” (p. 340). Thus, it is necessary to continuously focus on students' mental health in and outside the university; as a result, it increases the ability of students' social integration.

### 4.3.2 Cultural Distance and Return to Religion

To some extent, cultural distance became a challenging part of the social integration of South Asian students with Norwegian and international students in the beginning days. The ways of living, and thinking patterns, on many occasions, South Asian students keep themselves apart from their peers and limit themselves to persons with close culture, language, et cetera. South Asian students, according to Bipin, are open to discussing any issues they are facing, whereas Norwegians tried to maintain some gaps:

We cannot talk with Norwegian students about part-time work and similar things, but other students [non-Western] are asking openly. Where are you working? And what are you doing? ... We think asking about the job and personal things is as care, I would say these are the cultural difference. (Bipin, Male student, 25)

Likewise, the culture of supporting others is common in many parts of the world, whereas research participants perceive it very closely and go one step further. Keki (Female student, 27) shared her perception about support, “I realized there are boundaries with other (Norwegian and international) students. We ... help despite their limitation, for example, if someone is in a problem, we spend the whole night and tried to help but they show certain consolation only.” Asking about personal issues symbolizes different things in different conditions. Through the participants' experiences, South Asian students often take it as care, whereas many Western students think it's a personal matter. As a result of the fundamental cultural differences, South Asian students need to take some time to learn and integrate with other cultures.

Interestingly, according to the research participants, a comparison between South Asian and Norwegian understandings of participating in a party organized by their institution is noteworthy. Most of the participants in the study said that they usually arrange everything according to their affordability in South Asia when people or departments invite them to a party. But when students are in Norway, from the beginning, they are in quite a dilemma or surprise when they are asked to carry their own food and drinks. Bipin experienced the same:

Culturally, many things are different. ... Likewise, I don't know all the Norwegian and international cultures too. For example, I was invited to a dinner program by the department, but they asked us to bring our food and drinks. I guess we have to be ready to pay to attend any events. (Bipin, Male student, 25)

Understanding the culture of the host country is valuable. But Bipin is not alone; Prabhas also experienced the same in a distinct voice:

I feel that's a big difference here in Norway, I guess. Something else, maybe when you're going to a party you have to bring your own food, your own drinks, something that I've noticed. And they're not you know they don't think it's bad to say that you should bring food. I mean they would say right to your face, so you should bring your food. So, they are pretty much straight forward in those areas and yeah talking about straightforward, professors any Norwegians I see they are pretty much straightforward. (Prabhas, Male student, 25)

Notably, it is assumed that food is personalized because of individual diet patterns. In the South Asia collectivist society, food, in general, is perceived as common; but because of consciousness about their health, the trend is also changing. In the collectivistic cultures in many parts of the world, “food may be regarded in a more positive way because it facilitates social interactions and enhances the benefits of others’ company” (Rodríguez-Arauz et al., 2016, p. 186). South Asian students in Norway gradually learn the pattern and take food as personalized things more easily, which opens further opportunities to mingle between students without any preconceived notions about bringing food and drinks to parties. The understanding process of culture eventually opens the door to social integration with native and international students.

Similarly, as part of the cultural distance, alcohol consumption is another triggering issue among many South Asian students. Norwegian youths are accustomed to going to clubs and partying. Prabhas had experienced less nightlife in his hometown in India. In his culture, people often hesitate to dance or party out, but he saw the very life of Norwegian cities:

but at this party, people love drinking. Every everywhere you have you are drinking. So, a person who doesn't drink might feel excluded or outcast those kinds of events. If he doesn't drink and if he goes to a party like that, it would be really embarrassing for him. ... (Prabhas, Male student, 25)

Prabhas's experience with the nightlife in Norway restraining him from mixing with native Norwegian and international students. Despite the challenges, he tried spending time with them, but his limitations of balancing paid jobs, assignments, and engagement with people from the same country did not allow him. For example, Prabhas also wants to join sports with Western students, but they drink while playing, and he cannot drink with them because he must



work on weekends at his paid job and his assignments.

... even during the games, the games usually involve drinking during the games. So, even if you want to take part in the games, you should be drinking. For me, normally, it's been a while, I drink [He drinks only on some occasions]. Because these days I usually have to work, so after I get home and then I have to do my assignments... (Prabhas, Male student, 25)

Likewise, individual behavioral patterns also play a role in keeping people close or apart. A few students shared that those students who shared a cigarette or a drink with them quickly made friends. Imran (Male student, 26) is keen to make friends, so he is putting extra effort into making friends. But his nature of not drinking alcohol restrained him from mingling among Norwegian students. However, he has good relations with international students in his classroom.

Additionally, a few participants reported that religious factors prohibit them from drinking, which hinders mingling with Norwegian and International students. Ali (Male student, 25) is a Muslim; his religion prohibits him from going to clubs and drinking alcohol: "It's not easy to make friends with them (Norwegian and international students). I mean the thing is that we restrict ourselves because of religion. Then things become more complicated for us." Drinking alcohol "remains an important part of the maturation process from childhood to adulthood in many European countries" (Järvinen and Room, 2007 as cited in Rolando & Katainen, 2014, p. 189). But besides alcohol consumption and joining clubs, there are many places where students spend time and make friends. They are sports activities, artistic clubs in the university (for example, the Photo club), outdoor activities, volunteering, students' café, et cetera. Students' interest in a particular subject matter encourages them to integrate socially. However, through the participant's experience, it could internalize that cultural diverseness could bridge through drinking alcohol with Norwegian and international students, but it is not necessarily the primary way of social integration. Students can follow other ways to minimize cultural distance. Likewise, the following paragraphs elaborate on students' experiences of religious practices and their impacts on social integration.

With the availability of freedom and acceptance by Norwegian and international students, research participants feel comfortable exercising their religion. To express thoughts, conscience, and religion is a person's fundamental right (UN General Assembly, 1948). It creates a friendlier environment for students with different religious backgrounds to integrate

with the other students. Ali, a Pakistani Muslim student, feels very comfortable exercising his religion in Norway:

“In terms of religion, which I would admire people from Norway. Because I am Muslim, so I have to pray openly. I haven't been looked down for that, that's something that's quite respectful from people in Norway and a positive aspect. As compared to culture, people respect your culture in a way that if you dress up differently, they wouldn't be looked down upon.” (Ali, Male student, 25)

Ali did not feel uncomfortable practicing his religion in the open spaces. The statement by Ali informed us that Norwegian society respects people with a different faith from another part of the world. Consequently, it promotes integration between students with different religious values and local students.

However, a few research participants restrain themselves from joining certain social events with other students. For example, students from Muslim backgrounds mostly do not want to join clubs and drinking activities because of their religious values. The Muslim student Ali added that he is happy because Norwegian and European society does not force him to drink or eat against his beliefs:

No, religion constraint, just a religious constrained for Muslims. But again, one positive aspect, I would want to mention that the people of Europe, if you don't drink, they won't force you to drink. If you don't eat pork, they respect your religion. So, your religion is respected. I want to mention before as well. I mean they do not restrict you because of your religion. So that's one positive aspect. (Ali, Male student, 25)

The respect for religious values encouraged students with different values systems to join social events comfortably. Mutual respect for their belief system is a unique aspect that helps to strengthen social integration among students.

Meanwhile, Khalida has taken 12 rounds of counseling but has not found it helpful. She was stressed when she became helpless from a formal support network, COVID-19 lockdown impacts, poor performance in studies, and social (family) pressure. Her source of anxiety did not get appropriate ways, and as a result, she followed the religious path of Islam. Koenig et al. (2012, p. 18) explain religion as “...beliefs, cognitions, and behaviors that, when operating together, can often help people face and overcome the most difficult of situations” and

emphasize that it supports coping with mental stress by increasing empowerment and control, providing role models for suffering and answers to ultimate questions, providing positive worldview, also, providing social support and durability.

