How International Students Maintain Their National Identity While Living in Ireland?

A Comprehensive Video Documentary Exploration of International Students' Lives Abroad

By

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Abstract

In recent years, Ireland has seen a steady rise in the number of international students choosing to live, work and study in the country, with Dublin emerging as a central hub for global education. This dissertation accompanies the documentary *How International Students Maintain Their National Identity While Living in Ireland*, to better understand this reality.

Focusing on Dublin as both a symbolic and practical setting for cultural exchange, the documentary features students from various backgrounds, including both well-represented and lesser-represented communities, offering a balanced insight into shared experiences and challenges. Through in-depth interviews and visual storytelling, the project explores questions around cultural preservation, adaptation, and visibility in a new society.

The written component of this research outlines the rationale behind the documentary, the academic context surrounding migration and identity theories, and a detailed account of the creative and technical process, from conceptualisation and interviews to editing and final production. The project also draws attention to structural issues faced by international students, such as housing difficulties and social integration, as highlighted during the research process.

The findings suggest that students from less represented nationalities experience more difficulty maintaining their identity due to limited community support, while those from larger groups benefit from established cultural infrastructures. Nonetheless, all participants shared a common effort to hold on to cultural practices and identity markers as part of their daily routines abroad.

This dissertation reflects on how creative media can be used as a tool for representation, education, and dialogue. It also suggests opportunities for future development, including expanding the documentary into a series or using it in intercultural training for Irish institutions. The project ultimately advocates for a deeper understanding of identity and inclusion in contemporary Irish society.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

This documentary was created to explore and represent the lived experiences of international students currently residing in Ireland, with a particular focus on Dublin, the country's capital and its most culturally diverse city. The project aims to highlight how students from various national backgrounds maintain their national identities while adapting to life in a new country.

By doing so, it sheds light on both the cultural richness and the social challenges faced by one of the fastest growing and most dynamic groups in contemporary Irish society. The project adopts a research-informed approach, focusing not only on nationalities with a strong and visible presence in Ireland but also on those less represented in the public sphere. These underrepresented groups often encounter unique challenges, such as limited community support or cultural visibility, making their experiences particularly important to document and understand.

Ireland, and Dublin in particular, has become a global hub for international education in recent years, attracting thousands of students from across the world. This growth has contributed not only to the academic and economic landscape but also to the cultural fabric of Irish society. Also, despite their growing numbers, the personal and cultural journeys of international students remain underrepresented in mainstream media and institutional narratives.

"It is important to be curious about each other, because you can make much better connections than when you put someone in a box, instead of being interested in the person." (Nauta, 2023)

As on that speech from the Business Psychologist, Aukje Nauta in the video documentary "Why the Dutch always say what they mean" this Dissertation highlights not only the cultural differences, and a variety of experiences, but aims to show what is proper from these nationalities, what are proper of their nation, their habits, what says much of their people, expressing the multinational and global presence in Dublin, feeding the curiosity about different cultural realities, and informing the audience about some curious topics of the nationalities approached on that production for instead of just get the stereotypes, let them understand and have more knowledge about different human realities.

To visually emphasise this diversity, the documentary opens with scenes filmed in recognisable tourist landmarks around Dublin city centre. Each interviewee is introduced on camera while standing in one of the city's iconic public spaces, symbolically placing them in the landscape of their temporary home and representing the visible multicultural presence in Dublin's everyday life.

Through this combination of personal testimony and visual storytelling, the documentary aims to both inform and connect. Going deeper into personal details shared by the interviewees, it also includes typical daily routines and challenges that International Students usually go through while living in Ireland. It is intended as a resource for international students arriving in Ireland, as well as for educational institutions, local communities, who may benefit from a deeper understanding of the cultural identities and adaptation strategies of these students. By giving voice to diverse perspectives and capturing everyday acts of cultural preservation, the documentary seeks to foster empathy, increase visibility, and open dialogue around the experience of living between cultures.

Chapter Two: Evidence of Research

Demographic Context

An important aspect of this research was to contextualise the experiences of international students using both demographic data and practical insights from organisations that work directly with migrant communities in Ireland. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2023), over 20% of Ireland's population now consists of non-Irish nationals, highlighting a significant level of cultural diversity, especially in urban centres such as Dublin. Among these groups, Brazilians and Indians are two of the most represented non-European communities, which reinforces the importance of including their perspectives in this study.

This demographic shift reflects a broader trend of population growth: Ireland's population has officially surpassed 7 million for the first time since the 19th century, a milestone largely driven by immigration (The Journal, 2025). International communities have played a key role in shaping modern Irish society and culture. While population growth and immigration may generate mixed opinions among Irish citizens, recent data points to a predominantly welcoming national attitude.

An Ipsos survey commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) found that over 80% of Irish residents feel comfortable living alongside people of different nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, religious beliefs (or none), marital statuses, and abilities. Additionally, 72% believe immigrants contribute meaningfully to Irish society, 76% support government assistance for asylum seekers, and 87% favour helping those fleeing the war in Ukraine (DCEDIY, 2024). These findings suggest a society that is, overall, inclusive and increasingly open to cultural diversity, an essential backdrop for understanding the lived experiences of international students and migrants in Ireland today.

"Acculturation is not a linear path but a constant negotiation between adaptation and preservation." Berry (1997)

These social attitudes not only reflect the evolving multicultural character of Irish urban life, especially in cities like Dublin, but also underscore the importance of institutional and community support in shaping inclusive and enriching experiences for international residents. This context is central to the dissertation's findings, which explore how cultural identity is preserved, negotiated, or redefined by international students living in Ireland, as well as the everyday challenges of integration.

