Will they Enjoy Equal Opportunities? University Students' Perceptions of Employment Opportunities in the Globalized world

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore international university students' perceptions of future global employment opportunities and expectations with regard to workplace diversity. The study employs a qualitative design. The data were collected from nine study groups with thirty-eight students from twenty-one different countries studying in a private international university in North Cyprus. The thematic analyses of the data revealed that students anticipate some degrees of inequality and discrimination when seeking employment, i.e., they believe networking is more important than qualifications. Moreover, the participants maintain that overseas job experiences will provide them with better employment opportunities than experiences in their respective countries. The main implication of this study for educators is that they should evaluate their current business degree curricula allowing for more interactive communication to build confidence in students' ability to compete in the global workplace. The curricula should also aim at intercultural consciousness-raising through topics of equality and identity using English as a *lingua franca* with the objective of creating high levels of problem solving and critical thinking in students.

Keywords: Education, intercultural business communication, students' perceptions, employment opportunities, global workplace.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Students' cultural awareness and sensitivity is one of the topics addressed in previous research on intercultural business communication (IBC) courses in higher education. Interest in international students' perceptions of future global employment opportunities is also growing. However, research on students' perceptions of the issue of equality/inequality in future global employment is scarce. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this research gap by taking into consideration students' perspectives of employment opportunities. It is hoped that the findings of the present study will be used by decision makers in changing the IBC curricula to meet students' needs for finding employment after graduation. The study also aims to contribute to IBC research in higher education by adding the component of international students' perceptions of global employment opportunities.

Literature Review

Intercultural Business Communication

Research in IBC is an area that requires continuous investigation to keep in sync with the changing times. In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers addressed cross-cultural business communication, backstage culture, and cultural differences. They expected an increase in workforces that would be more ethnically and culturally diverse (Limaye & Victor, 1991; Varner, 1999). Recent IBC reviews and research have also addressed issues such as curricula, learning outcomes, students' intercultural competence and awareness, perceptions of "otherness", and the like (Arasaratnam, 2014; Bargiela-chiappini et al., 2003; Beckers & Bsat, 2014; Chitakornkijsil, 2010; Constantinescu, 2013; Dunbravă, 2010; Palmer-Silveira, 2013; Pikhart, 2016). However, the practical outcome of such theoretical enquiries needs further investigation. Thus, the aim of the present study is to highlight practical implications of research in this area which could be effectively used in everyday business activities, such as negotiations, advertising, and business meetings (cf. Witchalls, 2015; Zheng, 2015).

Curricula change is pivotal to keep up with changing cultural dimensions. Research suggests that educators should create incentives for learning in their students. They may use motivating texts, materials, consider the socioeconomic environment of the students, and address real world problems (Akbulut Taş, 2022; Alsubaie, 2016; Saban, 2021; Sahera et al., 2022; Voogt & Pelgrum, 2005; Wade, 2001).

Ly and Rygg (2013) approach intercultural communication course implementation and developing IBC curricula with the aim of improving students' intercultural competence, cultural sensitivity, and cultural awareness. They find that classes of no more than 40 students are easier to manage in order to receive individual feedback. They also maintain that students should work in smaller groups to encourage participation and discussion in a non-threatening environment.

Pierson (2010) found value in researching the effect of studying abroad in an English-speaking country, where students can exhibit higher levels of intercultural sensitivity. Similalry, Cheney (2001) claims we need more intercultural classrooms with domestic and international students so that interaction may create the conditions for learning intercultural communication and competence. Another researcher attempted to develop students' awareness of cultural bias and stereotyping through the use of films (Cardon, 2010). Since culture itself is still confusing among students, Blasco (2009) claims academic readings should explicitly address business activities from a cultural perspective.

Higher education programs in international business need to address the use of *lingua francas*. Cohen and Kassis-Henderson (2012) claim that language courses in France reflect 'national culture'. The results of their study indicate that through the use of both English and French students can develop better rapport, which helps mitigate barriers when problems arise. Thus, Research in Business as a *Lingua Franca* (BELF) may bridge the gap in language courses and aid in the transference of students' knowledge to the workplace. BELF studies at Multinational Corporations investigate communicative strategies in using English as a *lingua franca* (Du-babcock, 2013; Gajšt, 2014; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Marina & Rajprasit, 2016; Palmer-Silveira, 2013; Wu, 2013).

A study conducted in Turkey on students' use of diaries in an intercultural communication classroom showed they were afraid of being dominated in a group; However, collaborating and exchanging ideas helped their learning and confidence-building in communication (Usiuata, 1997). Another study in Kazakhstan addressed students' written business English skills to prepare them for the workplace and called for using authentic contexts in the classroom (Aimoldina & Zharkynbekova, 2014).

To improve students' conceptions of themselves relative to others, Brooks & Pitts (2015) used an online approach with learners in Singapore and the U.S. A similar experimental study conducted in an Australian University where students collaborated online. The findings suggest using business case studies as well as collaboration for learning about teamwork and intercultural communication can be considered as a means for internationalizing curricula and emphasizing the global citizen (Crossman, 2011).

Finally, Guo, Cockburn-Wooten, & Munshi (2014) focus on raising cultural awareness in homogenous groups of students. Their study included collaborative student-led analyses of case studies to open up meaningful discussions on the topic of diversity. The findings indicate students' need to learn to identify situations from different perspectives, a skill which is vital for management students.

International Students' Perceptions of Employment

On international students' perceptions of employability after graduation, research findings suggest a correlation between students coming from developed versus less-developed countries. In less developed countries, such as Turkey, students found that their acquired skills support their employability (Ergün & Şeşen, 2021). On students' perceptions of future careers, Turkish students considered international marketing courses prestigious, exciting, and trendy leading to employability while Northern European students perceived the opposite, i.e., seeing the courses as being required but not providing better job opportunities (Gegez, Hollensen & Venable, 2010).

Dawes and Bozkurt (2010) investigated Australian and Turkish university students' perceptions of the changing global employability in post-industrial countries and future job prospects. Davey, Plewa & Struwig's study (2011) showed that African students are more likely to seek entrepreneurial pursuits after graduation compared to European students. Moreover, a study including Finnish and international students found they were confident in their business competence, but their entrepreneurial intention was low (Kakkaonen, 2011).