Like there are many things, so that's why I have become more religious, like starting to pray a lot, becoming much more religious than before. I am a believer, I pray. But I wasn't that strongly prayed and everything. (Khalida, Female student, 33)

As she said, she was having a mentally difficult time because of various issues, and unable to heal through the counseling sessions, she became more religious. On the one hand, it is an irony for the existing formal and informal support systems. Interestingly, on the other hand, as Koenig et al. (2012, p. 18) said, through support of religion, Khalida became empowered. In terms of social support mechanism, the process she passed through raised questions about the social integration of international students in Norwegian Higher Education Institutions.

### **4.3.3 Personal Perception of Being Together**

Here, I explore how international students, despite challenges and dilemmas, started integrating with Norwegian and international students or changed preconceived mindsets about cultural differences, schooling, and personal habits. Most often, they need to follow a complex procedure. In many instances, comparisons between European and South Asian cultures and people's perceptions are visible in this section. It helps to understand the gaps and the student's orientation to change their behavior for better social integration.

#### **4.3.3.1 Individualistic Life Pattern**

Due to not knowing the ways of the place as a new student in a geographically and culturally diverse land, it is difficult to communicate and behave with students. It is a very personal and complex process. It hinders the students' social integration process. Keki is unsure how to react to other friends and how they perceive her.

When going to the grocery store, they [her kitchen mates] want to go single rather than in a group. They have a private life, and they are cold especially Norwegians. You don't know how to act. Something I felt I became more open. When I asked someone to go to the grocery store, they said, no I will go alone. Then I sensed, maybe they don't like me. Especially when I talked

to my European friends, I never knew like so many people here. ... In the beginning days, I always felt, 'will they really like me'. (Keki, Female student, 27)

The dilemma of appropriate behavior with other students is common among many South Asian research participants. Several research participants found Western students are more individualistic in their daily lives. An individualistic culture (for example, some European and North American cultures) carries the features of preferring and emphasizing independent and personal development as well as self-expression; on the other side, collectivist cultures (for example, African and some Asian cultures) emphasize the group rather than individuals as part of a tribe, family, or based on different values (Schmidt, 2006 as cited in Rivas et al., 2019, p. 691). Keki was a person who expected people's support for any task. But the situation enforced her to be individualistic, "most of the time I don't find friends in the library because some of them have different courses, so I need to be alone and now it is part of my habit." Meanwhile, with the support of Western kitchen mates, she eventually learned individualistic behavior.

Most of the research participants agreed that they were dependent on friends and family is very common for any task or occasion in their home country. New students also expect this behavior from western students in the beginning days. But gradually, they realized the individualistic life pattern and started to internalize the situation. Kamal further elaborates in his word:

but it's not like South Asian countries were someone will take you to, second one will speak or recommend for you. It's not like that. You should be on your own. So that's the difference what I found in Western countries and the culture in South Asia. (Kamala, Male student, 40)

The new settings helped to change the perception of South Asian students, which contributed to changing their behavior too. It is a voluntary process for them. It indicates they are ready to change themselves and adjust to the new situation. It ultimately contributes to a positive environment to integrate with international students.

Meanwhile, the research participants reported that an individualistic life is not always beneficial. Neelam suffered from loneliness. She wants to talk and exchange opinions with other students at a certain point, even though she is not very social.

Affecting factors are like the weather, you sometimes feel very lonely because you feel left out because of your limitations sometimes. Because if you don't talk to people, don't open to

people, they don't bother about you. They don't ask how you feel or what is wrong with you because they are like more into their private lives, and they don't want to interfere in your privacy. So sometimes this makes us very secluded or very left out like you feel like there should be somebody that you can go to, or you can talk to so sometime this is one thing that can affect. Sometimes, you have to specially tell them, like you want to talk, but sometime, I met some Norwegian say they used to talk to other Norwegians, but they never talk to me, or they talk, like they were like more comfortable with that. (Neelam, Female student, 44)

Because of the individualistic nature of the culture, students from that cultures expect to develop an independent personality, whereas students from collectivist cultures in South Asia are more inclined to follow values, roles, norms, and familial authority (Rolando & Katainen, 2014, p. 191). It could be understandable that South Asian students often seek others' opinions and attention. In Neelam's opinion, a lack of communication does not help students to bridge their differences, which reduces the chances of social integration. However, research participants understand the limitations of individualistic life and learn the trend; as a result, they respect and integrate with the students with individualistic life patterns.

#### **4.3.3.3 Experiences of Discrimination**

A few research participants experienced discrimination based on color and class in Norway. The encounter with discrimination impacted students' ability and willingness to socially integrate with Norwegian students and the community. While most South Asian students' experiences with discrimination are provisional, they identify the causes when observing the culture closely and interacting with Norwegian society and international students. According to Ali, a Pakistani student, class, and color discourage students from integrating with other students.

... because I would say we have to face some kind of discrimination. Some kind of, they we feel belittle, we feel. That we belong to a lower class. ... I have a friend who's from India. He works at night, and he had complained several times that he has been to some people because when he comes in late at night, he comes on weekdays from work. So, a lot of drunk people call him brown, and they make fun of him, but he feels discriminated against. (Ali, Male student, 25)

Like Ali, Neelam, and her friend experienced unpleasant behavior on public transportation. The incident reluctantly forced her to think about the existence of discrimination in terms of

color. Her experience in public transportation will not remain outside the university; it impacted her social integration with other students.

...when I was like going in the Bybanne (light train in Bergen) with my Ghanaian friend so and one like we took a seat and one lady who was sitting in front of us she just made a disgusted impression and she just changed the seat just because, like black and an Asian was sitting near her. So, it was kind of very racist and humiliating kind of experience (Neelam, Female student, 44)

Discrimination is very painful; it could impact student's mental and social life. No part of the world is free from discrimination, but the degree of manifestation could be different; some people express it, and some do not. It is always subjective; an individual's perception is different from other people.

In contrast to discriminatory behavioral findings, a few research participants noted that they found a positive atmosphere and respect in the host society. A safe environment and a culture of respect are fundamental to cultivating a positive attitude toward their host society's people. Ultimately, it contributes to the integration of students among native and international students. Norwegian society is easy to survive, where everyone respects whatever job they do, says research participant Neelam (Female student, 44). According to her, it seems Norwegian people respect skills regardless of their origin and language, but to many extents, language is a barrier for students to enter many skilled jobs (see language section for more elaboration). Being an Indian and a new student in Norway, Mahesh received an opportunity to engage in the university system and outside the university:

I think people treat you irrespective of where you're from, just based on your skills and based on what you bring to the table, you know. I don't think they are giving opportunities to people just because they speak Norwegian to give an opportunity to people to know what they can do, so that's a good thing. (Mahesh, Male student, 23)

The statement by Mahesh is very inspirational for many international students; it keeps them positive for their exploration and social bonding with native and international students. However, through the participant's experience, it could say that Norwegian society is not out of discriminatory practices towards international students, but respect and recognition of them also prevail, which plays a positive role in their social integration. Additionally, most of the discrimination incidents were noted because of not knowing the existing pattern of the society.

### **4.3.4 A Key of Social Integration in Norway: Language**

Language plays a crucial role in the integration of international students. Participants of this study have mixed experiences regarding the need to learn the Norwegian language and its impact on their social integration. Knowing the Norwegian language helps to understand the local culture and information given in Norwegian (Tungesvik, 2019, p. 62). While English is the language nearly every student uses to manage their lives. Overwhelming Norwegians speak English, which makes international students unaware that learning Norwegian is essential. For example, Prabhas (Male, 25), an Indian student, said language does not become an issue for him, "most Norwegian and international students speak English." Like Prabhas, Bipin (Male student, 25) also does not have concerns about the language: As an international student, it is easy to survive without knowing the native language. "... I do not have language issues. ... so, I don't realize the necessity of language learning." While surviving in an unfamiliar environment as an international student, it could be assumed, a few concerns may arise about the Norwegian language, but many Norwegian people can communicate in English, so it is not difficult to survive without learning Norwegian. Meanwhile, it plays a significant role when we talk about making intimate Norwegian friends, holding jobs, and integrating with them.

