What happens while we wait – a qualitative study on international students trust relationships during a policy change

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ABSTRACT,
Recently, the Dutch government has introduced a new policy, the Balanced Internationalisation Act, which limits international students studying in the Netherlands due to changing language requirements. The previously international student community of the Netherlands is therefore affected by this. This paper seeks to identify in what ways students´ trust relationships with their university are affected while they wait to see how the policy concerns them. Through interviews with international students at a specific Dutch university, these factors were identified and interpreted, based on an existing model explaining the vulnerability phase.

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AI Disclaimer:
"*During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT in order to form interview questions into easier English as well as to generate broad ideas. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.*"

Keywords
Vulnerability phase, student-university trust relationship, focal vulnerability, Balanced Internationalisation Act

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1. INTRODUCTION

After graduation from high school, most students enter a period of uncertainty (Savickas, 1999). Uncertainty about what next step to take, unsure of what the next period of their lives should look like. Many decide to enrol in higher education, to broaden their knowledge and acquire essential skills for their future careers (Twenge & Donnelly, 2016). The University of Twente offers these searching students three years of high-quality education and more, with their mission of: being the ultimate people-first university of technology (Universiteit Twente, n.d., *Our mission and vision*). In registering for a program at this university the student not only agreed to an educational contract but also entered a trust relationship with their institution, trusting that they will provide them with educational courses and a good study experience. This relationship involves a willingness to be vulnerable. This vulnerability manifests in the risk, that the university might not fulfil the students' expectations, that they will not provide them with a quality education or degree. Within their study period, students make decisions and commit acts of trust like paying their tuition in advance without having received any services. These focal vulnerabilities expose them to potential harm, as the outcome of decisions is unknown (Hamm et al., 2024).

As of 2023, the Dutch government has introduced a new legislation, the Balanced Internationalisation Act (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2023). This policy aims at reducing the number of English-speaking programs currently offered at Dutch universities to one-third, as well as not introducing new ones (Van Der Bij, 2024). In addition to that, the general enrolment numbers of international students shall be capped. This policy has been established in reaction to cuts in government spending and the hope to preserve the Dutch language, as well as to prevent overcrowding in lecture halls (Kerr, 2024). This new policy will affect many international students, also at the University of Twente in Enschede, whose international students currently make up 35 percent of the whole student body (Universiteit Twente, n.d., *Facts & Figures*). Upon registering at the University of Twente, many students were not aware of the change happening within the Dutch system and many are still not. The contract they have made with their institution and the relationship they have entered has changed. Therefore, the trust relationship has changed.

Considering this new change in a previously stable trust relationship, the research question of this thesis is*: In what ways does context impact a trust relationship in times of waiting?*

To answer this question, this thesis builds on the general puzzle (Dorobantu et al., 2024) of how students experience vulnerability in their relationship with their university. Existing trust research, such as a model by Mayer et al. (1995) focus on trust formation and what environment needs to be established in order for trust to grow. The Vulnerability Phase Model by Ballinger et al. (2024) makes a first conceptual attempt at explaining a vulnerability phase in a trust relationship. This thesis will attempt to empirically follow up on this concept by applying the model to a real-life changing system to gain a better understanding of how students at the University of Twente experience vulnerability and how it shapes their behaviour.

This thesis topic can be considered relevant due to many factors. First of all, by researching this direct case of the Balanced Internationalisation Act, this study explored the impact that new university or government policies have on students' uncertainty about their academic and professional futures. Trust in an institution is a critical factor for students in their academic career (Lewicka, 2022), and this study examined the effect a change in policy can have on a student. This is currently relevant and will stay important, as new changes will be applied in the future in times like these where the landscape of higher education is changing (Yanan, 2024). Second, the use of the Vulnerability Phase Model (Ballinger et al., 2024) will be new to the context of academia. Thus far, this model has only been applied to the business context in organisational trust research and therefore is unexplored in its application to higher education policy shifts. The study conducted for this thesis will expand the use of the model and apply it to a new angle by exploring how students react to change and uncertainty, here in the case of policy changes.

The motivation behind this thesis lies in not only personal interest but also personal stake in the policy change. Current news articles focus mainly on what influence the implementation of the Balanced Internationalisation Act will have on the economy and political situation in the country (Van Der Bij, 2024), and how this change may reduce the Netherlands´ status as a knowledge country (Cohen, 2000). Thus far, there are no studies which pay attention to the students affected by this issue, that investigates their lived experiences in this time of change. International students are an integral part of the community at the University of Twente, which prides itself on this diversity (Mkatini et al., 2022). Therefore, their reactions to this policy change can have a big impact on the future development of policies. When students' opinions and experiences are being considered, more inclusive and sustainable policies can be created, encouraging legitimacy of policy decisions (Alderman et al., 2012). In addition to that, exploring their perspectives can lead to a change in how new policies will be communicated with the student body. Learning about these policy changes early and not being left in the dark about their development will lessen students' anxiety about the change and will reduce the damage on the trust relationship, as there will be no feelings of betrayal (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Though this issue impacts students the most, they have been mainly left in the dark about changes happening at their own institution. This study can provide a student-centred perspective on the matter, hopefully ensuring that students´ psychological and behavioural reactions in this vulnerability phase will be taken into consideration, as they are most affected.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The themes of trust and vulnerability, as well as the effect of new policies have been explored in literature, by themselves, but also in regard to the student-university relationship. Some important concepts have been explored in this section.

