

*Interpreting International Students' Experiences in Terms of
Their Higher Education Academic Integration*

Jennyfer Paola Casas Trujillo, University of Debrecen, Hungary

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Abstract

Internationalization of higher education in Central European countries is increasing. In addition to their quality of education, higher education institutions are taking advantage of its geographical location, attracting foreign students into their corpus maximizing a multicultural environment. Research is needed in the field of international students' experiences from central European countries. Therefore, the present report will explore the qualitative methodological part of a research conducted at a University in Eastern Hungary. This study uses structured interviews, the chosen participants should have active status and belong to the countries and faculties which surpass one hundred students in both categories. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis method and the findings show that international students' academic integration has four factors that take place in their satisfaction: rankings, teacher-student relationship, peer-support, and curriculum. The results of the present study are of interest for the university under study itself, for education organizations in Hungary, and recruiters of international students.

Keywords: Student Experience, Academic Integration, International Students, Internationalization

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Introduction

The present research report contains the information of one part of a whole research study. The complete study explores the topics of international students' integration and acculturation. However, the scope of the matter in this current study is the academic integration. The present findings are derived from the analysis of structured interviews conducted to nineteen students from different nationalities. The interview had three main sections and only the first one will be the interest to solve the following research question: What do international students' experiences reveal about their academic integration? The objective is to understand the students' circumstances since the selection of their university, as well as their process while studying in a foreign country. This information will be of interest for university teachers, and future international students to know internationalization on higher education from firsthand informants.

In this article, the information provided contains the concept of academic integration and the methodological description from the data collection to the discussion section.

Academic integration

From the different interpretations and concepts of academic integration, in this article we will consider Tinto's perspective. His ideas are in the field of drop out, student persistence and commitment to their institution. According to Tinto (1975), this concept refers to the students' formal education. Examples could be the communication between the faculty and staff as well as academic achievements and performance. The latter ones can be measures through grade point average and intellectual development during the study period. On the other hand, academic performance, according to Baker and Siryk (1999), is influenced by academic integration, and within it, they identified four main concepts, namely academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal and emotional adjustment, and attachment.

The first two aspects are reflected in this paper. The academic adjustment refers to students' satisfaction with the academic environment meaning the teachers, and the curriculum. On the other hand, social adjustment, has to do with the interpersonal demands of dealing with others such as working in groups with their classmates.

Methodological approach

The framework in which this study is delimited to answer the research question is within the qualitative paradigm. The reason for choosing this paradigm is because within it, we can choose a tool that can provide sustainable data and be able to understand from the participants' voices the realities and experiences studying abroad.

Interviews are one of the most recognized forms of qualitative research method. The essence of the study considers a 'humanistic' approach (Plummer, 2005). Therefore, qualitative interviewing is designed to explore meaningful properties of the students' academic reality using an established structured set of questions, this approach is the way in which participants can feel more confident and willing to share their experiences.

The context in which the research was conducted is being placed in the University of Debrecen in Hungary. The university hosts seven thousand twenty-three international students from one hundred twenty-two nationalities (University of Debrecen, 2022). Key

details to have in consideration are that nationalities are not evenly distributed; it means that there are countries that send more students than others and based on this information the selection criteria to choose which nationalities would be selected for interview was crucial. Those nationalities that surpass one hundred students in the city were considered for interview (It was a total of twenty countries).

Method of data collection

For the collection of data, the interview procedure was snowball sampling (Flick, 2009). This method is one of the most widely applied methods to find participants in qualitative research, and it has proven to be effective when researchers need to recruit hidden or hard to reach participants (Flick, 2009; Lichtman, 2013). They were asked to refer someone who fit the research criteria (Lichtman, 2013). Potential participants were contacted via e-mail, however, in these scenarios not everyone responds. The ideal situation was to reach one student from each faculty and attempt to have a variety of nationalities as possible to present multiple perspectives.

The first step for the collection of data started with the development of the qualitative interview. It had three sections. The first was about academic integration, the second section social integration and the last one about cultural experiences. It was also asked about their future as well as how the Covid-19 affected these previous three aspects. It was a well-developed structured interview guide which contained twenty-three questions. Nevertheless, when the participant said something that could be significant, extra questions were asked. From the previously mentioned sections only the first one takes place in the analysis of this study.