#### **4.3.4.1 Demand of Norwegian Language for a Desirable Skilled Job**

It is common for research participants to use the English language everywhere, and while applying for both skilled and unskilled jobs, they often prefer to speak Norwegian. As a student, it is difficult to manage time to learn the language, Keki (Female student, 27) said, "Because of not knowing the language, we have limited work scope. We can work desktops and other jobs, but we don't have that much time to learn the language." Neelam has the same experience with the language requirement for the job market:

So, if you want a very good kind of office job or desk job, you are required to speak fluent Norwegian, without the language they don't offer you kind of prestigious jobs, for our jobs they don't require Norwegian language, but I remember when we tried in the beginning as an international student to get work in REMA or Kiwi or many these kind of department stores. They refused ...because they think like they say, you don't speak Norwegian. So, we need the people even in restaurants, the Norwegian restaurant they think if we speak Norwegian, we can be good waiters and we can be good, cashiers in the like grocery stores. (Neelam, Female student, 44)

In addition to earning money, working in a multicultural environment can be helpful for getting to know people and learning how to communicate with them. Students can manage their finances and learn different perspectives through their jobs, which helps to strengthen their social integration.

#### **4.3.4.2 Isolation and Discrimination Because of not Speaking the Language**

International students have the right to participate in any events and be involved in the decision-making process at the university system. This process also shows the degree of students' social integration at the university. Quite a few research participants in this study presented that they faced some challenges and were deprived of their rights because they did not speak the Norwegian language.

It could be beneficial to strengthen the social bonding between international and domestic students when they share a common language to strengthen their bonds. Whenever his co-students focus on playing games in his native language, Imran feels isolated.

Language is obviously like a very important part to integrate here and among youngsters just they do speak English, but they are not like that comfortable with English, so they like to speak in Norsk, ..., if you speak Norsk, and you can easily like hangout with them, or suddenly that happened like when you're sitting with Norwegians. So OK, when they're talking to you, so they were speaking English like you're in a group. And when they're talking to each other, then just switch to Norsk, and you're not understanding anything. ... Obviously, I feel not good like, you know, when someone is sitting, and he don't understand your language. There was an incident that like they are sitting six or seven people and they're Norwegian and there we are playing games. So, when they are like talking, talking to each other, so they're speaking Norsk, even they come to me, and then but I'm not know what going with them, you know, but they know about me. Because this gets understanding, but I cannot. So yeah, it's like, you start learning to feel like. Then you can go and leave like one or two times. Then you feel like OK, they I'm not good in language. It's not good. It's not worth going, you know. (Imran, Male student, 26)

In the case of Imran, it is visible how the language hindered integration with other students. It is obvious for native students to speak their language, but translating the conversation or using the commonly spoken language makes the outsider feel included. The sense of inclusion is the key to social integration of international students.



On several occasions, not knowing the Norwegian language prevented students from exploring and strengthening their capacity. Rekha, a student of sustainable development, decided to run for a position in student parliament, but she was discouraged by native students because she did not know the language:

They demotivated me because I cannot speak Norwegian. I tried most of the positions, but they don't allow me to run for that because they said they cannot provide the language translator. I am new and I came here for the English language-based course, how could they say this thing? If it was a Norwegian language-based program, I could learn the language back in my hometown. I guess it was my right as an international student. A few people who are in the union said providing a language translator is needed more cost. Maybe I don't ask the authorized people but with whom I consulted did not encourage me. I received this type of feedback, so I was demotivated. (Rekha, Female student, 26)

Rekha is not alone. Other research participants also have the same experiences. Imran, a student of Master, applied for a volunteer position in the Student Welfare Organization but was turned down due to a lack of Norwegian proficiency.

I applied in ... [Student Welfare Organization] in one position. This volunteer position and they didn't support me because I didn't speak Norsk. So, it's kind of a student Parliament thing. And this thing is to organize things and stuff. And like there's no applicant. So eventually they elected me because I am only the applicant but eventually the coordinator said it will be very hard for you. You should resign and I said no, I will try to like to do it. But I tried and they are not supporting me, you know. So, then I eventually I resigned from that position. (Imran, Male student, 26)

These are examples of South Asian students feeling excluded due to a lack of Norwegian language skills. Social integration also refers to participating in events or being a part of the common forum. As a student, they have the right to be a part of the student parliament and work as a volunteer. These incidents were happening in the beginning days of their entry into Norway. They need time to learn the language to compete with local students, or they could learn during the process. However, it hinders the social integration process of international students and questions the popular slogan “internationalization at home” education policy adopted by Norway.

In the same manner, Mahesh also shared his experience of how the inclusive event made him disappointed:

The event is basically announced that it's going to be inclusive. If it is inclusive, it should be in English. But everyone over there were Norwegians. I was the only guy who was brown in color and everything. The whole event took place in Norwegian, and I don't understand Norwegian that much because the whole event was in Norwegian. I can find some keywords, but I cannot listen to finding keywords throughout the day. So that could have been informed ... (Mahesh, Male student, 23)

These interview excerpts and illustrations inform that language is partially a hurdle for international students' engagement with domestic students and society besides their studies. Through these illustrations, it can be concluded that due to language limitations, international students are not integrating with Norwegian students properly. Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003) believe learning language and cultural knowledge are reciprocal to attain in new settings: “linguistic and cultural knowledge are constructed through each other” (p. 157). As long as, students are exposed to and engaged in the host country, they are more likely to learn the language and strengthen their social integration.

#### **4.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided details about influencing factors, hindering factors, and ways of navigating social integration for South Asian students in Norway (see below Figure 2). The overall findings show that there is a thin layer of social integration between Norwegian students and South Asian students; in a few instances, South Asian students are more inclined towards students from countries with similar social and economic conditions (for example, African countries). The majority of the research participants in this study traveled during COVID-19 lockdown, where they adapted to the situation. Likewise, South Asian students are from the teacher-dominated academic culture and, mostly, from the warm temperate zone, so they must adopt it in the beginning. Confining themselves in an apartment and attending digital education because of the COVID-19 lockdown is obstructing them from meeting other students physically and work. Whereas after the lockdown, to escape from the cold temperature, few of them voluntarily stayed in the residence, which restrained their social integration with Norwegian and international students.

Similarly, bonding between students, taking part in formal and informal social activities, and connecting formal and informal support networks are the major ways of navigating social integration among South Asian students. The social bonding process of students begins with the Orientation Program and Buddy Week. South Asian students' interpersonal skills also playing role for the expansion of their socialization with Norwegian and international students. A few students are proactive in making friends, but most of the South Asian students stick to their nationality. However, the support before arrival to Norway, at the time of settlement, finding a job, attending ceremonies, and sharing emotions keeping South Asian students with same nationality. Meanwhile, the shared kitchen is a place where South Asian students socialize with Norwegian and international students. In a very small number of cases, South Asian students ask students from the West for support and communication, so their social integration is limited.

Taking part in social activities among Norwegian and international students seems very difficult because of some hindering factors. Events organized by the student welfare organization are accessible, but a small number of South Asian students can participate. Most of the research participants are self-financed students; they often work weekends where they try to work up to their working limits and do volunteer work, (a few students learn Norwegian languages). Meanwhile, because of cultural and linguistic barriers, South Asian students are deprived of the opportunity to join formal and informal events; however, they try to spend time among the same nationalities. The formal support provided by the university staff, professors, and student welfare organizations keeps students positive toward them for social integration. Similarly, there are very few events organized by their department, which reduces the chances of socializing with these students. The support from the university staff, professors, and student welfare organizations is contributing to their social integration.