To complement academic literature, this research also engaged directly with community-based organisations and educational institutions. I attended Akidwa's African Day, an event that celebrates African culture through music, food, and traditional dress, while also highlighting the internal support systems created by African migrants in Ireland. Akidwa runs health programmes and peer-to-peer networks that help individuals access housing and employment opportunities. During the event, I had the chance to speak with Beth, the coordinator of the organisation, who kindly welcomed me and introduced some of the programmes they offer. These grassroots efforts demonstrate the value of culturally sensitive support services that go beyond formal institutions, playing a vital role in helping migrants navigate daily life while maintaining a connection to their heritage.

Organisational Insights and Fieldwork

As international students move to Ireland to study English or pursue academic degrees at Irish universities, it was essential for this research to engage with both types of institutions to gain a fuller understanding of their experiences and the support systems available to them. To this end, I contacted two prominent organisations in these areas: Atlas Language School, representing English-language education, and University College Dublin (UCD), representing higher education.

I visited Atlas Language School, located in Portobello, Dublin 8, and got in touch with Eve Reddin, one of the school's managers. Although Eve was unable to provide a formal interview due to a busy summer schedule, she generously shared a detailed email outlining the school's programmes and services tailored for international students. According to her, Atlas prioritises intercultural learning and student wellbeing, aiming not only to teach English but also to foster a sense of belonging while encouraging students to preserve their own cultural identities.

Some of their key initiatives include free, optional daily study clubs. These range from the *Job Club*, where students can receive assistance with CV writing, PPSN registration, and understanding the Irish tax system, to the *Drama Club*, which offers a space for creative expression through theatre, and the *Film and Fluency Club*, where students watch and discuss films, encouraging both language development and cultural reflection. These clubs create opportunities for students from various backgrounds and proficiency levels to engage with each other in meaningful ways.

Eve also highlighted their weekly social programme, featuring both free and discounted cultural activities. These include tours of the Guinness Storehouse and Jameson Distillery, street art walks, gallery visits, hiking trips, dance classes, and monthly overnight excursions to cities such as Galway, Cork, and Belfast. These outings help students immerse themselves in Irish culture while building new friendships and continuing their language practice outside the classroom.

Importantly, Atlas also has a dedicated student welfare team to support students' mental health and emotional well-being. Acknowledging that the process of moving abroad can be emotionally challenging, the school offers one-to-one sessions with trained welfare officers, providing a safe space for students to talk and receive guidance during their transition to life in Ireland.

In addition to Atlas, I also contacted the international office at University College Dublin (UCD). Although a direct interview was not possible, I received a detailed response from *UCD Globa*l, thanking me for my inquiry and directing me to their comprehensive webpage outlining the range of support systems available for international students. These include a Language Space, offering resources for English and other language development, the *Global Guide* programme, which organises events and supports to promote student integration, and clearly divided Campus and Academic Support channels, helping students navigate university life based on their specific needs (UCD Global, 2024).

Moreover, I contacted CI Intercâmbio, a Brazilian-based international education agency, which is one of the most popular Exchange Program agencies present around the world, located in countries like Australia, Canada, etc. I interviewed Wagner Marinho, one of their coordinators. He shared how their agency works with students to match them with countries and programmes

that align with their goals, while also preparing them for cultural adaptation without losing their national roots. Wagner emphasised that Ireland, alongside the US, Malta, and Australia, is among their most popular destinations due to the welcoming environment for international students and the quality of life offered in these locations. CI Intercâmbio's approach aligns closely with this dissertation's focus on sustaining cultural identity while adapting to new environments.

These interactions enriched this research by providing real-world insights and illustrating how international students, particularly those from underrepresented nationalities, navigate their lives abroad with or without institutional and community support. Integrating this lived experience into the study ensures that the theoretical concepts of cultural preservation and identity are grounded in the current reality of Ireland's increasingly diverse population.

Identity and Integration: Theoretical Perspectives

"National identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation." Hall (1992, p. 293)

Before developing my media artefact on international students' experiences in Ireland, I undertook a broad base of research combining academic literature, civil society insights, students' experiences reports and technical production studies. From an academic standpoint, I drew upon theories of cultural identity and hybridity, particularly Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of identity as fluid and shaped through positioning, as well as Berry's (1997) acculturation model. These frameworks helped me understand the different strategies students use to navigate Irish society while maintaining connections to their home cultures.

However, I noted a gap in current literature: while much has been written about policy and integration, less attention is paid to the personal, emotional dimension of these experiences, something that my project seeks to foreground through storytelling, not looking to be sentimental or appellative, but to show this other real side of students life that sometimes are not reported, and are extremely important as part of their process of adaptation, and maintenance of their lives in different stages and areas, as socially, mentally and academic, as highlighted by Eve and reported by many international students whom I got in touch with during this production.

Geiguen's (2019) study on immigrants' national identity is one of the central texts that informs the approach taken in this dissertation, offering an in-depth analysis of the cultural impacts experienced by individuals when moving abroad. His work was developed into the lived realities of immigrants who must reconcile the need to adapt to a new cultural context with the desire to maintain ties to their homeland. Among the challenges he identifies are cultural shocks, social isolation, and identity conflicts, all of which can significantly affect individuals' personal well-being and social performance. These experiences are directly applicable to international students, who may lack adequate support systems or institutional guidance as they navigate unfamiliar environments. Geiguen also highlights the role of external pressures, such as expectations to assimilate or conform to local norms, which can further complicate efforts to retain cultural identity while living abroad. His work is therefore particularly relevant in examining how international students in Ireland attempt to preserve elements of their cultural background while integrating into Irish academic and social life.