2.1 Trust and vulnerability

According to Dietz (2011), trust can be defined as the trustors willingness to accept vulnerability towards the trustee. The trust relationship between an organisation and an employer can be viewed similarly to the student university relationship, which has been echoed in organisational behavioural and Human Resource Management literature. In this context, trust is seen as a key mechanism that helps influence behaviour and performance, leading to stronger commitment, as long as the practices are supportive and respectful (Vanhala & Dietz, 2015). A study by Blaskova et al. (2015) highlighted that a student-university relationship needs to emphasise respect, support and ethical behaviour. Students not only value academic quality, but a perfect university for them also provides an environment in which relational and emotional aspects are valued, such as being listened to, being involved in decisions or receiving fair treatment. Students therefore also need to perceive the policy change to their best interest rather than only in support of the organisation for the change to have a positive effect on their academic and emotional relationships. In an article by Searle et al. (2011) this trust relationship was explored and they found that trust is enhanced by involvement in practices and perceiving them as fair. Applying this to the context of students, their exclusion from decision making regarding new policies and vague communication of those leads to distrust and with it increased focal vulnerability (Hamm et al., 2024). Focal vulnerability according to Hamm et al. (2024) is defined by three characteristics. First, the perception that they might get harmed by entering this trust relationship due to a lack of information. Second, that vulnerability is relational, the same way trust is, meaning that the trustor believes that the trustee should take responsibility for potential harm. Lastly, focal vulnerability perception changes over time and has need for temporal specificity. Enabling a new policy that affects students without their input could be seen as organisational control. In an article by Weibel et al. (2015) the effect of organisational control is explored. The differentiation between enabling and coercive control is made, showcasing how only good control can build trust whereas bad control leads to a decline in trust relationships. The Balanced Internationalisation Act and with it the limitations on international students could be perceived as coercive control by students, explaining a possible decline in trust and increase in experienced vulnerability towards their organisation.

A students trust in their institution is crucial, as it boosts enrolment rates, retention rates, quality perception and positive word of mouth (Carvalho & De Oliveira Mota, 2010). A study by Carvalho and De Oliveira Mota (2010) examines the importance of this trust relationship. According to the authors, when students trust their institution, they recognise both emotional and functional value, meaning they feel emotionally supported and perceive their education of high quality. These two perceptions then influence students' loyalty, which increases their willingness to stay enrolled and recommend their institution to others. This finding shows that trust is not only a factor in a positive study experience, but also a driver in commitment and a driver in the student-university trust relationship. In addition to that, the study shows that universities can receive positive benefits from their student relationships like

recommendations or returns for future degrees, if management puts students' interest ahead of the institutions in regard to administrative policies. These studies therefore show that the university could also draw benefits from maintaining positive trust relationships with its students.

2.2 Vulnerability Phase Model

Ballinger and Schurman's Vulnerability Phase model (2024) focuses on the time while waiting, on what happens when the trust relationship has been entered but the outcome is still unknown. This in-between phase of waiting can be a time of many different psychological states, namely, anxiety, fear or hope. An illustration of the model can be seen in Figure 1. The model identifies four moderators that shape the vulnerability experience. The first one is time. The longer the outcome is unknown, the stronger the emotions of hope or fear can get. The second factor is resource importance, which refers to the value of the outcome of the trust process. Should there be a change in this value during the waiting period, vulnerability intensifies or decreases. The third factors is strength of a relationship. If the relationship between the trustor and trustee was strong at the start, vulnerability might decrease, but there is now an increased risk of betrayal. The last factor is regulatory focus. This is based on the regulatory focus theory by Higgins (1998). Depending on whether the individual is promotion or prevention focused, they interpret uncertainty differently, with either a focus on growth or risk. The process that the model follows, shows how after a trust decision is made, the vulnerability phase begins. The phase in which someone experiences uncertainty, anxiety and overall lack of control. This phase is then influenced by the four factors just described, as they shape the vulnerability experience. Then, the trustor forms an emotional reaction over the process, before the outcome is known, they feel hopeful or fearful over the result. The emotion experienced then influences the behaviour accordingly. The vulnerability phase ends with the result of the trust decision, whose outcome either confirms or violates the trust that was previously placed on the trustee. The outcome of the decision is not only shaped by the result but also the emotions experienced during the wait, showcasing the importance of the vulnerability period.

Figure 1. Vulnerability Phase Model (Ballinger et al., 2024)

Note: P = Proposition.
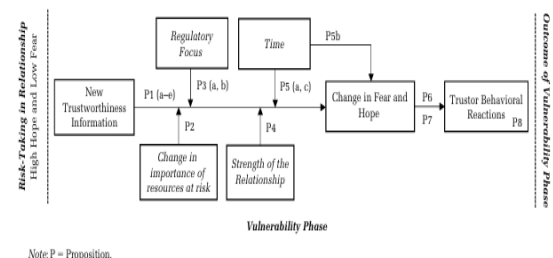
2.3 Policy changes

The Balanced Internationalisation Act is not the first policy change to be implemented and affect students and their trust relationship. A study by Lo (2025) explored different policy changes in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The author found that trust is severely affected by perception of justice. If students do not feel like their voices are being

heard in a decision-making process, especially in issues affecting them, mistrust grows, and tension arises. Transparency on the other hand increases trust, even if outcomes of the policy change do not fully align with the students' expectations. In the context of the Balanced Internationalisation Act this leads to the assumption that implementing a restrictive policy towards international students can erase trust and heighten vulnerability. Students may perceive the new governance as unjust and exclusionary, leading to feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, fear and mistrust.

Another study by Betkó et al. (2022) also explored the impact of a policy change. This study did not specifically target university politics, but rather the impact on individuals trust relationships to different institutions. The authors found that if policy changes are perceived as unfair, political and social trust decline. Similar to the study by Lo (2025) they also attributed this decline in trust to unfairness, exclusion, unmet expectations and a lack of transparency. Following those attributes, students will also feel increased vulnerability if they perceive their university to lack transparency. This could damage relational trust and the supportive educational environment once provided by their institution.

