STAR Open:
An International Multidisciplinary Journal

Copyright © Authors, 2026

Article

Resilience and Willingness to Stay: International Higher Education Students' Experiences in Finland

Zubeyde Durna-Flygare [1] & Satu Uusiautti [2] *

[1] Zubeyde Durna- Flygare (corresponding author); PhD, University of Lapland, Finland
E-mail: zubeydedurna@gmail.com
[2] Satu Uusiautti; PhD, Professor, University of Lapland, Finland, E- mail: Satu.Uusiautti@ulapland.fi

Abstract

This research explores how international higher education students' resilience experiences shape their willingness to stay in Finland by asking: (1) How do international students describe their willingness to stay after graduation in relation to their resilience-based experience? and (2) What types of resilience-based migration trajectories emerge from international students' accounts? Sixteen international higher education students in Finnish Lapland participated in this study between 2020 and 2021. The study adopts narrative inquiry to understand how the students interpret their resilience regarding their intention to stay. The findings demonstrated the student's resilience experiences are strongly linked to their willingness to stay in Finland, and there are resources helping them to be resilient. The study also identified resilience-guided immigrant narrative typologies for foreign students seeking support systems enabling them to be resilient and stay in Finland. Implications for higher education and student support are discussed based on these findings.

Keywords: resilience, higher education, international higher education students, willingness to stay, Finland

Received: date
Revised: date
Accepted: date

Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

1. Introduction

Within the framework of decades-long internationalization efforts in the higher education sector (Altbach, 1991), little attention has been paid to how international students themselves perceive their studies, the resources available to them in the host country, and their future in that country after graduation (Wu & Wilkes, 2017). In this study, our objective is to bring forward students' voices and investigate how they perceive their resilience and opportunities to stay in their host country, using Finland as the example.

Internationalization in Higher Education in the Finnish Context

Like most nations, Finland adopted the internationalization of higher education (HE) as a national strategic plan (Välimaa & Weimer, 2014). Since the 1920s, many reforms have been implemented in Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) with the aim of achieving the Europeanization of HE (Khan, 2022). In 1999, representatives from 29 countries, including Finland, signed the Bologna Declaration, which promotes mobility and employability for HE students (Shams et al., 2011). Since then, internationalization initiatives have been implemented in Finnish HE to achieve a long-term goal, especially with the Universities Act of 2009, when Finnish universities and polytechnics became more scalable and autonomous (Trifuljesko, 2021). To ensure greater internationalization, more funding has been allocated for mobility and degree programs taught in English at Finnish HEIs (Aarrevaara et al., 2022).

The internationalization of HE in Finland encompasses not only traditional person-based mobility, but also agreements between local and international institutions, and degree programs which focus primarily on the European Union (Hölttä, 2007). Although many steps have been taken, more improvements are needed to achieve the internationalization of Finnish HE.

From the international HE student's (IHES) perspective, free education and potential job opportunities are among the reasons for choosing Finland to study (Lu & Everson-Härkälä, 2024). Quality education, safety, and a higher standard of living are other reasons why IHE students decide to study in Finland (Lu & Everson-Härkälä, 2024).

While Finland is an attractive destination for many reasons, it also poses certain challenges for IHE students. Previous research has shown how international students perceive their host country as their *home* varies considerably, which also affects their post-graduation plans for staying (Wu & Watkins, 2017).

Students must also deal with financial and social challenges. For Kim and Istad (2026), work experience, the recognized value of students' degrees, and financial autonomy are positively associated with international students' intention to stay. In the Finnish case, the lack of job opportunities for those who do not speak Finnish is one of the main drawbacks for IHE students (Karhunen & Mathies, 2020). Additionally, Finnish is considered a difficult language; therefore, international students studying there are not motivated to learn it. This prevents them from finding a quality job, as the Finnish job market requires competence in the language. The difficulties international students face in finding employment are also a significant concern in most host countries, not just in Finland (Calonge et al., 2023).

Social-Ecological Resilience Framing Students' Experiences and Willingness to Stay

How international students handle hardships and plan their lives, including their willingness to stay after graduation, is particularly relevant (Masten, 2014). Resilience is an important concept in research related to international students, since it refers to the capacity to recover from challenging life situations (Ruiz-Robledillo, 2014). Rather than a personal trait, resilience is defined as the ability to adapt positively to stressful circumstances (Griffith & West, 2013). Zhao et al.'s (2026) recent review of international students' post-graduation mobility showed that students' decisions are highly contextualized and situational. Economic issues play a significant role, but at the same time, students' decisions appeared to be consistently evolving and changing. Uncertainty about the future was very much present (Zhao et al., 2026). Based on these findings, we wanted to better understand how students themselves perceive their resilience.

