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Living out global mindedness? A meta-analysis of qualitative empirical accounts of study abroad experiences[1]

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As study abroad activities regain their popularity in a post-pandemic world, questions and debates continue regarding the value of a study abroad experience. Focusing on the development of global mindedness, understood as a desirable goal of global education that encompasses qualities such as intercultural sensitivity, sense of global connectivity and responsibility, this qualitative meta-analysis explores university students' experiences of study abroad. Drawing on data from 22 primary qualitative studies, the findings reveal that while many participants demonstrated enhanced self-awareness, expanded worldviews and renewed perspectives, others showed limited growth, underscoring the nuanced and complex nature of global mindedness. Commonly reported experiences influencing its development include navigating emotional distress, confronting discrimination, overcoming language barriers and engaging in immersive learning and intercultural interactions. While confirming the valuable learning opportunities that study abroad can offer, this study also raises concerns about the limitations and problematic assumptions associated with these experiences, highlighting the need for a deeper examination of study abroad practices. These findings offer valuable insights for educators involved in designing, coordinating and evaluating study abroad programs, as well as for researchers who are interested in the values, potential and impacts of study abroad on students.

Keywords: study abroad; global mindedness; student experience; higher education; meta-analysis

INTRODUCTION

Travelling and staying overseas for educational purposes has a long history that goes far beyond modern times (Bufmack, 2013). Over the past decades, the rise of globalisation has fuelled steady growth in study abroad interest and activities (Dietrich, 2018; Goel et al., 2010). This growing trend was interrupted by the global COVID outbreak in 2020, as universities worldwide were forced to suspend study abroad programs (Gibbs, 2022) and replace them with online learning activities (Liu & Shirley, 2021). As education resumes in a post-pandemic world and interest in study abroad resurges, questions have been raised concerning the future of study

[1] This paper is adopted from a chapter in a doctoral dissertation (Tang, 2023). Substantial revisions and updates have been made to the original text.

abroad (Glass & Gesing, 2021; di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020; Xiao & Nie, 2023), prompting a re-examination of the learning outcomes of such programs and activities.

Widely used in literature and often without being clearly defined, 'study abroad' has become a rather generic term that may cause confusion. In this study, I am in favour of using the broader term 'study abroad experiences' over the narrow sense of study abroad as a form of (institutionalised) activities that lead to obtaining a degree or gaining credits (The Forum of Education Abroad, 2011). It refers to any learning experience through educational endeavour "that occurs outside the participant's home country" (p. 12). While this article focuses on student experiences of study abroad within the higher education domain, a more inclusive definition could allow for examining a wider range of study abroad experiences from a more diverse student population.

While high educational institutions praise the value of study abroad, questions and concerns also abound. Some critiques focus on the ideological level, pointing out the neoliberal zeitgeist and market-driven nature of the popular study abroad or international mobility discourse (Courtois, 2020; Tarc, 2013). As far as the value of experience is concerned, a most notable challenge comes from Gaudelli and Laverty (2015). Drawing on Dewey's conceptualisation of experience, they contend that despite the widely held belief that study abroad experience can "increase awareness and cross-cultural competence . . . such beliefs are not yet empirically supported" (p. 15). In a similar critical note, Doerr (2019) calls for more "rigorous analytical frameworks" (p. 4) to understand the learning in a study abroad experience.

Considering the lingering questions and debates over the value and benefits of study abroad experiences, I conduct this study to deepen the understanding of the processes and impacts on university and college students. However, instead of interviewing yet another group of study abroad participants, I take a step back to (re)examine the existing evidence in recent literature (from the past 10 years) by employing a qualitative meta-analysis approach. The following questions guided the inquiry:

- How do the student narratives in the selected primary studies characterise and explain the notion of global mindedness?
- What significant experiences, factors and processes reported in these narratives impact the development of global mindedness among study abroad participants?

GLOBAL MINDEDNESS

The central analytical lens for this study is *global mindedness*, a term frequently invoked in international education discourse but often under-theorised in empirical research. In this study, global mindedness is approached as both a pedagogical aspiration and a culturally situated process, shaped by the lived experiences of learners in diverse transnational contexts.

Earlier efforts to define global mindedness include Hett's (1993) *Global-Mindedness Scale*, which conceptualises it as a combination of three key aspects: intercultural sensitivity, personal responsibility and global interconnectedness. While influential, this measurement-oriented framework reflects one particular conceptualisation rather than a settled consensus. Prior to Hett (1993), Schmidt (1975) and Hanvey (1982) articulated related ideas, highlighting attributes such as open-mindedness, perspective consciousness and awareness of global dynamics. Building on these foundations, more recent work situates global mindedness within

broader constructs such as *global citizenship education* (OECD, 2018), *cosmopolitan learning* (Rizvi, 2009), and *international mindedness* (IBO, 2017).

