

Navigating cultural in-betweenness: A qualitative study of identity reconstruction among transnational returnees in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Transnational mobility has become an increasingly defining feature of contemporary higher education and professional life, yet the identity experiences of individuals who traverse multiple national and cultural contexts remain insufficiently understood, particularly within the Southeast Asian region. This study examines how transnational educational mobility shapes identity formation among individuals who have crossed national borders for education and subsequently returned to their country of origin or professional base. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants: two Indonesian nationals who completed their education in Indonesia before relocating to work in Singapore, and two Indonesian academics who pursued postgraduate education abroad before returning to teaching positions in Indonesia. Drawing on the Transnational-Transcultural Self-Formation and Belonging (TTSB) framework, thematic analysis identified four primary themes: (1) identity negotiation between dual cultural affiliations, (2) linguistic challenges and their relationship to belonging, (3) professional identity transformation following return, and (4) adaptive strategies for cultural identity reconstruction. Findings suggest that returnees consistently inhabit an "in-between" identity space, neither fully identifying with their country of origin nor their country of study, and that this liminality simultaneously poses challenges and confers professional advantages. The study contributes to cross-cultural management literature by foregrounding underrepresented Southeast Asian returnee perspectives and offers practical implications for educational institutions and organisations managing internationally mobile talent. These findings underscore the urgency of designing culturally responsive support systems that recognise plural identity repertoires as legitimate professional competencies.

Keywords: transnational identity; returnee experience; cross-cultural management; sense of belonging; Southeast Asia

Abstrak

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Mobilitas transnasional telah menjadi fitur yang semakin mendefinisikan pendidikan tinggi dan kehidupan profesional kontemporer, namun pengalaman identitas individu yang melintasi berbagai konteks nasional dan budaya masih belum dipahami secara memadai, khususnya di kawasan Asia Tenggara. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana mobilitas pendidikan transnasional membentuk identitas individu yang telah melintasi batas negara untuk pendidikan dan kemudian kembali ke negara asal atau basis profesional mereka. Menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis kualitatif, wawancara semi-terstruktur yang mendalam dilakukan dengan empat partisipan: dua warga negara Indonesia yang menyelesaikan pendidikan di Indonesia sebelum pindah untuk bekerja di Singapura, dan dua akademisi Indonesia yang menempuh pendidikan pascasarjana di luar negeri sebelum kembali ke posisi mengajar di Indonesia. Mengacu pada kerangka Transnational-Transcultural Self-Formation and Belonging (TTSB), analisis tematik mengidentifikasi empat tema utama: (1) negosiasi identitas di antara afiliasi budaya ganda, (2) tantangan linguistik dan hubungannya dengan rasa memiliki, (3) transformasi identitas profesional setelah kembali, dan (4) strategi adaptif untuk rekonstruksi identitas budaya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa returnee secara konsisten menempati ruang identitas "di antara", tidak sepenuhnya mengidentifikasi diri dengan negara asal maupun negara tempat studi, dan bahwa liminalitas ini secara bersamaan menimbulkan tantangan sekaligus memberikan keuntungan profesional. Studi ini berkontribusi pada literatur manajemen lintas budaya dengan mengedepankan perspektif returnee Asia Tenggara yang kurang terwakili dan menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi institusi pendidikan dan organisasi yang mengelola talenta lintas negara. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi urgensi perancangan sistem dukungan yang responsif secara budaya dengan mengakui repertoar identitas jamak sebagai kompetensi profesional yang sah.

Kata kunci: identitas transnasional; pengalaman returnee; manajemen lintas budaya; sense of belonging; Asia Tenggara

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented acceleration in transnational human mobility, driven by the globalisation of higher education, the internationalisation of labour markets, and the deepening integration of economies across the Asia-Pacific region. The movement of individuals across national borders for educational and professional purposes has become not merely a biographical episode but a formative sociocultural process that profoundly reshapes self-understanding, cultural affiliation, and professional identity (Marginson, 2024; Motadi & Nthambeleni, 2026). In this context, transnational mobility is no longer reducible to a logistical act of border crossing; rather, it constitutes an iterative identity project that unfolds across time, space, and institutional environments.

