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Constructing Social and Structural Realities of Adaptation: A Q-Methodological Study of Belonging, Cultural Strain, and Onward Migration Intentions among International Students in South Korea

Israel Fisseha Feyissa
Global college, Global Migration and integration Research Center, Kyungsung University, Busan 48434, Korea

Sofia Senbit Ali
Graduate School of International and Area Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Korea

ABSTRACT: *This study examines how international students in South Korea construct subjective realities of adaptation, cultural strain, and intentions to migrate onward. Using Q-methodology, a 42-item Q-set derived from coping theory and student narratives was sorted by sixty-one participants, revealing four patterned viewpoints: Engaged Cultural Adapters, Strained but Hopeful Strivers, Burdened and Outward-Looking Copers, and Supported but Selectively Engaged Settlers. Consensus statements indicated shared difficulties around Korean-language confidence, forming close Korean friendships, and unevenly perceived institutional support. Distinguishing statements highlighted divergent interpretations regarding cultural similarity, academic pressure, career prospects, and the feasibility of long-term settlement. The findings show that adaptation is shaped not only by stressors but also by the meanings students attach to their daily academic and social environments. The study advances the theoretical understanding of the socially constructed nature of adaptation and offers practical implications for improving support, integration, and retention within South Korean higher education.*

Keywords Q-methodology; acculturation; cultural strain; social construction of reality; international students; onward migration intentions; adaptation; higher education in South Korea; communal coping; subjective perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, South Korea has emerged as a formidable player in international higher education, transforming its academic landscape from a largely homogeneous one into a key regional destination for global student mobility (Lee, 2015). The country's pursuit of internationalization through initiatives such as the Study Korea 300K Project reflects a deliberate response to the demographic crisis—marked by one of the world's lowest fertility rates—and the imperative to sustain its knowledge economy (Korean Educational Development Institute [KEDI], 2022). Between 2003 and 2022, the number of foreign students enrolled in South Korean universities rose more than tenfold, from 12,314 to 166,892 (KEDI, 2022). This dramatic growth is predominantly Asian in composition, with Chinese, Vietnamese, Uzbek, Mongolian, and Japanese students representing the largest groups (Kim & Feyissa, 2022).

However, despite the government's promotional rhetoric of "global talent cultivation," these students are integrated into a society that continues to valorize ethnic homogeneity and cultural conformity (Kim & Oh, 2021). This paradox—between South Korea's outward projection of global modernity and its inward social exclusivity—has created a complex terrain for international students to navigate. Research has repeatedly highlighted the challenges they face: linguistic barriers, social exclusion, racialized interactions, academic pressure, and a sense of existential isolation (Dovchin, 2020; Hanassab, 2006; Klomegah, 2006; Park & Lee, 2022; Zhang & Mi, 2023). The resulting acculturative stress—a concept derived from Berry's (2005) model of cross-cultural adaptation—encompasses both the sociocultural difficulties of functioning in a new cultural system and the psychological distress that accompanies it, often linked to anxiety, identity dissonance, and reduced well-being among international students (Amlashi, 2024).

While these stressors are not unique to South Korea, their manifestations in this context are shaped by the nation's strong collective identity and Confucian social order. The notion of uri (우리, meaning "we/us") remains a central cultural logic, reinforcing boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Chung, 2022).

Consequently, international students in Korea navigate a dual process of social inclusion and exclusion—welcomed as economic and academic resources, yet subtly reminded of their foreignness through language, social distance, and institutional marginalization. As a result, adaptation extends beyond practical adjustment; it becomes a process of negotiating belonging within a society where difference remains tightly regulated (Kim & Feyissa, 2022; Shin & Choi, 2015).

Existing scholarship on international student adaptation has tended to approach these dynamics through quantitative frameworks that measure psychological well-being, cultural competence, or academic satisfaction (Lee et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2020). While valuable, these approaches often reduce adaptation to an outcome variable, obscuring the deeper processes through which students construct meaning and situate themselves within the host culture. In contrast, a growing body of sociological and interpretive research emphasizes that adaptation is not merely reactive—it is constitutive: a process through which individuals actively construct social realities, negotiate identity, and reconstruct belonging (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/2023; Bahl & Milne, 2006; Chen & Lee, 2023; Jiang, 2024).

This study builds upon that interpretive turn by employing Q-methodology to uncover the subjective patterns underlying international students' lived experiences in South Korea. Q-methodology, with its roots in social constructionism, is uniquely suited for exploring how people articulate complex and often ambivalent standpoints and identify shared discourses within a population (Barry & Proops, 1999; Brown, 1996; Watts & Stenner, 2012). It bridges the gap between qualitative depth and quantitative structure, allowing researchers to identify clusters of subjectivity—that is, groups of individuals who share similar ways of interpreting their experiences. In the context of international education, the Q-method enables the mapping of communal migration experiences: shared orientations toward adaptation, belonging, and future mobility that emerge from individual narratives.