The interviews were set according to participants availability. As soon as people were contacted, a google meet link was sent. The reason to do interviews online was because the research has been conducted in the middle of a pandemic situation and participants preferred this method to avoid being infected, as well to avoid displacement during the exam session and wintertime (when it is cold, and some students travel back to their countries). Three of the interviews were conducted in person because the circumstances facilitated it. Some respondents refer to other students as there were some nationalities difficult to reach. Fortunately, all the nationalities were reached except the Romanian. Nineteen interviews were conducted during the months of October 2021 through April 2022, 14 hours of individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

The requirement for participation was to not familiar with the Hungarian language or culture. In chart 1 the countries can be seen, the gender, the faculty, and major of the participant. Romania was excluded, as no student was found unfamiliar with Hungary.

Chart 1 Participant information

	Country	Gender	Faculty	Major
1	Romania	N/A		
2	Nigeria	M	Pharmacy	Pharmacy
3	Pakistan	F	Engineering	Engineering Management, MA
4	Iran	F	Dentistry	Dentistry
5	China	M	Medicine	General Medicine
5	Jordan	M	Food Science and Agriculture	Food Safety and Quality Engineering, MSc
7	Ukraine	M	Engineering	Professional Pilot
8	India	M	Science and Technology	Informatics, PhD
9	Egypt	M	Engineering	Mechatronics Engineering
10	Vietnam	F	Public Health	Public Health
11	Syria	F	Engineering/ Public Health	Biochemical Engineering/ Public Health
12	Israel	M	Medicine	General Medicine
13	Japan	F	Public Health	Public Health, BA
14	Brazil	M	Engineering	Engineering Management, MA
15	Kazakhstan	F	Medicine	General Medicine
16	South Korea	F	Engineering	Professional Pilot

17	Taiwan	M	Medicine	General Medicine
18	Mongolia	F	Public Health	Public Health, MA
19	Kenya	F	Engineering	Engineering Management, MA
20	Iraq	M	Computer Science	Computer Science, PhD

Method of analysis

After transcription, the method of data analysis used was thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Their method was developed in the psychology field; however, it can be used in other areas of study. It is a method for identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. This method has six phases to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012):

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data.

The first step, to get familiar with the data was to record the interviews with the permission of the participants and do the transcriptions.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

After all the interviews were transcribed, they were saved in different files per country and the coding started. The analysis to interpret the participant's interview started by doing the coding by nationality.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Once the codes were given to all the nineteen interviews, in the same way a new file was created under the name of each topic explored in the interview. In this section we will explore exclusively the academic integration information. A chart was created with three columns. One was country, the other for codes, and a last one which was integrated in a result of four themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes

Once themes were written, the codes and excerpts were double checked to determine if they fit into the theme or whether they should be moved into a different or a new one.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

During the analysis and when reading the excerpts, it is important to not only group information, but also to do it carefully so that themes are related, but do not overlap each other and the participants information can reveal meaningful possibilities to name the themes.

Phase 6: Producing the report

The reporting part is the last step in which we write about the analysis, in this case, the initial purpose is to draft an article from the analysis of the academic integration and later, the analysis continues with the other two parts from the interview which are not included in this proceeding.

Discussion

The analysis of the data was narrowed into four categories. The experiences of the students can be reflected and summarized in the understanding of each category. Nevertheless, the information contained in this article is a summary, but well condensed about the perspectives and experiences students share. In connection to the excerpts extracted some of them are positive, others negative, and suggestions were also made, I am aware of the incorrect grammar, but I quoted word by word as expressed by the participant.

“I chose university of Debrecen because it has a high ranking”

A conference in Veszprem, Hungary in 2013 took place to discuss the concept of “ranking”. One of the conclusions of the meeting was that ranking is usually for evaluating higher education institutions, but its accuracy is questioned. Different academics meet there and agreed that this concept is relevant in students’ decision-making and that the point is not whether to rank or not, but how to rank. In the case of Hungary, students place attention to teaching excellence and distance factors (from the capital). There are well-known rankings which students check to make their decision (Nagy, 2014).

The University of Debrecen, located in a non-capital city, turns out to be the most popular option for students. In the first place, students put emphasis on the fact that ranking of universities is a key aspect when choosing a university. Initially, the decision on where to study can be difficult due to a variety of reasons, for example reasonable cost of living, location, or scholarship, etc. However, when Hungary is chosen as the host country, the students check the rankings, they compare different higher education institutions and according to the participants’ information, the University of Debrecen has a good ranking position compared to other Hungarian universities. Nevertheless, we have no information about which ranking the students checked. It is important to notice that in terms of rankings there are a lot of variations. Some of them do not give an accurate validity, deriving from subjective data (Docampo, 2011). The participants expressed:

