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Understanding International Students' Experiences at University Belonging in the Turkish Higher Education System: Insights from Gaziantep University

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ABSTRACT: *International students constitute a significant portion of the higher education population in Turkey. This study explores the sense of belonging of 20 international students selected through maximum diversity sampling from Gaziantep University. Using a qualitative content analysis, the study identifies three key factors that shape students' sense of belonging: peer relationships, lecturers' attitudes, and the overall educational environment. The findings highlight the value of fostering collaborative learning, expanding social activities, and promoting supportive, responsive instructor behavior. The study also recommends involving students in academic projects and research, establishing effective communication and feedback systems, simplifying university procedures, and supporting student clubs. The research emphasizes the need for inclusive university policies to enhance the academic and social integration of international students. To strengthen their sense of belonging, both structural and social reforms are needed to enable students to express themselves more fully and participate more fully in the university environment.*

Keywords: Belonging, Higher Education, Inclusion, International Students, University Environment

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CONTEXT

The world is becoming increasingly multidimensional, both culturally and linguistically. However, as in many sectors around the world, there are many changes in education, especially in higher education, and the international student approach is one of them (Taylan, 2019). The definition of international student in Turkey is “a non-Turkish citizen who is studying in educational institutions of all degrees and disciplines or attending Turkish language courses”, while in the United States, foreign student refers to non-American students enrolled in a higher education institution and holding a temporary or permanent residence permit (Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2015).

According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019), there were 1.17 million international students worldwide in 1990, 2.1 million in 2000, and 5.31 million in 2017. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of international students in Turkey increased rapidly. The number of international students in higher education increased from 25,545 in 2010 to 155,47 in 2019 (Yurdakul, Yıldırım, & Şahin, 2021). Then, four years later in 2023, it reached 301,694 with an enormous increase (Council of Higher Education [YÖK], 2023). Such a high concentration of international students has led to multifaceted research on these students. Research generally covers language, academic, social, cultural and financial issues for international students (Cheung, 2013). Among these topics, social and cultural research affects students' adaptation and success in their country of origin (Chen, 2019; Shiraev & Levy, 2021; Glass & Westmont, 2014). One of the most important factors in the social and cultural adaptation process is belonging (Can, 2015).

Belonging has been identified as a powerful human need across cultures. As social beings, humans greatly desire to belong to a group and be accepted; otherwise, they may feel great fear. The Need to Belong Theory in social psychology (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggests that all human behavior, emotions and cognition are driven by feelings of belonging. There are two types of social capital: solidarity and intermediary. The necessary conditions for social capital are network closure, high density, and strong ties. In intermediary social capital, an individual's position in relationships determines his/her advantages (Ağcasulu, 2017). It is thought that international students often experience disruption and loss in both of these types of social capital and need to rebuild in a

new place (Malette & Ismailzai, 2020). Belongingness has become a central concept in understanding the experiences of international students in higher education. It refers to the extent to which students feel accepted, supported, and valued within the university environment, which significantly affects their academic motivation, mental well-being, and retention (Glass & Westmont, 2014). For international students, the sense of belonging is often shaped by various factors, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, peer support, and institutional policies (Demir et al., 2025). Bowman et al. (2019) consider the sense of belonging as a multidimensional factor that includes interaction with the campus community and external engagement and is influenced by students' individual emotional needs. Strayhorn (2018) emphasizes that belonging encompasses both a sense of belonging with peers or individuals and a broader institutional context.