In addition to that, the unique relationship between a student and an organisation increases the vulnerability, as there is a lack of a solid foundation protecting their stay at the university compared to the organisational context of an employment contract (Gaffney-Rhys & Jones, 2009). There is a difference in power dynamic amongst students and employees, as students are fully dependant on their organisation to access resources and opportunities (Symonds, 2020). This increased vulnerability is explored in a study by Bartolic et al. (2022). The study focussed on students increased vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic, where changes happened fast and were inevitable due to the foreign environmental circumstances. In comparison to that, the Balanced Internationalisation Act is being introduced slowly over time, deviating from previously explored policy changes. This study will provide a new angle by showing how students trust, and vulnerability is affected during a slow shift.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN
3.1 Research method
The study conducted for this thesis is of qualitative nature. Interviews were conducted with semi-structured, open-ended questions. In making the questions semi-structured, the answers will be more unique and personal, grasping wider perspectives due to the openness of the questions and their lack of strict answering parameters (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interviews followed a set of guiding themes and open-ended questions, which can be substituted further with follow up questions should further issues arise. The goal of these interviews was to gather first hand experiences of the students on their current trust relationships and any changes due to the changing context they are facing at their institution.

3.2 Sampling
For the interviews a sample of fifteen students was gathered. This number was determined after a study by Guest et al. (2005) showed that the saturation point of new information, in many interview studies, lies at twelve interviews. The additional three ensure sufficient data in case some participants choose to not answer questions or

data gets lost because of technical difficulties. The sampling method selected was purposive sampling. This method chooses participants that possess certain criteria that the researcher is looking for and are therefore best suited for the study (Etikan, 2016). The sample taken in this study had to fit certain criteria to be chosen for the interview process. The first criterion was to be over eighteen years old; due to ethical concerns, minors were excluded from the study. Second, participants needed to be a student at the University of Twente, as this specific university was chosen as the studies scope. Third, students needed to be international, meaning that they were not born in the Netherlands. This criterion is important, as only international students are affected by the new policy that provides the context for this study. All international students were chosen as they have a relationship with the University. Regardless of the distance to their home country, each student has built a community at this university, in the Netherlands, a second home they could possibly lose. Therefore, they all qualified as participants for this study. The study program or year was not chosen as a criterion, every year and study were eligible. A table of participants demographics can be found in Appendix A.

3.3 Data collection
In order to collect valuable data, an interview guide was created, which can be seen in Appendix B. The guide consists of 13 questions, which are divided into three themes, to ensure a guided structure of the interview and the coverage of all important topics. Before the themed questions, an introduction was given, in which the purpose of the study was explained, and the participants were asked for consent to record the interview. Then, general sampling questions about study year, type and nationality were asked. The first theme pertained to the current trust relationship students have with their institution. An example question for this theme would be: "On a scale from one to ten, how much do you trust the UT?". The second theme asked about the context of the study, the Balanced Internationalisation Act. An example here would be: "When you found out about the BIA, how did you feel?". The third theme then connected the trust relationship to context, investigating possible changes in trust or students' behaviour. An example questions for this theme would be: "While you wait to know what will happen, what do you think or feel the most?". The validity of the interview questions is given due to their direct alignment with the research aim, exploring how internationals students experience vulnerability and trust changes with their institution in response to the Balanced Internationalisation Act. The interview then closes with an outro, which wrapped up the interview process and left room for the participants to share any other information they deem relevant to the matter.

3.4 Data analysis
To ensure that all the answers will be captured, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions and insights of participants were anonymised. Each participant has been assigned a random number and throughout the presentation of the results, they will be referred to by IP (interview participant) and said number. To analyse the data, the first step was to conduct a thematic analysis according to the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), to determine the key themes in vulnerability, trust, and student reactions. The steps taken are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Process
1. Get to know data	Transcribe data, re-read interviews
2. Create general codes	Note interesting features, apply codes over whole document
3. Identify themes	Place codes in themes, gather all data relevant for each theme
4. Review themes	Check if all codes fit chosen theme
5. Define and name themes	Refine specifics, create names and descriptions
6. Produce findings	Explain themes and relate them to research topic

The software used for this was Atlas.ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2025). The results depict the key factors influencing students' trust judgment, how students experience the vulnerability period, and their emotional responses and behavioural strategies in that period.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of the interviews produced four themes. The four themes identified present the findings of this research and the answer to the research question, as they each show in what ways the Balanced Internationalisation Act has impacted the students trust relationship with the University of Twente. The themes are *Context creates information asymmetry, Context intensifies perceived stakes, Context prompts defensive responses* and *Context shows relationship expectations*. The following figure (Figure 2) showcases the results in the form of a pie chart, with the piece sizes representing the number of codes per theme.

Figure 2. Results to research question
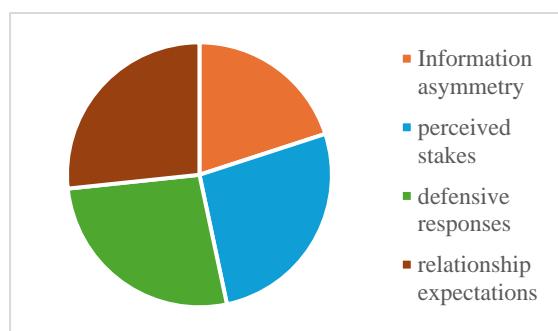
A full list of the theme`s sub- codes and examples can be found in the code book in Appendix C.

4.1 Context creates information asymmetry

This theme describes the result, that students, following the introduction of the context, now perceive an information asymmetry in their relationship, which was previously not present. The students interviewed, though not aware of the context, mentioned how they noticed their campus and student life changing. This became apparent, for example in this quote by IP2.

"I don't know if it's the fault of the UT or if it's something bigger because I feel like all associations have been kind of falling apart lately." (IP2)

This quote showed that students noticed the changing landscape of the country. They expressed feeling changes within the student community and the overall political climate, as can be seen in the quote by IP2. They stated how associations have been falling apart, an overall shift in how university life has felt over the last months. However, participants were not familiar with the name or the content of the new policy. Upon explaining, some recognised aspects of it, but the overall findings showed, that students were not aware of the actual political shift, despite noticing its effects. This indicated a lack of information in students regarding a policy, which concerns them personally.

"At least of what I've heard, they communicated nothing." (IP5)

This quote by IP5 further showcased, how students did not receive any information about the policy from the university. Whereas some students had not heard anything about the policy at all, some expressed how they received one email or notification stating that there might be a change, but no updates had followed. This lack of communication was perceived as a lack of caring by students, who described this factor as a breach in their trust relationship. Not only was no information about the new change given to the students by their main information source, the university but also students expressed how they were unable to acquire information themselves, as can be seen in this statement by IP13.