On seeking employment in the UK after graduation, the situation is not straightforward, but research findings indicate that self-efficacy constraints play a larger role than found before (Bozionelos et al., 2015). A research conducted in Pakistan showed that students were motivated to study abroad for employment; however, this causes brain drain in their home country (Javed, et al., 2019). In the same vein, Nisbett's (2011) study found similar ambitions in Caribbean students who are hopeful to find employment in Canada after graduation.

Burns and Foo (2011) address students' perceptions of their skills learned at a business school and the curricula design for multicultural classrooms. UK International students felt employable due to their education but less employable due to competition in the market and a conflict of financial resources (Donald, Ashleigh, & Baruch, 2018). Another study showed that Turkish Tourism students' expectations of global employability were neutral, but they were willing to study and work in tourism after graduation (Roney & Öztin, 2007). Finally, at a UK University, Master students' perceptions of their preparedness showed that participation in lectures with practical and theoretical focus positively influenced their preparedness for work

(Garcia-Aracil, Monteiro & Almeida, 2018).

Mueller & Robert (2021) found that university students' perceptions of employability did not correlate to their international studies. Instead, students perceived their field of study might hinder their professional success. Similarly, Cavanagh et al. (2015) found that in the Australian market, there was a gap between what students' learned at the university and what employers expected. They suggest re-designing curricula to include work readiness and competence and to utilize professional bodies from private sectors and carry out co-teaching.

Finally, Fakunle (2019) correlated students' motivation for studying abroad and their expectations for future employment, but found that most universities did not focus on employment opportunities for the students; instead, they focused on international student recruitment.

The Current Study

The aim of the present study was to identify the themes international students developed when using English as a *lingua franca* as well as analyzing the students' perceptions when discussing general business topics. This was achieved through identifying thematic topics common among the study groups and by exploring the students' perceptions of equality of opportunity for employment in the global workplace. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are international students' perceptions of equality of opportunity in the global workforce?
2. What teaching and learning policies can be recommended for improvement in international business curricula based on the findings of the present study?

METHOD
Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design to explore the views and perceptions of international university students on global employment opportunities and their expectations of workplace diversity experiences. Convenience sampling was used to recruit the participants of the study. The participants were all third and fourth year international students studying at an international private university in North Cyprus. In order to capture the views, experiences, and expectations of the participants, who were going through the last stage of their studies and were concerned about future employment, the study employed a phenomenological design. Phenomenology has its strength in capturing the perceptions and interpretations of people who are going through similar experiences. The data for this study were collected through study group discussions.

Study Groups and Participants

The participants were all international students, who were at the last stages of their studies (i.e., third and fourth year students), and had concerns about their future employment opportunities. The study used convenience-sampling techniques to select the university and participants. To recruit the participants, the first author announced the topic of the research in her business communication classes and asked for volunteers to participate in the study. Then, she randomly selected participants from among third and fourth year students. The selection criteria were: (a) students should be in their third and fourth year of their studies, (b) they should be international students using English as a *lingua franca*, (c) they should be studying in the Faculty of Business and Economics, hence being informed about the international business contexts and issues, and (d) they would willingly volunteer to take part in the study.

As Table 1 illustrates, the participants consist of nine study groups including thirty-eight volunteer students from third and fourth year courses in the Business and Economic Faculty at a private university in North Cyprus. Of these participants, 13 were female and 25 were male. Three of the students were monolingual in English, and the rest spoke more than one language, with four of the students claiming English as their first language. The students were from twenty-one countries[1] including: America/USA (1), Azerbaijan (1), Belarus (1), Congo (4), Egypt (1), Germany (1), Iran (1), Jordan (3), Kazakhstan (1), Kyrgyzstan (1), Libya (2), Nigeria (6), Pakistan (5), Palestine (1), Russia (1), Rwanda (1), Syria (1), Crimean Tatar (1), Cyprus, Turkey (2), and Turkmen (2).

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data were collected through video-recordings. Unmonitored study group discussions were adopted to minimize the effects of student-lecturer power relationship, as the authors are

Table 1: Number of Study Groups, and Gender Identification

Study Group	No. Students	Female	Male
1	5	2	3
2	3	1	2
3	5	1	4
4	5	1	4
5	4	3	1
6	5	2	3
7	3	0	3
8	4	3	1
9	4	0	4
Total Students	38	13	2

<?> There were 38 students recorded. Two students attended two different recording sessions.

lecturing in the same university. The aim was also to engage the students in natural conversations without an authority figure around.

The study groups were recorded between October and November in 2017. There were nine study groups. The first researcher was not in the room during the recording nor watched them from outside. No one directed the students' conversations during the recording; the students ended their conversations when they deemed the topic was exhausted. The ethical approval was taken from the university ethics committee before the data collection. Moreover, before the student group discussion, the participants filled out a demographic questionnaire and a consent form.

The participants showed up randomly on the dates and times convenient for them agreed upon by the study groups. During the study group discussions, participants picked a topic randomly from a list of topics provided to them by the first author. Each topic was inherently thematic. How the topic developed and transitioned depended upon the students' conversational development and interpersonal skills. After the topic selection procedure ended, the researcher left the room to enable the students to reflect their views openly on the work experiences during their studies, future expectations about employment opportunities, and the diversity issues they might experience at their workplaces.

For participants in groups with seemingly lower levels of oral English skills, the use of repetition, clarifications, and definitions aided in the development of their conversations. Transitions in topic development was not as common in these three groups except for one group where one participant lead the others as if he was a teacher. In this case, the topic transitioned more often through the use of different examples to explain ideas.

Table 2 shows the topics selected per study group, the number of students and the discussion time per group. The average discussion time for the nine study groups lasted approximately 32.52, in total 5 hours.

Data Analysis

The transcription of the study group discussions was verbatim. For ensuring the anonymity of the participants, the transcriber assigned each one of the participants a number/code such as SG1P2 (Participant 2 in Study Group 1).