Research shows that when international students perceive a high level of belonging, they are more likely to engage actively in academic and social settings, contributing positively to their overall educational experience (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Undoubtedly, disruptions in a sense of belonging can negatively impact mental health; however, a sense of university belonging has also been associated with many important benefits for students' well-being and academic success. In the university setting, "belonging refers to a sense of attachment to one's university, a strong support network, and a balance of challenge and support" (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Belonging is an important element for all students, but it is particularly important for international students' processes at university (Maestas et al., 2007; Murdock-Perriera, 2019). A positive sense of belonging has been associated with improved psychological well-being for international students in a variety of university settings (Can, 2015). For all students, a sense of belonging has also been found to be a protective factor for various aspects of mental health, such as depression (Khosravi et al., 2018; Sawir et al., 2008) and loneliness (Baskin et al., 2010). Belonging to a university has very similar health benefits to belonging in general, including specific academic outcomes. Academic success and student satisfaction are often important goals for both international students and universities. A sense of belonging has been associated with positive academic outcomes (Allen et al., 2018; Glass and Westmont, 2014) and academic persistence and retention (Hausmann et al., 2007). Students who feel valued and welcomed by universities (peers/academics) remain motivated and focused on their academic goals, students need to feel a sense of belonging to the university to be successful, and a sense of belonging for students is critical to the social environment in higher education (Strayhorn, 2018). Recent research emphasizes the role of psychosocial and peer-related factors in shaping international students' university belonging. While Demir et al. (2025) highlight how adaptation processes in Turkish universities influence sense of belonging, Hsieh and Watson (2025) explore well-being as a precursor to belongingness among graduate students. Additionally, Wang and Mireles-Rios (2025) demonstrate the impact of peer interactions on academic motivation, an indirect indicator of belonging.

As mentioned above, with the increase in the number of international students coming to Turkey from all over the world, academic research has been conducted on various aspects of international students studying in Turkey, but no study addressing their sense of belonging was found in the literature review. The majority of researchers have conducted research on the acculturation of international students, the problems they face and their needs. This gap in the literature encourages the researcher to explore international students' sense of belonging in the learning environment, and because international students' sense of belonging plays an important role in their academic achievement, this study examines how international students in Turkey experience their sense of belonging and why it is high or low.

This study draws upon Strayhorn's (2019) model of college students' sense of belonging, which frames belonging as a basic human need and links it to academic engagement and persistence. The framework helps explore how international students interpret their experiences within Turkish higher education institutions and how these experiences relate to their perceived belonging.

Research Questions

The main problem statement of this research is: "What are the factors that influence international students' sense of belonging in higher education, and how can universities support and enhance this sense?" To address this main question, the following subquestions were formulated:

1. What are the perceptions of international students regarding their sense of belonging at the university?
2. What factors do international students perceive as influencing (both positively and negatively) their sense of university belonging within the dimensions of classmates, faculty members, and the educational environment?
3. What strategies do international students suggest to strengthen their sense of belonging in the university context?

METHOD

The research was designed using a phenomenological model focused on discovering familiar yet underexplored phenomena. Phenomenology aims to reveal the essence of experiences by attempting to define and interpret individuals' experiences, feelings, and perceptions related to a specific phenomenon (Karakoç, 2021). In this study, a phenomenological design was chosen to analyze international students' sense of belonging to the university based on their own perspectives and personal experiences within the Turkish higher education system. Gaziantep University served as the contextual setting for the research by providing a practical environment for exploring students' experiences of belonging. The focus was not on evaluating the institution itself but on understanding the experiences of students within this context.

Data Collection

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Social Sciences Ethics Committee of Gaziantep University. As a study tool, a semistructured interview form was developed by the researcher with reference to a validated standardized tool. Specifically, items were adapted from the Sense of Belonging Scale developed by Hoffman et al. (2002), which identifies key factors influencing students' sense of belonging in higher education. The data were collected from 20 international students selected using maximum diversity sampling, a purposive sampling method aimed at identifying individuals who will provide the most accurate information to achieve the study's objectives. (Yıldırım, 2021). The diversity of the study group was deliberately ensured by considering various factors, including age, department, grade, education level, gender, nationality, Turkish language proficiency, and length of stay in Turkey. The interviews were conducted individually in the participants' preferred language (English, Turkish, or Arabic) to ensure that they could express their experiences comfortably and accurately and because the researcher was fluent in these three languages. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the data, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity in the reporting. With the participants' consent, all sessions were recorded using a digital audio device. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual information and nonverbal cues. Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was reviewed by two experts in higher education and intercultural studies to ensure its content validity and the appropriateness of its questions. The data were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