Bushman (2015) contributes a complementary perspective by focusing on the role of self-awareness and cultural understanding in identity formation. His research stresses the importance of individuals being grounded in their own cultural identity to engage meaningfully with others in multicultural settings. According to Bushman, those who possess strong cultural self-awareness are more likely to approach other cultures with empathy and respect, rather than resistance or misunderstanding, which I strongly agree. This concept is essential in the context of international student life, where individuals are continuously exposed to new customs, belief systems, and social expectations. Bushman's emphasis on mutual respect and cultural literacy aligns with the aims of this research, particularly in illustrating how international students can actively preserve their cultural identity while also cultivating openness to their host culture. His findings also reinforce the importance of institutional support that fosters intercultural learning, rather than pressuring students to abandon or suppress their heritage in favour of integration.

Both Geiguen's and Bushman's findings can be usefully linked to Anderson's (2006) theory of imagined communities, which provides a foundational understanding of national identity as a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in shared history, collective memory, and cultural practices. Anderson argues that individuals continue to imagine themselves as part of a national community, even when physically removed from their country of origin, a reality that can be empirically seen around Ireland, especially in cities like Dublin and Cork, where the number of international Students is high. This perspective helps to explain the enduring emotional and symbolic connection many international students maintain with their homeland. It also reinforces the argument that cultural retention is not only possible but essential for identity stability during periods of transition. Taken together, these three studies offer a rich and multidimensional framework for exploring how international students manage their identities, negotiate cultural belonging, and strike a balance between integration and cultural preservation while studying abroad.

"Migrants do not simply lose one culture and acquire another; rather, they develop hybrid cultural identities that draw upon multiple sources." Steven Vertovec (2001)

Agreeing with that Xu Shuqin's (2012) study on cultural preservation offers valuable insights into how individuals maintain traditional practices and customs while living abroad. Her research focuses particularly on people from culturally rich nations such as China and explores the emotional and social importance of preserving cultural identity through rituals, shared values, and everyday practices. Xu argues that cultural identity is not only a private experience but also a collective one, which agrees with Geiguen's thoughts. This is often nurtured through community events, language use, food, and symbolic celebrations that reflect shared national heritage. This is particularly evident in countries with large diaspora communities, such as Ireland, where groups like the Chinese, Indian, Polish, and Brazilian populations have established strong social networks that support cultural continuity and keep united as a nation.

Less Represented Nationalities and Cultural Visibility

According to the most recent census data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2023), mentioned above, Romanians are currently the third largest non-Irish nationality residing in Ireland. Despite making up 7% of the non-Irish population, their cultural and social visibility appears to be less prominent than other nationalities with similar or even smaller proportions, such as Indians or Brazilians, the latter representing approximately 4%. This

contrast raises important questions about the modes of social integration, cultural expression, and collective identity among Romanian migrants in Ireland.

Diana Gloria Macri (2012), in her doctoral thesis *Logging into Diaspora?*, critically interrogates these very dynamics. Reflecting on the internal discourse within the Romanian community, she writes: "Knowing the Romanian predilection to argue that 'Romanians are not united', I decided to be cautious in surmising any collective feelings of belonging to an imagined diasporic community."

"Hence, I started out on my research journey by looking closely at the situation of Romanians in Ireland: could we speak of them as a community or were they just a demographic group based on categorising them according to their country of origin? Were they isolated migrants, each with their views and feelings of belonging, or did they collectively construct shared identity discourses?" (Macri, 2012, p. 10).

Macri's reflections support the argument that national belonging does not automatically translate into collective identity, especially within the diaspora. Her observations resonate with this study's broader interest in how individual and cultural identity are maintained, reshaped, or fragmented among diverse student communities living in Ireland.

This rich globalised experience that Ireland is passing through and increasing over almost a decade is an important topic being explored in this dissertation, focusing on this diversity and how international students have experienced living in Ireland.

Xu's observations are especially relevant to that topic as well, as it highlight how the size and visibility of a national community abroad can impact an individual's ability to preserve their identity. While students from larger diaspora groups may have more opportunities to engage in familiar cultural activities and find peers with shared experiences, as Brazilians and Indians who live in Ireland, students from smaller or less represented nationalities, as Costa Rica and El Salvador, for example, may find it more difficult to access those same cultural touchpoints. This disparity can lead to feelings of cultural disconnection or isolation, especially when students cannot easily share their language, food, or traditions with others in their environment.

For international students in Ireland, participating in cultural events, such as national celebrations, traditional festivals, or even small gatherings that honour shared customs, plays a crucial role in maintaining a connection to home. It is clearly important not only as social events, or to build a network, but to preserve some habits, to keep alive their own languages, even using some proper slang, or to maintain their identity, living and sharing their own culture.

These practices not only reinforce personal identity but also offer a sense of belonging and emotional stability in a foreign context. Xu's (2012) work supports the argument that such cultural expressions are not merely nostalgic gestures but essential strategies for adapting to life abroad while preserving one's cultural heritage. As such, her research will help inform the present study's exploration of how international students maintain their traditions and cultural identities while adapting to a new academic and social setting in Ireland.

