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Worlds Apart, Learning Together: A Typology of International Higher Education Students' Academic and Social Integration

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ABSTRACT: *This qualitative research examined the academic and social integration of international students at a Central European university by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews in the 2023-2024 academic year. Via purposive sampling, thirty participants were selected, and a typology based on their integration experiences was developed through thematic analysis. Herein, we identified four distinct and well-defined student types: (1) focused scholars, prioritizing academics with scant social interaction; (2) engaged achievers, who maintain a balance between academic and social life; (3) overwhelmed isolates, who struggle in both areas, mainly due to cultural disconnectedness and stress; and (4) resilient networkers, who, despite several academic challenges, cope by leaning on their social connections. The results highlight the complex interplay among individual traits, cultural influences, academic demands and pressures, and institutional support in shaping integration outcomes.*

Keywords: academic integration, academic mobility, international higher education, international students, social integration

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INTRODUCTION

International academic mobility has increased dynamically in recent decades (Dusa, 2020; Van Mol et al., 2021); while 2.2 million students studied abroad in 2011, their number surpassed 6 million within 20 years (UNESCO Institute of Statistics [UIS], 2022; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024). For most universities, international students constitute a major source of income, also bringing cultural and academic enrichment (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). The data indicate that the already strong demand for English-language education will surge. As a result, adjusting educational systems and services globally will be crucial. Thus, integration facilitates not only the success of education but also its economic, social and diplomatic application. To that end, supporting international students is a key factor in any modern higher education institution.

Assimilating international students into higher education environments is a complex and multidimensional process academically and socioculturally. As globalization continues to shape the landscape of higher education, understanding the diverse experiences of international students has become increasingly significant (Bergman et al., 2023). These students often navigate unique challenges, such as adapting to unfamiliar academic practices, overcoming language barriers, and engaging with culturally diverse social environments, all of which affect their overall success and well-being while enrolled (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Dusa & Dabney-Fekete, 2024; Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025).

By examining student experience academically, socially, and culturally, we aim to explore student integration. Participant typologies were developed from interviews, resulting in four distinct student groups.

The novelty of this research can be explained and supported by the numerous research gaps that could be detected in special literature. While international student mobility has been steadily increasing in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the academic and social integration of international students has been explored little. Our research was conducted in a specific CEE university, making it possible to better understand the region's unique social and institutional context. A second important aspect is that most previous studies have used a quantitative approach, limiting their ability to capture students' subjective experiences. In our examination, we worked with qualitative methods, allowing students to extensively express their perceptions of integration. This opened the way to more deeply grasp the interplay between academic and social integration. Finally, our research reflects on the role of individual background factors, such as cultural

differences, language skills or previous international experiences, as well as on how students themselves perceive and evaluate institutions' support mechanisms and their effectiveness.