The urgency of this research lies in South Korea's shifting educational and migration landscape. Recent studies have documented rising numbers of foreign graduates who intend to leave Korea shortly after completing their degrees, citing limited career pathways, cultural isolation, and systemic barriers to long-term settlement (Istad et al., 2021; Park & Lee, 2022). This phenomenon—often referred to as onward migration—poses both a policy challenge and a theoretical puzzle. From a policy standpoint, it questions the sustainability of Korea's "global talent" strategy. From a theoretical standpoint, it demands a deeper understanding of how migration intentions are embedded in students' constructed realities—the subjective ways they perceive opportunity, belonging, and constraint within the host environment (Cerna & Czaika, 2016).

Thus, the present study investigates three interrelated questions:

1. How do international students in South Korea construct their social realities amid cultural strain and acculturative stress?
2. What communal or individual coping mechanisms emerge from these constructions?

3. How do these constructions shape their sense of belonging and onward migration intentions?

By situating these questions within the framework of social constructionism, acculturation theory, and cross-cultural coping, the study aims to transcend binary notions of "adapted" versus "maladapted." Instead, it conceptualizes adaptation as a meaning-making process—a dynamic negotiation of cultural dissonance and future aspiration. Through the interpretive power of Q-methodology, it seeks to capture how international students collectively navigate the tension between integration and mobility in a society that both invites and limits their belonging.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in three intersecting theoretical traditions—social constructionism, acculturation and adaptation theory, and cross-cultural coping—which together illuminate how international students interpret, negotiate, and act upon their lived experiences in South Korea.

The Social Construction of Reality

Berger and Luckmann's (1966/2023) seminal work posits that reality is not an objective given but a socially produced structure arising from continuous interaction and shared meaning. Individuals internalize societal norms, reinterpret them through personal experience, and externalize them again through social practice. For international students, this process unfolds as they navigate institutional routines, classroom dynamics, and peer relationships—domains where they both absorb and contest the symbolic boundaries of Korean society (Han & Kim, 2023).

Their experiences of inclusion or marginality are not merely reflections of external structures but active constructions of meaning mediated through language, habitus, and collective negotiation, much like how individuals interpret and respond to perceived social impacts within their communities (Andereck et al., 2005).This constructivist foundation aligns epistemologically with Q-methodology, which assumes that subjective viewpoints are legitimate data for scientific analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Rather than treating perception as an error, Q views it as a window into the social order of meaning-making—a perspective particularly apt for understanding cross-cultural adaptation.

Acculturation and Adaptation

The second theoretical strand draws from Berry's (2005) and Ward et al.'s (2020) models of acculturation and adaptation. Berry conceptualizes adaptation as a dual process involving changes in both the individual and the host culture. Ward's distinction between sociocultural adaptation (behavioral competence) and psychological adaptation (emotional well-being) remains foundational in contemporary studies. However, recent scholarship has called for integrating these models within structural contexts—acknowledging that adaptation

outcomes are shaped by host-society openness, perceived discrimination, and institutional inclusion (Park & Lee, 2022; Zhang & Mi, 2023).

In South Korea's context, adaptation is further conditioned by linguistic hegemony, hierarchical social relations, and limited multicultural policies. Students' adjustment therefore cannot be reduced to personal resilience; it must be situated within broader sociopolitical and institutional logics (Kim & Feyissa, 2022).

Cross-Cultural Coping and Communal Agency

Kuo et al.'s (2006) Cross-Cultural Coping Scale identifies three coping orientations—collective, avoidance, and engagement coping—that describe how individuals manage cultural stress. Collective coping underscores interdependence, community belonging, and cultural continuity; engagement coping involves proactive problem-solving and acculturative learning; and avoidance coping reflects withdrawal and emotional detachment. Previous research on international students' adjustment has similarly shown that coping strategies play a central role in navigating academic and cultural transitions in host institutions (McClure, 2007). These coping styles, when viewed through a constructivist lens, become mechanisms through which international students cocreate social meaning. Their coping choices—seeking peer solidarity, joining ethnic enclaves, or embracing bicultural learning—reflect different strategies of reality construction and identity negotiation (Kuo et al., 2006; Jiang, 2024).

Integrative Analytical Lens

Synthesizing these frameworks, the study conceptualizes adaptation and onward migration as emergent from constructed social realities shaped by communal coping practices and contextual constraints. Cultural strain and acculturative stress are understood as catalysts for meaning-making rather than mere symptoms of maladjustment. Through Q-methodology, the research identifies typologies of subjectivity—shared interpretive orientations toward living, belonging, and imagining futures in Korea.

This integrative lens redefines international student adaptation not as a linear progression toward assimilation but as a dynamic, negotiated process of constructing livable realities within and sometimes beyond the host society. In doing so, it connects the microworld of individual experience to the macroforces of policy, demography, and national identity that shape South Korea's evolving multicultural landscape.

METHOD

This study adopts Q methodology as an inductive and interpretive approach to explore the subjective constructions of adaptation, belonging, and onward migration among international students in South Korea. Q methodology is uniquely positioned at the intersection of qualitative and quantitative paradigms; it seeks to identify *clusters of subjectivity*—shared ways of thinking or

interpreting experience—rather than to measure variables in isolation (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). This makes it an especially fitting tool for understanding how international students negotiate cultural strain, acculturative stress, and coping within the social fabric of Korean society.