"I will not be able to read the Dutch news because they're in Dutch and maybe Google Translate is not as reliable. I don't know which news I need to look for because if you look at the local news, you have to pay a subscription to be able to read actual newspaper. So I think the UT should do a better job at briefly summarising more of what the political state is at the moment." (IP13)

This inability for many students stemmed from the inability to understand the Dutch language. Most relevant and up to date news articles are written in the Dutch language, which international students are not capable of speaking, as they follow an English-speaking program. Participants therefore expressed how they feel excluded from receiving updates about the current political situation. The combined issue of expecting change but not knowing where the feeling stems from, not being able to understand local news due to a language barrier and the main provider of information staying silent, creates information asymmetry, leading to negative impacts on the student-university trust relationship.

4.2 Context intensifies perceived stakes

This theme showcases student's realisation of what they have to lose should their trust relationship end. This became apparent in multiple ways, for example through students explaining how they fear for their future plans, as can be read by IP8.

"If every uni would be doing this, then I have to change countries, I would have to move. I would have to change a lot of my plans that are set for the next, let's say, three to four years." (IP8)

Participants described, how they were afraid that their envisioned future would be ruined by this new change in the trust relationship. Students might feel betrayed by the university if they can not achieve their desired career goal because of the change. Multiple concerns were voiced about how this policy will affect the universities rating. For them, the University of Twente was chosen based on its rating against other institutions. They feared that this new policy would cause a drop in the rating, and it would affect their possibilities of getting into a master's degree or their envisioned career options. In addition to that, not only were future plans after leaving the university a concern but also the fear that because of a study delay, degrees could not be completed due to the course becoming unavailable to international students. Besides employment and education options, participants also voiced concerns about the financial investment that has been made towards their studies.

"We're obviously spending a lot of money coming here. It's housing, it's. It's everything. Such an investment, not only physical but also emotional." (IP14)

Students have put a lot of money into their education and their residence in the Netherlands. With their staying at stake, losing that money may affect the vulnerability period negatively. Participants worried about being out of options financially, should the Netherlands become unavailable to them, due to other countries being too expensive, or their home countries` weak economies. Other participants also mentioned that students stood to lose scholarships and loans that they received to study here. They said that this adds more stress to the possibility of leaving, as the loan needs to be paid back, regardless of whether the degree at the University of Twente can be finished or not. Not only did participants express worries about losing financial and career options, but another loss expressed was social, in the form of losing the diversity of the university.

"I'm seeing literally all of those years of effort and community building which are so beautiful and so important to so many people just being thrown away." (IP4)

Participants described the erosion of the international bubble which students value at this institution. They explained how all activities they partook in at this university were international, how they found their community with the other international students. They fear that community disappearing. By many, the Netherlands were chosen specifically due to its internationalisation and because they heard that everybody was able and willing to speak English. On a personal level they then also added how it feels like they are being pushed out of their home. The new context introduced made students aware of the investment they have made over the last years, both physical and emotional. In the interviews the result became apparent, that the new policy affects students' vulnerability and trust relationships by bringing forward what it is they have to lose.

4.3 Context prompts defensive responses
The following theme explores how the context of the Balanced Internationalisation Act triggered protective behaviours and emotional responses in students. The main emotional response participants expressed was anxiety. This directly related back to the regulatory focus theory by Higgins (1998), as this finding described students with a prevention focus regarding the vulnerability period.

I think the waiting time makes most of the people nervous or they don't know what they expect. And yeah, it's not a good feeling, to be honest. I hope for the best, but who knows what's going to happen." (IP3)

Participants voiced many different concerns regarding their time at their institution. They expressed negative emotions about the uncertainty of the current state and how not being in control of their future creates anxiety. Other participants added the concern of not being able to focus on their studies due to the stress they are experiencing and how that created feelings of restlessness. Apart from the anxiety over waiting, another fear was often mentioned by the participants. This fear was related to the possible tension that may arise between international and Dutch students. From the start of the interview process, participants often mentioned that they do feel part of a community here, but only with the international students. Others expressed how they were surprised by their limitations as an international student, when they wanted to join an association for example. These concerns were then amplified when participants were questioned about their vulnerability experience. Participants stated that they were worried about people who do not like international students being validated in their feelings. They worried that this validation might create a larger divide between the two student groups, which would worsen their sense of community and study experience.

Participants expressed another emotion frequently when faced with the new policy, which was dependency. This described whether students felt at mercy to their institutions decision making and what feelings accompanied that. Strong feelings of dependency may create a shift in the relationship. However, two different observations were made. One group of students expressed complete dependency on the university and how that comes with feelings of anxiety. This first group shared how the university is their only source of information and how they depend on them to make informed decisions. Participants also expressed how they are dependent on the university as they are the only ones in contact with the government and therefore, they are the ones in power over the next steps, in power over their future. It was also mentioned how it is not only a personal dependency, but how the entire international community depends on the university right now. The other group of students did not feel dependent on the university at all. Some participants felt like no matter the government's decision, they can not change anything about it and will move on regardless, they simply need to deal with the choice made.

In addition to the emotional response of feeling anxious and dependent, participants considered leaving the Netherlands when they realised that their staying at the university may not be possible anymore due to the context.

"I think I would probably research or look into other countries to have a backup plan and not to be like stripped of everything when it would come into action." (IP9)

Leaving the University of Twente would mean breaking off the trust relationship, which ultimately affects its strength. Participants who thought about leaving either considered going back to their home country or to a neighbouring country of the Netherlands, most often mentioned were Germany or Belgium. Though leaving is an option, participants mentioned how they would only consider leaving as a last resort, as they would prefer to continue their education in the Netherlands, as other options were either not affordable or because they deem the political situation there even worse. One participant for example mentioned the UK and the USA, as they were other English-speaking options, but described them as the "worse alternatives" to the Netherlands due to the high costs. In contrast to the previously mentioned points, not all participants felt attacked or betrayed by the new changes, but many also expressed understanding for the context.