Table 1. Demographic information of the research sample

Participant code	Gender	Nationality	Age	Residence Period (year)	Turkish level	Education level	Department	Year of Studying
P1	Male	Nigeria	31	3	A2	PhD	Civil engineering	2
P2	Male	Syria	19	7	C1	Undergraduate	Electronic Engineering	1
P3	Male	Syria	21	6	C1	Undergraduate	Nursing	3
P4	Male	Syria	20	6	C1	Undergraduate	Economics	1

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P5	Male	Palestine	24	1	A1	Master's degree	Civil engineering	1
P6	Male	Syria	35	2	C1	PhD	Chemistry	2
P7	Male	Syria	22	4	B2	Undergraduate	Medicine	2
P8	Female	Syria	20	9	C2	Undergraduate	Law	2
P9	Female	Syria	20	7	C1	Associate Degree	First and Emergency Aid	1
P10	Female	Syria	24	3	B1	Undergraduate	Logistics	1
P11	Male	Somali	24	7	C1	Undergraduate	Aviation	4
P12	Male	Somali	21	3	C1	Undergraduate	Mechanical Engineering	2
P13	Male	Afghanistan	22	4	C1	Undergraduate	Medicine	3
P14	Male	Afghanistan	20	2	B2	Undergraduate	Theology	1
P15	Male	Afghanistan	21	2	C1	Undergraduate	Business Administration	1
P16	Male	Tanzania	28	3	C1	Master's degree	Educational Administration	2
P17	Female	Syria	22	6	C1	Undergraduate	Nursing	3
P18	Male	Syria	29	8	C1	Undergraduate	Mathematics Teacher Education	4
P19	Male	Yemen	22	4	C1	Undergraduate	Medicine	3
P20	Female	Egypt	21	4	C1	Undergraduate	Business Administration	3

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Coding was performed manually using Microsoft Word. First, units of meaning were identified and labeled with preliminary codes. These codes were repeatedly reviewed to capture the fundamental patterns emerging from the data and grouped into subthemes and main themes. A total of 86 initial codes were created and refined into 11 subthemes and 3 general themes reflecting the main dimensions of university belonging. Thematic analysis was primarily conducted using a deductive approach, as the interview guide and analysis were structured around three predefined dimensions (classmates, faculty members, and educational environment) derived from the prior literature on belonging in higher education. Within each dimension, inductive coding was applied to identify subthemes and patterns emerging from participants' narratives. This combination provided both a theoretical foundation and openness to new insights derived from the data.

To ensure analytical rigor, peer debriefing sessions were conducted, and continuous comparisons were made between the data and the themes. The final

themes were discussed with a qualitative research expert for validity and consistency.

Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the study, various strategies were employed based on the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Reliability was ensured through member checking, where participants were invited to review the accuracy of the key findings, and through a pilot study conducted with three students. The pilot study helped improve the clarity and relevance of the interview questions. Reliability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail of all research decisions, codes, and analytical notes. Validation was supported by reflexive journaling and peer debriefing sessions to minimize researcher bias. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed explanations about the research context and participants' backgrounds. Collectively, these measures strengthened the transparency and reliability of the research process, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives on university belonging.

RESULTS

Sense of University Belonging

Students' views on the sense of university belonging differed. This understanding was divided into four categories: emotional dimension, academic commitment, social and cultural integration, and supportive environment.

The emotional dimension of university belonging is related to the individual's identification with and pride in their university. When individuals feel belonging to the group they are in, they perceive the achievements of the group as their own achievements, and this increases self-esteem. "university belonging is being proud of the university. In other words, the reason why I am proud of my university is that I have improved myself with the knowledge and experience I have gained here." (p8)

The coming together of individuals from different cultures contributes to the reduction of prejudices and increases social cohesion by strengthening mutual understanding. Cultural interaction helps individuals to better understand their own identity and to be more open to the perspectives of others. This process reinforces the sense of belonging within the community. "university belonging, meeting students from different cultures led me to share my own culture and understand others" (p16).

