Reverse Culture Shock: An insight into returning student sojourners at Malmö University and their experience of reverse culture shock

Emilia Jacobsson

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Supervisor: Linda Austin
Abstract
As opposed to culture shock, where one experience difficulties going to a new country and culture, reverse culture shock is the difficulties one experiences when returning home. Reverse culture shock describes the phenomenon of the disorientation and negative feelings often experienced when an individual becomes a returning sojourner. This thesis examines reverse culture shock in the reentry process and its effect on the returning student sojourners at Malmö University. Researching reverse culture shock is important as it is an area that is often neglected in the context of student mobility, even though the majority of returning student sojourners experience it. There is a gap in the research around reverse culture shock where phenomenological qualitative research has been deprioritized for a much more tangible approach of quantitative research. The returning student sojourner’s stories are important if one seeks to gain a deeper understanding of reverse culture shock and the reentry process. The purpose of this research is to encourage a deeper discussion about reverse culture shock at Malmö University and its impact on student sojourners returning from studying abroad. This research seeks to answer the question: to what extent are returning student sojourners at Malmö University affected by reverse culture shock? And what can the university do to assist the reentry process? By utilizing qualitative research methods, three themes were identified which highlight aspects of the returning student sojourners experiences as they came home from their student mobility programs: social difficulties, a dream, and what the university can do to assist the reentry process. In conclusion, the student sojourners returned with a feeling of loneliness and isolation, an experience that felt like a dream, and with a wish for more support from their home institution.
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1 Introduction

The phenomenon of culture shock is an area that has been widely studied and discussed amongst companies and researchers alike. The fascination for the subject is perhaps a response to the increase in international mobility in the last decades. As more people seek to go abroad, it becomes important to examine the experiences of the people that are going abroad. The focus has been on how to care for employees or students that move to a new country and how to prepare them for the potential difficulties that come with moving abroad. How can they be assisted in the adjustment to a new culture? Both for long-term and short-term placements. The phenomenon of culture shock is fascinating as the world becomes more and more international. With greater access to international mobility, there has also been an increase in the search for an understanding of what people go through as they move abroad.

To understand the experience of the sojourners’ acculturation to a foreign culture, one increases the chance to avoid conflict and to have a successful time in the foreign country. While the focus on learning about different cultures and how to adapt to them, the concern for the reentry process for returning sojourners has fallen behind (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). The reentry process, meaning the psychological process one goes through as they return after their temporary stay in a foreign country, has been neglected in the pursuit of an understanding of international mobility. The research tells us a lot about how people have difficulties moving to a new country or culture, as well as what can be done in order to help with the transition to a new culture. The focus has been outwards, when one leaves their home culture and acculturates to a new culture. As opposed to this outward focus of culture shock and acculturation, the focus inwards on the reentry process and reverse culture shock have fallen behind in research. There has been a failure to accommodate for the return home (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). In the reentry process, people experience what is called reverse culture shock. Reverse culture shock “is a term used to describe the feelings (of surprise, disorientation, confusion, etc.) experienced when people return to their home country and find they do not fit in as they used to.” (Counseling & Psychological Services University of California, Davis, u.d.). It is an area that has been explored but not as seriously or expansive as the theory it is built upon, culture shock (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). There is a need for further exploration into returning sojourners and their experiences with coming home. Even though the phenomenon has been known since the 1940s (Scheutz, 1945), the reentry process needs further exploration to fully understand it and to find ways to assist the reentry for the sojourners. As of 2022, there are almost 700 000 swedes that lives abroad and out of those 700 000, 11% are students (Svenskar i Världen, 2022). The students make up a significant number of people that live abroad but jet, there is not a lot of research done on Swedish exchange students or their return home. This research paper will examine the experiences of reverse culture shock in the reentry process in returning student sojourners at Malmö University and what the university can do to assist in the reentry process. The hope for this paper is to start a conversation about reverse culture shock in Swedish universities and to help students in the reentry process to adjust to coming home from their student exchange. The purpose is to address the reentry process of returning student sojourners at Malmö University through phenomenological qualitative research.
1.1 Rationale and Purpose

This research initially had the goal of spreading awareness of what reverse culture shock is. There is a general knowledge in society about culture shock, people have a moderate idea of what the term means. But in the case of reverse culture shock, people seem to be unaware of the phenomenon. There has been some research conducted on the subject of reverse culture shock, but there is a significantly bigger collection of research on the former phenomenon, culture shock. This study seeks to fill a hole in the research on reverse culture shock by focusing on the returning student sojourners’ stories and experiences as they go through the reentry process. The purpose of this research is to encourage a deeper discussion about reverse culture shock at Malmö University and its impact on students returning from studying abroad. This research provides insight into how Malmö University can improve its already great study abroad programs.

1.2 Background

Malmö University is a multicultural university with over 1,800 international students, 25 English taught master’s programs and 7 English taught bachelor’s programs (Malmö University, 2023). Every year, the university sends out around 300 students on different student mobilities in their four study abroad programs, Erasmus+, Linneus-Palme, Nordplus, and Bilateral (Malmö University, 2023). Erasmus+, Linnaeus-Palme, and Nordplus are scholarship programs for studies within the EU/EES, with partners in developing countries, and the Nordic and Baltic countries respectively. Bilateral is an “exchange program with non-European partners and European partners not participating in Erasmus+ (e.g., United Kingdom and Switzerland)” (Malmö University, 2023)

Erasmus+ is run by the European Union in support of education, training, youth, and sport in Europe. Their work with opportunities within higher education, vocational education and training, school education, adult education, youth, and sport is shown to have been a success (European Commission, u.d.-c). The European Union has supported the Erasmus program financially for 35 years. This has allowed over 3 million European students to gain access to other higher education institutions throughout Europe as well as European organizations (European Commission, u.d.-a). The program is engaged in different activities but one of their main focuses is studying abroad. With a wide selection of countries to study abroad in, the student mobility programs have a positive effect on job prospects, language skills, and independence and self-confidence for the student sojourner (European Commission, u.d.-b).

The Linnaeus-Palme program focuses on strengthening the interest in cooperation for development among young people (Swedish Council for Higher Education, u.d.). The program aims to both strengthen education policies and aid policies. “It must strengthen the education sector, increase the quality of education, contribute to strategic work on internationalization, departmental capacity development and widening the interest in development work among young people” (Swedish Council for Higher Education, u.d.). The program is funded by SIDA (The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) as support for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through a strategy of capacity development, partnership, and methods (Swedish Council for Higher Education).

Nordplus aims “to create a collaboration between the institutions that participate in the program through exchanges, experience, good practice and innovative results.” (Nordplus). Nordplus has several different programs but their partnership with Malmö University falls...
under their Higher Education Program. The Higher Education program “supports network cooperation, intensive courses, development projects and joint study programs as well as student and teacher mobility in universities and university colleges.” (Nordplus).

The bilateral exchange program at Malmö University sends students outside of Europe to a handful of countries. These countries include, but are not limited to, Australia, Canada, The Republic of Korea, and The United States. The majority of the students who were interviewed for this research were a part of this exchange program. One of the students took part in the Erasmus+ program.

With a flow of students going abroad for exchange studies, the study abroad programs comprise students that temporarily go to a new country and culture. As the students go abroad, they will inevitably return home at the end of their study abroad program. When the students return home and go through the reentry process, there is a risk that they experience symptoms of reverse culture shock. While the benefits of student mobility programs are undeniable, so are the challenges. With 3 million students that have participated in an Erasmus+ program alone, it is too large a population to not address the challenges of reverse culture shock.

During the fall semester of 2022, Malmö University had 137 students participating in their student mobility programs. During the fall semester, the students that participated in a student mobility program were divided between three of the programs (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erasmus+</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nordplus</td>
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Table 1. Student mobility program distribution fall 2022 Malmö University

Comment. Created from data provided by the International Office at Malmö University, 2023, Malmö, Sweden.