Content analysis was used to identify common themes. The transcripts were read multiple times to identify the students' comments and arguments about employment opportunities and workplace diversity. Table 3 displays the identified thematic topics in Table 3.

FINDINGS

As Table 3 illustrates, the analysis of the data yielded five themes, which reflect participants' perceptions regarding general business topics and how they use English as a *lingua*

Table 2: Selected Topics, Number of Students, and Recording Times

Group	Topic Selected	No. Students	Minutes
1	Working abroad today, cultural perspective	5	54.82
2	Opportunities for employment after graduation	3	13.53
3	Equality in the workplace	5	33.11
4	Ethics in the workplace today and Equality in pay	5	48.29
5	Doing favors in the workplace today (intercultural perspective)	4	26.14
6	To do the work you love	5	33.88
7	Positive and negative business practices, a global and cultural perspective	3	13.81
8	Teamwork in the workplace today (intercultural)	4	26.64
9	Competition in the workplace today (global and cultural perspective	4	42.54
	Total Students and Minutes	38	292.76
	Total Hours		5

Table 3: Study Group Themes

No.	Themes
Theme 1	Having Bigger Dreams: Employment opportunities abroad
Theme 2	When it comes to real life: Having enough skills
Theme 3	Do you need a degree or connections?
Theme 4	Gender Stereotypes and Gender Discrimination at the Workplace
Theme 5	Being a foreigner: National, Ethnic, and Age Discrimination in the Workplace

franca. The findings related to these themes are presented below.

Theme 1: Having Bigger Dreams: Employment opportunities abroad

One of the main themes that frequently emerged during the study group discussions was to find better employment opportunities abroad to realize the bigger dreams that international students had. A student claims that there is a "brain drain" in Africa because most young people leave Africa due to lack of jobs, and government corruption; they go to Europe in search of opportunities. At the same time, the student hopes that they (young Africans), can do something about the problem. Next, comparing the job opportunities as a foreigner in North Cyprus to opportunities in other countries, the consensus was that the island is small and "nobody wants to work here" because they had bigger dreams. A sample of students' views in Study Groups 1 and 2 on this issue can be found in Appendix A.

Theme 2: Inadequate skills for real life employment

In Study Group 2, one of the concerns that students had was whether they had enough skills for the workplace. Students recognize that the skills they acquire at the university play a role in finding employment; however, they may not be able to transfer these skills to the workplace since university is a different environment compared to "real life" situations. The views of some of the students are found in Appendix B.

Students in Study Group 7 also believed that there is a "gap" between what students learn at the university and the skills needed in the workplace. They fear they may not be prepared when applying for employment. A student shares a personal anecdote about how he witnessed university graduates not knowing how to handle their jobs at a computer company. The student emphasizes the need for practical application of the theory they learn at the university. The following excerpts illustrate the above reflections.

> **SG7P2 (M)**: Experience, uh, uh, it's a big gap between uh-uh (pause) between (related) uh experience and uh trying to find a real job. […] Now a days […] like not, not, the qualification, but required qualification. It's getting higher so it's uh (pause), it's not negative but it's uh, some scary (firm like for future it is) when you're trying to figure out what should I have trained (so I don't know). […]

> **SG7P3 (M)**: I'm working a part-time job in a computer company, and there is students […] They are almost finishing their school, and, uh, they don't know anything, anything in practice. So […] uh, know, that job theoret—theoretically. But, by practice, uh, it's, uh, zero.

Theme 3: Do you need a degree or connections?

Despite having big dreams, most of the participants had concerns about being able to find jobs, and more specifically being treated equally when they applied for jobs. Needing connections was one of their main concerns. This was also highlighted when students discussed their preferences to work abroad and the idea of being evaluated based on their CV versus who their family knew. Students considered European countries having fairer hiring practices, hence they could find work more easily irrespective of who they knew.

In Study Group 2, students discussed lack of job opportunities in the private and public sectors as well as the need for networking for employment. They questioned if they needed a degree or volunteering experience. A student expresses her low chances in job opportunities because she does not have connections for finding a job in her home country, Rwanda. Other students feel the same. If there is job opportunity, they hope a company would evaluate their CV. They feared that most companies had already filled the position through connections. Student P2 shares a story about an unfair hiring practice by a bank in Nigeria where they announced a vacancy but how people were hired based on connections.

> **SG2P2 (M):** It's not like it's fair. […] Yeah, it's a government […] Central Bank in my country. They uh, they were supposed to employ like at least 200,000, uh, graduates but even before the list could come out they already employed mostly the family of those prestigious people who are, already, they have their own private companies, you understand. […]

For similar views, see Appendix C.

In Study Group 5, the sentiment of needing connections to find jobs is compared to the need for a CV and qualifications in Europe and places like Finland, Norway or Scandinavian countries. A student claims, as if out of disbelieve, that "they do look at your CV."

> **SG5P3 (M):** I know this guy and maybe he's not qualified, right. […] but I know him, or his father's brother is my friend or something. […] So, if you go like, "Okay I'm gonna give you my first salary," or "I'm gonna be giving you" because […] From my country I know people who are really desperate, and we have a lot of graduates who don't have jobs. […]\

> **SG5P1 (F)**: If you have connections, you'll easily get a job, if not then you'll…

> SG5P2 (F): I don't think it's in the countries, in some countries, in Europe for example, let's say, Finland or Norway or somewhere or the Scandinavian countries, like, oh, like (P1 says they're more strict) (pause). Yeah, they, they do look at your CV, at first place like.

Theme 4: Gender Stereotypes and Gender Discrimination at the Workplace

One of the themes discussed, in addition to nepotism, was gender discrimination. Students elaborated on how gender roles and expectations of parents have affected their decisions regarding future occupations. In Study Group 6, for instance, a student, who was the only son in the family, shared a story about studying what his parents wanted, regardless of his preferences. Another student followed-up with the same sentiments.

> **SG6P1 (M)**: Like for me, I'm in this situation as well. Up to one point I thought I love—I'm studying business, I love business. But now I uh, now I'm in a dilemma…like I love cooking. (Pause) But I can't, I can't do what I love. I am [Inaudible] (pursuing the), it's not like I'm sitting but I cannot do it because I have responsibilities on my head as well. Literally, cause I'm the only son in the family. I have some responsibility [Inaudible] as well.

