International Students' Social Integration Experiences During Their Higher Education in Europe

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ABSTRACT

The increase in academic mobility in Europe has inspired many to contribute to the special literature regarding internationalization. This contribution is quite timely, as the need to understand the ties between higher education and internationalization is great. Considering that mobility has predominantly occurred in Western Europe, special attention must be focused on Eastern Europe's Higher Educational endeavors. This study focuses on the Central European country of Hungary, and therein more specifically on its second largest city, Debrecen. The University of Debrecen currently hosts around 7000 international students, and every year this number increases. With such promising and ever-increasing numbers, it is a constant mission of the university to research and report on the life experiences of its international students, regarding their academic, social, and cultural aspects. In this present study the focus will be the social aspect of students whose nationality is represented by more than one hundred persons at the university. Content analysis was employed to analyze structured interviews to identify categories. The findings reveal four main categories to be relevant in their social adaptation: (1) the university, (2) networks students build, (3) language barriers, and (4) healthcare.

Keywords: *Social Integration, International Students, University of Debrecen*

Introduction

The increase of international students studying abroad in Hungary is the starting point for research into internationalization. Since the University of Debrecen boasts a large number of international students, it was of interest to research and understand the internationalization of higher education from the perspective of participants in academic mobility. Different aspects are depicted in the students' lives that help bring clarity to the issue. The categories found help inform university staff

and researchers about students' insights and suggestions; in turn, these help to know how to satisfy the international community and offer quality not only academically, but also privately.

Theoretical framework

The main concept that frames this study is social integration. According to Pascarella (1980), social integration can be summarized in two ways: one, it refers to the quality of student-student relationships at the institution; two, it highlights the frequency and quality of student-teacher relationships outside the classroom. As referred to by Tinto (1975), social integration also deals with the extracurricular activities of the student body, whether they be with an individual or a group, with friends and fellow students or with university staff. What is more, this side of social integration can take many forms, from attending cultural events to joining clubs.

When it comes to what mediates social integration (Severiens & Wolff, 2008), two of the categories which were found during the structured interviews appear to do just that: (1) the university and (2) the networks students build. Though quite common on every level, these are evidenced as being a dominant factor in first-year student success. Similarly, Wilcox et al. (2005) found that support from family and friends heavily influences success during freshman year. Thus, one's social life, though independent of the formal academic environment, influences academic integration. Social integration is also affected by a student's social life. Whether by living in a dormitory, sharing accommodation with other students, belonging to a sports team, or being involved in social groups (Bok, 2003; Severiens & Wolff, 2008), helping students find their place is heavily dependent on their level of activity and participation in the life of the school (Tinto, 1993).

To boost social integration, universities know that providing non-academic facilities to students will set them apart from other institutions and will directly impact their rankings (Bok, 2003). The education system implemented also influences social and academic integration. For instance, a small class size with more intensive mentoring is more efficient at fostering good academics and student bonding than institutes with large classes (Christie et al., 2004).

The study

This research report is part of a wider study which aims at understanding the experiences of international students at the University of Debrecen. The information was collected through structured interviews between the months of October 2021 and April 2022. The university hosts seven thousand students from more than one hundred and twenty countries. For this reason, the interviewees selected came from nationalities which were represented on campus by more than one hundred students. The interview had three sessions: (1) academic, (2) social, and (3) cultural integration – out of which this study focused on the second. This study attempts to answer the following research question: What do international students' experiences reveal about their social integration?

Methodology

The method employed in this study within the qualitative paradigm was thematic analysis. After checking the transcripts for repetition patterns, themes and categories emerged. These themes and categories were then validated by the participants to ensure that the analysis results matched what they intended to communicate. The whole process was comprised of four steps proposed by Burns (1999): (1) data organization, (2) information categorization, (3) category comparison, and (4) category reduction. These were manually carried out.

Participants

To be an interviewee, it was necessary to have active student status as recorded in the Neptune system, to belong to one of the countries represented by more than one hundred students, and to be in Debrecen for at least one academic year.

With all of these credentials met, the total number of interview subjects reached nineteen. Table 1 shows the name of the country, the gender, and the faculty of each student. To protect the identity of the participants, no other information is revealed, and when referring to the students' responses, only the country is cited.