The EU had the objective that in the year 2020, all member states of the EU would have overseas experienced students reaching 20 percent of its student population. Because of the positive trends within internationalization, the EU wants to encourage in their students to study abroad (Swedes Worldwide; Swedish International Students and Alumni, 2022). However, only six universities in Sweden reach the goal of having 20 percent of the student population with overseas experience (Swedes Worldwide; Swedish International Students and Alumni, 2022). Research from the European Commission shows that students with overseas experience benefit from their time as sojourners. There is a positive trend in students with overseas experience when it comes to finding their first job. The students with overseas experience have a greater salary development as well (Swedes Worldwide; Swedish International Students and Alumni, 2022). A report published by Swedes Worldwide and Swedish International Students and Alumni (SISA) highlights the danger for a country of falling behind the curve when it comes to student mobility. It is worrying that Sweden’s quota has decreased in the last decade (see Figure 1). Meaning that the share of students that study abroad has not had a significant increase in the last decade. In 2019, only 15 percent of
Swedish students that graduated that year had had an overseas experience within the frames of their Swedish education. In comparison, for Finland, 24 percent of their students have overseas experience and Germany have 33 percent. Every fourth and third student respectively in Finland and Germany had experience with going abroad.

This is concerning as Sweden falls behind in their share of overseas experienced students within student mobility. There needs to be an increase in Sweden’s globalization work within the universities. Why aren’t Swedish students going abroad? What is needed for an increase in the student population with overseas experience? What does this mean for Sweden’s share in the global market? These are all questions worth looking into and discussing further. The field of student mobility is a field that is in need of further exploration with the students in focus to gain deeper understanding of their experiences. (Swedes Worldwide; Swedish International Students and Alumni, 2022). Therefore, this research focuses on the students’ stories and experiences of returning home after their student mobility.

Swedes Worldwide and SISA question what is needed to increase the number of students who go on student mobility. Ultimately, they theorize that more research needs to be conducted on the students. “Lastly, there is a lot to learn from the students. There is a need for research that interview students and research studying abroad as a process: what information is needed at which time, and what barriers are the hardest to resolve?” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q1) (Swedes Worldwide; Swedish International Students and Alumni, 2022) This paper is a contribution to the research area of student mobility with the focus on returning student sojourners and their experience of the reentry process at a Swedish university.
1.2 Research question
When developing the research question, changes and adjustments were necessary as the collection of data and the analysis of that data was presenting new ideas and angles of the research. What was it that was going to be researched? The students were in focus and their experiences in the reentry process. What needed to be found out? Where is there a hole in the research on the subject? What does Malmö University do for their returning students? To answer these thoughts, the research question for this thesis is as follows: To what extent are returning student sojourners at Malmö University affected by reverse culture shock? And what can the university do to assist the reentry process?

1. Literature review:
To answer the research question of to what extent the returning student sojourners at Malmö University are affected by reverse culture shock and what the university can do to assist the reentry process, the answer needs to be grounded in literature. This thesis draws on the theories of Cultural Cognition, Culture Shock, and Reverse Culture Shock which are the main theoretical frameworks for this research. To understand reverse culture shock, one needs to understand the theory that it is built on, namely culture shock. Culture shock is a theory that is a part of the Cultural Learning Theory, or what is more commonly known as Social Cognitive Theory (SCT).

2.1 Cultural Learning and Cultural theories
Cultural Learning Theory (aka Social Cognitive Theory) explains the experience of learning about a new culture. With its connection to psychology and social cognition, it explains the psychological process of being immersed in a new culture (LaMorte, 2022). The theory highlights the importance that external and internal reinforcements have on the individual when learning about a new culture. “The unique feature of SCT is the emphasis on social influence and its emphasis on external and internal social reinforcement” (LaMorte, 2022). Social influence plays an important role in how we learn about cultures (LaMorte, 2022). The learning occurs through two modalities: observing and modeling others (Bandura, 1965). “People are partly the products of their environments, but by selecting, creating, and transforming their environmental circumstances they are producers of environments as well” (Bandura, 2000). Bandura argues that we have some control over our own environment as we can choose who we observe and model. Meanwhile the social environment one interacts in does have an effect on one’s behavior. The theory considers the process of how individuals acquire behaviors, while it takes into account the individuals’ social environment (LaMorte, 2022).

Cultural Learning Theory, or Social Cognitive Theory, explains aspects of the students’ experience as exchange students as it can explain their behaviors and actions, perhaps it is their social environment that made them more likely to go on exchange studies. Or how they respond to the reentry process can have its roots in the theory. Even though the theory of social cognition has its roots in psychology, this paper will focus on the cultural aspects of the theory, namely culture shock and in extension, developed from that phenomenon, reverse culture shock.
2.2 What is Culture Shock?

“Most research on sojourners, those who temporarily settle in another country, has focused on descriptions and theories to explain the stress of entering the host culture… including reports of deterioration in health in up to 25% of sojourners” (Soeterik & Chamove, 2006). Soeterik and Chamove (2006) look at research from Ward and Kennedy (1993, 2001) and Carsello and Creaser (1976) as examples of the research that had been done on sojourners. The research reflects the difficulties one could experience when living in a new country. The potential risk of experiencing culture shock is something that universities prepare their students for before sending them on their student exchanges, but they often neglect to inform the students about the difficulties they might experience coming home.

The focus in this paper is on reverse culture shock but when addressing the concept of reverse culture shock, it is important to acknowledge the theory that it is based upon, the theory of culture shock. Culture shock has its origin in the work that has been done by sociologist Sverre Lysgaard (1955) and anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in the 1960s. Their work was established based on the findings in their research on Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States (Lysgaard, 1955) as well as Christian missionaries being stationed in a foreign country (Oberg, 1960). In these articles, they both address an obvious ailment of moving to a new cultural environment. The expatriate sojourners in their work were found to experience an increase in their level of depression and anxiety about being in the new cultural setting that they found themselves in (Liu, Valcic, & Gallois, 2019). This work led to the development of the concept of culture shock, a four-stage phenomenon which is called the U-curve (Figure 2). The U-curve visually represents the four stages of the phenomenon: Honeymoon, Crisis, Recovery, and Adjustment (Brack, 2010).

![Figure 2. Lysgaard’s (1955) U-shaped curve (Alamri, 2018, p. 79)](image)

Culture shock has been explained as an occupational hazard when working with and in different cultures. This includes people that move abroad, whether that is for studies, work, or other reasons. When one enters a new culture, they go through the different stages in the U-curve. As a model to explain the phenomenon of adjusting to a new culture, the U-curve can be explained as follows.
**Honeymoon phase:**
When you first enter a new culture, you are in a honeymoon phase with all the excitement of being abroad and learning about a new culture. This stage is associated with euphoria and excitement about being in a new place. The intense excitement one feels at this stage is due to all the new things one encounters in this new cultural setting (Liu, Valcic, & Gallois, 2019).

**Crisis phase:**
After having been somewhere for a while, one moves into the crisis phase. This stage is also referred to as the disintegration stage. This stage is connected to the stress and frustration that starts to take hold of the sojourner. When one lives in a new cultural setting, there is a lot more conscious energy going towards navigating this new cultural landscape. This in turn leads to the sojourner becoming fatigued and experiencing cognitive overload. When one is in the crisis stage, oftentimes feelings of discontent, impatience, anger, sadness, and feeling of incompetence rise to the surface (Liu, Valcic, & Gallois, 2019).

**Recovery phase:**
The third phase, the recovery phase, is the stage where people start to solve their problems with the new culture. New cues being reintegrated and an ability to function in this new cultural setting give the sojourners the opportunity to adjust to the new cultural environment (Liu, Valcic, & Gallois, 2019).

**Adjustment phase:**
The fourth and final stage is the adjustment phase. This stage offers a comfortable navigation in the new culture for the sojourners. The culture becomes more predictable as the sojourners have developed tools for problem solving and conflict resolution. The adjustment phase can also be described as biculturalism, where the sojourners are comfortably navigating both their home culture and this new culture. This can also contribute to the sojourners feeling a sense of belonging in the new cultural setting that they are in (Liu, Valcic, & Gallois, 2019).