Peer support is an important factor in the formation of university belonging. Individuals feel more secure and motivated in an environment that supports them. Peer relationships help students make sense of the university experience and strengthen their sense of belonging. "university belonging is unthinkable without

the support of my friends and classmates. The time we spend together makes this experience more special.” (p10).

In this vein, it was concluded that students have various perspectives on the sense of university belonging and that these perspectives are shaped in different emotional, academic integration, social integration, and feeling-supported contexts.

Factors Influencing Sense of University Belonging

This section brings together the positive and negative effects perceived by international students and is divided into three categories: classmates, faculty members, and the educational environment.

Positive Influences

Classmates

Joint projects contribute to both the academic and social development of individuals and increase university belonging. Group work supports students' cognitive development by enabling them to interact with different perspectives. At the same time, collaborative work builds strong social bonds between students, which increases commitment to the learning process. “Working together on academic projects is not only a great learning experience but also a chance for international students to bring different perspectives to the discussions, which enriches the overall academic environment and therefore increases engagement in learning” (p2).

Participation in social activities strengthens individuals' ties with the university community and increases their sense of belonging. Taking an active role in academic and social activities helps students adapt to the university environment faster and expand their social circles. Bringing together individuals from different cultures increases interaction and makes university experience more meaningful. “Sometimes social events are organized with international and local students, which strengthens university belonging” (p12).

Academic solidarity enables students to learn from each other, strengthening both their academic success and their commitment to the university. Solidarity increases the sense of belonging by creating mutual understanding and support among students. This solidarity helps to build a strong bond within the university community and allows students to feel more valued and supported. “everyone is understanding, especially in regard to asking for help or asking for help from a particular person, which increases our connectedness” (p19).

Faculty members

Academic guidance and interaction with faculty members strengthen students' commitment to the university and enhance their continuity of study. The attention and guidance of faculty members provides great support, especially for

international students, which reinforces a sense of belonging. Students feel more valued and connected through strong relationships with faculty members, which increases their commitment to the university. “Our interactions with our faculty members are invaluable in building our sense of belonging to the university. With their care and guidance, we feel more connected as international students.” (p5).

The use of comprehensible language increases academic achievement for students with language barriers but also reinforces their commitment to the university. When teachers present lessons in a simple and understandable way, it increases students' interest in the lesson and makes the learning process more effective. This approach helps students express themselves better and become more connected to the academic environment. “it is very important for me that he uses understandable language. As a student with a language barrier, the fact that some professors express the topics in a simple and understandable way makes me understand the lessons better and increases my engagement.” (p10).

Faculty members who encourage collaboration create a solidarity and supportive environment among students. Group work enables students to both increase their academic achievement and strengthen their social bonds. This process supports students in learning from each other and increasing their commitment to the university by working more interactively. “When the lecturer encourages collaboration and group work among students, it creates a sense of solidarity among students in the classroom. This allows students to interact more with each other, learn more from each other and feel more connected.” (p12).

Education environment

Connecting students through collaborative work promotes cultural integration and facilitates academic and social cohesion. Collaborative learning environments enable international and local students to interact and foster a sense of belonging to the university. Students from different cultures working together help them build stronger bonds both on an individual and community level. “collaborative learning environments make it easier for international and local students to interact with each other. This increases the sense of belonging to the university.” (p2).

The views that participation in academic activities increases the sense of belonging indicate that they contribute to students' academic identity development processes. Activities such as conferences, workshops and competitions encourage students to share knowledge while also strengthening their sense of belonging to the academic community. “participation in academic activities makes students more engaged with their studies. This allows international students to participate more actively in the learning process, increasing their engagement and belonging.” (p4).

