



Working to Learn, Learning to Work: a narrative inquiry into the well-being of an international phd student in Taiwan

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Abstract

International doctoral students often face complex challenges related to academic responsibilities, financial pressures, and adapting to new cultures, especially those from developing countries seeking upward mobility and long-term stability. This study explores the experiences of an Indonesian PhD student in Taiwan who, while enrolled in two simultaneous doctoral programs, also works as an English teacher and research assistant. The goal is to understand how international doctoral students shape their well-being and academic identity while managing multiple roles. Using narrative inquiry as the chosen method, this research analyzes autobiographical reflections. It uses thematic narrative analysis to examine how the participant interprets and finds meaning in his experiences across academic, professional, and emotional areas. The results show that employment serves both as an economic strategy and a professional growth opportunity, strengthening the participant's academic identity. Despite the challenges of a heavy academic workload and adjusting to a new culture, the participant finds support mainly from his spouse and his personal ambitions. His well-being is seen not as a static state but as a dynamic process influenced by resilience, meaning-making, and long-term goals. The study concludes that the well-being of international doctoral students is actively shaped through the negotiation of their identities, responsibilities, and opportunities during a transnational academic journey.

Introduction

International doctoral education has become a significant feature of global academic mobility, offering students from diverse backgrounds opportunities to pursue advanced studies abroad. Nevertheless, international students' experiences differ considerably. Many must navigate rigorous academic expectations while concurrently managing financial, social, and personal responsibilities within unfamiliar cultural environments (Tran & Gomes, 2017; Marginson, 2014). These challenges are often intensified for students from developing countries, who, alongside their academic pursuits, also bear the additional pressure to improve their families' economic circumstances through overseas study.

This study explores the lived experiences of an Indonesian PhD student in Hualien, Taiwan, who initially came to Taiwan with the intention of focusing entirely on academic development. However, financial realities and opportunities led him to take up work as an English teacher and a research

assistant while continuing his doctoral studies. His case reflects a growing trend among international students who engage in paid work to support their education and long-term goals, particularly those seeking to return to their home countries with financial stability or improved living conditions.

The concept of well-being is central to this inquiry. Defined as a dynamic balance between resources and challenges (Dodge et al., 2012), well-being is neither static nor universal. For international doctoral students, it is shaped by the interaction of academic demands, employment responsibilities, financial pressures, family expectations, and cultural adaptation (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003). These overlapping factors require actively negotiating wellbeing instead of passively maintaining it.

Although existing research has explored international students' academic adaptation and mental health (Rosenthal et al., 2007), fewer studies have examined how students narrate and construct their own understandings of wellbeing within competing demands. This study employs narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to investigate how one student experiences and reflects upon his well-being through his dual roles as both learner and worker. Narrative inquiry is especially effective at revealing the complexities of identity, resilience, and self-perception over time, particularly when the personal and academic realities are closely interconnected.

Furthermore, the framework of aspirational migration (Carling & Schewel, 2018) is essential in understanding the long-term objectives that influence the subject's daily decisions. For many individuals, pursuing a PhD is not just about academic success but also about achieving economic stability and emotional well-being, driven by the desire to provide a better future for themselves and their families. While these ambitions may serve as motivating factors, they concurrently have additional burdens and substantially influence students' experiences. This paper aims to analyze how well-being is experienced and narrated in a single case, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the multifaceted challenges encountered by international doctoral students who must concurrently survive, study, and pursue their life goals.

Literature reviews

Well-being and international doctoral students

The concept of well-being has undergone substantial development in educational research, especially in relation to international students. Dodge et al. (2012) define well-being as a dynamic balance between an individual's available resources and the challenges encountered. For international doctoral students, maintaining this stability requires ongoing negotiation due to academic pressures, cultural adaptation, financial insecurity, and social isolation (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011). Many international students must leave established support networks, adapt to unfamiliar academic environments, and meet elevated performance expectations, all of which influence their psychological, emotional, and physical well-being (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Rosenthal et al. (2007) report that international students, especially those from non-Western backgrounds, frequently experience stress arising from demanding academic workloads, financial instability, and language barriers. These difficulties are intensified by the expectation to succeed for both personal advancement and the benefit of their families and communities. The independent nature of doctoral education, which prioritizes self-regulation and research autonomy, further magnifies these challenges. According to McAlpine and Amundsen (2011), doctoral study is inherently isolating, and for international students, this isolation is often aggravated by cultural differences and insufficient institutional support.