Research within migration literature draws attention to the negative consequences of experiencing a different culture. This notion has been transferred to the study of student sojourners. Zhou, et al. draws attention to Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner and Adrian Furnham (2001) observations of “the early theories applied to the study of international students were clinically oriented and strongly related to medical models of sojourner adjustment”. (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). From there, there was a movement away from the medical field as researchers started to query whether the implicit assumption that the stress associated with cross-cultural experience was medically connected (Bochner, 1982). Culture Shock became associated more with social psychology and education rather than the medical field. Models such as ‘culture learning’ and ‘stress and coping’ became well established in the 1980s (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), and ‘social identification’ theories became more discernable. The theory of Culture Shock became more expansive when embracing these three theories considering the components that actualize the response from experiencing a new culture – affect, behavior, and cognition (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

### 2.3 What is Reverse Culture Shock?
As opposed to culture shock, where one experience difficulties going to a new country and culture, reverse culture shock is the difficulties one experiences when returning home. Reverse culture shock is an extension of the phenomenon of culture shock. Reverse culture
shock describes the phenomenon of the disorientation and negative feelings often experienced when an individual becomes a returning sojourner. When someone returns from being temporarily placed in a foreign culture, they could potentially experience symptoms of reverse culture shock upon their return to their home culture. In 1963, Gullahorn and Gullahorn extended on the U-curve and developed what we call the W-curve for reverse culture shock, as seen in Figure 3. The idea of reverse culture shock is that one experience similar symptoms when returning home after having lived abroad as one does when entering a new culture. In the same way reverse culture shock is an extension of culture shock, the W-curve is an extension of the U-curve (Kranz & Goedderz, 2020).

Reverse culture shock can be described as such: “Reverse culture shock, or re-entry, is simply a common reaction to returning home from studying abroad” (Marquette University, 2023). It “is a term used to describe the feelings (of surprise, disorientation, confusion, etc.) experienced when people return to their home country and find they do not fit in as they used to” (Counseling & Psychological Services University of California, Davis, u.d.). And it “occurs because a place that once felt entirely familiar suddenly seems strange and foreign” (University of Nebraska Omaha, u.d.).

With a history dating back to as early as the 1940s, research on reverse culture shock has come a long way. In 1945, Alfred Scheutz researched veterans returning from war and their difficulties with their reentry into society. Scheutz (1945) writes in his text The Homecomer: “To the homecomer home shows – at least in the beginning – an unaccustomed face.” (Scheutz, 1945). Scheutz describes the reason why people experience reverse culture shock quite beautifully: “But the homecomer’s attitude differs from that of the stranger. The latter is about to join a group which is not and never has been his own. He knows that he will find himself in an unfamiliar world, differently organized than that from which he comes, full of pitfalls and hard to master. The homecomer, however, expects to return to an environment of which he always had and – so he thinks – still has intimate knowledge and which he has just to take for granted in order to find his bearing within it.” (Scheutz, 1945). What Scheutz is describing is that the attitude is different when you return home compared to when you go abroad. When students go abroad, they expect to experience culture shock. According to Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), the main difference between culture shock and reverse culture shock was the expectations of the sojourners. “Sojourners often expected to return to an unchanged home as unchanged individuals, which was not the case. In other words, one
can expect (and thus is more or less cognitively prepared for) the cultural differences when entering a new culture, thereby potentially minimizing the effects of culture shock… There has also been an assumption that reentry expectations negatively influence reverse culture shock” (Gaw, 2000). One’s expectations often have an impact on the severity of the effects of the reentry process. If one expects to experience culture shock, their symptoms can be less severe as they are prepared for the challenges of the U-curve. But as people return home, they are often unprepared for the challenges of returning home. Their expectation of home still being exactly the same as when they left often contributes to more severe symptoms of reverse culture shock as they face the difficulties of the reentry process.

Experiencing reverse culture shock has been proven to be difficult. Gaw (2000) found that students returning from studying abroad experienced Depression, Alienation, Isolation, Loneliness, General Anxiety, Speech anxiety, Friendship difficulties, Shyness concerns, and feeling of inferiority, among other things. The students also experienced difficulties regarding their education. The study done by Gaw showed that students, except for social difficulties, also experienced trouble studying, academic performance concerns, concerns about career match, and adjustment to the college environment (Gaw, 2000). These reactions are ordinary in relation to experiencing reverse culture shock. People often find themselves disoriented and confused when they return home.

“In a study of exchange students, Storti (2003) found that 64% of American returnees reported significant reverse culture shock upon repatriation, and that more than 50% of Swedish exchange students said that “they didn’t fit in” at home” (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021). It is common that the shock of reentry is stronger than the shock of going abroad. Fray (1988) has identified four dimensions of reverse culture shock: cultural distance, interpersonal distance, moral distance, and emotional distance (Fray, 1988)

Cultural distance is defined as “the inability to fit into one’s home culture and understand familiar (yet unspoken) socio-cultural customs.” (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021). This can be connected to linguistic, professional, academic, or environmental factors. Returning sojourners can feel distance from their own language as they might forget how to speak their own language and switch between the language of your home country and the host country (Fray, 1988). In professional settings there is often a disconnect between co-workers and supervisors, and the returning sojourner. This is due to the co-workers and supervisors’ failure to appreciate the newly gained cross-cultural competence that the returning sojourner possesses (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021). Academically, students can feel distance from their home university system as they go through the process of reentry. Since they have become familiar with their host countries university system, the home university system might feel very distant for the students (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021). It needs to be noted that cultural distance can manifest itself even when the geography and climate is different in the host country as it is in the home country (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021).

Interpersonal distance is the perceived connection that the returning sojourners have with the people in their home country. This connection may lead to a sense of fulfillment in their need for affection and belonging. The returning sojourners could also experience stress in the connection as they might feel judged, lonely, or misunderstood (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021). Anyone in the home culture can be a trigger of interpersonal distance for the returning sojourners but it is most commonly that the returning sojourners experience distance from
family, friends, and romantic partners. There is an expectation that the people that are closest to the returning sojourner will show interest in their stories. Research has shown that oftentimes, the returning sojourners relationship with their family is likely to be improved while friendships and romantic relationships weaken. Friends and partners often lack the time and skills needed to provide the support that the returning sojourners are searching for (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021).

**Moral distance** “refers to one’s likelihood to accept or reject the home culture’s moral values.” (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021). When students participate in student mobility programs, they learn about and get accustomed to different standards and behaviors that exist in the host country. Upon their return, some sojourners can start to challenge the cultural norms in their home country or even reject previous beliefs. Behaviors related to how they dress, or use of drugs and alcohol for example, can change when they return to their home country. The discomfort towards culturally dominant values that the sojourner can experience when they return is due to these values being re-evaluated during their time in the host country (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021).

**Emotional distance** is the feeling of homesickness and loss and separation from the host culture often experienced by people. Fray (1988) originally called it “grief”. In staying connected to people in the host culture, people are subjected to nostalgia and discontent for home (Butcher, 2002). A returning sojourner’s mental health can be affected negatively if left unaddressed (Gaw, 2000). The relationship between cross-cultural movement and negative mental health has been studied and confirmed. (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021)

2. **Methodology**

2.1 **Choice of Method**

This research paper focuses on student sojourners and their experience returning home after exchange studies. By collecting data from the student sojourners’ experiences in the reentry process it gives insight into the reentry process and how the universities can assist their returning student sojourners. With a focus on the subjective stories of the student sojourners, this study allows for the execution of qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method to collect data. Furthermore, Clarke and Braun’s (2006) method of thematic analysis are used to analyze the data.

2.2 **Research Paradigm and Approach**

The aim of this research is to explore student sojourners’ experience of culture shock in the reentry process after they return home after exchange studies. The focus will therefore be subjective rather than objective to gain a broader and richer understanding of the perception of the reentry process in the returning student sojourners. “In contemporary phenomenological research, the investigator deals with the phenomena of human experience. The purpose of this type of research is to investigate the experience of the participants’ being in the world” (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). The purpose is therefore not to investigate the students in an experimental situation but rather to investigate their experiences of naturally occurring situations. To focus on their spoken word instead of focusing on observation.

The philosophical framework of this research is an interpretivist paradigm. Since this research handles a small sample size and focuses on a subjective understanding of the student sojourner’s experience of the reentry process, this paradigm is appropriate (Collis and Hussey,
By following an interpretivism paradigm, the results of this research can be generalized to a similar setting but not a whole population (Collins and Hussey, 2014; Farrelly, 2013). This paradigm follows the rule of ‘reality is subjective’ and, therefore, the results of this research can be altered if the research is adopted in a different setting where different values and contexts are present (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

2.3 Method of Data Collection

In this research, the methods that are being used are qualitative. Most of the previous research that examines returning exchange students or returning sojourners have used quantitative methods in their research such as Rohrlich & Martin (1991), Tamura & Furnham (1993), and Rogers & Ward (1993). These studies give us great insight to identify the issues of people experiencing the shock of reentry. But when examining the ‘how’ of reverse culture shock, qualitative methods are better suited (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). This research required a phenomenological study of the returning students after their exchange to provide an insight into the experiences of the students’ reentry into the university and the country.