In this study, the social context is key to resilience. According to Ungar (2018), Social Ecological Resilience (SER) considers resilience as a process determined by the resources available and accessible within societal contexts, rather than merely as an individual ability. Therefore, the relevant question is not only whether students possess coping abilities, but also whether their host environment and university provide them with the resources that enable them to deal with challenges. In this research, the contextual resources

that help students to show greater resilience include financial resources, assistance for stress management, relationships that build a sense of belonging, and opportunities to pursue meaningful future goals. Moreover, by interpreting participants' stories as situational narratives about how resources are experienced and linked to imagined futures, this framing does not view resilience as a stable trait (McLeroy et al., 1988; Luthar et al., 2000).

The link between the internationalization of HE and the migration of IHE students is evident, since they are regarded as desired immigrants (Zigarus & Law, 2006). These students bring benefits to host countries, including cultural enrichment, economic opportunities, and human capital (Lashari et al., 2018). The retention of IHE students in Finland is significant for economic and social growth, as Finland shows low birth rates (Kuitunen, 2025). However, these students' willingness to stay after graduation is not only determined by job opportunities but is also connected to their lived experience and how they develop resilience during their studies.

Although previous studies have analyzed international students' resilience and their decision to remain in host countries, less attention has been paid to how the students themselves link resilience resources with post-study migration plans. By employing narrative inquiry to analyze the temporal and contextual relationship between resilience experiences throughout higher education and students' post-study goals, this study aims to fill this gap. Importantly, the study does not assume that students stay because they are resilient. Rather, it investigates how students understand the presence or lack of resources that foster resilience and how their perceptions are incorporated into their narratives about staying or leaving. Therefore, the purpose is to analyze the resources and meanings that students associate with willingness to stay and to form whole-story configurations to identify distinctive narrative trajectories. In line with these objectives, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do international students describe their willingness to stay after graduation in relation to their resilience-based experience?
2. What types of resilience-based migration trajectories emerge from international students' accounts?

2. Research Methods

Study Context and Participants

To answer the research questions on how IHE students interpret resilience experiences over time and connect these experiences with imagined post-graduation futures, a narrative approach was considered suitable (Guthrie, 2022). Instead of viewing participant comments as discrete variables, narrative inquiry focuses on experience as it is understood and retold; knowledge is constructed through interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2020). The fundamental idea is that the student's lived and current experiences, together with the audience (the researcher) and the temporal and spatial context, determine what kinds of narratives the student creates about the world and themselves (Salmela & Uusiautti, 2017). Obtaining multi-voiced narratives is the core objective of narrative research (Guthrie, 2022).

The narrative data were collected from IHE students enrolled in HEIs in Finnish Lapland, specifically the University of Lapland and the Lapland University of Applied Sciences, with a total of 16 students, of whom 6 were male and 10 were female. Their ages ranged from 19 to 39. The participants were students enrolled in bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. The data were collected between 2020 and 2021. In this article, we refer to participants from the two universities as "international higher education students" without distinguishing between the two establishments. This is to ensure the participants' anonymity and to place greater emphasis on the students' resilience experiences in their narratives.

We implemented the "International Student Interview Protocol" that we designed. This protocol included semi-structured and open-ended items whose objective was to understand the participants' experiences and how they interpret those experiences in greater detail in relation to their resilience and willingness to stay in Finland after graduation. Each one-to-one interview lasted approximately 40 to 45 minutes. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all sessions were held online. They were recorded and transcribed into anonymized text documents.

Data Analysis

Two complementary types of narrative analysis were administered, following Polkinghorne (1995): analysis of narratives, which arranges narrative material into categories, and narrative analysis, which reconstructs patterns across whole accounts. This distinction was important for maintaining an explicit link between the two research questions. The category-content-oriented analysis was primarily administered to answer the first research question, while a holistic, content-oriented analysis of the entire narratives was used to answer the second.

Category-content-oriented analysis is based on identifying recurring narrative units (Lieblich et al., 1998). For the first research question, this type of analysis was used to define recurring narrative units related to resilience and willingness to stay. Similar units were categorized according to the resource or meaning they represented. Accordingly, four categories emerged: (1) *financial resources*, including funding, financial stability, and employment opportunities; (2) *stress-management resources*, including tools for dealing with distress and accessing health or other support; (3) *resources that foster a sense of belonging*, including relationships, acceptance, and participation in university and Finnish social environments; and (4) *resources that foster a sense of purpose*, including educational achievements, employment, family aspirations, and other future-oriented goals. The categories represent recurring themes through which participants talked about the conditions that made staying possible, desirable, or challenging.