Additionally, well-being is closely linked to future goals. Tran and Gomes (2010) describe the phenomenon of "living in transition," in which international students navigate an ongoing balance between current challenges and future opportunities. Many students undertake doctoral studies with the intention of achieving enhanced socio-economic status, which imbues their academic journey with significant emotional and moral significance. In this context, well-being is not solely a psychological condition but also a survival strategy and a long-term personal investment.

Academic identity and student employment

Academic identity refers to how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others within the academic community. For doctoral students, identity formation involves navigating roles as learners, researchers, and emerging professionals (McAlpine & Lucas, 2011). International doctoral students often

enter academic programs with the intention of immersing themselves fully in scholarly work. However, economic necessity and opportunity frequently force them into employment during their studies, adding another layer to their identity.

Employment during doctoral studies, particularly among international students, is a growing trend influenced by financial pressures and limited funding (Wang et al., 2020). While some students engage in academic-related employment such as research or teaching assistantships, others work in non-academic roles to meet financial needs. The dual role of student and worker can create tension, as employment may interfere with academic productivity, time management, and overall well-being (Anderson, 2006).

However, employment is not solely a burden. For students with specific skills, such as English proficiency, teaching positions can offer both economic relief and professional development. Yet, this dual engagement also complicates their academic identity, as time and energy are divided. According to O'Connor (2007), juggling multiple roles can lead to identity conflict, especially when institutional expectations emphasize singular academic commitment. For many international students, maintaining academic performance while fulfilling work obligations requires constant negotiation and emotional labor.

Narrative inquiry in educational research

Narrative inquiry, as articulated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is a methodology that explores individuals' lived experiences through storytelling. It recognizes that people make sense of their lives through narratives that reflect the temporal, personal, and social dimensions of their lives. In educational research, narrative inquiry has gained prominence as a way to understand the complex realities of learners and educators, particularly in contexts where traditional quantitative methods may not capture the depth of human experience.

In the context of international education, narrative inquiry enables researchers to center the voices of students whose experiences are shaped by mobility, displacement, and cultural negotiation (Barkhuizen, 2011). By focusing on individuals' stories, narrative inquiry uncovers how learners construct meaning, cope with challenges, and transform during their academic journeys. It provides a way to examine not only what students do but how they feel, interpret, and reflect on their experiences over time.

Xu and Connelly (2009) argue that narrative inquiry is particularly valuable for examining identity, as it allows individuals to explore how they position themselves in relation to institutional structures and social expectations. Through narratives, researchers can explore the relationship between personal agency and external constraints. In this study, narrative inquiry is used to trace the experiences of an international doctoral student who is both the researcher and the participant, offering a deeply reflexive account of well-being, identity, and aspiration throughout the doctoral journey.

This literature review establishes a foundation for understanding the interconnected themes of well-being, academic identity, and narrative methodology. These themes frame the narrative inquiry that follows, offering both conceptual grounding and justification for focusing on the lived experience of one student navigating multiple roles in a transnational academic context.

Method

This study employed narrative inquiry as its primary research methodology. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that focuses on the ways individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By centering the participant's experiences as a doctoral student, teacher, and migrant, the study aimed to explore how the construction of personal and professional identity correlates with well-being in a transnational academic context. Narrative inquiry is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for the examination of the complexities of identity, agency, and resilience within real-life contexts (Riessman, 2008). Through the participants' personal stories, the study sought to understand how meaning is constructed across time and social space, acknowledging the interconnectedness of cultural, institutional, and relational dimensions. Given that the participant is also the author, this research takes the form of an autobiographical self-narrative. Such approaches are supported in qualitative research, particularly when the researcher-participant dynamic offers intimate access to emotional, psychological, and contextual details (Ellis, 2004).