Table 1. Contextualization of participants

#	Country	Gender	Faculty	#	Country	Gender	Faculty
1	Nigeria	M	Pharmacy	11	Vietnam	F	Public health
2	Pakistan	F	Engineering	12	Syria	F	Public health
3	Iran	F	Dentistry	13	Israel	M	Medicine
4	China	M	Medicine	14	Japan	F	Economy
5	Jordan	M	Food science and Agriculture	15	Brazil	M	Engineering
6	Ukraine	M	Engineering	16	Kazakhstan	F	Medicine
7	India	M	Science and technology	17	South Korea	F	Engineering
8	Egypt	M	Engineering	18	Taiwan	M	Medicine
9	Mongolia	F	Public Health	19	Iraq	M	Computer Science
10	Kenya	F	Engineering				

Created by the author (2022)

Results

The social aspect in the lives of the interviewed international students is reflected in various ways. Above some are mentioned according to Tinto's (1975) theory and some by Pascarella's (1980). As was stated in the abstract and the introduction of this study, the structured interviews yielded four categories that were considered by the interviewees to be important to social integration. Those results are detailed below.

The university

Social integration happens as the individual student and the characteristics of the university environment meet (Braxton et el., 2008). When they perceive that the university demonstrates a

strong commitment to its students beyond simply the academic aspect, they begin to settle into their new surroundings.

To promote smoother social integration, institutions often utilize various extracurricular activities to "break the ice". Determining just how many extracurricular activities a university should create is a challenge. In the case of the University of Debrecen, the Coordinating Center for International Education (CCIE) supports the International Student Union (ISU), and, through their Facebook group, different events are posted. Most of them are created to bring out and highlight the cultural traditions of students. Each event is headed up by active international students from different faculties. Although the activities are interesting, not everyone is satisfied, and some wish to have more:

"I get bored because there are not so many English programs. Because of the language I cannot interact with many people. The university should make more events, competition, presentation of food of the country, present the city, the country in trips, I'd like to be a part of this". (Brazil)

According to Tinto (1975), the greater the students' social integration level, the more commitment there will be toward the university. Thus, along with student-led events, the university itself puts on sprawling events in order to help social integration along. As an example, the University of Debrecen's opening ceremony for the new academic year is introduced by an event called yoUDay. This is an event celebrated since 2016 (yoUDday, n.d.). YoUDay is a welcome to all Debrecen-local students attending the school and as well as to all those who come from afar to attend. It is a function that draws people many internationals allowing them to be exposed to the Hungarian way of life and Hungarian higher education system. Everyone is physically together at this celebration, while due to the blasting music and other boisterous noises their verbal interaction is made difficult:

"The university more or less could help, bringing different cultures together with the Hungarian culture. They need more events, I'm an international student, but if I search, I find, for example there is not group for international dentist in the university, so I really have no contact or communication with the others. One student can lead and create a group, but there is no group for international engineering student, we have the group on Facebook, but this group is not public, it is only for 2022. If I want to communicate with engineering students I don't know how, unless I know a friend from engineering and I ask, so there is no way to communicate among students, unless like food day event, but only one event per year is not enough. And when they do open ceremony in a bar it is not the same". (Iran)

The previous excerpt reveals the presence of two main events. The one mentioned as opening ceremony, which although very popular might be more successful if presented as an additional event, replacing it with a previous formal event. Simply put, social activities on a grand scale are important, however, it could be more productive if a formal opening ceremony were held by each faculty separately with all the academic staff. The second event which is "International Food Day" (Debrecen sun, Sunday, April 24th, 2022) takes place every year, and consists of student groups from different nations preparing meals traditional to their cultures. The event is very interesting for the locals, who can try, in one day, food from more than fifteen countries. The university

sponsors the event, giving a budget to each group. The ISU sells the tickets, and the money collected is donated to charity. Also mentioned previously is the difficulty in communication among different faculties. Recently the university has been developing channels of communication among students. The application "UD Studyversity" allows students to connect and find all types of sources and resources.

Solving issues like these is paramount for any university or institution to thrive in today's international world. Fayzullina (2019) considers the university as the principal venue for international adaptation of students, not only in terms of academic, but also with respect to social and cultural aspects. Bringing together the academia and social gatherings is the way to foster both areas in the international students. However, intervention on the part of university staff is necessary as well as from the leadership of faculties and programs populated by international students. Rienties and Nolan (2014) said, "A common teachers' assumption is that some groups of international students tend to stick together and seem to be hesitant to interact with students of the host country." The interviews, however, revealed the opposite:

"Even though we are in Hungary, we don't have much opportunity to communicate with them, we don't have any class with them. It was hard to communicate because they didn't speak English, it was in Nyiregyhaza. I change from health to public health. The experience was okay, because of the language barrier". (Mongolia)

In conclusion, we can recognize that the efforts the university puts out in terms of social activities are a step in the right direction, but there is still a need to create a space where locals and foreigners can connect socially, starting with shared classes, projects, and/or study clubs.