Colin Graham (2003) discusses the complex relationship between authenticity, culture, and colonialism, arguing that national identity is frequently shaped through postcolonial experiences that influence how authenticity is both expressed and perceived. His analysis is

particularly useful when examining how formerly colonised nations, such as Brazil or various African countries, often retain elements of the culture of their colonisers, while also developing distinct, singular traits that reflect their own national identity. Graham suggests that authenticity is not a fixed cultural essence, but rather a social and political construct, often shaped in opposition to colonial power structures. This concept resonates with the lived experiences of many international students, whose identities are informed by a mixture of inherited traditions and adaptive strategies developed abroad.

Influence on Media Productions

In terms of applied research, I consulted reports from the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS), the Department of Education, and interviews published by the Irish Times and RTÉ featuring migrant youth. I also spoke informally with fellow international students from Brazil, Spain, and Nigeria to shape the themes of the project. To support my technical decisions, I studied short documentaries by BBC, New York Times, Short of the Week,60seconds Docs, Nowness, and AJ+ that use minimal narration, ambient sound, and personal testimonies to build narrative intimacy, and they also have short documentaries, which allowed me to gain better ideas and inspiration to produce mine. This guided my decision to adopt a conversational, interview-led format that centres the students' voices and lived realities, swapping scenes, daily routine, and their shared experiences, creating a good combination to build a video storytelling.

Several documentary films and visual narratives contributed significantly to the development of this research, especially in understanding how cultural identity can be represented, preserved, and interpreted through lived experiences. These works provided insights not only into national characteristics but also into the nuances and limitations of cultural comparison.

One such example is the *BBC Reel* short documentary, *"Surprising images from inside North Korea"* (2022), which uses a minimalist approach to storytelling, combining conversational camera work with subtle narrative to explore North Korea's social behaviours (BBC Reel, 2022). The naturalistic framing helps the viewer to engage with the subject matter as if in direct conversation, reinforcing a sense of respect and observational immersion, an approach echoed in this dissertation's creative component.

In contrast, the NOWNESS short film *Creating Feeling, Frank Gehry at Fondation Louis Vuitton* (2023) employs aesthetic storytelling with fewer, yet emotionally powerful shots to depict the fusion between space, identity, and emotion. Though focused on architecture, this short film serves as an example of how narrative pacing and intentional scene selection can create meaning beyond words, influencing the visual strategy adopted in this research (NOWNESS, 2023).

Documentary storytelling has served as an essential inspiration in shaping this dissertation's understanding of cultural identity and national character. The short film *Creating Feeling: Frank Gehry and the Fondation Louis Vuitton*, produced by Nowness, offers a reflective and emotionally charged visual narrative that illustrates how spaces and structures can convey memory and belonging. Though not directly about migration or nationality, the film's intimate narration and purposeful visual pacing influenced the creative choices of this research's media project, particularly the value of using fewer, but more meaningful, visual moments to evoke emotional resonance (Nowness, 2023).

A series of BBC Reel documentaries provided deeper insight into cultural behaviours that go beyond surface-level stereotypes. In *How Sweden Survives Without Small Talk*, Swedish cultural habits are presented with a light, humorous tone, yet the film delivers meaningful analysis on how Swedish people often prioritise personal boundaries and emotional space. This cultural pattern, while possibly misinterpreted as aloofness by outsiders, reflects deeper values of respect and autonomy. It contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how students from reserved cultures might experience integration in more socially expressive environments like Ireland (BBC Reel, 2022).

Another BBC Reel piece, *Why the Dutch Always Say What They Mean*, explores Dutch cultural directness and communication norms. Rather than framing this bluntness as negative, the documentary celebrates it as a reflection of cultural honesty. Behavioural scientist Aukje Nauta makes a critical point in the film:

"The reason why culture comparisons are problematic is because it leads to stereotyping." (Nauta,2023)

This sentiment strongly aligns with the goals of this dissertation. The project does not attempt to rank or essentialise national behaviours, but rather to explore what is unique, contextually rooted, and meaningful within each culture. This aligns with a wider movement in migration and identity studies that resists simplification and instead embraces complexity and intersectionality in intercultural dialogue.

These documentaries supported the central aim of this research: to reflect on the lived experience of international students in Ireland not through the lens of comparison or judgment, but through appreciation of what each culture brings into the shared space of migration, adaptation, and belonging.

In the context of this dissertation, Graham's view on authenticity is directly relevant to understanding how students articulate and preserve their cultural uniqueness while living in Ireland. Through interviews conducted during this research, students were encouraged to reflect on the customs, behaviours, and values they believe are unique to their nationality. This included asking the question, "What makes you Italian?", designed to reveal the most representative features of their national identity, which may not always align with institutional or stereotypical definitions.

Graham's discussion also links authenticity to revolution and independence, suggesting that cultural authenticity can drive movements of resistance or affirmation, as individuals assert their right to exist and express their identity freely and without dominance (Graham and Kirkland, 2003). This theoretical framing helps explain why cultural preservation is so emotionally and politically significant for students navigating a new national space. It also highlights the responsibility of educational institutions to acknowledge and support these expressions of identity as part of their integration strategies.

CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRUCTING AND DESIGNING THE DOCUMENTARY

"Documentary is not simply a 'window on the world', but a constructed representation shaped by choices in editing, framing, and narration." (*Winston, 1995, p. 103*)

Understand that was essential to my creative process. While I aimed to depict real experiences, I was also conscious that my editorial decisions, like who to interview, what scenes to include, and how to structure the narrative, would shape how this reality was represented and received.