Participant's profile

The participant in this study is a 32-year-old Indonesian doctoral student who has lived in Taiwan for five years. He initially came to Taiwan for graduate studies (master's degree-seeking) and later advanced to a doctoral program, where he currently pursues a major in the Ph.D. Program in Asia Pacific Regional Studies and a minor in the Education and Human Potential Development department. His academic journey is supported by a scholarship that provides around 20,000 NTD per month, excluding the research incentive from the advisor, allowing him to sustain a stable yet modest lifestyle while pursuing his academic and professional goals. Additionally, he sees this as a great opportunity to earn his Ph.D. degree with stable financial situation.

The participant's educational background is rooted in English education. Prior to his PhD studies, he worked as an English teacher in Indonesia, which equipped him with the pedagogical skills and language proficiency that opened up teaching opportunities in Taiwan. His strong command of English gave him an advantage over other international students seeking labor work. In Taiwan, he teaches English part-time at both schools and cram schools while also working as a research assistant for his advisor and another professor in the Graduate Institute of Multicultural Education. So, he is a research assistant under two professors.

Although his Mandarin proficiency is limited, the participant has actively engaged with Taiwanese culture through daily interactions, his workplace, and the academic community. This cultural immersion, despite language barriers, has contributed to his social adaptation and sense of belonging. His primary motivation for pursuing a PhD abroad includes the desire for better education, enhanced career prospects, and long-term financial security.

The context of Hualien, a smaller city in eastern Taiwan, plays a meaningful role in shaping the participant's experiences. While the city offers fewer resources than Taiwan's metropolitan areas, it has provided the participant with a quieter academic environment and unique professional opportunities. His identity as both a doctoral student and an English teacher places him in a distinct position to reflect on the intersection of academic, professional, and cultural adaptation.

Data collection

Data for this narrative inquiry were drawn from autobiographical reflections, journal entries, personal correspondence, and memory-based reconstructions of critical incidents during the participant's doctoral journey. As Clandinin and Huber (2010) emphasized, narrative data can be gathered through multiple channels and do not rely solely on interview transcripts. In this study, the participant-as-researcher constructed a chronological and thematic account that reflected lived experiences, contextual shifts, and evolving identity positions.

The self-narrative was iteratively reviewed and shaped through a reflective writing process. Key events, transitions, and challenges were recorded and analyzed for their emotional, cognitive, and social significance. The participant engaged in prolonged reflection, member-checking with trusted peers, and peer debriefing with academic mentors to enhance credibility.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, which focuses on identifying recurring patterns, contradictions, and evolutions within the participant's story. This interpretive process aligns with the holistic-content perspective proposed by Lieblich et al. (1998), in which the whole story is preserved while key themes are drawn out and interpreted. Themes were derived inductively through repeated reading and coding of the narratives. These themes were then connected to the broader constructs of academic identity, economic aspiration, and well-being.

Special attention was given to the shifting nature of the participant's academic identity, the interplay between external pressures and internal motivations, and the construction of meaning around the idea of "being well" amidst multiple demands. The narrative form was preserved during analysis to maintain the integrity of the storytelling process, allowing the participant's voice to remain central to the interpretation. This methodology provides a holistic, context-sensitive understanding of one student's academic and personal trajectory (Tisdell et al., 2025), illustrating how well-being is actively constructed through resilience, aspiration, and identity work in a transnational doctoral journey.

Results or findings

The findings of this narrative inquiry reveal a multidimensional portrait of a doctoral student who

simultaneously occupies the roles of researcher, teacher, spouse, and aspirational migrant. The participant's experience sheds light on the complexities of striving for academic excellence while managing financial, emotional, and social responsibilities in a foreign country. This section presents the emergent themes: (1) professional development through dual engagement in teaching and research, (2) economic motivation and personal aspiration, and (3) emotional labor in balancing academic and familial roles.