Unlike traditional survey research, which treats opinions as discrete data points, Q methodology interprets participants' subjective perspectives as patterned wholes—constellations of meaning that reveal how individuals make sense of their lived realities (Stephenson, 1993). Here, Q is used not to generalize across populations but to illuminate the diverse ways international students conceptualize adaptation and belonging within a host society characterized by ethnic homogeneity and selective inclusion.

Following the standard structure of Q methodology, the study proceeded through five stages: (1) identifying the theoretical concourse, (2) constructing the Q-set, (3) selecting participants (the P-set), (4) conducting the Q-sort, and (5) analyzing and interpreting the resulting factor structures (McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Identifying the Theoretical Concourse

In Q methodology, the concourse refers to the universe of possible ideas, statements, or expressions relevant to a discourse (Stephenson, 1993). For this study, the concourse was defined theoretically rather than empirically, drawing on extensive literature on international student adaptation, acculturative stress, coping theory, and migration intentions (Berry, 2005; Kuo et al., 2006; Ward et al., 2020; Kim & Feyissa, 2022).The conceptualization of the concourse began with three thematic pillars identified in prior scholarship:

1. **Adaptation and belonging –** encompassing sociocultural and psychological adjustment, language competence, and perceived inclusion;

2. **Cultural strain and coping –** referring to experiences of acculturative stress, collective coping, and identity negotiation; and

3. **Onward migration intentions –** shaped by students' perceived opportunities, structural constraints, and sense of future in Korea.

The initial body of potential statements was derived from both theory and empirical findings across previous studies of international students in East Asia (e.g., Park & Lee, 2022; Zhang & Mi, 2023). Early conceptual mapping also drew inspiration from the *Cross-Cultural Coping Scale* (Kuo et al., 2006), allowing the inclusion of coping strategies—collective, avoidance, and engagement—as interpretive lenses. These themes reflect the constructed social realities through which international students narrate their presence, belonging, and aspirations in the Korean context.

Q-Set Construction

From this theoretical concourse, a Q-set of 42 statements was developed to represent the range of views within the discourse. Each statement captured a distinct aspect of international student life—academic pressure, social integration, cultural familiarity, institutional support, and migration outlook. The statements were refined through a three-stage process: (1) content validity screening by two migration scholars, (2) review by two international student advisors to ensure contextual clarity, and (3) pilot testing with five students for comprehension and redundancy.

The finalized statements were translated into clear, accessible English (given the multilingual composition of the student body) and arranged for digital presentation through Google Forms, ensuring accessibility across devices and geographic locations. Each statement was phrased neutrally to avoid value-laden connotations, following the guidelines of Van Exel and De Graaf (2005).

P-Set Sampling and Participant Selection

The *P-set* represents the participants whose subjective viewpoints form the basis of analysis. As Q methodology is concerned with the variety rather than the frequency of perspectives, the sample is intentionally small yet diverse (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Thirty-two international students were purposively selected from one private university in Busan, South Korea. Participants represented a broad range of nationalities—including students from Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Ethiopia—and varied in academic level (undergraduate, master's, and doctoral). Selection criteria emphasized participants' experience of living and studying in Korea for at least one academic semester, ensuring that their viewpoints reflected meaningful engagement with the host society. Recruitment was conducted through university networks and peer referrals, reflecting a snowball strategy (Eden et al., 2005). Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection.

The Q-Sort Procedure

Participants were asked to engage in a two-step Q-sort process adapted for digital implementation via Google Forms.

1. In the first step, respondents indicated their initial reactions to each of the 42 statements using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.
2. In the second step, they performed a forced distribution—a key feature of Q methodology—by ranking all statements across a quasinormal distribution grid from *Most Disagree (−3)* to *Most Agree (+3)*.

This approach replicates the tactile logic of traditional card sorting while allowing for broader accessibility and cleaner data extraction. The forced distribution ensures that participants make discriminating judgments about the

relative importance of statements, thereby revealing underlying subjective priorities (Brown, 1996). Each Q-sort result represents a holistic configuration of meaning—a cognitive map of how the participant constructs adaptation and belonging.

Statistical and Interpretive Analysis

The completed Q-sorts were compiled into an Excel dataset and subjected to Q-factor analysis to identify clusters of subjectivity—groups of participants who shared similar ways of ranking the statements. While specialized Q software such as PQMethod is traditionally used, this study conducted the analysis in Python using *principal component analysis (PCA)* followed by *varimax rotation* to maximize factor interpretability. Factors were retained based on eigenvalues (>1.00) and the visual inflection of the scree plot.

As Q methodology does not rely on traditional reliability coefficients, interpretive rigor was established through transparency and theoretical triangulation (Gobo, 2008). Each factor was interpreted by examining the composite *factor arrays*—weighted average rankings of statements defining each cluster—and the distinguishing and consensus statements between factors. These were then situated within the theoretical framework of social constructionism and coping theory to illuminate how international students construct and share their realities of adaptation and migration in South Korea.

