

**Exchange students' unique experiences during
Covid-19
To stay or leave?**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of exchange students in Finland during Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic started at the beginning of 2020, which caused universities among other things to be closed down. Future exchange periods were mainly moved or cancelled. International mobility was almost totally stopped for a while. The focus in this study is specifically on the impact of immobility and mobility in constructing an exchange experience. The main research question is "How the (im)mobility during a pandemic affected the students exchange experiences?" followed by two sub questions, which are interested in the student's own actions, resources and agency in constructing an exchange experience.

This study consists of eight semi-structured interviews, that were conducted in the summer of 2020. The interviewees were exchange students who were studying in Finland when the pandemic started. The data has been analyzed with qualitative content analysis in a concept driven way. The main concepts in this study are agency, especially international student agency, and Bourdieu's different forms of capitals. This study is a part of a bigger research project called "Equality, (Im)mobility structures and International students: A study of international students' experiences during the pandemic in Finland".

From the findings of this study it is clear to see that mobility is one of the most important factors in creating an exchange experience. The students either left or stayed in Finland when the pandemic started. The students had different push and pull factors that affected their decision. Especially the effect of social, economic and cultural capital could be found from the student's stories. The ones who ended their mobility period did not really have an exchange experience. Those who stayed had a really unique exchange experience and they stayed mobile in different ways inside of Finland. The student's own agency and the will to make the experience the best it could be really had an impact on their time abroad. For those who stayed the pandemic did not ruin their exchange experience, it just changed it.

The findings suggest that there should be better support systems for exchange students. The universities and Erasmus network could all learn and develop from this crisis if something similar will happen in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19, Exchange students, International students, Agency, Capital, Bourdieu, Erasmus

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1 Introduction

In the first few months of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic spread rapidly and in reaction many countries including Finland were closed down. This meant the closing of universities, schools, restaurants, sport facilities, workplaces and many more. Additionally, the borders of many countries were closed. This spring was really out of the ordinary for everyone, but what was it like to live in a different country by yourself when the Covid-19 pandemic shut down the whole world.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of the exchange students from different points of view and review their possibility for mobility during a pandemic. I will analyse what happened to exchange students studying in Finnish universities during spring 2020. All students have different experience and stories about this unordinary time. My main research question is “How the (im)mobility during a pandemic affected the students exchange experiences?” and I have two sub questions that will be introduce later.

The coronavirus pandemic, Covid-19, began in December 2019 when China reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia. It was later on identified as coronavirus. During the first months of 2020 the disease started to spread worldwide, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a pandemic on March 11th in 2020. In Finland schools closed from 16th of March onward and on the same day the Government declared a state of emergency. Even with schools closed there was no break in teaching as it continued in online form. The Finnish education made an outstanding performance compared to other countries when moving to online learning. (Loima 2020, 66.) Covid-19 has caused the largest disruption of education in history worldwide (United Nations 2020, 5). Contagion is always a social phenomenon and the pandemic has a lot of other consequences than health related ones. Covid-19 pandemic is a global crisis on a large scale. (Lupton 2020.)

Because of Covid-19 international mobility was disrupted. The European parliament and council (2006) define mobility in education as an integral part of the freedom of movement of persons. In a higher education context mobility is targeted for anyone who could benefit from a period of learning abroad. Mobility is a way of creating true European area of lifelong learning, for promoting employment and reducing poverty. Mobility brings citizens closer to one another and it can improve solidarity and better understanding of other cultures. In Europe it furthers economic, social and regional cohesion. Mobility and immobility are

relational, and people shift between these two phases (Breines et al. 2019, 484). Immobility can occur because of government policies and social inequalities, which is considered involuntary immobility. Immobility can also be one's own decision, but there is not much research on voluntary immobility. Mobility can be mediated through distance or actors, so the line between mobility and immobility is not clear. For example, online education can be a form of mobility. (Breines et al. 2019, 486–487.) During Covid-19 mobility posed a risk of contagion. Responses to control infection through mobility vary from prohibition (travel bans) and substitution (online classes) to filtering (nationality). These measures were applied by many countries and had a varying degree of effectiveness. (Haugen & Lehmann 2020, 171–172.)

According to The Finnish National Agency for Education (EduFi) (2020) almost 50 percent of international students studying in Finland returned back home because of the pandemic. Also, more than half of Finnish students studying abroad returned home. About 30 percent of both groups stayed in their exchange country. The majority of those who came back to Finland continued their studies through online learning. Furthermore, for the students who left Finland were offered the possibility to continue online. The Finnish Erasmus + National Agency (EduFi 2020) stated that nearly 30 percent of the Finnish higher education institutions decided to cancel all incoming and outgoing mobilities for the autumn 2020 semester because of the uncertainty of the pandemic and also spring semester 2021 is very unsure and dependable on how the pandemic evolves. At the same time other higher education institutions stated that they will implement physical exchanges if the circumstances allow it. Some institutions have plans to replace physical exchange by a virtual one. It is interesting to see when student mobility will be back to normal.

This topic is important, because the pandemic is still roaming the world in the spring of 2021 and there is no end in sight, even as vaccinations in Finland started in December 2020 (THL 2021). International mobility has been and will be compromised for a long time and this pandemic could change the structure of international programs. Many students have cancelled their exchanges, or they have been cancelled by other parties. Some people were stuck in their exchange country without a way of going home for a long time because of the pandemic. By finding out what exchange students experienced can be helpful while planning study abroad periods during this pandemic or it can be helpful in the future. It is quite possible that something like this will happen again and it would be useful to be more prepared the next time and know what kind of support and actions are needed for everyone to stay safe.

I, myself, am interested in this topic, because I was also studying abroad during spring 2020 and had to return back to Finland when the pandemic got worse. It was probably the most stressful and unsure time I have ever had to go through. This means I have first-hand experience about what has happened. My own experience helps me understand the exchange students better and sympathise with them. I felt that exchange students were kind of left to their own luck and it is very interesting to see what others have experienced.

For my theoretical perspective I will use the term agency to define what kind of role the students played in their own life during a time of crisis. I will explain push and pull factors for the reasons why the students left or stayed in Finland. I will also be reflecting the actions of these students to Pierre Bourdieu's three forms of capital: social, cultural and economic. All the factors in these capitals helped the students make tough decisions and live their best exchange experience during the pandemic. At the end of this study I will examine the mobility and immobility of these students.

2 International student mobility

Knicht (2012) has identified six types of international student mobility, which are the following: 1. Full degree program in foreign country, 2. Short-term study-abroad experience as part of degree program at home institution, 3. Crossborder collaborative degree programs between two or more institutions or providers, 4. Research and fieldwork, 5. Internship and practical experiences and 6. Study tour and workshops. All these different types of mobilities are important since they give more people the chance to understand foreign cultures and educate themselves. (Knicht 2012, 24–25.) These categories do not include virtual or distance mobility which are interesting and relevant ways of internationalization at the moment.

Students may have many reasons to study abroad but traditionally it has been driven by the expectation of its ability to raise the economic and social status of a graduate. This is true at least in less developed countries where there might be limited access to education. Many factors affect student's decision on studying abroad and also the decision where to study. (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002, 1–2.) Students decision to leave their home country is affected by push factors. These are for example the level of economic wealth, the availability of educational opportunities and the degree of involvement of the developing country in the world economy. (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002, 3; McMahon 1992.) Mazzarol, Kemp and Savery (1996) have found that the decision to select a final study destination appears to involve three stages. First the student must decide to want to study internationally. In second stage one host country must be relatively more attractive than any other. Finally, in stage three the student will make a decision in which institution they want to study. Every stage and the decision are affected by pull factors. (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002, 18.) These pull factors are: knowledge and awareness of the host country, personal recommendations, cost issues, environment, geographic proximity and social links (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002, 4; Mazzarol, Kemp & Savery 1996, 37–38).

International student mobility is not a new phenomenon, but there has not been a lot of theoretical approaches examining the flow of people across national borders. Transnational social field provides a conceptual space to examine international student mobility. This concept emerged from the study of migration as a part of a trend to examine global flows on transnational spaces and processes. Transnational social fields are spaces for the exchange, organization and transformation of ideas, practices and social networks. These fields include

networks that extend across borders and incorporate its participants in the everyday activities of social reproduction in these numerous locations. Global processes promote the creation of transnational social fields, which forces re-examination and reconceptualization of the relationship between social spaces, physical locales and the geography of the mind. (Gargano 2009, 332–334.)

International students are not specifically mentioned in transnationality, but they are a significant migrating population and operate in transnational social fields. The experiences of international students are totally different from other groups such as immigrants or refugees. Students who seek a whole degree abroad are grounded in multiple social spaces for periods of time, travelling to and from contexts of origin and campuses abroad over a period of several years. Gargano (2009) describes that “international students create transnational social fields and networks that cross-national boundaries and develop social networks of associations that maintain social, familial, economic, religious and political relations with their context of origin.” (Gargano 2009, 336–338.)

2.1 The Erasmus programme

In the European Union (EU) the citizens have the basic rights to circulate freely, to take up employment and residence within a different EU country (Papatsiba 2005, 30). The Erasmus programme is the largest student exchange scheme for higher education and the flagship program of the EU (Otero et al. 2013, 70). Erasmus + is the European Union’s programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. The program started in 1987 and currently runs from 2014 until 2020. It provides opportunities for over 4 million Europeans to study, train and gain experience abroad. The program offers possibilities for individuals and different organizations. It includes all EU member countries and some countries outside the EU such as Turkey, Norway and Iceland and now also The United Kingdom as a separate country. There are additionally some other partner countries and organizations involved. (EduFi 2020a.)

Erasmus + for higher education is what I will be focusing here. This program is an exchange and cooperation program for higher education. It supports international cooperation between higher education institutions and mobility for their students, teachers and staff. Over the last

30 years Finland has received more than 120 000 higher education students from other countries participating in the Erasmus + programme. (EduFi 2020a.)

The aim of Erasmus + for higher education is to promote and increase: 1. The number and the quality of mobilities in Europe, 2. The cooperation between institutions and working life, 3. The fulfillment of the European Higher Education Area, 4. Innovation, 5. Reciprocal academic recognition of studies and grades, 6. Transparency and recognition of degrees and qualifications, and 7. The use of information and communication technologies and education service. (EduFi 2020a.) The program has many different goals, but one of its main objectives is to support lifelong learning. The Erasmus + programme strives to strengthen the European identity and active citizenship and furthermore contribute to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion. This can be made possible by educating people towards common goals. (European Commission 2020.)

2.2 Earlier research about student mobility

Earlier research has revealed that individuals who have experienced mobility in Europe say that there are not only benefits to free movement (Papatsiba 2005, 30–31). During an abroad mobility period the Erasmus students are confronted with a different academic system and culture, while they discover ways of life in the host country. Papatsiba (2005) found in her research different stages of the Erasmus stay. She analyzed 80 texts about student's Erasmus experience. The stages she found are: steps to take to deal with administrative procedures and various practicalities related to initial settling in the new country, courses to choose and validate, tourist visits to make and leisure activities and everyday routines to install (Papatsiba 2005, 37.) The results indicated that the students mentioned their academic experience to be the most developed category. The student's academic skills, language competence and professional knowledge was developed during the Erasmus stay. (Papatsiba 2005, 46–48.) The students in her study mentioned that through cultural enrichment they could develop themselves and decenter from national norms and acquire tolerance towards others. Some students also acknowledged the recognition and acceptance of other cultures without hierarchies: societies evolve successfully while being organized differently than their own. (Papatsiba 2005, 51–52.)

One of the biggest differences that happened during their mobility period is how the students perceive and portray themselves. Maturation, self-confidence, adaptability, flexibility and resilience were some attributes the students reported gaining through the experience. (Papatsiba 2005, 52–56.) The Erasmus study period caused a certain number of awakenings. The students felt they recognized their national identity better and it became more important to them during their stay abroad. At the same time the recognition and appreciation of their home culture increased. This awakening of their national membership also woke their sensitivity towards other cultures and nations. In addition, some students evoked their European identity. (Papatsiba 2005, 56–59.)