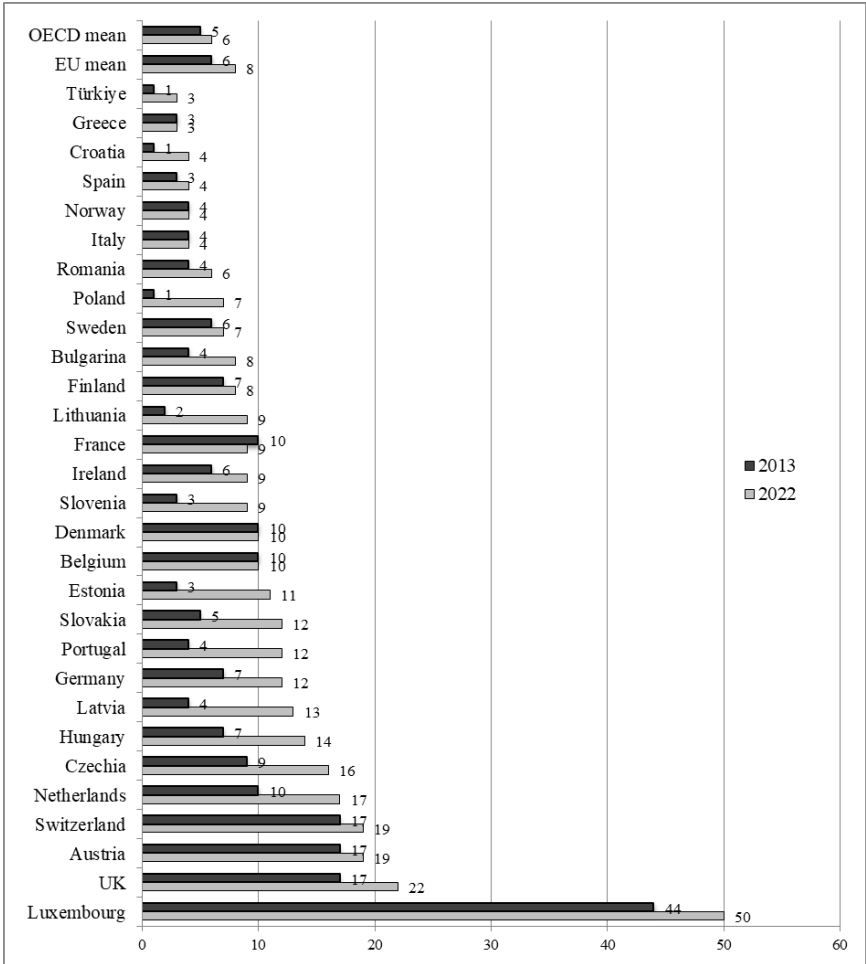


Figure 1: Proportion of international students among all higher education students (2013-2022; %)

Source: Compilation and selection based on data from Education at a Glance 2024 (OECD, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students in Central and Eastern Europe

Based on data from *Education at a Glance 2024*, the ratio of international students at most European higher education institutions has increased considerably between 2013 and 2022 (OECD, 2024). As illustrated in Figure 1, throughout a nine-year span, Luxembourg outpaces other European countries regarding international student ratios among total student bodies. The most pronounced growth in the examined time period was detected in Latvia, Portugal and Estonia. It indicated an accelerated and very much conscious effort toward internationalization. Slight decline or stagnation was found in only a few nations.

Several tertiary education systems in CEE also experienced a rather rapid and intensive rise in incoming mobile students during this period. In 2022, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia and Estonia had international student ratios 1.8 to 2.6 times that of the OECD average and approximately 1.5 to 2 times higher than the EU mean. It is, therefore, safe to say that these countries have become more appealing higher education destinations for foreign students. This may result from a persuasive and productive internationalization strategy and a lifestyle that, compared to other Western European countries, is affordable. Such an upward trend may increase visibility, bettering reputation, global prestige, and academic position within the EU. Although its absolute ratio was lower than that of other CEE countries (7%), Poland's growth trajectory was up sevenfold from 1% in 2013, suggesting that even states with originally lower numbers are catching up.

Likewise, Hungary has also witnessed a rather substantial growth in both the absolute number and relative proportion of international students compared to those in Hungarian programs. While in 2001, only 3.4% of the total student population was international students, this figure rose to 13.5% by 2019 (OECD, 2024). The underlying factors behind that escalation could be multifaceted. First, the ever-growing number of English-language programs may attract students wishing to obtain degrees from a European university that is more affordable than Western European higher education institutions. The academic courses and programs offered by Hungarian institutions, international cooperation, improvement in university rankings, and strong marketing strategies also contribute to that increase. Furthermore, the country's appeal is raised by the relatively low fees and the safe and livable cities and towns with their developing environments. However, this dynamic operates in both directions, and the increasing number of international students may enrich academic collaborations, experience and learning environments while also broadening perspectives into multicultural communities despite barriers (Brito et al. 2025; Dusa & Dabney-Fekete, 2024).

According to the statistical data of the University of Debrecen (UD Statistics, 2024), where the research was conducted, international student levels have been steadily climbing. It must be noted that the data are analyzed and taken into consideration only from 2000, the year when the University of Debrecen came into being, following the integration of several higher educational institutions and

faculties. While in the early 2000s their number was relatively modest (although even before the Change of Regime in 1989/90, within the socialist solidarity program, students from socialist countries worldwide came to study in Hungary), in recent years, a remarkable increase could be detected, which was due to a very intentional and carefully planned internationalization strategy. According to the 2024 October data, 7625 international students enrolled in the university, 23.6% of the whole student body. The university's development into a global actor can be seen by both its growing attractiveness and its reshaping of itself, as a multicultural hub, and the city in which it is located.