Ethical Considerations

All research procedures adhered to institutional and ethical guidelines for social science research. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality of responses, and the right to withdraw at any time. Since the study involved international students potentially reflecting on personal or sensitive experiences (e.g., discrimination, belonging), particular care was taken to anonymize all identifiers and ensure data protection.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of the P-set

The P-set for this study consisted of 61 international students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs at a private university in Busan, South Korea. The group reflected a highly diverse international student population, including participants from Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Pakistan, Italy, China, Greece, Brazil, Spain, Malaysia, and Rwanda. Their ages ranged from early twenties to late sixties, and the length of residence in South Korea varied from a few months to more than a decade, reflecting different stages of adjustment and settlement. Korean language proficiency ranges widely—from none or beginner levels to intermediate, advanced, and fluent—capturing the heterogeneous linguistic realities through which international students experience academic and social life.

Using centroid factor analysis with varimax rotation, four factors emerged as distinct clusters of subjectivity, collectively explaining 30.9% of the total variance: Factor 1 (eigenvalue = 6.90, 11.3% variance), Factor 2 (eigenvalue = 4.53, 7.4% variance), Factor 3 (eigenvalue = 3.97, 6.5% variance), and Factor 4 (eigenvalue = 3.50, 5.7% variance). From the 61 Q-sorts, only a subset loaded significantly: 31 sorts loaded onto one of the four factors, 2 sorts were confounded (loading significantly on more than one factor), and 28 sorts did not reach the 0.40 loading threshold and were excluded from the interpretive phase. As is standard in Q methodology, the analytical value lies not in the number of sorts within each factor but in the distinctiveness and coherence of the shared viewpoint each factor represents; individuals may change their personal opinions, but the patterned structures of meaning—clusters of subjectivity—remain analytically central. A detailed summary of participant characteristics and factor loadings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Q-Sort Factor Analysis Results: Participant Loadings and Descriptions Across Four Factors

31 Q-sorts have been accounted for in four factors; 2 were significant in more than one factor (confounded), and 28 were not significant.

Sort	F1	F2	F3	F4	Participant Description*
17	0.49				Bangladeshi/Male/Graduate/D2/N/A
26	-0.56				Pakistan/Male/Graduate/D2/Beginner level
28	-0.67				Nepalese/Male/Graduate/D2 - Visa/Beginner level
34	-0.63				Nepal/Male/Graduate/D2 (Student)/Intermediate level
35	0.59				BANGLADESH/Male/Graduate/D-2/Intermediate level
37	0.64				N/A/Male/Undergraduate/N/A/Beginner level
39	-0.42				Nepal/Male/Undergraduate/D2/Intermediate level

40	-0.42			Nepali/Male/Undergraduate/D2/Beginner level
43	0.57			Bangladesh/Male/Undergraduate/D2/Beginner level
50	-0.73			Italy/Female/Undergraduate/D2/Advanced level
51	-0.53			China/Male/Graduate/F4/Advanced level
9		-0.59		Srilankan/Female/Graduate/D2/Beginner level
10		-0.73		Bangladeshi/Female/Graduate/D-2/Beginner level
21		-0.49		Srilankan/Female/Graduate/D-2-3/Beginner level
23		-0.72		Nepal/Female/Graduate/D2 visa/Intermediate level
41		0.41		Bangladeshi/Male/Graduate/D2/Intermediate level
49		0.41		Indonesia/Female/Undergraduate/D-2/Intermediate level
52		-0.71		Indonesian/Male/Undergraduate/D2/Beginner level
53		-0.47		Indonesia/Female/Undergraduate/D2/Advanced level
13			0.79	Nepalese/Male/Graduate/D2/None
25			-0.54	Bangladeshi/Male/Postgraduate/D2/Beginner level

47		0.75		uzbekistan/Female/Undergraduate/ D2/Beginner level
58		0.53		Bangladesh/Male/Postgraduate/Stu dent (D-2)/Beginner level
59		0.64		Viet Nam/Male/Graduate/D2/Beginner level
2			0.65	Nepal/Male/Graduate/D2/Beginner level
7			-0.51	Bangladesh/Male/Graduate/D2/Inte rmediate level
8			-0.74	Sri Lanka/Female/Graduate/F3/Beginn er level
20			-0.54	Sri Lankan/Female/Graduate/D2/None
29			-0.44	Nepali/Female/Graduate/Student/B eginner level
45			-0.45	Babgladeshi/Male/Undergraduate/ D-2-2/Intermediate level
56			0.55	Greek/Female/Undergraduate/D_2/ None
Sorts 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 22, 24, 27, 30, 31, 32, 36, 38, 42, 44, 46, 48, 54, 55, 57, 60, 61 not significant (All loadings < 0.40)				
Confounded				
19	0.47	0.4		Brazil/Female/Undergraduate/D-2/Intermediate level
33	0.52		0.42	Malaysia/Male/Undergraduate/D2/ Beginner level

Eigenvalue	6.9	4.53	3.97	3.5	
% Variance	11.3	7.4	6.5	5.7	Total Variance Explained: 30.9%

Factor Interpretation

The interpretation of the four extracted factors is based on the consensus and distinguishing statements presented in Table 2, which outlines the z score distributions that define each cluster of subjectivity. These patterned viewpoints reflect the ways international students make sense of their cultural adaptation, experiences of strain, and intentions regarding continued residence or onward migration. By examining the highest and lowest scoring items within each factor, clear narratives emerge that reveal how students construct meaning around life in South Korea.