Rather than adopting a rigid definition, this study treats global mindedness as an emergent, contested and flexible category, shaped by the voices and reflections of study abroad participants themselves. This approach is informed by naturalistic, qualitative meta-synthesis methodologies (Timulak, 2014), which prioritise allowing conceptual categories to emerge inductively from qualitative data rather than imposing predefined frameworks. Meanwhile, I take a slightly critical stance in my interpretation. In alignment with scholars such as Tarc (2013) and Doerr (2019), this study is attentive to how discourses of personal transformation, global citizenship, internationalisation and *becoming global* may obscure persistent inequalities and unexamined assumptions within study abroad programs.

Importantly, this study also positions students not merely as recipients of global education but also as meaning-makers who negotiate the tensions between personal, institutional and ideological framings of their international experiences. Global mindedness here is thus treated not as a static trait but as a processual and relational development, situated in context and often marked by ambivalence, contradiction or even regression.

To deepen this inquiry, the following sections draw upon 22 primary qualitative studies, highlighting how global mindedness is interpreted, challenged or reimagined by students navigating linguistic, emotional and cultural transitions abroad.

METHODS OF INQUIRY

This study employs a qualitative meta-analysis, which refers to the secondary analysis of findings from original qualitative studies to generate new interpretive insights. The term meta-analysis is more commonly associated with quantitative research synthesis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). In qualitative research, it denotes a form of thematic and conceptual integration across studies. As defined by Timulak (2014), qualitative meta-analysis involves "a secondary analysis . . . of the primary, original, studies addressing the same research questions" (p. 481), with the aim of generating broader conceptual understanding. The term *meta-analysis* is often distinguished from *meta-synthesis*. Typically, meta-synthesis emphasises the reinterpretation of study findings at a higher level of abstraction.

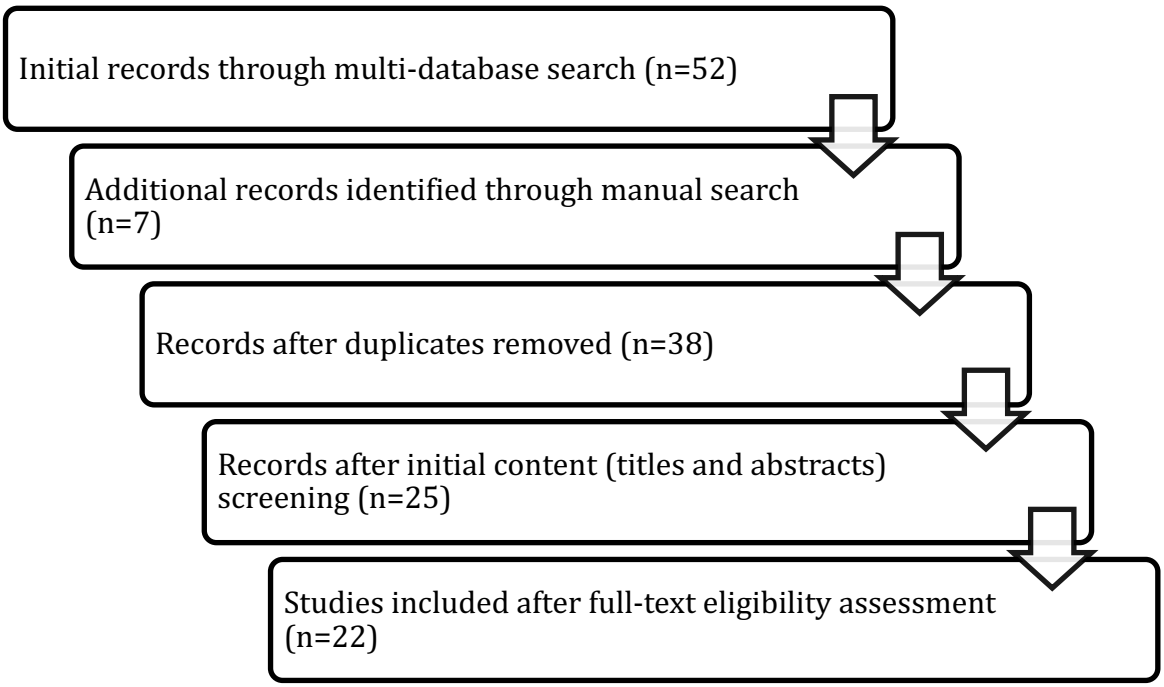
In contrast, qualitative meta-analysis often retains closer alignment to the original study's aim and purpose (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). In this study, I adopt Timulak's usage of qualitative meta-analysis, which offers a systematic yet interpretive lens suited to exploring participant voice, contextual nuance and meaning-making across cases. Timulak's view aligns with Irwin's (2013), who defines "qualitative secondary analysis" as "the use of already produced data to develop new social scientific and/or methodological understandings" (p. 295). Given the study's focus on identity, reflection, and the construct of global-mindedness, meta-analysis provides a robust and appropriate framework.

