International Students' Academic and Social Integration Stories

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ABSTRACT

This research report has the purpose to inform the audience about the methodological qualitative part of a study being conducted in a Hungarian university. In the last decade the Hungarian government has created opportunities for internationals to fit into the internationalization trend in education. Following these initiatives through the lens of the students is a convenient form to understand the impact of its application. The university where the study is conducted has a good reputation and of preference for international prospect students, becoming the ideal spot to research about the process of integration of international students in two aspects, academic and social. The understanding of this thematic required information collected through qualitative interviews which were conducted with students from different faculties, countries, majors, and levels of study. The findings revealed that students are satisfied in terms of social integration and gaps are found to fulfill their academic integration. The information is a relevant and important source of input for educational organizations in Hungary which are working continuously to increase the enrollment of international students, especially in the pandemic situation.

Keywords: *Acculturation, Foreign Students, Debrecen*

Introduction

The origin of this research emerges from the need to explore the new age of globalization that Hungary is experiencing since the last decade. Understanding part of its history is important to recognize the answer to many of the issues that are evident in the process of integration of international students.

After the second world war, most of the Central and Eastern European countries were under the control of the Soviet Union, therefore economic, cultural, and social aspects were shaped by the iron curtain, and it is evident the lagging of these countries compared to the western world.

During the Soviet control academic mobility was strongly controlled, there were student exchanges within the communist bloc (Connelly, 2000 as cited in Dobbins & Khachatryan, 2015). However, right before the 1990s things started to change. Before 1989 Western organizations such as The Ford Foundation, The Fulbright Commission, The Soros Foundation and German political foundations or The German Academic Exchange Service [DAAD] as well as governments contributed to the international socialization of scholars from Central Eastern Europe. This intentionally would allow the accelerated development of what might be termed classic "internationalization" (Teichler, 2004). Cross border contacts increased exponentially through both physical mobility and wider patterns of professional communication.

The period following the collapse of the Soviet Union was called the New Regime (Zahavi & Friedman, 2019). From this time central European countries like Hungary could start witnessing the opening of a new era of globalization. Additionally, in 1999 the Bologna process was created to facilitate academic mobility in Europe between European countries, as well as making universities attractive to people from outside Europe (Rivza & Teichler, 2007). This was possible with the feasibility of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and integrating Central and Eastern European countries (De wit & Altbach, 2020).

During the first years of transition of regime, Hungary started joining international organizations. Since 2013 with the implementation of the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship, the minister of education has stablished agreements with developing countries. These relationships are promoting the entrance of international students into the country. There are three types of students' mobility, degree mobility, credit mobility and certificate mobility. For this research the type which will be considered is the first one since it is the one in which international students can spend at least two years in Hungary and experience the cultural exchange. For this reason, the stories of five students who represent a strategic geographical zone of the world will give a glance and share their experiences as students in a Hungarian university in one of the secondary cities.

The literature review
In this section I will define the main concepts that shape the research: Academic Integration, Social Integration, and Multicultural Environment in Higher Education.

Academic Integration
Different definitions are found about academic integration, nevertheless researchers define the term as the student's perception of faculty concern for quality classroom, teaching and student development. According to Tinto (1975, p. 104) academic integration refers to the formal education of students (i.e., academic performance and faculty/staff interactions; Tinto, 1975) which can be measured in terms of both grade performance and intellectual development during the college years. Such academic performance according to Baker and Siryk (1999) is influenced by academic integration. Within it, they identified four main concepts, namely academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal and emotional adjustment, and attachment. Academic adjustment refers to students' achievement in coping with educational demands like academic

activities, as well as satisfaction with the academic environment. Social adjustment, on the contrary, has to do with the interpersonal demands of dealing with others, such as working in groups with other students. Personal and emotional adjustment is connected to the psychological and physical level of distress experiences while adapting to the academic way of life. Attachment reflects the degree of commitment to the educational institutional goals. Additionally, the definitions of academic integration have included the frequency of non-classroom communication with faculty, and the ability to obtain information and advice about academic programs.