Student mobility has been shown to help with future career enhancement and it enables former students to acquire more visible international professional positions. It is shown that studying abroad can help a person to cope more successfully with increasing international demands at work and improve international proficiency. Furthermore, student mobility increases the probability of a person working abroad later in life. (González, Mesanza & Mariel 2011, 414.)

Even though the Erasmus programme has many benefits and is available to many students there is some barriers why students will not participate in the program. Otero et al (2013) studied the differences between students who participated in Erasmus and who did not even consider participating. They found five types of factors that affected the student's decision: financial barriers, barriers related to higher education system comparability, awareness and information barriers, personal background and social background (Otero et al. 2013, 72). The two groups agreed on the level of the Erasmus grant on being too low. They also agreed on the lack of integration of studies at home and abroad and the expected difficulties with credit transfer. These groups had many differences too. The non-Erasmus students are more likely to be uncertain of the benefits derived from the Erasmus + programme and they are also more likely to be ill-informed about the program. Those who did not participate were not confident in their language skills and they felt their personal relationships were a barrier for participation. (Otero et al. 2013, 72–73.) Because the social and personal barriers were so important to students it could suggest that the marketing of the Erasmus exchange should change to emphasizing opportunities for personal development and the establishment of new relationships without losing the old ones. Therefore, in the light of the research language and financial support should be offered more. (Otero et al. 2013, 76.)

2.3 International students in Finland

There are two main types of international student mobility in Finland. Some students do their whole degree in Finland and some come here for a shorter mobility period. In 2018 EduFi published two Fact express publications. (EduFi 2018.) The data used in these publications is from 2017. The first publication reviews the statistics of foreign degree students and the second reviews the statistics of international mobility periods in Finland.

There is a national strategy in Finland to enhance the visibility and attractiveness of Finnish higher education to foreigners. According to the strategy it is important to recruit students to complete their whole degree in Finland. In 2017 there was more than 20,000 foreign students in Finland completing their whole degree here. There was a slight decrease comparing to the year before. More than 75 percent of these students come from non- EU/EEA countries. The most students come from Russia, Vietnam, China and Nepal. Since the autumn of 2017 non-EU/EEA students have been charged tuition fees. Most of these students' study in one of these three fields: business, administration and law, engineering and information or communication technologies (ICT). Additionally, natural sciences are popular among foreign students. (EduFi 2018.)

International mobility periods are one of the main methods for internationalization. The idea is to do a part of your studies abroad and complete courses at a foreign higher education institution. This way the students can expand their studies with courses and contents that is not available in their home institution or even in their home country. One goal in short term mobility is to increase knowledge and understanding of other countries and cultures. In 2017 Finland received a total of bit over 10,400 incoming students. The majority of them were university students. The number of incoming students to Finland is generally higher than the number of students going abroad from Finland. (EduFi 2018.)

2.4 International students during Covid-19

As stated in the introduction, a third of Finnish higher education institutions cancelled all incoming and outgoing mobilities for the autumn semester 2020 because of the uncertainty of the pandemic. The institutions that are allowing mobility are having much less students participating than usual. EduFI (2020b) stated about the Erasmus + programme, that there is no administrative barrier to start the physical studying abroad, if mobility is possible for the

sending and receiving organization and if the pandemic situation allows such movement. During this situation it is important to take care of the insurances needed and make sure they cover enough.

However, it is possible to start the Erasmus mobility virtually if the physical mobility is hindered due to the emergency conditions in the destination country. At the same time there must be a plan to do the physical period abroad at some point later on. The length of this period abroad must meet the minimum requirements. There can be a gap between the virtual and physical period and they both will be taken into consideration when recognizing how the learning goals were met. If only a virtual learning period is possible Erasmus will not grant financial support for these kinds of studies. (EduFi 2020b.)

The European Association for International Education (EAIE) conducted an online survey for individuals working in higher education institutions. The survey was open during 19th of February to 6th of March in 2020. The survey got 805 usable answers which came from 38 different countries. (Rumbley 2020, 4.) From the survey more than two thirds of the respondents indicated that the outbound mobility of students had been affected as well as the outbound mobility of staff. Under half of the respondents reported that inbound mobility had been affected. (Rumbley 2020, 10–12.) This could be explained by the fact that when this survey was conducted the Covid-19 situation in Europe was much better than in many other regions. This is why students could still stay and come to Europe, but maybe not the other way around. In addition, during this time most of the students had already arrived at European campuses earlier in 2020. The participants were also asked what adjustments had been done to outbound and inbound mobility. Most commonly cited adjustments were postponing and cancellation of mobility. (Rumbley 2020, 15.)

International students who were already abroad when the pandemic started had two choices, either to stay or leave back home. Those who stayed have faced even more racism and discrimination because of the pandemic situation. In particular Chinese students living abroad have been targeted by normal citizens but also politicians and the media. These issues are not new in higher education, but they definitely intensified during Covid-19 and affected the experience of international students. (Mittelmeier & Cockayne 2020, 3.) Mittelmeier and Cockayne (2020) researched how international students were represented in Twitter conversations globally. They found out different stereotypes that have existed before but also new perceptions that occurred because of Covid-19. It is common that people assume a

relationship between Covid-19 and international students. There were many tweets where international students were feared or avoided because people assumed them to be the disease carriers. In addition, many tweets showed racism and xenophobia. (Mittelmeier & Cockayne 2020, 7–9.) However, after mid-March when most students were sent home, if possible, the tweets about international students started to show empathy and condemning the treatment of international students by universities, and on a national level. As a result of Covid-19 the presuppositions that the public now have towards international students need to be recognized. These developed stigmas and stereotypes can have a long-term effect on the experiences of international students in different countries. (Mittelmeier & Cockayne 2020, 10–12.)

Another example of what international students have faced during this pandemic comes from Canada. Firang (2020) published an essay concerned with the fact that international students are more vulnerable during this pandemic and from a social work point of view they should be helped. Canada has provided its citizens emergency social and economic help, but international students are exempted from these. Firang (2020) states that this violates the student's basic rights as international human rights law states that the measures taken should not discriminate against any group. The students shared their emotional and financial distress being abroad without a safety net when the university closed down or the whole country went into lockdown. The students did not have a way of going back home so they should be included in the group that needs help. (Firang 2020, 820–822.) New studies about international students during Covid-19 are coming out very frequently. This is just one example, but you can find a general trend from these studies: the international students were forgotten and left to their own luck.

3 Agency

International students are rational human beings who are in charge of their own actions and how they use their own capacity and capability. These students are usually understood as strong agents piloting through the course of their life. (Marginson 2013, 12.) They have the capacity to use different types of agencies and take on a whole different role during their time abroad. Agency theory provides a way to examine what kind of agentic actions the students used during their unordinary time abroad. This is why I will be using agency theory as one of my main theories. In this chapter, I will examine agency as a concept and then focus specifically on student and international student agency.

Agency can be defined in different ways depending on the context where it is used. Agency, in general, is “the sum of a person’s capacity to act on her or his own behalf” (Marginson 2013, 10). Agency can be defined as an individual or collective capacity to act with intentionality in line with rational choices and in response to a given circumstance. In this sense, it is activity rather than passivity. (Tran & Vu 2018, 170.) Agency is also freedom. It is the active human will, the seat of self-directed conscious action, which guides reflexive self-formation and the self-negotiation of identity (Marginson 2014, 11). An agent can be defined as a person who acts and brings change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well (Sen 2000, 19).

Bandura (2001) defines in his research four core agentic features that are intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness. Actions that are done intentionally are referred to as agency. To do something intentionally we must have performed some level of forethought beforehand. Often, we set goals and think about the consequences of our actions before performing them. Agency involves the deliberate ability to make choices and action plans but also to motivate and regulate the execution with self-reactiveness. In the last feature, self-reflectiveness, people assess the correctness of their actions and self-examine their own functioning. (Bandura 2001, 6–10.) All these four features work together for people to use their agency properly.

Social cognitive theory divides agency to personal, proxy and collective modes (Bandura 2001, 13). The personal mode of agency can be connected to Bandura’s (1986) idea of self-efficacy that plays a central role in agency. Self-efficacy refers to “beliefs in one’s capabilities

to execute the competences needed to exercise control over events that affect one's welfare" (Bandura 1986, 1). Peoples trust in their own capabilities affect what course of action they choose to pursue and how much effort and time to invest in the matter (Bandura 1986, 1–2). The proxy mode of agency relies on social efficacy and the help of others. Collective agency is based on the belief of collective power to produce desired results. Collective agency is needed because people do not live their lives in isolation and many of the things that people want to achieve are not possible without socially interdependent effort. (Bandura 2001, 13–14.)

Agency is connected to identity. Identity is what we call ourselves and what others call us. Identity labels are self-chosen or imposed by social institutions and agency is more irreducible. (Marginson 2013, 10.) Since agency is such a broad concept, I have to delimit what kind of definition I will use. Above I have explained the basic definitions of agency but in this study, I will mainly focus on (international) student agency.

3.1 Student agency

Student agency is its own kind of agency that starts to develop early in education but especially in higher education. Being a student is a life stage that is limited and developmental. It is a stage of being free and becoming and for this reason it is very agentic. In studentship every action is oriented towards the future and building your future self. (Klemenčič 2015, 2.) Higher education can be referred to as "a process of self-formation" (Marginson 2014, 7). By developing their own agency, students affect to the development of others agency as well as to the development of knowledge, economic and social development. Students try to influence the environment and conditions of study at all levels of the higher education governance, either individually or collectively. Students act as members of the academic community, as stakeholders, but they are also a part of the local community and citizens. Thus, student's agency cannot be isolated to only the educational institution. (Klemenčič 2015, 2.)

Vaughn (2020) sees that student agency is associated with 1. Dispositional dimensions of individuals who act and transform environments, 2. Motivational dimensions of individuals who regulate their actions, exist within context and make choices and decisions and 3. Positionality of individuals in that individuals negotiate and interact within complex social

contexts. (Vaughn 2020, 110.) The first dispositional dimension refers to the extent that students can act independently creating opportunities and goals and striving for them. The motivational dimension is all about persisting and choice-making as the students learn how to make decisions to complete tasks and take up on opportunities even when there might be obstacles in the way. Motivation also refers to the ability one can regulate their actions and ideas and reflect on them. Lastly the positional dimension includes the interactions in school context across different social interactions. This way students develop perceptions of themselves in relation to the school institution and they adopt various identities. (Vaughn 2020, 111–112.)

Agency can be a motivational component in student learning. With the sense of personal agency people are more driven to achieve the agendas that they set for themselves. Agency can give a will to achieve but also the belief that one can achieve. However, teachers cannot expect to amplify student agency by giving students more freedom and expect them to naturally be more agentic. Engaging students into dialog and argumentation is a good way to engage students and help them find their own agency. For example, problem-based learning is one method that can be useful. (Lindgren & McDaniel 2012, 346.) Lindgren and McDaniel (2012) have researched online learning and student agency, which is a component of my research as well. Computer technologies can present a new opportunity for drawing out student agency and learning to use it. With technology it is possible to personalize the learning experience by letting students work at their own pace and listening to their individual needs. (Lindgren & McDaniel 2012, 346.)

Basharina (2009) studied the importance of student agency in international online learning environments. She found three different kind of approaches to learning and interaction in online environments: deep, surface and strategic communicators. The students who used deep strategies were taking control of their own learning and investing extra effort to learn and ask for help. These deep communicators had more motivation to actually learn compared to the surface and strategic learners who communicated with messages that would only help them pass the course. (Basharina 2009, 400.) Student agency clearly played a role in the students learning but still instructors should follow a combination of structure and freedom to accommodate all these different types of learners and communicators (Basharina 2009, 408).

