



BEYOND BORDERS: TWO JOURNEYS – LESSONS LEARNED FROM RESEARCH SHORT STAYS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OLDENBURG, GERMANY

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Abstract:

International research mobility has become an increasingly important component of doctoral education because it enables researchers to acquire new methodological competencies, establish international scholarly networks, and participate in diverse research cultures. Although numerous studies have examined the outcomes of academic mobility, relatively little attention has been devoted to reflective accounts from African doctoral researchers describing how international research stays shape their academic identities and professional practices. This paper critically reflects on the lessons learned during two research short stays at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, undertaken by two doctoral researchers pursuing PhD studies through the East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA). Mgejwa and Ranji were classmates in the same PhD programme in Educational Research and Evaluation at Moi University, Kenya, and this shared doctoral pathway led both of them, a year apart, to the same host institution in Germany. Mgejwa, a Tanzanian doctoral candidate and lecturer, undertook a three-month stay between February 1 and April 30, 2025, while Ranji, a Kenyan doctoral candidate and researcher, undertook a five-month stay between April and August 2024, immediately after completing his data collection. Guided by a reflective collaborative autoethnographic approach, the paper weaves together two personal experiences within contemporary scholarship on doctoral education, researcher development, academic mobility, and higher education internationalization. The reflection demonstrates that the research stays significantly enhanced methodological competence, critical academic writing, scholarly independence, intercultural competence, research integrity, digital

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research literacy, and international collaboration. The paper further argues that international research mobility should not be understood merely as temporary geographical movement but as an important mechanism through which doctoral researchers reconstruct their academic identities and strengthen their contributions to institutional and societal development. The paper concludes by recommending greater investment in structured research mobility programmes for doctoral candidates within African higher education institutions.

Keywords: academic mobility, doctoral education, research short stay, researcher development, higher education internationalization, Germany, Africa

1. Introduction

The rapid internationalization of higher education has fundamentally transformed the nature of teaching, research, innovation, and academic collaboration across the world. Universities are increasingly expected to operate beyond national boundaries by developing international partnerships, promoting collaborative research, encouraging staff and student mobility, and participating in global knowledge production (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Within this broader transformation, international academic mobility has emerged as one of the most influential mechanisms for developing researchers capable of addressing increasingly complex global challenges.

Research mobility extends beyond the movement of students from one country to another. It encompasses the exchange of knowledge, ideas, research practices, academic cultures, and professional identities across institutional and national contexts. According to UNESCO (2024), academic mobility enables researchers to participate in diverse scholarly communities while promoting international cooperation and the global circulation of knowledge. Consequently, international mobility has become an important strategy for strengthening research capacity, improving institutional competitiveness, and enhancing the quality of higher education.

During the last decade, doctoral education has increasingly incorporated international mobility as an important component of researcher training. Universities and international funding organizations now recognize that exposure to different academic systems allows doctoral candidates to acquire methodological skills, improve academic writing, establish international collaborations, and broaden their perspectives on knowledge production (Hernández-Torrano *et al.*, 2024). International research stays have therefore become integral components of many doctoral programmes worldwide.

The growing importance of research mobility reflects significant changes in the expectations placed upon doctoral graduates. Contemporary doctoral researchers are expected not only to produce original research but also to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, collaborate internationally, utilize advanced research technologies, supervise future researchers, and contribute to evidence-based policy and

institutional development (Boud & Lee, 2021). These expectations require exposure to multiple research environments that extend beyond the candidate's home institution.

Recent studies consistently demonstrate that international mobility contributes positively to researchers' professional development. Gu *et al.* (2024) found that government-sponsored international mobility significantly improves scientific productivity and research collaboration by expanding researchers' professional networks and increasing opportunities for joint publications. Similarly, Momeni *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that internationally mobile scholars generally occupy stronger positions within global scientific collaboration networks and produce greater research impact than researchers without international mobility experience.

However, international mobility should not be viewed exclusively through measurable outputs such as publications or research grants. Several scholars argue that its most significant contributions often occur in less tangible dimensions, including researcher identity, confidence, intercultural competence, critical thinking, professional values, and intellectual independence (Hanley, 2025; Quiroz-Schulz, 2024). These dimensions remain relatively underexplored because they are difficult to quantify using conventional research indicators.

The importance of reflective scholarship has consequently received increasing attention within higher education research. Reflective studies enable researchers to examine how academic experiences transform their assumptions, values, and professional identities while connecting personal experiences to wider institutional and societal issues (Tight, 2024). Such reflections are particularly valuable because they complement quantitative evaluations of academic mobility by explaining how learning actually occurs within international research environments.

Despite substantial growth in international mobility programmes, relatively few published studies document the experiences of African doctoral researchers participating in research stays within European universities. Existing literature frequently reports statistical outcomes of mobility programmes while giving limited attention to how researchers themselves interpret these experiences and apply the acquired knowledge after returning to their home institutions. Consequently, important questions remain regarding how international mobility influences the professional development of African scholars and how these experiences may contribute to strengthening higher education systems across the continent.

This paper addresses this gap by reflecting jointly on two research short stays at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany. Ranji and Mgejwa were classmates, pursuing the same PhD programme in Educational Research and Evaluation at Moi University, Kenya, and it was this shared doctoral pathway that led both of them, a year apart, to the same host institution in Germany. Ranji travelled to Oldenburg between April and August 2024, immediately after completing the data-collection phase of his doctoral research. Mgejwa travelled to the same institution between February and April 2025, while pursuing his own doctoral studies. Both stays were undertaken through the CERM-ESA partnership and supported by the German Academic Exchange Service

(DAAD), and both authors were hosted and co-supervised by the same project coordinator at Oldenburg. Rather than presenting two separate descriptive travel narratives, the paper critically analyses the shared and distinct academic, professional, intercultural, and institutional lessons emerging from these two experiences and interprets them through recent scholarship on doctoral education and international academic mobility.

The central argument advanced throughout this paper is that international research mobility represents far more than temporary physical relocation. Drawing on two independent but closely related experiences at the same host institution, the paper argues that such mobility constitutes a transformative educational process through which doctoral researchers reconstruct their academic identities, expand their methodological competence, develop intercultural understanding, establish international scholarly relationships, and strengthen their capacity to contribute meaningfully to research, teaching, and institutional development after returning to their home universities and countries.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary higher education. Rather than viewing universities as institutions serving only national interests, governments increasingly recognize universities as participants within interconnected global knowledge systems. Consequently, universities are expected to establish international partnerships, participate in collaborative research, promote academic exchanges, and prepare graduates capable of functioning within international professional environments (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Although internationalization has often been associated with student recruitment and institutional rankings, recent scholarship emphasizes that its broader objective is improving the quality of education, research, innovation, and societal engagement (Brandenburg *et al.*, 2020). Effective internationalization should therefore contribute not only to institutional prestige but also to the production of socially relevant knowledge capable of addressing local and global challenges.

Within this context, international academic mobility represents one of the principal mechanisms through which universities pursue internationalization. Mobility enables researchers to access diverse research infrastructures, develop international collaborations, exchange methodological knowledge, and participate in global scholarly communities. However, recent studies caution against understanding internationalization solely through physical mobility because meaningful internationalization also depends upon institutional culture, curriculum, digital collaboration, and equitable partnerships (Hernández-Torrano *et al.*, 2024).

For African universities, internationalization presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, international partnerships create opportunities for capacity

building, research collaboration, funding, and knowledge exchange. On the other hand, unequal access to financial resources, technological infrastructure, publication opportunities, and global academic networks may limit the ability of many African institutions to participate fully within international knowledge systems. Consequently, contemporary discussions increasingly advocate forms of internationalization based upon reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared knowledge production rather than one-directional transfer of expertise.

2.2 Doctoral Education and Researcher Development

Doctoral education has undergone significant transformation during the past two decades. Traditionally, doctoral programmes emphasized disciplinary specialization and dissertation completion. Contemporary doctoral education, however, increasingly focuses on preparing researchers capable of addressing interdisciplinary problems, engaging internationally, communicating effectively with diverse audiences, and contributing to innovation and public policy (Boud & Lee, 2021).

Researcher development therefore extends beyond acquiring technical research skills. It includes the development of scholarly identity, intellectual independence, ethical responsibility, critical thinking, academic leadership, communication competence, collaboration skills, and resilience. Doctoral researchers are expected to become independent producers of knowledge rather than merely consumers of existing literature.

International mobility has become an important mechanism supporting this broader conception of researcher development. According to Quiroz-Schulz (2024), doctoral mobility creates opportunities for professional learning because researchers participate in unfamiliar academic environments that challenge existing assumptions and expose them to alternative research cultures. These experiences contribute to both intellectual and professional growth.

Similarly, Hanley (2025) argues that international mobility supports the development of intercultural competence and academic identity by enabling researchers to interact with scholars from different cultural, disciplinary, and institutional backgrounds. These interactions often continue influencing researchers long after they return to their home institutions, affecting their approaches to research, teaching, supervision, and institutional leadership.

2.3 International Research Mobility

International research mobility has become increasingly recognized as an important determinant of scientific productivity and research quality. Rather than viewing mobility simply as geographical movement, recent scholarship conceptualizes mobility as participation within international knowledge networks that facilitate collaboration, learning, innovation, and professional development.

Empirical evidence supports this perspective. Gu *et al.* (2024) found that internationally mobile researchers generally produce higher levels of scientific

collaboration and publication than researchers without mobility experience. Similarly, Momeni *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that mobile scholars occupy stronger positions within international collaboration networks, increasing opportunities for future partnerships and scientific influence.

However, researchers increasingly emphasize that mobility should not be evaluated solely through bibliometric indicators. Hernández-Torrano *et al.* (2024) argue that the educational value of mobility includes cognitive, professional, social, and intercultural learning outcomes that cannot be adequately measured through publication statistics alone. These outcomes include confidence, adaptability, intercultural communication, researcher identity, methodological flexibility, and academic independence.

Furthermore, recent scholarship questions assumptions that all forms of international mobility automatically produce positive outcomes. The benefits of mobility depend upon the quality of institutional support, opportunities for meaningful participation, supervisory relationships, social integration, and the extent to which researchers critically reflect upon their experiences (Quiroz-Schulz, 2024). Consequently, reflective analyses remain essential for understanding how mobility contributes to researcher development.

2.4 Research Gap

Although international research mobility has received growing scholarly attention, three important gaps remain evident within the existing literature.

First, most empirical studies concentrate on quantitative indicators such as publication output, citation impact, collaboration networks, or employability. Comparatively fewer studies investigate how mobility transforms researchers' academic identities, professional values, critical thinking, and approaches to knowledge production.

Second, much of the available literature originates from Europe, North America, Australia, and East Asia. African doctoral researchers remain considerably underrepresented despite increasing participation in international mobility programmes. Consequently, limited evidence exists regarding how African scholars interpret these experiences within their own institutional, cultural, and professional contexts.

Third, relatively few studies examine research short stays as distinct forms of international mobility. While long-term doctoral mobility has received substantial attention, shorter research visits remain underexplored despite their increasing importance within international doctoral education programmes.

This paper addresses these gaps by providing a reflective analysis of a research short stay undertaken by an African doctoral researcher. Rather than evaluating mobility through quantitative outputs alone, the paper critically examines how the experience contributed to methodological competence, academic identity, intercultural learning, researcher development, and institutional engagement while relating these experiences to recent scholarship on international higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a reflective collaborative autoethnographic approach to examine the academic, professional, and personal lessons learned by two doctoral researchers during their respective research short stays at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany. Collaborative autoethnography extends conventional autoethnography by having two or more researchers pool and jointly interpret their individual autoethnographic accounts, which supports a shift from individual to collective agency and allows convergent and divergent experiences to be examined against one another rather than in isolation (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). Reflective autoethnography more broadly is increasingly recognized as an appropriate qualitative methodology for examining how individual experiences are shaped by broader institutional, cultural, and professional contexts. Rather than treating personal experiences as isolated narratives, reflective autoethnography critically analyses lived experiences alongside existing scholarly literature to generate insights that extend beyond the individual researcher.