DATA SELECTION

To ensure the quality and relevance of data, the following criteria were used in the literature search and screening process. First, only primary qualitative research studies were considered. Studies based on qualitative interviews, focus groups, reflection papers or journal entries were included if the data foregrounded participants' lived experiences. Second, as an additional validity-ensuring feature (Creswell & Miller, 2000), eligible studies needed to contain first-person, *thick description* of personal experiences from study abroad participants, with studies

required to present direct quotes from participants and rich narrative excerpts. Third, the selection was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in reputable academic databases such as EBSCO, ERIC and ProQuest Education. As Major and Savin-Baden (2010) noted, the credibility of a meta-analysis depends on the integrity of its included studies. Applying a peer-reviewed, database-indexed filter served as a practical and consistent quality-assurance mechanism. Fourth, to ensure relevance of topic, selected studies must have addressed international student mobility in higher education contexts, with a focus on participants' lived experiences. Finally, data selection focused on literature from the past 10 years (2014–2024) to ensure contemporary relevance.

Figure 1: Flow diagram for study selection.



Identifying suitable data began with the most common strategy of keyword search (Swift & Wampold, 2018). Using terms, including *study abroad*, *student experience*, *higher education,* and *qualitative* as keywords. The initial search yielded over 50 results. These results were then expanded using backward and forward searching (Finfgeld-Connett, 2018) and hand-searched key journals for more recent publications not yet included in the databases.

During the screening process, repetitive results were dropped, as were the research papers that did not meet the quality-control criteria listed above.

At the end of the screening process (Figure 1), 22 studies were chosen for the analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected literature

Selected papers	Number of participants	Student origins	Study abroad destinations
Vatalaro et al., 2015	5	USA	Italy
Dai & Garcia, 2019	7	China	Australia
Sato & Hodge, 2015	8	Japan	USA
Yang, 2020	13	USA	China
Lee & Green, 2016	4	USA	South Africa
Onosu, 2021	15	USA	Multiple countries
Jaeger & Gram, 2016	18	China & Denmark	Denmark &China
Oh & Nussli, 2014, (2021)	5	USA	South Korea
Young & Snead, 2017	11	Saudi Arabia	USA
Lickteig et al., 2019	2	USA	Finland & Indonesia
Fukuda & Nishikawa Chávez, 2021	6	USA	Japan
Huffman et al., 2020	50	Japan	Multiple countries
Hsiao et al., 2021	14	Taiwan	Australia
Conceição et al., 2021	33	Brazil	USA
Rybo-LoPresti & Rhein, 2021	22	USA	Thailand
Sobkowiak, 2019	12	Poland	Multiple European countries
Prieto-Arranz et al., 2021	8	Spain	Multiple European countries
Moon et al., 2020	6	China & South Korea	USA
Medina et al., 2015	16	USA	Germany
Baker et al., 2022	14	Thailand	Multiple countries
Chang, 2024	1	Vietnam	Taiwan
Witt, 2024	12	USA	Multiple countries

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis followed the qualitative meta-analysis procedures outlined by Timulak (2014) and Levitt (2018), using an inductive, interpretive approach to extract, compare and synthesise meaning across studies. The process involved four main stages:

1) Data extraction: From each study, narrative findings and verbatim participant quotes were compiled into a central dataset. Where available, data were drawn from results sections, appendices and illustrative vignettes. Both first-order (participants' voices) and second-order data (researcher summaries) were collected to ensure comprehensiveness.

2) Initial coding: Each unit of text was examined line-by-line using open coding informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were created inductively, capturing emotional tones, cognitive shifts, metaphors and intercultural experiences. This process

was conducted iteratively and documented in analytic memos to preserve emergent patterns.

3) Thematic synthesis: Codes were grouped into preliminary thematic categories using axial coding techniques. These categories were refined through constant comparison across studies, attending to both recurring patterns and outlier cases. Redundant or overlapping codes were collapsed, and categories were merged or split as needed to enhance conceptual clarity.

4) Critical alignment: Emergent themes were aligned with the study's two research questions, particularly focusing on how participant narratives articulated or challenged key dimensions of global mindedness. Themes were tested for coherence, relevance, and analytic saturation, ensuring they captured variation across cultural, institutional and geographic contexts.

Throughout this process, the voice of participants was prioritised over researcher commentary wherever possible. This emphasis was critical to capturing authentic reflections of global engagement and identity negotiation. Longitudinal data were used where available (Oh & Nussli, 2021) to identify sustained impacts and deferred meaning-making over time. Coding and synthesis were managed manually and were reviewed through multiple iterations to maintain transparency and reflexivity in interpretation (Finfgeld-Connett, 2018; Levitt, 2018).

NOTABLE FINDINGS

Global mindedness unpacked: Nuanced change in participants

While study abroad is often celebrated for fostering global mindedness through broadened perspectives and cross-cultural immersion (Paige et al., 2009), the qualitative evidence analysed in this study suggests a far more complex and uneven process. Participant narratives reflect a spectrum of outcomes, from increased openness and reflexivity to persistent cultural biases and discomfort. This section presents three interrelated themes, demonstrating how students engage with, resist or reinterpret global mindedness in practice.