Vaughn (2020) found that often students are discouraged or denied of agency in schools especially for students who are from a minority. Opportunities to use students' ideas and

interests are central to supporting student agency in classroom settings. (Vaughn 2020, 109.) The teaching for agency requires teachers to use all three dimensions mentioned earlier: dispositional, motivational and positional. Students' opportunities to exert influence in their environment increases when classrooms support the development and use of student agency. (Vaughn 2020, 113.) When student agency is allowed learning moves beyond a transactional approach to a co-constructed and generative learning (Vaughn 2020, 115).

Student centered learning has been one of the main goals of the European higher education policy since 2015. Student centered learning is "a pedagogic concept to foster individual learning, a cultural frame for developing communities of learning and a lever supporting learning systems." (Klemenčič 2017, 70–73.) Student centered learning is close to student agency since both of them emphasize autonomy, choices and freedoms of students in the higher education context. However, it is difficult to know if an institution has implemented student centered learning and the policy developments are failing due to the lack of scholars involved. (Klemenčič 2017, 81–82.)

3.2 International student agency

Tran and Vu (2018) present international student agency, and how it is distinctive compared to other forms of human agency since the conditions for this group develop and enact agency involves cross-border and transnational spaces and relationships. International students move across geographical, political, cultural and linguistic borders. This way they are engaged in continuous and quick learning about the new country and they negotiate identities on a more regular basis. (Tran & Vu 2018, 169.) The international student identity and self-development are created in a shifting combination of the given material conditions, which includes the social relations the student is engaged in, and the agency freedom or active will of the student (Marginson 2014, 18).

Agency can be sorted into different themes depending on how and in what situation one uses agency. International students must exercise different forms of agency when dealing with problems and challenges that could be facing them during their journey. They have to respond to emerging needs in the new country and transform themselves through mobility. (Tran & Vu 2018, 168.) Tran and Vu (2018) define four different aspects of agency that the international students can engage in. This definition of international student agency and its

four aspects are what I will be using in my analysis as well. The four aspects of international student agency are 1. Agency for becoming, 2. Needs-response agency, 3. Agency as a struggle and resistance, and 4. Collective agency for contestation.

Agency for becoming involves the ways which international students envisage and proactively cultivate both personal development and transformation of the context in which they engage. It is the individual's active engagement in constructing his or her own life course. (Tran & Vu 2018, 175.) Agency for becoming is linked to Marginson's (2014) ideas about self-formation. Self-formation incorporates investment to yourself as human capital, the economic attributes and credentials acquired in education. Marginson (2014) sees international education as a way of self-formation. A self-determining person is guided by agency freedom. Everyone is engaged in continuous self-formation, but among international students the role of agency is more apparent. The students have high autonomy because they live far from their family. In the first stages in a new country they gain new features very quickly in their studies, daily life and in the institution. (Marginson 2014, 11–12.) Students have the potential to change themselves in this new environment and for some students the outcomes can be rich, but for some this journey might be all about survival and coping rather than a voluntary adventure. This is dependent on the resources that the students have to use and also their personal attributes and their vulnerability. (Marginson 2014, 13.)

Needs-response agency is exercised in order to satisfy specific personal demands. International students might have social or well-being needs or some sort of learning needs for example needing more explanation and asking for it in class. Needs-respond agency is in relation with the student's cultural identity. The students reposition themselves to active agents in order to bridge the existing cultural gaps and add mutual cultural understanding. This form of agency makes it possible for the international students to retain and reproduce the intercultural capital embedded in their transnational mobility into their learning context and the host community. (Tran & Vu 2018, 177–178.) The students' might be trying to change their identity rather than moving their home country identity as a whole to the new environment. The new unfamiliar surroundings can also change their way of living, consumption and even personal beliefs. (Marginson 2014, 12.) Marginson (2014) introduces two models of student's identities. Multiplicity means that two different identities coexist, and the students use the one they need in that context. The second one is hybridity where the student combines different cultural and relational elements in order to create a new self-identity. (Marginson 2014, 15)

Agency as struggle and resistance is a form of agency that entails the power to reconstruct and self-transform when the agent has to confront a contradictory or otherwise problematic situation. International students face a lot of unfavorable and disagreeable conditions. The student can use both resources that they bring to the country and the resources they find there. When international students open themselves to the host culture, it can only be to the extent that is necessary for survival. Common situation where agency as resistance can be awakened is if international students face discrimination or inequalities. (Tran & Vu 2018, 181.)

Collective agency for contestation can also be defined as relational agency (Edwards 2011), which in my opinion is a much more approachable term. It refers to “a capacity for working with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems” (Edwards 2011, 34). Relational agency has risen from relational expertise and how professionals can solve problems with others. Relational agency arises from a two-stage process: 1. Working with others to expand the ‘object of activity’ or task being worked on by recognizing the motives and the resources that others bring to bear as they, too, interpret it, and 2. Aligning one’s own responses to the newly enhanced interpretations with the responses being made by the other professionals while acting on the expanded object. (Edwards 2011, 34.)

In Tran and Vu’s research (2018) the situation that wakened the student’s collective agency act was extremely difficult, because when an institution was suddenly closed down, the students’ wellbeing and sense of belonging are the most vulnerable. International students use collective agency to connect to one another, for mutual support, learning needs and in difficult situations. International students can also use this agency to restore their rights and identity in the host society by enacting to an external organization. This form of agency extends the understanding of the motivation to form groups and networks by international students in the host society. Additionally, the functionality of these groups is an important part in collective agency. (Tran & Vu 2018, 182.)

Megan Siczek (2020), a professor at the George Washington University in the US, describes in her essay what it was like for international students in her class during the spring of 2020. Most of the students left back to their home country, but a few stayed in the US. She describes their student agency as follows: “They showed up, they engaged, they connected and cared for one another, they learned.” Students joined the online sessions fully prepared even after travelling back to their home countries. They who could not join the sessions watched the recordings and contributed to the class in other ways. The students had the resources to adapt

and even thrive during this global crisis because they had crossed cultural, linguistic, geographical and epistemological boundaries when studying abroad. Even with this totally new situation their agency was developed to navigate these new and uncertain times.

4 Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's concern with intellectual life has three concepts in its center: field, capital, and habitus. The three ideas together form a single conceptual structure and they cannot exist on their own without the other two. (Medvetz 2018, 8.) The social world is composed of different fields. The actor's position in different fields is determined by the resources they have. Capital is the different types of resources the actor might have, and they can use to better their position in a field. Habitus is the actor's permanent dispositions and the way they act and connect to the social world. (Ihlen 2009, 65–66; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992.) All three combined becomes a theory where social actors struggle and compete to position themselves in fields with the help of different form of capitals (Bourdieu & Waquant 1992; Ihlen 2009, 62). These theories are reversible to use in different contexts. For example, Bourdieu has worked a lot on higher education and his main desire is to explain how the institutions maintain and reproduce social inequalities (Naidoo 2004, 457). In this study I will mainly focus on the different forms of capital which are Economic capital, Social capital and Cultural capital. I will later use these in my analysis as explaining factors about the student's decisions and actions.

4.1 Habitus and Field

Habitus and field are an important part of Bourdieu's social theory, and they cannot be separated from the different forms of capital. These concepts are important to understand to fully grasp the meaning of the capitals which are an important part of this study. Habitus is "a socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world" (Bourdieu 1998, 81). The habitus is thought as a system of durable dispositions, it is mental or cognitive structure that functions consciously and unconsciously, and it limits what should do. Through habitus actors can relate to the social world. (Ihlen 2009, 65; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992.)

Habitus is embodied and turned into a permanent disposition: a way of standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking. This relationship to the body is a fundamental part of the habitus. (Bourdieu 1990a, 70–72.) Through habitus, practice (agency) is linked with capital and field (structure). Habitus becomes active in relation to a field and it leads to a

different practice depending on the state of the field. (Bourdieu 1990b, 116.) Habitus is the society's materialization and is at "home" at the field where it belongs and where it is constructed (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2015, 159). Therefore, habitus is socialized subjectivity and that individual, subjective and even personal are all collective, a part of the society (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2015, 157).

Habitus is connected to agency that I have introduced before and these concepts are overlapping in some dimensions. Bourdieu sees habitus as the potential of generating a wide repertoire of possible actions and at the same time enabling to transform and constrain these courses of action. Habitus allows individual agency, but it sees agents being restricted with the rules of the society so it will behave certain way in certain circumstances. (Reay 2004, 433.) Agency is seen as freedom and as the active human will, but many decision-making settings are far from ideal and the actor serves the deep-seater structural power relationship that exists (Greener 2002, 697). Habitus guides actions without strictly determining them, but it provides a "feel for the game" or "practical sense" of what is appropriate and what is not. This practice always occurs in relation to a specific social context, a field, where the individuals position themselves. (Greener 2002, 691–692.)

Field is a social space, where different relations and amount of resources define the actor's position (Ihlen 2009, 62; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). These positions are created and structured by the unequally shared power of capital. The actors can take up different positions of dominance, subordination or equivalence depending on how much capital they possess. In different fields also different forms of capital are more valued than others. (Ihlen 2009, 65–66; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992.) For example, in the business field, economic capital is prioritized, but it is not important in the art field where likely cultural capital is more important. The most autonomous fields are the ones that have established their own rules and their own specific interests that are free from religious, political or economic constraints (Sapiro 2018, 3).

The relation between habitus and field works in two different ways. One way it is an effect relationship where the field composes the habitus in such way that it has everything that is necessary in the field. In another way it is a cognitive construction. This means the habitus helps to construct the field to be a meaningful world. The world that is constructed should be valuable and a place where everyone should invest their energy. The social reality exists as

habitus and fields, outside and inside the actors in the society. (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1995, 158.)

4.2 Three capitals

Bourdieu (1986) describes capitals as “Capital is accumulated labor which, when appropriated on a private basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (Bourdieu 1986, 241). Capital in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and has potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form. Capital contains a tendency to persist in its being and is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. The distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment represents the immanent structure of the social world, the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which governs its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices. Bourdieu thinks that capital can present itself in three fundamental forms: Economic capital, Cultural capital and Social capital. (Bourdieu 1986, 241–243.) The different forms of capital can be distinguished according to their reproducibility or according how easily they can be transferred (Bourdieu 1986, 253).

Wood (2014) argues that Bourdieu’s capitals have been a useful analytical tool for examining citizenship participation. However usually researchers draw attention to only one of the capitals. (Wood 2014, 582.) Bourdieu himself insist that the structure and functioning of the social world can be understood only by understanding of capital in all its interrelated forms.

Tran (2015) has studied international students from a Bourdieuan point of view. She constructs student mobility as a product of different social, cultural, and economic structures. In her study economic capital is understood as the financial resource that international students and their family possess and invest in overseas education. Cultural capital is assessed by the international students’ language competence, foreign credentials, work experience and sensibilities. Social capital includes the family’s social status and positional advantage international students’ access. (Tran 2015, 6.)

In my research I see the different capitals in a certain way. Social capital is the amount of social relations and networks the students have during their exchange. It is also the support that they can gain from these new and their old friendships and from their family.

Furthermore, the support from the university or their government is also a form of social capital. Economic capital is their financial situation, which in their situation is their own savings, the Erasmus support or other financial aids and also their family's contribution and help. Cultural capital is the students' overall knowledge and educational background and especially how familiar they are with Finland and the Finnish language.

4.2.1 Social Capital

Social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, or in other words, to membership in a group, which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the work” (Bourdieu 1986, 248–249). The first characteristic of social capital is that “it is a resource connected with group membership and social networks” (Siisiäinen 2000). Social capital is made up of social obligations. The amount of social capital possessed by a given agent is dependent on the size of the network he or she can effectively mobilize and on the amount of the capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed by those whom they are connected (Bourdieu 1986, 243, 249.)