The selection of this approach was informed by the purpose of the study. The objective was not to evaluate the effectiveness of international research mobility through quantitative indicators such as publication output or citation counts. Instead, the study sought to understand how participation in an international research environment influenced methodological competence, academic identity, intercultural understanding, research practices, and professional development. These dimensions are best explored through systematic reflection supported by contemporary scholarship.

Reflective autoethnography also recognizes that researchers are simultaneously participants and interpreters of their own experiences. Because two authors contributed independent reflections drawn from mobility experiences separated by roughly a year, a collaborative autoethnographic design allowed each author's account to be examined on its own terms before being read against the other, so that convergences and differences between the two experiences could be identified rather than assumed. Consequently, each researcher becomes both a subject and an analytical instrument of the study. This position requires continuous reflexivity, understood as a set of ongoing, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context shape the research process (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio, & Kahlke, 2023), to ensure that interpretations move beyond personal opinion and are situated within wider debates concerning doctoral education, researcher development, and internationalization of higher education.

3.2 Context of the Reflection

The reflection draws on two short-stay research visits at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, undertaken roughly a year apart by two doctoral

researchers connected through the same CERM-ESA partnership and, in Ranji's case, the same co-supervisor who hosted both visits.

Ranji's stay ran for five months, from 1 April to 31 August 2024. It formed part of his doctoral studies in Educational Research and Evaluation at Moi University, Kenya, and followed directly after the completion of his fieldwork data collection between January and March 2024. His doctoral research examines the mediating effect of parents' motivational beliefs on parental engagement in the implementation of the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) among selected public primary schools in Nakuru County, Kenya. He travelled to Oldenburg specifically to work on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of this data under the guidance of his co-supervisor at Oldenburg, whose own published work includes a review of CBC implementation in Kenya.

Mgejwa's stay ran for three months, between 1 February and 30 April 2025, and formed part of his own doctoral studies in Educational Research and Evaluation at Moi University, Kenya, under the same CERM-ESA arrangement.

Both authors had been CERM-ESA/DAAD scholarship holders since 2018, having previously completed DAAD-supported Master's studies before proceeding to doctoral study, and both were hosted at Oldenburg under an invitation that offered office space, access to university facilities, accommodation support, connections to fellow PhD students, participation in an ongoing research working group, opportunities to present research and receive peer feedback, and access to capacity-building courses for doctoral candidates.

The primary purpose of both research stays was to strengthen the quality of doctoral research through sustained engagement with an international academic environment. During their respective stays, both authors participated in research consultations, independent scholarly work, academic seminars, literature review, methodological discussions, library-based research, and interactions with doctoral candidates and academic staff from different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds.

Unlike conference participation or short academic visits that primarily emphasise dissemination, the research stays provided prolonged immersion in everyday academic life. This immersion created opportunities to observe institutional practices, compare research cultures, examine supervisory relationships, and reflect critically on similarities and differences between the host institution and the researcher's home university.

3.3 Sources of Reflection

The reflections presented in this paper emerged from several complementary sources accumulated throughout the research stay. These included observations of academic practices within the host institution, participation in seminars and scholarly discussions, consultations with academic staff, engagement with library resources and research infrastructure, interactions with fellow doctoral candidates and researchers, and experiences of living within a different cultural and institutional environment.

Additional reflections developed after both researchers returned to their home institutions, where each evaluated how the acquired experiences influenced subsequent

teaching, postgraduate supervision, research practice, academic leadership, and institutional engagement. This post-mobility reflection was particularly important because the long-term value of international mobility becomes clearer after researchers attempt to apply newly acquired knowledge within their own institutional contexts.

3.4 Data Analysis

The reflections were analysed thematically. Repeated reading and critical examination of the experiences enabled the identification of recurring themes representing major areas of learning. Similar experiences were grouped together and interpreted in relation to contemporary literature on higher education, doctoral education, academic mobility, researcher development, and intercultural competence.

The analysis was guided by three principles.

First, each reflection had to originate from an actual experience during or immediately after the research stay.

Second, each experience was interpreted critically rather than descriptively. The emphasis was placed on explaining why a particular experience was significant and how it contributed to researcher development.

Third, every major theme was connected with existing scholarly literature to demonstrate how the individual experience contributes to broader academic discussions concerning doctoral education and international research mobility.

3.5 Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Because each researcher was also a participant, reflexivity was maintained throughout the study by both authors. Personal experiences were continuously questioned to reduce the possibility of presenting subjective impressions as universal conclusions, in line with guidance that reflexivity should be practised as a continuous and iterative activity rather than a single declarative statement made at the outset of a study (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023). Each researcher acknowledged that his experiences were shaped by his own educational background, cultural values, institutional context, disciplinary orientation, and professional responsibilities.

To strengthen trustworthiness, personal reflections were interpreted alongside contemporary empirical studies rather than presented as independent evidence, and each author's account was read against the other's before being incorporated into the shared narrative. The intention was not to generalize the findings to all doctoral researchers but to provide an analytically rich account capable of informing wider discussions on international doctoral education, researcher development, and academic mobility.

4. Context of the Two Doctoral Journeys and Research Short Stays

4.1 Mgejwa's Doctoral Journey

John Mgejwa's academic and professional journey reflects a sustained commitment to teaching, educational research, higher education, and academic leadership in East Africa.

Before pursuing postgraduate studies, he worked as a Mathematics teacher in Mwanza, Tanzania. During this period, he also served as a part-time Tutorial Assistant, teaching Mathematics and Statistical Methods. These experiences strengthened his interest in educational practice, institutional management, and research.

In 2018, Mgejwa was awarded a scholarship by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to pursue a Master of Education in Planning and Administration at St. Augustine University of Tanzania. He completed the programme in 2020 through Jordan University College, a constituent college of St. Augustine University of Tanzania in Morogoro. The programme equipped him with knowledge and professional competencies in educational planning, leadership, and the administration of academic institutions and education systems. During his master's studies, he also served as President of the Students' Organisation at Jordan University College, an experience that enhanced his leadership, representation, communication, and institutional management capabilities.

Soon after completing his master's degree, Mgejwa secured a position as an Assistant Lecturer at the Institute of Accountancy Arusha, Tanzania. In this role, he became actively involved in teaching, research, student supervision, community engagement, and academic administration. His growing involvement in higher education reinforced his aspiration to develop advanced research competencies and contribute more meaningfully to addressing challenges affecting educational institutions in Tanzania and the wider East African region.

Mgejwa subsequently competed for and secured a DAAD doctoral scholarship in East Africa to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Research and Evaluation at Moi University, Kenya. His doctoral studies were undertaken through the East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA), established through collaboration between Moi University and Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, with support from DAAD. His doctoral thesis examined the performance of income-generating projects in financing budget deficits in Tanzanian public universities, focusing specifically on their relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability.

As part of his doctoral training, Mgejwa undertook a three-month research stay at Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, from February to April 2025. The research stay enabled him to refine his methodological approaches, strengthen the theoretical foundations of his doctoral work, engage with international scholarship, and experience a different academic and research environment. It also provided opportunities for scholarly exchange, intercultural learning, professional networking, and reflection on the institutional conditions that support high-quality doctoral research. The experience therefore constituted an important stage in his development as an educational researcher, university lecturer, and emerging academic leader.

4.2 Ranji's Doctoral Journey

Ranji John Karanja followed a similarly research-oriented pathway, beginning with a Bachelor of Education degree in Early Childhood and Primary Education at Moi University, Kenya. After graduation, he worked as a teacher trainer in Nakuru, where his experiences in teacher education stimulated a growing interest in educational research and programme evaluation. In 2018, he was awarded a CERM-ESA/DAAD scholarship to pursue a Master's degree in Education Research at Moi University, which he completed in 2021. He subsequently received a second DAAD scholarship to undertake doctoral studies in Educational Research and Evaluation at Moi University.

By the time he travelled to Oldenburg in April 2024, he had completed his doctoral coursework, successfully defended his research proposal, and conducted fieldwork between January and March 2024. His doctoral research examined the mediating role of parents' motivational beliefs in parental engagement during the implementation of Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in selected public primary schools in Nakuru County. The timing of the research stay coincided with the commencement of data analysis and dissertation writing, enabling him to work closely with his co-supervisor in Oldenburg, whose research on the implementation of the CBC in Kenya provided valuable contextual and methodological guidance.

4.3 Shared Doctoral Context at Moi University

Although Mgejwa and Ranji came from different national and professional backgrounds, their doctoral journeys converged at Moi University through the Doctor of Philosophy programme in Educational Research and Evaluation under the DAAD Incountry-Inregion scholarship. The programme emphasizes rigorous preparation in educational research methodologies, programme evaluation, quantitative and qualitative analysis, educational measurement, policy analysis, and evidence-informed decision-making. Beyond technical competence, it seeks to develop independent researchers capable of generating original knowledge that addresses educational challenges within Africa and beyond.

Throughout their doctoral studies, both researchers were exposed to diverse research paradigms, advanced methodological approaches, scholarly writing, educational policy analysis, and ethical research practice. Academic supervision encouraged originality, methodological rigour, reflexivity, and intellectual independence. At the same time, like many doctoral researchers in African universities, both balanced their research responsibilities alongside professional obligations, making dedicated periods for uninterrupted scholarly work particularly valuable.

4.4 The East and South African-German Centre of Excellence (CERM-ESA)

A defining feature of both doctoral journeys was participation in the East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA). Established through collaboration between African and German universities and supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD),

the programme seeks to strengthen research capacity across Eastern and Southern Africa through postgraduate education, collaborative research, academic exchange, and methodological training.

Participation in CERM-ESA extended learning beyond conventional doctoral coursework. It enabled both researchers to engage with scholars from different countries, participate in interdisciplinary academic activities, access international research networks, and contribute to broader debates in educational research. The programme's philosophy recognises that strengthening research capacity in Africa requires both local relevance and international engagement. Rather than promoting one-directional knowledge transfer, CERM-ESA seeks to develop researchers capable of producing contextually relevant scholarship while participating confidently within global academic communities.

4.5 Research Short Stays at the University of Oldenburg

Although their research stays took place approximately one year apart, both researchers were hosted by the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg through the same CERM-ESA partnership and were supported by the same academic team. Ranji undertook a five-month stay between April and August 2024 immediately after completing fieldwork for his doctoral study, while Mgejwa completed a three-month stay between February and April 2025 during the later stages of his doctoral research. Despite differences in timing and research focus, both visits shared a common purpose: to strengthen the quality of their doctoral research through sustained engagement with an international academic environment.

During their respective stays, both researchers participated in research consultations, academic seminars, methodological discussions, independent scholarly work, library-based research, and interactions with doctoral candidates and academic staff from diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds. They benefited from extensive digital research infrastructure, access to international scholarly databases, structured supervisory support, and opportunities to engage in critical academic dialogue.

Beyond formal research activities, the two stays provided immersion in an academic culture characterised by intellectual curiosity, collegiality, scholarly independence, and evidence-based discussion. Informal interactions with researchers from different countries, participation in research working groups, and everyday engagement with university life demonstrated that researcher development extends beyond formal supervision to include participation in vibrant scholarly communities. These shared experiences formed the foundation for the reflections and lessons presented in the subsequent sections of this paper.