The chosen method for data collection in this research is semi-structured interviews. Before conducting the interviews, an interview guide was established where key terms were identified and predetermined questions were chosen. The predetermined questions allow for more in-depth answers since they are formulated in an open-ended way (Collis and Hussey, 2014). This method will allow for a thorough discussion on the subject since there will be both predetermined and non-predetermined questions.

With semi-structured interviews as a method to collect data, it allows for more questions to develop during the duration of the interview as well as students being given the opportunity to bring up ideas that were relevant for explaining their experience of the reentry. With the freedom given to the student sojourners with open-ended questions, there needs to be a predetermined framework for the theme of the interviews. The predetermined thematic framework of these interviews were student exchange, reverse culture shock, and the university. The predetermined questions were the following:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where did you study? Tell me about that experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you experience culture shock while you were there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know what reverse culture shock is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you tell me about the time you came home? How was that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any habits that you have picked up from being abroad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any values that have changed since your time abroad?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A key to conducting semi structured interviews is to allow the interviewee to express themselves in their own words (Collis & Hussey, 2014). For the students to be able to express themselves in their own words, without having to adjust or consider the theoretical framework that this study work with, is important since it allows for an open dialogue on the subject which is advantageous when conducting semi-structured interviews (Collis & Hussey, 2014).
Semi-structured interviews provide more detailed answers in its approach since it is flexible (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Leading questions are not asked since it is important that the interviewees’ own perception is expressed in their own words. This also ensures that the conversation stay lively and exploratory (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). As the interviews were conducted, the questions needed to be modified to explore topics that were brought up in the interviews. This was done by adding questions to later interviews that handled topics that were discovered in previous interviews. This approach gave the opportunity to explore new concepts that could be developed (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013).

2.4 Sample
In this research, a group of returning student sojourners at Malmö University were interviewed on how they were affected by reverse culture shock after their return from their exchange semesters and their thoughts on what could have assisted their reentry here in Malmö and their reentry into the university. By enlisting the help of the international office at Malmö University, I was able to send out a survey to the returning student sojourners to volunteer their interest in taking part in an interview. The survey asked for name, contact information and when and where they had gone on exchange. Out of the 107 returning student sojourners the survey was sent to, 15 returning student sojourners showed interest in being a part of this research. Ultimately, 10 returning student sojourners took part in the research project. This was due to some returning student sojourners retracting their interest and others having scheduling difficulties. The criteria for participating in this research was the following:

- You are a student at Malmö University
- You have done an exchange semester through Malmö University
- You have returned from your exchange semester within the last year.

The ten returning student sojourners consist of nine women and one male. Two of the participants were studying on a graduate level and the eight of them on an undergraduate level and they were all in their final semester of their program. To keep the returning student sojourners anonymous, they have been assigned a number from 1-10 (Table 2). Before the interviews, verbal consent was given by all interviewees after they had been informed of the study and what the data would be used for.

Table 2. Overview of the returning student sojourners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Semester Abroad</th>
<th>Sojourn Country</th>
<th>Exchange Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student I</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fall 2022</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Erasmus+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student II</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fall 2022</td>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
<td>Bilateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student III</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fall 2022</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Bilateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student IV</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Fall 2022</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Bilateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student V</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fall 2022</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Bilateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student VI</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fall 2022</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Bilateral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5 Data analysis

This research project follows the analytic method of thematic analysis. By following the six-step framework that Braun and Clarke (2006) came up with for thematic analysis of data, it allows for a discovery of themes in the interviews. Ten returning student sojourners were interviewed in both Swedish and English. The interviews were later transcribed in the language that they were conducted in. This ensured that the students' answers were not mistranslated in the analysis. The quotes from the students used in this research paper were later translated to ensure that the data quoted in this thesis paper would be available to non-Swedish speakers. The original quotes are available in Appendix 1. By first becoming familiar with the data, phrases or words were identified that continuously came up in the interviews. In the process of becoming familiar with the data, there was an advantage of basic understanding of it as I had been the one to collect the data. Throughout the interview process, there were already some words and thoughts that stood out, but there was still a need for further immersion into the data. An active reading of the data was conducted. This was to ensure a deep understanding of the data. It required reading and rereading the transcripts several times to become familiar with the content to ensure that the findings were accurate and followed a systematic rigor. After the familiarization process, the initial coding of the data was executed and following, a search for themes in that code.

Table 3. Examples of the coding of the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excerpts from data</th>
<th>What they are describing</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Maybe more the isolation part” [About symptoms of reverse culture shock]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “I also feel like the people are different, like, Australians are very open and very friendly and talkative, and they banter a lot.”  
  [Implying that Swedes are the opposite.]                                        |                                                                                        |                                          |
<p>| “When I came back, I felt completely isolated and new in my class. Up until now I still have trouble finding friends or connecting with people from my class.” |                                                                                        |                                          |
| “In Sweden, it is sort of like we use. Like you do your own thing during the week, and then during the weekend you do something with Swedes” | Isolation, struggling connections, anti-social Swedes                                  | Social difficulties                       |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>your friends.” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You want to go back, like to the life you had there...there were more very social and fun people there.” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t have as many friends in Malmö as I did in South Korea...I miss the community that happens, the fellowship.” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It is sort of like those months were like a dream in a way. Like they don’t feel quite real. Like something happened there and now I woke up and have to process everything.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It felt like a dream, and then it was gone” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q5)</td>
<td>It didn’t feel real, returning to the same place but feeling different, it felt like they were dreaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You come back to the same place. It felt like I was dreaming, and then it was gone. Then you came home, and it was, I mean, the same again” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q6)</td>
<td>A dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ok, I’ve done that, but I have no one to really share this experience with because I’m the only one, kind of, and I don’t have the means to like contact anyone else who’s done this.”</td>
<td>What the university can do to assist the reentry process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I start explaining? How should I explain all of this to someone? It’s four months, I’ve had a lot of fun experiences and like this, it’s hard to summarize it and explain to someone. Then it can be nice to talk to someone that has done the same thing, gone to the same country.” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q7)</td>
<td>Desperate to talk to others that share the experience of exchange studies, lack of support from the international office, no means to contact others to talk to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I feel like sometimes the international office wasn’t that present, I mean, they were helpful, but they were helpful almost at the end of the periods to apply and that was really stressful. So, I don’t know if I would feel comfortable with them.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment. Created from data provided by the interviews for this research project, 2023, Malmö, Sweden.
Once the themes had been established, they were reviewed to make sure they had proper backing in the data and the ones that did not have support in the data were eliminated. Finally, three themes were established that describe the returning student sojourners experiences of returning to Malmö University and Sweden. The three themes are social difficulties, a dream, and what the university can do to support the students in the reentry process.

3. Findings

By following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step framework for thematic analysis, three themes from the data were established that explain to what extent the returning student sojourners at Malmö University are affected by reverse culture shock and what the university can do to assist the reentry process. These three themes were social difficulties, a dream, and what the university can do to assist the students in the reentry process. The following is an introduction of the themes.

3.1 Social difficulties

The first theme that was identified in the process of content analysis of the transcripts was social difficulties. A majority of the returning student sojourners expressed a concern for the social situations that they found themselves in after their return. They had become accustomed to a certain way of socializing during their exchange that they no longer have access to. Student V explains it as: “the difference with Australians is that they as people are like impulsive and social and that was a very big difference, that they talk to you like they have known you for five years when you first meet them. But here in Sweden, everyone kind of, like, keeps to themselves… they are so social in Australia, they say hi to you and you can talk to someone on the bus but it was really weird here when you come from there and I thought, I reacted to it when I came home again that people were like scared of saying hello even if it was someone that you are acquaintances with. People like to look away when you make eye contact with someone. I think that is very sad” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q8) (Interview 3, 2023). She expressed it as a sense of loneliness and isolation of not being seen by the people around her.

Other students expressed feeling lonely in other scenarios as they were now living by themselves. During their exchange, they were living together with other people in a dormitory. “So, you met people every day, unlike how you might do it at home in a different way when you now live alone. The life on campus was just so much nicer, and we don’t really get that here, at least not in Malmö. I want to say that probably not even in Sweden in that way” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q9) (Interview 3, 2023). She expressed a wish or perhaps a longing for the same type of campus spirit that she experienced during her exchange.