“The ranking of Unideb was higher than in Budapest” (Egypt, Mechatronics Engineering)

“To choose the university, I just look for the best 5 universities in Hungary, I saw Debrecen, ELTE, Szeged, and for Computer Science I found that Debrecen is better than others” (Iraq, IT)

On the other hand, not everyone guides their decisions based on internet search, others prefer to rely their decision on the stories that people close to them may have. In the book of geographies of international students, Suzanne E. Beech (2019) tells that 89% of the international students who were interviewed in four UK universities already knew a friend, a relative or an acquaintance. After rankings, people’s experiences become the second layer, especially when they previously studied and had a pleasant experience. In the field of

medicine people recommend the university, to the point that a group of siblings did the same study program:

“I think all the Hungarian universities are good to study in Hungary. My older sister and brother studied here and therefore I chose and the medical achievement of the university in medicine. Once I go back to Israel, I know that my diploma is of high quality and the students that study here in Debrecen can pass the state exam in Israel. The quality here is no less than those who study in UK or Germany” (Israel, Medicine).

“I chose this university, because I know some students, it was recommended” (Jordan, Food safety).

The next category refers to the actual situation of experience in the classroom in connection to their learning, practices, feedback, and support.

“There should be more communication between teacher and students”

This category allows to comprehend deeper the relationship that students develop with their teachers. The teaching practice takes a significant role in enhancing university learning and teaching. It is through the teachers that students experience the academic environment and a positive relationship can facilitate students’ motivation, achieve learning outcomes, and retain students (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The teacher’s role in and outside the classroom is crucial to create a good atmosphere. Teachers can motivate, inspire, or even frustrate students. The next excerpt is an example of the teacher’s support outside the classroom, observing students’ work, and letting her know the feedback:

“For example, when we were working on something in Excel, or programs to calculate an exercise. Sometimes, you are really struggling because you don’t know what is really going on with your Excel and you are doing exactly the steps you should do, but you are not generating the analysis you should find, so we had a lecturer. He would allow to send that Excel and then he would check and say what he thinks is the problem or what settings you can modify and then it would be fine.” (Kenya, Engineering Management).

Based on Fajčíková and Fejfarová’s findings (2019), building a good teacher-students’ relationship is as important as providing quality classes, the work during the class and the teacher performance is the first step to connect. Teachers’ knowledge and experience should play a role when preparing a course, designing a logical structured seminar or lecture with an understandable method (Fajčíková & Fejfarová, 2019). If a class is not challenging, the students would even feel discouraged to attend as reported:

“I think the lectures can be improved, they should be teaching not just giving information, they are just telling what you know, but not explaining properly. In the second year some of my classmates didn’t attend lectures and they study by themselves.” (China, Medicine)

The most principal factors influencing students’ satisfaction and learning outcomes are a good course organization, clear presentation, and explanation (Alauddin & Kifle, 2014).

Once students put theory in practice in the form of an internship or a job, they can see the gaps in their knowledge:

“Now I use a program to handle data analysis, I had the class, but it was very superficial, I would like to use it more deeply, it was very theoretical, but the way it was taught was very superficial. I think the way he presented the class; he could have been deeper not just the basics.” (Brazil, Engineering Management)

In relation to the academic part, when students might feel unsupported or experiencing teacher’s centered method, it can result in less attended classes, and eventually boredom and rejection towards them. However, the satisfaction of international students not only depends on receiving high-quality education (Rahimi et al., 2017), but also from having a sense of belonging in the new country, through social interaction with the local culture and people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Regarding this aspect, the teacher-student relationship is not strong. In the next excerpts students reveal that this connection does not happen:

“Sometimes teachers just think in the box, and they don’t want to use their own thoughts, they just follow because these are the rules. We are students from another country if they consider this besides our identity as students, most of the time. There was no teacher asking us about our worries, needs, future concerns. This is one of the biggest negative points that I find here.” (Iran, Dentistry)

Teachers are one of those groups of people with whom international students have most social contact. Quality interactions with teachers lead to build better relationships (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019) and benefit students’ learning and their adjustment (Tinto, 1993).