Social Integration
The second key term is social integration, it has been defined in multiple ways: (a) the measurement of the extent and quality of a student's relationship with peers at the institution; (b) the measurement of the quality and impact of a student's informal, non-classroom interactions with faculty; (c) the frequency of non-class contacts with faculty; (d) the opportunity to socialize informally; and (e) the ability to discuss a campus issue or problem. Social integration, in brief, deals with the extracurricular activities and peer-group interactions. Interactions with faculty and staff this integration, unlike the academic, relates to the informal education of students. It focuses on the affiliations with classmates, faculty, and staff that occur with no academic relations, development of friendships, attending cultural campus events, and belonging to clubs and groups (Tinto, 1975). Severiens and Wolff 's (2008) research indicates that the social integration is mediated by two elements, the institute and social networks students have. It is strongly determined by, and of importance specially to first-year students. Higher education institutions are aware of the impact that rankings have and are providing more considerable effort in providing non-academic facilities to students in order to set themselves apart from other institutions (Bok, 2003). Additionally, the educational system implemented in an institute strongly influences both academic and social integration of students. Christie et al. (2004) found small group classes and intensive mentoring to be more successful in academic and bonding with other students than institutes with large classes. Regarding the informal social integration of students, three factors are distinguished, namely: social support by family and friends; social life; and national/ethnic identity. Wilcox et al. (2005) found that social support by family and friends has a strong influence on study success of first-year students. The social life outside of the academic environment has a strong influence on academic integration. Having enough friends, sharing accommodation with other students, being member of a study association, student fraternity or sports club can influence social integration (Bok, 2003; Severiens & Wolff, 2008). This allows students to become part of a social life that is closely attached to the university setting (Tinto, 1993).

Multicultural Environment in Higher Education
The variety of nationalities living together at least for two years (full time students) in the same place, create an environment of multiculturalism which requires mutual understanding which leads to cultural and psychological changes. This process of transformation is known as acculturation, a term taken from the discipline of cultural anthropology. The following concept although, not being

the first from a study of acculturation, it is the first comprehensive definition of the concept in anthropology:

"Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups. Under this definition, acculturation is to be distinguished from culture change, of which it is but one aspect, and assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation" (Redfield et al., 1936, pp. 149-152 as cited in Berry, 2005).

Acculturation is a mutual process that brings changes in all groups in contact. For the case of Hungary, the internationalization process is recent if compared with western Europe. This being said, the development of acculturation has had short steps on the part of the local people. Consider the language barrier's contribution to the perception that locals reject the opportunity to mingle with different cultures.

During the study abroad period, some issues may arise. Within this perspective there could be cases such protection of traditions, heritage, language and identity, the degree to interact with other traditions sharing them, or the degree to which people seek involvement in the larger society of settlement. The intersection of these situations creates what Berry (1997 as cited in Berry et al., 2006) calls the four sectors of how individuals are seeking to acculturate. "Assimilation is the way when there is little interest in cultural maintenance combined with a preference for interacting with the larger society. Separation is the way when cultural maintenance is sought while avoiding involvement with others. Marginalization exists when neither cultural maintenance nor interaction with others is sought. Integration is present when both cultural maintenance and involvement with the larger society are sought".

The Study

In my research, one of Hungary's biggest universities of international student bodies was investigated. The higher educational institution that is found in the Eastern part of Hungary has 14 faculties altogether, which makes it the university that offers the greatest variety and widest spectrum of training. It also plays a significant role in Hungarian higher education's internationalization, and as a result, the university is well represented internationally. For many years students from other countries have chosen the medical faculty at the university due to its competitive fees and possibility to study in English. Since 2014, the numbers of students have risen significantly in different faculties. However, medicine is still the predominant field in terms of numbers of international students.

The university has students from more than one hundred countries from all the continents around the world. In this study, we will know the stories of international students who become the voice of their nation, their faculty and their major. Although the study does not intend to generalize, it provides a source of information in which the experiences are known. The purpose of the study is not to criticize, but to provide preliminary data about issues that need improvement to generate the most amazing experience to those who step into a new culture and new ways of learning.

Research Questions

To approach and explore the experiences of students, three main questions guide the development of this research, these are:

1. How do international students perceive the aspects that intervene in their formal learning?
2. What are the relationships that international students build to integrate in a foreign country?
3. How do international students merge themselves in the Hungarian culture?

Methodology

This research study is framed within the qualitative paradigm. The qualitative technique was chosen because it contributes to understand and analyze the participants' personal experiences.