Student I opened up about her social anxiety and how she challenged herself during her exchange. She was expecting to eliminate her anxiety but found that that was a monumental task. “So, when I came back, I felt like I hadn't accomplished socially what I wanted to accomplish and that hurts a bit. So, when I come back, I feel like I’m still. I still have to kind of deal with this process of, I don't know, finding myself” (Interview 1, 2023). She talked about how she didn’t feel like she knew who she was anymore when she returned.
3.2 A Dream

The second theme is a word that came up in the majority of the interviews which was *dream*, or *dröm* in Swedish. The students expressed their uneasy feeling of the fact that they were no longer engulfed in the student exchange bubble. “It’s sort of like those months were like, a dream in a way, like, they don’t feel quite real. Like something happened there and now I woke up and have to process everything” (Interview 1). They reflected on their experiences of returning home to a familiar place which made their time abroad feel like it did not happen. “It was so weird to come back to the exact same place you were before you went away because then the whole trip became like a dream. It is so weird” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q10) (Interview 3, 2023). To the question if home still felt like home, student IX said: “I don’t think so, because it felt like, like I said, you come back to the same place. It felt like I was dreaming, and then it was gone. Then you came home, and it was, I mean, the same again” (Interview 4, 2023). She reflected on the fact that home was just the same as when she left, but it felt different. She goes on to acknowledge that there was something that felt different after her return from her student mobility program, but she could not quite put her finger on what it was that was different (Interview 4, 2023).

3.3 What the university can do to support the students in the reentry process

The last theme that was identified is what the universities themselves can do. What consistently came up in the interviews was the students’ desire to talk about their experience of studying abroad. The students perceived there to not be a space or platform for them to connect with people that share similar experiences. They are looking for connections with other students that understand and can relate to the experience of being an international student. The students were looking for a space to talk about their experiences that the university could provide for them but is currently not.

In one of the interviews, a student talk about this issue:

> And I think it can definitely help just to, especially when you're feeling lonely, like bringing these people together because they're probably feeling the same as you like, they have experienced the same as you and so I think it would be helpful even to talk about your experiences or how you feel. Because yeah, when you're back here, you're like, OK, I've done that, but I have no one to really share this experience with because I'm the only one, kind of and I don't have the means to like contact anyone else who's done this (Interview 2).

Not only did the students want a chance to talk about their experience afterwards, but they also wanted to take part in the expertise of the students that went before them.

> It would have been fun to have a physical space, like an event for example where we from the previous year can come and they can ask questions or something to us. Or we meet the ones that are going to the same place that we went to. That you sit there and talk for a little bit. Do you have any questions? Start telling a little bit about what we did. Here are some tips that I have. That’s probably smart actually. I wish that I had that before (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q11) (Interview 4).
4. Discussion

When looking at previous research on reverse culture shock, there are limited qualitative research studies conducted on returning student sojourners and their experiences with reverse culture shock. This paper addresses a hole in the previous research on reverse culture shock by providing an insight into the experiences of the reentry process in returning student sojourners at Malmö University. This paper also addresses what Malmö University can do to assist the students in the reentry process. When looking at the research that has been conducted on the subject of student mobility with a focus on reverse culture shock, there are limited studies out there. As globalization and internationalization have grown more popular in the last decades, there is an abundance of research on culture shock and how to help students that are moving to a new country. The focus has been on the outgoing students. Both qualitative and quantitative research has been done on the subject. In comparison, research has been conducted on reverse culture shock (see Gaw, 2000; Kranz & Goedderz, 2020; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991) but it is lacking in its qualitative research. What is lacking in the research is the students’ stories, the experiences of the students, the phenomenological research on the returning student sojourners that looks into what support the students need when returning from their exchange semesters. The lack of phenomenological research on the subject makes it an area that needs to be further explored. In the field of social sciences and cultural studies, there is a need for qualitative research on returning student sojourners.

In this study, to answer the research question “To what extent are returning student sojourners at Malmö University affected by reverse culture shock? And what can the university do to assist the reentry process?”, qualitative research was conducted to tell the stories of the students. For this research study, ten students were interviewed, which, through the method of thematic analysis, lead to three themes that summarized the students’ experiences after returning from their student mobility programs. Their stories and experiences of the reentry process gave insight into what students experience when returning home from exchange semesters. In the themes, one can find a sense of unity in their answers. This reveals a common ground for the experience of the reentry process. Even though they went to different countries, those countries being Australia, Canada, Ireland, The Republic of Korea, and the United States, they shared an experience that is unique for exchange students. As an international student, or exchange student, students have an experience that one seldom experiences anywhere else. There are numerous people that go abroad and become sojourners, but the experience of an exchange student is different from someone that is going for, i.e., a job. Even though the students went to different countries and cultures, the returning student sojourners had similar experiences during their time as exchange students. Almost every student that was interviewed expressed some level of reverse culture shock as returning student sojourner.

4.1 The themes in the literature

The three themes social difficulties, a dream, and what the university can do to assist the reentry process describe the students’ experience of returning home after their student exchange programs. As the students talked about their experiences, they described some of the symptoms (Gaw, 2000; Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021; and Kranz & Goedderz, 2020) of reverse culture shock. They talked about depression, anxiety, isolation, and feeling like they are unsure about the path of their education. It is clear that as returning student sojourners, the
students experienced reverse culture shock as they returned home to Malmö and went through the reentry process.

4.1.1 Social Difficulties
Research has found what difficulties the students experience when they return from their exchange semesters. Gaw’s (2000) quantitative study on students returning from overseas concludes that students experience difficulties when they return home. The difficulties are both social and academic. This is something that is reflected in the interviews with the students at Malmö University as well. Most of the students expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation upon their return as they no longer lived with other people and their social life here in Malmö was not the same as it had been on their exchange. It is not surprising that when one returns to Sweden, one face difficulties adjusting to the social landscape in Sweden. It is important to note that the Swedish culture, and in turn, Swedish people tend to be more reserved and anti-social than people from other countries. When one gets accustomed to a more open and social climate, Sweden feels isolating and lonely. Most of the students interviewed for this thesis expressed that they had problems with the social aspect of returning home. Many of them experienced a different social dynamic here in Malmö compared to when they were on their exchange. They express a wish to be more social in their day-to-day life here in Sweden, as they have brought that habit with them from their exchange.

In my own experiences as an international student, it is difficult to adjust back to the Swedish culture after one return home. As a 19-year-old, I moved to Chicago, USA to start my university career as I had committed to a full bachelor’s degree as an international student. This experience proved to be one of the most incredible experiences I had ever had. After four years in this foreign country, it was time for me to return home. Back to my hometown of Stockholm and back to the Swedish culture. What I was not prepared for was the shock of not feeling like I belonged there anymore. I experienced a lot of the typical symptoms of reverse culture shock, such as depression and anxiety, but was unaware of the fact that there was an actual term for the state of mind that I was in. It was not until a few months later when I attended a course in Intercultural Communication that I was made aware of the concept of reverse culture shock, allowing me to reflect on the symptoms I had felt and what they could have been caused by. Even as a returning student, it can be hard to adjust back to Swedish culture. As a highly individualistic country, Sweden has a culture that can seem very cold and distant at first but in my experience is very positive and happy once you are able to connect with people. But connecting with people can be one of the most difficult things. One of the students that I interviewed for this research explained that difficulty. “When I came back, I felt completely isolated and new in my class. Up until now I still have trouble finding friends or connecting with people from my class” (Interview 2, 2023). It can be very devastating to feel like it is impossible to connect with people in a place that is your home. That leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness which can have devastating consequences if not addressed.