"I do understand them because like all of the universities, are publicly funded. So coming here, studying for three to five years and then leaving doesn't really give back to the Dutch Government." (IP6)

The participants showed how students regardless of the disadvantages that come from the new policy still understand why it is being implemented. This finding is relevant as it shows students grasp on the policy and how it is not a personal attack against international students, but how it is also grounded in reason. This understanding has a positive effect on the trust relationship, as understanding the policy makes students not feel betrayed by their institution. However, this understanding can also be regarded as a coping mechanism to the possibility of losing their home. This will be further discussed in section 5.3 of the discussion. This theme of context prompting defensive responses showed, how during uncertainty in their trust relationship, students respond through different coping mechanisms. Some felt anxious, dependant and sought out alternative options, whereas others rationalised the context in order to preserve the trust relationship.

4.4 Context shows relationship expectations

The last theme revealed participants expectations towards their institutions and possible gaps in their expected trust relationship. In the beginning of the interview process, students were asked to describe their relationship with the university and give it a trust score, ranging from 1 to 10. The numbers attributed to the current trust score showed trust levels before the information on the new policy. This assessment matrix was implemented to gather insights on the existing strength of the trust relationship. According to the Vulnerability Phase Model (Ballinger et al., 2024), a strong relationship is harder to be deterred by bad news. Overall, participants gave the university trust scores between 6 and 10, averaging with a score of 7.6. Participants for example scored the university at an 8, saying that there have been no instances where their trust has been misused, like IP5 who said:

"An eight means that I do trust them. There are some points where I would say I don't trust them fully or

sometimes I hope that they will be more open about what they're doing, but it's still a solid trust relation or trust relationship that I have with them." (IP5)

Other participants scores were grounded in the trust that they could finish their degree, but the fear of having to delay a course lowered the score significantly. Students always expressed a solid trust foundation in their institution. Points of deduction always stemmed from different factors. The most common factor was the lack of communication from the university.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked to re-evaluate the previously named scores to directly assess whether trust had been negatively affected due to context in this waiting period. Here the observation was made, that nine out of fifteen participants described a lower trust level than they expressed at the start. The new scores by the participants who changed their results ranged from 6 to 3. Participants explained the lower scores due to the loss of community and their long-term plan being derailed. The rest of the participants lower scores was grounded in a lack of communication from the university. They felt misguided and left in the dark, especially participants that had not been aware of the existence of the policy. Others explained it through the lack of ongoing communication. Though one notification had been sent, there have been no follow ups. This lack of effort in communication was named the main reason for a lowered trust score. Another present theme when talking about how their trust relationship had been negatively affected, was the lack of support provided from the university. Participants expressed how they wished the university would put more effort into communicating this policy, into keeping their students up to date regarding its current status. They also added how they felt left alone with their anxiety about this new policy. Another participant mentioned how they feel like the university is not doing anything to work against this policy. They expressed how they are never aware of what is currently happening and being left in the dark makes them feel uneasy. They specifically also mentioned how they are hoping that the university would show more support for its international community.

"I think they can not simply just look back and then turn their back to the whole international community that they created. It would be great if they actually see that this community is being killed by other circumstances that they try to at least aid those people into finding other possible paths." (IP4)

Feeling supported by the university and knowing their current standing would make them feel less anxious, but also more appreciated as a student here. Lastly, the point was brought forward that they wish the university would provide them with support sources. They explained that it would make them feel supported if the university would aid the internationals by for example providing resources about possible alternatives should studying in the Netherlands no longer be an option.

The remaining six of the fifteen participants did not lower their trust score. Though they expressed effects on their vulnerability phase throughout the interview, they did not lower their score. They either expressed that they still believe the university to still act in their best interest or that they do not believe to be personally affected by the policy. Participants explained how they do not see the university at fault here, but the government. They

expressed that they did not believe to be affected by the policy, due to them leaving the university soon. Other participants shared that sentiment and also stated that once you have been admitted, they will not end your contract. Many participants also experienced hopefulness, expressed promotion focus during this time of waiting. They believed that they could finish their education at the University of Twente, believed that the trust relationship would end positively. Participants expressed that they are certain they will not get kicked out of the university, even if their education should take another two to three years. They believed in the university's care of international students. They said that the university has proven time and time again that they value their international community and will act with them in mind. Other participants, usually ones who were familiar with the policy prior to the interview, mentioned how the institution has been actively fighting the policy and tried to find ways around it. The most common observation showing promotion focus was the students trust and believe, that this policy is created by the government and the government is also the only supporter of it. Students mentioned that this fight is bigger than the university that as a public institution, the University of Twente has no choice but to adhere to the new policy, so they do not see blame with them.

Overall, taking into account new trust levels by all participants the initial average score of a 7.6 had decreased to a 6.1, showing that though many students rated their trust level lower due to the Balanced Internationalisation Act, the overall trust score only decreased slightly.

4.5 Summary
The results of the interview process have shown that the vulnerability phase of students has been affected. Most influential was the impact of fear of change and having to leave the university, due to loss of community or not speaking the language. In addition to that, not receiving communication from the university has had a great effect on the vulnerability phase and trust relationship. Though the context of the Balanced Internationalisation Act had strong effects, many participants did not feel a decreased trust level, contrary to expectation. This was due to the strong relationship the university had built with students beforehand and the trust level resulting from that. Further interpretations of the findings can be found in the discussion section of this paper.

5. DISCUSSION
The following section discusses the findings of the interview analysis, in what ways context has shaped a trust relationship while waiting. These results are discussed and brought into context with other theoretical concepts.