For the second research question, the analysis moved from these cross-cutting categories to each participant's narratives. Using a holistic, content-oriented analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), each account was analyzed to identify the dominant way in which resilience experiences, contextual resources, and imagined post-graduation plans were linked. Narratives with similar organizing patterns were classified and compared with the category-level findings. Consequently, the emerging typologies derive from combinations and emphases across the four categories, rather than from isolated themes. Each narrative was assigned to the typology that best represented its dominant resilience–future configuration. The four typologies—Safe Future Seeker, Support Seeker, Finance-Practicality Seeker, and Identity Developer—are interpretive meta-narratives rather than fixed psychological types.

Ethics and Reliability

Validation was sought through Heikkinen et al.'s (2012) five principles for evaluating narrative research: reflexivity, historical continuity, dialectics, evocativeness, and workability and ethics. These served as standards for assessing the narrative analysis's interpretive coherence and credibility. The concordance between individual accounts and the reconstructed meta-narratives, the chronological relationship between experiences and plans related to the future, and the diversity of participant voices were all taken into consideration.

Reflexivity involved noticing that the researchers' academic engagement with resilience and immigration influenced what was recognized and how meanings were interpreted (Berger, 2015). Historical continuity was achieved by retaining the temporal sequence in the participants' accounts: experiences during

university were considered in relation to how students imagined their lives after graduation. This prevented resilience and willingness to stay from being considered as isolated or decontextualized statements.

Dialectics were addressed by comparing participants' accounts and attending to both convergent and divergent meanings. Similar resources were not assumed to produce similar future orientations; instead, the analysis focused on how they were interpreted differently. This comparison proved particularly significant in distinguishing the four narrative typologies. Participant quotations were retained to show how interpretations were grounded in the students' accounts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Evocativeness was achieved by sharing participants' memories, sensations, and subjective interpretations when presenting the findings (Heikkinen et al., 2012). The analysis therefore distinguishes between participants' perceptions and the researchers' interpretation: statements regarding feeling financially secure, supported, or accepted are regarded as participants' accounts of resilience-supporting conditions. Workability refers to the usability of the findings, which we elaborate on later in this article.

Ethics were addressed by respecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. To do so, we chose not to use the participants' first or last names, using codes to identify them instead.

3. Results

Resilience-based Experiences and Willingness to Stay

Across the narratives, willingness to stay was constructed in relation to the perceived availability of four groups of resilience-supporting resources: financial resources, stress-management resources, resources that foster a sense of belonging, and resources that foster a sense of purpose. The findings do not show a direct causal link between migration and these resources. Instead, when participants thought that they might be offered resources in Finland that would help them to manage current hardships and pursue future aspirations, they regarded staying as more feasible. On the other hand, students expressed more doubts about staying when these resources, particularly work and financial stability, appeared to be unavailable.

Financial Resources

The first category, financial resources, relates to the students' perceptions of their ability to secure the material conditions necessary to go on living in Finland. These accounts show how access to contextual resources, rather than only personal coping mechanisms, is linked to resilience within the SER framework. The participants connected their capacity to handle social and academic challenges—through grants, employment, income, and future financial stability—to their ability to manage academic and social pressures.

Students emphasized that receiving financial support during their studies helped them to survive and enjoy their lives in Finland. One interviewee commented: "…[O]f course, money changes everything. Without enough funding, I would never be able to survive. I have money thanks to a grant I received. I enjoy studying and living here" (IHES 16). Another student made a similar comment, saying:

> Finance is a key factor to be happy. I have money, so I'm leading a comfortable life here. In the future, with the degree I get from the university, I believe I'll have a better life financially, so I'll be able to support my family. (IHES 14)

To secure financial sustainability, finding a job was discussed as a crucial contributor to the participants' resilience. They reflected on how having a proper job with a good salary might help them to stay in Finland, since money can solve problems. One suggested:

> In my country, the economic situation isn't very good. Therefore, I don't want to go back. If I find a job here and make good money, I'll stay in Finland. Without money, it's hard to live and be resilient. My family tells me to return, but that depends on finances. (IHES 2)

Similarly, one interviewee linked his resilience—based on maintaining a positive outlook—to his decision to remain. He felt optimistic about his future in the country and said, "I want to move to Finland permanently because finding a job here is easy. My department can offer me quality jobs here. I hope I can. I feel positive about my future here" (IHES 13).

Although some participants in this study said that their financial situation and its effects on their resilience influenced their plans as regards whether to stay in Finland, others mentioned experiencing financial difficulties. Therefore, they were unwilling to stay in Finland after graduation. Their views were based on the negative impacts of the economic problems they already faced—or may face in the future—on their resilience. One student noted: "I had, and am still having, some money-related problems here. I can't concentrate on my studies. In the future, I'll face even more difficulties, so I can't move here" (IHES 1).