Membership and involvement in social networks can be utilized to improve the social position of the actor (Siisiäinen 2000). People can use investment strategies to create relationship networks. These strategies can be individual or collective and are consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are usable short or long termly. Thus, “the existence of a network of connections is not naturally or socially given, but it is the product of endless effort.” (Bourdieu 1986, 249.) Bourdieu sees social capital as a collective phenomenon, even though it is the perspective of actors who are exploiting its potentialities. Another characteristic of social capital is that it is based on mutual cognition and recognition. To become effective social capital must be transferred into symbolic capital and the differences between groups and classes must be recognized and transformed into meaningful differences. (Siisiäinen 2000.)

Social capital is an economic, sociological, political and geographic concept at the same time. Because social capital is created through interactions with individual or groups it is shaped by the context that they live in. Social capital is beneficial to individuals and communities. (Mohan & Mohan 2002, 192.)

Other researchers have defined social capital in a number of different ways. Putnam sees social capital as a general moral resource of the community that is divided into three components: trust, social norms and obligations and the social networks of citizens' activity. (Siisiäinen 2000.) These social norms and networks can be created through participation in different forms of civic activity (Mohan & Mohan 2002, 192). Putnam stresses the importance of voluntary associations in the development of modern society. With trust Putnam means that when individual actors do something for the general good, they trust that their action will be rewarded from the positive development of communal relations. A well-functioning modern society needs to have a common value basis between persons who are strangers to each other. (Siisiäinen 2000.)

4.2.2 Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is convertible in some conditions into economic capital and it can be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986, 242). Bourdieu first found cultural capital in one of his research where he studied children from different social classes. He found that the unequal scholastic achievement of children originated from their social class. This showed that the distribution of cultural capital between classes and class fractions is uneven since children from different social classes are separated by academic success. (Bourdieu 1986, 243.) Cultural capital can be acquired quite unconsciously. It is depended on the period of time, the society and the social class. Cultural capital has three forms that it can exist in. They are embodied state, objectified state and institutionalized state. (Bourdieu 1986, 243.)

The embodied state of cultural capital can be seen as its most fundamental state. It is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment. This embodied state is external wealth converted into an integral part of the person and cannot be transmitted instantaneously by request or as a gift. It converts into the persons habitus and knowledge. The transmission of embodied cultural capital is dependent on the capital embodied in the whole family. This makes the transmission of cultural capital the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital and it receives greater weight in the system of reproduction. This is because embodied cultural capital is unequally distributed, as so is the resources to acquire more cultural capital through education. (Bourdieu 1986, 244–246.)

The objectified state of cultural capital has a number of properties that are defined only in the relationship with cultural capital's embodied form. Objectified cultural capital is in material object and media for example writings, art and instruments. It is something that can be transferred in its materiality. This is very connected to economic capital, since a collection of paintings can be transferred from parents to the child and this is both cultural capital and economic capital that is being transferred. These cultural goods can be appropriated materially, which is economic capital, or symbolically, which is cultural capital. For actually using these items in accordance to their specific purpose one must have embodied the cultural capital of them. (Bourdieu 1986, 246–247.)

The institutionalized state is the objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications. An academic qualification is a certificate of cultural competence which gives its holder a conventional, constant and legally guaranteed value with respect to culture. By giving institutional recognition on the cultural capital possessed by any given agent as academic qualifications, we can compare qualification holders and even exchange them. This makes it possible to establish conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by giving a monetary value to a given academic capital. (Bourdieu 1986, 247–248.)

4.2.3 Economic Capital

Bourdieu does not give an in-depth definition of economic capital. However, he states “It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the form recognized by economic theory” (Bourdieu 1986, 241). Desai (2013) introduces a possibility that economic capital is something obvious for Bourdieu “where exploitation is transparent, capital has no secrets to betray” and “does not require a conceptual definition separate from the way it appears to native experience” (Desai 2013, 333–335). Therefore, Bourdieu's idea is not to refine the economic definition of this capital, but to show that the capital must be understood as plural. He wants to challenge the common-sense definition of economic capital rather than inventing a new definition. (Neveu 2018, 12.) Economic capital is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights (Bourdieu 1986, 243). All the different types of capital can be derived from economic capital and they are seen as transformed and disguised forms of economic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 252). Economic capital can be any kind of resource that can help the actor. It provides freedom and guarantees for the

actor which can be a form on self-assurance (Bourdieu 1983, 349). Economic capital can be inherited, converted from stock to real estate very quickly or converted to objectified cultural capital. It requires time and understanding of society to be properly converted and its effect be maximized. (Neveu 2018, 13.)

Pinxten and Lievens (2014) used economic capital as a framework in their study about health inequalities. In this context economic capital is easy to convert into use. They distinguish two pathways of economic capital. First the amount of material resources is positively related to health outcomes. Secondly the actual differences in material resources determine the possibility of an individual encountering health problems. Having little economic capital can lower your living standards and cause stress, which can influence your health. (Pinxten & Lievens 2014, 1098.) In their study they confirmed that a low level of economic capital has a negative effect on physical and mental health. That means that there is a positive association between economic capital and measures of health (Pinxten & Lievens 2014, 1106.) This is just one example of economic capital in use, but it gives a good example how it can affect individuals' lives.

Economic capital is the international students own personal resource but also something they bring to their destination. In Yang's (2020) study he explains the significance of Chinese students studying abroad. China is one of the top suppliers of tertiary international students to almost all leading nations in the developed world. International students bring billions of economic capital in to these countries. As China has a leading role in sending students, the economic capital measuring in billions is yearly transferred from China to the Western developed nations. (Yang 2020, 7–8.)

5 Methods

The field of qualitative research is in transition and moving to many different directions at once (Denzin & Lincoln 2018, 1). Qualitative research is seen as a process that has three stages: theory, method and analysis or ontology, epistemology and methodology. In addition, the politics and ethics of the research must be considered in every phase of the research project. (Denzin & Lincoln 2018, 16.)

Most often qualitative research explores questions of personal or social meaning. Qualitative research handles symbol material where there is a lot of room for interpretation. Because of this fact qualitative research is comfortable with the fact that there can be multiple meanings and multiple truths. The process of finding and understanding meaning is a constructive one and during this journey we bring our own individual background to the research and with such the correct meaning of the data loses its appeal. (Schreier 2012, 20–21.) With these facts in mind my research questions are the following:

1. How the (im)mobility during a pandemic affected the students exchange experiences?
 - 1.1 What actions did the exchange students take during Covid-19 pandemic and what factors affected their decisions?
 - 1.2 How the exchange students used their agency to modify their exchange experience during a pandemic?

5.1 Data collection and participants

This study is done as a part of a bigger research project called “Equality, (Im)mobility structures and International students: A study of international students’ experiences during the pandemic in Finland” (University of Turku 2021). When I became a part of this project the research group had already decided on data collection method to be theme interviews. I was given the names of my interviewees, there were 12 names, I contacted all of them but only six replied. I conducted those six interviews myself and also received two interviews from the other researchers, so I have 8 interviews in total. The interviews lasted around 20 to 50 minutes, the average was about 35 minutes. I transcribed the interviews which came to a total of 38 pages of text. All the interviews were performed in the beginning of June 2020.

The interviewees were exchange students who studied in Finland during spring 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic began. They all study in different majors and come from different countries. All the students were female and most of them were from Central Europe, only two were outside of the EU. (Table 1.) Next, you can find a table where I have explained more about the backgrounds of the interviewees. In my analysis I will use a grouping of the students based on whether they left Finland or stayed. In this table you can already see the division, but I will explain this more in the Findings section.

Table 1 "Summary of participants"

Number	Gender	EU/Non-EU	Major	Left/Stayed
1	Female	Non-EU	Environmental studies	Stayed
2	Female	EU	Psychology	Left early
3	Female	EU	Education	Left immediately
4	Female	EU	Education	Stayed
5	Female	EU	Communication	Left early
6	Female	EU	Medicine	Stayed
7	Female	EU	Law	Left immediately
8	Female	Non-EU	Economics	Stayed

The interviews were conducted via Zoom because many of the students had returned to their home countries and we were trying to avoid in-person meetings because of the pandemic. Zoom is a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service. Archibald et al (2019)

researched the feasibility and acceptability of using Zoom to collect qualitative interview as a data collection method. They found that Zoom was a useful method and majority of participants in their study preferred it more than any other platform or in person interviews. Other benefits that they found were its user-friendliness and convenience. There were also some disadvantages such as having difficulty of connecting to the Zoom session. (Archibald et al. 2019, 1–4.) Based on my own experience I would recommend using Zoom as a tool for data collection. I found Zoom to be working really well expect for some connection problems, which were expectable, and in one interview the participants video did not work.

Interview can be relatively structured, relatively unstructured or semi structured. The interviews in this study were semi structured consisting of four different parts: background information, current situation and impacts, future and concluding remarks. Main themes under these four parts were life in general, studies, financial situation, social life, wellbeing, support, and the exchange experience during this unusual time. Semi structured interviews are the most common ones in human and social sciences. It is also equated as qualitative interviewing. Semi structured interviews can use the knowledge producing potentials of dialogues by allowing a free conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. The interviewee has more freedom to become a knowledge producing participant in the situation rather than hiding behind the interview guideline. The interviewer has a chance to focus on matters that are seen important in relation to the research project. (Brinkman 2018, 579.)

Interview is believed to generate useful information about lived experience and its meanings. It is a negotiated text, a place where power, gender, race and class intersect. Interview is the art of asking questions and listening, a conversation. It is not a neutral context and at least two people create the reality in an interview. The interview is always influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewee for example race, class, ethnicity and gender. (Denzin & Lincoln 2018, 519.)

As said this kind of interview should allow a free conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. My own experience was not necessarily the greatest. I conducted one pilot interview before moving on to the actual ones. I was really nervous in almost all of my interviews, at least in the beginning, and I feel like I could have gone more with the flow but mostly I followed quite strictly the interview guideline. The good part is that at least I got an answer to every theme. I could have steered the interview into another direction to be more of a conversation, but I feel like quite many of my interviewees were also not that talkative and I

had to encourage them to go more in depth with their answers. However, I feel like I got enough answers to do a proper analysis and get a picture of the students' situation.

5.2 Data analysis

In this study I will be doing a qualitative content analysis. It is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data (Schreier 2013, 2). This can be done by assigning successive parts of the material into different categories that form a coding frame. Qualitative content analysis is a good option if you have to interpret your data in order to arrive at the meaning. The data never speaks for itself and so the researcher brings their own perception of the material. This meaning that is constructed from the data is always influenced by the researcher's individual background. (Schreier 2012, 1–2.)

Qualitative content analysis has not been a well know method in English speaking countries until recent years (Schreier 2013, 5). Qualitative and quantitative content analysis cannot be totally separated because they both are concerned with the systematic description of data through coding. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is more focused on detailed description of the material under analysis. This method also shares many features with other qualitative research methods like the concern with meaning and interpretation of the material and the importance of context in analyzing the meanings. (Schreier 2013, 5–6.) It does have a few distinctions when compared to with other qualitative methods. Qualitative content analysis focuses on selected aspects and it is not trying to analyze the whole data. It also does not give a holistic interview of the material. (Schreier 2012, 4.)

Qualitative content analysis has three characteristics. First it reduces data. Qualitative content analysis helps reducing the data as you can only focus on selected aspects. In the coding frame you can classify all specific information to one higher category and so you make the material more easily accessible. This way you lose specific information but at the same time create new information yourself. Secondly it is systematic. You examine all the material and decide for each part where in the coding frame it fits. It is important to go through all of the material even if you are not using all of it. Qualitative content analysis has eight steps that should be systematically carried through. There has to be consistency in the research and checking consistency is one way to asses reliability. Thirdly it is flexible as you can tailor your coding frame to your material. Because the coding frame and material have to match,

the researcher can mix concept-driven and data-driven categories in one coding frame. As mentioned, the coding frame should be reliable and also valid. The coding frame is valid if your categories represent your research questions adequately. There is a lot of space for the researcher to use qualitative content analysis as wanted but there are some guidelines that need to be followed and fulfilled. (Schreier 2012, 5–7.)