Southeast Asia, and the Indonesia-Singapore corridor in particular, represents a compelling yet understudied site for examining these dynamics. Singapore's highly internationalised educational system and its status as a regional hub for multinational employment have attracted significant numbers of Indonesian students and professionals, creating complex patterns of cross-border movement, return, and re-identification. Meanwhile, Indonesia's expanding higher education

sector has increasingly relied upon academics who hold postgraduate qualifications from universities in Europe, Australia, North America, and East Asia individuals who bring with them not only disciplinary expertise but also layered cultural identities shaped by years of immersion in foreign educational environments. Despite the significance of these phenomena, existing research has disproportionately focused on Western host-country contexts (Cai et al., 2024; Hillman, 2022), leaving the identity experiences of Southeast Asian returnees - those who complete their international education and return to their home country or regional base substantially underexplored.

The concept of the "returnee" occupies a particularly nuanced position in transnational identity literature. Unlike the migrant who settles permanently abroad or the sojourner who maintains an unambiguous home-country identity, the returnee undergoes a dual process of cultural immersion and re-entry that can produce what scholars have described as an "in-between" or hybrid identity (Hou et al., 2024; Sung, 2021). This in-betweenness characterised by simultaneous belonging and non-belonging in multiple cultural contexts has significant implications not only for individual wellbeing but also for organisational performance, educational effectiveness, and cross-cultural collaboration. Understanding how returnees construct, negotiate, and ultimately inhabit this identity space is therefore a matter of considerable practical as well as theoretical importance.

Despite growing scholarly attention to transnational education (TNE) and its effects on student identity, several critical gaps persist in the literature. First, the majority of empirical studies have focused on students during their period of study abroad rather than examining the longitudinal identity trajectories that unfold upon return (Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Second, research from Southeast Asian contexts - particularly studies that bridge the Indonesia-Singapore educational and professional corridor remains scarce. Third, existing frameworks tend to treat identity formation as a student-phase phenomenon, neglecting the professional identity dimensions that emerge when returnees reintegrate into home-country workplaces and academic institutions. This study addresses these gaps by centring the voices of individuals at a post-mobility stage of their transnational journey.

This study is guided by the following research objectives: (1) to examine how participation in transnational educational mobility shapes identity formation and the sense of belonging among returnees in the Indonesia-Singapore corridor; and (2) to explore the strategies through which returnees negotiate, reconstruct, and articulate their cultural and professional identities following their return. Correspondingly, two primary research questions orient the inquiry: (RQ1) How do transnational educational experiences influence the identity trajectories of returnees navigating the Indonesia-Singapore corridor? and (RQ2) What adaptive strategies do returnees employ to negotiate cultural in-betweenness in their professional and social lives post-return?

The significance of this study is threefold. For the field of cross-cultural management, it extends theoretical understanding of identity formation beyond the

workplace to encompass the formative educational experiences that precede professional life. For higher education institutions, it provides evidence-based insight into the long-term identity consequences of international study programmes, informing more responsive support and curriculum designs. For policy, it contributes to ongoing conversations about the internationalisation of Indonesian higher education and the strategic management of internationally mobile human capital within the region.

Transnational and Transcultural Identity: Conceptual Distinctions

The theoretical landscape surrounding identity in international education has been significantly advanced by Marginson's (2024) distinction between "transnational" and "transcultural" as analytically distinct yet intersecting constructs. In Marginson's formulation, transnationalism refers to the structural dimension of cross-border movement the institutional frameworks, credential systems, and migration policies that enable individuals to traverse national boundaries. Transculturalism, by contrast, concerns the subjective, meaning-making processes by which individuals negotiate plural cultural repertoires and construct coherent yet fluid self-understandings across cultural contexts. This distinction is consequential because it clarifies why two individuals following identical mobility trajectories may arrive at substantially different identity outcomes: the structural path may be shared, but the transcultural work of self-formation is always particular, contextual, and iterative. Building on this conceptual foundation, identity in transnational contexts is increasingly understood not as a stable attribute that individuals carry with them across borders, but as a dynamic, contextually produced accomplishment (Hou et al., 2024).