Factor 1 reflects a group of students who exhibit strong engagement with Korean cultural life, academic confidence, and a positive orientation toward long-term integration. Their strongest agreement appears in items such as *"I am confident that my academic choices will secure me a job in South Korea"* (z = 1.87) and *"I am motivated to participate in extracurricular activities or clubs"* (z = 1.87). This group is notably comfortable navigating the cultural landscape, as shown by their high agreement with *"I am comfortable with the cultural norms and customs in South Korea"* (z = 1.43) and their frequent use of the Korean language in daily life (z = 1.29).

These students also perceive similarities between South Korean culture and their own (z = 1.17), suggesting a subjective sense of cultural closeness or ease of adjustment. Their most-disagreed statements provide additional insight: they explicitly reject intentions to migrate onward. They disagree with leaving Korea after graduation (z = –0.78) and strongly dismiss the statement that they would move because of a lack of career prospects (z = –0.90).

Together, these patterns represent a highly engaged and optimistic view of life in Korea, grounded in cultural comfort, academic confidence, and a forward-looking belief in local opportunities.

Factor 2 captures a viewpoint marked by ongoing challenges, including social and academic strain, yet accompanied by a sense of measured optimism about Korea. Students in this group show high agreement with *"I consider moving to another country because I lack social support"* (z = 1.18) and *"I consider moving because of academic pressure"* (z = 1.18), indicating heightened vulnerability and unmet needs. Their endorsement of *"I consider moving because I can make a better living"* (z = 1.18) reflects perceived economic insecurity.

Despite these pressures, they simultaneously hold more positive cognitive appraisals, agreeing with *"My expectations about South Korea before arriving match my current experience"* (z = 1.03). They also uniquely exhibit stronger self-perceived linguistic confidence (z = 1.25), even when other factors do not.

Their lowest-scoring items further define the viewpoint: they reject the notion that they are satisfied with long-term life in Korea (z = –0.31), and they do not feel socially integrated (z = –0.55).

Taken together, this factor represents students who have not fully adapted but remain earnest, hopeful, and striving, balancing realistic strain with cautious optimism.

Factor 3 conveys the most strained perspective in the P-set, characterized by intense academic pressure, low cultural and linguistic confidence, and strong intentions to emigrate elsewhere after studies. Students in this cluster strongly identify with items such as *"I consider moving to another country because there are no career prospects for me in Korea"* (z = 1.71) and *"I consider moving after completing my studies"* (z = 1.61). They also showed high agreement with emotional burnout (z = 1.33) and concerns about limited social support (z = 1.18).

What distinguishes this factor most sharply is the extremely low z score for *"I am confident in my Korean proficiency"* (z = –4.08), reflecting deep linguistic insecurity. They also express significant dissatisfaction regarding mismatched expectations about Korea (z = –2.14) and limited confidence in academic or career prospects (z = –1.78).

This factor represents a coping-oriented, survival-driven perspective, where students endure cultural strain and academic burden while actively seeking better opportunities outside South Korea. Factor 4 reflects a more balanced and resource-supported perspective, with students reporting high levels of institutional support and moderate cultural adjustment alongside measured but not strong intentions to stay long-term. They strongly agree with *"I am satisfied with my life in South Korea and think I can live here long-term"* (z = 1.12) and endorse having received accommodation (z = 1.03) and immigration guidance (z = 1.03). At the same time, they express selective engagement: while they are motivated to participate in campus activities (z = 1.14), they register neutrality or mild disagreement regarding complete cultural comfort or expectations. Their lowest-scoring items indicate disengagement from outward migration (z = –0.15) and low concern about limited career prospects (z = –0.10). This factor refers to students who feel institutionally supported and moderately integrated, but whose engagement with broader Korean society remains somewhat selective and pragmatic.

In Table 3, the results of the deeper interpretive phase of the Q-method process are presented. This table displays each of the four factors together with the names assigned to them. In Q methodology, naming the factors is a critical interpretive step undertaken by researchers to provide an organic, conceptually grounded picture of the distinct operant subjectivities present within the P-set. The names are derived from the patterns expressed in the items with the highest and lowest z scores, which together articulate the central logic of each cluster. For each factor, the table lists the five statements most strongly endorsed and the five most strongly rejected, forming the conceptual backbone of each subjective viewpoint within the concourse.

Table 2. P-set Consensus and Distinguishing Statements with Z score Distributions

Item	Consensus Statement (N = 8): **(Statements where all four factors show similar response patterns and max z score differences < 1.00)**	F1 z	F2 z	F3 z	F4 z
1	I participated in programs or initiatives aimed at helping international students gain practical work experience in Korea.	–0.01	0.09	0.10	0.05
2	I have received support or guidance about career opportunities in Korea.	–0.01	0.09	0.10	–0.05
3	I experienced culture shock when arriving in South Korea.	–0.05	0.01	–0.08	–0.08
4	I have been provided with language and cultural training.	–0.03	–0.03	0.07	0.02
5	I have been provided with opportunities for social activities and events.	–0.03	–0.03	0.07	0.02
6	I have made close Korean friends in South Korea.	–0.05	–0.10	–0.09	–0.04
7	I was able to find resources to adapt well to the academic environment.	–0.03	–0.02	–0.07	–0.05
8	My university is responsive to my social support needs.	–0.05	–0.10	–0.09	–0.04
	Distinguishing Statements for Factor 1				
1	I am confident that my academic choices will secure me a job in South Korea.	1.87	0.88	–1.78	1.14
2	I am comfortable with the cultural norms and customs in South Korea.	1.43	1.25	–0.05	–0.08
3	I use Korean language and its communication style in most of my daily life.	1.29	0.43	–0.10	0.06
4	I feel that South Korean culture is significantly similar to my home country's culture.	1.17	0.38	–0.55	–0.30
5	I am motivated to participate in extracurricular activities or clubs on campus.	1.87	0.88	–1.78	1.14
	Distinguishing Statements for Factor 2				
1	I am always confident with the level of my Korean proficiency, and I can express my ideas clearly.	–0.18	1.25	–4.08	