From the two mentioned categories above, I will be mainly working in a concept-driven way which means basing the categories on previous knowledge for example a theory, previous research or everyday knowledge. It is defined as a deductive strategy that bases new work on previous knowledge. In building my analysis coding frame I will use different theories and previous research. In qualitative research it is more common that the coding frame contains only a few theory-driven categories and the other categories are based on some other prior knowledge or derived from the data. So even when doing a concept-driven analysis it usually cannot be totally based on a theory. It is also beneficial to use previous research. Especially with the coding frame you can adapt categories that were used by other researchers. (Schreier 2012, 85.)

As mentioned earlier qualitative content analysis has a series of steps which are: 1. Deciding on a research question, 2. Selecting material, 3. Building a coding frame, 4. Segmentation, 5. Trial coding, 6. Evaluating and modifying the coding frame, 7. Main analysis, 8. Presenting and interpreting the findings. (Schreier 2013, 6–7.)

These are the basic steps that should be taken when doing a qualitative content analysis. In practice the steps do not necessary work so linearly. In this study I performed steps one and two simultaneously. As I mentioned I got my topic and interviewees handed to me by the research group. After I had performed the interviews, I thought what I want and can find from them. I decided on my first research questions and started to select what I want to include from the interviews. However, my research questions changed many times before they got to their finalized state. So basically, I selected the material before I was set on my final research questions.

After this I started to form my coding frame. Building a coding frame consists of selecting material, structuring and generating categories, defining categories, revising and expanding the frame (Schreier 2013, 7). At this stage I had narrowed down my material and what I want to focus on. As I am doing a concept driven analysis, the next step was to go through my theory to find ways to categories my findings. I am doing two parts in my analysis which each

focus on one of my sub questions. In the first part of my analysis I found my main categories from the theory and then added subcategories that I created myself. This means my main categories are theory-driven and my subcategories are data-driven. My main categories are based on Mazzarol & Soutar's (2002) research where they studied the push and pull factors that affected international students' decision to study abroad and in which country. Under these I have subcategories or what I call factors that are derived from the interviews. In this first part I have also analyzed these factors in relation to Bourdieu's social, economic and cultural capital. The second part of my analysis is based solely on concept-driven categories from Tran and Vu's (2018) research where they defined four aspects of international student agency which are agency for becoming, needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance, and collective agency for contestation. I chose their categories because they applied really well to my research as well. I performed the two different parts of my analysis separately, so I went through all these steps twice with both parts of my analysis.

After choosing my categories I started to define them. The definitions should consist of four parts: naming, a description, positive examples and decision rules (Schreier 2013, 10). I named all the categories and then explained what they consist of. In each category I have citations from the interviews as positive examples to illustrate what the category is all about. The fourth step, decision rules, is optional and it is needed if some categories may have overlaps and they should be separated from each other by decision rules (Schreier 2013, 11). I did not have this kind of situation while doing my analysis.

Stages four to seven are designed for a wider study where there are much more categories than in my study and to research papers that should be peer evaluated. In addition, there should be another researcher who could check the validity of my coding frame. I have evaluated my coding frame to make sure it is clear and straight forward, and it describes what it is meant to. I modified the names a few times, so they match the description and my research questions better. I have gone through these steps as well as I can by myself. In the final steps of the main analysis the results should be prepared so that they are suitable for answering the research question (Schreier 2013, 14). This I have performed at the end of each analysis part as I have answered my research questions clearly and gathered my findings together.

The last step is presenting the findings. In qualitative content analysis the coding frame itself can be the main result. (Schreier 2013, 14.) As my coding frame consist of broad definitions

and citations it presents my findings as well. I have added text matrices in between my categories that illustrate the findings more. In my last chapter I have examined the findings and further explored the data. In the last chapter I also conclude everything together and answer my main research question.

5.3 Trustworthiness and ethics of the research

A common problem in naturalistic studies is proving its significance. That is why examining the trustworthiness of a research is important. Trustworthiness has conventionally been divided into four criteria that a researcher can impose on themselves to prove their study. These criteria are internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 290.) However, these criteria are difficult to apply to qualitative research. Lincoln & Guba (1985) have created alternative trustworthiness criteria for naturalistic research which are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Next, I will look through these concepts in relations to my own study. At the end of this chapter I will also address the limitation and ethics of this study.

Credibility refers to the truth of the data and the interpretation of it by the researcher. The description of human experiences should be recognized by individuals that share the same experiences. If this is true, qualitative research can be considered credible. To show credibility the researcher should demonstrate engagement and methods of observation. (Cope 2014, 89.) This research will not apply to the whole population, but for the group of exchange students during Covid-19 the experiences are probably quite similar. I have attached my interview guideline in the appendix. There you can see what was asked of the interviewees and that it does correlate with my findings. Furthermore, my study includes all steps of a scientific research method and is as transparent as possible.

Transferability can be compared to external validity, but it is not achievable in naturalistic research. Since the findings of qualitative research are specific to a small number of environments and individuals the results cannot be applied to a wider population. (Shenton 2004, 69.) The only thing the researcher can do is give a good enough description of the research context that transferability can be contemplated as a possibility. To achieve transferability the researcher has to provide the data base that makes transferability judgements possible for the potential applicators. However, what is good enough description is

not completely resolved and is at the hands of the researcher. In this description there should be the minimum elements needed but still be provided the widest possible range of information. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 316.) The results of qualitative research must be understood within the particular context it was made. To be able to assess the extent which findings may be true in other settings, there should be similar projects using the same methods but in different environments. (Shenton 2004, 70.) In this study the time and context where my interviews were executed cannot be replicated so in this sense this study is unique. My findings are very connected to this context and they cannot be moved to another context without a proper explanation.

Dependability is concerned with how consistent the data is. This could be done by replicating the research steps in similar participants and conditions by another researcher. Through the researcher's process and description, a study could be seen to be dependable. (Cope 2014, 89.) As I just mentioned the context of this study is unique so it cannot be replicated exactly. In this study I have explained in detail about the data collection and analysis methods so this study could be done in another context, even if the results will not be similar.

Confirmability is comparable to objectivity. It refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the findings represent the participants responses and not the researcher's own views. The researcher can show confirmability by describing how the results were established and for example using quotes from the data. (Cope 2014, 89.) This is exactly what I have done in this research. In the next chapter you can find quotes from the interviewees that explain my interpretations. As for my own position as a researcher I have examined through the concept of objectivity. Objectivity in some contexts means being fair and open to all sides of the argument. A researcher should be objective in her views and methods and have objective knowledge. To do an objective study is to do something that is not primarily about ourselves. Complete objectivity is not possible, but it is a goal to be as objective as possible. (Eisner 1992, 9.)

My own position in relation to this topic is a bit tricky. As I mentioned I was an exchange student in the spring of 2020 and had to go back home in the middle of my exchange. I was really bitter and disappointed in this situation and still felt this way when I started my interviews. At first, I was really angry and felt like there was no support in this situation from anyone. However, while doing the interviews I saw that other people had the same kind of experiences and at least a few of my interviewees were also really disappointed and frustrated

with their situation. Doing this research and talking to other people who have gone through the exact same things, really helped me to put all my feelings away and accept what has happened. Furthermore, the whole pandemic situation continuing so long has put everything into perspective for me. I think my own experience and opinions have not affected my research objectivity, because I could put my own feelings aside and listen to those of others. I see it as a strength that I have my own experience in this matter because that has made me really passionate about this topic and research. As Eisner (1992) states experience is a form of human achievement and any particular framework provides a special value to a research (13).

Ethical issues are present in any kind of research. However, qualitative research rarely faces ethical failures, as long as ethical issues are addressed. (Orb et al. 2000, 93.) My interviewees had shared their willingness to participate in an interview even before I contacted them. Thus, my study is based on the participants willingness to share their experiences. Many of the students even mentioned how important this is to them that someone is interested in their experience. In my interview guideline there are some more difficult questions that refer to the mental health of the students. These questions can be a bit questionable depending on the state of the interviewee and how they were feeling about this situation. I handled every interview differently and if the interviewee did not seem to want to share that much, I did not ask them certain questions or push them to go over their limit. They could share as much as they wanted to without any pressure.

The privacy of the participants and their answers is ethically important. The interviews are coded in such way there is no identifying facts left and the information given about the students in this study is just as much as is necessary. Before the interview the students were mandated to read the privacy notice and accept it. The transcriptions were stored safely where there is little to no threat of leakage of information. The last ethical issue in this study that I will point out, is my own interpretations of the data. I have tried to interpret it as neutral and transparent as possible. All the citations are original, and my observations are based on them. As I talked about my own relation to this topic, I think it has actually helped with the interpretation of the data more truthfully. I can understand the experiences and their points more easily than someone without any similar experience. In conclusion there are some ethical issues to acknowledge while doing this study, but they do not limit the making of this research.

There are still some other limitations in this study. First, as I already mentioned, this study cannot be reflected to the whole population or even to all international students. This is a very specific group of exchange students during a pandemic. Furthermore, as it is only students who studied in Finland, other students studying in different countries might have different experiences. Second limitation is the fact that this study cannot be replicated like this. The conditions where the interviews were conducted, at the start of a global pandemic, are hopefully not coming again very soon. I also hope that all the parties involved learn something from this situation and are ready for the next time. Furthermore, as Covid-19 is still relatively new there is not much research about this topic yet. New research is rolling out all the time, so the field is slowly growing. A limitation connected to the interview situation is the fact that neither my or the students' first language is English. This means there could have been some misunderstandings on both sides. In addition, while I was transcribing the interviews, I had a few parts where I had trouble understanding the interviewees either because of the language or from the poor internet connection. Regarding my interviewees it would have been interesting to have both genders in my research, but I do not think that would have made much of a difference to the findings. Even though there are some limitations they are mainly connected to the possibility to repeat this study and not connected to my findings which I will move on to next.

6 Findings

6.1 Student's actions and background factors

First thing to acknowledge from the interviews is what did the exchange students do: leave or stay in Finland. This decision dictates their answers later because the exchange experience is not the same when you are not in the country anymore. The students can be divided into three different categories based on their actions that I will look at first. The course of action that they took was dependent on many different factors. These factors can be divided into categories that are explained later. Also, the student's decisions had some consequences that were either positive or negative. The quotations that will be presented in this chapter are direct speech from the interviewees. However, I have corrected some errors from their speech to make it easier to understand.

First group, which consists of two students, were the ones that stayed in Finland but still left earlier than was their original plan. These students really wanted to stay and had planned to spend some time after their studies exploring Finland during the summer. However, when the pandemic got worse and their studies were moved online and everything was cancelled, they decided it was not worth it to stay in Finland anymore. They still stayed in Finland for about one to two months after the pandemic started. These students described their decisions as follows:

“Actually, I planned to stay a little longer. My previous plan was to stay till the end of June, but due to the whole situation, due to the fact that we had a really noisy construction site in front of our building in Finland I decided to leave early because there were no longer possibilities for journeys.” (2, EU, Left early)

“I left Finland early, I was supposed to leave in May, but I finished my studies because I could do everything by remote teaching.” (5, EU, Left early)

The second group has two students who left almost immediately when the Covid-19 situation got bad. For both of them the decision was really hard, and the journey back home was really hectic and unsure. For these students the possibility to finish the semester online was a factor that made it easier to go back home. This interviewee explained her situation:

“It was a really hard decision to go home. The students from France were called to come back and there were only a few people left and like I didn’t really have friends in Finland at that point like of course all my Erasmus friends, but they needed to go home, and I didn’t want to stay there on my own, so I decided to go home. So, it was not about the university itself but more about the people who left.” (3, EU, Left immediately)

The third group, which is the largest one, has four students and they were the only ones that stayed their whole exchange period. The biggest reason to stay for most of them were their own will to stay. They were not ready to give up on their exchange experience. All of them mentioned that the Covid-19 situation in Finland was much better than in their home country and that they were safer staying in Finland rather than travelling back. A fear for these students was the possibility to get infected while travelling back home and then infecting their friends and family.