In such a multicultural context where these international students must learn to navigate the challenges and culture shock they encounter in the host country and where they are required to adapt to norms, academic and social integration proves to be indispensable. Moreover, to develop new internationalization strategies, knowing what promotes (or hinders) integration could be crucial.

International students' academic and social integration

Various theories address the integration and involvement of higher education students, notably those proposed by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984). Integration is conceptualized as having two dimensions: academic and social. Academic integration encompasses academic performance, intellectual development, and positive experiences within academic settings, while social integration pertains to participation in extracurricular activities and the development of interpersonal relationships. In contrast, involvement, as defined by Astin (1984), refers to the physical and psychological energy students invest in their academic experiences. This theory posits that greater involvement in both academic and extracurricular activities enhances students' likelihood of achieving academic and social success.

Student behavior during their academic journey is dynamic and may evolve over time, influenced by psychological factors that shape their integration into academic and social environments. Although the advantages of learning in a foreign country may be numerous, international students in the new academic and social environment must face challenges, and to overcome them, they must adapt new coping mechanisms (Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025; Ersoy & Akçaoğlu, 2025; Dusa & Dabney-Fekete, 2024). Schlossberg's transition theory (1984) provides a framework for understanding these challenges, emphasizing four factors that influence the transitional experiences of individuals: the situation itself, personal resources, coping skills, and the meaning attributed to the transition.

Additionally, Berry's (2006) acculturation theory offers insights into the integration processes of international students. For example, students with higher levels of acculturation may find it easier to traverse the complexities of a new academic and social environment, while those with lower levels may find it harder.

Further research supports these foundational theories. Milem and Berger (1997) integrated Tinto's and Astin's models to examine the interplay between student behaviors and perceptions, demonstrating that academic and social

integration often develop concurrently through shared activities, such as classroom interactions. Moreover, Karp et al. (2008) explored Tinto's framework in the context of community colleges and found that information networks play a crucial role in fostering both academic and social integration. These findings underscore the importance of creating supportive environments that facilitate student engagement and incorporation.

One of the key concepts relevant to the satisfaction of international students is academic integration, primarily defined by Tinto (1975). Research based on his concept indicates that instructors play a pivotal role in facilitating a positive student experience. Academic integration involves adjustment to academic and institutional expectations and norms (Shamionov et al., 2020; Al Juboori et al., 2025), also entailing academic performance and intellectual development. Academic achievement and satisfaction, communication with staff, supervisors, and professors, the frequency of such interactions, and participation in study groups, academic clubs, and internships are all contained in it (Tinto, 1993). Tinto posits that academic progress, cognitive growth, and positive experiences define the term, wherein institutional and personal strategies complement each other, influenced by prior education, abilities, skills, and personal goals. Institutional factors thereof include admission criteria, academic standards, and organizational structure.

According to Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2022), several strategies can effectively define academic integration and serve as a source of information for institutions seeking to integrate students. These strategies include student orientation programs at the beginning of each semester, class organization, supervisor consultations, and learning communities to promote academic progress. A significant study by Comes et al. (2014) examined the academic integration of international students through information gathered from their teachers. Conducted at the University of Alicante, where students use Spanish in the classroom and beyond, this research utilized questionnaires to collect data on students' academic needs. The findings suggested the implementation of academic guides with specific information about subjects and teachers from the perspective of non-native students. This concept is closely linked to the notion of dropout as well. Research incorporating Tinto's ideas and related concepts, such as Lakhali et al. (2020), suggests that platforms created for students to transfer knowledge among themselves and with academic staff can mitigate dropout rates. In this research, academic integration is understood as the aspects students frequently mention during data collection, including their academic standards, experiences with academic staff and peers, and impressions of their programs.