Swedish culture can be hard to define but to get a framework for what Swedish culture is, Hofstede’s (u.d.) six cultural dimensions can give us a clearer frame of reference. Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions explain the power difference, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence of a country. Sweden scores low on the power distance dimension. This means that Sweden is independent, a hierarchy is only for convenience, there are equal rights, superiors are accessible, leaders coach, management facilitates and empowers. The power is decentralized, and managers rely on the experience of
their team, employees expect to be consulted and their attitude towards managers is informal and on a first name basis. Control is disliked and communication is direct and participative (Hofstede, u.d.). As opposed to the low score of the power distance dimension, Sweden scores high on individualism. This means that as a highly individualistic country, the social framework in which Swedes operates is loosely defined and one is expected to only take care of themselves and their closest family. If one goes against the norm, it could cause a loss of self-esteem and encourage guilt. In a corporate setting, it means that the relationship between an employee and their employer is contract based which has mutual benefits. Hiring and promotion decisions are based on merit only (Hofstede, u.d.). On the masculinity dimension, Sweden scores very low. This is because Sweden is a feminine society. In a feminine country, they value a work/life balance and inclusion is important. Management is supportive and decisions are made through people’s involvement. Equality, solidarity, and quality in their working life is highly valued. Conflicts are managed by long discussions until consensus can be reached. Conflicts are resolved through compromise and negotiation. Free time and flexible working hours and place are highly favored by swedes. Our culture is based on “lagom” which roughly translates to not too much, not too little. Everything in moderation and not too noticeable (Hofstede, u.d.). Lagom is upheld by something called “the law of Jante” which works to keep people in their place. So, they do not stick out too much and they uphold the societal norm. It is an unwritten rule in most of Scandinavia which as a concept teaches people to not boast or lift themselves above other people (Hofstede, u.d.). The uncertainty avoidance dimension reveals a low preference for avoiding uncertainty. As a low uncertainty avoidance society, Sweden has a more relaxed attitude in which principles are less important than practice and unnecessary rules are unnecessary. Innovation is also highly encouraged (Hofstede, u.d.). Long term orientation is a dimension that describes how a society maintains some links to its past while dealing with the challenge of the future. Low scores on this dimension are normative countries that prefer to maintain time-honored traditions and norms while being weary of societal changes. If a country scores high on this dimension, they have a more pragmatic approach as they value modern education to prepare for the future. Sweden scores intermediate on this dimension which shows that it has no clear preference for either traditions or the future (Hofstede, u.d.). Sweden scores high on the indulgence dimension which means that swedes exhibit a willingness to follow their impulses and desires with regard to enjoying life and having fun. They have a positive attitude, and they lean towards optimism. Leisure time, acting as one pleases and spending money as they wish is important (Hofstede, u.d.). While considering the dimensions discussed above, Swedish culture can be loosely defined. But when talking about Swedish culture in the context of this research paper, I am basing the definition on what the students in the interviews express that they experience Swedish culture as. Namely shy, anti-social people that will not acknowledge strangers but are very accepting of other people’s way of expressions (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 4, Interview 5).

Many people that come to Sweden have a problem with the closed off, shy personalities of Swedes. Foreigners that move to Sweden often express how hard it is to make new friends since most people here tend to be closed off and shy on a surface level. Even Swedes, born and raised in Sweden, once they spend a significant time abroad, sometimes forget what it is like to navigate the Swedish society and the Swedish personality again. The returning student sojourners had difficulties dealing with the fact that no one interacts with strangers on the bus or acknowledges you simply because they do not really know you. Those things are very
natural in the Swedish culture and that can make it difficult navigating that once you return home as you have gotten used to other forms of social interactions in the host country.

Looking at the literature, research that has been done on returning student sojourners have been conducted in other countries such as Japan (Tamura & Furnham, 1993), USA (Gaw, 2000), and Cyprus (Thompson & Christofi, 2006). But there is minimal research conducted here in Sweden, or with Swedish nationals, on returning student sojourners which makes this an area in research that is full of unexplored research opportunities. Even though the general concept of reverse culture shock is universal, it is important that we gain an understanding of how the reentry process works for Swedish nationals as they return home. I.e., how are people affected by going from a collectivistic country back to Sweden’s individualistic culture. That is a much larger project than what the scope of this research allows, but it is important to mention since there is a need for further research there.

Through the interview process in this project, it was found that previous research on returning student sojourners does adequately explain the experiences and difficulties the student sojourners at Malmö University had as they returned home. Depression, anxiety, and isolation were common effects for the returning student sojourners at Malmö University. What the students’ experienced as they went through the reentry process, what was expressed in the interviews also resonated with my own experiences of returning home from overseas studies. I was able to participate in a student mobility program myself through Malmö University. Having become aware of the risk that comes with going abroad and having to go through the reentry process upon my return, I still decided that I wanted to go abroad again. Perhaps another symptom of my reverse culture shock. Through Malmö University, I was able to participate in a student mobility program during my elective semester in this master program. As I prepared to return home from my student exchange, I was expecting and preparing to have the same reaction after my homecoming as I did three years prior when I returned home from the US. However, the reaction to being back home was not nearly as severe as the first time. Perhaps this is due to my previous knowledge of the concept. Or perhaps because the amount of time spent abroad was reduced which led to a reduced reaction. Since all the students interviewed for this study were all abroad for one semester, it was not plausible to add that dimension to this research. However, it would be an interesting framework for future studies to explore if a longer time abroad means that one’s reaction to returning home is more severe.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the returning student sojourner’s experiences after four months abroad are not severe when they return home. The student’s experiences are very real and should be taken with the utmost seriousness and consideration. Even small things that they experience can make a difference in how they experience the severity of the reentry process. One student shared that she had to increase her dose of antidepressants after she had returned home. “I have been taking antidepressants for like a while, and for the first time when I came back here, I actually asked to higher the dose because I really couldn’t concentrate on my studies. I, I could barely get up from the bed so, yeah. Yeah, that was literally the first time I requested that. So, there was something that was totally off” (Interview 1, 2023). This is a very serious concern, and it is important to consider that the students need support as they return home.
4.1.2 A Dream

The students had a similar experience of feeling like their exchange semester had been like a dream. They described this feeling in the interviews like they were waking up from a dream when they returned and that it almost felt like the exchange semester did not happen. They felt like they were in a dream and coming back from their exchange felt like waking up from it. Similar to when you have taken a nap for too long and then when you wake up you feel disoriented and confused. A room that you are very familiar with suddenly feels strange and foreign. The room didn’t change but somehow it feels different. Perhaps this is a hint towards what state of mind the returning student sojourners are in when they have returned from their student mobility programs.

This theme is something that I have not found in previous research when looking at research that has examined the subject of student mobility and reverse culture shock. Perhaps it is because of the lack of qualitative research on the subject. Or because it has not been considered as a big enough problem to be deemed relevant to bring up in a study that is focused on the difficulties of returning home. Waking up from a dream can both feel like a positive thing and a negative thing. For returning student sojourners, the dream of the host culture is intensified when returning home and experiencing feelings of anxiety and depression. As such, the dream-like feeling is intensified and a need or longing to return to the host country and culture to experience it again may arise. Having this feeling may result in more students seeking study abroad programs or to work abroad. Being unable to support returning student sojourners in their reentry process may result in hostility within the students towards their home institution or even country. Why stay here when it was so much better over there?

The fact that the students felt like their time abroad was like a dream, that it did not feel real after their return, is ultimately something that needs to be further explored. It is something that could potentially be problematic for future student mobility. The consequence of that has the potential of being highly problematic for the student mobility programs. What does it mean that it did not feel like reality to them. What are the psychological implications of that? Furthermore, if one takes into consideration the goal of helping the returning student sojourners in the reentry process, this is something that needs to be understood and further researched. To be able to assist the returning student sojourners in the reentry process, it is essential to fully understand their experience of the time after they have come home. Ultimately, the limitations for this paper do not allow for further exploration of this theme. It is an area that needs to be further explored to gain a deeper understanding of the returning student sojourner’s experience of returning home to Swedish universities. In opposition to the potentially problematic side of returning student sojourners experiencing their exchange semester as a dream, it can be explained as something positive. That it was a good experience that made the returning student sojourners view it as “too good to be true”.

Another explanation for the returning student sojourner’s experience of a dream could be the length of time they were abroad. Perhaps a longer stay than four months abroad would have made it possible for the student sojourners to process and digest their temporary stay in the foreign country. Which in turn would have made the reentry process for the returning student sojourners different than what it was for the students that were interviewed. Perhaps a longer stay in a foreign country will make it feel more real for the students. That is something that
this research study can only begin to theorize about. For further discussion on it requires a completely different frame of study.

When one is on their exchange semester, they are often in a bubble with other exchange students. It is a very fun and exciting time as one gets to experience a new culture and explore a new country. People are more open and outgoing, as other exchange students are also trying to make new friends and connect with people. It can be overwhelming when one returns from their student exchange and the “exchange bubble” burst. The students talk about this “bubble” they were in during their exchange semester and the difficulties they faced when the bubble burst and they had to adjust back to reality. It is easy to immerse yourself into the exchange student experience that often you do not notice that you are in this bubble until you are out of it. Being in the bubble is comparable to dreaming as you are faced with having to adjust to reality once you burst the bubble or wake up.