5. Lessons Learned from the Research Short Stay

5.1 Lesson One: Research Excellence Is Built on a Strong Research Culture Rather Than Individual Intelligence

Perhaps the most transformative lesson from my research stay was the realization that excellent research is rarely the product of individual brilliance alone. Instead, it emerges from a supportive research culture that consistently encourages critical thinking, scholarly dialogue, collaboration, intellectual curiosity, and ethical conduct.

Before arriving in Germany, I largely viewed research quality as depending on the competence of individual researchers. Although personal ability remains important, my experience at the University of Oldenburg demonstrated that institutional culture substantially shapes researchers' productivity and intellectual development. Research seminars, informal discussions, accessible supervisors, efficient administrative support, and well-developed research infrastructure collectively created an environment in which scholarly inquiry flourished.

One striking observation was that academic discussions were not restricted to formal supervision meetings. Researchers continuously exchanged ideas in seminars, offices, libraries, and informal gatherings. Questions were welcomed, disagreement was treated as part of scholarly inquiry, and criticism focused on improving ideas rather than evaluating individuals. This culture reduced fear of making mistakes and encouraged intellectual openness.

Recent studies similarly argue that institutional research culture significantly influences doctoral researchers' learning, productivity, and identity formation. Doctoral candidates who participate in supportive scholarly communities demonstrate greater confidence, stronger academic identities, and increased research productivity than those working within isolated environments (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2022).

The experience encouraged me to reconsider how research environments can be strengthened within African universities. Improving research quality requires more than increasing individual qualifications. Universities should cultivate institutional cultures where seminars are regular, interdisciplinary collaboration is encouraged, postgraduate students actively participate in research discussions, and academic staff receive institutional support for scholarly work.

Consequently, I returned home convinced that strengthening research culture is a collective institutional responsibility rather than an individual obligation.

5.2 Lesson Two: A Doctoral Researcher Must Become an Independent Knowledge Producer

Another significant lesson concerned the meaning of scholarly independence. Throughout my doctoral studies, I understood that doctoral candidates were expected to conduct independent research. However, the research stay fundamentally changed my understanding of what independence actually means.

Academic independence does not imply working in isolation or refusing assistance from supervisors and colleagues. Rather, it refers to developing the intellectual confidence to formulate arguments, justify methodological decisions, critically evaluate evidence, and defend scholarly conclusions while remaining open to constructive criticism.

During my stay, supervisors and senior researchers frequently encouraged doctoral candidates to justify every research decision. Questions such as "Why have you chosen this theory?" or "How does this method answer your research question?" were common. Rather than providing immediate answers, supervisors often responded with further questions that encouraged deeper reflection.

Initially, this approach appeared demanding. However, I gradually realized that the purpose was not to test knowledge but to develop intellectual autonomy. Doctoral education aims to produce researchers capable of making informed scholarly decisions independently rather than researchers who simply follow supervisors' instructions.

This experience significantly influenced my understanding of supervision. Effective supervision should gradually reduce dependence while strengthening critical reasoning, methodological confidence, and academic judgment.

Contemporary research supports this perspective. Recent scholarship emphasizes that doctoral education should facilitate the transition from student to independent researcher by promoting intellectual agency, reflexivity, and ownership of knowledge production (Boud & Lee, 2021; Pyhältö *et al.*, 2022).

This lesson has profoundly influenced my own supervision practices. I increasingly encourage postgraduate students to explain the reasoning underlying their methodological choices instead of merely reproducing textbook definitions.

Ranji experienced a closely related version of this lesson during his own stay a year earlier, under the same co-supervisor. Rather than being told which statistical test suited his mediation analysis, he was repeatedly asked to justify why the PROCESS macro, and not an alternative approach, was appropriate for testing the mediating role of parents' motivational beliefs. This insistence on justification, rather than instruction, gradually shifted his own understanding of the analysis from a procedure to be followed to an argument to be defended.

5.3 Lesson Three: Critical Thinking Is More Important Than Memorization

A further lesson involved the central role of critical thinking within research. Prior educational experiences often reward the accurate reproduction of established knowledge. However, doctoral education demands a fundamentally different intellectual orientation.

At the University of Oldenburg, scholarly discussions rarely focused on recalling information. Instead, researchers were expected to evaluate assumptions, compare competing explanations, identify weaknesses in existing knowledge, and propose alternative interpretations.

This approach transformed my understanding of literature reviews. Rather than summarizing previous studies sequentially, I learned that literature should be synthesized critically. Researchers should identify patterns, contradictions, methodological limitations, conceptual gaps, and theoretical disagreements before explaining how their own studies contribute to existing knowledge.

Critical thinking also influenced methodological decision-making. Every research design involves assumptions, strengths, and limitations. Consequently, selecting an appropriate methodology requires evaluating alternatives rather than applying familiar methods automatically.

This experience demonstrated that doctoral education is less concerned with acquiring information than developing the capacity to evaluate information critically.

Recent studies indicate that international research mobility enhances critical thinking because researchers encounter unfamiliar intellectual traditions and alternative perspectives that challenge existing assumptions (Quiroz-Schulz, 2024).

After returning to my home institution, I became increasingly committed to promoting critical discussion during research methodology classes. Students should not simply learn research procedures; they should understand why different procedures exist, when they are appropriate, and what limitations accompany each methodological choice.

5.4 Lesson Four: Academic Writing Is an Intellectual Conversation

Perhaps one of the most significant academic transformations occurred in my understanding of scholarly writing.

Before the research stay, writing was often viewed as documenting completed research. During my stay, I increasingly recognized that writing itself constitutes part of the thinking process. Researchers clarify arguments while writing, discover weaknesses through revision, and strengthen reasoning through repeated engagement with literature.

I also learned that academic writing represents participation in an ongoing scholarly conversation. Every article, dissertation, or conference paper responds to previous knowledge while inviting future discussion. Consequently, effective writing requires positioning one's argument within existing debates rather than merely presenting isolated findings.

The emphasis placed on multiple revisions was particularly enlightening. Drafts were viewed as evolving intellectual products rather than indicators of personal competence. Receiving substantial comments on written work was interpreted as an opportunity for improvement instead of evidence of failure.

This understanding reduced my anxiety regarding revision. I began to appreciate that excellent academic writing emerges through continuous refinement rather than initial perfection.

Recent research demonstrates that doctoral writing develops through participation within scholarly communities where feedback, peer interaction, and repeated revision strengthen researchers' academic identities (Aitchison & Guerin, 2022). Following my return, I significantly increased the emphasis placed on revision during postgraduate supervision. Students are encouraged to understand that producing several drafts reflects scholarly maturity rather than academic weakness.

5.5 Lesson Five: Research Integrity Is the Foundation of Scientific Credibility

The research stay reinforced my appreciation of research integrity as the foundation of credible scholarship.

Although research ethics is commonly associated with obtaining ethical approval and informed consent, my experience demonstrated that integrity extends throughout every stage of research.

Integrity is reflected in accurate citation, honest reporting of methods, transparent discussion of limitations, responsible data management, acknowledgement of uncertainties, and avoidance of exaggerated conclusions.

I observed that researchers openly discussed methodological weaknesses within their own studies. Rather than weakening research, acknowledging limitations strengthened its credibility because readers could better evaluate the evidence presented.

This openness challenged my previous perception that researchers should attempt to present their work as flawless. Instead, I learned that honest recognition of limitations demonstrates scholarly maturity.

The increasing use of artificial intelligence and digital research tools makes this lesson even more important. Researchers remain responsible for verifying information, evaluating generated content critically, protecting confidential data, and ensuring transparency regarding the use of technological assistance.

Current literature emphasizes that research integrity is becoming increasingly central to doctoral education because digital technologies create new ethical challenges concerning authorship, plagiarism, transparency, and responsible scholarship (European Network for Academic Integrity, 2023).

Consequently, integrity should not be treated as an administrative requirement but as an enduring professional value guiding every aspect of academic work.

5.6 Lesson Six: International Collaboration Creates New Opportunities for Knowledge Production

One of the greatest benefits of the research stay involved opportunities for international collaboration.

Interactions with researchers from different countries demonstrated that contemporary research increasingly depends upon multidisciplinary and international partnerships. Complex educational problems rarely respect national boundaries, making collaborative research increasingly necessary.

International collaboration provides access to diverse expertise, alternative methodological perspectives, broader datasets, and comparative educational experiences. It also promotes intercultural understanding and strengthens the global visibility of research conducted within African institutions.

However, collaboration requires more than exchanging contact information. Sustainable partnerships depend upon mutual respect, clearly defined expectations, equitable contribution, transparency, and shared commitment to producing meaningful scholarship.

The experience also demonstrated that African researchers possess valuable contextual expertise that enriches international collaborations. Effective partnerships should therefore recognize African scholars as equal contributors rather than merely providers of research sites or data.

Recent studies indicate that researchers participating in international mobility frequently develop stronger collaborative networks that continue producing joint publications and research projects long after the mobility period has ended (Gu *et al.*, 2024).

The research stay therefore expanded not only my professional network but also my understanding of collaboration as a reciprocal process of knowledge creation rather than one-directional knowledge transfer.

For Ranji, this reciprocity was especially visible because his supervisor's own published review of Kenya's CBC curriculum meant that the collaboration ran in both directions from the outset: her prior engagement with the Kenyan curriculum context gave immediate relevance to his data, while his fieldwork provided her with a fresh, locally grounded dataset on how CBC was actually being experienced by parents in Nakuru County schools.

5.7 Lesson Seven: Digital Research Infrastructure Determines the Efficiency and Quality of Research

One of the most noticeable differences I observed during my research stay was the extent to which digital research infrastructure supported everyday academic work. Before travelling to Germany, I understood the importance of electronic databases and digital libraries. However, living and conducting research within an institution where these resources formed an integral part of daily scholarly practice fundamentally changed my appreciation of their significance.

The University of Oldenburg provided seamless access to international journals, electronic books, institutional repositories, research software, and digital reference-management systems. Consequently, locating literature became less time-consuming, allowing greater attention to critical reading, synthesis, and interpretation. Rather than spending considerable effort searching for accessible materials, researchers could focus on developing stronger arguments and identifying gaps within existing knowledge.

The experience also strengthened my information literacy. I learned that effective literature searching requires systematic strategies involving appropriate keywords,

Boolean operators, citation tracking, database selection, and critical evaluation of evidence. High-quality literature reviews are not simply collections of articles but carefully constructed syntheses that explain relationships, contradictions, methodological trends, and conceptual developments within a field.

Another important lesson involved the use of reference-management software. Organising citations electronically improved consistency, reduced referencing errors, and made revision considerably more efficient. Such digital tools do not replace critical thinking, but they reduce administrative burdens and allow researchers to devote more attention to analysis and interpretation.

Recent studies have shown that digital research environments significantly enhance research productivity by improving access to scholarly resources, facilitating collaboration, and supporting transparent research practices (Bond *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, digital infrastructure alone is insufficient. Researchers require adequate training to evaluate information critically, distinguish credible evidence from misinformation, and use digital technologies responsibly.

For African universities, investment in digital infrastructure should therefore be accompanied by systematic training in information literacy, reference management, research data management, and responsible use of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence.

5.8 Lesson Eight: Time Management Is a Scholarly Competence Rather Than a Personal Habit

Before undertaking the research stay, I often regarded time management as a matter of personal discipline. My experience in Germany demonstrated that effective management of time is also an academic competence requiring deliberate planning, prioritisation, and institutional support.