Regarding job opportunities, competence in Finnish is a requirement to work in many sectors of the Finnish labor market. However, the IHE students residing in Finland considered that they could not learn Finnish as Finnish is a difficult. Due to their lack of Finnish language skills, some students felt pessimistic about their chances of employment. Consequently, they felt that their resilience was under threat. For instance, one student remarked:

> Finnish is difficult. The words are long and hard to remember. The grammar rules are hard. If you can't speak Finnish, you can't get a job. Therefore, I have no future here. It's stressful when I think about my future. (IHES 1)

Being able to cope with financial distress and ensure financial stability were crucial for the international students. However when they did not have that stability, their resilience could be hindered, affecting their intentions regarding staying in Finland after graduation.

Stress Management Resources

The second emerging category of resources which affected students' resilience and consequent willingness to stay in Finland after completing their studies is stress management. The participants noted that the ability to manage stress was a very important part of being resilient and, consequently, an important factor regarding their intention to stay in Finland. One participant concluded that both her staying in the country and studying at the university depended on how well she can manage stress. She noted: "If I don't have a stressful life in Finland, I can stay for my studies and continue living here" (IHES 7).

Stress management skills were considered crucial for survival. The difficulties encountered require one to develop particular strategies or seek help. One student gave an example of her need for help and where she could find it, stating: "There are challenges and various issues, but there are also solutions when you get support from friends or professionals" (IHES 11).

Both universities have health services that provide mental and physical support for students. The students experienced the effectiveness of these services when they needed support, which helped them to be more resilient. Accordingly, one interviewee recounted:

> There are health services. When I have problems, I go there. They find a solution, so I don't need to worry about. Because of the pandemic, we don't know what will happen. In Finland, I feel safer when it comes to my health. (IHES 2)

The availability of resources to help the students manage stress strengthened their resilience and supported their intentions about staying. However, some interviewees clarified that they were not sufficiently informed about such assistance, saying:

> My friends told me there's a health care service at the university, but I've never seen a poster or an e-mail about it. I just read the e-mails concerning psychological counselling, but nothing else. It's hard to cope with stress. (IHES 2)

Another participant suggested that a platform students can use to express their emotions could help them to manage stress, so their life at university and their general outlook on life could be different. She commented: "A platform where you can call in… talk freely about how I'm feeling… that would help me cope with stress and change my perception of my academic and social life" (IHES 1).

The participants noted that stress management was necessary for studying at university as it helped to develop resilience. Consequently, how the students described their intentions to remain in Finland after graduation was also shaped by how they perceived their ability to manage stress during their stay.

Resources That Foster a Sense of Belonging

Another category of resources that related to the IHE students' resilience and intention to remain in Finland involved developing a sense of belonging. The latter was a key determinant of the participants' resilience and consequent willingness to stay in Finland.

The students' narratives highlighted the importance of being able to interact with other people in the university. For instance, one study participant emphasized the role of the tutors, who helped him to feel that he belonged at the university as well as in the country. He said: "Tutors helped you regarding this feeling of belonging to the institution**,** helping you to adjust more easily… especially international students. I feel like I belong in Finland" (IHES 16).

Feeling appreciated and having good relationships with others contributes positively to international students' resilience. This view was cited as one of the factors that lead a person to develop a positive outlook as regards staying in Finland after graduation. One international student noted: "I feel quite welcomed here. My tutors and friends appreciate the efforts I make. I can be work with Finnish people" (IHES 15).

Developing a sense of belonging within an HE context nourished international students' resilience, encouraging them to consider staying in Finland after graduation. An environment where there is respect encourages the student to stay after graduation. Accordingly, one student said:

> Studying at this university makes me feel I'm part of this academic community and Finnish society. We understand each other. People are kind. It wouldn't be the same for a foreigner in my country. This makes me afraid to go back. (IHES 2)

The students' narratives revealed that a good relationship with university staff and other students created a positive atmosphere, resulting in more positive perceptions regarding staying in Finland after graduation. They believed they could find that same positive atmosphere if they stayed in Finland.

Resources That Foster a Sense of Purpose

The final category regarding the students' resilience and willingness to stay in Finland after completing their studies consisted of resources that foster a sense of purpose. Some of the students felt that if they could pursue a profession, stability, or long-term goals in Finland, then they might stay in the country. One participant mentioned that having a focus in life had helped him to achieve his goals at university and that he would also apply the same focus in his future professional life. He concluded: " You need to have a purpose. I have my own goals, both at university and in Finland. I'm successful and will be successful in the future because of this. I'm happy. (IHES 4).