Professional development through dual engagement

The opportunity to work while studying was seen as a pivotal moment in the participant's academic journey. Initially arriving in Taiwan solely to pursue a master's degree, the participant later received an offer to advance to the doctoral degree while teaching English and working as a research assistant. Rather than viewing these roles as distractions, the participant embraced them as avenues for growth. Teaching not only allowed him to apply his academic knowledge but also improved his communication, classroom management, and pedagogical strategies.

The role of a research assistant further deepened his understanding of academic processes, including publication, data analysis, and academic collaboration. Participating in research projects under the university language center and English development center, contributing to papers, and engaging in scholarly dialogue expanded his research literacy and confidence. He expressed that these dual roles complemented his doctoral studies and prepared him for his expected role as a university professor upon returning to Indonesia.

The participant described how managing these responsibilities helped him feel more embedded within the academic community. Rather than being on the periphery, he saw himself actively contributing to both student learning and academic research. He acknowledged that these experiences offered a broader, more holistic view of academic life beyond coursework, grounded in real-world expectations and institutional culture. The chance to teach and research simultaneously enriched his academic identity and affirmed his decision to study abroad.

The participant's academic achievements also played a crucial role in creating these opportunities. He was awarded a highly competitive scholarship to pursue his doctoral studies in Taiwan—the “Scholarship for Elite Ph.D. Students Award” from the university—in recognition of his distinction as the best graduate of his master's program. This recognition not only provided financial stability but also validated his academic and professional potential on an international stage.

The participant also reflected on how fortunate he felt to have secured teaching opportunities in Taiwan as a non-native English speaker. In 2020, he received an offer to teach in a school in Taiwan—a rare chance for Indonesians, especially given the country's general preference for native English speakers in language education. He successfully held that position for two years. Following that, he continued to teach at another school throughout his PhD studies, maintaining the role for three years. Most recently, he was hired by a prestigious cram school in Hualien, a position that required him to compete directly with native English-speaking applicants. Securing such a role was highly competitive and uncommon for non-native speakers, which he views as both an honor and a reflection of his professional capability.

His qualifications, communication skills, and academic background in English education helped him stand out in a challenging job market. These attributes not only earned him respect but also led to multiple job offers for teaching and management positions after graduation—including offers to work as a full-time English teacher and even as a cram school manager. These professional prospects underscore the exceptional nature of his accomplishments and the recognition he has earned in the Taiwanese education sector. This sequence of teaching roles not only strengthened his resume but also reinforced his identity as a competent and highly adaptable educator and academic.

Economic motivation and personal aspiration

A major driving force behind the participant's decision to work during his PhD program was financial necessity, opportunity, and long-term personal goals. He expressed a clear understanding of the wage disparity between Taiwan and Indonesia. Working part-time as an English teacher provided a substantial income, three times what he would earn in similar roles in his home country. This economic advantage was not only a survival strategy but a deliberate investment in his future.

The participant expressed his goal of saving enough money to build a house and establish a business to achieve financial independence upon returning to Indonesia. He frequently linked his current labor to this long-term goal. His financial motivation was tightly interconnected with a sense of duty—

to his family, to his community, and to himself. This goal-oriented mindset transformed his demanding schedule into a purposeful routine.

He also discussed how the ability to earn while studying allowed him to avoid debt, maintain autonomy, and support his wife. The income gave him the freedom to focus on his studies without relying on financial aid or loans, which he viewed as obstacles. He framed his financial situation not as a hardship but as a calculated and empowering element of his doctoral experience.

His financial agency was also a source of personal pride. By working legally and meaningfully in a respected role, he differentiated himself from peers who had to rely on labor work. This not only conferred dignity on him but also affirmed his belief in the value of education and language skills. His story revealed that economic motivations can coexist with academic integrity and ambition.

Furthermore, his sense of financial achievement was deeply tied to his aspiration to provide a better life for his family. The participant often framed his success in monetary terms—not out of materialism, but as a symbol of stability, independence, and responsibility. This interpretation of financial success was grounded in cultural expectations and personal values, which emphasized hard work, education, and long-term planning.