This chapter outlines the creative and technical decisions made in the development of my video documentary, which explores how international students maintain their national identity while living in Ireland. The choice of format, the selection of contributors, Nationalities covered, the field research, and the institutional engagement all played central roles in shaping the final product. The process required both personal and professional growth, from investing in equipment to navigating cultural sensitivities and building trust with participants.

From Radio to Video: Choosing the Format

At the beginning of this project, I considered producing a radio documentary. My experience in podcasting and radio production throughout the Master's programme was positive, and my work received strong grades and constructive feedback from lecturers. However, the theme I chose demanded something more visual and immersive. I realised that audio alone would not effectively illustrate the cultural nuances, body language, and symbolic elements that are so crucial in exploring national identity.

Despite being more comfortable with radio, I decided to challenge myself by embracing video. The shift required learning new technical skills and adapting to a different storytelling rhythm. As Lindgren (2011) notes, documentary storytelling is a fluid process that evolves through reflection and encounter.

Developing the Concept: Networking and Research

The central theme of this documentary, how international students preserve their national identity in Ireland, demanded extensive fieldwork, proactive networking, and openness to unexpected developments. Regarding this, a central decision during the development of this project was the use of the term international students instead of foreigners. While both refer to non-Irish individuals residing in Ireland for educational purposes, foreigners is increasingly perceived as outdated or exclusionary in tone. During informal interviews and conversations with students and professionals, it was pointed out that international is a more respectful and widely accepted term in academic and institutional contexts. This choice is supported by literature that emphasizes how terminology shapes identity and inclusion: "The labels we use influence how people are treated and how they see themselves" (Leong, 2015, p. 460).

Furthermore, the use of international students aligns with policy discourse from global institutions such as UNESCO (2019), which promotes the term in relation to mobility, cross-cultural learning, and student engagement rather than othering, encouraging the globalisation and supporting countries to help each other instead of building barriers between them.

To better report this reality, I needed to step outside the library and into real-world environments where these stories were unfolding, trying to connect what I was researching,

reading, and watching to what I had seen and heard from the students and professionals on this theme. So, I began approaching language schools, university offices, and international student organisations.

While Atlas Language School and other organisations provided valuable insights and access to international student communities, it was important to consider their operational context. Atlas, as a private language school, functions within a market-driven model aimed at attracting and retaining paying students. As such, their support systems, although meaningful, are also part of a broader customer-service strategy. This does not invalidate their input, but it does require critical awareness.

In contrast, institutions like University College Dublin (UCD), which are state-funded and subject to public accountability frameworks, operate under different pressures and motivations. Including both types of institutions in the research, one private and one public, offered a more nuanced understanding of how international students are supported in Ireland.

This experience taught me not only the importance of logistical planning but also how to approach people, build rapport, and ethically collect stories. Many of the insights that shaped the documentary emerged from casual conversations, institutional visits, and the willingness to listen beyond scripted interviews (Rabiger and Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020).

A key recommendation from my supervisor in our early meetings was to include voices from smaller, underrepresented national communities, alongside more visible groups like Brazilians and Polish students gave me a great challenge during this process, but also helped me to see the other side of this situation, exploring how is this maintenance of Identity when your nationality has small representation on the country where you live. Following this, I interviewed students from countries such as Costa Rica and Mozambique, perspectives often missing from broader media narratives.

Although UK nationals account for the largest group of non-Irish residents in Ireland (CSO, 2022), they were not the primary focus of this research. The central objective of this study is to examine how students maintain their national identity when living abroad, particularly in contexts where they face strong cultural and geographical differences from the host country. The UK and Ireland share a close cultural, linguistic, and geographic relationship, meaning UK students often experience fewer of the identity-related adaptation challenges faced by students from further afield, for this reasons students from UK were not approached on this research.

Therefore, this project prioritised the voices of students from countries such as Mozambique, Costa Rica, Italy and India, where differences in language, tradition, and physical distance create more visible struggles in maintaining one's cultural identity abroad.

Equipment and Practical Planning

To ensure flexibility and independence during production, I chose to invest in my own equipment. This included microphones, tripods, and a stabiliser for dynamic footage. While Griffith College provides equipment loans, the scheduling involved would have added unnecessary stress, especially as I had to coordinate interviews around my work commitments and the availability of participants. Although it was an expensive investment, I believe it was worth.

Having my own tools allowed me to capture moments spontaneously and with more creative control, which improved both the quality and consistency of the documentary (Hughes, 2019).

Participant Selection and Interview Themes

Interviewing international students was essential to understanding and illustrating the lived experience of cultural preservation in Ireland. I aimed for diversity in both nationality and personal experiences, so I chose the following nationalities based on Data research and availability of interviewees getting in touch with them by networking when most of them are friends of friends so, I contacted them, explained the purpose of this project and they kindly accepted to be part of it representing their nation:

Costa Rica: The first participant, a young woman who has been living in Dublin for four months, reflected on cultural similarities and contrasts between Costa Rica and Ireland. She described how she preserves her habits through cooking and social rituals, while also adapting to new ones.

Italy: The Italian participant spoke about the challenges of staying connected with other Italians. While food and cultural practices are relatively easy to maintain, he noted, *"I don't meet many Italians in Dublin."*

Mozambique: The Mozambican interviewee discussed the difficulty of connecting with people from his own country. However, he finds solidarity with other Africans, such as Nigerians and Kenyans, and also connects with Brazilians due to their shared language (Portuguese). This sense of transnational belonging expanded the scope of my documentary to explore not only national identity but also linguistic and continental connections (Hall, 1996).