Another student stressed the importance of having a goal if you want to lead a happy life. This involved focusing on his future family life, a key factor as regards whether or not he would stay in Finland after finishing his studies. He suggested: "If I build a family here, I'll be able to stay. This country is safe" (IHES 16).

The interviewees highlighted finding a job as an important goal after graduation. Specifically, they considered it essential to find a good job that would allow them to maintain at least an average living standard. One student stated: "If I can get a good job which would allow me to support my family here, that would be enough. I can settle here permanently" (IHES 8).

The pursuit of success at university was considered meaningful in relation to developing a sense of purpose, which was reflected in the students' intentions around staying in Finland after completing their studies. One participant noted: I want to be successful. Academic success leads to success in family and professional life. I feel I am successful because I like being in Finland. My future is here. (IHES 9).

Overall, the findings reveal four cross-cutting categories: financial resources, stress-management resources, resources that foster a sense of belonging, and resources that foster a sense of purpose. These categories relate to the first research question in that they identify how the participants interpreted resilience regarding staying through contextual resources. Their significance depended on how the participants combined and interpreted them.

Resilience-Guided Meta Narratives

The second stage of the research moved from thematic categories to narrative configurations. The purpose was not to create demographic or psychological "types," but rather to identify recurring ways of organizing adversity, resources, a sense of belonging, purpose, and imagined futures, such that the four meta-narratives represent the dominant trajectories in the data. They differ in that each places different resources and meanings at the center of the account.

The Safe Future Seeker

The Safe Future Seeker organizes resilience around the possibility of constructing a financially secure and meaningful future. Experiences such as grants, academic progress, and employment opportunities are interpreted in relation to long-term goals. Therefore, the willingness to stay depends on whether Finland is seen as capable of supporting that future.

Within this trajectory, financial and occupational resources are connected to a sense of purpose in life. Employment, settling in the country, and family stability demonstrate that it is possible to lead a sustainable life. This was an important factor to stay in Finland.

The Safe Future Seeker reflects the future-oriented dimension of SER model: resilience involves evaluating whether the environment provides the resources necessary to achieve long-term goals. The willingness to stay depends on the circumstances. It is strengthened when economic opportunities appear attainable and weakened when the future appears uncertain.

The Support Seeker

The Support Seeker organizes resilience around emotional and social resources, which makes daily challenges more manageable. The participants mentioned feeling appreciated and able to access help when stressful situations arise. Thus, the narrative connection to staying depends on the perceived quality and accessibility of societal and institutional support.

Friends, tutors, and the counselling service are resources that international students use to manage stress and develop a sense of belonging. According to SER theory, these experiences demonstrate how resilience can be enabled by relationships and institutional measures. The trajectory goes from hardship to easily available help, through a greater sense of belonging and finally to a more optimistic view as regards staying in Finland.

The Support Seeker is distinctive because its organizing logic is relational. Financial resources may be important, but what matters most is that the student is treated as a valued and supported member of the society.

The Finance-Practicality Seeker

The Finance-Practicality Seeker also emphasizes financial resources, but their narrative logic is different from that of the Safe Future Seeker. Finances are an immediate practical condition for managing everyday life and reducing distress. Paying bills, securing employment, and avoiding insecurity are regarded as essential for practical and mental stability.

Money-related hardships impact the participants' ability to study, cope, and imagine a future in Finland. Employment represents both a source of income and a way to reduce distress. The trajectory is based on practical feasibility: whether life in Finland can be secure enough to allow them to survive and flourish after graduation.

The Finance-Practicality Seeker differs from the Safe Future Seeker in their emphasis on sustainability, rather than focusing primarily on a long-term plan. Both are based on financial resources, but the former foregrounds everyday economic security and stress reduction, whereas the latter links financial security to settling down, family, and work-related goals.

The Identity Developer

The Identity Developer organizes resilience around belonging, meaning, and the development of a future self. Staying in Finland depends on whether participants can see themselves as members of the country's academic and social community. Resilience is narrated as a changing process through which acceptance contributes to the development of the self.

The identity trajectory connects several SER-related resources: academic achievement can strengthen a sense of belonging, which, in turn, can reinforce a sense of purpose. Consequently, a sense of purpose can make a future in Finland more imaginable. The Identity Developer represents a narrative in which contextual relationships and opportunities become part of an emerging understanding of the student`s self.

The Identity Developer illustrates the SER model proposition that resilience is framed by interactions between individuals and their surroundings. The trajectory toward a decision to stay in the country is strengthened when the students perceive opportunities to feel part of a community, achieve their goals, and build a future.