Academic overload and strategic endurance

Enrolling in two concurrent PhD programs presented a considerable academic challenge. The participant described taking approximately 50 to 60 credits, nearly double the typical doctoral student load. This meant attending more classes, completing more assignments, and managing overlapping deadlines. While most students completed their coursework in three semesters, he projected that he would need four to five semesters.

The academic pressure was intense, often leaving him physically and mentally drained. His daily routine was busy and demanding, teaching during the day, attending classes in the afternoon, and working late into the night on reading or writing assignments. Despite these challenges, he maintained high academic performance, which he was very proud of. He said that although the workload was tiring, he accepted it as part of his chosen path. He believed that enrolling in two programs would give him an edge when applying for academic jobs in Indonesia, thanks to the additional knowledge, networks, and qualifications he gained. His perspective turned stress into a strategic advantage—while the pressure was real, he saw it as temporary and purposeful.

This level of endurance came with its challenges. He experienced times of fatigue, sleep deprivation, and difficulty maintaining social relationships. However, he believed these sacrifices were necessary. His choice to take on a heavier academic load showed he believed in the long-term benefits. Despite obstacles, his ability to stay focused demonstrated his strong commitment to his academic and personal goals.

He also emphasized that his experience as a high-achieving student during his master's program helped cultivate the mindset needed to endure this academic pressure. His past academic excellence served as a psychological anchor, a reminder of his capabilities even during times of exhaustion. The internal drive to maintain that standard of excellence contributed significantly to his ability to navigate this overwhelming phase of his academic journey.

Relational support and emotional resilience

A key factor in the participant's emotional well-being was the supportive relationship with his wife, who was also undertaking doctoral studies in Education. Their shared academic background fostered mutual understanding, and they regularly discussed assignments, research, and personal development. These conversations, typically held before bedtime and upon waking, offered emotional stability amidst their demanding schedules. The participant characterized his wife as both a partner and a confidante. She sometimes assisted with academic work and consistently provided encouragement during challenging periods. Their shared objectives of completing their studies and returning home with both academic qualifications and financial savings contributed to a strong sense of partnership and common purpose.

Despite his wife's academic commitments, the participant expressed a preference for her to rest more, as he believed that, as the husband, he held greater responsibility for their future. He articulated a cultural expectation that he "should be smarter" and more capable, highlighting the gendered aspects of his self-expectations. While this sense of obligation created pressure, it also reinforced his determination. Their relationship offered emotional safety, validation, and companionship. In the

absence of extended family support, their bond functioned as a substitute for a broader social network. The participant remarked that, without this support, the emotional challenges of his studies and work would have been significantly more difficult to manage. This close relational dynamic was essential in sustaining his well-being.

Their shared reflections and emotional support enabled the participant to develop resilience. He frequently highlighted the importance of having someone who understood his academic environment with whom he could "talk things out." This emotional outlet was vital in preventing burnout and reinforcing his sense of purpose amid daily sacrifices.

Navigating multiple identities with purpose

Throughout the narrative, the participant described the challenges of managing multiple roles—doctoral student, teacher, researcher, husband, and migrant. Each role entailed distinct expectations; rather than seeing them as conflicting, he worked to integrate them into a unified sense of identity. He emphasized that successfully navigating these roles with clarity and discipline was a source of personal pride. He did not regard his roles as isolated or burdensome. Instead, he viewed them as integral components of a meaningful narrative, considering work and study abroad as avenues for personal transformation. His experience demonstrated a strong sense of self-awareness and agency. He was clear about his objectives and made deliberate choices consistent with his goals.