> **SG6P3 (F)**: Yeah, I came here to study music but I'm studying business...and it's complicated.

When it comes to hiring practices, there were two opposing views. Some of the students believed that it was easier for women to find jobs, if they looked nice. For example, during Study Group 5, a student perceived a female employee in North Cyprus who "look[s] nice" and "literally doing nothing."

> **SG5P2 (F)**: I think in Cyprus, mostly, they doing favors for women, because if you look nice, you have a nice body, of course it's all across the globe, yani (Arabic term for "you know") (P2 shakes her body side to side a bit still with her arms crossed and uses expressive facial expressions). Cyprus like ah, (pause and laughs) most of the…And she is literally doing nothing. She is just, "Ah (she shakes her head in a bouncy manner) merhaba, merhaba, hoş geldiniz." And so it's like, and she's getting salary for that.

Furthermore, Student P3 (male and Nigerian) agrees that it is also a common practice to hire female employees based on appearance in Nigeria. He perceives gender discrimination when comparing how females find employment easily while men in Nigeria need to have a connection to find employment.

> **SG5P3 (M)**: Um, in Nigeria, doing favors is pretty much like Cyprus, right. If you're a girl, you have like, let's say seventy percent (chance or for--or securing a job, for example, (pause) and as a guy, you have to know someone.

> **SG5P1 (F):** Yes, yes to uh, to help you (others say yeah)

In Study Group 4, on the other hand, the students discussed how discrimination exists against women. A student perceives inequality in hiring practices as common practice in Jordan. The student backs up her claim with the common belief that men view women as less intelligent than men.

> **SG4P4 (F):** Yeah but [Inaudible] in Jordan in places they don't (make) equally, if you're a guy or a girl. For example, I can do more work (when the)

> **SG4P3 (M):** (interrupts) Lower.

> **SG4P4 (F):** Lower […]

> **SG4P4 (F):** Yeah because they still think that men are better smarter and (people) won't work (and) that's true (4. shrugs *a shoulder*).

SG4 discusses the topic of hiring women who may become pregnant. At this point, a male student claims he would pay a woman on maternity leave less than a male. Furthermore, the argument suggests the probability of a woman on maternity leave not returning to work. One male student suggested that more than one woman in a company may become pregnant and this would cost the company more in terms of maternity leave. This is reflected in the following excerpts.

> **SG4P5 (M)**: But I mean, when you talk about ethics and equal pay, it's, I mean it's how you look at it.

> **SG4P1 (M)**: […] Like, I'll take into consideration, "Oh, is she gonna get pregnant?" I'll give her some time off, but I'm not gonna pay her as equally as the other guy –

> **SG4P4 (F):** Okay, pay her less – […]

> **SG4P3 (M):** But not every woman is going to get pregnant at the same time.

> **SG4P1 (M)**: Yeah.

> **SG4P3 (M)**: Per year, at least one or two women are gonna get pregnant. So, at least one or two are not working, but the rest are still working.

In SG4, the topic of hiring a pregnant woman is an ethical dilemma as they progress in their conversation. Next, a male student poses the question of hiring a pregnant woman. Another male student avoids the question with a joke by saying that women would not be looking for work when pregnant. The only female student in the group agrees that she would not hire a pregnant woman. In the end, a male student claims it is unethical not to hire a pregnant woman. The female student agrees. For this conversation, see Appendix D.

During Study Group 3, most of the students considered gender as the forefront inequality issue as well, being more

prevalent than other inequalities, such as ethnicity and race. In the workplace, their perception is that the person who is a position of power will not treat a person of the opposite sex and of a lower position equally. The male students shift the focus to men and argue that men experience gender inequality as well. A male student is adamant that males would "be treated unfair in the workplace, definitely" if the boss is a woman. The students discuss how equality in the workplace is not a straightforward concept and it operates like a "double edged sword." The student's perception is that depending upon who is in the position of power, he or she will not treat a member of the opposite sex and of a lower position equally. For further details of this conversation, see Appendix E.

In SG3, Student P1 (M) shifts the topic of gender inequalities to inequalities in terms of ethnicity, religion, and virtually everything. During this debate, the only female student in the group agrees that equality is not restricted to gender.

> **SG3P1 (M):** See but equality is not just man and woman working *(P5 (F) says yeah)* it's not just a male and woman working….it's ethnicity, religion…it's on everything.

Later in SG3, Student P5 develops the topic into a global and national perspective and claims many countries in the Middle East and Africa are behind fifteen to twenty years in regards to equal rights compared to countries in Europe, the USA and the UK.

> **SG3P5 (F):** For example, Europe, USA, UK, these kinds of countries, they're more into the equality. For ex*ample, the Middle East, these kind of countries, like you said Africa...*

> SG3P2 (M): Remote actually, when you go there, that's ah, it's the exact opposite… (P5 is still trying to talk but P2 talks over her)

> SG3P5 (F): Yeah, until, until, until those countries will start a thinking about, about the equality in the workplace it needs like almost fifteen like twenty years...

In the same Study Group, the discussion develops into equality in the workplace for people from Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender (LGBT) communities. The students have discussions in the context of gender inequalities and sexual orientation. In the first excerpt, a student reported that a company fired employees in America because they were identified as being gay.

> SG3P3: Wait hold on. Let me finish (addressing and 3. uses a finger outward them signaling 1. to wait). Two months ago on the 20th of August

[Inaudible] they laid off thirty homosexual workers, why? [Inaudible] because they don't like a gay person serving them?

> **SG3P2:** That's bad, yani (Arabic word for not good in conte*xt).*

In the next excerpt, the students discuss providing support for people who identify as part of the LGBT community and who are seeking employment.

> **SG3P1**: If I have my own firm, whether it's , it's,it is, the person is from the LGBT community, as long as he's doing it right, and he's, he's is giving me, giving me the numbers [Inaudible] I would defiantly hire him *(5. says yeah).*

> **SG3P5***:* [Inaudible] As long as they do their jobs right.