“I didn’t feel the need to go home as the cases in Finland were really low all the time and the cases in (their home country) were much higher most of the time and even though the university was only online then I still wanted to live in Finland and explore the country and I was not ready to leave.” (6, EU, Stayed)

“It’s easier for me to stay here rather than be infected during the travel back home because it is such a long journey and I don’t think it is safe for me at the time to travel back home.” (1, Non-EU, Stayed)

The reasons why the students left or stayed can be divided into push and pull factors. Push factors are reasons why the students decided to leave Finland and pull factors are the things that were “pulling” them to stay here. The idea to use push and pull factors to explain the student’s actions was taken from Mazzarol & Soutar’s (2002) research about the push and pull factors that affect student’s decision to study abroad. I already mentioned a few factors but below you can find a table that shows all of them. After examining these factors through push and pull point of view I have furthermore examined them through Bourdieu’s capitals because they also made a difference between the students.

Table 2 “Push and Pull factors”

Push factors	Pull factors
Having to stay at home	Own will to stay
Online teaching	The risks of travelling back home
Friends leaving	Having friends in Finland
Recommended return	Support from different sources
Unsure financial situation	Apartment contract
Finnish language skills	Knowledge about Finland

Possibly the biggest reason for the students to stay or leave was the fact if they still had friends in Finland. In this kind of crisis no one wanted to be alone. The peer support the students could get from one another was priceless. No one else could understand their situation and help with making a decision like the people who are in the same situation. One student described that even though she was stuck in Finland she was fine because of her friends:

“No actually I’m stuck here until 1st of July and I’m still here even my studies finished. I’m a little bit bored but at the same time I have lots of friends, I still have my Erasmus friends and we are with them all the time so it’s nice right now.” (8, Non-EU, Stayed)

One student left earlier because her boyfriend was visiting her and they got the announcement that all travel forms were starting to shut down, so she decided to leave with him. Her decision was heavily influenced by the fact that everyone else was leaving or had left already. She described her decision:

“I think if one or two of my roommates had still been in Finland I would’ve stayed as well. Because everyone left in such a rush, we didn’t really have a chance to say goodbye. I thought it doesn’t matter anyway now I can’t do anything I might as well go home at least I still have family there.” (5, EU, Left early)

Another student had made some Finnish friends before the pandemic and she could continue interaction with them even though almost all international students left back to their homes.

“The interactions with international students nearly fell away and I was lucky that I already met Finns before the outbreak, and which all stayed of course in Finland and I still met them two times a week maybe.” (6, EU, Stayed)

The second factor that was stated most often was the support and information from different sources. Most of the students said they talked with their family about what to do but mostly the students made the decision by themselves.

“We talked with my parents how to do this and we had many discussions about it and then we just decided, because I really liked the things here (Finland) and I didn’t want to give up even if it was a really hard situation and on the other hand I thought that I’m in a really good place.” (4, EU, Stayed)

Different universities had really different responses to the pandemic. Through the interviews it was obvious that the Finnish universities had better information and support systems than the students home universities.

“First, I considered going back earlier because the whole situation was, so I don’t know, it felt so insecure first because for me personally from my home university I didn’t receive any information on what to do. I just got the information from the Finnish university that they are closing the building and the teaching will continue via remote teaching.” (2, EU, Left early)

“We got really good information from the university.” (3, EU, Left immediately)

Every country also responded differently to this crisis. Many interviewees were from Central Europe and the general consensus from their answers was that their home countries mostly recommended students to stay in Finland because the pandemic situation here was much better. There were big differences between different countries and their instructions to the students abroad. A student described the situation:

“We were not forced to return but they said (the embassy) we should return home when it’s still possible because they didn’t know how the situation was going to evolve.” (7, EU, Left immediately)

These factors above are related to friends and support. The factors can also be seen as social capital. The amount of social capital possessed by a given agent is dependent on the size of the network of connections he or she can effectively mobilize (Bourdieu 1986, 249). As said

if a person had friends in Finland they would probably stay. The more the student's had social capital the more likely they stayed. The support and advice from family and other sources are also a part of their social capital. Siisiäinen (2000) describes that the first characteristic of social capital is that it is a resource connected with group membership and social networks. During the pandemic social capital is definitely a resource and the amount one possesses makes a difference. Regardless of if they stayed or left home all of the students still stayed connected with their friends and family back home as well as with their new exchange friends. Virtual connection has become even more important during Covid-19 pandemic and it is a way of keeping your social resources even in a time when you cannot see other people. However, the interviews show that online connections cannot replace seeing others and many of the students exclaimed how lonely they had felt at least during some point during the spring.

“I had periods when I felt really lonely and lost somehow because the only connection to other people was your laptop and you don't really know what to do and when you're in a foreign country I think this dependence to technical devices is even stronger because you don't have a trusted surrounding and everything is like not so familiar to you.” (2, EU, Left early)

One of the push factors was uncertainty about financial situation. This uncertainty comes from the student's own savings or about the travelling or living expenses. None of the students were working in Finland while studying and they got to keep their scholarships so in the end their income was secured. Many students mentioned how their grocery bill went up because they could not eat at the school cafeterias anymore. This together with the cost of flights back home were the biggest expenditures for them. Two students mentioned that either the Erasmus programme or their home university might help them out with the cost of the plane ticket back home but both of them were unsure if this was going to actually happen. A student described the flight situation:

“Also, when I went home of course it wasn't the cheapest flight you could get just two or three flight left so that was also a huge part of the money that was just gone for the flight.” (3, EU, Left immediately)

The Erasmus support is really important for exchange students. From the interviews I got the perception that Erasmus did not handle the situation in the best way. At the end all the

students got their Erasmus support even if they left Finland but for many it was a big factor on deciding whether to leave or stay.

“The main worry for many students was if they leave now for their homeplaces, would they still get their Erasmus support money because it was said you get the first four aids when you go there and then you ask for one more when you finish your studies.”
(5, EU, Left early)

On the other side of this some students even saved money because all their trips were cancelled. It is common for exchange students to save a lot of money beforehand for their study abroad period for trips and other experiences. Another thing where some students saved money, was not going to parties and buying alcohol. However, this was only mentioned by two students so for most of them it had not been a big part of their exchange.

“I saved a lot of money because actually I didn’t spend that much money before and I received a lot of money back from the journeys that were cancelled. So yeah it was still really stable as I said I could still save money during the situation.” (2, EU, Left early)

For one student a pull factor to stay in Finland was her apartment contract. Two other students said that they had to pay for their rent for one month even when they had left Finland. All these factors are a part of economic capital. Economic capital can be any kind of resource that can help the actor. It provides freedom and guarantees for the actor which can be a form on self-assurance. (Bourdieu 1983, 349.) The interviews show that the more insecure the students were about their economic capital the more likely they went home. The students who received money back from their earlier trips were happy to stay in Finland and use the money to take trips close to their home. Good financial situation was reassuring to the students that they had the means to get back home if they needed but they could also provide for themselves if they have to stay longer in Finland. Students without enough economic capital did not have this choice. However, with having said this based on the interviews economic capital was not the most defining feature of the student’s actions.

For a few students their knowledge about Finland seemed to make a big difference. Every student mentioned that the Covid-19 situation was a lot better in Finland than in their home country and that is why they possibly stayed. During spring 2020 the Covid-19 situation was really bad in Central Europe where most of the interviewees were from. So, this is no surprise

that most of them did not want to go back to their homes because comparing these countries to Finland they could live pretty freely here. In addition, the students were reliant about the Finnish health care system. Two students mentioned that as a reason that made them stay:

“I’m in good place so even if I get it (Covid-19), I’m in the Finnish hospital.” (4, EU, stayed)

“In (home country) if you want to get good health care you have to pay a lot but in here if you’re a student and I’m in the student union it was barely nothing.” (8, Non-EU, Stayed)

One student especially talked about how she sees the Finnish government and she really trusted it during this crisis. She explains how things in her home country are so different and you cannot see what the government is doing like you can in Finland. She put things into perspective as she explains how she heard that the Finnish government is for example fighting over environmental issues as other countries are fighting against terrorism and other more serious aspects.

“I don't know I guess it's a thing in my mind I conceptualize the Finnish government really high in my governmental ranking. You can really understand what the government is doing for you, so I really didn't have doubts about the government at all and I was pretty chill about it.” (8, Non-EU, Stayed)

One student who left back home, mentioned that informing the exchange students was handled poorly at first. She did not know almost any Finnish language and all the e-mails about the Covid-19 situation and its effects came in Finnish. It would have been really important to give accurate information from the beginning because the students who left were leaving almost immediately and without proper information, I can see how difficult it must have been.

“When everything came out (e-mails) it was all in Finnish so I couldn't understand any of that maybe “Kiitos” and so a day later they also upgraded it to English so it now I kind of knew what was going on.” (3, EU, Left immediately)

The two categories “knowledge about Finland” and “Finnish language skills” are examples of the effect of cultural capital. The more knowledge a student had about Finland or the Finnish language the more likely they stayed. These factors can be roughly categorized into embodied

cultural capital as it converts into the persons habitus and knowledge. Cultural capital can be acquired quite unconsciously and often it is unequally distributed. (Bourdieu 1986, 243–246.) These factors can be acquired more with education and through social capital such as family and friends. Even though cultural capital is harder to transfer into action its impact can really be seen in the student's actions as the knowledge about Finland is one of the most important factors in the student's decision to stay or leave.

Now I have explained all the factors that the students were affected by and that helped them make a decision. The decision these students made also had some consequences which I will look at next. I will also explain how this pandemic situation affected their studies and future plans.

As mentioned earlier at the time of the interviews two students were stuck in Finland without a sure way of getting home. This was a straight consequence of their decision to stay in Finland. They both had plans on how and when to get back home but it was still very unsure, since the flights were cancelled many times. Unfortunately, I cannot know if and when they made it back home.

Three students who left earlier than they were supposed to reported that it was a good decision. They could go straight to their home university's new semester as it starts in different time than in Finland. This could possibly help them graduate earlier but they were a bit unsure because of the online teaching.

“I was able to start my masters earlier than I was supposed to so normally the semester starts in April and the semester in Finland ends in May so it would have been an overlap but now I was able to leave Finland and then go straight into the (home country) semester so that was pretty cool and because of that I maybe will not study as long as usual.” (3, EU, Left immediately)

Due to the pandemic, some of the students faced consequences that could affect their future. One student had considered doing her PhD in Finland but is now reconsidering because this kind of situation shows how hard it is to get back home. Three students said that they either already had an internship and it was cancelled or they were supposed to get an internship after returning but right now they could not because no one was hiring. This could postpone their studies and affect at least their own plan that they had in mind. The students saw that the

pandemic would not probably affect their future that much or they could not anticipate the effects yet.

In conclusion, the students had three courses of action: to either leave immediately, leave early or stay in Finland. The factors that affected their decisions were related to social, economic and cultural capitals. Other factors were related to the pandemic such as having to stay at home and the initial panic the pandemic caused. The main reasons to stay were connected to the student's social networks and their own will to stay. Even though I can separate different factors that apply to almost all the students, it must be remembered that every one of the students had an individual experience in this situation and different things guided them to make their decisions.

6.2 International student agency during a pandemic

In the previous chapter, I have focused on what the students did when the pandemic started and what affected their decisions. Next, I will look at particularly those students who stayed in Finland during the pandemic. These students had a unique exchange experience even when it was really different from what they had planned. Also, those who left had some experiences from Finland during the pandemic through online learning. I will consider the students' agentic actions and how they made their exchange experience the best it could be under these circumstances. Agency is something the students need in order to make their own decisions and help them along their journey. They have their own agency, but they can also have collective agency. Especially for exchange students their collective agency is really important because you need peer support in a difficult situation. Agency can be found from the interviews in many ways and in the student's everyday lives. I have examined these students' experiences and the use of agency through Tran and Vu's (2018) international student agency concepts. The concepts are agency for becoming, needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance, and collective agency for contestation.