Further, this chapter explored some hindering factors for South Asian students' social integration among Norwegian and international students. Cultural distance, drinking alcohol, and nightlife are seen as hindering factors in integrating with western students. The majority of the students are from collectivist cultural backgrounds and are trying to understand the pattern of individualistic life patterns and unintentional discriminatory behavior. Likewise, despite having good counseling services, students feel a lack of cultural sensitivity among counselors and, as a result, become more religious. Likewise, most Norwegians speak English, so it is not difficult for students to survive without Norwegian language skills. But it is

challenging for them to find a job or any position (volunteer or paid work), make intimate Norwegian friends for research participants. However, their understanding of the circumstances and willingness to change themselves make many South Asian students positive about their social integration.

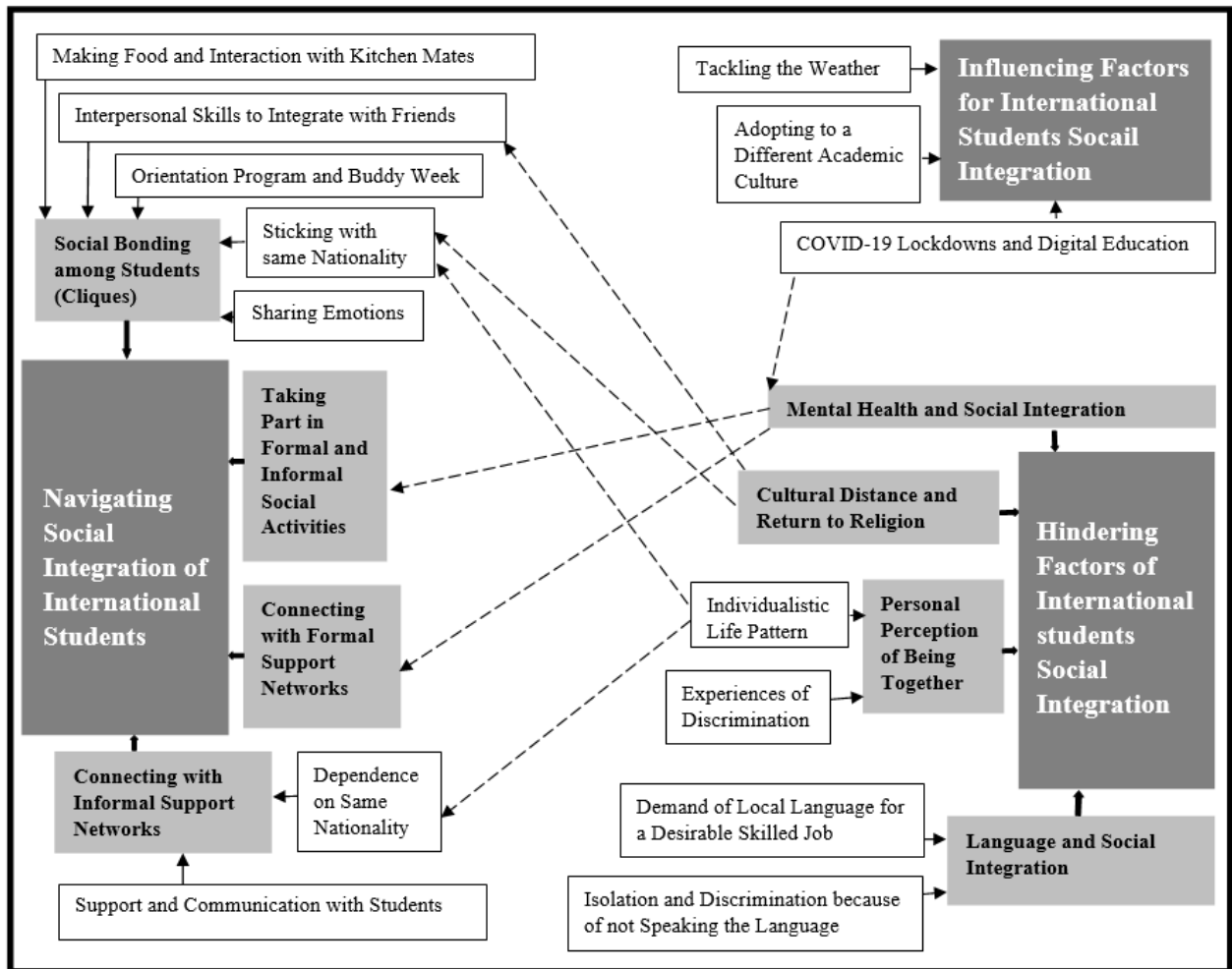


Figure 2: Summarizing the findings; Navigating social integration of international students at university/college.

On the whole, the above Figure 2 summarizes the findings and the connection to how students navigate their social integration at university. It shows the complexities in navigation and the connectedness of the different issues related to international students' social integration. Meanwhile, in the next chapter, I discuss the findings of this study in light of the social integration theory and existing literature.

## Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of 12 South Asian master's students' experiences of navigating social integration at four Norwegian universities (colleges). I discuss the research findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature to answer the research questions. In the first part of this chapter, I aim to provide an answer through discussion to the principal research question of this study. The second and third parts of this chapter discuss the secondary research questions and in the last part, I elaborate on the limitations of this study.

### 5.1 Navigating Social Integration

This section discusses the answer to the principal research question, *how do South Asian university students in Norway navigate their social integration?* It follows the four dimensions of the social integration theoretical framework: structural integration, cultural integration, interactive integration, and identificational integration, as suggested by Heckmann (2005), which was discussed in Chapter II (see Figure 1, Section 2.1).

#### 5.1.1 Structural Integration

Findings from this research show that students have different experiences of social integration when they are in contact with formal support networks, university staff, professors, and student welfare organizations. The quality of support for settlement and life without stress increases the possibilities of social integration not only with formal support systems, but also among students. Meanwhile, Heckmann (2005, p. 15) says that structural integration stands with the rights that provide access to positions and membership status in the major areas of the university environment. The degree of student access and the support from university staff, professors, and the provided facilities show the structural integration of students. Students' experiences show that the trend of support from formal networks at the beginning keeps students more inclined to be socially integrated. For example, providing pick-up services from the airport and practical guidance to settle in a new environment seems minor, but it is crucial for their beginning in a new place, which makes students positive towards university staff and professors.

A few instances of discrimination in terms of not having Norwegian language were notable among the research participants. It created a distraction and increased the feeling of negativity

toward formal networks. Meanwhile, as Bosswick and Heckmann (2006, p. 9) said, many students get access to the formal support system through the university and student welfare organizations.

The university (professors, staff) and student welfare organizations are the local guardians for international students, so their roles are paramount for their lives. A few South Asian students suffer from mental health issues because of inadequate formal and informal support, and for personal reasons, they approached counselors. A student, Khalida, is an example of someone who chose the path of religion and became more religious after failing several rounds of counseling to heal her issues. This study reported that counselors are less culturally sensitive while providing mental health counseling for students.

The mental health of students is crucial for their socially integrated university life. However, Norway is not the only country with international students having mental health issues; it is an emerging issue among international students globally. In the context of Australia, Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) reported that international tertiary-level students suffer more mental health issues. In this context, counselors need to "eliminate their own biases and prejudices," learn the cultural issues of international students, and not under or over-emphasize the cultural differences (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007, p. 192). It seems there is a need to review the existing support system, which could contribute to students' structural integration. Whereas, religious minority students also feel safe and secure in their religious practices, which creates an atmosphere to promote social integration.