In the third excerpt, a student claims people in the world support people who identify as homosexual in the workplace but the reality is the opposite.

> **SG3P3**: Equality is the fact that homosexualism might seem like it's been accepted in this world (pause) but it's not being accepted. It looks that way. It's trying to put that LGBT, that, that, that, [Inaudible] it's not it's not being accepted.

> **SG3P1**: Well—it's not—It is accepted. It's not everywhere, it's not accepted. There are some places that it is accepted.

Finally, a student claims people who are successful in the workplace are successful regardless of gender identification or sexual orientation.

> **SG3P2**: For me, for me when you're successor, you're just a successor—either you're a male or a female, you're a gay*,* you're a lesbian, you are born to be a successful person.

In Study Group 4, their conversation continues about having a third restroom facility for people who identify as transgender and the topic transitions to equality, defining gender, and offering a reasonable solution. The follow-up question inquires how the students would behave if they had to share a restroom with someone who identifies as transgender. One student explains the physiological effect of using a restroom that is not your gender saying, "…because they know that females don't do that, so they wouldn't want to do that…". For this conversation, see Appendix F.

In SG4, a student develops the topic asking for clarification about having a third bathroom. After much debate, it was resolved that only two restroom facilities in an organization would suffice for male and females,

and not a third. In addition, a student argues that labeling a restroom 'transgender' would be "rude." They claimed a third facility would unfairly discriminate people who identify as transgender. The participants also addressed the label on the restroom facility doors. For this conversation, see Appendix G.

Theme 5: Being a foreigner: National, Ethnic, and Age Discrimination in the Workplace

In Study Group 1, Student P3 perceives discrimination against foreigners after being hired. Later in the conversation, Student P4 explains marginalization as not directly intended by some people but still people create a barrier based on one's language and cultural background. Instead, people of a given country, "want to take advantage of the fact that in quotes, you're not supposed to be working." For further details of this conversation, see Appendix H.

In Study Group 3, Student P1 considers inequality in pay as discrimination between locals in Abu Dhabi and foreigners like him who is from Pakistan.

> **SG3P 1 (M)**: I come from United Emirates, in Abu Dhabi. The thing is, if, for example, let's say me, okay, I'm a UA [Inaudible] (raised) but I, I'm a Pakistani, for my nationality. If I work in a same place as a local guy, he'll get more money than me.

Student P1 also experienced unfair treatment by a female manager. After the company fired the female manager, he experienced discrimination by a new male boss who replaced her. The new male boss fired him, the student claims, because he was from Pakistan; he was not a local Arab.

> **SG3P1 (M):** He, he fired me just because I, I was Pakistani. It was a me the company. Because me the company in Abu Dhabi, they prefer more of local people—than having the nonlocals (pause) that's the thing.

> SG3P3 (M): Arab.

> SG3P2 (M): Yeah, right.

> SG3P1 (M): The female she had, she wanted me because my work was on point. I got a lot of big offers and everything. But the male, he just saw, he just saw my sheet and like where I'm from and where I stand and everything, and like sorry, here's your done, your letter, your check. Please be on your way.

In Study Group 5, Student P2 perceives discrimination in the US with hiring Russians.

> **SG5P2 (F):** I'm Russian, I'm trying to find the, the, workplace in America and they look at your CV and it's like "oh you're Russian" like that *(she makes a sour face)*, na, na, na, na, na *(shaking her head no)*. You know like those political *(looking at table)*, uh, things between Russian and American stuff.

> **SG5P3 (M):** So, basically it's all dependent on your background like where you're from.

In SG5, a Congolese student confirms that foreigners find work easier than the locals do. She claims that locals need to seek work abroad experience first and then return to Congo to qualify for work. In addition, the perception of Student P2 is that Congolese locals do favors for foreigners in Congo. Furthermore, a student from Libya (P1) confirms that they too need to seek work abroad first and then return to Libya for employment. For this conversation, see Appendix I.

In SG5, a Nigerian student claims foreigners also find employment easier than the local in Nigeria does.

> **SG53 (M)**: Ah, it [discrimination toward locals seeking work] happens in Nigeria though, like, if as a foreigner—I don't know why it's crazy. Like as a foreigner, you don't even have to know the job, as long as you're a foreigner *(P1 you can easily find one)* yeah.

In SG5, a student claims Russians earn less pay compared to people from the UK in Dubai. Student 2 says, "They treat you, um, from which country, you are…"

> **SG52 (F)**: For example in Dubai, is for *(P3 says it's really messed up)* a (furlough) of things for example. Like if you're from Russia, again, you can get a salary with, um, five zeros, let's say, right. But if you're from, UK, for a same job position, and if you're working as taxi, a taxi driver, you can get a salary for six or seven zeros, for the same position. *(P4 really)* yes, in Dubai *(P1 yeah yeah yeah yeah)* and it's true.

> **SG51 (F)**: They treat you, um, from which country, you are…

> SG52 (F): Yeah, yeah exactly, exactly, exactly (pause) But Dubai, Russia, like, why though why? Why? (P2 laughs and P1 says right and laughs) (pause) It's so unfair *(P3 mmmm)*.

A student in Study Group 3 reports on ethnic discrimination against blacks when employed by the Cheesecake Factory in America and shares a personal story that includes racial name-calling.

> SG3P3 (M): Some fat white dudes don't want a black man to serve them. […] …this dude in [Inaudible] called me a nigger for working at the Cheesecake Factory. I don't need that money though. I just did it to make a little cash, you understand?

Students in SG3 discuss age being a qualifying factor for advancement in a company. A student shares his story about perceived age discrimination toward the younger generation at a job. In addition, the student expresses an unconscious bias when he presupposes that his co-workers and the event team would not select him due to his age.

> **SG3P1 (M)**: I give my company's name and everything. I show them my papers and everything. "Like how old are you? […] I was not given, I was not treated equally. They made me share. They went to a different company, which was all, which was all supposed to be for me.

In SG1, Student P1 shares a second hand account: in the story, a Russian female employee experienced discrimination based on her culture and language but not her ethnicity.