Negative Influences

Classmates

Students' integration into not only the academic but also the social environment strengthens their commitment to the university. However, limited social interaction outside the classroom makes it difficult for students to develop friendships and negatively affects their sense of belonging. "The fact that there is not much social interaction outside of classes in the university environment limits friendships as international students, and this affects our sense of belonging" (p2).

Language is a fundamental tool in communication, and the learning process is largely realized through social interaction. The language barrier makes interaction between students difficult, hindering the integration of international students, particularly into the university community, and weakening their sense of belonging. "My classmates are sociable and nice people who behave very well in class. However, sometimes it is difficult for us to communicate with each other because of the language barrier, so they cannot communicate with me, which can make me feel excluded, which negatively affects university belonging." (p1).

Differences in the age and life stage of international students cause a lack of common experiences, making it difficult for them to establish social bonds and negatively affecting their sense of belonging to the university. "Age and life stage differences make it difficult for me to establish a common bond with my classmates. This negatively affects my sense of belonging to the university." (p10).

Faculty members

Academic staff's inability to allocate sufficient time for one-to-one communication weakens students' sense of belonging by making them feel emotionally unsupported. "i felt emotionally unsupported at times. I had the impression that there was not enough time for student-faculty interaction, which affected the sense of belonging." (p6).

When lecturers are insensitive to the challenges faced by students, students feel excluded, and their sense of belonging is diminished. In particular, international students expect empathy and support as they face cultural and linguistic barriers. When faculty members understand these challenges and provide appropriate support to their students, it strengthens their commitment to the university. "It is important that lecturers show more empathy. It is important to recognize that some students face different challenges and provide appropriate support. This is especially important for international students, otherwise their belonging to the university may be affected." (p19).

Education environment

Social interaction plays a critical role in building a sense of university belonging. However, the lack of sufficient social activities or supportive programs for international students leads to a sense of “disconnection”. Limited activities that promote social integration reduce international students' commitment to the university. “Social cohesion is hindered by limited opportunities, leading to a sense of disconnection among international students” (p6).

Universities offer various services to support students' academic, social and cultural integration. However, a lack of awareness about these services prevents international students from benefiting from these resources and negatively affects their sense of belonging. “Like most foreign students, I do not have enough information about the services at the university, which can reduce our sense of belonging to the university. The university needs to raise awareness on this issue” (p16).

Perceived strategies to strengthen university belonging

Classmates

Collaborative learning environments bring together students from different cultures to learn from each other and strengthen their commitment to the university. By encouraging students to interact more in the community, collaborative learning can strengthen social bonds and increase a sense of belonging to the university. “Cooperative learning strengthens our learning by bringing together classmates from different cultures, which can lead to a stronger attachment to the university” (p2).

Organizing social events can allow students to interact more with both national and international classmates. These activities can contribute to the development of a sense of belonging to the university by building stronger social bonds among students. Participants stated that social events provide the opportunity to get together with classmates more often, and this can reinforce a sense of belonging. “Organizing social events allows us, as international students, to interact with my classmates more often, and this strengthens our social ties, which can increase our sense of belonging” (p8).

Increasing intercultural understanding makes the university community richer and more diversified. Participants stated that organizing cultural events would help build better understanding and communication among students, which could reinforce a sense of belonging to the university. “Maybe it would be good to organize events related to more cultures to increase intercultural understanding. I mean, everyone can understand each other's culture better.” (p19).

Faculty members

When faculty members show empathy and sensitivity, it increases students' sense of belonging to the university. Being more understanding and supportive of students with language difficulties gives students confidence and makes their university experience more positive. Participants emphasized that faculty members can reinforce students' sense of belonging to the university by providing not only academic but also emotional support. "it is important to be more understanding, especially toward students with language problems. It gives us confidence to feel that not only academic but also emotional support is provided" (p. 13).