Unlike academic integration, social integration pertains to non-academic activities outside the classroom, such as club and group gatherings, friendships, informal relationships with teachers, and participation in social or cultural campus events. Both, however, are crucial for determining student retention. According to Lakhali et al. (2020), positive integration in both academic and social realms leads to persistence in higher education. Social integration can be defined by students' perceptions of their interactions with peers and teachers (Tinto, 1975, 1993). First, peer mentoring is most effective at enhancing social integration,

while peer tutoring significantly affects academic integration. Moreover, student–faculty interactions can signal social inclusion or exclusion, thereby making international students feel welcome or outcast (Glass et al., 2015). Ultimately, both forms of interaction contribute to institutional attachment (Byl et al, 2023).

The primary question guiding and shaping our research was how and in what ways international students in higher education institutions develop a perceived connectedness through co-occurring experiences in academic and social integration in a country that is culturally different from theirs.

METHODS

In this study, a qualitative research design was employed. To understand the participants’ experiences and personal viewpoints more extensively, semi-structured interviews were adopted as the data collection method. With this approach, we could better grasp students’ complex opinions, attitudes, and emotional responses.

If they matched the criteria, participants were selected from among the international student body at the University of Debrecen, Hungary: they had to be active students, be from a country that has more than a hundred citizens studying at the university, and be enrolled in a full-time program (e.g., Erasmus’ one-semester long programs did not qualify), Hungarian could not be their mother tongue, and they had to be born somewhere outside Hungary. The latter two had to be incorporated due to the distinctive historical, cultural and geographical context of the region: in the border regions outside of Hungary, many individuals are ethnically Hungarian and speak Hungarian, although they often hold citizenship in neighboring countries as well and are technically considered “international.” Snowball sampling was used because we understood that personal referrals and trusted connections were needed to conduct the interviews. Altogether, 20 students were interviewed. Aside from the criteria, the principle of data saturation also helped pick the sample size (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data collection took place between October 2021 and April 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Interviews were conducted online since the participants preferred not to meet in person. Additionally, it mainly affected the winter exam session, when international students usually travel back to their home countries. The interviews were recorded with student approval and then transcribed. Their average length was one hour. Participants were informed about major research topics and goals in advance, and they were also told that their participation was voluntary and that their statements and remarks could be withdrawn at any point. Assurance was given that provided data would be handled confidentially and anonymized, with no third-party access.

The interviews were analyzed manually. The reason this particular approach was selected over software-based analysis was to facilitate the researcher’s deep engagement with the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ views. It allowed for the identification of subtle meanings, cultural nuances, and nonverbal cues that automated software might have overlooked. As

Saldaña (2021) emphasizes, manual coding is often instrumental in qualitative research, as it fosters an iterative and reflective process, leading to more refined, detailed insights. To avoid potential biases and minimize personal opinions during the interpretation process, peer discussions with academic colleagues were regular. An inductive thematic analysis method was used to scrutinize it (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Data were coded by the researchers, and every interview complied with the coding process. The data were carefully coded and, upon completion, selected and categorized (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To assess and improve the original codes, new codes have been added, irrelevant codes have been removed, and certain codes have been split and merged.

Noteworthy research limitations were as follows: snowball sampling methods can form a group of participants that is not representative of the broader population, making generalization impossible. Additionally, language and cultural barriers can lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

RESULTS

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from Iran, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, Korea, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Taiwan, China, Japan, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, Brazil, and Ukraine. Ages ranging from 20 to 33 years old and their studied majors being dentistry, aviation, medicine, pharmaceutical sciences, mechatronic engineering, public health, engineering management, food safety and quality control, and informatics, 10 of them were male and 10 were female. Out of twenty, fourteen claimed to have scholarships that covered their tuition fees, while six were self-financed.

During the analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) theme analysis method followed six steps. After becoming deeply familiar with the data, we tried to map and codify the significant and compelling features. Basic units of meaning constituted the codes that were then grouped into themes. The themes were then refined and checked if they fit the dataset. Afterwards, they were clearly defined and named. To conclude, findings were written up.

Based on how integrated the interviewees were, both from an academic and a sociocultural standpoint, four distinct groups were identified: the focused scholars, the engaged achievers, the overwhelmed isolates and the resilient networks. Figure 2 shows the four types on a two-dimensional coordinate plane that is structured by the intersection convergence of the two axes, academic and sociocultural integration.