The student's active engagement in constructing his or her own life course is at the core of agency for becoming (Tran & Vu 2018, 175). I see agency for becoming in my study as the student's way of constructing their experience and taking responsibility of their life in a foreign country. Marginson (2014) defines international students as self-determining people who are guided by agency freedom. Everyone is engaged in continuous self-formation, but in

international students the role of agency is more apparent. The students have high autonomy because they live far from their family. This means they can, and they have to make their own decision in relation to what is possible in the situation. When the pandemic first hit many of the students were a bit isolated and unsure what they could do. For one student her reaction to this time was acceptance: “I guess this is just how it is now.” (5) After a while they took matters in their own hands and started to plan other experiences. As all abroad trips were cancelled the students shifted their travel plans to travel inside Finland and specifically close to their home town.

“I actually planned to go on a lot of other trips. I wanted to go to Sweden and to Russia also and still cover some other parts of Finland and this was no longer possible. But then I started to explore the surroundings of Turku all the national parks and nature which was really easily possible, and I was actually really surprised about that.” (2, EU, Left early)

“Because of the virus I actually get to know and go around in the country. So it’s actually pretty bad when you think about the virus outbreak but at the same time when you look on the bright side you have a lot of time and you’re in a very beautiful country and this encouraged people to go around so I really got the chance to go around a lot so I really appreciate that actually.” (8, Non-EU, Stayed)

All the students who stayed in Finland for a while or stayed their whole exchange time, said that they had other experiences that had not been planned before and they were really happy with those replacement experiences. They got different kind of experiences that they had not thought about before. As many of the students live in Europe, they still have the chance to travel in Europe quite easily, so maybe it was better this way when they really got to know Finland better than they had expected.

“This (travelling in Finland) was a good kind of compensation in the end I was really fine with this and with the fact that the other journeys were cancelled.” (2, EU, Left early)

The second concept, needs-response agency, emerges from a specific need or demand that is unique for the international students (Tran & Vu 2018, 177). In Tran and Vu’s research needs-response agency emerged mostly in the students different learning needs and in relation to their cultural identity. In my interviews needs-response agency is seen a bit different. Because

of the global emergency and a state of crisis in the student's lives they learned to live a new normal through practicing their needs-response agency. A common theme during spring 2020 for everyone, not just the international students, was having to stay at home. Not being able to go to the university or having those planned exchange experiences must have been a difficult time. The students described that the exchange part between student's kind of fell away. The students could not see each other as much and many left back home. At first when the pandemic situation was so new and unsure the students did not want to go anywhere: "I chose to stay at home." (8) and "I'm afraid of the contamination" (1).

Half of the students reported feeling lonely and desperate sometimes having to stay at home. However, this loneliness awakened their needs-response agency and after the first shock they started to see other students and also interact with their friends back home through online platforms. A few students mentioned that they needed to make more effort to see their friends.

"I think the major change is that I didn't go to the university anymore because this was like the connection point for every exchange student and of course you sometimes saw other exchange students in the dorm but you were more on your own than before because you didn't have this place to go to see other people and to eat together and plan the rest of the day together." (2, EU, Left early)

As I mentioned needs-response agency can be awakened through learning needs. I thought that this would have been the case with the interviewees. However, all of the interviewees, regardless of whether they stayed or left, really complimented how the Finnish universities handled the online learning situation. All the classes were moved to online form in the course of one weekend. The universities really supported the students and the teachers replied to e-mails usually during the same day. This was a surprising fact for the students, and they compared this to how things are in their home country.

"I think in Finland schools closed on Friday and on Monday I had my first online meeting which for me was really surprising because I'm not used to this digital learning stuff and I was surprised how well the university had handled the situation." (3, EU, Left immediately)

"I hear from my home students that in (home country) especially the professors still don't got a hang of it, still trying to organize stuff and don't know how the network works and I think that it was best I was here (Finland) because just the technical

situation was so much better and people were more used to it than in (home country).”
(5, EU, Left early)

The third concept, agency as struggle and resistance comes into play when there is a problematic or otherwise tough situation. Generally, while living in a foreign country, international students face a lot of unfavorable situations. Furthermore, a global pandemic adds more hardship that can make everyday life a real struggle. The first difficult situation that the students faced was the decision to leave or stay. This I have already explained in the last chapter. Regardless of what their own decision was all the students mentioned how hard it was to stay calm when everyone else around them was hurrying to leave home and their friends left.

“Because everyone left in such a rush, we didn’t really have a chance to say goodbye”
(5, EU, Left early)

“I was thinking that everyone is leaving but it would have been nice to know how many were staying in Finland.” (3, EU, Left immediately)

Most of the students contacted their home university or their government to get information on what they should do. They were really active in learning all of the facts and information they could get before making a decision. This is an act where they use their agency to make tough decisions and get all the facts straight to survive from this kind of situation. The students got some recommendations from their home university or government but for the most part they were left to themselves. One student mentioned how she took matters into her own hands by avoiding the media and news all the time because she realized it was not good for her. This was a conscious move to make a bad situation a bit better.

“I actually stopped (watching the media) after a point because when I was following it, I was always checking the number like how many new cases got today, how many deaths, how many got well or something, but it was only making me depressed.” (8, Non-EU, Stayed)

International students rely heavily on their social networks during an exchange. In a study made by Sinanan and Gomes (2019) they found that international students saw their friends as immediate family while they were abroad (Sinanan & Gomez 2019, 680). That’s where collective agency is formed. Collective agency refers to the capacity where the goal is to solve complex problems by working with others. Collective agency can also be about creating

purposeful relationships and strengthen groups. (Tran & Vu 2016, 181.) No one can understand the students better than those in the same situation. Everyone's pandemic experience was different, but these students had at least something in common. Some of them lost their exchange experience totally and some had to adjust it with their own actions. The students who stayed in Finland formed even tighter groups and support systems between other students. One student mentioned that she thinks that because of the virus she made much stronger friendships than she could have ever hoped for from an exchange period. Especially Erasmus students were mentioned and how well they helped each other in this situation that only they could understand.

“I still have my Erasmus friends and we are with them all the time.” (8, Non-EU, Stayed)

“I think I wasn't much worried because you know Erasmus people are usually more easygoing and everything so this whole atmosphere let us to go through more easily through this pandemic.” (4, EU, Stayed)

As mentioned earlier the student's main reason to stay or leave was their friends. The students used their collective agency to make a decision together, even if they did not really think of it as a collective decision. Friends can act as an informal source of knowledge and support that complement the formal ones such as the university (Sinanan & Gomes 2020, 678). There really cannot be an exchange experience by yourself, so if many people left it is natural that all the rest left too. In this quote you can see how the decisions of others affected the decision of this interviewee:

“I was wanting to stay but everyone around me left so I thought okay now it doesn't matter.” (5, EU, Left early)

In conclusion to answer how the students used their agency is not so simple. The four ways the students used agency were agency for becoming, needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance, and collective agency for contestation. The students changing their travel plans and staying mobile is a way of using agency for becoming. They constructed their own life course through the resources that were available at the moment. The student's needs-response agency awakened when they felt lonely and started to have more social contacts and planning things to do. As the pandemic was and still is a problematic situation the students used their agency to make a decision whether to stay or leave. They also used it to get all the

information available to them to possibly make the right decision. All the students said that they were happy with their decision, even if it had some consequences or they were disappointed with the whole situation. The student's collective agency had a huge impact on their actions and the whole exchange experience. Their friends who are in the same situation are the only ones who can truly understand what they are going through and how they are feeling.

7 Discussion and conclusion

Otero (2008) has found that the importance of an “international experience” or the “Erasmus experience” is a great motivator and highly appreciated by students (137). The main theme in this study has been the experiences of the exchange students. My main research question was “How the (im)mobility during a pandemic affected the students exchange experiences?”. I have studied this through my sub research questions and in connection to the theory.

Generally, this study gives information about the lived realities of exchange students and their experiences during a pandemic. These students exchange experience differs from other exchange students before them. In a sense they had a really unique experience that no one else can understand.

To answer my research question, we have to look at my sub research questions first. The first question was “What actions did the exchange students take during Covid-19 pandemic and what factors affected their decisions?” The first finding from this study is the course of action the students took which was that they either left immediately, left earlier than they were first planning or stayed through their whole exchange time. The factors that affected their decision were personal or connected to other people or institutions. The factors could also be divided into economic, social and cultural capital based on how the factor impacted their decision. I was surprised how much the capitals influenced the students as they made decisions based on the amount of capital they possessed at the moment.

To look at these groups experiences those students who left immediately did not really have an exchange experience after they returned home. They talked with some of their exchange friends online and participated in online learning, but their actual experience ended when they left Finland and at the same time ending their mobility period. These students were physically immobile but them participating in the online learning of Finnish universities makes them a part of the student mobility network. People can be mobile in different ways and the students who left tried their best to still finish their exchange by participating in online learning and connecting to their exchange friends.

All the other students who stayed in Finland, experienced immobility as all their trips were cancelled. They did not let this get them down and they soon continued their mobility in a more short-distanced way. As mentioned, the students explored Finland and everything it has to offer. Either they planned actual trips or just incorporated the Finnish nature into their daily

routine. The students still saw their friends and participated in some activities that the Erasmus network offered. They used their resources and their own agency to make their exchange experience the best it could be under the circumstances. These students' who stayed did not see that their exchange experience was ruined by the pandemic, it only changed things and maybe even for the better for some of them.

My second question was "How the exchange students used their agency to modify their exchange experience during a pandemic?" The students use of their own agency had an impact to their exchange experience. They used their own agency and their collective agency. They did what felt to be the best decision for themselves, but many of them made their decision in relation to what others did. Those who stayed, modified their plans and their everyday lives to fit this new normal. They still did their school work and got all the credits they were meant to get from their time abroad. In the mean time they found ways to meet their friends and see Finland and their surroundings. The students really took responsibility of themselves and their experience and used their agency in many ways to have a good exchange experience. For many of the students this was probably the only chance to study abroad and they did not want to give up on it, if it is not absolutely necessary

However, it must be recognized that the students used agency in different extents and some student were more agentic than others. Still every student used their agency in some capacity. The usage of agency is vital in constructing an exchange experience especially during this pandemic. Usually there is a lot of events and trips to go to but right now there was nothing. With their own agency the students could direct and construct their unique exchange experience. This shows how adaptive people can be and transform with the situation. The fact that the students were happy with their replacement experiences shows something about the nature of a study abroad period. Everyone always talks about the travelling and parties and other exciting experiences. Still at the heart of an exchange is the everyday lives and the friends you make. While studying abroad you create these lived realities and kind of separate from your normal life for a while. An exchange can be as good even if you do not get the "normal" exchange experiences everyone is raving about. After the first shock was over the students seemed to have adapted to these new conditions pretty well. Of course, there was still uncertainty and frustration left, but these are feelings everyone was going through at this time and not just specifically exchange students.

Something that was mentioned through all the interviewees was how well the Finnish school system transferred online in one weekend. I was surprised by this fact because the Finnish university students were not so impressed by the whole online learning situation. We are so used to our great school quality and the online connections working so well that we expected everything to work immediately. However, for the exchange students it was a huge surprise. Especially students from Central Europe were really impressed and explained how in their home country it took a few weeks to get everything running and with bad internet connection things are still not working. It is interesting to hear from the Finnish education system from someone else's point of view, because Finnish people often forget how well it is working. Studying is also a part of an exchange experience, but it is often disregarded because of all other aspects of an exchange. It was important that the Finnish school system could continue teaching so rapidly and so well because studying and learning in a different country is an experience in itself, even if it happens online.

One aspect that I want to bring up from the results is equality. I have not straightly researched equality amongst the students, but it is easy to see this aspect from the findings. For example, a few students were worried about their financial situation and the Erasmus support, so they were worried about their economic capital. That was one factor affecting their decision to leave and interrupt their exchange. Some students said that their parents are financially helping them or that they have a lot of savings that could help them if they get stuck in Finland or have to buy new plane tickets for example. Another factor creating inequality between the students was the amount of support from the Finnish universities that the students got. Different universities handled the situation differently and some helped the students more than others. That was also a factor that weighed in on their decision to leave or stay. As this study is focusing on the exchange experience some of these students did not even get to have an experience. Of course, it was their own decision to leave, but various unequal factors were behind these decisions.