Educational Mobility and Identity Formation

The relationship between educational mobility and identity formation has been extensively theorised in recent scholarship. Hou et al. (2024) demonstrate through qualitative interview data that students who traverse national educational systems undergo profound self-reconstruction, adopting new disciplinary speech genres, modifying their participation styles, and revising their sense of cultural affiliation in response to the demands of foreign academic environments. Critically, these authors find that identity trajectories are shaped not only by the host-country educational experience but also by the transition back into home-country contexts a phase they describe as involving significant discontinuity and the need for renewed self-positioning. Cai et al. (2024) extend this analysis by comparing identity formation across different transnational educational institutional models, finding that the specific organisational form of the educational context significantly mediates the nature of identity work that students undertake.

Sense of Belonging in Cross-Cultural Contexts

The concept of belonging the subjective sense of fitting, mattering, and being accepted within a social environment has emerged as a central mediating variable

in research on transnational educational experiences (Mohamad & Manning, 2024). Drawing on a comprehensive narrative literature review, Mohamad and Manning (2024) identify staff responsiveness, peer relationships, and inclusive assessment practices as primary antecedents to belonging among international students. Bethel et al. (2020) provide quantitative evidence for the mediating role of host-national connectedness in psychological adaptation among internationally mobile individuals, demonstrating that sustained relationships with members of the host culture reduce acculturative stress and enhance cross-cultural competence.

In-Between Identity and Cultural Negotiation

The metaphor of the "in-between" drawn from Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space has been widely employed to describe the identity positions occupied by individuals with experience of sustained cross-cultural immersion. In the context of transnational education, Sung (2021) demonstrates through qualitative classroom discourse analysis that international students in Hong Kong constantly negotiate their identities through linguistic choices, code-switching practices, and the management of accent-related stigma. Hillman (2022) extends this analysis to the phenomenon of linguistic shame the internalised negative affect arising from perceived inadequacy in dominant-language contexts. For returnees specifically, the in-between identity carries a dual character: it can be experienced as a form of productive cultural brokerage enabling the individual to operate effectively across cultural contexts or as a persistent sense of not fully belonging anywhere.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Transnational-Transcultural Self-Formation and Belonging (TTSB) framework as developed by Motadi and Nthambeleni (2026), which integrates three complementary analytical lenses: transnational structures, transcultural self-formation, and belonging as a psychological mediator. The framework conceptualises identity as iterative work conducted within specific recognition regimes institutional, linguistic, and social environments that selectively validate or marginalise particular cultural repertoires and ways of being.

METHODS

This study adopts an interpretive, phenomenological qualitative paradigm, grounded in the epistemological position that subjective human experience is the primary locus of meaning-making and that the task of social inquiry is to access and faithfully represent the lived experience of research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study utilizes a purposive sampling method, selecting four participants who fit the criteria of having significant cross-cultural mobility experiences. The first group consists of two Singaporean nationals (P1 and P2) who spent their formative years growing up and completing their education in Indonesia, before eventually returning to Singapore to pursue professional careers in the Food and Beverage (F&B) sector. The second group comprises two Indonesian academics (P3 and P4) who pursued their postgraduate studies abroad

(Malaysia and Taiwan) before returning to teach at their home institutions in Indonesia.