Rather than relying on institutional support, he developed personal systems of resilience. He managed his time efficiently, maintained open communication with his wife, and sustained motivation through clear vision and strategic planning. Even during periods of overwhelm, he focused on the broader purpose behind his efforts. The narrative demonstrates that, for international doctoral students, well-being is not a static state of comfort but a dynamic process of managing competing demands with purpose and resourcefulness. Well-being is shaped by aspirations, relational support, personal identity, and a readiness to endure temporary hardship in pursuit of long-term objectives. In summary, the participant's experience illustrates how the various dimensions of life, academic, economic, emotional, and relational, interact to influence the doctoral journey. His account reflects both the challenges and strengths that characterize the experiences of international students striving for excellence while establishing a foundation for a secure and meaningful future.

Discussion

This study examined the lived experience of an Indonesian doctoral student balancing multiple roles in Taiwan. The participant's narrative demonstrates how the intersecting demands of academic work, teaching responsibilities, economic aspirations, and family commitments shape well-being throughout the doctoral journey. Using a narrative inquiry framework, this discussion situates the findings within broader themes of international student well-being, identity formation, and agency.

The participant's experience illustrates how academic and professional opportunities abroad can significantly foster both personal and intellectual growth. His dual roles in research and teaching strengthened his academic identity, increased his confidence, and reinforced his sense of purpose. However, these same commitments also led to chronic stress, fatigue, and a heightened risk of burnout—challenges frequently encountered by international doctoral students. The concept of well-being for international students encompasses not only physical health but also emotional resilience, professional fulfillment, and a sense of belonging (Andrade, 2006; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). In this context, the participant's well-being was simultaneously supported and challenged by the breadth of his responsibilities. His capacity to perceive these demands as opportunities for growth reflects a proactive and adaptive approach to stress, often described as academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Although the workload was considerable, his perspective enabled him to maintain a positive outlook and regard his efforts as investments in future achievement.

Financial insecurity is a significant source of stress for many international students (Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014). The participant's narrative demonstrates that earning income through meaningful academic work, rather than low-wage labor, can alleviate this stress and enhance psychological resilience. His economic agency was integral to his sense of autonomy and pride, supporting his well-being by fostering a sense of control over his circumstances. Unlike students who may view financial strain as an impediment to academic success, the participant transformed economic necessity into motivation. By interpreting his work not simply as a means of survival, but as preparation for a financially stable and professionally rewarding future, he converted hardship into opportunity. This

cognitive reframing, associated with higher emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), underscores how perceptions of financial pressure can profoundly affect well-being.

The participant's attainment of competitive teaching positions in Taiwan—despite not being a native English speaker—challenges prevailing assumptions that favor native speakers in English education (Braine, 2010). His academic and professional accomplishments disrupted conventional hiring norms, enabling him to cultivate an empowered identity as a competent, non-native educator. This affirmation supported his well-being by strengthening his sense of belonging and value within the host society. Identity construction among international students is a dynamic process, shaped by both social recognition and self-perception (Norton, 2000). The participant's roles as educator, researcher, and scholar were validated through institutional recognition and professional opportunities. Such external validation served as a protective factor, mitigating feelings of marginalization that international students may experience.

The participant's emotional bond with his wife provided essential psychological stability. Relational well-being—especially among married international students—can mediate the stresses of academic mobility (Zhou & Todman, 2009). His narrative illustrates how emotional intimacy, shared academic goals, and mutual encouragement buffered the impact of academic overload. Their joint involvement in academia also enabled emotional mirroring and co-regulation, contributing to a resilient household environment. Nevertheless, the participant's internalized sense of gender responsibility—the belief that he should be “smarter” or more capable—introduced additional emotional pressure. This reflects broader cultural narratives around masculinity and responsibility, which may complicate well-being even in supportive relationships. The participant's approach to well-being was relational and collective, rather than solely individualistic. His goals were closely linked to his wife's aspirations and their family's future plans. This interdependence aligns with collectivist cultural orientations, where well-being is regarded as a shared outcome rather than merely personal fulfillment (Hofstede, 2001).