Bourdieu's capitals are also connected to equality. The more capital a person has the better they survive in a certain field. As mentioned above the more economic capital a student possessed the more likely they stayed. It is researched that the expenses during and Erasmus period are higher than they would be living in the student's home country (Otero, 2008, 143). In a times of crisis people need to feel safe and taken care of and money is one huge aspect in achieving that. The main reason why the students stayed was their friends and their own will. This refers to a feeling of belonging in some group or community, which is a part of social

capital. The exchange experience is shaped in transnational social fields together with other exchange students. In case there were no exchange students left to interact with, it is hard to create a fulfilling exchange experience. Furthermore, cultural capital has its part in creating inequality among the students since it is often distributed unequally, and it is hard to require. As stated earlier cultural capital transfers from one's family and it is connected to academic success and overall knowledge. All these three capitals together show the impact of socio-economic background in constructing inequality and which has also affected the students exchange experience. This shows that this pandemic has really brought out the inequalities between people and their resources. In general Erasmus students come from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds, but the situation has changed slowly (Otero, 2008, 150). If the students possessed a lot of all these three capitals, they probably had a better exchange experience and they had an easier time to make a decision about staying and changing their plans.

When examining the results, it must be remembered that there were only eight participants in this study. The result cannot be straightly applied to all exchange students since this is a small portion of them. It still gives insight about their situation which has been unknown to many. With this in mind these results can be used by the universities international services, to see and understand what the exchange students went through. This study reveals what was done well and what could be improved in the future. By having data from this crisis, the universities can plan for new support systems and practises for the future. Based on this study, there is a need for better support for exchange students. The participants in this study were fairly happy with the support from Finnish universities, but there is still room for improvements. Furthermore, the Erasmus network needs to be more informant and supportive and ready to handle these unfamiliar and challenging situations in the future. It would be beneficial to form a uniform plan between universities and even countries because during this pandemic all the students got different instructions and information. At least there should be a plan for individual countries on what their guidelines are. Even though universities are independent institutions, their own plans of actions might not always be efficient. I think Afsahi et al. (2020) summarizes the situation well by saying "the global spread of the virus has created a unique opportunity for shared learning around the world" (Afsahi et al. 2020, vi). Already there can be seen innovation within the education sector such as distance learning solutions, so this crisis also highlights the promising future of learning and the endless possibilities of development (United Nations 2020, 2).

The findings from this study are useful if another crisis similar to Covid-19 should occur and probably will in the future. All in all, this study gives valuable knowledge about the exchange students position in Finland and about their lived realities. As this study is a part of the bigger research project “Equality, (Im)mobility structures and International students: A study of international students’ experiences during the pandemic in Finland”, the results from all the research papers together will provide more knowledge in a wider context. The research project gives valuable information from different international student groups and their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the research group there is already a second interview round going on. A few other researchers interviewed international students who do their whole degree in Finland. They interviewed them the first time at the same time as I did and now in spring 2021, they are interviewing the same people again. It will be interesting to see how their answers change and how the students have been doing.

I’m not interviewing my interviewees again but thinking about future research possibilities there is one interesting factor that rises from the literature, the findings and from my own experience. It would be interesting and beneficial to study how these exchange students are doing now, especially how these events affected their future and their mental health. For many students going on an exchange is a long journey and a long-time dream. As it all crumbled down because of Covid-19 it must have been a big disappointment and maybe a cause of anxiety and depression, especially for those who interrupted their mobility period. I know it was really hard for me, so I think other students might share these feelings. Exchange students are already vulnerable to anxiety and depression because of the sudden change of environment, difficulty to fit in and the lack of social support (Cho et al. 2020, 393). If this is the case in a “normal” exchange, adding a pandemic on top, things could have gone really poorly. The pandemic has affected all students and especially international students who are staying far from their families are at a higher risk of developing mental problems (Sankhi & Marasine 2020, 68). However, while executing the interviews I was really surprised by how positive the students still were. A few of them seemed bitter and very disappointed but most of them seemed to be fine at least in that moment. It might just be that the students did not feel comfortable enough to dive into these more difficult feelings. Still there could have been some big consequences to their mental health and overall well-being. This is a delicate matter to do interviews about, but it could give valuable information about how this totally new situation affected the people going through it.

Something I found very interesting was when the students were asked “Do you want to visit Finland again?” every student said “yes” without hesitation. Finland made a really good impression on them even under the pandemic. A few students maybe want to study here in the future, and a few want to bring their family to visit Finland. Finland handled the start of the pandemic really well compared to other countries. This probably gave the students a good picture about the Finnish government and health care system. Also, the universities changed to online learning in an instance which was really impressive for many of them. Many students get attached to the country where they studied abroad when they learn about its cultural and historical heritage (King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003, 241). It is great to see that these students did get attached to Finland as well. It has been researched that for exchange students there is an indirect effect of memorable experience on revisit intentions (Cho et al. 2020, 403). These students most definitely had a memorable experience even if it was not what they were expecting. It would be interesting to know if the students are more likely to visit Finland because their time here was cut short, compared to other exchange students.

Finally, to circle back to the student’s experiences, the students were not victims of immobility, but they were very mobile in different ways. Immobility did not affect their exchange experience negatively, it just changed it. As stated already in the introduction mobility and immobility are relational and two stages that people shift to and from. The students in this study shifted between these stages as well. These students have different feelings about their exchange experience. In general individuals tend to remember past experience in accordance with the last emotion they felt before it ended (Cho et al 2020, 393). As the students exchange experiences all ended in different times and ways it affected how they perceive their exchange experience as a whole. If the students continued their mobility period, the better exchange experience they had. Those who left and became physically immobile did not feel that they even had an exchange experience after returning. Based on this study mobility is the most important part of an exchange experience but mobility can be implemented in many ways and not just physically.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Invitation to participate

Dear International Student,

You participated in our survey about international students' experiences during the COVID19-pandemic and provided your contact information indicating the availability for an interview. This invitation call is part of International students in times of crisis: Global pandemic and international student experiences in Finland -research project.

The interview will be conducted online through Microsoft Teams/Zoom/Skype and it will take about 30-60 minutes. For organising the interview, we would like to suggest one of the following dates/times 1) Thursday 4.6 9am-3pm 2) Friday 5.6 9am-6pm 3) Monday 8.6 9am-3pm 4) Tuesday 9.6 9am-3pm 5) Wednesday 10.6 9am-3pm. Do you find a suitable time from the suggested ones? You can also propose a time that is more suitable for you.

As we strictly follow the ethical guidelines on conducting research and data management, we kindly ask you to familiarise yourself with the privacy notice before the interview. The privacy notice is provided here: <https://seafire.utu.fi/f/8d2f16dff1274210b4b4/>

Your participation in this research project provides us with valuable information on international student experiences during this pandemic and enables us to conduct this research. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Kind regards,

Ella Sirva

Appendix 2 Interview guideline

A. Background Information

1. Could you tell me about yourself?

1.1. In which field of study are you? How many years?

1.2. How long did you stay in Finland? How long have you been in Finland?

1.3. Where are you living now?

1.3.1. In Finland, why did you stay?

1.3.2. At home, why did you go back and when?

(How did you feel about the decision to leave?)

B. Current Situation and Impacts

2. Could you tell me about your daily life during COVID outbreak?

2.1 How has it been changing during the outbreak?

2.2 How has it been different from the pre-outbreak?

3. Could you tell me about your studies since COVID outbreak?

3.1 Has it changed from the pre-outbreak?

(How have you experienced studying since the COVID outbreak?)

4. How has your financial situation been influenced?

(note: part-time work, full-time work, scholarship etc.)

4.1 Has your way of spending money been different?

5. How about your social life during the COVID-outbreak?

5.1 How has it changed?

5.1 Communication with your friends? (note: online)

(Friends from homeland and communication with new exchange friends?)

5.2 Communication with your family? How's the relationship?

5.3 Communication with supervisors, teachers or faculties?

(How have you experienced communicating mostly online?)

6. How did you react to the COVID-outbreak? (when it first came)

6.1 Were your reactions changing in time?

7. How have you been feeling during the COVID outbreak?

7.1 How have you experienced your physical or mental wellbeing in this situation?

7.2 How have you experienced these changes?

(How have you felt about your study abroad semester being cut short?)

8. Has the COVID-situation affected your feeling of being abroad?

(How has the situation affected your exchange experience?)

9. Have you received support from someone or some authority? (family, friends, government, university: home and Finnish)

9.1 If, what kind of? How do you perceive this support?

9.2 What kind of support would you have needed?

C. Future

10. How has the COVID-situation influenced your plans for the future?

10.1 Have your plans for the future studies been affected, and how?

(If exchange was cut short are you interested about studying abroad again?)

(How about your thoughts of visiting Finland again, why or why not?)

D. Concluding remarks

11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for the interview!

Appendix 3 Privacy Notice

27th of May 2020

PRIVACY NOTICE FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

International students in times of crisis: Global pandemic and International student experiences in Finland

The data controller

Turun yliopisto, University of Turku
FI-20014 Turku

Researchers in charge of the research

Postdoctoral researcher: Suvi Jokila, suvi.jokila@utu.fi

Postdoctoral researcher: Kalypso Filippou, kalypso.filippou@utu.fi

Data Protection Officer

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Implementers of the research

Postdoctoral researcher: Suvi Jokila, suvi.jokila@utu.fi

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Postdoctoral researcher: Xingguo Zhou, zhou.xingguo@utu.fi

Master's student Ella Sirva

Master's students Magda Czarnecka

Thesis students under the supervision of the researchers in charge of the research project

Contact Person

Postdoctoral researcher Suvi Jokila

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suvi.jokila@utu.fi

Name of the research

International students in times of crisis: Global pandemic and International student

experience in Finland

Purpose of processing personal data

Interview data is collected to study the impact of COVID-19 pandemic to international students in Finland.

Legal basis for the processing personal data

EU's General Data Protection Regulation, Article 9, Paragraph 2

Performing a task in the scientific or historical research

The type of personal information

Interview data collects international students' experiences, feelings and views. Interviewees are asked to tell about themselves, which may include gender, age, family relations, field of study, parents' educational background and nationality related information.

We ask a permission to save interviewees' contact information for the purpose of inviting them for a follow-up interview.

Source of personal data

Interviewees contact information is accessed from the international student survey conducted in the project. Personal data is asked directly from the interview respondents.

Transfer of personal data outside the research group

The personal data will not be transferred outside the research group.

Transfer of personal data across borders outside the European Union

The personal data will not be transferred across borders outside the European Union.

Automated decision-making and profiling

The personal data will not be used for automated decision-making or profiling.

Protection of personal data

The personal data is confidential.

Processing the data is protected by:

User identifier

Password

Results are reported in a way that no single respondent can be identified. The results will be published in international and national journals.

Processing of direct identifiers

Direct identifiers including interviewees contact information are removed when the research project ends.

Storage and archival of personal data

The data will be archived without direct identifiers.

Estimated storage period of personal data

Direct personal data including interviewees' contact information will be permanently erased in 12/2021. After the removal of direct personal data, interview data is archived for 20 years.

Rights of the research subject and deviation from them

A research subject has the right to lodge a complaint to the office of the Data Protection Ombudsman if the research subject considers that the processing of personal data relating to him/her infringes the valid data protection legislation. (Read more at <http://www.tietosuoja.fi>).

Rights of the research subject:

Right of access by the data subject (Article 15).

Right to rectification (Article 16).

Right to erasure (Article 17). This shall not apply to the extent that processing is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes in so far as the right is likely to render impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the objectives of that processing.

Right to restriction of processing (Article 18).

Right to object, that is, to prevent the processing of the subject's personal data (Article 21).