4. Discussion

The findings address the two research questions at complementary analytical levels. The first defines four groups of contextual resources helping to be resilient, which affects the participants` decisions about staying in Finland after graduation: financial resources, stress-management resources, belonging, and purpose. The second illustrates that these resources cannot be interpreted simplistically: whole-narrative

analysis produced four future-oriented trajectories. The typologies provide an interpretive meaning by revealing various narrative reasons through which resilience resources become relevant when deciding whether to stay in or leave Finland.

The findings related to economic factors are consistent with research that links financial resources, wellbeing, and resilience (Rahman et al., 2021; Karairmak & Sivis, 2011). In their accounts, the participants claim that financial security impacts both their current student life and their perceptions regarding whether a future in Finland is viable. Monetary concerns are expressed in different ways: for the Finance-Practicality Seeker, security is mainly a condition of everyday feasibility, while for the Safe Future Seeker, it is part of a future-driven plan. Finnish language proficiency and employment opportunities further show the contextual nature of these concerns (Karhunen & Mathies, 2020; Lu & Everson-Härkälä, 2024).

The findings related to stress management support a contextual interpretation of resilience. The participants referred to friends, professionals, university health services, and other resources that helped them cope with stressful situations. In other words, these are regarded as facilitators of resilience. This aligns with SER theory, which connects resilience to resources in the surrounding environment (Ungar, 2018). The fact that some students were not sufficiently informed about these services is significant: a resource does not automatically help a student just because it exists. This shows that institutional interaction is an important subscale of the environment in which resilience is constructed.

The findings regarding the sense of belonging are consistent with research underlining the connection between this sense of belonging and support for international students' resilience (Ajjawi et al., 2025; Cai & Meng, 2025). Tutors, friends, and social relationships in general were depicted as experiences through which participants felt that they were accepted and not alienated. Within the framework of SER model, these relationships can be understood as social resources for coping with adversity. The participants also associated the sense of belonging within the university to an imagined sense of belonging to the Finnish community; this could be interpreted as perception held by the students rather than as evidence of guaranteed social integration.

A sense of purpose signifies a future-driven layer. The participants connected academic achievement, employment opportunities and familial plans with a meaningful future in Finland. Previous research identifies purpose as a resource linked to resilience (Lewis & Hill, 2021; Yildirim et al., 2023). The narratives suggest that purpose imbues current experiences with a future-related aim, especially for the Safe Future Seeker and Identity Developer trajectories.

A sense of belonging and wellbeing indicate the value of SER perspective. Although the participants may experience stressful situations, they evaluate their futures in a variety of ways depending on whether they perceive their environments as motivating and inclusive. This is consistent with the argument that a sense of belonging can help to overcome challenges (Abdulhamed et al., 2024). The present study adds a narrative lens by demonstrating how support and acceptance become an element of imagined futures. Accordingly, the findings support a conditional willingness to stay, rather than an ambitious relationship between resilience and migration.

The link between belonging, purpose, and identity enables us to explain the Identity Developer trajectory. International education can provide an environment where students reassess their sense of self and their relationship with their host community. The narratives suggest that acceptance and goal achievement become meaningful when they are incorporated into an emerging identity, which is consistent with research linking resilience to identity development (Akgül et al., 2023).

The main theoretical contribution of this research is to connect SER theory with post-study migration decision-making through narrative analysis. Resilience is conceptualized as a contextual and interpretive process, rather than as a personal trait that drives the decision to stay. The four categories identify resources across narratives, while the four typologies indicate how those resources are configured in various migration trajectories.

Some limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved 16 students from two higher education institutions in Finnish Lapland; therefore, the findings should not be generalized statistically to all international students in Finland. The narratives were collected in 2020–2021, but the willingness to stay may vary depending on employment, language competence, interactions, policies, and other conditions. The typologies are interpretive meta-narratives rather than fixed classifications of people. Future studies could use larger and more diverse samples, employ longitudinal designs, and track international students' shifting resilience and migration narratives.

5. Conclusions

Immigration is influenced by several factors, including employment, education, and living conditions (Telsaç, 2024). From the SER perspective, the willingness to stay involves shifting perceptions as regards whether students can access resources that provide them with financial security, stress management, a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose. The typologies demonstrate that the same resource can have different meanings.

This research investigated how IHE students describe their willingness to remain in Finland in relation to resilience during higher education. The category-content-oriented analysis recognized four contextual resource categories, while the holistic narrative analysis produced four resilience-guided meta-narratives. Together, these analyses show that resilience and willingness to stay are linked through meaning-making, rather than through an uncomplicated causal relationship. Staying becomes more imaginable when the academic and social environment is seen as providing resources that make present challenges manageable and future aims obtainable.