2	I consider moving to another country because I lack social support in South Korea.	–0.55	1.18	–0.05	–0.65
3	I consider moving to another country because of the academic pressure.	–0.55	1.18	–0.05	–0.65
4	My expectations about South Korea before arriving match my current experience.	–0.21	1.03	–2.14	–0.51
5	I consider moving to another country because I can make a better living.	–0.55	1.18	–0.05	–0.65
	Distinguishing Statements for Factor 3				
1	I am always confident with the level of my Korean proficiency, and I can express my ideas clearly.	–0.18	1.25	–4.08	–1.11
2	I consider moving to another country after completing my studies in South Korea.	–0.78	–0.52	1.61	–0.15
3	I consider moving to another country because there are no career prospects for me in Korea.	–0.90	–0.10	1.71	–0.10
4	I have felt burnout due to academic load and expectations.	–0.55	–0.65	1.33	–0.13
5	It does not worry me that I am from another cultural background.	–0.71	–0.55	1.02	–0.10
	Distinguishing Statements for Factor 4				
1	I am motivated to participate in extracurricular activities or clubs on campus.	1.87	0.88	–1.78	1.14
2	I consider moving to another country after completing my studies.	–0.78	–0.52	1.61	–0.15
3	I have been provided with accommodation support.	–0.22	0.09	–0.13	1.03
4	I have been provided with advice on immigration laws and services.	–0.22	0.09	–0.13	1.03
5	I am satisfied with my life in South Korea and think I am capable of living here long-term.	–0.31	0.18	–0.44	1.12

The clusters of subjectivity are as follows: Factor 1 – Engaged Cultural Adapters; Factor 2 – Strained but Hopeful Strivers; Factor 3 – Burdened and Outward-Looking Copers; and Factor 4 – Supported but Selectively Engaged Settlers. Together, these characterizing statements illuminate how international

students construct their adaptation realities within the broader discourse of cultural strain, belonging, and intentions to migrate onward.

Factor 1 (Engaged Cultural Adapters) reflects students who show a strong sense of cultural comfort, institutional engagement, and academic confidence. These students highly agree that their academic choices will secure employment in Korea, that they are motivated to participate in campus life and that they feel culturally aligned with South Korea. Their strongest disagreements relate to outward migration intentions, burnout, and concerns over cultural difference. This pattern suggests a confident and agentic adaptation posture rooted in cultural familiarity and future-oriented optimism.

Factor 2 (Strained but Hopeful Strivers) is characterized by high endorsement of items reflecting linguistic self-confidence and matched expectations but also strong agreement with statements expressing social strain and financial or academic pressure. Their most strongly disagreed statements related to long-term settlement intentions, community integration, and life satisfaction in Korea. This configuration captures a group who are striving to succeed—linguistically and academically—yet feel weighed down by the pressures of adjustment and therefore contemplate onward mobility.

Factor 3 (Burdened and Outward-Looking Copers) represents the students most heavily affected by academic strain, limited cultural comfort, and diminished confidence in career prospects in Korea. These students strongly endorse motivations for onward migration—especially those related to career limitations and burnout—while strongly rejecting statements about Korean proficiency, cultural ease, and meeting expectations. Their profile reveals an adaptation reality defined by psychological burden and future aspirations located outside South Korea.

Factor 4 (Supported but Selectively Engaged Settlers) reflects a group who feel institutionally supported and reasonably satisfied with life in Korea but who remain selective in their patterns of cultural and social engagement. Their highest z-scores indicate long-term settlement confidence and strong institutional support (e.g., accommodation, immigration services), while their most-rejected items include academic pressure-related migration motives and intentions to leave Korea after graduation. This cluster embodies students who are stabilized through support systems but do not necessarily exhibit high levels of cultural immersion.