Reflexive self-awareness and intercultural perception

A key facet of global mindedness involves the capacity to view oneself through the eyes of others (Skolnick et al., 2004) – developing reflexive self-awareness within unfamiliar sociocultural contexts. Across several studies, participants reported newfound understandings of how their national, racial or religious identities were perceived abroad.

Some participants reflected on how collective identity labels such as "American" (Medina et al., 2015), "white woman" (Onosu, 2021), "Spaniard" (Prieto-Arranz et al., 2021) and "Muslim" (Young & Snead, 2017) were perceived in study abroad contexts. The study abroad experience heightened their self-awareness and provided insight into how their identities were understood in different cultural settings, fostering a renewed understanding of themselves and their social labels. A participant in Lee and Green (2016) observed, "Biologically there's no reality of race, but there is a political reason to be Black" (p. 71). These reflections frequently emerged through moments of intercultural comparison, as a student in Lickteig et al. (2019) noted, "Through those differences [I experienced in Indonesia,] I learn more about the system I am familiar with" (p. 12).

Others articulated an emerging reflexivity about their cultural positioning. One participant in Witt (2024) acknowledged, "I kind of forgot other countries and [their] histories" ("Role of global experience in understanding global leadership," para. 1). A student in Onosu (2021) remarked, "We talk about American issues as if they are worldwide issues"; and through the experience abroad, "[you] can now look at things from an outsider's perspective, and you see yourself and the bubble you grew up in from a different lens" (p. 8). Similarly, a student in Huffman et al. (2020) noted, "This program exposed me to foreign cultures and made me aware that I had previously lived in such a narrow world" (p. 58).

In these cases, participants could also be said to have acquired "perspective consciousness" (Hanvey, 1982) and enhanced "intercultural awareness" (Baker, 2015; Dasli, 2011), foundational elements of global mindedness.

Open-mindedness and new perspectives

Global mindedness also entails an evolving openness to alternative worldviews, cultures and systems of meaning. Many participants expressed significant shifts in how they perceived cultural others and questioned the biased and limited views they had formed in their home environments.

One participant in Baker et al. (2022) stated, "I used to be quite conservative and quite nationalist, but now . . . my mind has opened, and I learned a lot of things from that" (p. 10). In Medina et al. (2015), a student who had previously judged minority groups in the US acknowledged, "It's a lot harder to fit into a society than Americans think it is" (p. 85).

Participants described a growing attentiveness to nuance and a recognition of shared humanity across cultural divides. One student in Sobkowiak (2019) reflected, "I used to judge people in a very shallow and superficial way, [but now] I try to pay attention to nuances concerning what people are doing and saying" (p. 701). This growing awareness was often accompanied by a deeper sense of global interconnectedness. As one student in Baker et al. (2022) observed, "Nationalities and languages are just a shell of who we are" (p. 10). Similarly, a participant in Yang (2020) noted, "At the deepest level . . . we are really not all that different after all" (p. 116).

Other students recognised common emotional and social concerns as transcending national boundaries. A participant in Huffman et al. (2020) shared, "I used to think that foreigners and foreign countries were very different from Japan . . . [A]fter the experience, I realized that they worry about things and cry about things just like me" (p. 58). Echoing this insight, a Brazilian student in Conceição et al. (2021) commented, "Formerly I thought that just Brazil had problems. But now I [can] see that all places have problems" (p. 138).

These narratives reflect a shift toward what Byram (1997) calls intercultural empathy—the ability to suspend judgment and seek deeper understanding across cultural lines.

Counter examples of global mindedness

Despite the prevalence of positive shifts, the data also revealed ambivalent or regressive trajectories. Some participants retained or reinforced cultural stereotypes even after immersive experiences, complicating the assumption that study abroad inherently leads to global mindedness.

In Prieto-Arranz et al. (2021), a participant stated, "I had the perception prior to departure . . . that Spaniards showed no respect for language issues and Catalan. And going to Venice helped me check it out for myself" (p. 10).

Others expressed discomfort or intolerance. In Young and Snead (2017), a Saudi student remarked, "I don't like when women wear [shorts] and short dresses . . . A university should be a place to learn [and] not to show your body off" (p. 43). In Medina et al. (2015), a US student studying in Germany described that when she "received a new roommate from a Middle Eastern country," her initial thought was, "Could he be like a terrorist?" (p. 83).

National stereotypes also persisted in Sobkowiak (2019), where Spaniards were described as "spending a lot of time in cafes" (p. 693), Portuguese as "often late and very loud", and Belgians as "quite reserved and withdrawn" (p. 694). One Danish student in Jaeger and Gram (2016) commented, "it is very Chinese that things change every other minute" (p. 41). Similar generalisations appeared in Fukuda and Nishikawa Chávez (2021), where a student noted, "Japanese people would stand by themselves quietly, they would not want to sit next to me" (p. 836).