From the visual data, it can be inferred that **focused scholars** reflect high academic integration but limited sociocultural involvement. They demonstrated moderate to high academic performance but showed limited involvement in social and cultural activities. Despite cultural differences, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as Iran, Syria, South Korea, and Kazakhstan, shared common ground on academic success. Their fields of study demanded great focus and intellectual commitment, which resulted in them having little social interaction. The affected students were all female.

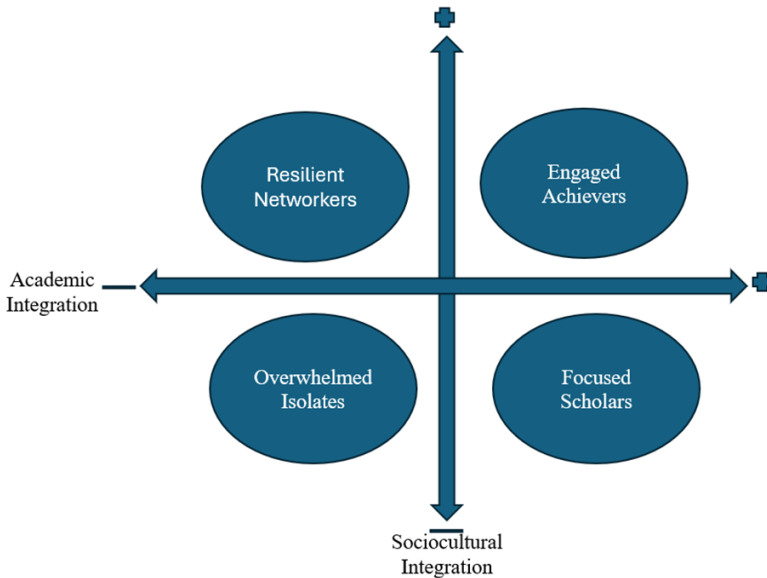


Figure 2: The four main groups regarding academic and sociocultural integration

To continue, the **engaged achievers** reflect a high degree of integration in academic and sociocultural domains as well. There is a balance between their high academic performance and active sociocultural involvement. Representing countries including Ukraine, Nigeria, Egypt, Vietnam, Pakistan, Israel, India, and Brazil, these students, coming from far and wide, excelled in demanding fields while also maintaining a social life. Their social engagement was often facilitated by collaborative academic programs involving teamwork, group projects, and professional networking. In contrast to the previous group, the majority of students were male, with only two female students in the group.

In the case of the **overwhelmed isolates**, low levels of integration can be indicated on both axes. These students struggle significantly with their academic workload and exhibit minimal participation in social and cultural activities. These individuals often experience reduced self-confidence, which exacerbates the fact that they socialize little. Their fields of study are particularly rigorous, and this is further compounded by cultural and linguistic barriers. While both genders are represented in this group and participants are primarily in their mid to late 20s, these struggles are more reflective of individual circumstances rather than being age- or gender-specific.

Resilient networkers are characterized by stronger sociocultural integration but somewhat lower academic integration. This is the smallest and most distinctive group; it consists of two female students from Kenya and Japan. Despite encountering academic challenges, these resilient networkers actively

engage in social and cultural events, suggesting that such participation serves as a coping mechanism to alleviate stress and find support. Their respective fields of study, public health and engineering management, may put less intense academic pressure on them comparatively, allowing them greater flexibility to be involved in social events.

DISCUSSION

The research that was conducted among international students at a university in Central Europe clearly identified four well-defined types. In the first group, a high level of academic integration contrasted with low sociocultural engagement. The second group exhibited high levels in both, which indicated effective adaptation. The third type showed low academic integration but relatively high sociocultural involvement, implying that these students face challenges in their studies despite being socially active. The last group had low integration in both respects, which indicates extensive and significant adaptation issues. This four-group pattern aligns with Berry's model of acculturation strategies (2006) while also supporting Astin's theory (1984) that the intensity and depth of student engagement in both the academic and social spheres are closely linked to their development. The study echoes Milem and Berger's model (1997), highlighting that academic and social integration have an impact on how and to what degree students will be able to stay engaged and excel.