Table 3. Characterizing Statements for Factors 1–4 Using Highest and Lowest Z Scores

Factor	Item	Statement	Z Score
Factor 1 – **Engaged Cultural Adapters**	Most agreed statements	I am confident that my academic choices will secure me a job in South Korea.	1.87
		I am motivated to participate in extracurricular activities or clubs on campus.	1.87
		I am comfortable with the cultural norms and customs in South Korea.	1.43

		I use Korean language and its communication style in most of my daily life.	1.29
		I feel that South Korean culture is significantly similar to my home country's culture.	1.17
	Most Disagreed statements	I consider moving to another country after completing my studies.	-0.78
		I consider moving to another country because there are no career prospects for me in Korea.	-0.9
		I consider moving because I lack social support in South Korea.	-0.55
		I have felt burnout due to academic load and expectations.	-0.55
		It does not worry me that I am from another cultural background.	-0.71
Factor 2 – **Strained but Hopeful Strivers**	Most agreed statements	I am always confident with the level of my Korean proficiency and can express my ideas clearly.	1.25
		I consider moving to another country because I lack social support in South Korea.	1.18
		I consider moving to another country because of academic pressure.	1.18
		I consider moving to another country because I can make a better living.	1.18
		My expectations about South Korea before arriving match my current experience.	1.03
	Most Disagreed statements	I consider moving to another country after completing my studies.	-0.52
		I consider moving due to lack of career prospects in Korea.	-0.1
		I have felt burnout due to academic expectations.	-0.65
		I am satisfied with my life in South Korea and believe I can live here long-term.	-0.31
		I am integrated into social groups and communities in South Korea.	-0.55
Factor 3 – **Burdened and Outward-Looking Copers**	Most agreed statements	I consider moving to another country because there are no career prospects for me in Korea.	1.71
		I consider moving to another country after completing my studies.	1.61
		I have felt burnout due to academic load and expectations.	1.33
		It does not worry me that I am from another cultural background.	1.02
		I consider moving to another country because I lack social support.	1.18
		I am always confident with the level of my Korean proficiency and can express my ideas clearly.	-4.08

	Most Disagreed statements	I am comfortable with the cultural norms and customs in South Korea.	-0.05
		I use Korean language and its communication style in most of my daily life.	-0.1
		My expectations about South Korea match my current experience.	-2.14
		I am confident that my academic choices will secure me a job in Korea.	-1.78
Factor 4 – **Supported but Selectively Engaged Settlers**	Most agreed statements	I am satisfied with my life in South Korea and think I can live here long-term.	1.12
		I have been provided with accommodation support.	1.03
		I have been provided with advice on immigration laws and services.	1.03
		I am motivated to participate in extracurricular activities or clubs.	1.14
	Most Disagreed statements	I am comfortable with the cultural norms and customs in Korea.	-0.08
		I consider moving to another country after completing my studies.	-0.15
		I consider moving because there are no career prospects for me in Korea.	-0.1
		I consider moving because of academic pressure.	-0.65
		I have felt burnout due to academic expectations.	-0.13
		I experienced culture shock when arriving in South Korea.	-0.08

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how international students in South Korea construct their social realities of adaptation, cultural strain, belonging, and intentions to migrate onward through a Q-methodological lens. The analysis revealed four distinct clusters of operant subjectivities—Engaged Cultural Adapters, Strained but Hopeful Strivers, Burdened and Outward-Looking Copers, and Supported but Selectively Engaged Settlers—each representing a unique configuration of acculturative stress, coping strategies, and future orientation. These factors reflect not only variations in personal adaptation but also the broader structural and cultural dynamics that shape international students' experiences in a rapidly globalizing yet still ethnically homogeneous host society.

A critical finding concerns the divergent meanings students assign to their academic, cultural, and social trajectories in Korea. International students, even while sharing common stressors (e.g., language barriers, academic expectations, limited support structures), interpret these stressors through different frameworks of coping, agency, and imagined futures. This resonates with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) proposition that individuals construct meaning through lived

experience and with Ward et al.'s (2020) view that adaptation includes both psychological and sociocultural processes.

The four factors demonstrate that acculturation is not a linear pathway but a negotiated, socially embedded experience. Engaged cultural adapters actively invest in integration, perceive Korea as culturally navigable, and rely on engagement-based coping to reinforce a sense of belonging. Strained but hopeful Strivers experience substantial academic and social pressures, but instead of disengagement, they look outward while still maintaining fragile optimism about Korea. Burdened and outward-looking Copers hold the most critical view of their Korean experience, marked by burnout, unmet expectations, and a strong intention to leave after graduation. Supported but Selectively Engaged Settlers benefit from institutional support yet maintain a cautious approach to deeper cultural integration.

These patterns highlight an important theoretical insight: students' coping strategies—collective, avoidance, or engagement (Kuo et al., 2006)—interact with structural conditions (e.g., social inclusion mechanisms, xenophobia, language access, employment policies) to shape subjective meanings of "belonging" or "not belonging."

The presence of two outward-looking clusters (Factors 2 and 3) is particularly noteworthy. Despite South Korea's national push to retain foreign talent under initiatives such as the "Study Korea 300K Project," many students continue to conceptualize their stay as temporary. This supports prior findings that cultural distance, discrimination, and limited career pathways reduce long-term settlement intentions (Istad et al., 2021; Kim & Feyissa, 2022; Feyissa & Sonam, 2023).

Meanwhile, the existence of Factor 4, a minority yet stable group that envisions long-term life in Korea, suggests that institutional support remains a powerful mediator between strain and adaptation. Access to housing, immigration guidance, and reliable information substantially increases their psychological settlement—even when cultural integration remains partial.