*India***:** The Indian participant described his time in Ireland as overall positive, particularly due to the large Indian community and the cultural familiarity this provided. However, he also highlighted challenges related to adapting to daily routines and domestic responsibilities. In his home country, household services such as meal preparation and cleaning are typically carried out by domestic workers, which made the self-sufficient lifestyle in Ireland a significant adjustment. Despite this, he emphasised that the availability of Indian shops, restaurants, and community events in Dublin made his transition smoother and helped him preserve key elements of his cultural identity while studying abroad.

These interviews highlighted a key finding: students from larger diasporas (e.g. Brazilians, Polish, Spanish) often enjoy greater cultural support through stores, restaurants, events, and informal networks. Meanwhile, those from smaller or newer communities must work harder to maintain cultural practices and find social belonging. So, all the information shared on that interviews were used to shape the video documentary and illustrate the reality of International Students specifically living in the capital of Ireland.

Making a strong reference of this variety of nationalities living in Ireland, and illustrating Dublin spots as home for many immigrants, I decided to do the opening video recording the interviewees in different Touristic places around Dublin city center, where they present themselves and say where they are from, just with the Indian student that it was not possible because of his time availability and the location where he lives, as he lives in Dublin 18 and I went to his house to get this interview and we could not arrange another date to record that part so I did it in his house.

Ethical Considerations and Consent

Ethical considerations were at the core of this project, particularly because the documentary involved interviews with international students sharing personal experiences. Before conducting any interviews, participants were presented with a clear explanation of the research aims and the purpose of the documentary, it was being produced as part of my Master's dissertation, exploring how international students preserve their national identity while living in Ireland. A casual and conversational tone was adopted during interviews to help participants feel more at ease and to encourage open, personal sharing.

Each participant was asked to sign a consent form, giving their permission for both the recording and use of their contributions in the final documentary. They were also made aware that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure transparency and comfort, I avoided asking intrusive questions and instead gently guided the conversation around their cultural habits, personal reflections, and daily routines. The more intimate style of interviewing helped capture a deeper and more honest portrayal of each participant's experience, moving beyond generic themes often associated with international student life.

Editing Process and Thematic Structure

The editing process was guided by both the research question and the emerging themes brought up during the interviews. Initially, I anticipated that students would focus more on major challenges like language barriers, academic pressure, or difficulties socialising. However, what emerged instead was a strong emphasis on daily routines, particularly related to food, leisure activities, and habits that helped them feel closer to home. These topics, while less expected, became central in shaping the documentary's tone and message.

B-roll footage was captured to visually support the stories told by participants, including clips of students shopping in cultural grocery stores, cooking traditional meals, in their work or at home, and engaging in small habits that maintained their cultural identity. For example, in the case of the Italian participant, I filmed moments that reflected culturally specific elements of daily life, his job, which is also connected with his nationality, reinforcing their verbal account, bringing a stronger visual report for this documentary, exploring visually what was reported in their interviews, focusing in two main themes that in the production field can be consider as one section, that are food and beverage. I also recorded scenes that express their daily routine as mentioned by them.

During post-production, I made deliberate choices to highlight personal reflections over general commentary. Any content that appeared overly promotional, especially from institutions or organisations, was carefully reviewed. I ensured that their contributions served the purpose of the research and did not shift the focus to advertising services. The final edit prioritised authentic experiences, ethical storytelling, and thematic clarity.

After days of editing work, I could realise how important it is to have breaks when possible to refresh our minds and not edit all the materials in just two days, and say this because even on the last editing days, I could reduce some speeches and long pauses that I just realised watching the video several times.

Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges arose during the course of this dissertation, both in production and research.

One of the first issues was technical. I initially relied on borrowing equipment but eventually made the decision to invest in my own camera and audio gear. This made the production process more manageable and flexible, allowing me to shoot interviews and B-roll on my own schedule.

Scheduling interviews proved to be a more complex task than expected. Some confirmed participants cancelled last minute, for instance, an Indian student had to return home unexpectedly for family reasons. This required finding another participant within a short timeframe, as well as filming new footage that could visually support their story. Despite these setbacks, this substitution ultimately added richness to the project. The new participant shared valuable insights, including how the Indian community and access to familiar services helped ease their transition.

Another limitation involved language fluency. While many students spoke English comfortably, some struggled to express their thoughts in detail due to still learning the language. This occasionally affected the depth of the interviews, though I did my best to adapt, simplifying questions, allowing longer pauses, and following up to clarify points. Even with these limitations, many participants were able to offer sincere and meaningful reflections.

One unanticipated challenge was the direction the documentary took. I initially expected broader topics to dominate, such as culture shock, academic pressure, or social life. Instead, most participants highlighted small but significant routines, food, shopping, and personal time, as the primary ways they stayed connected to their culture. These insights shifted the documentary toward a more grounded, day-to-day representation of life as an international student. While this meant adjusting my narrative structure, it ultimately led to a more nuanced and authentic film.

Time management was also a significant constraint. Balancing the demands of part-time work, academic writing, and production logistics proved difficult at times. Coordinating with institutions and professionals posed an additional challenge, especially when aligning schedules or securing availability. In dealing with organisations, I had to navigate ethical boundaries carefully, ensuring their contributions were framed as informative support for international students, rather than promotional content.

Institutional Perspectives

To enrich the narrative, I also included interviews and email contact with representatives from institutions that work directly with international students:

CI Intercâmbio: A Brazil-based agency that supports students before arrival, from choosing destinations and booking schools to arranging accommodation.