The **focused scholars**, the group with high academic performance and low sociocultural engagement, had only female students. This is interesting in light of Gove's (1994) view that gender differences in behavior result from biological, psychological, and social processes, with stereotypes historically portraying men as competitive and women as nurturing. However, recent shifts highlight increased female representation in traditionally male-dominated fields (Thornton et al., 1997; Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002), and several studies focus on them (Kadriu et al., 2026). Furthermore, in several cultures, there is a pressing expectation from parents of daughters who are studying abroad to focus entirely on their studies and eliminate every kind of distraction that could hinder them from excelling academically. Studies also show that in many cases, female international students may often choose not to take part in sociocultural activities due to the mixed-gender environment, where they might encounter cultural misunderstandings or even harassment. Sometimes they avoid certain events merely owing to cultural, legal, or personal restrictions or even to a lack of confidence in language proficiency (Trice, 2004). This aligns with our interviewees' expressed perspectives. Baumeister and Sommer (1997) point out that there is an essential difference between men and women in regard to seeking companionship and striving for acceptance. While men tend to pursue bonding in groups, women commonly look for dyadic interactions.

In this group, students came from Iran, Syria, South Korea, and Kazakhstan. Despite the many regional and cultural differences, certain common patterns could be detected regarding how well they adopt host cultures in an international

academic environment. In these countries, a strong emphasis is placed on academic performance, and parents sometimes feel obliged to stress its importance; thus, giving precedence to studies over socializing is common (Biggs, 1996; Moussa, 2010). This point and the group perspective on this were perfectly summed up by one student who stated that “The university is not an institute that is supposed to contribute to social life.” In some cases, there is also a high stress factor that may arise from the home country’s unstable economic and/or political situation, and should a student be forced to interrupt his studies, not only him, but the whole family would be in a daunting situation. Existing stigmas attached to mental health issues may also be another reason why they do not become involved in sociocultural life, meaning that seeking help might be a limited option for them (Shek et al., 2024).

Regarding the field of study, it is interesting to note that three of the students came from medicine-related disciplines, which require constant and full focus and attention to detail. Therein, students are expected to internalize a considerable amount of information rapidly. The fourth student is in professional pilot training, which can likewise have similar stipulations. These fields are both intellectually, physically, and emotionally taxing, with a high degree of responsibility involved. This is consistent with the interviewed students’ statements.

The group of **engaged achievers** shows elevated academic and sociocultural involvement. Given that these students are mainly from engineering, health sciences and informatics fields, it is to be expected that this group is predominantly male. All the perspectives on sociocultural integration and gender introduced earlier in connection with the Focused Scholars are now equally valid, only in reverse. Male students are more likely to engage in sociocultural events, since in several countries and cultures, men enjoy greater autonomy and freedom in social interactions, notably in a mixed-gender environment. Additionally, unlike women, men are not under social pressure and are expected culturally to appear “reserved”. As Baumeister and Sommer (1997) point out, gender differences have a great impact on how a person pursues belonging.

Regarding the disciplines these students represent, we can say that almost all those fields assume developed problem-solving and strong analytical skills and, in most cases, high stress, cognitive and emotional loads. They require accountability, precision, and adherence to strict standards. They are typically areas that undergo rapid change and development; thus, students need to keep abreast of progress. Therefore, it is not surprising that Engaged Achievers demonstrate a significant degree of academic integration. One interviewee mentioned that “the university has a lot of opportunities, fairs, competitions, and many programs that allow you to apply to internship and summer programs,” which shows proactive engagement and a firm commitment to seek out possibilities for further development.

The high level of academic integration can also be a result of the cultures these students are from. Education in most of these countries (Ukraine, Nigeria, Egypt, Vietnam, Pakistan, Israel, India, and Brazil) is considered an essential route to social mobility; thus, students are often highly motivated to study, are goal-oriented, and show strong resilience. Owing to the volatile economic,

fragmented social and unstable political context, as was also expressed by our interviewees, students in an international environment tend to develop relatively high levels of resilience, adaptability, self-efficacy and psychological capital (Prasath et al., 2022). Furthermore, social support from family and friends (also from the host country) seems to be a crucial element in reducing stress from acculturation and shifts in academic and educational environments (Kristiana et al 2022; Ersoy & Akçaoğlu 2025).