5.1 Interpretation of results
5.1.1 Context creates information asymmetry
One of the most prominent findings in this analysis is that there was a perceived information asymmetry by students following the announcement of the Balanced Internationalisation Act. Students sensed a change, without being able to explain what it is. With the additional ambiguity of not understanding the language and no communication from their primary source of information, stress and confusion were heightened. According to the Vulnerability Phase Model by Ballinger et al. (2024), uncertainty increases should the waiting period take longer than expected, without open

communication about the change. This aligns with this research's finding, as participants also felt unsure about their future at their institution. They perceived a change happening, that possibly could alter their stay but were not informed as to what was happening. However, the model only focuses on temporal aspects of waiting, whereas the findings of this thesis research imply that the quality and frequency of communication matter as well. In the original model, only the absence or presence of communication is discussed and its impact on the waiting period, whereas this study found that minimal communication followed by long silence can be just as damaging to the trust relationship. Additionally, the language barrier added to the information asymmetry. Not understanding current news and not being able to access any relevant news channels due to costs added frustration. These findings are further supported by Tanovic et al. (2018) who found waiting in uncertain times to be difficult and emotionally aversive for students. The lack of communication causing a strain on the trust relationship can also lead to a breakdown in relational maintenance, as open communication is vital to preserve trust (Sisk & Baker, 2019). From these findings and additional literature, it can be argued that silence from an institution can become an active source of distrust, specifically when the trustor relies heavily on the trustee for information. The university's failure to mitigate the current asymmetry can be seen as a failure to uphold relationship obligations, causing a strain on the trust relationship in times of waiting.

5.1.2 Context intensifies perceived stakes
The second finding in regard to how context affects a trust relationship while waiting, is that students re-evaluate what is at stake in their trust relationship with the university. This includes financial resources, future plans, but also social communities. Participants describe how they significantly invested into their staying in the Netherlands, the amount of effort that went into making this happen, both from themselves, but also through their parents. The weight of these investments increases the trust placed in the university, which ultimately increases the potential loss or feelings of betrayal, should the trust relationship end due to the new policy. This finding is echoed in the literature of student-institution trust research, where it was discovered that students expect support, fair return and continuity on the investment they made (Carvalho & De Oliveira Mota, 2010). This not only causes students to fear their future careers but also makes them rethink their university's reliability. Not only did participants fear the investment they made, but also how there were no other viable options. According to Mayer et al. (1995) this perception of high costs in the current country, but also no or limited alternatives can be described as dependent vulnerability. The significant investment already made by students and the lack of other options create feelings of increased vulnerability, as either option of risking to stay or leaving comes with risk, creating high pressure. Additionally, factors like fear of delay in the studies demonstrated that not only emotional factors affect the vulnerability period, but also practical matters, like retaking a course, tuition or career timelines. These uncertainties can lead to procrastination behaviour in students according to Lim and Javadpour (2021) which would further the fear already expressed by students of delaying their courses and waiting for the expected change to happen, as well as general academic progress. These

practical concerns of the vulnerability phase also need to be addressed, not only emotional concerns, to be able to create successful communication (Renn, 2022). Apart from the loss of academic resources that are now at stake, participants also fear the loss of the international community. This community was described as a support system, for some even as a home. This safe space is now threatened in light of the new policy, which represents a loss of belonging. This loss does not only undermine trust but also students' relational identity with the university (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). This emotional response ties into focal vulnerability, as the erosion of this resource leaves students socially vulnerable.

The observation that context intensifies perceived stakes is similar to the factor resource importance of the Vulnerability Phase Model by Ballinger et al. (2024) which refers to the perceived value of the outcome of the trust relationship. In the model, resource importance is viewed as static, either the resource becomes more or less important. In this research, the dependent vulnerability in an academic setting is not static, but it contains multiple risks at the same time that reinforce each other and create greater vulnerability whilst waiting for the context outcome and with it the effect on the trust relationship.

5.1.3 Context prompts defensive responses
When confronted with the Balanced Internationalisation Act, participants reactions showed, how students engaged in a range of different defence mechanisms. The most common emotion displayed was anxiety. Participants were stressed about the unknown of their future, how or when the policy will affect them and how this will affect their stay in the Netherlands. This draws on Higgins (1998) Regulatory Focus Theory, where students feeling anxious, express prevention focus by concentrating on the negative impacts of this policy. This anxiety and defensive behaviour is further strengthened by the students feeling dependent on the university to act in their best interest. The finding of a dependency feeling ties into an important aspect of focal vulnerability, that students not only experience general vulnerability but are specifically vulnerable to decisions or support of their institution. Participants describe the university as their only source of information, leading to an asymmetry in power and knowledge, which adds a strain on the vulnerability phase. Some student's detachment from their possible dependency could be explained as a defensive strategy or a withdrawal of engagement, which poses a risk to the long-term student-university relationship (Dean & Jolly, 2012).

These findings are in line with other literature on trust that explores long exposure to uncertainty without control, for example, the impact of asymmetrical power and limited uncertainty by Bijlsma-Frankema and Costa (2005). This finding shows, how students fear is not abstract and unreasoned, but it is grounded in their inability to alter the current situation, which is also a core feature of focal vulnerability (Hamm et al., 2024). This vulnerability is further enhanced through the fear students experience about their social belonging, that they are no longer welcome in the Netherlands. This finding is represented in literature through identity-based trust. Gbobaniyi et al. (2023) describe how students trust is also shaped by their perceived inclusivity. Feeling excluded in the Dutch community and fear of losing more of that standing, therefore, increases students' vulnerability and has a

negative effect on their trust relationship to their institution. In response to those feelings of dependency, exclusion and anxiety, students began to look for alternative options, such as leaving the Netherlands. This demonstrates a form of protective detachment (Knee & Zuckerman, 1998). By having an alternative to the University of Twente, students regain control of the situation. However, leaving was described as a last resort, implying that the trust relationship is still standing.

Whilst most participants experienced anxiety, some also demonstrated promotion focused trust orientation. Those participants expressed an understanding for the context. They recognise the university as a public institution that has to follow governmental regulations and therefore do not blame the university. This shows how an important factor in the vulnerability phase is attribution. In attribution theory in trust research, perceived motives and constraints of the trustee influence the interpretation of action (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). Here, students see the risk of the Balanced Internationalisation Act as external and unpreventable, leading them to preserve their trust relationship with the University of Twente. Whereas in the original model by Ballinger et al. (2024), the vulnerability phase is altered either by prevention or promotion focus, this research finds that participants often experience both at the same time. Many participants felt anxious, whilst still expressing an understanding for the context showcasing that both forms of regulatory focus can simultaneously influence a waiting period.