In line with the finding of this study, Rienties et al. (2012, p. 867) write that sharing accommodation with other students, having friends, and communicating with university staff and professors positively influences international students' social integration.

### **5.1.2 Cultural Integration**

The findings of this study show that cultural integration is a profound dimension of navigating social integration for South Asian students at universities in Norway. Cultural integration is widely prevalent as an influencing and hindering factor. Bosswick and Heckmann (2006, p. 10) write that cultural integration is "cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal change," South Asian students shared their experiences of changing themselves according to the context. Having a diverse background, the research participants adjusted to stress and challenges in the

new settings (the impact of COVID-19 lockdown, cold weather, and a different academic culture), individualistic life patterns, cultural distance, experiences of discrimination, and language issues (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022, p. 193). Mostly, all South Asian students give their best effort to learn and change themselves to adapt to the new setting. It restored the idea that the integration process is gradual.

Cultural distances between international and domestic students play a pivotal role in students' social integration. This study offers a detailed description of South Asian students' experiences of cultural distance, alcohol consumption and eating patterns, individualistic lifestyles, friendships, and many western values that are different for South Asian students in Norway, which is very common in other nations too. For example, comparative research by Pan and Wong (2011) in Hong Kong and Australia among Chinese students shows they feel more comfortable adopting in Hong Kong and have difficulties in Australia because of the huge cultural distance. The situation in Europe is also similar for international students. Another study in the Netherlands also highlighted that Asian (Vietnam, Taiwan, and China) students also faced challenges adjusting to the social life at university (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). On another occasion Russell and colleague (2010) found that international students living in Australia experienced significant stress due to perceived discrimination, cultural shock, and homesickness.

South Asian students in Norway face their greatest challenge in transitioning from a collectivist life pattern to an individual one. During the process, students sometimes encountered discriminatory behavior, which was more temporary because they did not know the cultural pattern. For example, after a few months of observation, South Asian students understood that living at a distance on public transport is a cultural pattern of seeking and respecting privacy (discussed in the finding section in detail), which indicates that the perception of discrimination remains temporary. Meanwhile, understanding the gap between cultural distance and adoption in the new setting is gradually helping to integrate international students in Norway.

Research participants reported that English is common among the majority of Norwegians, and students can survive without learning Norwegian. All the research participants are studying English-taught programs; in a way, it is unnecessary for them to learn the Norwegian language. But when international students apply for jobs or vital positions (volunteer or paid work), it is not easy because they do not have Norwegian language skills. According to the findings of this

study, they are deprived in many ways, including discrimination, being unable to participate in activities with native students, and having difficulty making intimate Norwegian friends. Similar to the findings of this study, Akhtar and Kröner-Herwig (2015) reported that due to a lack of German language proficiency, international students faced acculturation stress. However, local language skills are considered a key aspect of integrating into a new community (Strang & Ager, 2010). Knowledge and communication skills in the local language are vital to understanding the local cultural attributes of the host country.

### **5.1.3 Interactive Integration**

Interactive integration is a visible aspect of social bonding to demonstrate the social integration of international students. It refers to the acceptance and inclusion of international students in the university or students group (Heckmann, 2005, p. 17) where students' involvement in activities, informal support networks, orientation programs, sharing emotions, and interpersonal skills to integrate with other students seen as important in this study. Students get more information and find potential friends through the Orientation Program and Buddy Week, which are the beginning of formal and informal bonding. The majority of the research participants in this study missed the introductory programs; they struggled to enter friends' circle. As a result, South Asian students relied on the informal social network of their nationality for their social activities and support.

Meanwhile, very few students were able to use their interpersonal skills to make Norwegian and international friends, and interestingly, cooking food in a shared kitchen became a common place to socialize among international students. Sharing emotions is mostly confined to people of the same nationality; it indicates weak social integration among students of other nationalities. Most of the respondents manage their finances themselves and are mostly busy at weekends with their paid work; on many occasions, this restrains them from socializing. In summary, the findings of this study are consistent with Hauge and Pedersen's (2018, p. 9) findings, which demonstrate that the integration between international and Norwegian students is weak.

Connecting with informal networks and participating in different formal and informal activities supports students in building relations with each other, which may assume the best way of social integration. Further, Emotional ties, friendships, and networks in primary groups with domestic students indicate the interactive integration among students (Kısar Koramaz,



2014, p. 15). As Heckmann (2005, p. 17) highlighted, communication is the core of cultural integration among students, which is a precondition of interactive integration. This research shows that there is less intercultural communication between international students and domestic students.

They provide formal and informal activities and support through student welfare organizations, universities, and informal groups that could enhance the creation of a positive environment for integration. Similarly, according to the research participants, Norwegian students like hiking, partying, and drinking alcohol. In many instances, it is difficult for South Asian students to manage their time (or personal choices), so they rarely join. Further, this study shows less interactive integration among South Asian and Norwegian students, where the inclusion and acceptance of South Asian students in the primary network and relationships are insignificant (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006, p. 10). But students' interpersonal skills in integrating with other students and involvement in formal and informal activities are noticeable factors.

#### **5.1.4 Identificational Integration**

Identificational integration refers to the feeling of belonging towards a particular ethnicity, group, regional, or national identification and their inclusion at the subjective level (Heckmann, 2005, p. 17). The identificational integration among the research participants begins with their application process, and it remained vivid when students arrived and started international students' lives in Norway.

The research findings explore how many South Asian students tried to connect with students from the same community or country before arriving in Norway. From the day they landed in Norway, many of the research participants were attached to them, which resulted in their passive social integration with Norwegian and other international students. Their support for information, pick-up from the airport, settlement in the apartment (helping to collect the key before arrival), including cultural, linguistic, job searching, and different festival celebrations, et cetera, keeps them very close to each other. To some extent, the bonds between students of the same nationality or community hinder intermixing with Norwegian and international students, which limits the sense of belonging within their circle.

The concept of identificational integration, highlighted by Heckmann (2005, p. 17), is helpful in understanding the result of this study: a sense of belongingness among students is more inclined toward the same community or national identity. The trend of belongingness among South Asian research participants is not unique and shows that they are more attached, at least in the first year of their studies with the same nationalities. It indicates that social integration with Norwegian and international students is a difficult process; it may take longer to cultivate the "we feeling."

Contrary to South Asian students' experiences of belongingness, Hendrickson et al. (2011) reported that if international students have friendships with more host national students, they experience greater satisfaction, less homesickness, and less loneliness. But the existing challenges of limited interaction with Norwegians (Wiers-Jenssen, 2020, p. X) and cultural distances hinder international students' social integration in Norway. Obviously, as Heckmann (2005) said, the sense of belonging may develop in the latter parts of the integration process, but in the two or two and a half years of regular full-time study, the integration is still challenging. However, students' objectives to stay in Norway could motivate them to learn the Norwegian language and integrate with society in the fastest possible time.

As I discussed in the previous section, South Asian students participate in very few activities together with Norwegian and international students; they are deprived of holding positions (volunteer or paid work) and are discriminated against because of language, culture, race, color, et cetera. In this context, it is tough to cultivate the feeling of belonging among them, which only develops through participation, acceptance, and inclusion in the university (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006). However, belonging is not a fixed entity; it is a perception that changes according to the context. To explain the feeling of connectedness, Strayhorn (2012, p. 3) writes, "the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus." Apart from that, it could change through participating in games, academic interests, socialization with each other, and other similar objectives that gradually attach people over a certain period for social integration among them.