The **overwhelmed isolates'** group, the other end of the spectrum, has rather sparse academic integration and sociocultural involvement. As noted by research, in the Netherlands, examining academic and social integration in relation to academic performance, non-Western international students, compared to others, show considerably lower levels of integration in both areas during the first year of their studies in the host country (Rienties et al. 2012). The challenges faced by these students are particularly evident in the academic sphere, as depicted in the third quadrant of the integration graph (Graph 3). One notable issue stems from the discrepancy between their prior educational experiences and the pedagogical methods employed in Hungary. For instance, students have expressed frustration with instructors who do not adhere to scheduled class durations, perceiving such behavior as a lack of teaching commitment. Furthermore, some students reported difficulties adapting to new coursework, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed challenges for both educators and students navigating online learning environments.

Based on the interviews, it can be pointed out that these students struggle with having to study in English rather than their native language; thus, taking part in academic debates and discussions is especially demanding. It could be especially stressful if the students, who were academically excellent in their home countries, were now underperforming in the new international environment due to limited abilities to express themselves (Yeh & Inose 2003). Language barriers emerged as a recurrent theme, affecting both academic and sociocultural integration. Students criticized the lack of English proficiency among some instructors, which also negatively impacted their learning experience. Additionally, the overwhelming academic load in certain disciplines left little time for relaxation, further exacerbating feelings of stress and isolation. "Too much stuff is in my brain; it is hard to manage so much information," one participant poignantly stated.

Moreover, language barriers and cultural stereotypes further hindered interactions between international students and locals. For example, a participant shared that "racist behavior toward internationals" sometimes created feelings of alienation, as locals treat them as outsiders. However, this particular problem was only encountered in this group.

These obstacles highlight the hardships students go through when adapting to a new cultural and academic environment. Thus, Overwhelmed Isolates could highly benefit from very clear and precise academic instructions and supervision, as well as from events that are culturally respectful and sensitive.

Positioned in the second quadrant of the integration in Figure 2, **resilient networkers** prioritize social engagement while overcoming academic difficulties.

They emphasized the importance of building community connections, particularly in light of administrative challenges that sometimes led to disorganization in their academic programs. One student noted, “My faculty is kind of messy; they cannot find the teacher, which is why they cannot provide several subjects for us.” This lack of structure prompted students to rely more on peer support, as expressed by another participant: “We didn’t truly reach out to the staff; we make group work.” The differences in educational system structure, in-class assessment styles and teaching methods, language hurdles, and the disparity of what form institutional support should take between student and faculty may make efficacious integration arduous. Academic integration was less emphasized in this group because the fields of study (engineering management and public health) might involve more flexibility and lower levels of stress and pressure.

The Kenyan participant, coming from a culture that places high value on social engagement and community support, appears to draw on these cultural attributes to remain socially active despite struggling academically. Conversely, Japanese culture is of a reserved nature (Baldwin et al., 2013), valuing group affiliation and communal solidarity and harmony. In contrast, the Japanese participant demonstrated traits such as conformity, consideration of others, and respectfulness in interactions, which may have facilitated their connection to Hungarian culture. For these students, both in their late twenties, the social dimension of university life was integral to their overall well-being. Resilient Networkers noted that they participated in Hungarian language classes, which could be seen as one of the approaches to connecting and familiarizing themselves with the host culture and developing ties with locals. “My Hungarian teacher was amazing”, stated one, adding that “I have a Hungarian family; I can know their culture.” These are quintessential in helping students integrate socially, since studies have shown that friendships with locals may increase contentment and moderate homesickness (Hendrickson et al 2011).

Limitations

The research focused solely on the international student body of one CEE university, and only nationalities with more than a hundred citizens present at the university were included in the sample. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to all higher education environments and every international student. However, the concerns raised and issues recognized in our research are also relevant to other academic contexts; they may reflect international student experiences and may also be relevant to them. Useful perspectives and significant insights could still be gleaned from the patterns of integration revealed in the study.

The authors are affiliated with the university where the research was carried out, which provided access and a deeper contextual understanding. This may have shaped the interpretation of the data. To address potential bias, reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analysis to examine assumptions and monitor interpretive decisions.