The participants stated that faculty members involving students in projects and research can increase the sense of belonging to the university. Students taking on more responsibility can help them gain experience, and this process can strengthen their bond to the university. Participating in projects and research can increase the sense of belonging by making students feel more valued. "perhaps involving more students in projects could increase our sense of belonging to the university. This can help us gain experience by giving students more responsibility." (p6).

Education environment

Participants indicated that simplifying university procedures could facilitate international students' adaptation to the university. Making registration, application and other bureaucratic processes clearer and more accessible would help students adapt to the university quickly. This, in turn, can help develop a sense of belonging quickly. Reducing the difficulties students face in these processes can help them integrate more easily into the university community.

"Streamlining university procedures can strengthen international students' adaptation to the university. Clear and accessible application, registration and other bureaucratic processes facilitate the rapid integration of international students. This facilitation can enable students to quickly feel a sense of belonging to the university community" (p4).

The participants stated that student clubs and organizations can strengthen international students' sense of belonging to the university. Through student clubs, students can share their culture and interact with local students by participating in different activities. Such interactions can make university life richer and more diverse and contribute to a strong sense of community.

"through student clubs, international students can share their own culture and at the same time interact with local students by participating in various activities. Student clubs can make university life richer and more diverse, strengthen the sense of belonging to the university and contribute to building a strong community among students." (p20).

These suggestions provided by the participants stem from the challenges and experiences of students in the university environment. These suggestions are in

line with existing research and demonstrate the effectiveness of strategies to improve the sense of belonging. Moreover, the alignment between the recommendations and the problems identified points to the need to address systemic barriers to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. However, the realization of these recommendations may require collaboration among various stakeholders.

The findings of the study underline the complexity of students' university belonging and emphasize its multifaceted nature. The study shows that important contextual elements such as perceptions of well-being, academic and social integration and support play an important role in shaping these perspectives.

Factors influencing international students' sense of university belonging were analyzed. Positive influences include cooperation among students, social activities, open communication and the supportive attitude of faculty members. Negative influences include limited social interaction, language barriers, lack of faculty time and communication difficulties. Suggested solutions to increase the sense of university belonging include collaborative learning methods, social activities, peer mentoring programs, faculty members' caring and encouraging attitudes, strengthening communication channels and supporting student clubs.

DISCUSSION

Students' views on the sense of university belonging differed. This understanding was divided into four categories: emotional dimension, academic commitment, social and cultural integration, and supportive environment.

Students' views on the sense of university belonging; the emotional dimension overlaps with Leary's (1990) view, emphasizing the strong connection of belonging with happiness and subjective well-being. Academic engagement is in line with the studies of Strauss & Volkwein (2004) and Hausmann et al. (2007) Social and cultural integration is in line with the findings of Glass et al. (2015), St-Amand et al. (2017) and Arkoudis et al. (2019) Supportive environment, "feeling supported by peers and faculty", is in line with Strayhorn's (2018) definition of belonging and the research of Cartmell & Bond (2015) and Christopher et al. (2015) It can be said that the definitions and findings obtained from different sources and the findings of the current study generally overlap.

The emphasis on emotional well-being, academic engagement, social integration and supportive environments underlines the importance of holistic approaches to promote belonging in higher education institutions. It is possible that the alignment between the findings of this study and established theories and studies in the field may stem from common human experiences and basic psychological processes. The need for social connection, acceptance and support seems to transcend cultural and contextual differences and shape individuals' perceptions of belonging in different university settings. Furthermore, recognizing the various dimensions of belonging may highlight the importance of addressing various aspects of students' experiences to promote inclusivity and a sense of community in the university setting.

The factors that positively affect the sense of belonging are grouped into three categories: classmates, faculty members and the educational environment.

Classmates: Students stated that academic cooperation, effective communication, participation in social activities, support in difficult situations, information sharing and open dialog positively affected their sense of belonging. In the literature, it has been shown that peer interaction, social support and group activities increase the sense of belonging (St-Amand et al., 2017; Hausmann et al., 2007).