The narrative approach provides a place- and time-sensitive understanding of resilience, adaptation, and post-study migration. It also shows how SER theory can be used in qualitative research. This approach reveals various perceptions of the same environment and provides a basis for future research on international student integration and post-study migration.

The contribution of this study to research in higher education can be summarized in the following theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the narrative approach provided a new, multi-voiced understanding of the realities and meanings of higher education studies in the international students' lives. Furthermore, our research has provided a new conceptualization of IHE students' resilience and combines it with their willingness to stay in the host country. However, future research is needed on the typology presented here, using longitudinal and statistical methods. Practical contributions to the higher education sector include a new understanding of how higher education studies and student services should be organized to better meet students' needs throughout their academic journey, from the pre-study phase through the post-graduation phase. Based on our findings, we also suggest that higher education institutions should collaborate even more closely with regional authorities to facilitate students' arrival and make them feel welcome, as well as to guide them toward post-graduation employment.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare and Satu Uusiautti; methodology, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare and Satu Uusiautti; software, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare; validation, Satu Uusiautti, formal analysis, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare; investigation, Satu Uusiautti.; resources, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare; data curation, Satu Uusiautti; writing—original draft preparation, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare and Satu Uusiautti; writing—review and editing, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare and Satu Uusiautti ; visualization, Zubeyde Durna- Flygare and Satu Uusiautti ; supervision, Satu Uusiautti; project administration, Satu Uusiautti.; funding acquisition, Satu Uusiautti. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

References

Aarrevaara, T., Tulpo, P., Vasari, P. & Tenhunen, V. (2022). Institutional engagement in internationalization in Finnish higher education. *Journal of Higher Education,* 12, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.2399/yod.21.202203

Abdulhamed, R., Hietajärvi, L., Skogberg, N., Klemetti, R., & Lonka, K. (2024). Sense of belongingness, discrimination, and mental health: associations and buffering effects of sense of belonging on mental health among Finnish native and immigrant-origin youth. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 103*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.102081

Ajjawi, R., Fischer, J., Adachi, C., Bearman, M., Boud, D., Macfarlane, S., & Coutts, K. (2025). Coming to belong in the university through small acts of connection. *Studies in Higher Education*, *51*(1), 197–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2025.2462666

Akgül, G., Ergin, D., & Çok, F. (2023). Resilience and coping strategies in immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents and identity development. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *52*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2023.2224931

Altbach, P. G. (1991). Impact and adjustment: foreign students in comparative perspective. *Higher Education*, *21*(3), 305–323.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *15*(2), 219–234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Cai, Z., & Meng, Q. (2025). Academic resilience and academic performance of university students: the mediating role of teacher support. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 123456. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1463643

Calonge, D. S., Shah, M. A., Aguerrebere, P. M., Abdulla, N., Connor, M., Badr, M., & Blakemore, E. (2023). Should I stay or should I go?: International students' challenges and opportunities to secure employment in their host country after graduation. A scoping review using prisma. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching, 6*(2), 187–201. https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.T202510260000329166724786l

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: experience and story in qualitative research.* Jossey-Bass.

Finn, R., & Brown, A. (2024). Custodians of an ecology of data: foundational theory and practice for data analysis in a complex world. *Qualitative Research*, *25*(1), 110–129. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241234293

Griffith, J., & West, C. (2013). Master resilience training and its relationship to individual well-being and stress buffering among Army National Guard soldiers. *Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, *40*(2), 140–155. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-013-9320-8

Guthrie, K. (2022). (Re)fractional narrative inquiry: A methodological adaptation for exploring stories. *Methodological Innovations, 15*(1), 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/20597991221077902

Heikkinen, H. L. T., Huttunen, R., Syrjälä, L., & Pesonen, J. (2012). Action research and narrative inquiry: five principles for validation revisited. *Educational Action Research*, *20*(1), 5–21.

Hölttä, S. (2007). Challenges of institutional responses to globalisation in engineering education in Finland. In *Proceedings of the international symposium on university engineering education under globalization* (pp. 1–10). Beijing University of Technology.

Karairmak, O., & Sivis, R. (2011). The role of financial resources in resilience and positive personal qualities of college students. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, *43*, 19–34.

Karhunen, H., & Mathies, C. (2020). Do they stay or go? Analysis of international students in Finland. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *18*(3), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1816926

Kess, R., & Puroila, A.-M. (2021). Narratives from the North: early childhood teachers' narrative identities in place. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *67*(1), 126–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2021.1983867

Khan, J. (2022). *The paradox of internationalization in Finnish academia: more attraction and less integration*. (Academic doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki.)