Network students build

Among the top non-academic necessities of students is their relationship with others. In a foreign country people become pillars in the lives of others, these communities and connections in turn weigh heavily on their experience and overall satisfaction. In the previous category it was mentioned that international students feel that they should be mixed with the Hungarians. Their connections are not as strong as the ones they build with students from other countries, with their co-nationals or with those who share the same mother tongue.

The researcher's view on the subject is, some are more mutually supportive than others – a concept especially true of southeast Asians, Africans, and Latinos. International status, similarities and a shared mother tongue are not the only factors garnering support, however. Religious beliefs also play an important role. For example, many Israelis who come to Hungary (on their own money, without the help of scholarships) to study get together to support each other throughout their studies and to celebrate together the holidays and traditions connected to their beliefs:

"It is easy and convenient for us because most of the Israeli students' study in the medical faculty. Medicine or dentistry and we do some social interaction, parties, Jewish holidays, ski trips, things like that. The students pay 5000 forints a year to register, and this group started about 20 years ago". (Israel)

The next excerpt refers to a running club started by students from Kazakhstan which allows students from other nations to join as well. Freelance student organization like this showcases the fact that there is a lack of ongoing or continuous activities organized by the university:

"Usually when students come to Debrecen, and they see it is a small town usually they isolate themselves or go to party. We open a group for people who do not like party and take care of their health. So, I think if we have different clubs, it would be better. I advise new students to ask seniors what is in here, and people not only go to party, but do more beneficial things. We have Kazak runners and nowadays yoga classes, many international people come from different countries". (Kazakhstan)

In a study on international student social friendship networks at the University of Hawaii, Hendrickson et al. (2011) found that having more relations with host country students was positively correlated with satisfaction and connectivity. The next excerpt reveals the lack of connection with others, whether colleagues, or locals:

"But unfortunately, until now I don't have any Hungarian friends. I don't have classes, so I don't have friends. If you have classes, you have classmates and then you have friends. But eventually, I will have friends. Most of my friends are from my country". (Iraq).

The university does not mix classes, locals study in Hungarian and internationals in English. This means the only opportunity to mingle is outside the academic environment. Sharing accommodation with other students (Ward et al., 1998), especially in the first year, is a good way to build connections. Though the University of Debrecen has six dormitories for international students, they still remain separated from Hungarian students. A good reason for this separation could be the language barrier and avoidance of possible conflicts that living together could entail.

"My best experience, the friends I have made, and living in the dormitory was also a good thing, because I got to meet friends and it was during lock down, so if I were to stay in an apartment, I would be locked there, so staying in my dormitory was a good thing. Because now we are in this institution, now we are together, it is like a family, it is during a pandemic, so we are away from home, and we hang out together". (Kenya).

It should be mentioned that the data was collected during the Covid period. Thus, most of the classes were held online. The consequence was that students could not connect with their classmates, but that was true for the Hungarian students as well. Unless those in flats opened up their homes to other students, only those in the dormitory could maintain connections and friendships. During the lockdown period strong steps were taken, not only from the university's side, but on a larger scale by the government, social activities were canceled, and curfew hours were imposed.

The new measures were spread by the university through the Neptune system. Also, food , Hungary Today or Debrecen Today on Facebook offered and continue to offer information and country updates in English. Nevertheless, one thing that interferes in a student's full social integration is the language barrier. Students have reported the issue at the academic university level, but in this section we only refer to the non-academic side.

Language barrier

The previous categories that have emerged are interrelated with the present category. Although stating that language is a barrier could sound contradictory to the fact that foreigners are studying in Hungary. It is an impediment to their full integrate with the nationals. This situation is happening not only in Hungary, according to a study of Erasmus students in Croatia carried out by Senci et al. (2022). In it, a number of issues were raised that stood in the way of integration, namely the following: limited opportunities for inclusion in social life, social distance regulations, lack of curiosity shown by locals, language barriers, and insufficient support from student organizations in creating events. If there were more interaction between foreign and local students, stress might be reduced, well-being might improve, and academic performance might also increase (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019).

At the beginning of their studies, international students might have the misconception that they would share classes with Hungarians, but in most programs, this is not the case. In this scenario, language becomes a form of segregation, setting a clear barrier between the Hungarians and the international students. There are Hungarians who speak the English language, of course, and if they are interested, they could take classes with the international fellows, but these cases are scarce. The reason for this could be that they are in their natural environment with family and friends, thus they may not see the need or benefit to such interaction. In an attempt to aid foreigners, the university offers two free levels of compulsory Hungarian classes for bachelor and master's degree students who are in the stipendium scholarship program, and elective classes for doctoral students.