5.1.4 Context shows relationship expectations
The last theme explored the existing strength of the trust relationship students have with their institution and the change in trust level due to the Balanced Internationalisation Act. In the Vulnerability Phase Model (Ballinger et al., 2024), the stronger the pre-existing relationship, the better the resilience against negative news or uncertainty. However, if the relationship has its doubts from the beginning, the newly introduced context can lead to distrust or detachment. This definition of the model was apparent in the findings of this analysis. Students reported their trust level to be high initially. Ratings were based on previous experiences made with the university, based on feelings of care and competence. Though the relationships were described as strong, introducing the context showed a decline in the trust level. The decrease in trust was not based on past events, but rather current inaction of the university, especially the lack of communication. This finding shows how trust is not static but can change and can undermine previous positive experiences, especially when relational expectations are not met (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). Therefore, students who begin the vulnerability phase with high trust levels might experience a reappraisal of their emotions if there is a lack of engagement from the trustee. This change in trust is also explained by the lack of support students expressed, showing a breach of their expectations. They voiced a desire for regular updates, emotional support and resources to navigate the policy. The absence of these desires during the vulnerability period signals to students that their needs are not seen or prioritised, which could explain the decrease in trust observed. This finding is also in line with literature, for example by Searle et al. (2011) who found similar conclusions in the workplace. In line with the model, this finding shows how trust requires maintenance in the waiting period and can not alone stand

on the outcome. The vulnerability phase therefore suffices as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship by being responsive to the trustors needs.

Contrary to expectations prior to the interviews, not all students saw a decrease in their trust relationship, mainly due to confidence in their institution. This can be attributed to resilient trust (Gustafsson et al., 2020). The students believe that due to positive experiences in the past, the university will shield them from negative impacts again, believing that positive prior experiences can avoid negative consequences from the context. Again, the attribution theory by Tomlinson and Mayer (2009) is relevant here. Students with higher confidence in their institution and therefore the same trust levels as before externalising the responsibility to the government, which preserves the original trust relationship. The findings regarding how context reveals relationship expectations add to the factors identified in the Vulnerability Phase Model (Ballinger et al., 2024) but reveal a triangular trust relationship in comparison to the dual trust relationships explored in the original model. For students in this research, not only the university is relevant to determine their vulnerability phase, but also the government, as the party that created the policy. This complexity in attribution allows students to preserve their trust relationship, making this a significant finding. The varying degrees of lowered trust can be explained through Wiemann et al. (2018) who found that trust relationships are not weakened by the decision made, but rather poor communication and support as well as a lack of transparency in the process of making that decision. This theme shows how the initial strength of the relationship influences the emotional experience while waiting. Where high trust was present, students perceived the ambiguity as manageable. If trust was decreased, students perceived the lack of communication and support as concerning, frustrating and felt compelled to leave.

5.2 Implications

The findings of this study reaffirm the relevance of the Vulnerability Phase Model (Ballinger et al., 2024) by showcasing how contextual uncertainty can affect a trust relationship. While the model finds four relevant factors, this study explored how these manifest in real life academic settings, namely through information asymmetry, perceived stakes and defensive responses. These findings reveal that the theoretical model can be applied in practice and is relevant to an educational setting. It highlights the model's relevance, as it can be expanded beyond the use in organisational leadership and can help understand relational and institutional forms of vulnerability. Furthermore, the findings show how students are not only vulnerable due to the general uncertainty of the context, but because their trust is focused, and they depend on a specific institution. This specific dependency on one actor creates greater emotional impact in the case of betrayal (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). This relationship specific trust relationship and the power asymmetry at hand, make this finding relevant to the concept of focal vulnerability. Therefore, the concept previously only applied to employer-employee relationships is transferable to the academic context, specifically the relationship specific exposure to risk.

Practically, this thesis offers insights into how Dutch universities can support their students during times of uncertainty and change. First, transparent and timely communication needs to be implemented, to ease students' anxiety and confusion. Possible implementation of communication protocols to ensure regular updates should be considered, to elevate students stress during the waiting period. Secondly, universities could implement support services targeted for international students, that provide them with not only information, but also other resources should they have to leave the Netherlands. Resources could include mental health tools like stress management or counselling, to directly manage students increased vulnerability. These resources should also address the dependency students are experiencing, address this power imbalance and provide possible ways to reduce it, by for example showcasing different academic pathways. Lastly, universities could reaffirm students belonging to the university and the institutions commitment to the international community to reduce possible divides between student groups and sustain the inclusive environment previously established. All these practical steps can ensure that the trust relationship between students and their institution can be upkept and uncertainty while waiting can be reduced, by taking a student-centred approach.

5.3 Limitations

Despite the valuable insights from the interviews on the students trust relationship with their universities while waiting, there are some limitations to consider that may have influenced the results of this study. First was the scope of the study. The Balanced Internationalisation Act concerns every university in the Netherlands and not only the University of Twente. This particular university is rather small, in comparison to Dutch universities in metropole cities like Amsterdam or Rotterdam and therefore might be more severely impacted by the policy to regulate its international students. Secondly, the study only had a sample of 15 students. This small sample can not fully represent the entire international student body of the University of Twente. Not only does the small sample size not cover this specific university, but also is not representative of the population, leading to problems in variability and generalisability. More participants might have led to different results, as this group of participants was only able to cover a small percentage of the different study programs and nationalities present at the University of Twente. Lastly, almost all participants interviewed were third year students, meaning that they are about to receive their bachelor's degree. Their being at the end of a study period may have influenced the results. Talking to students at the beginning of their academic careers might have brought forward even more profound results.