As per the findings of this research, South Asian students mostly confined themselves to students from their country; similarly, Norwegian students relied on their existing friend's circle. For example, 20% of Norwegian students only participate in activities with international students (Hauge & Pedersen, 2018, p. 7), which limits the potential integration between Norwegian and international students. It could be an explanation for South Asian students

sticking together, which discussed in the literature in the beginning chapters. Integration is a two-way process where "the recipient society equally bears a responsibility" (Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003, p. 28). Norwegian students' proactiveness also contributes to the international students' social integration, which is not significant in this study.

In Russell and colleagues (2010) opinion, international and domestic students have to adapt together to learn and work. Meanwhile, a study by Spencer-Oatey and colleagues (2017) also highlighted that Chinese students in the UK feel emotionally and personally satisfied with students from a similar background, which remains a barrier to friendships with other students. Another UK-based report among 135 students shows students attached to their classmates demonstrated a higher level of adjustment into university life, whereas students with a lower level of attachment among classmates faced challenges adjusting to university life (Maunder, 2018). The research findings of this research also demonstrate the same situation in Norway. This is a gap between Norwegian and South Asian students, whereas this study identifies a few facts, such as cultural distance, support, language, and, to some extent, class and color issues, et cetera, from the perspective of South Asian students.

Thus, this section responded to the first research question about South Asian students' ways of navigating social integration with social, cultural, interactive, and indentificational integration. Now, the subsequent sections particularly answer the two secondary research questions of this study.

## **5.2 Factors Influencing Students' Abilities for Social Integration**

While considering the first secondary research questions, "*which factors influence South Asian students' ability to socially integrate into Norway?*" The study highlighted a few influencing and hindering factors that impacted students' ability to socially integrate (which also discussed in different dimensions of social integration in the previous section). It was difficult for a few research participants to cope with the cold climate, the new education system, and the COVID-19 lockdown, but gradually they adapted to the situation. The adoption process is obvious when a person transfers to a new environment, which is very transitional. Prior knowledge and exploration of the climate and academic culture may facilitate faster adaptation in a new place for students. In this study also, a few students adopted very quickly, and many of them waited for a better situation, which impacted their social integration.

Similarly, a few dominant factors—mental health, cultural distance, religion, personal perception, and language—hindered their ability to socially integrate in Norway. At the same time, this study reveals that South Asian students are ready to change themselves in the new environment, which is very important to prepare the background for integration. For example, at the beginning, South Asian students felt discriminated against, but when they realized that the cultural pattern of people wanting individualistic lives and, importantly, that behavior is very common among domestic nationalities.

In contrast, in the case of asking for support, Norwegian students were open to them. It could be the impact of individualistic life patterns; domestic students may feel international students also believe in individualistic life patterns. Likewise, this study reported that there were no incidents of intentional boycotting by domestic students against international students. According to the research participants, Norwegian students' welcome international students for hiking, partying, and going to clubs where they spend time for recreation. These situations encourage international students to join domestic students' groups. But the existing cultural distance, to some extent, language barriers, and financial factors push them back. Moreover, most of these aspects relate to the willpower of both international and domestic students, whereas the informal support system and the activities among them are very powerful for their social integration.

### **5.3 Non-South Asian Peers' Role in Social Integration**

Likewise, the last secondary research question: *what role do non-South Asian peers play in the social integration of South Asian students in Norway?* was under consideration when starting this research. After analyzing the students' experiences, the role of non-South Asian peers in the social integration of South Asian students is not significant; however, students from the same economic and social contexts, such as African countries, are closer to South Asian students.

According to the experiences of the South Asian students, many Norwegian students are more into their existing friends and family circles, which is obvious for them. Students' socialization with their nationality, cultural backgrounds, geographical closeness is obvious (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 11). This characteristic is visible among all Norwegian and international students. Both the South Asian students and students from the same social and economic region are new in Norway, and they have to manage their finances, search for jobs, and mostly work

on weekends, which keeps them closer, but it does not mean Norwegian and students from developed western countries do not work. This study reported that most of the students from the developed western countries received education loans and can survive with a little extra work. Therefore, it could say that influencing and hindering factors often play a role as barriers to South Asian students' social integration among Norwegian and international students.

Interestingly, when asking for help, all the Norwegian and Western students show their generosity regardless of their region, color, or background. The individualist life pattern, strong public support system, and existing network keep the domestic students in their own circle, where South Asian students' entry is challenging but not impossible.

## **5.4 Limitations of this Study**

Further, I explored the potential limitations of the study in detail. First, a limited (12) number of South Asian master's students were chosen for interviews. Therefore, the findings may not be assumed uniformly or exactly across all universities and international students in Norway. Meanwhile, for the master's thesis, 12 students' interviews are considerably enough, but the proportion of South Asian students, their field of study, their nature or culture, available activities, interpersonal skills, and many other factors influence the context of students' social integration. The perception of Norwegian and international students is based on South Asian students' experiences; they have not been involved in the research. Second, the study covered four universities and colleges in Norway, Bergen (mostly), Kristiansand, and Stavanger, which could not generalize to the context of the whole of Norway. Likewise, students' experiences in different locations, sizes, and services provided may impact students' social integration.

Third, as a self-financed student, I wanted to complete my studies quickly, economically, and within the given time by the university, which restricted me from further deepening the issue. Fourth, Norway produces many documents in Norwegian, and in many instances, it is hard to find the officially translated version in English, which limits my access to resources. Fifth, this study relied on the participants' narration as the primary source of information. I could administer additional research tools, such as focus group discussions, questionnaires, and surveys, which could avoid the potential personal discomfort of any participants in interviews and explore new dimensions of social integration. Sixth, speaking in English could be an issue for their expression because English is the second language for all research participants. For

example, the interview transcription process took a long time and energy to understand the dialects. Meanwhile, the English language pronunciation is different according to geography.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

In this chapter, I explain the overall review of the thesis concerning my research questions and findings. Analyzing the international student's social way of life at university (Rienties et al., 2012, p. 686) is not an easy phenomenon that relates to different aspects that this research explores. South Asian students' social integration processes in Norwegian universities are the primary concern of this study. This qualitative study included 12 South Asian students' interviews by adopting a phenomenological orientation to narrate their experiences with the social integration theoretical framework, as suggested by Heckmann (2005). It comprises four dimensions (structural, social, interactive, and identificational integration) of social integration of international students. Regarding the aim and the research questions, the below section highlights the research findings, the contributions of this study, and further research.

The present research aimed to examine a) To explore the experiences of South Asian students attending universities in Norway. b) To identify the factors which influence the social integration process of South Asian students in Norway. And c) To assess the degree to which non-South Asian peers play a role in the integration process of South Asian students in Norway. And this study successfully achieved these aims by answering the three research questions through the lens of social integration theory, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Still, my positionality, being an insider in the South Asian students' group on the one hand and, on the other hand, my position in the student parliament at NLA University College, could count as inclined towards institutional leaders, and also being a male researcher interviewing female students from male-dominated societies (Bangladesh and Pakistan) could have impacted this study.

Through the students' university life experiences of social integration, this research highlighted the influencing factors, COVID-19 lockdown, different academic culture, and whether that directly or indirectly impacted students' social integration. These influencing factors are very temporary. Likewise, international students' ways of social integration at universities in Norway include social bonding, formal and informal social support, and activities, which create an environment for social integration among students. Importantly, mental health, cultural distance/religion, personal perception, and language issues were found as hindering factors of South Asian students' social integration; international students need to work harder to overcome these factors.

Meanwhile, to chase the global mobility of abroad studies (Healey, 2008) South Asian students also chose Norway as their academic destination for their master's and Ph.D. studies. But international students' social integration aspects are given less priority among scholars, with an assumption of less problematic groups and their temporary stay (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Concurrently, the group of international students perceived as talented graduates with high potential to stay and contribute to the particular nation (Tremblay, 2005). This background encourages us to focus on international students' social integration among domestic and international students, professors, university staff, and even the local community.