Atlas Language School: An English school based in Dublin, representing the language-learning experience that many students go through upon arrival.

UCD's International Office: Symbolising the higher education pathway, which includes graduates, postgraduate, and PhD students navigating Irish academia and identity.

These interviews gave the documentary a broader lens. Rather than focusing solely on personal stories, I could also explore how support systems, or their absence, affect the ability of students to maintain national identity abroad (Berry, 2005).

Media and Theoretical Influences

Throughout the creative process, I engaged with documentaries, articles, and academic texts to deepen my understanding of national identity, migration, and intercultural adaptation.

Some of the key documentary influences included:

The Irishness of Irish Weather (RTÉ, 2020), an exploration of national identity through something seemingly ordinary.

My Asian Journey (BBC Three, 2019), portraying second-generation identity struggles and cultural preservation.

Generation 98 – Chile (Netflix, 2023)**,** a fictional series that inspired me to reflect on collective identity, memory, and resilience in the diaspora context.

Why the Dutch Always Say What They Mean (BBC, 2022), which examines how national communication styles reflect deeper cultural values, helps me consider directness vs indirectness in the way international students navigate Irish social spaces (BBC, 2022).

How Sweden Survives Without Small Talk (BBC, 2022), which showed how non-verbal cultural norms affect belonging and interaction, echoing the difficulties some students expressed in forming connections in Ireland (BBC, 2022).

"The reason why culture comparisons are problematic is because it leads to stereotyping" (Nauta, cited in BBC, 2022).

This idea became a central reminder throughout my work. While it was tempting to highlight "typical" cultural traits, I constantly asked myself: *What is truly representative?* What elements of nationality are meaningful, and what are generalisations?

My guiding question was: *"What is proper of each nationality?"*, not in the essentialist sense, but in terms of self-perception, ritual, memory, and everyday expression. This helped ensure the documentary stayed focused and avoided superficiality (Said, 1994).

Final Thoughts and Ongoing Challenges

This project has demanded more than just technical execution, as it required emotional sensitivity, cultural awareness, and creative adaptability. From shifting formats to refining interview themes and negotiating access, each decision helped the final product become richer and more nuanced.

The biggest challenge was balancing narrative storytelling with informative content. I didn't want to produce a merely academic report or a feel-good multicultural montage. Instead, I tried to explore what it **really means** to live between two worlds, to carry your homeland with you while adapting to another. Ultimately, *Preserving National Identity* is not just a visual story, but a layered reflection on culture, belonging, and personal reinvention.

Chapter Four: Discussion

In this chapter, I return to the central theme of this research: the maintenance of national identity by international students living in Ireland. As an international student from Brazil, having lived in Ireland for over three years, I am personally connected to this topic. This connection was a key motivation behind producing the documentary. I am part of a growing group that has contributed significantly to Irish society and economy in recent years. As Eva Leahy from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) stated in 2024, *"Ireland's population was estimated to be 5.38 million, rising by 98,700 people in the year to April 2024. This was the largest 12-month population increase in 16 years."* (CSO, 2024).

In that number are also included International students, who after three months of residence, fall into the legal definition of immigrants in Ireland. Many come with hopes of building a better future through study and work, but their experiences vary significantly depending on cultural background, access to community, and institutional support.

Following that, one of the most interesting discoveries throughout the research and interviews was the visible difference in how students from smaller communities experience life in Ireland compared to those from larger diasporas like Brazilians, Indians, and Polish nationals. Interviewees from less represented countries expressed feelings of isolation, a lack of cultural references, and difficulty accessing support networks. In contrast, students from larger national groups described more ease in maintaining cultural traditions, through food, community events, religious practices, and friendship circles.

This difference highlights how cultural maintenance depends not only on personal effort but also on the presence of an existing support system in the host country. For example, Brazilian, Indian, and Polish students reported attending community events or accessing familiar food and language with relative ease. Meanwhile, others struggled with invisibility and a lack of cultural representation, making it harder to keep a strong connection to their national identity.

To get more personal reports from the interviewees, the interviews were guided by four main questions:

- What makes you feel more connected to your country, and what are you proud of being from there?
- What is the hardest part of living in Ireland?
- What cultural traits or habits do you consider specific to your nationality, and how do you maintain them abroad?
- What aspects of your culture most represent your people?

These questions acted as open doors for wider conversations. Interviewees also shared their reasons for choosing Ireland, their expectations, the cultural shocks they faced, and how they've adapted. They spoke about their best moments here, the value of cultural exchange, and their strategies to hold on to their roots. These stories became the core narrative of the documentary, helping to design both the structure and visuals.

Many students expressed that maintaining their national identity comes through small, daily acts, as cooking traditional meals, speaking their native language, listening to music from

home, or participating in community meetings. Others described a more emotional or internal form of connection, expressed through memories, values, or spirituality.

Ireland's position as a growing hub for international education cannot be separated from its current immigration patterns. In 2024 alone, net migration was recorded at over 79,000 people (CSO, 2024), with a significant portion made up of students. While many Irish institutions promote inclusivity and multiculturalism, challenges persist.

As Laura Harmon, Chief Executive of ICOS, stated: *"The lack of affordable housing for students demands urgent action if Ireland is to maintain its strong reputation abroad"* (RTÉ, 2025). Housing, in fact, was mentioned by almost every interviewee as a major difficulty. During this master's programme, I researched Ireland's housing crisis and its impact on student life, especially for those without financial support or institutional accommodation.