Kim, S., & Istad, F. (2026). Staying or leaving after graduation? Factors shaping international students' decision to remain in South Korea. *International Journal of Educational Development, 125*, 103647. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2026.103647

Kuitunen, I. (2025). Finland's falling birth rate prompts study of neonatal outcomes in secondary-level delivery units. *Acta Paediatrica*, *114*(10), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.70218

Kuroso, S., & Dong, H. (2025). Economic stress and migration in early modern Japan: rural–urban comparative evidence from population registers. *Explorations in Economic History*, *97*, Article 101456.

Lashari, S., Kaur, A., & Awang-Hashim, R. (2018). Home away from home: the role of social support for international students' adjustment. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, *15*(2), 33–54. https://doi.org/ 10.32890/mjli2018.15.2.2

Lewis, N., & Hill, P. (2021). Sense of purpose promotes resilience to cognitive deficits attributable to depressive symptoms. *Health Psychology*, *40*(12), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.698109

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Sage.

Lu, W., & Everson-Härkälä, T. (2024). International student experience of employment integration in Finland. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, *19*(2), 133–152. https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999241238172

Luthar, S. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and Psychopathology*, *12*(4), 857–885. https://doi.org/ 10.1111/1467-8624.00164

Masten, A. S. (2014). Global perspectives on resilience in children and youth. *Child Development*, *85*(1), 6–20.

McLeroy, K. R., Bibeau, D., Steckler, A., & Glanz, K. (1988). An ecological perspective on health promotion programs. *Health Education Quarterly*, *15*(4), 351–377.

Meyers, E. (2000). Theories of international immigration policy: a comparative analysis. *International Migration Review*, *34*(4), 1245–1282.

Nagamani, Y., Suresh, M., & Kumari, Y. (2024). Stress management: strategies and approaches for enhancing well-being. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, *12*(7), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.doi.one.IJCRT2407113

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, *8*(1), 5–23.

Rahman, M., Che, R., Masud, M., Sarker, M., & Chowdhury, N. (2021). Financial behaviour, financial literacy and financial stress in explaining the financial well-being of the B40 group in Malaysia. *Future Business Journal*, *7*(52), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-021-00099-0

Ruiz-Robledillo, N., De Andrés-García, S., Pérez-Blasco, J., González-Bono, E., & Moya-Albiol, L. (2014). Highly resilient coping entails better perceived health, high social support and low morning cortisol levels. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, *35*(3), 686–695. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2013.12.007

Salmela, M., & Uusiautti, S. (2017). How to implement the narrative approach in different phases of a positive psychological research? A four-dimensional analysis. *International Journal of Research Studies in Psychology*, *6*(1), 43-55. https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrsp.2017.1704

Shams, F., Huisman, J., & Wilkins, S. (2011). Decision-making and changing behavioural dynamics of potential higher education students: the impacts of increasing tuition fees in England. *Educational Studies*, *39*(2), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2012.681360

Ström, K., Wenström, S., & Uusiautti, S. (2024). Positive leadership development and leadership types in Finnish leaders' narratives. *International Journal of Research in Education and Science*, *10*(4), 688–708. https://doi.org/10.46328/ijres.3484

Telsaç, C. (2024). Deep economic factors causing migration', *International Journal of Global Politics and Public Administration*, *1*(1), 1–10.

Trifuljesko, S. (2021). Internationalization experiences of Finland and the UK. *International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*, *15*(3), 32–55. https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2022.150304

Ungar, M. (2018). Systemic resilience: principles and processes for a science of change in contexts of adversity. *Ecology and Society*, *23*(4).

Välimaa, J., & Weimer, L. (2014). Trends of internationalization in Finnish higher education. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, *60*(5), 1–15.

Wu, C., & Wilkes, R. (2017). International students' post-graduation migration plans and the search for home. *Geoforum, 80*, 123-132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.01.015

Yildirim, M., Turan, M., Albeladi, N., & Chirico, F. (2023). Resilience and perceived support as predictors of emotional wellbeing. *Journal of Health and Social Sciences*, *8*(1), 1–10.

Zhao, B., Marangell, S., & Baik, C. (2026). Exploring post-graduation mobility: A scoping review of international students' decision-making. *Journal of International Students, 16*(18), 165-190. https://doi.org/10.32674/ws5wae77

Ziguras, C., & Law, S. (2006). Recruiting international students as skilled migrants: the global skill race as viewed from Australia and Malaysia. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *4*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720600555087

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the publisher and/or the editor(s). The publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.