5.4 Recommendations

First, it would be useful to consider turning this study into a longitudinal study. These interviews only captured a moment of the vulnerability phase, as it currently responds to the news of the Balanced Internationalisation Act. As trust is dynamic (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2013), it would be useful to analyse the change in the vulnerability phase through different periods of the policy implementation. Insight into trust repair or erosion should be made, specifically regarding the possible implementation of the interventions mentioned in the previous section. Secondly, further research could focus on not only the University of Twente but also take into account other Dutch universities to ensure greater validity. This would also bring important

10

insight into how other universities manage their student's vulnerability phase and trust levels. Best practices could be compared in a cross-case comparison to identify the most optimal trust management. This approach could then even be widened to other universities outside the Netherlands, to investigate whether practices created for the Dutch system could be applicable in times of waiting to different systems. Lastly, the interview study with its thematic coding could be quantified. This study applied the Vulnerability Phase Model (Ballinger et al., 2024) in a qualitative manner and future research could validate the findings made here with survey instruments to test the applicability of the model on a larger scale. In practice, this could mean testing the significance of each factor to see which one is the most relevant. Additionally, as deviations from the original model have been identified, it could be important to test these further and see whether they also apply to contexts apart from the Balanced Internationalisation Act.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at identifying how students trust relationship is affected while they wait amidst a policy change. Following this goal, the central research question of this paper was:

"In what ways does context impact a trust relationship in times of waiting?"

Through conducting interviews with international students at the University of Twente, the ways in which they were affected were identified. The findings of this research showed how context affects a trust relationship by creating information asymmetry, intensifying perceived stakes, prompting defensive responses and showing relationship expectations. These results were then analysed and contextualised with existing theory. Ultimately, the research provided vital insights into the student-university trust relationship in times of uncertainty, for example students decreases trust level due to a lack of communication. These could provide a basis for further research.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX

Appendix A – Demographics

Age	20 – 29; average: 23
Gender	Male: 46.67% Female: 53.33%
Nationality	Brazil: 13.33% Czech Republik: 6.67% Estonia: 6.67% Germany: 33.33% Ireland: 6.67% Kazakhstan: 6.67% Peru: 6.67% Romania: 6.67% Spain: 13.33%
Study	BIT: 13.33% CS: 6.67% IBA: 46.67% PCPT: 6.67% PSY: 26.67%

Appendix B – Interview guide

Interview questions

1. what do you study and what year are you in?

2. what is your nationality?

Trust

1. On a scale from one to ten, how much do you trust the UT?

Why did you choose that number?

2. Do you partake in UT life besides classes?

3. Do you feel like you are a part of a student community at the university – why, why not?

Context

1. Have you heard of the BIA?

2. When you found out about the BIA, how did you feel?

Trust in context

1. Did the university tell you anything about the BIA?

How did they tell you, was it clear?

2. Right now, we are waiting to see what will happen with the new policy. How does the waiting make you feel? (make use of airport smileys if answers are uncertain)

3.Do you feel unsure or worried about your future at the UT? – why, why not

4. Has your trust in the University changed since you heard about the policy?

What is your new trust score?

Why has it changed?

How does this affect your relationship?

5. Do you often think about the policy?

Do you talk to your friends about it, do you do research on your own?

6. While you wait to know what will happen, what do you think or feel the most?

7. Do you feel dependant on the university to act on your best interest right now – why, why not

How does that make you feel?

8. Has the policy made you think about leaving the Netherlands or switching to another university?

Appendix C – Coding table

Theme	Code	Description	Quote
Context creates information asymmetry	Expected change	Students expect current system to change	I could see the tide turning towards this kind of push for the Dutch culture. So I kind of just decided to learn the language as best as I can, just in case.
	Language requirements	Need to speak Dutch to be a part of community	if it does become a requirement by the time I'm applying that it's done through Dutch, I don't think my level would be sufficient by that point to be able to do assignments and exams in Dutch? I don't think I'd be capable of learning it that quickly
	Lack of communication	University does not provide updates or policy timeline	I only heard like once in announcement about this stuff and then not really again
Context intensifies perceived stakes	Career uncertainty	Concerns about long term goals being derailed	If every uni would be doing this, then I have to change countries, I would have to move. I would have to change a lot of my plans that are set for the next, let's say, three to four years
	Financial investment	Worry about money invested in education	I pay a lot of money for them, at least my parents do, and like the education is expensive in comparison to Germany and like I need their information because I personally I am not in the government like I cannot change anything about the situation
	Diversity loss	Loss of international culture at university	Dutch people were kind of like mean towards international students and or were kind of annoyed with us. And I feel like those changes are just going to fuel that fire, you know?
	Course delay	Concern that new system will not offer courses or lead to delays	But I think if I would have to delay courses or something then maybe take on another year, I wouldn't be so sure if the UT is still you know such a great place with all the change that is going on
Context prompts defensive responses	Anxiety	Students experience tension and concern about their future	It's horrible. Like, honestly, I have the feeling that I had such a solid ground under me because the Netherlands seemed to be such a safe option when it came to studies and opportunities
	Alternative options	Considerations leaving Netherlands	If it makes it harder to stay here, you know for study, then yeah, I could see myself seeing that as a reason to go to another country.
	Dependency	Feelings of being at mercy to universities decision	I think the whole international community right now is

			depending on how the universities are going to be positioned in this.
	Understanding for context	Compassion for reasons behind policy	But I'd also completely understand the position they're coming from with the housing crisis and. You know the difficulties that it has for some of the locals say, and communicating in English with people. And there is definitely a lack of interest in learning the Dutch language from students here
Context shows relationship expectations	Initial trust	High trust expressed prior to context	I think the university gives a lot of help and I think they really do care about how the students feel.
	Confidence in Institution	Students hopeful trust in institutions care	From my experience, at least, I had the feeling that like they really prove to me that they do care about their students and they really prove to me that they are international minded
	Lack of support	Perception of disregard	I feel for the international students because I understand it's a lot of things involved, a lot of money involved, and these changes play with this. So I think the university could do more of showing support.
	Decrease trust	Lowered trust after policy announcement	I wouldn't be so sure if the UT is still, you know such a great place with all the change that is going on.