Theoretical implications

The typology provides nuanced and richer insight into the experiences of international students by exploring how cultural background and academic and social integration intersect and affect one another. It not only brings attention to the challenges that they encounter daily but also sheds light on the personal competences and tenacity that are needed for academic success. In accordance with Berry's acculturation framework (2006), our research showed that cultural background has a great impact on how a student adapts to an international academic environment and in what ways and forms social and academic integration will take place. It was also highlighted that positive and strong integration in both fields are crucial for high academic achievement, which supports Lakhali et al.'s (2020) theory. Furthermore, in accordance with Glass et al. (2015), the research drew attention to the importance of relationships and communication between students and faculty, a possible key to enhancing academic integration in international students.

By considering and closely observing these interrelated dimensions, a more accurate view of international student experience and life comes to the surface. Such a comprehensive approach reinforces the salience of support systems that are culturally sensitive and responsive and academically inclusive. Our findings indicate that academic and social integration cannot be addressed as a generic and rigid process but as one that is heavily impacted by culture and shaped by personal and organizational factors. The results call attention to the theoretical necessity of fine-tuning integration models to more accurately capture cultural and academic integration components.

Practical implications

The typology that was proposed and developed in the research may offer a foundation for higher education institutions to design more targeted and personalized institutional initiatives and support services based on the needs of international students, such as intercultural and academic peer networks and mentoring, language development courses, academic workshops, and cultural events. Universities could also implement inclusive policies and strategies that provide services targeting mental health. The evidence that the study provides is rooted in real experience; thus, with the help of patterns and trends, the persistence rate and attrition might be improved. It would also be essential for universities to emphasize promoting cultural awareness and providing intercultural communication training for the staff. Taking all these factors into account, we can conclude that improving and carefully planning the service support strategies may advance the university's global reputation and ranking and facilitate international recruitment.

We intend to continue the research in the future and explore how (or whether) transition between the specific typologies emerges and how personality traits affect this. It is also important to ascertain what specific institutional practices, policies and faculty attitudes prove to be the most effective with each particular

type. It would be valuable to examine how different individuals and groups react to certain crisis situations (e.g., geopolitical unrest), which are becoming increasingly prevalent on campuses. Another researched area could be student-led associations and intercultural communication-based organizations and the role they play in enhancing international student integration. Another topic that could receive more attention is how the host country's academic community, both students and faculty, interacts with international students and how their cognitive and affective orientations and attitudes influence whether an international student can develop a strong sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

This research outlined the typology that identified four separate groups of international students regarding their academic and social integration patterns at a CEE university: focused scholars, engaged achievers, overwhelmed isolates, and resilient networks. These typologies offer a very clear and refined understanding of all of the experiences and hardships international students go through on a daily basis in a higher education setting abroad. Individually, they point to concrete issues related to language, community, and workload, thereby making it easier for institutions to offer help that best fits the students. With programs specific to students, universities are able to meet them right where they are – be it about language, health, integration, or tutoring.

This research also offers a methodological advantage by employing qualitative tools to capture nuanced, context-sensitive narratives. The voices of the participants underscore the importance of a bottom-up approach when designing policies or interventions. This finding reinforces the idea that internationalization strategies cannot be successfully implemented with one-size-fits-all solutions. Tailoring support systems based on emergent student types allows universities not only to meet institutional goals for retention and performance but also to foster equity, well-being, and a culturally inclusive academic environment.

The fact that this study also organizes the experiences of international students in a multilayered, interconnected fashion makes it novel. Moreover, using the accounts of students to verify results, this study exposes the interwoven nature of adjusting to both a new academic environment and a new social environment. With it, universities gain a flexible and applicable structure that will help them keep students, improve their satisfaction, and raise their academic performance.

Overall, when universities help these students, they help themselves by performing better, becoming more welcoming, and by strengthening their position on the world stage. Moreover, through a combination of well-planned support based on student needs and a well-trained, culturally sensitive team of academics, it can better address issues that arise, and as a result, students worldwide will be more successful academically and socially.

In conclusion, this study serves as a practical and theoretical scaffold for future investigations that seek to map longitudinal changes in integration and assess institutional practices across cultural contexts. By focusing on typologies grounded in lived experiences, this research invites policymakers, faculty, and student service professionals to reconsider how success and satisfaction are coproduced within higher education.

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