Faculty Members: Factors such as interest, use of clear language, supportive communication, mentoring, empathy, individual conversations, and cultural sensitivity strengthen students' sense of belonging. Similarly, the literature emphasizes that connections with faculty members, supportive attitudes and guidance increase belonging (Maestas et al., 2007; Chen & Razek, 2016).

Educational Environment: Factors such as collaborative learning, participation in academic and social activities, orientation programs, support services, cultural integration and inclusive campus culture positively affect the sense of belonging. It is also stated in the literature that a supportive campus environment and participation in social activities increase belonging (O'Keeffe, 2013; Heng, 2023).

In this framework, students believe that there are various elements that positively affect their sense of belonging to the university, such as interaction with classmates, help in studying, support, open communication with the faculty member and feeling supported by him/her, creating a supportive environment on campus, and participation in academic activities. The findings of the studies mentioned above overlap with the findings of the current study.

These findings may reflect people's basic need for meaningful social connections and supportive relationships in academic settings. The emphasis on peer interactions, collaborative learning and social activities underscores the importance of creating opportunities for students to interact with their classmates and develop a sense of friendship and belonging. Moreover, the importance of faculty support, mentoring and empathetic communication emphasizes the crucial role that faculty members play in shaping students' experiences and sense of belonging. Faculty members who show genuine interest, understanding and cultural sensitivity contribute to a positive learning environment where students feel valued and supported. Furthermore, the emphasis on creating a supportive educational environment through initiatives such as orientation programs, academic support services and inclusive campus culture underscores the importance of institutional policies and practices in fostering students' sense of belonging. Providing resources and opportunities for social and academic engagement can increase students' overall satisfaction and commitment to the university community.

Overall, these findings suggest that fostering a sense of belonging among international students requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses both interpersonal relationships and institutional support structures. By addressing these various factors, universities can create environments conducive to students' academic success, well-being and sense of belonging.

The factors that negatively affect the sense of belonging are grouped into three categories: classmates, faculty members and the educational environment.

Classmates: Students stated that factors such as limited social interaction outside the classroom, language barriers, lack of inclusiveness, academic jealousy and lack of interaction negatively affected their sense of belonging. In the literature, it is emphasized that limited peer group interactions (Strayhorn, 2018; Le et al., 2016), language barriers (Kwon, 2009; Yao, 2015) and inhomogeneous environments (Cena et al., 2021) reduce belonging.

Faculty Members: Factors such as lack of time, language barrier, lack of empathy, lack of clear language, lack of support and encouragement weaken students' sense of belonging. Research shows that these factors have a negative impact on international students (Christopher et al., 2015; Chen & Razek, 2016; Kingsley, 2018).

Educational Environment: Factors such as communication difficulties, limited social integration opportunities, lack of awareness of support services, and weak sense of community negatively affect students' sense of belonging. Similarly, it is stated in the literature that a lack of social integration (Chen & Zhou, 2019), communication difficulties (Ng, 2021) and a lack of awareness of support services (Le et al., 2016) reduce belonging.

In this framework, students believe that there are various factors that negatively affect their sense of belonging to the university, such as limited social interaction with classmates outside the classroom, language barriers, lack of interaction, lack of time for faculty members, language barriers, lack of empathy, lack of use of understandable language, communication difficulties on campus, limited social integration opportunities, and lack of awareness of support services. The findings of the aforementioned studies overlap with the findings of the current study.

These findings may reflect the inherent complexities and tensions that arise in culturally diverse academic communities. Issues such as limited social interaction and language barriers can result from differences in language proficiency, cultural norms and social dynamics, which can create barriers to meaningful engagement and connection among students. Moreover, challenges related to faculty interactions, such as lack of time, attention and empathy, as well as language barriers and cultural differences, can highlight the importance of promoting inclusive teaching practices and providing faculty with training and resources to effectively support diverse student populations. Furthermore, issues in the educational environment, such as communication difficulties and limited awareness of support services, may highlight the need for proactive measures to improve campus communication channels, increase awareness of available resources, and promote a more inclusive and supportive campus culture.