These examples illustrate that global mindedness is not a guaranteed outcome, but a contingent process shaped by personal readiness and sociocultural context.

The journey to global mindedness: Significant experiences, processes and factors

While internal reflection and openness are central to the development of global mindedness, participants' narratives also reveal that external experiences, emotional responses and contextual dynamics profoundly shape this process. These encounters are often disorienting, complex and emotionally charged, underscoring global mindedness as a negotiated process and context-bound journey rather than a linear development. The following themes illustrate the pathways and obstacles participants encountered.

Emotional disruption as a catalyst for critical reflection

Emotional discomfort was frequently the first rupture in participants' expectations. Initial encounters with cultural unfamiliarity often triggered anxiety, awkwardness, self-doubt and inner insecurity—what Mezirow (2008) calls "disorienting dilemmas" and Jarvis (2012) describes as "disjunctures". These moments, though unsettling, often opened spaces for deeper and critical reflection.

A participant in Rybo-LoPresti and Rhein (2021) shared, "I was kinda freaked out in the beginning," while another in Sobkowiak (2019) expressed discomfort at being kissed on both cheeks by "a complete stranger" (p. 696). Feelings of alienation were also common. As one student in Prieto-Arranz et al. (2021) put it, "[Y]ou are not German . . . you're a Spaniard studying in Germany. No, no, you're not one of them" (p. 8). Similar feelings were reported in other studies, such as in Fukuda and Nishikawa Chávez (2021), where a participant "felt so out of place" (p. 837) and a student teacher in Oh and Nussli (2014) who "truly felt like an outsider" (p. 80).

Though distressing, some students reframed these emotions as learning moments. A participant in Onosu (2021) reflected on her shift "from the feeling of anger and discomfort" to the realisation that she could "learn from the situation" (p. 8). These narratives suggest that emotional disruption, when coupled with reflexivity, can support the development of global mindedness.

Discrimination and marginalisation

Several students encountered exclusion, racism or Islamophobia during their time abroad, highlighting the structural inequalities embedded in global mobility. These experiences challenge the assumption that cross-cultural encounters are inherently positive or transformative.

One participant in Sato and Hodge (2015) reported, "There was no way to join in the discussion. Group members did not care about me," adding, "This type of experience made me feel lonely and I do not think my study abroad is a success" (p. 217). Similar experiences were reported in Moon et al. (2020), where some Chinese and Korean students felt their native English-speaking classmates questioned their intelligence: "They might not think I am the same level" (p. 38).

Some participants recalled incidents of racism and Islamophobia, such as in Young and Snead (2017): "Some people don't like me because I wear hijab," said one female Saudi student (p. 42), while another recounted, "A white male spit at my wife" (p. 42). In Prieto-Arranz et al. (2021), a student described feeling hyper-visible due to her skin colour: "Every time I went to class . . . everyone [was] staring at me, even the teachers" (p. 8).

These accounts highlight how the pursuit of global mindedness often occurs within unequal and exclusionary systems, requiring not only empathy but also critical consciousness.

Language as both a barrier and a bridge

Language emerged as a major axis of both limitation and growth. For many, linguistic barriers disrupted academic engagement and social integration. A student in Moon et al. (2020) confessed, "My biggest difficulty in the U.S. is language" (p. 35), while students in Hsiao et al. (2021) found that limitations in English fluency impeded their learning.

Such challenges often produced feelings of inadequacy or frustration. In Sato and Hodge (2015), a Japanese student spoke of losing linguistic confidence after becoming a minority speaker (p. 213), while a participant in Huffman et al. (2020) shared the emotional strain of "trying to speak but not getting the words right" (p. 59). A Saudi student in Young and Snead (2017) remarked, "Before I came here, I understood some words, but I was surprised when I started learning academic English" (p. 42), highlighting the inadequacy of pre-departure preparation and the gap between conversational and academic language demands.

On the other hand, many students described proactive strategies for language learning. A Saudi student in Young and Snead (2017) stated, "I listen to the radio and read in English as much as I can" (p. 41), while a Brazilian student in Conceição et al. (2021) reflected, "Speaking in English obliged me to rethink my first language in order to speak correctly" (p. 135). Many participants also took the opportunity to interact with English speakers through questioning and frequent communication practice, as highlighted by students in Sato and Hodge (2015, p. 213) and Huffman et al. (2020, p. 58).

Overcoming language barriers not only enhanced participants' linguistic proficiency but also fostered greater self-confidence and intercultural understanding. One participant in Chang (2024) proudly remarked, "I started to think, maybe I'm able to learn English or maybe any foreign language faster than others" (p. 816). Such narratives illustrate how the process of confronting and navigating language challenges can cultivate intercultural resilience and linguistic self-efficacy, both of which are key dimensions of global mindedness.

Interacting with people from diverse backgrounds

Study abroad provided opportunities for intercultural contact, but students varied in their willingness or ability to engage beyond familiar circles. Some participants intentionally sought diverse interactions. One student in Baker et al. (2022) described "spending time . . . with students and lecturers who have different cultural backgrounds and speak different first languages" (p. 9).