"During the first few months before my Hungarian class, and before I was familiar with everything, it was a little bit tricky to communicate with people". (Kenya)

This allows students to be familiar with basics of the language. If the students are interested, they can take two extra Hungarian levels for a reduced fee. The Hungarian courses are a positive initiative that allows the students to learn some basics in the language, thus magnifying the possibility of integration. In the next excerpt the student faces a difficult situation in the hospital, a situation only made harder by the language barrier:

"I found a negative thing in the university; the emergency room didn't have a person who speaks English. we have international students, and this is the least the university can do. To have a person that can speak English in the emergency room. I had an emergency and the security guard said in Hungarian "you are in Hungary and should speak Hungarian". I understood because we have some Hungarian classes". (Iran).

Another example of language barrier's connection to social activities in which the university could support integration is through the promotion of events around campus. I mentioned above that the university sends communiques via Neptune, this they do in both English and Hungarian. The next excerpt, however, expresses the need for this to be done on paper as well:

"The university can contribute with the social lives of students, for example if there is an event and they publish the posters, they only do it in Hungarian. So, as an international student, I see that people are dancing in that poster and there are balloons, I know it is a party, I don't know where it

is, I don't know what it involves, so the first thing I know I'm segregated from this. Maybe, I can make an effort to translate, find out where to go, but just from looking at it, I know clearly this is something not for me. Maybe they assume we have Hungarian friends that will translate, or they assume students have other activities". (Kenya)

Debrecen is a very important city, the country's second largest after Budapest, but it is not as visited as the capital. Therefore, the need to speak English has not yet become a priority among its citizens. Only those in contact with international students, like landlords, manage to communicate and in some cases help if needed. This same help ought to be rendered when informing students of events. By printing posters and other event information-carrying papers in Hungarian and English, much confusion would be cleared up, and a more varied group of university students might be drawn to the events. Overall, the channels of communication are a matter to be checked by the pertinent people in order to free the way for integration to happen, and thereby to improve student well-being. This leads to one of the aspects mostly highlighted by the students – the healthcare system.

Healthcare

Egenes (2012) expresses the positive aspect that entails for foreigners to experience health care system abroad.
International students must have health insurance to study in Hungary. Tuition-paying students can access health insurance by hiring a private service, and the stipendium scholars are covered under the government healthcare system. In the case of Debrecen, a general practitioner or "GP" is assigned to a certain area with the inhabitants of that area being in their care. Because of this "GP districting", students also benefited from this basic healthcare provider.

This access to healthcare though helpful at times, still had its challenges. The interviews included in this study recount the difficulties of making appointments. Challenges like the phone call not being picked up, a speaker's command of language (either English or Hungarian) being weak and due to the social distance between locals and foreigners, most of the students feel that they do not have a Hungarian friend who can help.

Discussion

The analysis of the interviews showed that there are four main factors connected to the student's social aspect, the university, network students build, language barrier, and healthcare. The study intended to respond to the research question: What do international students' experiences reveal about their social integration? Indeed, the information gave an answer to our inquiry. In general, it can be noticed that the students integrated into the new culture still lack relationships and connections. The reasons rest on the assumption that the language factor plays a key role. On one side, the international students come with no knowledge of the Hungarian language, and on the other, English is a language that has only recently started becoming popular in cities outside the capital. The language factor interferes in both non-academic and important aspects of student life, for example grocery shopping, getting doctors checkup, finding, and renting accommodation, etc. Students testify that the activities that do not require interaction are manageable, and whatever

needs dialogue is a challenge. Different alternatives have been implemented to solve this issue. The university has offered Hungarian language courses. This is good, but the interviewees claimed more ought to be done. Spaces should be created for interaction between Hungarians and internationals, events should be organized not on a broad university level, but rather on a faculty basis – and their advertisement should be done printed as well as electronically, and in both English and Hungarian. Anything short of these aforementioned solutions, according to the subjects, would result in social integration not being achieved.

Implications

This study acknowledges that, based on their daily experience, the social integration of students is highly positive. The university has been taking measures in partnership with the organization of scholarships, and thus international students are exposed to the culture and traditions of Hungary, and to the language. The efforts, however, have not yet breached the barrier of connections between locals and internationals. Nevertheless, the creation of academic clubs, practical classes (laboratory), and organizing opening events at the beginning of every academic year by faculties are suggestions aimed at full student integration.

Suggestions for further research

In conducting the study, it was revealed that international students would very much like to get to know Hungarians. It would then be advisable to research whether this desire for interaction is mutually shared by Hungarians, what their view of international students really is, and whether or not they are interested in integration.

It would be of great importance to be acquainted with the International Student Union (ISU), since they have much to do with student social life. Exploring their responsibilities, their sponsorship, and their work in breaking down barriers between Hungarians and international students could prove invaluable information, usable in developing and implementing new social integration activities.

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