While my main focus was on cultural identity, issues like housing, transport, mental health, and job insecurity emerged naturally during interviews. These aspects are deeply connected to how students experience and express their identity, stress, instability, and lack of belonging often weaken cultural maintenance efforts. This highlights the value of using student voices in developing better policies and support services.

The process of creating the documentary was deeply personal and rewarding. It allowed me to connect with people from many backgrounds, hear their struggles and dreams, and reflect on my own identity as a Brazilian in Ireland. Designing the narrative through a documentary format made it possible to present these themes in a visual, emotional, and accessible way.

Although the production was not intended as a traditional news piece, I found that it fulfils a journalistic role by documenting real experiences and highlighting important social dynamics. Through interviews and visual sequences, I aimed to create a piece that resonates with other international students, while also informing Irish institutions and local audiences about the diversity and challenges within this growing community.

One of the key takeaways from this experience is the reminder that identity is not fixed, it shifts and adapts depending on environment, opportunity, and social inclusion. I hope the documentary contributes to a broader understanding of how international students build new lives in Ireland without losing their cultural essence.

This documentary was more than a media production; it was an exploration of human stories, cultural resilience, and the importance of being seen and supported. While it was impossible to cover every issue international students face, I believe the final product offers a meaningful contribution to the conversation around immigration, identity, and global education.

Conclusion

This documentary was developed in response to the core research question: *How International Students Maintain Their National Identity While Living in Ireland?* Drawing on qualitative interviews, visual storytelling, and location-based filming across Dublin, the final media product captures a range of personal experiences that offer valuable insight into this dual process of cultural preservation and adaptation.

One of the key findings that emerged from the documentary process is that national identity is not static but negotiated continuously through language, food, clothing, social practices, and community ties. Many participants shared that while adapting to aspects of Irish life, such as communication styles or academic expectations, they still found ways to actively retain cultural practices through social gatherings, traditional cooking, or family customs, and digital media connections with their home country.

Interestingly, students from less represented nationalities highlighted the absence of formal support systems or community infrastructures. Their experiences stood in contrast to those from larger cultural groups, who often had easier access to ethnic grocery shops, language support, or social networks. This finding aligns with existing literature, such as Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, which emphasises the significance of support systems in facilitating successful cultural adaptation. Similarly, Hall's (1990) reflections on identity and diaspora are echoed in the interviewees' complex negotiation of belonging and visibility within Irish society.

In terms of production, the documentary successfully met its aim of blending academic insight with creative storytelling. The use of tourist locations in Dublin to film opening segments gave the documentary a strong visual metaphor for transience and belonging, placing the students quite literally in the landscape of their new home. However, scheduling constraints and filming permissions limited some of the visual diversity that had originally been planned. For example, one interview had to take place in a private home due to time and distance limitations. While this adaptation preserved the participant's voice, it slightly disrupted the planned visual coherence.

Reflecting on the overall impact of the work, it becomes clear that combining lived experience with broader cultural theory allowed for a richer, more authentic exploration of identity in transition. This documentary contributes to the growing body of creative academic work that centres less represented voices within the context of migration and education. Unlike mainstream media portrayals that often simplify or generalise the "international student" experience, this project prioritised individual complexity, intersectionality, and underrepresented perspectives.

For future development, the project could be expanded into a multi-episode series or a web-based platform, allowing for the inclusion of more nationalities, LGBTQ+ perspectives, going deeper on solutions for their issues and biggest challenges, and recording their relationship or contact with their families while living abroad, for instance. Collaborations with universities, student unions, and cultural organisations could also help distribute the film more widely, using it as an educational resource or discussion tool during orientation programmes or intercultural training workshops.

Ultimately, this project has reaffirmed that national identity remains a powerful, adaptive, and deeply personal construct. While international students in Ireland continue to face both

challenges and opportunities, their voices reflect strength, pride, and a willingness to build bridges between cultures, making them key contributors to the evolving story of Irish society.

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Appendices

List of Interviewees

Armenio Alberto Rodrigues da Roda, Phd in Law, UFBA

Edoardo Rossi, English Student

Eve Reddin, Atlas Language School Front of House Manager

Taran Tuteja, Msc in Data and Computational Science, UCD

Veronica Perea Parrado, English Student

Wagner Coutinho, Ci Intercambio Agent

Interview consent form

I, _____, enter into this agreement with Lucas da Silva Nascimento, hereby known as the Producer. I have been informed and understand that the Producer is doing a video documentary for academic purposes that may be aired on public and/or commercial video and other formats, and that my name, likeness, image, voice, performance or story, or that of my artwork, is being recorded as part of the production.

I hereby grant the Producer the right to use any of said recordings in their productions, whether recorded on or transferred to film, slides, photographs, audiotapes, print, digital/electronic media or any other media in perpetuity. This includes, without limitation, the right to edit, mix or duplicate, and to use or reuse said recordings in whole or in part, as they may desire.

The Producer shall have complete ownership of the program(s) in which I or my artwork may appear.

I also grant the right to broadcast, exhibit, publish, archive, market and distribute any of said recordings, either alone or as part of its finished productions, for commercial or non-commercial videos. This includes the right to use said recordings and images to promote or publicise any of these uses.

I hereby give all copyright clearances for the use of my voice in the production.

I expressly release the Producer and its officers, employees and agents from any and all claims, known or unknown, arising out of or in any way connected with the above uses and representations.

I have read the foregoing and fully understand and consent to the terms and stipulations contained therein.

SIGNED_____

PRINTED NAME_____

DATE_____