Others spoke of the value of stepping outside their comfort zones. As an American student in Yang (2020) noted, "I was able to ask [my Chinese peers] questions and not feel awkward or ashamed not knowing . . . They really provided the support I needed" (p. 117).

At the same time, many reported gravitating toward linguistic or cultural peers. A participant in Medina et al. (2015) recalled, "We just sorta self-segregated so most American students sit with each other" (p. 5). In Sato and Hodge (2015), a Japanese student said, "There are many benefits when I hang out with Japanese students" (p. 216). Similarly, one participant in Prieto-Arranz et al. (2021) noted the tendency for Spanish students to stick together so they can "always speak Spanish among themselves" (p. 8).

These patterns illustrate that intercultural learning is not automatic. Instead, it requires deliberate effort from the learner, as well as careful preparation, guidance and institutional support. As Onosu (2021) observed, "Transformative learning during cultural immersion depends on the willingness and the intensity with which the participants engage" (p. 7).

Immersion and homestay as transformative contexts

Immersive settings, such as a homestay, offered participants vivid, embodied insights into cultural life. A student in Lee and Green (2016) emphasised the power of "being in that space and learning" (p. 71), while another in Onosu (2021) noted, "once your [host] family accepts you, the community accepts you" (p. 7).

Two telling examples come from essays written by two students in Fukuda and Nishikawa Chávez (2021). In one instance, a student recounted a moment when her host mother confided that she worried her son would struggle in adulthood due to his emotional challenges. Initially, the student found this perspective extreme, but later understood it as a reflection of a broader cultural concern in Japan. Eventually, as the authors explain, the student "learned the hidden meaning of her host mother's comments [by] connecting them to the concept of 'giri'" (p. 838), or social obligation, as opposed to 'ninjo' (human feelings): "According to conventional Japanese thought, when *giri* declines and *ninjo* escalates, social harmony is threatened" (pp. 838–839). Another student from the same study shared a critical moment when his host father played an old guitar with visible damage. When the student asked about it, the father explained that despite its imperfections, it was irreplaceable. "This moment", the student reflected, "was a breakthrough in my understanding of how the Japanese mind works in relation to my own Western views" (p. 839). Through this incident, he "discovered the exact sensation of how the Japanese appreciated beauty in imperfection" (p. 838).

However, not all homestay experiences were positive. In Oh and Nussli (2014), three out of five participants reported rewarding relationships with their host families, but the other two described significant discomfort stemming from cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, and mismatched expectations. One participant shared, "I just felt like such an inconvenience to them" (p. 74), even though she acknowledged that her host family "was really nice". This tension reveals how feelings of burden and alienation can persist despite outward hospitality,

especially in the absence of effective communication. Similarly, in Yang (2020), a student described feeling repeatedly pressured by her host family to eat unfamiliar food: "Sometimes I would sit with the host dad and he would make me eat all this food that I just didn't want to eat . . . but I just was horrible at communicating" (p. 114). These experiences suggest that the quality of intercultural engagement during homestays depends not only on the host context but also on students' communicative readiness and cultural sensitivity. Without adequate pre-departure preparation, even well-intentioned immersion can result in frustration and missed learning opportunities.

Yet even these challenging moments, when reflected upon, contributed to intercultural awareness. As Onosu (2021) observed, participants who engaged more openly tended to report more transformative outcomes. A typical example comes from a student who initially expressed deep frustration with her Colombian host family's early morning routines, but through guided reflection, "was able to understand the reason" behind the household dynamic and ultimately shifted her perspective (p. 6). Homestay, then, can serve as a powerful context for fostering global mindedness, but only when accompanied by careful preparation, ongoing support, guided reflection, as well as the student's willingness to learn and to adapt.

DISCUSSION

This section revisits the two research questions that guided the study and addresses them in light of the findings from the qualitative meta-analysis. It also explores the study's contributions to the field, outlines its limitations and discusses implications for both educational practice and future research on global learning.

Reframing global mindedness through student narratives

In this section, I return to the first research question: *How do the student narratives in the selected primary studies characterise and explain the notion of global mindedness?* This study contributes to a more situated, participant-centred understanding of global mindedness by examining how students articulate their evolving sense of self and others in intercultural settings. Across the included studies, participants described becoming more reflexive, critically aware of their own cultural lenses and empathetic toward other ways of being. These processes align with dimensions emphasised in adjacent constructs such as *perspective consciousness* (Hanvey, 1982), *intercultural competence* (Byram, 1997), and the "epistemic virtues" of cosmopolitan learning (Rizvi, 2009). However, as clarified earlier, none of these concepts and similar theoretical frameworks can be treated as synonymous with global mindedness. Rather, global mindedness in this study is defined as an integrative, reflexive disposition and a learning journey, rooted in meaning-making, critical awareness of global interdependence and openness to complexity.