In this narrative, well-being was not a fleeting condition but a sustained trajectory. The participant endured academic overload, social fatigue, and emotional exhaustion not due to ignorance of their toll, but because he maintained a future-oriented perspective. He regarded temporary hardships as necessary for long-term gain—a mindset aligned with goal-oriented motivation theories (Locke & Latham, 2002). Rather than seeking immediate comfort, he prioritized strategic endurance. His faith in future academic, financial, and personal rewards served as a psychological buffer during challenging times. This perspective frames well-being not as the absence of stress, but as the ability to pursue meaning and purpose amid adversity. Thus, the participant's well-being was shaped not only by what he endured, but also by how he interpreted and assigned meaning to his experiences. His narrative supports the idea that well-being among international students can be cultivated through purposeful engagement, relational support, and affirmation of identity, even in the face of systemic and personal obstacles.

Conclusions

This narrative inquiry has provided a deeply contextualized understanding of an Indonesian doctoral student's experience of well-being while studying and working in Taiwan. His journey demonstrates that well-being extends beyond the absence of stress or discomfort; it is a dynamic, ongoing process of negotiating responsibilities, aspirations, and identities. The participant's story illustrates the complexities international students face as they simultaneously manage academic pressures, financial goals, cultural adaptation, and personal relationships.

A central insight from this study is that well-being is achieved through purpose-driven endurance. The participant did not regard well-being as a consistent state of comfort or ease. Rather, it resulted from finding meaning in hardship and aligning actions with future objectives. His capacity to perceive stressors as temporary and purposeful reflects a resilient mindset that sustained his motivation in various aspects of life.

The findings also highlight the importance of academic identity and recognition. The participant's achievements in securing competitive scholarships and teaching positions were instrumental in affirming his abilities and fostering a sense of belonging. Such affirmations alleviated feelings of marginalization commonly experienced by non-native English speakers in transnational settings. Furthermore, his teaching and research activities provided both economic advantages and intellectual development, reinforcing his self-concept as a competent and valued academic.

The study further emphasizes the significance of relational well-being. Emotional support from the participant's spouse functioned as a stabilizing influence throughout his experience. Their shared academic pursuits facilitated mutual encouragement, co-regulation, and collaborative goal-setting. This relational support system served as a protective buffer against emotional exhaustion and exemplifies how well-being is frequently co-constructed within intimate partnerships.

Finally, the participant's ability to integrate multiple roles as a student, teacher, husband, and migrant into a coherent and empowering narrative was central to his well-being. Instead of being overwhelmed by these roles, he leveraged them to reinforce his sense of direction and identity. His narrative demonstrates that well-being for international students is a multidimensional construct shaped by internal agency, cultural context, institutional factors, and social relationships.

Implication

The findings of this study have several implications for institutions, educators, and policymakers aiming to enhance the well-being of international doctoral students. First, the definition of student success should be expanded to encompass resilience, relational strength, and identity development. Institutional policies must acknowledge that academic achievement frequently coincides with non-academic employment, and that students who work are often motivated by financial necessity rather than a lack of commitment.

Second, universities should consider developing more inclusive hiring and teaching opportunities for non-native English speakers. The participant's experience illustrates that linguistic proficiency and pedagogical expertise can overcome native-speaker biases. Expanding equitable access to teaching roles would support student income while affirming professional identity and self-worth. Third, counseling and student services should embrace a holistic perspective on well-being that integrates financial, academic, and relational dimensions. Initiatives such as peer-support groups, financial advising, and mentorship programs can address the diverse sources of stress faced by international students.

Fourth, faculty and advisors should recognize and support students who undertake employment during their studies. Rather than viewing work as a distraction, advisors can help students manage dual commitments to facilitate both academic progress and personal growth. Providing flexibility with deadlines or acknowledging professional development beyond the classroom can validate students' broader experiences. Finally, future research should further investigate the intersection of identity, labor, and well-being among diverse international student populations. By centering students' perspectives through narrative and qualitative methodologies, researchers can inform the creation of more responsive and empathetic support systems.

In summary, this study reaffirms that well-being in international doctoral education extends beyond managing stress; it involves constructing a meaningful life through work, study, and relationships. Supporting this process necessitates deliberate action at institutional, interpersonal, and policy levels.

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