One of the greatest advantages of the research stay was the opportunity to dedicate uninterrupted periods to reading, writing, analysing literature, and refining methodological decisions. The absence of routine administrative responsibilities revealed how fragmented schedules often reduce research productivity.

I learned to organise research activities around realistic daily and weekly objectives. Rather than attempting to complete entire chapters at once, I divided larger tasks into manageable components such as identifying relevant literature, revising conceptual definitions, strengthening theoretical arguments, or editing specific sections. This approach improved concentration while making progress more measurable.

Another important observation concerned the relationship between planning and flexibility. Although structured schedules are important, research rarely progresses exactly as planned. New literature, unexpected methodological questions, or valuable academic discussions frequently require researchers to revise their priorities. Consequently, effective time management involves balancing discipline with adaptability.

The research environment also demonstrated the importance of respecting appointments, preparing adequately for meetings, and using supervisory sessions efficiently. Researchers were expected to circulate documents before meetings, identify specific issues requiring discussion, and implement agreed actions within established timelines. Such practices enhanced both accountability and productivity.

Contemporary literature similarly recognises time management as a fundamental component of researcher development. Doctoral candidates who develop effective planning strategies generally experience greater research progress, lower levels of stress, and higher completion rates than those working without structured schedules (McAlpine *et al.*, 2022).

Following my return, I became increasingly intentional about protecting dedicated research time despite competing teaching and administrative responsibilities. I also encourage postgraduate students to view time management as an essential research skill rather than merely a personal lifestyle choice.

5.9 Lesson Nine: Intercultural Competence Is Developed Through Daily Interaction Rather Than Formal Instruction

Perhaps the most enriching personal lesson from the research stay involved the development of intercultural competence. Living in Germany required continuous interaction with people whose languages, customs, communication styles, social expectations, and academic traditions differed from my own.

Initially, some everyday situations appeared unfamiliar. Communication styles were generally more direct than those I had previously experienced. Administrative procedures followed different expectations, and social interactions reflected cultural norms that required careful observation and adaptation. Over time, I realised that successful intercultural engagement depended less upon extensive knowledge about another culture than upon openness, respect, patience, and willingness to learn.

The experience taught me to avoid interpreting unfamiliar behaviour solely through my own cultural assumptions. Actions that initially appeared unusual often reflected different social norms rather than personal attitudes. Likewise, behaviours I considered normal could be interpreted differently within another cultural context.

Academic interactions provided similar lessons. Researchers from different countries approached discussions, criticism, collaboration, and problem-solving in diverse ways. Exposure to these differences broadened my understanding of how knowledge can be constructed through multiple cultural perspectives.

Recent research demonstrates that international mobility contributes significantly to intercultural competence when researchers actively engage with local communities, participate in collaborative activities, and critically reflect upon their experiences (Hanley, 2025). Simply travelling abroad does not automatically produce intercultural learning. Development occurs through meaningful interaction, openness to difference, and continuous reflection.

This lesson has influenced my teaching by encouraging greater appreciation of cultural diversity within classrooms and research supervision. Universities increasingly educate students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and professional backgrounds. Consequently, intercultural competence has become an important academic and professional attribute rather than an optional personal characteristic.

Ranji's intercultural learning extended beyond Germany itself. His five-month stay gave him time to travel to the Netherlands and to France, and to interact with DAAD and CERM-ESA scholars from other African countries who were pursuing doctoral studies across Germany. These encounters reinforced the same lesson from a different angle: that intercultural competence is built cumulatively, through repeated small adjustments across several unfamiliar settings, rather than through a single act of relocation.

5.10 Lesson Ten: Effective Doctoral Supervision Balances Guidance with Intellectual Freedom

My research stay also transformed my understanding of doctoral supervision. Observing interactions between supervisors and doctoral candidates revealed that effective supervision extends beyond monitoring progress or correcting written drafts.

Supervisors frequently challenged candidates to justify methodological choices, explain theoretical positions, defend interpretations, and consider alternative perspectives. Rather than providing direct answers, they often encouraged deeper reflection through carefully formulated questions.

Initially, this supervisory style appeared demanding because it required candidates to think independently before seeking guidance. However, I gradually recognised that this approach aimed to develop intellectual autonomy rather than dependence upon supervisory expertise.

The supervisory relationship was characterised by mutual respect. Doctoral candidates were treated as emerging colleagues whose ideas deserved careful consideration. Constructive disagreement was encouraged, and critical feedback focused on improving arguments rather than evaluating personal ability.

This experience reshaped my understanding of postgraduate supervision. Effective supervisors should guide students towards independent reasoning instead of solving every research problem on their behalf. Their role is to create intellectual conditions through which students gradually become confident researchers capable of making informed scholarly decisions.

Recent scholarship emphasises that successful doctoral supervision combines academic guidance, emotional support, constructive feedback, and opportunities for intellectual independence (Halse & Bansel, 2023). Such supervision strengthens both research quality and researcher identity.

Since returning home, I have increasingly adopted supervisory practices that encourage students to defend their methodological choices, question assumptions, and develop ownership of their research projects.

5.11 Lesson Eleven: Academic Confidence Emerges Through Scholarly Participation

Before undertaking the research stay, I occasionally perceived international academic environments as intimidating spaces dominated by highly experienced researchers. Participating in everyday academic life at the University of Oldenburg gradually transformed this perception.

I realised that confidence in research does not originate from possessing complete knowledge. Rather, it develops through active participation in scholarly conversations, willingness to ask questions, openness to criticism, and continuous engagement with evidence.

Attending seminars, discussing methodological issues, and interacting with researchers from different countries demonstrated that uncertainty is a natural component of academic inquiry. Even experienced scholars openly debated competing interpretations, acknowledged limitations, and revised their arguments when presented with new evidence.

This observation reduced my fear of intellectual imperfection. I became more willing to contribute ideas, participate in discussions, and seek clarification when necessary. Confidence gradually emerged from participation rather than certainty.

Recent studies similarly indicate that international academic mobility contributes to researcher identity by strengthening scholars' sense of belonging within global academic communities (Boutiuc-Kaiser & Symeonidis, 2025). Exposure to diverse scholarly environments encourages researchers to view themselves as legitimate contributors to international knowledge production.

This lesson has remained influential throughout my academic career. Rather than encouraging students to avoid mistakes, I now emphasise that meaningful learning often begins with asking thoughtful questions and engaging respectfully with scholarly disagreement.

5.12 Lesson Twelve: International Experience Should Inspire Contextual Innovation Rather Than Institutional Imitation

Perhaps the most important lesson emerging from the entire research stay concerns the relationship between international learning and local application.

Returning from Germany, it would have been easy to conclude that African universities should simply replicate European academic systems. However, closer reflection demonstrated that such an approach would be both unrealistic and inappropriate.

Universities operate within different historical, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts. Practices that function effectively within one institution may require significant adaptation before becoming meaningful elsewhere. Consequently, international exposure should encourage critical adaptation rather than unquestioning imitation.

Instead of copying institutional structures, I learned to identify transferable principles. These include protecting research time, strengthening research culture,

promoting constructive supervision, investing in digital infrastructure, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, supporting postgraduate researchers, and cultivating academic integrity.

Equally important, the experience reinforced my appreciation of the strengths already present within African higher education. African researchers possess contextual knowledge, resilience, multilingual capabilities, and extensive experience addressing complex educational and developmental challenges. These strengths should form the foundation upon which international partnerships are built.

Contemporary discussions on higher education internationalisation increasingly emphasise reciprocity, mutual learning, and equitable partnerships rather than one-directional transfer of knowledge (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). International collaboration should therefore enrich local scholarship without diminishing local intellectual traditions or priorities.

Ultimately, the greatest value of my research stay was not learning how German universities operate. It was learning how international experiences can inspire thoughtful improvements within my own academic context while remaining responsive to the realities, opportunities, and aspirations of African higher education.

5.13 Lesson Thirteen: Academic Leadership Begins with Personal Responsibility Rather Than Positional Authority

One of the most unexpected lessons from my research stay was that leadership within academia is not confined to those who occupy formal administrative positions. Before travelling to Germany, I tended to associate leadership primarily with titles such as Head of Department, Dean, Director, or Professor. However, the academic environment at the University of Oldenburg demonstrated that leadership frequently emerges through everyday scholarly behaviour rather than organizational hierarchy.

I observed doctoral researchers taking initiative in organizing seminars, coordinating reading groups, supporting newly arrived international students, facilitating research discussions, and contributing ideas that improved departmental activities. These actions illustrated that leadership is fundamentally about influencing positive change rather than exercising authority over others.

This experience reshaped my understanding of academic leadership. Effective researchers lead by maintaining high standards of integrity, encouraging collaboration, sharing knowledge generously, mentoring junior colleagues, and contributing to institutional improvement. Leadership therefore begins with personal responsibility for strengthening the academic community.

Recent scholarship supports this perspective. Aarnikoivu (2024) argues that doctoral researchers should not perceive themselves merely as students but as emerging change agents capable of influencing higher education through initiative, collaboration, and reflective practice. Rather than waiting for institutional authority, doctoral researchers can contribute meaningfully to positive organizational change through everyday academic engagement.

Following my return to Tanzania, this lesson significantly influenced my approach to academic leadership. I increasingly viewed leadership as an opportunity to create environments where colleagues and students can succeed, rather than as a position associated primarily with administrative power.

5.14 Lesson Fourteen: Resilience Is Developed Through Navigating Academic and Personal Challenges

The research stay reinforced my understanding that resilience is one of the most important qualities required of successful researchers. Academic life inevitably involves uncertainty, criticism, revision, rejection, and continuous learning. International mobility intensifies these challenges because researchers must simultaneously adapt to unfamiliar institutional systems, cultural expectations, languages, and social environments.

During the first weeks of my stay, several adjustments were required. Learning institutional procedures, understanding new academic expectations, adapting to different communication styles, and managing temporary separation from family demanded emotional as well as intellectual effort. Although these experiences were occasionally uncomfortable, they gradually strengthened my confidence and adaptability.

I came to appreciate that resilience does not imply the absence of difficulty. Rather, it reflects the capacity to continue learning, adapting, and progressing despite challenges. Every obstacle became an opportunity to develop greater independence and confidence. Research on international academic mobility similarly identifies resilience as one of the most significant competencies developed through overseas research experiences. International exposure requires researchers to navigate unfamiliar academic environments while maintaining motivation and scholarly productivity, thereby strengthening their long-term professional capabilities.

The lesson has influenced my subsequent academic practice. Rather than viewing research difficulties as indicators of failure, I increasingly regard them as natural stages within scholarly development. This perspective has also shaped how I mentor postgraduate students, encouraging persistence and reflective learning during challenging periods of their research journeys.

5.15 Lesson Fifteen: Professional Networks Are Long-Term Academic Assets

Perhaps one of the most enduring outcomes of the research stay was the establishment of professional relationships extending beyond the three-month mobility period. Initially, I considered networking mainly as an opportunity to exchange contact information with other researchers. However, I gradually realised that meaningful academic networks are founded upon sustained intellectual engagement rather than occasional social interaction.

Relationships developed during seminars, informal discussions, consultations, and collaborative academic activities created opportunities for exchanging research ideas, discussing methodological challenges, identifying future collaborations, and

learning about different higher education systems. These interactions broadened my academic perspective and demonstrated the value of maintaining scholarly relationships across institutional and national boundaries.

Professional networks also contribute to the exchange of resources, peer feedback, publication opportunities, conference participation, and collaborative grant applications. More importantly, they create communities of scholars who support one another's professional growth over extended periods.

Recent bibliometric research demonstrates that internationally mobile researchers generally develop broader collaboration networks and stronger scholarly visibility than researchers without international mobility experience. Such networks frequently continue producing collaborative outputs long after the mobility period has ended.