Suggestions for classmates: Collaborative learning, social activities, peer mentoring programs, intercultural understanding and feedback sessions come to the fore. In the literature, it is stated that elements such as working together (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012), organizing social activities (St-Amand et al., 2017) and intercultural understanding (Shiraev & Levy, 2021) have an effect on increasing the sense of belonging.

While the faculty member's showing concern and empathy is a factor that is particularly effective on the sense of belonging (Glass et al., 2015; Wood & Harris, 2015), involving students in projects (Le et al., 2016) is a factor that increases the sense of belonging.

Suggestions Regarding the Educational Environment: Students suggest that university procedures should be facilitated, social activities should be organized, student clubs and organizations should be supported, and housing and campus facilities should be improved. In the literature, it is stated that supporting student organizations (Sharma, 2016) and organizing social events (Ahn & Davis, 2023) are factors that increase the sense of belonging.

It can be said that the suggestions offered by the participants stem from their first-hand experiences and observations of the difficulties students face in the university environment. By identifying areas where improvements can be made, students offer practical solutions that address the key factors that contribute to their sense of belonging. On the other hand, the consistency between these suggestions and existing research underlines the effectiveness of these strategies in improving students' sense of belonging. Moreover, the parallelism between the problems identified by students and the proposed solutions emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic barriers and implementing proactive measures to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

However, it is clear that the implementation of these recommendations may require collaboration among various stakeholders, including faculty, administrators and student organizations.

Implications

The findings offer several implications for institutions seeking to strengthen students' sense of belonging and overall engagement within the campus community. The results highlight key factors that influence belonging, identify practices that positively support students' integration, and point to barriers that institutions should address to foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

1. **Influencing Factors:** Students' perceptions of belonging were shaped by emotional well-being, academic and social integration, and the perceived availability of institutional support.
2. **Positive Contributors:** Collaborative classroom dynamics, faculty encouragement, and programs promoting social engagement were identified as key contributors. Orientation programs, social media networks, and academic support services helped students integrate into the campus community and build a stronger sense of belonging.
3. **Barriers to Belonging:** Limited social interaction outside academic settings, language difficulties, and the absence of inclusive practices undermined students' sense of belonging. Additional factors included age-related differences, lack of empathy, academic competition, communication challenges, and insufficient awareness of available support services.

4. Suggested Enhancements: Participants emphasized the importance of collaborative learning, social events, peer mentorship, and cultural exchange. They recommended that faculty provide individualized support, show empathy, and engage students in academic activities. A supportive educational environment—including effective use of campus resources, student clubs, and counseling services—was seen as essential for enhancing belonging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings also suggest several recommendations for institutions seeking to strengthen international students' integration, engagement, and sense of belonging. These recommendations focus on improving academic and social support structures, fostering inclusive campus environments, and encouraging further research to better understand and address the challenges international students face.

1. Enhance Peer and Faculty Interaction: Implement structured mentorship programs and interactive learning environments that promote intercultural dialog and sustained interaction between international students and faculty members.

2. Promote Social Integration: Organize inclusive social events, cultural exchange programs, and student-led initiatives to reduce isolation and foster a supportive community.

3. Strengthen Orientation and Awareness: Develop orientation programs tailored for international students, with clear guidance on available academic and psychological support services.

4. Expand Language Support: Offer targeted language assistance to help students overcome communication barriers, thereby improving their academic and social engagement.

5. Support Student Organizations: Encourage the formation and participation of international student clubs to enhance representation and foster a sense of identity and belonging on campus.

6. Future Research Directions: Given the current study's qualitative nature, it is recommended to conduct quantitative research using standardized belongingness scales to measure the effectiveness of institutional programs such as academic support, orientation sessions, and social engagement initiatives.

7. Address Structural Challenges: Further qualitative studies are needed to explore systemic factors—such as social exclusion, language discrimination, and lack of communication—that hinder international students' integration and sense of belonging.

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