“The staff of the university don’t help too much outside the class, you can ask for help but they are usually quite busy.” (China, Medicine)

According to the interviewees an area of improvement in the University of Debrecen is to create the opportunity for more interactions that ensure communication between students and teachers:

“There should be more communication between teachers and students. I think the communication between teacher-student is important, it is one of the teacher’s jobs, to let students feel more entertain for their subject. We are beginner and sometimes there are too much information. Sometimes we cannot handle it and we can feel more frustrated.” (Taiwan, Medicine)

Varied reasons could justify the lack of communication, one could be that teachers do not live in the city where the university is located, they may have other work-related activities, or there are distinct cultural expectations in connection to the teachers’ responsibility:

“If the professor is old, he is not in with technology, but the poor communication was with the younger ages, they should be responding more, because if we ask, we should get the information that we need. I know everyone is busy, but they should make the time. Some of the teachers are from Budapest, some Miskolc, we have a lot of professors from practical medicine, medicine faculty, pharmacy, psychology.” (Syria, Public Health)

The teachers-students' communication could also be affected by a topic highly mentioned by participants, which was the language barrier. This miscommunication happens with the local people and in the classroom too:

“Honestly, I was expecting more from the teaching methods and materials, some of the professors can't speak English properly, I would give teaching 5 out of 10 actually”. (Jordan, Food Safety)

In connection with the pedagogy of the teacher, there is a crucial factor that plays a key role, and it is the knowledge transmission. The common language for this is English, which can be the first language for some students, but mostly it is the second language and not just for the students, but also for the teachers. Its command becomes of key importance for teachers to pass down and students to obtain new knowledge. Although students recognize that the teachers' expertise is not questionable, it is their level of English:

“In the university some of the teachers are good, but some of them lack English knowledge badly. Because to study a subject from a professor that barely speaks English is strange. The professors must improve their English. Specifically, because it is really needed, and I guess some official and not related to the university evaluation should be conducted.” (Ukraine, Professional Pilot)

To complement the student's suggestion, Keane (2015) says that peer-review should be executed to consistently evaluate the teaching quality and the competence of teachers. In fact, if the university wants to increase their teaching quality, they will implement different tools to overcome the deficiencies spotted.

Another important academic aspect is the feedback provided by teachers. The feature of the feedback is that it comes not only with grades, but also comments and tips on how to improve weak areas. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding. whether teachers give good or poor feedback, it contributes on students' motivation:

“Some teachers would say to you it is good, you can modify this. Other teachers would tell you how to modify it, and others would just say good work, and you would not know what is good or not, because at the end of the day they would just give you a signature. Then this generates your attitude towards the subject, you are motivated to do more if the teachers are telling you try this or try that. But if you get an ok and a signature, you don't put more effort. It depends on the type of subject you are doing. If it is lots of calculation the feedback will be check this formula, use this different approach. If it is something like doing an analysis about a company, there is not right or wrong answer, but they can go an extra mile to show how to explore a different angle or he can just say ok” (Kenya, Engineering Management).

“The only feedback we get is just grades, not everyone gives explanations. I guess because they don't have much time. For me I think I should learn by my previous mistakes, so it is good if they say what we did wrong” (Egypt, Mechatronics Engineering)

Wisniewski et al. (2020) state that specific written comments are more effective than providing grades and, forms of feedback with a lack of information value have low effects on student achievement.

“Teachers don’t give personal feedback, just grade. We don’t have contact with professor. They can send feedback by email, because they say very clear, don’t call them.” (China, Medicine)

The previous excerpt is a call to create reflection and propose a change in the teacher’s feedback methods. Generating a more elaborated and personal way to provide recommendations and assessment could benefit both teachers and students.

An additional aspect to the communication with teachers based on the interviews is a lack of support providing information that concerns students after graduation. Most international students would like to remain in Europe, and they wish that the teacher could guide students towards that goal:

“Maybe I have high expectations about professors. Most students want to get working experience here, but we didn’t get any information on how to work here, they just ask do you want to stay or go back. And when we say stay here, they finish the conversation, they don’t say anything about where we can go, how to apply and where. Not just in the faculty, but I think in life as a teacher they have the responsibility to give information to guide in the future to know how to do after graduation. (Iran, Dentistry)

The following category refers to the support that students find in themselves and through their classmates.

“I do everything by myself or with my friends”

The role of the student is to learn from their instructors and be an active member of the class, cooperate with classmates and help each other. Besides building relationships with the teachers, students also build them with their peers. Peer learning refers to the mutual learning interaction with each other during informal or formal learning situations (Boud, 2014):

“We experienced group work in some classes, and this became a habit, we studied as a group and we build a good relationship despite the nationality, everyone knows more about one topic, others about other and we supported each other.” (Syria, Public Health)

In today’s form of education students prefer to be the center of the class, this authoritative figure of the teacher who knows everything has changed and by giving students a more leading role, their motivation increases:

“In medicine most of the learning is individual, but in some subjects, we must do some presentations and here is where you learn from your classmates. If we do presentation in each subject we could improve in knowledge and presentation skills, it is important does not matter what you study.” (Israel, Medicine).