> **SG1P1 (M):** I think the lady's Russian or something of that nature. And she was complaining about the fact that—so at least—that this one I know (it wasn't the case), discrimination, it wasn't a case of you know, skin color, it was not racial. You know the background it was actually, I think, the language, and culture.

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to identify international students' perceptions of equality of opportunity in the global market and to recommend teaching and learning policies for international business curricula. A common theme identified among the study groups was equality of opportunity when seeking employment globally and domestically. The majority of their concerns related to equal treatment where the sub-themes shown in the findings indicated that the students had concerns about equality of genders (women and men, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTIs)), as well as ethnic and nationality when seeking employment.

The findings suggest that students study abroad for global employment opportunities, preferably in a country that represents equal opportunity compared to their respective home countries. The students' openness to discuss equality in the workplace suggests they may have concerns about what they will face when employed after graduation. They reported that they have faced, continue to face, and expect to face different forms of discrimination based on gender, nationality and ethnicity. These findings are in line with those of Coffey et al. (2018). In their study also participants suggested direct discriminatory experiences in related to race, age, and gender during the agent and recruitment process for employment in Australia. The current study also reflects gender discrimination in Theme 4, and race discrimination in Theme 5.

On having bigger dreams for studying abroad, many participants in the present study are in search of better opportunities abroad and once they find them they do not want to return home. They have bigger dreams but not in North Cyprus due to lack of opportunities. This finding is in contrast with Nisbett's (2011) study which revealed that Caribbean students studying in Canada have reasons to stay in Canada after graduation. The findings indicate that work opportunities include easy access to the market, high wages, less stringent immigration policies, careers relevant to their degrees and support from governing bodies.

According to another finding, leaving one's country in search of a bigger dream abroad causes brain drain in the students' home countries, as in African countries. Bushra et al. (2019) also address student mobility and brain drain in Pakistan. Their findings suggest students have academic, professional and social motivations for studying abroad and remaining in the host countries. The researchers suggest using their study as a reference for national policy makers to reverse brain drain.

The students in the current study also discussed whether they have enough skills after graduation when it comes to employability. Cavanagh et al. (2015) also found that students have less understanding about what employers want and how their perceived graduate skills would help them transition to the workplace. In the present study, participants claim that some students may do well in school but they may not be able work in the real world; there is a gap between academic experience and real work. They perceive that job qualifications and requirements are competitive today, hence they are unsure about which degree qualifies them best and if the theoretical knowledge will prepare them for the workplace. These views suggest students in the current study have lack of confidence in their sense of future employability.

Contrary to the findings of the current study where some participants were not sure that their university education would enhance their future employment opportunities, Dawes and Bozkurt (2010) found that Australian university students, unlike Turkish students, were relatively optimistic about their opportunities for finding employment after graduation. Unlike some students in the present study, both the Australian and Turkish students shared positive views that they would have better life experience through tertiary studies.

A more recent study conducted in Australia found that students appeared to find difficulty in relating what they learned at university to work contexts (Cavanagh et al. 2015). They argued for effective learning activities and for the transference of skills since students will risk employer criticism for having undeveloped skills. This confirms the findings of the current study. Coffey et al.'s (2018) study also revealed that students in Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore expect that lack of work experience after graduation may affect their job opportunities.

While studying abroad does not increase Australian students' employability in Mueller and Robert's (2015) study, it is considered a factor by participants of the present study. Although international students in the current study may have decided to study abroad out of interest, later they may not be positive if their degree will secure future employment or whether they are studying in an employable field. In the same vein, Mueller and Robert's (2021) study revealed students' uncertainty about degree choices. The study showed that Australian students do not see an increase in job opportunities owing to the courses they take. In fact, some students withdrew from combined international studies and enrolled in single professional degree programs. However, Mueller and Robert did not categorize the participants based on nationality, unlike the present study with participants from twenty-one countries.

Literature review shows that no study has hitherto addressed the topic of networking and nepotism as a factor affecting employment opportunities after graduation. However, the students in the current study discussed this topic with passion and concern about corruption in their respective countries where hiring seems to be on family connections.

Some participants had mixed perceptions about whether a degree is necessary for finding a job while considering it a necessity together with having connections. While the participants have hopes that companies in their home countries will evaluate their job qualifications based on their CV, they think companies in Europe hire based on their CV alone and networking. Finally, the students in the present study felt that they needed connections to find employment after graduation and that their CV was ornamental.

The students' concern about discrimination in entering the global workforce mostly relate to gender followed by nationality and ethnicity. Other concerns included family expectations for a future career options and power struggles between genders in relation to management and subordinates. The topic of inequalities with maternity leave for women and equal pay for men exists. In addition, students had concerns about profit and production loss if they hired pregnant women. The findings of Donald et al.'s(2018) study are in line with the perception of participants in the current study. The participants in their study found areas of challenge involving gender, such as gender stereotyping, female's self-worth and confidence, and issues on maternity leave. They also found that students had concerns about gender pay gaps, maternity pay, and gender targets.

Another research topic not identified in the literature review, but found in the current study, is equality in the workplace for people from the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTI) community. While students believed in equality in employment in the workplace, they revealed a slight bias in this regard. Finally, they resolved not to include a third restroom facility in the workplace for

people who identify as transgender claiming it would be discriminatory.

Regarding the age factor, Fakunle's (2019) study included two interviewees from India and Nigeria discussing how their age and gender were barriers to returning to study in their respective countries. The research also found educational, age and gender restrictions for locals in India, which led students to wonder if age and gender would be an issue in the UK. Similarly, in the current study, a student from Pakistan experienced age discrimination in Abu Dhabi at a professional conference.

In the present study, the students also discussed how companies in places such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai prefer locals while other countries such as Nigeria and Congo prefer hiring foreigners. The students expect to witness pay differences between locals and foreigners and unfair treatment and discrimination if they are the foreigner. Students from Pakistan, Nigeria, and Kazakhstan perceive discrimination in the global workplace. This is particularly the case when Russians apply for jobs in the U.S. A student from Libya claims, "They treat you, um, from which country, you are [from]," and the student from Belarus confirms this. The Libyan student states that a degree is not enough and claims if local Libyans work abroad it is easier for them to get a job back home.