The findings affirm that global mindedness is not a pre-designed or automatic outcome of studying abroad, but an ongoing, negotiated process. Student narratives revealed dynamic, diverging and sometimes contradictory learning trajectories, shaped by experiences of dissonance, marginalisation, and critical self-reflection. These accounts highlight the non-linear and context-dependent nature of global mindedness, and they complicate narratives that frame study abroad as inherently transformative.

The study underscores the value of centring student voices in global education research. Through their own words, participants conveyed moments of cognitive, emotional, and ethical shift, offering insights into how global mindedness is lived, resisted or gradually formed. In

contrast to standardised outcome measures, these qualitative accounts illustrate how global mindedness and its various aspects are embedded in daily life, lived tensions and emergent understanding.

Recent studies on international-mindedness and global citizenship education reinforce this view. Hacking et al. (2018), for instance, argue that international-mindedness should not be reduced to Western-centric ideals, but instead be constructed through inclusive school cultures, sustained reflection and context-sensitive pedagogy. They emphasise the importance of school-wide ethos and leadership in promoting global understanding. Similarly, Metli (2021) found that while *International Baccalaureate* (IB) programs aim to cultivate international-mindedness, students' growth is mediated by institutional context and opportunities for authentic intercultural engagement. These studies reinforce the idea that global mindedness is best developed not through prescriptive curricula but through environments that allow for plural perspectives and self-inquiry.

This meta-analysis thus contributes to a deeper conceptualisation of global mindedness, grounded not in pre-defined indicators but in students' evolving narratives and the tensions they navigate. It also strengthens the case for qualitative approaches to global education research, where meaning-making and lived experience remain central to understanding complex learning outcomes (Gaudelli & Laverty, 2014; Young, 2010).

Conditions, contradictions and the "discourse of experience"

The second research question asked: *What significant experiences, factors and processes reported in these narratives impact the development of global mindedness among study abroad participants?* The analysis identified five recurring influences: emotional disruption, marginalisation and discrimination, language and communication challenges, intercultural interaction, and immersive settings such as homestays. These factors do not act in isolation, and their impact depends heavily on how students interpret and respond to them, as well as the support they receive from their host institutions and communities.

One of the study's key insights is the discrepancy between students' actual experiences abroad on the one hand, and the expectations they carried into study abroad on the other, which are often shaped by idealised institutional or popular cultural narratives. I refer to these narratives as the *discourse of experience*. It constitutes a set of popularised tropes that frame the study abroad experience, often packaged and decorated for sale, as inherently "life-changing," "authentic" or "transformative". While not a term drawn from previous literature, it resonates with critiques by scholars such as Doerr (2019) and Moreno (2021), who highlighted the neoliberal packaging of international experiences and the problematic assumptions embedded in such representations.

Participant narratives show how this discourse influences perceptions and leads to disillusionment when reality falls short. For instance, in Baker et al. (2022), a Thai student expressed disappointment that people in Malaysia "didn't speak proper English" and that it was not the "purer English-speaking community" they had expected (p. 9). Similarly, in Rybo-LoPresti and Rhein (2021), a participant lamented the absence of a homestay option, imagining that staying with a local family would offer a more authentic or "real" Thai experience (p. 5). These examples reveal how students' expectations, shaped by institutional or cultural narratives, can limit openness to actual intercultural encounters if left unexamined.

Even well-intentioned programmatic framings can inadvertently reinforce shallow or uncritical understandings of global concepts. In Baker et al. (2022), for example, a participant was asked, "Do you now see yourself as a global citizen?" Reflecting on activities such as tree-planting with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the student responded, "Therefore, I am quite certain that I am now one of the global citizens" (p. 9). While this suggests a sense of personal growth, the global citizenship discourse encompasses much more than participation in multicultural activities. Simply self-identifying as a global citizen without articulating a deeper understanding of the term may reflect a superficial engagement rather than a meaningful transformation.

Educators can play a critical role in addressing these patterns. Structured reflection and critical questioning can help students surface and interrogate unexamined beliefs. For example, "What do you mean by a 'real' Thai life?", "What would a 'pure English-speaking' environment be like?", "What assumptions are embedded in your notion of fluency?", or "What does being a global citizen mean to you?" Without such guidance and support, study abroad risks reinforcing stereotypes or (re)producing uncritical, surface-level learning.

Institutional context, strategy and coordinated support also matter. As Zhang and Chan (2023) argue in their study of Australian schools, meaningful intercultural learning requires not just student openness, but institutional readiness to support cultural, linguistic and emotional adaptation. While their work focuses on international students in the K–12 sector, the principles, such as culturally responsive pedagogy and relational care, are equally relevant to higher education. As findings in Section 4 show, global mindedness is fostered by more than mere exposure. This process of learning is shaped by, and can equally be constrained by, not only student agency but also the programs and environments into which students are placed.