This study began with the understanding that social integration between international and Norwegian students is weak (Hauge & Pedersen, 2018, p. 9), however, the findings of this research highlighted the fragile process of making a university a community to learn and serve each other among domestic and international students, professors, and university staff because of various factors, which minutely elaborated in the finding and analysis chapter of this study. This study shows South Asian students are more dependent on their nationality, whereas Norwegian students confine themselves to their existing friends and family circle. It demonstrated a limited communication existing among them. Their belonging to their close groups and their interpersonal ability remained the challenges of identificational integration. The formal and informal activities and support system, facilities by the university, and student welfare organizations would be supportive of the interactive integration of all students.

This study also iterated that South Asian students are more confined to small groups because of cultural distance, language, and individualistic lifestyles. Interestingly, this study reported that making food in the shared kitchen and asking for minor support also positively contributes to students' integration, although the frequency was limited. Similarly, despite the existing facilities and support, students faced mental health issues and, to some extent, became more religious. However, these connections urge us to explore different points of view on social integration at the university.

Likewise, with the consideration of language, weather issues, a high cost of living, and a few high-ranked academic institutions (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019, p. 284), international students are choosing Norway for their higher studies and potentially working and living in Norway. But, as this study reported, the poor scenario of social integration among domestic and international students raises questions about the aim of making education internationalized in Norway. Meanwhile, the findings show South Asian students are more or less culturally integrated; in a



way, they are trying to adapt by changing their behavior and perception according to the context, for example, by adopting a new academic culture, weather, COVID-19 lockdown, and individualistic life patterns.

Similarly, having a low crime rate, a low unemployment rate, English-taught programs, a high-ranked human development index (HDI), an economic welfare state (free education for all international students till 2022 at the tertiary level), investment in education, and peace (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019), international students chose Norway as a globally accepted academic venue. Meanwhile, this study shows mental health, personal perception from the collectivist life pattern to the individualistic life pattern, return to religion, cultural distance, and language issues are seen as hindering factors in international students' structural and interactive integration. For instance, when it comes to searching for jobs, participating in activities, making intimate friends, or discrimination because of not having language skills. International students could rethink their future destination for education and job. And those students who intended to live in Norway after graduation could focus on Norwegian language proficiency and sustain themselves in the academic environment to maintain the English language. At the same time, their quality of integration could also help determine their future stay in the host country.

## **6.1 Contribution of this Study**

This tiny study is an attempt to explore the relevant issues and existing practices concerning South Asian students' social integration at Norwegian universities. This study offers a couple of implications for the university college, student welfare organizations in Norway, and South Asian students.

### **Norwegian University College / Student Welfare Organization**

Social integration of students helps to make the universities a community; this study iterates on the lack of intercultural communication between Norwegian students, South Asian students, and international students. This finding urges us to rethink hindering factors such as cultural distance, language, mental health, discrimination, and a formal support system for all students. It is relevant to create an environment where domestic and international students understand the diversity, tolerance, and importance of intercultural communication in their university lives, which could contribute to minimizing the effects of hindering factors and respecting each other. Based on the findings, universities need to focus on creating a platform to make friends and

support them at the beginning of their lives in Norway, and inclusive activities promote social integration. Similarly, this study indicated the influencing factors, climate, and academic culture students gradually adopt over time. Along with these factors, formal and informal social activities and support—interestingly, cooking food and socializing in a common kitchen, asking for help, religious tolerance, and so on—reported significant positive factors for social integration in this study. The establishment of proper communication and support among all students, professors, university staff, and student welfare organizations gradually minimizes language issues, mental health issues, and discrimination issues. Likewise, universities focus on creating a platform to make friends and support them at the beginning of their lives in Norway, and inclusive activities promote social integration.

Mental health counselors should understand cultural sensitivity while dealing with students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Likewise, as this study shows, South Asian students often manage their finances themselves and work weekends mostly in unskilled jobs. Likewise, a few students choose completely different courses not relevant to their academic backgrounds. Similarly, the majority of the students from South Asia are mature and culturally diverse; in addition, learning languages, academic performance, and finding relevant jobs always create pressure on them. In this situation, mental health is potentially always alarming.

Additionally, I have presented the findings in Figure 2 (see Section 4.4); the visual representation illustrates the complexities as well as the interconnectedness of factors while international students navigating social integration at university. This Figure 2 could be a future resource for understanding the social integration of international students.

### **South Asia Students**

Before departure or upon arrival in Norway, South Asian students need to be ready to adjust to influencing factors of social integration such as the cold climate and academic culture. Mental and physical preparation helps them adjust very easily. For example, understand and prepare as the Norwegian proverb says: "There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing." Likewise, learning to navigate through smart phones seems very minor but helps adapting quickly.

In the same manner, there are various hindering factors of social integration such as mental health, cultural distance, individualistic life patterns, and language issues. A prior

understanding of individualist life patterns, language, food habits, openness to accept people from diverse regions, and so on helps students to be socially integrated. Similarly, participating in the events, asking for help, and proactiveness to socialize with international and domestic students could assist in integrating into the new place. Importantly, the social integration process is a gradual process where all international students need continuous efforts. Besides learning from this study, I would like to explore further research aspects which this study is unable to deal with.

## **6.2 Future Research**

The findings of this research informed us that the situation of South Asian and other international students at many universities in Norway and beyond is similar. This research has thrown up many questions that need further investigation concerning international students. It is obvious for Norwegian students to restrain themselves in their existing friends' circle and spend time with them for recreation and support. As per the secondary research question, "What role do non-South Asian peers play in the social integration of South Asian students in Norway?" of this study shows there is no significant role for non-South Asian peers in their social integration. But students from the same economic and social contexts, such as African countries, are closer to South Asian students. In the same manner, South Asian students limit themselves to their nationality for various reasons (as per this study cultural distance, language, individualistic lifestyle and so on). Thus, a further study should examine the intercultural communication among Norwegian and South Asian students emphasizing Norwegian students' opinions concerning social integration, which could serve the internationalization of education at home.

Second, this study did not touch enough on the digitalized education pattern and students' engagement in their social integration. After the COVID-19 lockdown, digitalization in education increased, and now many academic programs use a hybrid model of the classroom (physical and/or digital class). In this situation, the student's social integration is crucial and poses this question, what are the motivational factors and interpersonal skills in the digitalized world that brings all domestic and international students together to make a community at the university?

Third, as per the aims and the limitations of this research (financial, time management), this study focuses on extracting students' experiences of social integration at university. But it

could be interesting to understand the impact of social integration on their post-university lives. Study shows (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015) students get long-term friends, networks, and many more for their future careers and lives from the university. These facts highlight the importance of social integration for international students during university life. With this in mind, building a common forum to illustrate students' experiences of social integration and its impacts on their post-university lives in different contexts and institutions.