Cases of discrimination mentioned by our participants are also found in the following studies. For instance, Coffey, et al.'s (2018) study suggests that international students have barriers to finding employment based on perceived discriminatory practices of potential employers and/or their agents. Discrimination was also one of the factors mentioned in Nisbett's (2011) study, which influenced Caribbean international students' to remain in Canada instead of returning home after graduation. Coffey et al.'s (2018) study found that students in Australia, Malaysia and Singapore also have perceptions of discrimination after graduation by potential employers and/or agents.

IMPLICATIONS

The thematic topics developed by the students in the present study suggest they had flexibility using English as a *lingua franca* when structuring their arguments, persuading, and providing evidence. Their use of critical thinking skills for problem solving allowed them to explore sensitive topics related to diversity, discrimination, and opportunities in employment. The areas of interest suggest that intercultural and international business course curricula should emphasize discussions that allow for more flexibility and tolerance so that the students can develop their interpersonal oral communication skills.

The study reveals that curricula in international business should continue with, change and/or reinforce courses that include topics on diversity, discrimination, equality

of employment opportunities globally, and equality of pay between locals and foreigners of a given country. In addition, the changes should be innovative to allow students to share their fears and hopes while also developing confidence that their learned skills will qualify them for employment prospects. Once hired, they may contribute to diversity and equality discourse.

Curricula should address how to instill students with hope and knowledge so that they can influence and enhance equal employment rights in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In such a context, locals may choose to go abroad based on their interest rather than the desire to escape their home countries to avoid difficulties. As one student claimed, the Middle East and Africa are fifteen to twenty years behind countries such as UK, Europe, and the US in terms of equality the workplace. Curricula changes should address how students may see the benefit of returning to their home countries as a comparable option when deciding to seek employment abroad after graduation. Finally, the topic of equality in different global contexts such as hiring foreigners in the US and European countries and employing westerners in the Middle East and Africa are of interest.

Furthermore, curricula should reemphasize topics on sexual orientation and gender bias. In addition, topics on gender and power positions in management should be included in the curricula to reduce bias and ease their expectations of having confrontation between genders when they find employment. Integrating topics of equality to include not only gender but also, as one student put it, "on everything." For example, more attention should address gender and sexual orientation and equality for people in the workplace from the LGBTI community.

Finally, the students' interest in maternity leave and equalpay for men should be included as a discussion topic in classes as well as the benefits men may have in comparison with maternity leave. In addition, students' awareness of discrimination toward hiring woman based on the possibility that they may become pregnant or are pregnant during employment is a topic of concern. The ethical dilemma of finding equal time off for a male employee compared to a female on maternity leave was not reconciled in the study group's discussion. Therefore, curricula should address this dilemma and allow students to find solutions considering what they learn will at the university will transfer to the global workplace. Finally, universities should address career services and employability opportunities to aid students in transferring their skills and creating hope for success in the global workplace.

Conclusion

Students from twenty-one countries, using English as a *lingua franca*, and studying at the same private university shared similar perceptions of equality/inequality in the workplace regardless of nationality, ethnicity or gender.

Their openness to discuss topics of equality and identity suggest a high level of problem solving and critical thinking skills. While some have a big dream of employment opportunity abroad, they expected forms of discrimination when applying for employment. They made clear distinctions between identification based on nationality, gender, and language when seeking employment internationally. In the end, most students expected to rely on connections to find employment. In Nigeria, Congo, Libya, and North Cyprus, the students' perception of having a degree and a CV was viewed as ornamental in that connections for employment supersede their actual qualification for employment consideration. They expected fairness in the evaluation of CVs in European countries, but the sentiments were almost out of disbelief. Finally, the students discussed the need to seek work abroad first so that when they return to their countries, they are more likely to find employment. Returning to their respective countries was the main concern of most of the participants. The idea of global employment opportunities creates hope for a better life.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The limitations of this study are as follow:
1. The generalizability of the findings is low due to sample size.
2. The transcriptions were verbatim and included some body language such as facial expressions and hand gestures, but did not include all visual or oral features that may contribute to the communication process.
3. Finally, while gender, ethnicity, and nationality are included, the findings are not correlated to these variables.

This study's use of discussion groups without an authority figure present allowed students to discuss business topics of interest. To improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills, one recommendation is to include more group activities involving group discussions in a way that students may freely discuss topics concerning diversity openly and without the presence of a teacher and ask one or more students in the group to report their group's highlights to the class.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Transcripts of Theme 1 (Having Bigger Dreams: Employment opportunities abroad)

SG2P2 (M): I think mostly in African countries there's this brain drain because there's less opportunities in the, in the, in the country—so they decided to travel outside country, like, to mostly to Europe. […] mostly in my country because of, ah, the, the sit-situation we are in with the bad government and other things (P1 says corruption) and corruption. And hopefully in the future maybe in our, our own future maybe we can be able to do something about this situation

SG1P1 (M): So most people are thinking, okay, I want to go where I—[…] Like you leave your country and you're going out, your plan is get as much knowledge, and finally get as many opportunities as possible. Where about you're going and if the opportunity of getting there are no (pause) by and large much better than what you have gotten back home, then you (new) motivations to stay out of your country (another says sure). Most people, at least, I can speak for 70% of African, most people um, most Africans, when they leave, don't want to go back, home….They are looking for financial freedom. They are looking for a way to earn enough money to be able to support their families back home […]

SG1P4 (M): How do we feel about the social access of North Cyprus, in abroad? Compared with other international bodies?

SG1P1 (M): I think Cyprus is just small. […]

SG1P4 (M): And working a permanent job, I think it's not, uh, here, I don't think so, it's, it will be like good for us or anything because (pause) hopefully we're dreaming big, right.

SG1P3 (F): "Yeah, so nobody wants to work here [in North Cyprus].

Appendix B. Transcripts of Theme 2 (Inadequate skills for real life employment)

SG2P1 (M): You know, like some people they're good with education and, uh, studying but when it's comes to real life and it come to working, the, the…

SG2P2 (M): (Yeah, there's those people) that can actually apply what they learn but some people can only read to understand and pass at the, at the moment, just because they need the grade.