There are three figures of support within the learning process, one is provided by the teacher, the stronger the better. The second is a peer support, which plays a significant role in peer learning, during it a more advanced student can clarify and monitor a classmate's learning process (Panadero et al., 2019). The third is self-support finding answers by themselves:

“When I have questions, I can ask my teacher to solve it, but most of time I do everything by myself or with my friends, sometimes we study together for the exams. It is a big support for us.” (Taiwan, Medicine).

The last category refers to the subjects and requirements students must be fulfilled during their study period.

“The curriculum of the university must change”

Students have direct experience with the organization of their faculty, and the curriculum. There are fields of knowledge that may require practical activities. For example, laboratory practices, field trip visits, internships, or field work. From the perspective of students, practice should exceed theory and it should be reflected in an updated curriculum adjusted to the current needs of the job market:

“Theoretical part is enough, but I think they should include practical part in the academy program” (Vietnam, Public Health).

“I criticize the education system. I discuss about the education in pharmacy and health care, the job market is very competitive, I advise to change the curriculum of the faculty. The curriculum of the university at least in pharmacy must change.” (Nigeria, Pharmacy)

Curriculum usually refers to the content, objectives, and organization of learning (Walker, 2003). Students explore the university websites and check the curriculum of their program of study to have a vision of their academic path. When this information does not match with the reality, the responsibility is from the administration which should comply with the study program students find:

“I think my academic staff should be prepared about the timetable and they should be certain or sure, the timetable change over time, it is not stable. Sometimes they do not inform us, I think this is about the administration. This semester at the beginning (week 3) my professor has told they changed and after that, they changed again, this has been for two subjects. Fortunately, the professor told us directly but if we wait for administrative, we wouldn't get that information.” (Vietnam, Public Health).

“Also, several compulsory subjects are missing, we don't know in the future what will happen to us, there are doubts and uncertainty. We need more information. I don't know, we are missing many compulsory subjects, they said we will study next semester, and then never happens. I think I would not recommend my faculty. Other faculties, but my faculty no.” (Japan, Public Health)

“Regarding the pharmaflight (outsourced department of the university for the professional pilot program) and the university. There should be some legal paperwork to establish the responsibilities of university and pharmaflight, and to really follow

these guidelines. Because, for example, what is written in our curriculum is completely different from what happens in real life, so the programs are different, the number of hours is different, the schedules are different, so in the first year, we were basically told to forget about curriculum and we were going to do something else, which is strange. In pharmaflight they told us that in the curriculum we have the subjects which are provided by pharmaflight, but the curriculum is from the university, but in real life the programs, and the requirements are not in the curriculum. Because pharmaflight say we are a different company, we organize a little bit different, and the subjects are not in this order and the grading will be also different and so on.” (Ukraine, Professional Pilot)

Two key areas need improvement. First, to make the master programs more specialized in certain areas and second, to increase the research development considering that the university is a research-based institution:

“There should be emphasis in one thing and not just a lot of things, the idea is to be expert in one thing, not so wide information. To be successful, we should look at the market, and then improve academic knowledge, otherwise we cannot do a good life, if we do not emphasize in one thing.” (Syria, Public Health)

“There should be more precise information about how to conduct research. In the master’s degree there should be at least two subjects about research, even many PhD students don’t know how to do it.” (India, IT)

The previous categories revealed that despite the less positive experiences of students, there are aspects that create a good atmosphere for learning. The multicultural friendships, the academic support from most of the teachers, and the academic challenges, shape resilient students in different fields of study in a research-based university that every year rises in the rankings.

Conclusion

The academic integration of the international students in Debrecen is constituted by four categories. The participants revealed that four main aspects take place and are fundamental during the experience of their study abroad period. Their experience can be positive or negative, however resilience predominates in the areas that according to the participants need improvement.

To answer the question of this research: What do international students’ experiences reveal about their academic integration? We can conclude that from the beginning there are elevated expectations since students relied on their search in the rankings to choose the university. As soon as they start to face the actual Hungarian education system of the university, they can observe that the administration and the curriculum, in some cases, are different from what they thought.

In terms of the classroom performance, they noticed that teachers have the knowledge of the subject, but language barrier and a distance relationship with teachers create a gap between what they should learn and what they learn. Finally, the peer learning relations and a sense of togetherness with their classmates is developed because of the connection in the classroom.

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Contact email: Jennysita814@gmail.com