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# Appendix 1: Interview Guide

## Personal/Demographic Information

Pseudonym Name:

Age:

Enrolled academic program and University/College:

Arrived in Norway:

Relationship Status:

Employment:

*Interview Time and Venue:*

<b>South Asian students in Norway</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
Tell me about why you decided to come here to Norway to study? (Probing: Did you have any challenges with moving here for your studies? Also, decision making process, financial, leaving family, getting visa, et cetera.)	To know background
How would you describe your experience as an international student here in Bergen/Kristiansand/Stavanger?	
<p>Probing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation program/week</li> <li>• Making friends /Relations –sharing (Friends circle/professors/college administration)/Support</li> <li>• Participation: Cultural aspects (recreation/clubs/hiking/)/Extra activities</li> <li>• Finance/Language/Role of Student Welfare Organization</li> <li>• Influenced or affected situation/context.</li> <li>• Challenges/benefits/Interesting factors</li> </ul>	Lived experience
Imagine that I am a –South Asian- person who is considering going to study in Norway. What kind of advice would you give me? What sorts of thing would you tell me about what I can expect as a South Asian student in Norway?	Further advice
Observation/impression note:	Overall impression

# Appendix 2: Ethical Clearance from the NSD



[Notification form](#) / [Navigating social integration into Norwegian higher education institut...](#) / [Export](#)

## Notification Form

### Reference number

767691

### Which personal data will be processed?

- Name (also with signature/written consent)
- Date of birth
- Address or telephone number
- Email address, IP address or other online identifier
- Sound recordings of people
- Other data that can identify a person
- Racial or ethnic origin
- Religious beliefs

### Describe which other data that can identify individual persons you will be processing

Name and address of University/College and enrolled programs details

### Project information

#### Project title

Navigating social integration into Norwegian higher education institutions: Lived experiences of Nepalese students

#### Project description

This research project wants to explore the experiences of Nepalese students to evaluate and analyze their social integration into Norwegian higher education institutions. The descriptive research design will base on primary data through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation among Nepalese students in Norway and publicly available secondary data.

#### If the collected personal data will be used for other purposes, please describe

To publish article after completion of the thesis.

#### Explain why it is necessary to process personal data in the project

To analyze the information based on their personal information in order to answer the research questions. I am interested in their personal lived experiences.

#### Project description

[Project Discription\\_NSD.docx](#)

#### External funding

Ikke utfyllt

#### Type of project

Student project, Master's thesis

#### Contact information, student

Madhu Bilas Neupane, neupanem13@yahoo.com, tlf: +4746552366

### Data controller

#### Data controller (institution responsible for the project)

NLA Høgskolen AS

#### Project leader (academic employee/supervisor or PhD candidate)

Hilde Danielsen , Hilde.danielsen@nla.no, tlf: 55540776

**Will the responsibility of the data controller be shared with other institutions (joint data controllers)?**

No

## Sample 1

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### Describe the sample

Male and Female Nepalese students

### Describe how you will recruit or select the sample

I will recruit informants through my own networks and through contact with Nepalese organizations (Student/other)/International students organizations in Norway.

### Age

20 - 50

### Personal data relating to sample 1

- Name (also with signature/written consent)
- Date of birth
- Address or telephone number
- Email address, IP address or other online identifier
- Sound recordings of people
- Other data that can identify a person
- Racial or ethnic origin
- Religious beliefs

## How will you collect data relating to sample 1?

### Personal interview

#### Attachment

[Interview Guide.docx](#)

#### Legal basis for processing general categories of personal data

Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a)

#### Legal basis for processing special categories of personal data

Explicit consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 9 nr. 2 a)

#### Explain your choice of legal basis

### Participant observation

#### Legal basis for processing general categories of personal data

Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a)

#### Legal basis for processing special categories of personal data

Explicit consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 9 nr. 2 a)

#### Explain your choice of legal basis

## Information for sample 1

### Will you inform the sample about the processing of their personal data?

Yes

### How?

Written information (on paper or electronically)

### Information letter



## Third Persons

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**Will you be processing data relating to third persons?**

No

## Documentation

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**How will consent be documented?**

- Manually (on paper)

**How can consent be withdrawn?**

Consent can be withdrawn by contacting me/supervisor/NLA University College either directly through phone or email.

**How can data subjects get access to their personal data or have their personal data corrected or deleted?**

By contacting me/supervisor/NLA University College either directly through phone or email.

**Total number of data subjects in the project**

1-99

## Approvals

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**Will you obtain any of the following approvals or permits for the project?**

Ikke utfyllt

## Processing

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**Where will the personal data be processed?**

- Computer belonging to the data controller
- Mobile device belonging to the data controller

**Who will be processing/have access to the collected personal data?**

- Project leader
- Student (student project)

**Will the collected personal data be transferred/made available to a third country or international organisation outside the EU/EEA?**

No

## Information Security

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**Will directly identifiable data be stored separately from the rest of the collected data (e.g. in a scrambling key)?**

Yes

**Which technical and practical measures will be used to secure the personal data?**

- Personal data will be anonymised as soon as no longer needed
- Restricted access

## Duration of processing

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**Project period**

01.07.2022 - 31.07.2024

**What happens to the data at the end of the project?**

Personal data will be stored temporarily until: 31.07.2024

**What is the purpose of further storage?**

Journal Article

**Where will the collected personal data be stored?**

Internal to the data controller

**Will the data subjects be identifiable (directly or indirectly) in the thesis/publications from the project?**

No

**Additional information**

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# Appendix 3: Information Letter

## INFORMATION LETTER

### **Are you interested in taking part in the research project “Navigating social integration into Norwegian higher education institutions: Lived experiences of Nepalese students”?**

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to explore the experiences of Nepalese students to evaluate and analyze their social integration into Norwegian higher education institutions. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

#### **Purpose of the project**

This Master's thesis research project wants to explore the experiences of Nepalese students to evaluate and analyze their social integration into Norwegian higher education institutions. I am interested in finding out how Nepalese students in Norway navigate their social integration and understand more of the factors that influence Nepalese students' ability to socially integrate into Norway, such as the possible role of both Nepalese and non-Nepalese peers in this process.

This is a master-project in Intercultural studies at NLA University College and the collected data will be used in an anonymized form only for the master's thesis and possibly one research article.

#### **Who is responsible for the research project?**

Department of Intercultural Studies at the NLA University College, Bergen, Norway is the institution responsible for the project.

#### **Why are you being asked to participate?**

You are asked to participate as a Nepalese student in Norwegian higher education who has done at least half a year of university or college study in Norway. I have used Nepalese and international students' organizations in Norway to find possible participants to my research, in addition to personal acquaintances and networks. Similarly, Norwegian and international students and university/student representatives will include in the conversation. I will try to maintain the gender balance, and ask students at different universities/colleges from different geographical areas and academic disciplines.

#### **What does participation involve for you?**

Upon agreeing to participate in this research project, you will be asked a semi-structured questionnaire about your experiences of social integration in the university/college. It will take around one hour. Notes as well as a recorder will be used during the interview to record data. The data will be kept confidential and securely stored during the period of study, and deleted at the end of the study.

#### **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in the research project is voluntary. You can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be deleted. There will be no negative consequences for you choosing not to participate or deciding to withdraw your data.

#### **Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data**

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation. Only people who have access to the information would be the person in charge of the project together with the supervisor.

For this master study and for the interview I will replace your name with a code so that data will be anonymous. The list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data.

### **What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?**

The project is schedule to end on 31 July 2024. All the data will be destroyed after analysis for the study.

### **Your rights**

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

### **What gives us the right to process your personal data?**

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with NLA University College, Bergen, Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

### **Where can I find out more?**

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- NLA University College, Bergen via Associate Professor Inga Støren, PhD on [Inga.Storen@nla.no](mailto:Inga.Storen@nla.no) with any questions about the rights of research participants or research related concerns. Similarly, contact me Madhu Bilas Neupane at [neupanem13@yahoo.com](mailto:neupanem13@yahoo.com) or, Mobile +4744552366.
- Our Data Protection Officer: Inger-Johanne Gamlem Njau, [Inger-Johanne.Njau@nla.no](mailto:Inger-Johanne.Njau@nla.no), or Telephone: 55 54 07 49
- Data Protection Services, by email: ([personverntjenester@sikt.no](mailto:personverntjenester@sikt.no)) or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,

Inga Støren, PhD  
Project Leader  
(Researcher/supervisor)

Madhu Bilas Neupane  
Research Student

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## **Consent form**

I have received and understood information about the project “Navigating social integration into Norwegian higher education institutions: Lived experiences of Nepalese students” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in *an interview*
- to participate in *an online survey interview*

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. *[July 2024]*

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(Signed by participant, date)