Overall, the four clusters reveal that international students do not simply adapt to Korea—they interpret Korea, and those interpretations fundamentally shape their emotional orientation, social strategies, and future trajectories within or beyond the country.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for institutions, policymakers, and those working directly with international students. One of the clearest insights is that institutional support, while available, is not evenly internalized by students. Only a small subset—those represented in Factor 4—translate available support into long-term settlement intentions. The shared difficulties related to language confidence, limited local friendships, and perceived gaps in institutional support reinforce widely documented challenges in international student adjustment (Ching et al., 2017). This suggests that support

services must extend beyond standardized information delivery and instead cultivate trust, personalized mentorship, and sustained interpersonal engagement.

Language also emerges as a central bottleneck in the adaptation process. Differences in Korean proficiency sharply divide the clusters, reinforcing the need for more tailored and discipline-specific language programs capable of easing both academic and social pressures. Equally important is career guidance. Employment prospects emerged as an important dimension shaping students' adaptation experiences, although perceptions varied across clusters. While some students—particularly those represented in the Engaged Cultural Adapters cluster—expressed confidence that their academic choices could lead to employment opportunities in South Korea, other groups demonstrated greater uncertainty about their future career pathways. This variation suggests that universities should strengthen career guidance, internship pathways, and visa transition support to help students translate their academic investments into viable employment outcomes. Institutions may therefore benefit from deeper collaborations with industry partners to widen opportunities for internships, career workshops, and visa transition support for pathways such as D-2 to D-10 and E-7.

Finally, social integration remains fragile. Regardless of factor membership, students commonly reported difficulties forming close Korean friendships. This highlights the importance of structured and intentional interactional spaces that do not rely solely on student initiative. Universities may need to design programs that actively facilitate cross-cultural engagement and foster genuine relational inclusion within the campus community.

Theoretical Implications

The results contribute meaningfully to scholarship across several theoretical domains. First, within acculturation and adaptation studies, the findings reinforce the view that international student adaptation is multidimensional. It cannot be understood through linear or stress-reduction frameworks alone; instead, it must account for the subjective meaning-making processes through which individuals interpret their lived realities.

Second, echoing Berger & Luckmann (1966), the analysis supports the social construction of the reality framework. Students continuously negotiate, assemble, and reinterpret their experiences in Korea through interactions with peers, institutional structures, and broader cultural narratives. Q-methodology makes visible how these individualized constructions cluster into coherent shared perspectives, demonstrating the patterned nature of subjective experience.

Third, the study contributes to research on migration intentions and transnational mobility. Factors 2 and 3, in particular, reveal how onward migration intentions can emerge as coping strategies in contexts where structural barriers—such as limited employment prospects, linguistic challenges, or perceived social exclusion—are viewed as difficult to overcome (Cerna & Czaika, 2016; Shachar & Hirschl, 2013). This aligns with broader migration scholarship

illustrating how mobility decisions are shaped by an interplay between personal agency and the constraints embedded in host country systems.

Limitations

As with all Q-methodological inquiries, this study has several limitations. The Q-set, although grounded in cross-cultural coping literature and enriched by student narratives, may not represent all possible dimensions of adaptation experienced by students from diverse national backgrounds. While the P-set includes a wide range of nationalities, it is drawn from a single university and may not reflect the experiences of students in more highly internationalized or elite institutional settings. Furthermore, given the exploratory nature of Q-methodology, the findings describe clusters of subjectivity rather than offering generalizable claims about the broader population of international students in Korea.

Future Research

Future work could fruitfully expand on the current study in several directions. Comparative studies across multiple Korean universities would help determine whether similar clusters of subjectivity emerge in different institutional or regional contexts. Parallel Q-studies involving domestic students, faculty, or university staff could illuminate how different groups construct the process of internationalization and student integration. Additionally, linking Q-factor membership with longitudinal indicators such as academic performance, postgraduation career outcomes, or visa transitions could provide deeper insight into how subjective realities shape long-term trajectories. Further research might also explore the mediating role of community belonging—such as involvement in religious groups, ethnic associations, or workplace environments—in shaping adaptation and migration intentions.

Conclusion

This study shows that international students' adaptation in South Korea is not merely a matter of overcoming cultural strain or acquiring language proficiency. Instead, students construct complex social realities shaped simultaneously by institutional structures, coping strategies, expectations, and imagined futures.

The four clusters—Engaged Cultural Adapters, Strained but Hopeful Strivers, Burdened and Outward-Looking Copers, and Supported but Selectively Engaged Settlers—demonstrate that adaptation is plural, negotiated, and often ambivalent. Their narratives reflect both the opportunities and the limits of studying in an emerging global educational hub.

By recognizing these differentiated subjectivities, universities and policymakers can better address the relational, emotional, and structural barriers that influence whether international students ultimately stay, leave, or transform their experiences into new forms of global mobility.

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Author bios

ISRAEL FISSEHA, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Global College at Kyungsung University, South Korea. He also serves as the Director of the Global Migration and Integration Research Center at Kyungsung University. His primary research interests focus on migration, integration, and social welfare issues related to refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and socioeconomic minorities, as well as welfare policy frameworks for migrants. Email: israel12@kyungsung.ac.kr

SOFIA SENBIT is a former graduate student of the Graduate School of International and Area Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Her research focuses on Asia-Pacific migration and international relations. Email: alisofiasenbit@gmail.com