This experience encouraged me to maintain regular communication with colleagues encountered during the research stay. I increasingly appreciate networking not as an isolated event but as a continuing scholarly relationship grounded in mutual respect, intellectual generosity, and shared commitment to advancing knowledge.

This is, in fact, how the present paper came to be written. The first author's participation in a DAAD-produced video encouraging prospective African applicants to consider in-country and in-region scholarships connected him with a wider community of CERM-ESA alumni, and it was through this same scholarly network, anchored by a shared supervisor at Oldenburg, that the two authors were able to compare their experiences a year apart and jointly produce this reflective account.

5.16 Lesson Sixteen: A Researcher's Identity Continues to Evolve Throughout an Academic Career

Another important lesson concerned the dynamic nature of academic identity. Before the research stay, I often viewed becoming a researcher as a destination achieved upon completing doctoral studies. The experience in Germany demonstrated that academic identity is continually reconstructed through new experiences, collaborations, responsibilities, and intellectual challenges.

Exposure to different research cultures encouraged me to reconsider how I viewed myself as a scholar. Rather than identifying primarily as a doctoral student, I increasingly perceived myself as an emerging member of an international research community. This shift influenced my confidence, aspirations, and professional responsibilities.

The experience also highlighted that researchers simultaneously occupy multiple identities: learner, teacher, supervisor, collaborator, mentor, and institutional leader. These identities evolve throughout one's career and are influenced by changing institutional contexts and professional experiences.

Recent autoethnographic research similarly demonstrates that doctoral researchers continually negotiate multiple academic identities shaped by previous experiences, current institutional environments, and future professional aspirations. Identity development is therefore an ongoing process rather than a single achievement attained upon graduation.

Recognizing the evolving nature of academic identity has encouraged me to remain open to continuous learning. Regardless of professional experience or academic position, researchers should continue developing new knowledge, skills, perspectives, and collaborations throughout their careers.

5.17 Lesson Seventeen: Research Should Ultimately Contribute to Society

One of the most profound reflections arising from the research stay concerned the purpose of academic research. Throughout interactions with scholars at the University of Oldenburg, I observed a strong emphasis on producing knowledge capable of addressing real societal challenges. Research was not viewed solely as a means of completing degrees or increasing publication counts. Rather, it was understood as a contribution to educational improvement, policy development, innovation, and social wellbeing.

This perspective challenged me to reconsider the broader purpose of my own research. Doctoral research should certainly contribute to theoretical advancement and methodological development. However, it should also seek practical relevance by informing educational practice, institutional decision-making, and public policy wherever possible.

For researchers within African universities, this lesson is particularly significant. Our societies continue facing important educational challenges requiring evidence-based solutions. Consequently, research should strive to produce knowledge that improves educational quality, strengthens institutions, supports policy formulation, and contributes to sustainable national development.

The research stay therefore reinforced my conviction that scholarly excellence and social relevance should complement rather than compete with one another. A successful researcher contributes simultaneously to academic knowledge and societal transformation.

Ranji encountered this same conviction from a different entry point. His study of how parents' motivational beliefs shape their engagement with Kenya's Competency Based Curriculum was never designed as a purely theoretical exercise; its findings speak directly to how public primary schools in Nakuru County, and by extension across Kenya, might better support parental involvement as CBC continues to be rolled out. Analysing that data at Oldenburg, surrounded by scholars who treated policy relevance as a normal expectation of research rather than an afterthought, sharpened his sense that the value of his PhD would ultimately be judged by its usefulness to Kenyan schools and policymakers as much as by its contribution to academic theory.

5.18 Lesson Eighteen: International Mobility Is Ultimately a Journey of Personal Transformation

Reflecting upon the entire experience, I conclude that the greatest lesson from the research stay was personal transformation. While the mobility undoubtedly strengthened my methodological knowledge, academic writing, research skills, and

international networks, its deepest impact occurred in how I now understand myself as a researcher, educator, supervisor, and academic leader.

The experience expanded my intellectual horizons, challenged long-held assumptions, strengthened my confidence, increased my appreciation of cultural diversity, and reinforced my commitment to lifelong learning. It also deepened my understanding that genuine scholarship requires humility, curiosity, collaboration, integrity, and continuous self-reflection.

Recent studies on doctoral autoethnography similarly argue that international experiences transform researchers not only academically but also personally by strengthening agency, professional identity, and commitment to institutional improvement. Researchers frequently return home with renewed confidence, broader perspectives, and stronger aspirations to contribute positively to their universities and societies.

Looking back, I recognize that the research stay was not simply a period spent conducting research abroad. It represented a formative stage in my academic journey through which I learned to think more critically, collaborate more openly, supervise more thoughtfully, and appreciate the broader responsibilities accompanying academic life. Ultimately, the true value of international research mobility lies not in the number of months spent abroad but in the lasting transformation that continues to shape the researcher's thinking, professional practice, institutional contribution, and commitment to advancing knowledge for the benefit of society.

6. Discussion

This study critically reflected on the lessons learned during two research short stays at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, undertaken a year apart by two doctoral researchers pursuing doctoral studies at Moi University, Kenya, through the same CERM-ESA partnership and the same co-supervisor at Oldenburg. Unlike many studies that evaluate international research mobility using bibliometric indicators such as publications, citations, or collaborative outputs, this paper examined mobility as a transformative educational process that shapes researchers' academic identities, professional competencies, and institutional engagement. The findings demonstrate that international mobility contributes to researcher development through multiple interconnected pathways, including participation in research culture, identity reconstruction, intercultural learning, academic networking, and reflective practice. These findings both confirm and extend the contemporary literature on doctoral education and international academic mobility.

6.1 International Research Mobility as a Catalyst for Researcher Development

One of the most significant findings emerging from this reflective study is that international research mobility contributes to researcher development in ways that extend far beyond the acquisition of technical research skills. Although the primary

purpose of the research stay was to strengthen my doctoral research, the experience gradually transformed my methodological competence, academic writing, critical thinking, scholarly independence, research integrity, intercultural awareness, and confidence as a researcher. These findings suggest that research mobility should not be understood merely as geographical movement but as an educational process through which researchers reconstruct their professional identities and expand their academic capabilities.

This finding is consistent with Quiroz-Schulz (2024), who found that international mobility during doctoral education creates important opportunities for professional learning because doctoral researchers participate directly in unfamiliar academic practices, institutional cultures, and scholarly communities. Rather than acquiring knowledge only through formal supervision, doctoral candidates learn through observation, collaboration, participation in seminars, informal discussions, and engagement with everyday research activities. The present study confirms these observations. My learning was not confined to formal research consultations but was continuously shaped by daily interactions with researchers, participation in seminars, independent study, and exposure to different academic expectations.

Similarly, the findings support the bibliometric evidence presented by Momeni *et al.* (2022), who demonstrated that internationally mobile researchers generally possess stronger scientific collaboration networks, broader social capital, and higher research productivity than researchers who remain institutionally static. According to their study, international mobility enhances researchers' visibility and creates opportunities for future collaborations that positively influence scientific careers. My experience supports this conclusion. The research stay enabled me to establish relationships with researchers from different disciplinary and national backgrounds, thereby expanding my understanding of international research collaboration beyond what could have been achieved within my home institution alone.

However, the present reflection extends previous literature by demonstrating that the benefits of research mobility continue well beyond the mobility period itself. Existing studies frequently evaluate mobility through publications, citations, grants, or collaborative outputs. While these indicators are important, my experience suggests that equally important outcomes occur after researchers return to their home institutions. The knowledge, confidence, methodological approaches, and professional values acquired during the research stay subsequently influenced my teaching practices, postgraduate supervision, research mentoring, and academic leadership. Consequently, the long-term impact of mobility should be evaluated not only by immediate scholarly outputs but also by its contribution to institutional development and researcher transformation.

Another important observation concerns the relationship between mobility and academic identity. During the research stay, I gradually shifted from viewing myself primarily as a doctoral student to recognizing myself as an emerging member of an international community of researchers. This transformation was not simply a consequence of studying abroad but resulted from active participation within an

academic environment where scholarly dialogue, constructive criticism, independent inquiry, and collaborative learning were integral components of everyday research practice. This finding aligns with Phan (2023), who found that international doctoral students develop stronger academic identities when supervisors and academic communities recognize them as legitimate contributors rather than passive learners. Academic identity therefore develops through participation and validation within scholarly communities rather than through doctoral enrolment alone.

Recent scholarship further reinforces this interpretation. Garcia-Morante *et al.* (2025) argue that researcher identities are increasingly hybrid and continuously reconstructed as scholars move across different institutional and professional contexts. Their dialogical analysis demonstrates that mobility exposes researchers to multiple academic cultures, requiring them to negotiate new expectations while integrating previous experiences into evolving professional identities. My experience reflects this process. Exposure to the German academic environment did not replace my previous educational experiences from Moi University; rather, it expanded my understanding of scholarship by integrating African and European academic perspectives into a broader conception of researcher identity.

The findings also resonate with recent autoethnographic work examining international doctoral students' experiences. Research by Yu (2025) demonstrated that disciplinary and linguistic transitions experienced during international doctoral education reshape how researchers understand themselves, communicate knowledge, and participate within scholarly communities. Although conducted within a different disciplinary context, that study similarly concluded that researcher development occurs through continuous negotiation between previous educational experiences and newly encountered academic cultures. My reflection extends this argument by showing that such identity reconstruction continues after researchers return home, influencing not only personal scholarship but also institutional practice through teaching, supervision, and academic leadership.

The findings also have important implications for doctoral education in African universities. International mobility should not be regarded merely as an opportunity to access better facilities or complete research more quickly. Rather, it should be viewed as a strategic investment in researcher development. Universities and scholarship providers should therefore evaluate mobility programmes using broader indicators that include researcher identity, scholarly independence, leadership capacity, intercultural competence, mentorship, and institutional contribution alongside traditional measures such as publications and conference presentations. Such an approach acknowledges that the ultimate value of international mobility lies not only in what researchers produce while abroad but also in how they transform research culture, postgraduate education, and institutional capacity after returning to their home universities.

In general, this study supports the growing body of literature that conceptualises international research mobility as a multidimensional process of researcher development rather than a temporary geographical relocation. At the same time, it contributes new

evidence from an African perspective by demonstrating that the transformative effects of mobility are sustained through subsequent teaching, supervision, institutional leadership, and continued participation in international scholarly communities. In this regard, the study extends existing knowledge by illustrating that the true impact of international mobility should be assessed across the entire trajectory of a researcher's professional career rather than during the mobility period alone.

6.2 Research Culture and Academic Identity: Learning Through Participation in a Scholarly Community

Another major finding of this study is that researcher development was profoundly influenced by the research culture experienced during the research short stay. Beyond the acquisition of methodological knowledge, the stay provided immersion in an academic environment characterized by regular research seminars, constructive scholarly dialogue, accessible supervisors, interdisciplinary interaction, efficient research support services, and strong expectations regarding academic integrity. These experiences demonstrated that research excellence is not solely the product of individual intelligence or technical competence but also of the institutional environment within which researchers learn, interact, and produce knowledge.

This finding is strongly supported by recent studies on doctoral education and research culture. Quiroz-Schulz (2024) argues that the greatest professional learning derived from international academic mobility occurs when doctoral researchers become active participants in the academic practices of the host institution rather than remaining passive observers. According to the study, participation in seminars, collaborative discussions, informal interactions with peers, and exposure to different research expectations enables doctoral researchers to acquire tacit knowledge that cannot easily be transmitted through formal coursework or supervision alone. The findings of the present study closely align with this argument. Although the research stay included formal consultations with academic staff, much of the learning emerged through everyday participation in the research community, including interactions with fellow doctoral researchers, attendance at seminars, independent library work, and informal scholarly discussions. These experiences gradually reshaped my understanding of what constitutes quality research and effective scholarship.