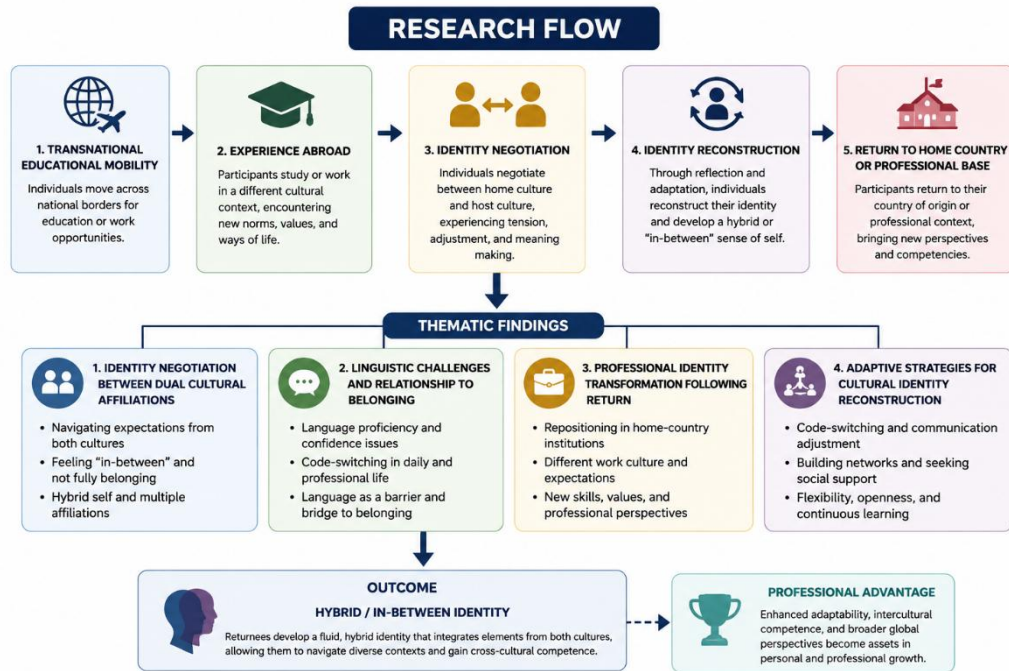


Figure 1. Research Flow

Data were collected through written semi-structured questionnaires distributed via Google Docs. The questionnaire was developed based on the TTSB framework and covered seven main sections: participant background; pre-mobility experiences; experiences during study/work abroad; cultural and linguistic challenges; experiences of return; identity negotiation and belonging; and adaptive strategies. Follow-up clarification questions were conducted via email or brief video calls where necessary to deepen understanding of specific responses. Data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Member checking and reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analytic process to enhance credibility, and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interview data generated four primary themes, each of which is presented below with illustrative evidence from the participant narratives.

Identity Negotiation Between Dual Cultural Affiliations

As presented by Figure 2, across all four participants, the data revealed a persistent and often tension-laden process of negotiating identity between two or more cultural frames of reference. Rather than experiencing their transnational

backgrounds as a unified, coherent identity, participants described a continuous process of positioning and re-positioning. P1 described a complex layering of cultural fluencies that did not map neatly onto either Singaporean or Indonesian identity categories: "In Singapore, I sometimes feel that my way of speaking, my sense of humor, and my mindset are still more Indonesian. But when I return to Indonesia, people also perceive me as different because I now work and live in Singapore" (P1). For the academic returnees (P3 and P4), identity negotiation structured around the tension between the cosmopolitan academic identity cultivated during their international studies and the expectations of Indonesian academic culture. P4 described the clash in argumentation styles: "The most 'in-between' moment for me is when writing an academic paper, because in Taiwan I was trained to argue sharply and boldly take a position, whereas here, academic writing that is too assertive is often considered disproportionate" (P4).

Linguistic Challenges and the Experience of Belonging

Language emerged across all four participant narratives as a central site of identity negotiation and belonging experience. For P2, managing a multilingual repertoire that included English and Singlish created moments of self-doubt: "At work, I have to adapt to the English and Singlish used by colleagues and customers. Sometimes I feel less confident when speaking because I worry my pronunciation or grammar is incorrect" (P2). For the academic returnees, linguistic challenges centred on the negotiation between English-medium scholarly discourse and Bahasa Indonesia. P4 described the cognitive and emotional labour involved in translanguaging: "The fear of being perceived as 'pretentiously Western' is real..." (P4).