Limitations and implications

This study offers a grounded rethinking of global mindedness through the lens of qualitative meta-analysis. By centring the voices of study abroad participants across 22 peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2024, the analysis highlights how global mindedness is constructed through student experiences in situated contexts. While this focus ensures analytical rigour, data quality and contemporality, it also limits the scope by excluding grey literature, older publications and potentially valuable perspectives from underrepresented sources or underreported contexts. Additionally, the variation in methodological designs and reporting styles among the selected studies introduces challenges for consistent cross-study comparison.

Despite these limitations, the study makes several important contributions to the field of global education. First, it affirms that global mindedness is not a fixed or inevitable outcome of international mobility but an emergent, ongoing process—a journey shaped by emotional disruption, contextual complexity and critical reflection. Second, it demonstrates the value of placing student voice at the centre of inquiry, revealing aspects of critical understanding, resistance, transformation and negotiation of identity that might otherwise remain invisible. Third, it underscores the importance of comparing and contrasting the various perspectives and expectations students carry into study abroad, which are often shaped by idealised narratives and popular (yet misleading) discourses rather than focusing solely on the experiences themselves.

These insights have significant implications for educational practice. Pre-departure preparation should move beyond procedural orientation and information sessions to include opportunities for students to critically examine and question their assumptions about "authentic" experiences,

linguistic fluency or cultural norms. Post-return programming also deserves greater attention. Rather than overly relying on informal conversations or reflective essays, institutions can develop more structured, dialogic frameworks that support students in processing their experiences abroad, unpacking dissonance, disappointment and discomfort in a safe environment, and facilitating reintegration and long-term meaning-making.

In line with the insights of Zhang and Chan (2023) and Porter and Porter (2020), I argue that the success of international education depends not only on where students go or how far they travel from home but also on how well institutions are prepared to recognise and support the psychological, cultural and relational dimensions of their experience. Similarly, Beckwith's (2022) discussion of global citizenship education reminds us that conceptual ambiguity can weaken educational coherence. Education for global mindedness must be grounded in clear, context-sensitive practices rather than abstract ideals. Echoing the concerns of earlier scholars about popular and market-oriented study abroad discourses (Doerr, 2019; Tarc, 2013), the findings of this study suggest that meaningful global learning is most effectively supported not by decontextualised ideological standards but by practices rooted in the complexities of lived experience.

Beyond practice, this study also has implications for future research on study abroad and global learning. Most notably, it reveals a critical gap in long-term engagement with returned study-abroad participants. Oh and Nussli (2021) provide a rare example of longitudinal inquiry, revisiting preservice teachers nearly a decade after their overseas practicum (Oh & Nussli, 2014). Their follow-up study demonstrates how early study abroad experiences continued to shape participants' teaching practices and educational worldviews. Similarly, by adopting a longitudinal design, Kiely (2004) found that while students often experienced significant perspective transformation through international service-learning, they also struggled to translate this awareness into sustained action after returning to the US. Future research could build on these models by tracking students at multiple points over time to better understand how global mindedness is sustained, reinterpreted or disrupted.

In cases where longitudinal research is not feasible, alternative approaches such as life story analysis (see Tang, 2023) could offer valuable insights into how students retrospectively interpret and narrate their study abroad experiences. This could shed light on both the persistence and re-interpretation of global learning across different life stages.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I employed a qualitative meta-analysis to investigate how students in existing empirical research articulate and make sense of their study abroad experiences, with particular attention to the construct of global mindedness. This approach allowed for a re-examination of diverse qualitative accounts across 22 peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024. Methodologically, qualitative meta-analysis offers a rapid and cost-effective means of engaging with existing data without compromising analytic depth or interpretive rigour. While limited by what is available in published reports, it provides a valuable avenue for theory-building and comparative insight. As a relatively underused methodology in higher education research (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010), its potential for expanding the understanding of student experience remains significant.

The meta-analysis produced several key findings. First, global mindedness was revealed as a dynamic and negotiated process shaped by emotional complexity, cultural dissonance and

critical reflection. Second, the findings suggest that student expectations and assumptions, often influenced by institutional or cultural (including mainstream or social media) narratives, play as important a role as lived experiences in shaping learning outcomes. Third, the study identified a series of significant factors that contribute to or constrain the development of global mindedness, including emotional vulnerability, societal pressures, language and communication, immersion and homestay, as well as the availability of relational and institutional support.

Taken together, these findings challenge simplistic narratives of transformation and call for a more student-centred and critically informed approach to global learning. They also point to several areas for future research, particularly the need for longitudinal or life story methodologies that can capture how students sustain (or struggle to sustain) their intercultural learning and awareness over time.

Global mindedness is not something students simply "gain" through travel or study abroad. It is a never-ending process of becoming, a capacity that learners continually construct, negotiate, and reconfigure in response to disorientation, unmet expectations and complex encounters. It involves learning to hold multiple perspectives, to question one's own identity and sense of place in the world, and to navigate uncertainty with humility and care. This "journey" is where education meets learners—not by offering easy answers or predefined outcomes, but by providing the conditions, tools, and reflective spaces they need to engage, interpret, integrate and grow from the complexity of their experiences.

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