The importance of research culture has also been demonstrated within African higher education. Fussy (2024), in a study of Tanzanian universities, argues that a sustainable research culture is cultivated through research governance, institutional support, research capacity-building initiatives, dissemination of research findings, collaboration, and academic networking. However, the study further observes that many higher education institutions continue to experience structural constraints, including heavy teaching workloads, limited research funding, weak postgraduate research ecosystems, and inadequate opportunities for collaboration. These findings resonate strongly with the reflections presented in this study. My experience at the University of Oldenburg illustrated how a supportive institutional environment can create conditions

in which researchers devote greater attention to critical inquiry, methodological rigor, and scholarly dialogue. At the same time, returning to Tanzania reinforced the reality that sustaining such practices requires institutional commitment rather than individual motivation alone. Consequently, strengthening research capacity in African universities should involve deliberate investment in research-support systems alongside the development of individual researchers.

The findings further demonstrate that research culture plays a central role in shaping academic identity. During the research stay, I gradually moved from perceiving myself primarily as a doctoral student completing a dissertation to understanding myself as an emerging member of an international community of scholars. This transformation occurred because participation in the host institution extended beyond research activities to include academic discussions, collaborative learning, intellectual debate, and engagement with researchers from different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds. The opportunity to contribute ideas, receive constructive criticism, and participate in scholarly conversations strengthened both confidence and a sense of belonging within academia.

This observation is consistent with Liu and Shi (2025), who found that doctoral students construct academic identities through a process of academic embeddedness and enculturation within scholarly communities. Their study demonstrates that identity formation is shaped by participation in academic activities, engagement in scholarly dialogue, development of research networks, and recognition by members of the academic community. Likewise, organizational environments and disciplinary cultures influence how doctoral researchers perceive themselves and their future roles within academia. The experiences described in this paper closely mirror these findings. My academic identity was strengthened not merely because I travelled to Germany but because I became embedded within a scholarly environment that valued participation, critical engagement, and intellectual contribution.

Similarly, Phan (2023) argues that international doctoral students develop stronger academic identities when they are empowered by supervisors and recognised by colleagues as legitimate contributors to knowledge production. Academic identity, therefore, is not simply conferred through enrolment in a doctoral programme or completion of a degree; it is socially negotiated through recognition, participation, and agency within academic communities. The present study supports this conclusion. Constructive interactions with supervisors and researchers at the host institution encouraged me to contribute ideas confidently, defend methodological decisions, and participate actively in scholarly discussions. These experiences gradually transformed my understanding of myself from a recipient of knowledge into an emerging producer of knowledge.

However, the present study extends the existing literature in an important way. Much of the contemporary research focuses on academic identity formation during the mobility period itself. By contrast, this reflection demonstrates that identity development continues after researchers return to their home institutions. The knowledge, confidence,

and professional values acquired during the research stay subsequently influenced my teaching practices, postgraduate supervision, research mentoring, and academic leadership. This observation is consistent with the findings of Ai, Zhang, and Kostogriz (2024), who reported that returning doctoral graduates continue reconstructing their professional identities after returning to their home universities while negotiating local institutional expectations and international academic experiences. Their study also highlights that returnees often face challenges in transferring newly acquired practices into existing institutional contexts. My experience similarly revealed that the value of international mobility lies not only in learning abroad but also in adapting that learning to strengthen institutional practice after returning home.

The findings therefore suggest that academic identity should be understood as a dynamic and lifelong process rather than a fixed outcome achieved upon graduation. Identity evolves as researchers participate in different scholarly communities, assume new professional responsibilities, and integrate diverse academic experiences into their own research and teaching practices. International mobility accelerates this process because it exposes researchers to alternative research cultures that challenge existing assumptions while expanding intellectual horizons.

From a policy perspective, these findings have important implications for universities and scholarship providers. International research mobility programmes should be designed not only to facilitate research completion but also to promote meaningful participation within host academic communities. Similarly, universities in Africa should strengthen institutional research cultures by creating regular research seminars, expanding interdisciplinary collaboration, protecting research time, investing in digital research infrastructure, and supporting postgraduate research communities. Such initiatives would enable returning scholars to sustain and disseminate the practices acquired during international mobility, thereby multiplying the benefits of these programmes across departments and institutions.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that research culture and academic identity are inseparable dimensions of researcher development. International mobility becomes transformative not simply because researchers cross national borders but because they become active participants in scholarly communities that reshape how they think, conduct research, collaborate with others, and understand their responsibilities as academics. In this regard, the study contributes to the growing body of literature by showing that the enduring value of research mobility lies in its capacity to strengthen both individual researchers and the institutional research cultures to which they subsequently return.

6.3 Doctoral Supervision, Scholarly Independence, and Researcher Agency

Another important finding of this study is that effective doctoral supervision extends beyond providing technical guidance on research methodology or monitoring thesis progress. My experience during the research stay demonstrated that high-quality supervision is fundamentally a developmental process through which supervisors

cultivate intellectual independence, critical thinking, scholarly confidence, and researcher agency. Rather than directing every aspect of the research process, supervisors at the University of Oldenburg consistently challenged doctoral candidates to justify methodological decisions, defend theoretical positions, evaluate evidence critically, and reflect on alternative interpretations. This supervisory approach gradually transformed my understanding of supervision from a process of academic control to one of intellectual empowerment.

This finding concurs with Wichmann-Hansen and Nielsen (2024), who examined the relationship between supervisory practices and doctoral student independence in Denmark. Their study found that although doctoral students require guidance, excessive directive supervision may inadvertently reduce their independence and capacity for autonomous decision-making. Conversely, supervisory practices that combine appropriate advice with opportunities for independent judgement contribute significantly to researcher autonomy and long-term scholarly competence. My experience strongly supports this conclusion. During the research stay, supervisors rarely provided direct solutions to research problems. Instead, they posed probing questions that encouraged deeper reflection and required doctoral researchers to assume responsibility for defending their own academic decisions. This approach gradually strengthened my confidence in making methodological and theoretical choices independently rather than relying exclusively on supervisory direction.

The findings also align with Guarimata-Salinas *et al.* (2024), who argue that the role of the doctoral supervisor has expanded considerably in response to the internationalization of doctoral education. Their multinational study involving universities from 116 countries identified eighteen complementary functions of doctoral supervisors, including mentor, facilitator, academic adviser, motivator, evaluator, cultural mediator, and professional role model. The authors conclude that contemporary doctoral supervision should not be understood merely as oversight of dissertation completion but as a multidimensional relationship that supports intellectual, professional, and personal development. My observations during the research stay reinforce this perspective. Supervisors were not only methodological experts but also facilitators of scholarly dialogue who created opportunities for intellectual growth through constructive critique, academic discussion, and encouragement of independent inquiry.

The intercultural dimension of supervision was equally evident during the mobility experience. As an international doctoral researcher working within a different academic and cultural environment, I recognised that effective supervision required sensitivity to differences in educational backgrounds, communication styles, research traditions, and cultural expectations. Constructive supervisory relationships were characterised by openness, mutual respect, empathy, and clear communication rather than assumptions that all doctoral candidates shared identical academic experiences.

These observations are consistent with Showunmi *et al.* (2024), whose rapid review of inclusive doctoral supervision argues that intercultural supervision should prioritise

multicultural competence, inclusive communication, and recognition of diverse academic identities. Their review identified power relations, communication barriers, cultural misunderstanding, and limited belonging as common challenges experienced by international doctoral students. The authors recommend that supervisors intentionally develop culturally responsive supervisory practices that foster trust, participation, and equitable learning opportunities. During my research stay, inclusive interactions with supervisors and colleagues created a sense of belonging that encouraged active participation in academic discussions and reduced anxiety associated with working in an unfamiliar research environment.

Similarly, Pinto (2024) found that international doctoral students place considerable value on supervisors who demonstrate empathy, availability, flexibility, cultural awareness, and effective communication. Students in that study emphasised that understanding their educational backgrounds and cultural contexts significantly enhanced the quality of supervision and facilitated academic adjustment. These findings closely mirror my own experience. Supervisors who recognised the diverse experiences of international researchers were better able to encourage meaningful scholarly participation while respecting different approaches to learning and research. Such supervision strengthened both academic confidence and researcher identity.

An additional insight emerging from this study concerns the relationship between supervision and researcher agency. Rather than treating doctoral candidates as passive recipients of expert knowledge, the research environment encouraged researchers to become active contributors to scholarly conversations. Agency was demonstrated through independent reading, critical engagement with literature, participation in seminars, presentation of emerging ideas, and willingness to defend methodological decisions using evidence. These practices gradually shifted responsibility for learning from the supervisor to the researcher.

Recent scholarship increasingly recognises agency as a defining characteristic of successful doctoral education. International doctoral researchers develop professionally when they are encouraged to participate actively in knowledge construction rather than merely comply with supervisory instructions. Such participation strengthens confidence, scholarly judgement, and long-term research capability. The present study therefore supports emerging perspectives that conceptualise supervision as a collaborative intellectual partnership rather than a hierarchical transmission of knowledge.

Nevertheless, this study extends the existing literature in several important respects. Much contemporary research on doctoral supervision concentrates on supervisory practices within host institutions or during the period of international study. By contrast, this reflection demonstrates that supervisory experiences continue influencing researchers after they return to their home institutions. The supervisory philosophy encountered during the research stay has significantly shaped my subsequent practice as a university lecturer and postgraduate supervisor. Rather than emphasising procedural compliance, I increasingly encourage students to justify methodological decisions, critique existing literature, defend conceptual arguments, and

develop intellectual ownership of their research projects. Consequently, the influence of international supervision extends beyond doctoral completion to shape future supervisory relationships and institutional research culture.

These findings have important implications for doctoral education in African universities. Strengthening postgraduate supervision should involve more than increasing supervisory capacity or reducing supervisor-to-student ratios. Universities should invest in supervisor development programmes that emphasise inclusive supervision, intercultural competence, constructive feedback, mentoring skills, and strategies for promoting doctoral student independence. Such initiatives would contribute not only to improved completion rates but also to the development of confident, independent, and internationally competitive researchers.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that effective doctoral supervision is a cornerstone of researcher development. The findings reinforce contemporary scholarship suggesting that supervision should cultivate scholarly independence, researcher agency, intercultural understanding, and critical inquiry rather than simple compliance with academic requirements. By illustrating how these supervisory experiences continued shaping my research, teaching, supervision, and academic leadership after returning to Tanzania, the study contributes further evidence that the impact of international doctoral supervision extends well beyond the mobility period and plays an important role in strengthening research capacity within home institutions.

6.4 Digital Research Infrastructure, Information Literacy, and Scholarly Productivity

Another important finding emerging from this study is that digital research infrastructure substantially influenced the quality, efficiency, and depth of scholarly work undertaken during the research stay. My experience at the University of Oldenburg demonstrated that access to comprehensive electronic databases, institutional repositories, digital library services, reference management software, and research support systems enabled researchers to devote more time to critical analysis and knowledge production than to searching for information. More importantly, I learned that access to digital resources alone is insufficient; researchers must also possess advanced information literacy and digital research competencies to use these resources effectively.