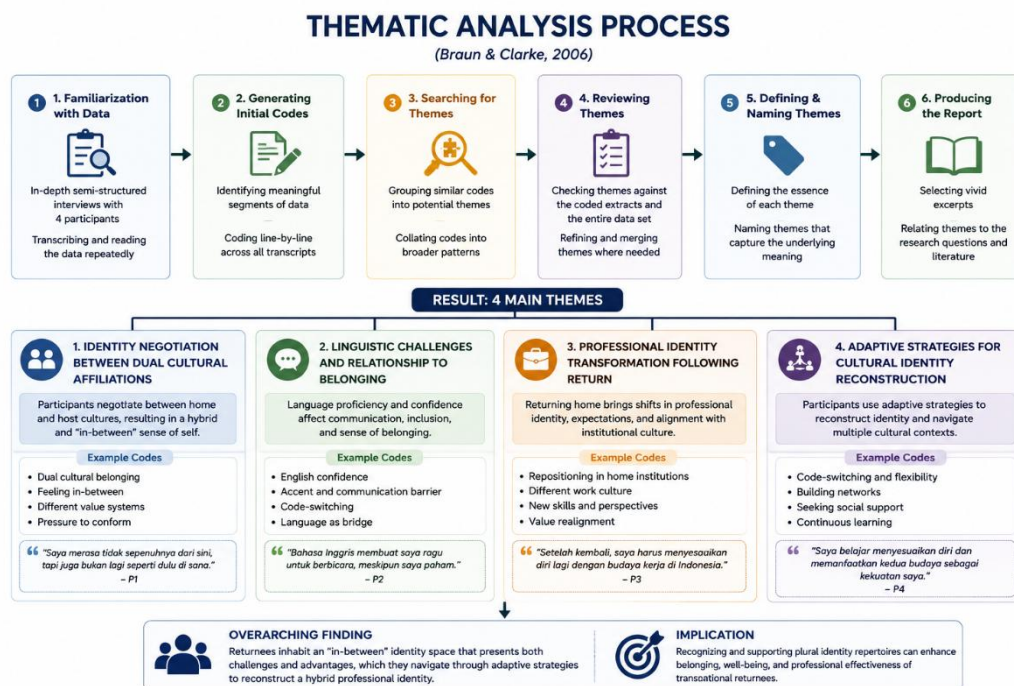


Figure 2. Thematic Analysis Process

Professional Identity Transformation Following Return

A third prominent theme concerned the transformation of professional identity following the return to home-country contexts. For P1, the transition involved a stark shift regarding time and discipline: "Compared to the more relaxed work environment in Indonesia, Singapore taught me valuable lessons about speed and discipline" (P1). Academic returnees described a similar reshaping of professional values. P3 recalled the "hard-learning habit" witnessed in Malaysian university libraries as a cultural practice they consciously wish to instill in their Indonesian students. Meanwhile, P4 reflected on a deeper epistemological shift regarding their self-concept as an academic: "What changed the way I view myself as a lecturer the most was realizing that my experience in Taiwan does not automatically make me better, but rather it just gives me more references" (P4).

Adaptive Strategies for Identity Reconstruction

The fourth theme concerns the active strategies developed to navigate the challenges of transnational identity. The first and most prominent strategy was selective code-switching and behavioral adaptation. P1 articulated a vision of identity synthesis: "To keep my Indonesian and Singaporean sides balanced in daily life, I am flexible... I want to be someone who combines the strengths of both cultures" (P1). A second adaptive strategy involved the deliberate cultivation of "boundary-spanning" professional networks. P4 described maintaining active international research collaborations as central to their professional identity. Additionally, adaptation required recalibrating communication styles to align with the hierarchical nature of Indonesian academia, without sacrificing substantive knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex processes of identity reconstruction among transnational individuals navigating the cultural spaces between Indonesia, Singapore, and other international academic environments. The findings reveal that cultural "in-betweenness" is not a temporary phase of transition, but rather a persistent state of being that requires continuous, active negotiation. Whether returning to their country of citizenship after being culturally formed abroad, or returning to their home institutions after completing international studies, participants experienced profound tensions in their self-concept, linguistic practices, and professional values. Rather than fully assimilating into one culture or completely rejecting the other, these individuals developed sophisticated adaptive strategies, engaging in conscious code-switching, blending cultural strengths, and recalibrating their communication styles to navigate local hierarchies. Ultimately, this research highlights that transnational identity is fluid, relational, and continuously reconstructed through everyday interactions. The ability to embrace this "in-betweenness" often anchored by humility and a willingness to adapt emerges as a crucial competency. Future studies could expand on these findings by examining a larger cohort across diverse professional

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 sectors to further understand how structural and institutional factors influence the
 daily identity work of transnational individuals.

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