4.1.3 What can the university do?
The question of what the university can do can be a complex question to answer. What people need from the university is individual. All students have different needs and wants so it can be difficult to define exactly what is needed from the university. Research within the scopes of student mobility and the reentry process for the returning student sojourners has seldom focused on the university itself. This is most likely because they send out a survey after the student sojourners return where they gain insight into the needs of their students. Early research on reverse culture shock claimed that all returning sojourners experience reverse culture shock. “While the theoretical literature states no returnee is exempt from reverse culture shock (Adler, 1981, Church, 1982, Stelling, 1991, Zapf, 1991), there are limited data to support this hypothesis” (Gaw, 2000). Gaw argues that there are exceptions, that there are returnees that do not experience reverse culture shock, which was something I found in my research as well. The interviews conducted in this research showed that there was one student that did in fact not experience reverse culture shock. If some of the students do not experience reverse culture shock, the need for support from the university is, presumably, reduced.

Contrary to what one could assume when dealing with returning student sojourners that do not experience reverse culture shock is that despite the fact that they are averse to reverse culture shock, they still need support. It would be a mistake for a university to disregard the opportunity to give support to the students, even the ones that might not need it as much as others.

In Gaw’s (2000) research, he examines the willingness to see a counselor and use the student support services in returning student sojourners. He found that the level of reverse culture shock had no correlation with the willingness to see a counselor but, he found a negative correlation with the use of student support services. If the returning student sojourner experienced a higher level of reverse culture shock, they were less likely to use student support services. As Gaw (2000) explains, when students experience a higher level of reverse culture shock, the student support services are less sought out. It is therefore important for the university to identify the correlations and how they can help with it.

Comparing the differences between the student sojourners that experienced reversed culture shock and the ones that did not, one can see a clear correlation between actively reentering society and not. As described previously, many returning student sojourners experience depression and anxiety in their reverse culture shock. Having these feelings of depression and
anxiety often results in a lack of reaching out to people and being able to actively seek out a solution for their problems. Resulting in what Gaw (2000) found, if one has feelings of anxiety and depression, they are less likely to use student support services that they have to seek out for themselves. On the other hand, the student sojourners that did not experience reverse culture shock are more likely to use the student support services that the universities are providing. The question then is whether it reaches the people that need it the most? Of course, all student sojourners should have access to support from the universities regardless of what amount of reverse culture shock they are experiencing. What is important for the universities to consider is how that support is provided and to what extent it is needed for the returning students. Maybe the universities need to arrange events where invitations are sent out to all students who have returned from being abroad. Being invited to an event rather than having to sign up for one may help the students with feelings of depression and anxiety. In that way, it may be easier to reach the students that need it the most. It is often the ones not reaching out at all that need it the most.

4.2 What can be expected of a university?

What can be expected from a university in terms of the reentry process for the students and the university’s involvement in it? When looking into what can be expected of a university in their work to assist their returning student sojourners in the reentry process, there are a few different aspects to consider. Information, timeframes, and opportunities are some of the areas that need to be considered. What information do the returning student sojourners need, and when do they need it?

As discussed above, the student sojourners that have more severe experiences of reverse culture shock are the ones that are less likely to actively reach out for help rather than the ones not experiencing it. It is therefore increasingly important for the university to identify when and how the support should be provided. It is an essential element of studying abroad to have all the information that is needed to go abroad. Much effort is put into the students being prepared for a new culture while limited effort is made in regard to how the student sojourners should approach the reentry process. Therefore, a good approach for the universities is to address this prior to departure as well as after reentry. Having the knowledge beforehand, the students are more prepared for identifying and handling the feelings that may arise once they return back to their home country.

In terms of how much information should be provided, a good rule is often ‘too much rather than too little”. One still needs to be mindful as to not provide an unnecessarily excessive amount of information but at the very least, basic information about reverse culture shock should be mandatory. Some universities have information about reverse culture shock on their websites while some do not. The university of Notre Dame has a section on their study abroad website called Returnees. Here you find information about reverse culture shock as well as other helpful information such as tips on how one can cope with reverse culture shock (University of Notre Dame, 2023). This is something that far from every university has on their website. Having such information on their website shows the student sojourners that they are still important and cared for once they come back. By giving the students the information readily available on their website show the students that they are seen as they return home and that they are cared for and understood by the international office. It is important for universities to have information about reverse culture shock on their websites. Universities such as Brown University (Brown University, 2023), Marquette University (Marquette
University, 2023), and even my old Alma mater North Park University (North Park University, 2023) has some information about reverse culture shock on their websites. However, Malmö University, and other Swedish universities, does not have any information about reverse culture shock on their website. Having information about what reverse culture shock is and what the returning student sojourners can expect once they return is an easy and efficient way of assisting the students in the reentry process.

4.2.1 Pre departure

As the universities prepare their students for their student mobility programs, they need to give the students all the information they need before they go abroad. Information about visas, insurance, how they can transfer their credits back to their home university, etc. Most universities also take the opportunity to inform their students about culture shock. The international office at Malmö University hosts a kick-off event for the students that are going abroad every semester. At this kick-off event, they have a lecture on culture shock and explain the U-curve and what to expect when you go through it. However, at this kick-off event, they do not mention reverse culture shock and the only information we get for when we return is what we need to do to transfer our credits back to our home institution and that we have to do an evaluation afterwards. There is no information about reverse culture shock or the W-curve. There is no mentioning of the difficulties one can go through as they return home.

If the university provides information on both the U-curve and W-curve, it will ensure that the students are better prepared for what is to come once they return home. When one goes abroad, it is a known fact that the culture will be different, and that the student will have to adapt to the new culture. However, what many fail to see, especially if they have not experienced it themselves, is the difficulties of fitting in to one’s own culture when one return home. But as the students have gained new experiences and perspectives abroad, their frames have changed. Consequently, what ones felt like home no longer fit into those frames. By giving the students the information about reverse culture shock before they go can give the students the opportunity to process it beforehand, which could help with the reentry process as they try to adjust their new frames to home.

4.2.2 During

During the student mobility program, the student sojourner’s role is to represent the university. It is then in the universities best interest that the student sojourners are adequately prepared for all aspects of their exchange, including their return home. When sending students abroad, it is important for the university to not lose contact with them. Having contact and communication with the students while they are abroad is important for the students to feel a sense of belonging and that they are cared for by the home university. One of the students who was interviewed in this research talks about how she felt like once she left Sweden, she was on her own. “No one checked on you during the time abroad. Like hi, is everything good? We just wanted to check that everything is ok. We are adults, sure, but it feels like they have some responsibility over it, and then at the same time, yeah, we have the survey, we would love to fill it out, but it maybe would have been nice if they had contact with us through mail and just like, I hope you had a lot of fun. And maybe organize a mingle where everyone can meet and talk about their experiences. I actually missed that the whole trip” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q12) (Interview 5, 2023). She did not feel supported by the university during her student mobility, and this led to a lack of trust in the international office and the university itself. If the returning student sojourners do not have trust in the
international office while they are away, they are less likely to reach out for help if they need it. That is why it is essential that the university makes sure that the students feel cared for even when they are at their host university. A simple email can go a long way. Last fall, when I was on my student mobility in South Korea, there was a devastating accident on Halloween in Itaewon, an area in Seoul, South Korea, where people were crushed to death and many people were injured. The university reached out to us to make sure that we were okay. By the simple act of reaching out, by sending an email, the university builds trust between the students and the university. It shows the students that their home university still keeps an eye on them and that they are not just left to fend for themselves. With the trust that is then built and retained, the university has a greater chance to fulfill their responsibility to take care of their students in all stages of the exchange.

If the university can offer support and trust to their student sojourners, the students will most likely talk positively about their home institution while they are at the host institution. This in turn will lead to a positive association with the university in the international community as well as an increase in foreign students that want to attend the home university.

Even in this stage, during their student mobility, the student sojourners still need to be provided with information. Towards the end of their student exchange, it would be very easy for the university to send an email to their students that are abroad with everything they need to think about as they prepare to go home. Things like their credits transfer, a welcome home, and information about reverse culture shock and what they could potentially experience after they return home. Remind the student sojourners about what resources are available for them and that the university is here for them if they need extra support in the reentry process.

### 4.2.3 Returning

When the student sojourners return, it is important to welcome them back with open arms and remind them of what difficulties they may be facing as they return and that it is perfectly normal to feel that way. Ensure the students that they are not alone in this. Remind the students about what resources are available to them. It might feel excessive to tell the students for the third time, but it is a way to signal to the students that the university does not want them to experience difficulties in the reentry process and that they are here to help. When there is an open conversation about reverse culture shock, it takes away the stigma that the students might experience as they feel like they are the weird one for feeling these things as they return.