This finding is consistent with Sulehri (2024), who found that information literacy skills and digital skills significantly improve knowledge sharing and research productivity among university academics. The study demonstrated that researchers who possess strong competencies in searching, evaluating, organizing, and communicating digital information are more productive than those who rely primarily on conventional approaches to accessing scholarly resources. The present study confirms these findings. During the research stay, digital research tools enhanced not only the efficiency of literature retrieval but also the quality of evidence synthesis, academic writing, and scholarly communication. Consequently, digital competence became an essential component of researcher development rather than merely a technical skill.

The findings also support Prakasha *et al.* (2024), who demonstrated that structured digital research training significantly improves doctoral researchers' ability to conduct literature reviews, manage references, analyse research data, and communicate scientific findings. Their study argues that doctoral education should deliberately integrate digital research competencies because contemporary scholarship increasingly depends on technology-supported research environments. My experience strongly supports this conclusion. The research stay exposed me to digital practices that extended beyond accessing online journals. Researchers routinely employed reference-management software, collaborative digital platforms, institutional repositories, and electronic research support systems to improve the quality and transparency of their work. These experiences fundamentally changed my understanding of how digital technologies support the entire research process rather than isolated research activities.

Similarly, Deja, Wójcik, and Świerczyńska-Głownia (2025) argue that a strong digital information culture within doctoral schools depends on three interconnected dimensions: access to digital information, institutional research support, and participation in communities of inquiry. According to their review, doctoral researchers develop more effectively when digital infrastructure is integrated into institutional research culture rather than treated simply as technological infrastructure. The present reflection reinforces this argument. At the University of Oldenburg, digital infrastructure functioned as part of a broader research ecosystem where librarians, supervisors, researchers, and digital services collectively supported scholarly inquiry. Thus, digital resources were embedded within everyday academic practice rather than existing as isolated technological facilities.

Another important lesson concerned information literacy. Although electronic databases provide unprecedented access to scholarly literature, researchers must still evaluate the quality, credibility, relevance, and methodological rigor of available information. My experience demonstrated that effective literature reviews depend not on the quantity of sources identified but on researchers' ability to search systematically, evaluate evidence critically, synthesize competing arguments, and identify conceptual and methodological gaps.

This finding aligns with the ILDoc model developed by Sobielga *et al.* (2024), which demonstrated that doctoral researchers require advanced information literacy competencies extending beyond basic database searching. Their study identified information evaluation, critical synthesis, ethical information use, and evidence management as fundamental competencies for doctoral research. Likewise, Kim, Hong, and Evans (2024) found that data literacy has become an equally important component of higher education research because researchers increasingly manage large and complex datasets requiring advanced analytical and ethical competencies. Collectively, these studies suggest that doctoral education should integrate information literacy and data literacy as central components of researcher training rather than optional support services.

The findings are also particularly relevant for African higher education institutions. Nalaila and Eliab (2024), studying public universities in Tanzania, reported that although students increasingly access digital technologies, substantial disparities remain in digital literacy competencies required for effective academic learning. Similarly, Shikali and Muneja (2024) found that limited internet connectivity, inadequate digital infrastructure, insufficient electronic library collections, and low information literacy continue to constrain effective utilization of digital academic resources in many African universities. These observations resonate with my own reflections after returning to Tanzania. While international mobility exposed me to highly developed digital research environments, it also highlighted the importance of strengthening digital infrastructure and information literacy within African universities if comparable research productivity is to be achieved.

However, the present study extends existing literature in two important respects. First, previous studies primarily examine the relationship between digital competence and research productivity during doctoral training. This reflection demonstrates that digital competencies acquired during international mobility continue influencing researchers after they return to their home institutions. The digital research practices learned during the research stay subsequently enhanced my postgraduate supervision, literature review strategies, research mentoring, and academic writing. Second, while much of the literature focuses on technological infrastructure, my experience suggests that digital transformation in doctoral education depends equally on institutional culture. Technology becomes meaningful only when researchers receive continuous training, institutional support, and opportunities to integrate digital tools into everyday scholarly practice.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. Universities should recognise digital research competence as a core graduate attribute for doctoral education. Investment should therefore extend beyond purchasing electronic databases to include systematic training in information literacy, reference management, research data management, digital collaboration, open science, and responsible use of artificial intelligence. Likewise, scholarship programmes supporting international mobility should incorporate structured opportunities for researchers to transfer digital research skills to colleagues and postgraduate students upon returning to their home institutions. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that digital research infrastructure and information literacy are indispensable components of contemporary researcher development. International mobility strengthened not only my access to digital resources but also my ability to use those resources critically, ethically, and strategically. Consequently, the study reinforces recent scholarship arguing that digital competence has become an essential dimension of doctoral education while extending this literature by demonstrating how digital learning acquired through international mobility contributes to long-term institutional capacity building after researchers return to their home universities.

6.5 Intercultural Competence, International Networking, and Researcher Resilience

Another important finding of this study is that the research short stay contributed significantly to the development of intercultural competence, international networking, and personal resilience. Although these competencies were not explicitly stated as objectives of the mobility programme, they gradually emerged through everyday interactions with scholars from different countries, adaptation to unfamiliar institutional practices, and engagement with diverse academic and social environments. The findings suggest that these competencies are not peripheral outcomes of international mobility but constitute essential components of contemporary researcher development.

The findings regarding intercultural competence are consistent with Bartel-Radic and Cucchi (2025), who found that the development of intercultural competence during international mobility depends not merely on physical relocation but on meaningful interaction with people, institutions, and academic practices in the host environment. Their study demonstrated that students who actively participated in academic and social activities developed stronger communication skills, cultural adaptability, empathy, and openness to diversity than those whose experiences remained largely confined to academic tasks. My experience closely mirrors these findings. The research stay enabled me to engage with scholars from different cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary backgrounds, requiring continuous adaptation in communication, collaboration, and scholarly interaction. These experiences gradually transformed my understanding of intercultural competence from theoretical knowledge into an everyday professional practice.

The findings are further supported by Hanley and Chankseliani (2025), who argue that intercultural competence should not be viewed as a static outcome achieved during mobility but as a dynamic capability that continues developing after researchers return to their home countries. Based on interviews with returnees from forty-three countries, the authors identified communication, flexibility, empathy, resilience, and adaptability as competencies that continued evolving as participants reintegrated into their professional environments. This observation strongly resonates with the present study. The intercultural skills acquired during my stay did not end upon returning to Tanzania. Rather, they have continued shaping my interactions with students, colleagues, postgraduate researchers, and international collaborators. Consequently, international mobility should be understood as initiating an ongoing process of intercultural learning rather than completing it.

The findings also correspond with broader evidence from systematic reviews on higher education internationalisation. André-Das Dores, Delgado-García, and Conde-Vélez (2025) conclude that higher education institutions increasingly recognise intercultural competence as a graduate attribute that should be deliberately integrated into university curricula and internationalisation strategies. Their review further argues that intercultural competence enhances graduates' professional effectiveness because it enables them to collaborate successfully within culturally diverse environments. Likewise, Teng and Cosier (2024) found that internationalisation, whether through

mobility abroad or internationalisation at home, significantly contributes to the development of global competence by strengthening cross-cultural communication, adaptability, and collaborative capacity. These studies reinforce the argument that intercultural competence has become an indispensable attribute for researchers operating within increasingly international academic communities.

Beyond intercultural competence, this study demonstrates that international mobility substantially strengthened international academic networking. During the research stay, relationships established through seminars, research consultations, workshops, and informal discussions created opportunities for future scholarly collaboration. Rather than viewing networking as simply exchanging contact information, I came to understand it as a long-term process of building professional relationships based on shared intellectual interests, mutual respect, and scholarly reciprocity.

This observation agrees with Momeni *et al.* (2022), who demonstrated that internationally mobile researchers generally occupy stronger positions within international collaboration networks than non-mobile researchers. Their findings indicate that mobility expands researchers' scientific visibility and facilitates future collaborative research, co-authorship, and access to international research opportunities. Similarly, Whetsell and Sidorova (2024) argue that international collaboration networks continue expanding despite geopolitical and institutional challenges because they remain central mechanisms for scientific innovation and knowledge exchange. My experience supports these conclusions by illustrating how relatively short-term mobility can establish professional relationships that continue influencing research collaboration and academic engagement long after the mobility period has ended.

Another important dimension emerging from this reflection concerns resilience. International mobility required adaptation to unfamiliar academic expectations, institutional procedures, climatic conditions, communication styles, and everyday social practices. Although these challenges occasionally created uncertainty, they ultimately strengthened my confidence, flexibility, and capacity to function effectively within unfamiliar environments. Rather than representing obstacles to learning, these experiences became opportunities for personal and professional growth.

This finding is consistent with Hanley and Chankseliani (2025), who identified resilience as one of the core competencies developed through international mobility. Their study demonstrates that returnees continue drawing upon resilience acquired during international study as they negotiate institutional constraints and professional responsibilities within their home countries. Likewise, recent research on educational staff mobility found that international experiences strengthen resilience, adaptive leadership, professional confidence, and institutional engagement because participants learn to navigate unfamiliar academic environments while maintaining scholarly productivity.

However, the present study extends the existing literature in several important respects. Most contemporary studies examine intercultural competence, networking, and

resilience as separate outcomes of international mobility. This reflection suggests that these competencies are deeply interconnected. Intercultural competence facilitated the establishment of international professional relationships, while those relationships, in turn, strengthened resilience by creating supportive scholarly networks that extended beyond the mobility period. Consequently, researcher development should be understood as an integrated process in which cognitive, social, cultural, and emotional competencies develop simultaneously through sustained participation in international academic communities.

The findings also contribute to discussions on research-capacity development in African higher education. While considerable attention has been devoted to improving methodological competence and publication productivity, comparatively less emphasis has been placed on developing intercultural competence, international networking, and researcher resilience. Yet these competencies increasingly determine researchers' ability to participate effectively within global knowledge networks, establish international collaborations, attract research funding, supervise internationally diverse postgraduate students, and contribute to globally relevant scholarship.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that universities and scholarship providers should deliberately incorporate intercultural learning, collaborative networking, and resilience-building into international mobility programmes. Pre-departure orientation, intercultural communication workshops, structured networking opportunities, mentoring systems, and post-return reintegration activities would enable researchers to maximise the long-term benefits of mobility. Such initiatives would strengthen not only individual researchers but also institutional internationalisation strategies by creating globally connected academic communities capable of sustaining international collaboration beyond the mobility period.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that intercultural competence, international networking, and resilience are fundamental outcomes of international research mobility. These competencies enabled me not only to adapt successfully within the German academic environment but also to strengthen my subsequent teaching, postgraduate supervision, institutional leadership, and international scholarly engagement after returning to Tanzania. The findings therefore reinforce recent scholarship that conceptualises international mobility as a multidimensional process of researcher development while extending existing literature by illustrating how these competencies continue shaping academic practice well beyond the period of mobility itself.

6.6 International Research Mobility, Knowledge Transfer, and Institutional Capacity Building

The final major finding of this study is that the value of international research mobility should not be assessed solely by the competencies acquired by individual researchers but also by the extent to which these competencies are transferred to their home institutions. Although the research short stay significantly enhanced my methodological competence, academic writing, intercultural awareness, digital research skills, and international

networks, the most enduring impact emerged after returning to Tanzania, where these experiences informed my teaching, postgraduate supervision, academic leadership, research mentoring, and institutional service. This finding suggests that international mobility generates its greatest value when individual learning is transformed into institutional learning.