Appendix C. Transcripts of Theme 3 (Do you need a degree or connections?)

SG2P2 (M): […] After graduation I want to be someone that works on my own, in my country, in my own field. But the

way things are going in my country, like you need to have connection—[…]. But there are a few companies actually that consider your grades and they give you the opportunity to work like few, a few months. […] But in the government institutions like, it's very difficult to get a job.
[…]

SG2P3 (F): I think like, once you graduate, like there's few opportunities but [Inaudible] that you have your good grade. […] But I think like internationally you need a place to go and, and volunteer somewhere. […]

SG2P1 (M): I don't know. When it comes to employment, I believe in connection and experience more than a grades and what your GPA is. […]

SG2P3 (F): Sometimes we don't even have the opportunity to like what you say, like if you don't have anyone who know you.

SG2P2 (M): […] There's also an opportunity but th--I know the chances are very slim. But you know if you have a slim chance you have to try but when you are trying at least someone will recognize your effort and maybe might be able to help you.

SG2P3 (M): […] You want to just submit your thing and you know that they have already chosen somebody.

SG2P2 (M): Yeah, I understand.

Appendix D. Transcripts of Theme 4 (Gender Stereotypes and Gender Discrimination at the Workplace)

SG4P5 (M): What about hiring pregnant women?

SG4P4 (F): What? (They wouldn't hire.)

SG4P5 (M): Hiring, yeah.

SG4P3 (M): I don't think a pregnant woman would want to find a job at the moment of pregnancy.

SG4P5 (M): Let's say she's two to three months into her pregnancy. You are a firm made of brokers. You need someone who's always on point, always focused. Would you hire a pregnant woman?

SG4P4 (F): (No. Honestly, no.)

SG4P5(M): Why? (Pause) Well that's not ethics –

SG4P3 (M): If she has different things –

SG4P4 (F): It's not ethical. You're right.

Appendix E. Transcripts of Theme 4 (Gender Stereotypes and Gender Discrimination at the Workplace)

SG3P1 (M): […] equality is like a double-edged sword, it can work either ways. (pause) If it, if if there's a female in a higher,

a higher power men are not treated equally; if there's a man in that higher power, female are not treated equally.

SG3P5 (F): No, that, it shouldn't be that way.

SG3P1 (M): Leaving, leaving, leaving, race, ethnicity, and everything, aside...[…]

SG3P1 (M): So you would say, if, equality can work in a, not only towards a, female, towards the male as well. *(P3 gesturing in forward motion saying "yeah and Amen")*. For example if there is a female boss *(P3 says "amen" and P1 smiles and holds out his hand to shake P3s hand)* yes, yes, thank you, let's shake on it. …If there's a female boss *(slapping their palm on the table)* the male will have.

SG3P2 (M): Will ruin your life.

SG3P1 (M): Yes…He'll be, he'll be treated unfair in the workplace, definitely, especially…

Appendix F Transcripts of Theme 4 (Gender Stereotypes and Gender Discrimination at the Workplace)

SG4P5: But that, but that's not equal. You're not giving them the right facilities to go with their own body.

SG4P3: But if they identify as female, they feel like they're a female, they're not gonna go --they don't want to go to a urinal and pee, because they know that females don't do that, so they wouldn't want to do that.

SG4P5: Would you be okay with that?

SG4P3: Yes.

SG4P4: Would you be okay if a, a *(pause)* girl *(pause)* transgender –

SG4P3: Male—female to male.

SG4P4: Yeah. Female to male, would you be okay if he/she if he *(P3 says if she)* [inaudible] uses the bathroom [inaudible] –

SG4P1: *(smiles while watching P4 talk)*

SG4P3: Yes.

SG4P1: What if…

SG4P3: [Inaudible]. As long as they mind their own business in the bathroom, I couldn't care less if they (move in) [inaudible].

Appendix G. Transcripts of Theme 4 (Gender Stereotypes and Gender Discrimination at the Workplace)

G4P5: But like, would you have a third toilet?

SG4P3: No.

SG4P4: Why?

[…]

SG4P4: – so they can choose whatever they want. Why would you need to install a third bathroom? Uh, and, by the way, they're not going to be happy about this, because the third bathroom, what will it say? Men? Female? Male, female, and it, trans-.[…]

SG4P4: Yeah, what? Transgender. That would be [inaudible] –

SG4P3: Rude.[…]

SG4P3: And you can't do that, so just keep it two bathrooms.

[…]

SG4P5: Isn't it called "the LGBT community"?

SG4P4:: Yes, but as soon as you label them something, they get offended. They blow up.

SG4P5: No, no, no. You're using their own words. Their own community. Their own rights.

Appendix H. Transcripts of Theme 5 (Being a foreigner: National, Ethnic, and Age Discrimination in the Workplace)

SG1P3 (F): People, they accept you because you are foreigners for them right. But, still, when you start working with them, there's this kind of discrimination still here. You know, they'll discriminate you and stuff like that. So yeah, that's one of the thing—you think they will accept—they're accepting but in, but somewhere they're discriminating you as well. […]

SG1P4 (M): […] they see that they're not of the same language, culture, those things tend to create a barrier that now makes it difficult to *(pause)* it makes it easy for them to want to marginalize you. That actually the, the real thing. They (don't want) to marginalize, they want to take advantage of the fact that in quotes, you're not supposed to be working.

Appendix I. Transcripts of Theme 5 (Being a foreigner: National, Ethnic, and Age Discrimination in the Workplace)

SG5P2 (F): So how people from, the Congolese people are treating them? Do they do like favors, like, "Oh, because you're from abroad, you can, you can get this from us.

SG5P4 (F): Yeah but I think even people from outside the country, get easily a job from the…Yeah.

SG5P2 (F): And, and Congolese people they don't get that opportunity.

[…]**SG5P4 (F)**: It's very easy to get a job when you're outside but when you're in--you it's kind of difficult to get a good job.

SG5P1 (F): […] And then they said, uh, "Just having a degree is not enough." And also, are inside, if you work in Libya, in Libya, it's not enough, you have to work in another place, abroad, and then you can get a job easily.