By giving the return student sojourner an opportunity to sit down with other students that also studied abroad, they get to talk about their experiences with people that understand the situation and can relate. It is often hard to talk about one’s experience with people that have not experienced what it is like to go on student mobility. “What do I start explaining? How should I explain all of this to someone? It’s four months, I’ve had a lot of fun experiences and like this, it’s hard to summarize it and explain to someone. Then it can be nice to talk to someone that has done the same thing, gone to the same country” (Translated from Swedish, see Appendix 1: Q7). This can be done by inviting all returning student sojourners from the previous semester to a homecoming event where they get the chance to talk about their experiences with people that understand. All the interviewees expressed how good it felt to be able to talk about their experiences with people that understand what they are going through. They just want to talk about it. Another idea is to invite the alumni that have studies abroad to
a big yearly event that gives future student sojourners and former student sojourners the opportunity to talk about their experiences, to connect, and share tips and tricks with each other. Universities do a lot to prepare their students that are going on exchange for the difficulties of going to a different culture, but it is often forgotten that one needs to prepare the students for their return home. Malmö University used to have a homecoming event to assist the students in the reentry process. This event has not taken place for around 10 years, and it is unclear as to why it stopped. (Malmö University, 2023).

Malmö University has a responsibility as an institution that claims to be internationally oriented to create the best study abroad experience for their students and that includes still caring for them when they are no longer on their student exchange. One thing to note is that they will have more success if the university is the one that reaches out to the students after their return as the students may not do so themselves. Oftentimes as student sojourners, we go into the student mobility experience with the expectation to feel a little weird when we go to a different country and to face the difficulties that come with culture shock. But we never consider that home will feel different when we return home. “Often we are unprepared for the unfamiliarity of what we anticipated would be comfortingly familiar” (Gallatin Anderson, 1971).

So when, or if, the returning student sojourners are struggling with their homecoming, the information needs to be available to them. That is the beautiful part about this. That is does not require much for the student mobility experience to significantly improve. The bare minimum is to have the information on the school website that is easy to locate. Because if students do not know what it is, they cannot do anything about it. This research study is focused on exchange students, but it is also good to prepare the international students at the university for reverse culture shock as they return to their home countries.

### 4.3 Why should the university work with this?

If it is known that students can experience difficulties after they return from their student mobility programs, why should the university have to do further work with that? Why is it important to assist the returning student sojourners in the reentry process? The students represent their home university while they are away and if the students feel positively towards how the university handles the whole process of studying abroad, they will most likely recommend their home university to other people at the host university. As discussed above, this will give the university a good reputation which in turn will prove beneficial for the university. With a good reputation, the university attracts future students and can create better relationships with partnering universities. It can also benefit alumni relationships since most returning students return to their final semester at the university.

### 4.4 Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this paper. The phenomenon of reverse culture shock is quite a large area that can be researched. Because of this, there was a need to limit this research project to be a large enough research project to fit the scope of a master’s thesis, but at the same time be small enough to fit the timeframe of the thesis. As the findings present one viewpoint of the reentry process, it is important to note that the students that were interviewed were only a small part of the population of returning student sojourners. It is possible that other returning student sojourners have had completely different experiences of the reentry process. However, this study can still be helpful in telling these students stories
and guiding the university to their returning student sojourners experiences of the reentry process.

5. Conclusion
By using a phenomenological qualitative research method for this research paper, the findings of this research reflect the returning student sojourners experiences of the reentry process and to what extent they were affected by reverse culture shock. This research also shows what Malmö University can do to assist the returning student sojourners in the reentry process. With limited previous research on reverse culture shock in relation to student mobility, this research contributes to insight into the reentry process of returning student sojourners at Malmö University.

The research question, to what extent are returning student sojourners at Malmö University affected by reverse culture shock? And what can the university do to assist the reentry process? is answered by the student’s stories and experiences as returning student sojourners. The findings reflect that the students do experience symptoms of reverse culture shock. Most significantly, they feel lonely and isolated after they return to Sweden. They also view their time abroad as a dream. When they returned home, they felt like they were waking up from this dream and had to adjust to reality again. Lastly, the interviewees brought up ideas for how the university could have made their student mobility experience even better.

5.1 Recommendations for Malmö University
To answer the question of what Malmö University can do to assist the returning student sojourners in the reentry process, is to give them information about reverse culture shock and facilitate a space for the student to talk about their experiences after they return home. Today, the students do not reach out to the international office if they are experiencing difficulties when they return home. The university is therefore not aware if their students experience reverse culture shock or not. To actively work with the students in the reentry process will be both beneficial for the university and the returning student sojourners. Give the students information about reverse culture shock, just as they give the information of culture shock, remind the students of that information and plan a homecoming event for the students to give them an opportunity to talk about their time abroad.

5.2 Suggestions for Future Research
Future research on the subject of reverse culture shock and student mobility is advisable to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject. It could be interesting to look into Swedish/international universities to see if they use the methods discussed above. If they do or don’t, does that reflect the perception or reputation of the institution among its students and alumni and future students? That type of research would be a natural continuation of this research paper.

As student mobility programs grow more popular around the world, the research should reflect that. Is there a difference if someone is a sojourner for years or only for four months? This would be an interesting topic to research as most exchange programs are only for a semester.

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In this research all but one of the interviewees were women. A suggestion for future research is to explore if there is a difference between women and men in their experience of the reentry process.
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Appendix 1. Quotes in Swedish

Q1.
“Slutligen finns mycket att lära från studenterna. Det behövs bättre undersökningar som intervjuer studenter och undersöker utlandsstudier som en process: vilken information behövs vid vilket tillfälle, och vilka barriärer upplevs som mest svåröverkommliga?”
- (Swedes Worldwide; Swedish International Students and Alumni, 2022)

Q2.
“I Sverige så är det typ att vi använder. Man gör sin vardag liksom sen på helgen så hittar man på något med sina vänner.”
- (Interview 3, 2023)

Q3.
“Man längtade tillbaka, liksom till det liv man hade där…mycket socialare och roligare människor.”
- (Interview 3, 2023)

Q4.
“Jag har inte lika många vänner i Malmö som jag hade i Sydkorea…jag saknar liksom det här med community som det blir, alltså gemenskapen.”
- (Interview 4, 2023)

Q5.
”Det kändes liksom som en dröm och sen va den borta.”
- (Interview 4, 2023)

Q6.
”Man kommer tillbaka till samma ställe. Det kändes liksom som jag drömde och sen, allt var borta. Sen kommer man hem och det var, alltså, samma igen.”
- (Interview 4, 2023)

Q7.
”Hur ska jag liksom börja förklara? Hur ska jag förklara allt det här för någon? Det är ändå fyra månader, jag har haft jättemånga roliga upplevelser och liksom det är svårt att sammanfatta det och förklara för någon. Det vore skönt att kunna prata med folk som faktiskt har gjort samma sak, som har varit i samma land.”
- (Interview 4, 2023)
Q8.

- (Interview 3, 2023)

Q9.
Så man träffade ju alltid folk varje dag, till skillnad från vad man kanske gör hemma på ett annat sätt när man ändå bor själv. Så just campuslivet är trevligare och det finns ju inte riktigt här, eller i alla fall inte i Malmö. Men jag skulle typ inte riktigt säga i Sverige heller på det sättet.

- (Interview 3, 2023)

Q10.
"Det var också skumt att komma tillbaka till exakt samma ställe som man var på innan vi åkte iväg för då blev ju liksom hela resan som en dröm. Det är så konstigt.”

- (Interview 3, 2023)

Q11.

- (Interview 3, 2023)

Q12.
"Det var liksom ingen som kollade till en under utbytestiden och liksom så här hej står allting bara till? Ville bara kolla så att det är okej. Vi är vuxna människor absolut, men man känner ändå att de har lite ansvår över det. Och sen samtidigt är liksom, ja, det här formuläret. Vi fyller jättegärna i det, men det kanske hade varit trevligt om de hade kontaktat det oss på mail och liksom bara så här hoppas ni hade jättekul eller kanske anordna något litet mingel där alla kan få träffas och snacka om sina erfarenheter. Så det saknade jag faktiskt hela resan.”

- (Interview 5, 2023)