This finding is consistent with Ai, Zhang, and Kostogriz (2024), who examined the experiences of internationally trained doctoral graduates returning to their home universities. Their study found that returnees often function as knowledge brokers by introducing new research practices, pedagogical approaches, international collaborations, and institutional innovations acquired during their overseas experiences. However, the authors also observed that successful knowledge transfer depends on institutional readiness, leadership support, and opportunities for returnees to apply their newly acquired competencies. My experience strongly supports this conclusion. The research stay broadened my understanding of research methodology, supervision, and scholarly engagement, but the practical value of these experiences became evident only after I was able to apply them in postgraduate supervision, curriculum development, departmental leadership, and institutional quality improvement. Consequently, the benefits of mobility should be evaluated not only by learning abroad but also by the capacity to translate that learning into institutional practice.

The findings also corroborate Gu *et al.* (2024), who demonstrated that international research mobility strengthens scientific collaboration and research productivity by expanding researchers' professional networks and facilitating knowledge exchange across institutions. Their study argues that mobility contributes to scientific advancement because researchers act as channels through which ideas, research methods, and innovations circulate between universities and countries. The present study confirms this argument while extending it beyond research productivity. My reflection indicates that knowledge circulation also occurs through teaching, supervision, mentoring, academic leadership, and institutional decision-making. Thus, returning researchers contribute not only through publications but also through strengthening institutional research culture and postgraduate education.

Similarly, Brandenburg *et al.* (2020) argue that the contemporary purpose of higher education internationalisation should extend beyond individual mobility to encompass broader societal and institutional benefits. According to the authors, internationalisation should contribute to institutional transformation, curriculum improvement, research quality, community engagement, and social development. Although their work focuses on internationalisation more broadly, the findings of the present study provide empirical support for this perspective. The research stay demonstrated that international mobility becomes most valuable when acquired knowledge is intentionally shared with colleagues, postgraduate students, and institutional stakeholders rather than remaining an individual achievement.

Another important implication emerging from this reflection concerns research-capacity development within African universities. Recent studies have consistently

argued that strengthening research systems in Africa requires more than increasing the number of doctoral graduates. Cloete, Bailey, and Pillay (2021) contend that sustainable research capacity depends on interconnected investments in human capital, institutional leadership, research infrastructure, international collaboration, and supportive policy environments. Likewise, Fussy (2024) emphasizes that research culture in African universities is strengthened when institutions deliberately support mentoring, interdisciplinary collaboration, dissemination of research findings, and professional development opportunities for academic staff. My experience reinforces these arguments by demonstrating that international mobility should be embedded within broader institutional strategies for research development rather than implemented as isolated scholarship programmes.

The findings also highlight the importance of reintegration after international mobility. While considerable resources are often invested in supporting researchers during their overseas experiences, comparatively less attention is given to how returning scholars are reintegrated into their home institutions. Hanley and Chankseliani (2025) argue that the competencies acquired during international mobility continue evolving after researchers return home and that institutions should provide opportunities for returnees to utilise these competencies effectively. Their study suggests that reintegration policies, mentoring programmes, collaborative research initiatives, and institutional recognition significantly influence the long-term impact of mobility. This observation closely aligns with my experience. Opportunities to apply the knowledge acquired during the research stay through teaching, supervision, academic leadership, and departmental activities enabled the benefits of mobility to extend beyond personal development toward institutional improvement.

The present study further extends the literature by demonstrating that knowledge transfer is multidimensional. Existing studies frequently evaluate return mobility through research publications, collaborative projects, or international partnerships. While these indicators remain important, my reflection suggests that knowledge transfer also occurs through less visible but equally significant activities, including redesigning research methodology courses, improving postgraduate supervision, strengthening students' academic writing, introducing new digital research tools, encouraging critical thinking, and promoting research integrity. These contributions are difficult to quantify using conventional performance indicators, yet they may have substantial long-term effects on institutional research quality.

The findings also have important policy implications for governments, scholarship agencies, and higher education institutions. First, international mobility programmes should include structured reintegration strategies that encourage returning researchers to disseminate acquired knowledge through seminars, workshops, mentoring, curriculum review, and collaborative research. Second, universities should create enabling environments that allow returnees to apply new competencies by supporting innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional research development. Third, scholarship providers should evaluate programme success using broader

indicators that include institutional impact, postgraduate supervision, curriculum enhancement, and research-capacity development in addition to publications and research outputs.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the success of international research mobility should be judged not only by what researchers accomplish while abroad but also by the enduring contributions they make after returning to their home institutions. The findings therefore reinforce recent scholarship that conceptualises international mobility as a mechanism for institutional capacity building while extending existing knowledge by illustrating how individual transformation can stimulate broader improvements in teaching, supervision, research culture, academic leadership, and higher education development. From this perspective, international mobility represents not merely an investment in individual researchers but a strategic investment in the long-term development of universities and national research systems.

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education institutions, governments, scholarship providers, research centres, doctoral supervisors, and doctoral researchers, particularly within Africa. The reflections demonstrate that international research mobility should be conceptualized as a strategic investment in researcher development and institutional capacity rather than merely an opportunity for individual academic advancement.

7.1 Implications for Universities

Universities should reposition international research mobility as an integral component of doctoral education rather than an optional academic experience. Recent scholarship emphasizes that mobility programmes are most effective when they are embedded within institutional strategies for research capacity development, internationalization, and researcher professional development (Gu *et al.*, 2024; Hernández-Torrano *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, universities should establish long-term partnerships with international institutions that enable doctoral researchers to participate in research stays, collaborative projects, joint supervision, and international research networks.

The findings further suggest that universities should strengthen their internal research cultures by providing regular research seminars, interdisciplinary forums, writing retreats, mentorship programmes, and opportunities for collaborative scholarship. Although international mobility exposes researchers to productive research environments, sustainable institutional transformation requires home universities to create conditions that enable returning scholars to apply and disseminate newly acquired knowledge. This observation supports Fussy (2024), who argues that sustainable research culture in African universities depends upon institutional leadership, research governance, mentoring, collaboration, and continuous capacity development.

Investment in digital research infrastructure should also become an institutional priority. Universities should expand access to electronic databases, institutional repositories, reference-management software, research-data management systems, and digital collaboration platforms. However, technological investment should be complemented by continuous training in information literacy, research data management, open science, and responsible use of artificial intelligence to ensure that researchers can use digital resources effectively and ethically (Prakasha *et al.*, 2024; Sobielga *et al.*, 2024).

7.2 Implications for Governments and Scholarship Providers

The study indicates that governments and scholarship agencies should evaluate international mobility programmes using broader indicators than publication outputs alone. While publications, conference presentations, and collaborative projects remain important, programme evaluation should also consider researcher identity development, supervisory competence, academic leadership, institutional contribution, curriculum improvement, and postgraduate mentoring.

Scholarship providers such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and similar organizations should strengthen post-mobility reintegration initiatives by supporting returnee seminars, collaborative research grants, alumni research networks, and institutional knowledge-transfer programmes. Recent studies demonstrate that the long-term impact of mobility depends substantially on opportunities available after researchers return to their home institutions (Hanley & Chankseliani, 2025; Ai *et al.*, 2024). Structured reintegration therefore maximizes the institutional benefits of international mobility while strengthening national research systems.

Governments should likewise continue investing in international research partnerships while simultaneously strengthening domestic research infrastructure. International mobility should complement, not replace, investment in national universities, postgraduate education, research funding, and innovation systems.

7.3 Implications for Doctoral Supervision

The findings demonstrate that effective doctoral supervision extends beyond monitoring research progress to fostering intellectual independence, researcher agency, and scholarly confidence. Universities should therefore provide continuous professional development programmes for doctoral supervisors focusing on constructive feedback, intercultural supervision, mentoring, researcher wellbeing, ethical supervision, and strategies for promoting critical thinking.

The study also suggests that supervisors should encourage doctoral candidates to participate actively in research seminars, international conferences, collaborative research projects, and scholarly networks. Such participation accelerates researcher development by exposing candidates to diverse perspectives, constructive criticism, and international academic communities. Contemporary literature consistently shows that researcher development is enhanced when doctoral candidates become active

participants in scholarly communities rather than passive recipients of supervisory guidance (Quiroz-Schulz, 2024; Guarimata-Salinas *et al.*, 2024).

7.4 Implications for Doctoral Researchers

For doctoral researchers, the findings highlight the importance of approaching international mobility as an opportunity for comprehensive professional development rather than solely for data collection or dissertation completion. Researchers should deliberately engage in seminars, workshops, research discussions, academic networking, and intercultural experiences because many of the most valuable lessons emerge through active participation rather than formal academic activities alone.

The findings further suggest that doctoral researchers should cultivate habits of reflective practice throughout their mobility experiences. Maintaining reflective journals, documenting professional learning, participating in scholarly discussions, and critically analysing experiences can enhance learning and facilitate subsequent knowledge transfer. Reflection transforms international experiences into enduring professional competencies by enabling researchers to connect personal experiences with broader scholarly debates.

Finally, doctoral researchers should recognize that the value of international mobility continues after returning home. Applying newly acquired knowledge through teaching, supervision, institutional leadership, collaborative research, and mentoring represents an important academic responsibility that extends the benefits of mobility beyond individual career development.

8. Conclusion

This paper critically reflected on the lessons learned during two research short stays at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, undertaken a year apart by two doctoral researchers pursuing doctoral studies in Educational Research and Evaluation at Moi University, Kenya. Using a reflective collaborative autoethnographic approach, the study examined how participation in an international research environment influenced researcher development, academic identity, research culture, scholarly independence, digital competence, intercultural learning, international networking, resilience, doctoral supervision, and institutional engagement.

The findings demonstrate that international research mobility is a multidimensional educational process that extends far beyond geographical relocation or temporary institutional affiliation. The research stay strengthened methodological competence, critical academic writing, information literacy, research integrity, scholarly confidence, and professional identity while simultaneously expanding international research networks and intercultural competence. More importantly, these competencies continued influencing teaching, postgraduate supervision, academic leadership, and institutional practice after returning to the home university.

The study confirms recent scholarship suggesting that the greatest value of international mobility lies in active participation within the academic culture of the host institution rather than physical mobility itself (Quiroz-Schulz, 2024; Hanley & Chankseliani, 2025). At the same time, it extends existing literature by demonstrating that the long-term impact of mobility should be evaluated through the contribution of returning researchers to institutional research culture, postgraduate education, academic leadership, and research-capacity development. In this regard, the paper contributes an African perspective to the growing literature on doctoral education and international academic mobility, an area that has historically been dominated by evidence from Europe, North America, and East Asia.

The study also contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of reflective autoethnography in understanding dimensions of researcher development that are often overlooked by quantitative evaluations of mobility programmes. Through systematic reflection supported by contemporary literature, the paper illustrates how personal academic experiences can generate broader insights into doctoral education, researcher identity, and higher education internationalization.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations. As a reflective account based on the experiences of two researchers from the same doctoral programme and the same host institution, the findings remain context-specific and should not be generalized to all doctoral researchers or all international mobility programmes. Experiences may differ according to disciplinary background, host institution, duration of mobility, supervisory relationships, funding arrangements, and national context. Future research could adopt comparative multi-case studies involving doctoral researchers from different countries, disciplines, and mobility programmes to examine similarities and differences in researcher development across contexts. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining how the effects of international mobility evolve over time and influence academic careers, institutional leadership, and research productivity.

In conclusion, this study argues that international research mobility should be regarded as a strategic investment in both individual researchers and institutional development. The success of mobility programmes should therefore be measured not only by publications or completed dissertations but also by the extent to which returning scholars strengthen research culture, mentor future researchers, improve postgraduate education, expand international collaboration, and contribute to solving educational and societal challenges. Ultimately, the true legacy of an international research stay is reflected not in the period spent abroad but in the enduring transformation of the researcher and the lasting contribution made to the home institution, the wider academic community, and society.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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