Regarding the qualitative part, in the case of the interview conducted, the researcher developed an interview guide (Lichtman, 2013) and conducted one individual pilot interview to test the interview questions and estimate the length of the interviews. Piloting was a useful step during the data collection because based on the results of the pilot interview, the interview guide was corrected to improve the flow of the interviews and to address research questions in a better way (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The participants of the pilot interviews were informed that the interviews were conducted to test the interview guide. Potential participants were contacted via WhatsApp, Instagram, and messenger, however in these scenarios widely and frequently used by students, not everyone responded. The purpose was to approach one student per continent, for the interview procedure snowball sampling (Flick, 2009) was used to identify potential participants by asking those already contacted or interviewed to name others who might meet the selection criteria for participants (Lichtman, 2013). This method is the most widely applied method of finding participants in qualitative research, and it has proven to be effective when researchers need to recruit hidden or hard to reach participants (Flick, 2009; Lichtman, 2013). After interviewing, I transcribed all individual interviews verbatim and, during the analysis phase of the research, read and re-read all interview transcripts. In total, five hours of individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed during the analytical process provided by five participants.

Participants

The selection of participants was done following the logic of representativeness (Patton, 1990). The participants were informed about the purpose of the research, they were shown the questions of the interview, and once accepted to be interviewed their data and identity was protected according to ethical standards.

The study had five participants; they have been studying in the country for minimum one year. Their age range is between twenty-one years old to forty-seven years old. Three of them are single and two of them are married and have between two and four children. Their nationalities correspond to Ecuador representing the American continent, Albanian representing the European continent, Japan representing Asia, South Africa representing Africa and finally Iraqi Kurdistan representing the middle east.

Table 1 shows the general contextualization of the participants.

Table 1. Contextualization of participants

Faculty	Major	Nationality	Age	Marital status/children	Time In Hungary
Faculty of Economics and Business	Commerce and Marketing, BSc	Japanese (J)	21	Single/ No children	2 years
Faculty of Humanities	Human Sciences, PhD	Iraqi Kurdistan (IK)	47	Married/ 4 children	3 years
Faculty of Medicine	Molecular Biology, MSc	Albanian (A)	24	Single/ No children	1 year
Faculty of Science and Technology	Chemical Engineering, BSc	South African (SA)	21	Single/ No children	3 years
	Biology and Environmental Sciences, PhD	Ecuadorian (E)	28	Married/ 2 children	2 years

Created by the author (2021)

Analysis

The obtained data was analyzed taking into consideration the conceptual framework of creation of inductive and deductive categories which emerged from the corresponding transcriptions, categories which were validated with the participants to verify that the analysis corresponds to the meaning they intend to express. The process had four steps proposed by Burns (1999), the organization of data, the categorization of the information, comparison, and reduction of categories. All this process was done manually due to the number of participants and the length of the interviews were manageable to be analyzed in this form.

Results

To show some excerpts from the participants and to protect their identity, the nationality will be mentioned instead of their real name, using the acronyms in chart 1 nationality section. In addition, based on the literature review and the characteristics of the interview guide, the categories purposefully will be expressed in terms of the same topics from the literature review:

My university, my professors, and my learning

The analysis of responses to explore the experiences of these five participants during their time studying in Debrecen demonstrated a common factor, all five students said that professors have a very good command of the subject, they are very knowledgeable, some studied abroad, and it is notorious that they are experts who mostly dedicate their time in research but lack teaching skills. It is important to mentioned that since the pandemic situation hit the world, the classes were online from March 2020 until the end of the academic year in 2021, meaning that for those preparing for a master's degree, three academic semesters., or most of their learning, was online. The covid -19 has its moments, its situation can be controlled or complicated. At the beginning of the school year in 2020 the classes were in person, but later the Hungarian government took strong measures, and after two months all the university went back to online mode. Despite the situation, students have positively coped with it.

"The pandemic situation was unexpected, and professors have tried to do their best responding, requesting to turn on the video, asking questions" (J and SA).

The methodology of classes mostly has been experienced from the computer, and students have made their home a place to study. For some this was hard, but for others it was a very convenient situation.

"I think the problem was more from me, making my personal space a place to study" (SA) "For me the online classes were more convenient, because in person we had many subjects and self-control test, being at home was more relaxing" (A)

However, during the first semester before the pandemic situation, two students did not have a positive experience in the subjects that, according to them, were very important for their career. One focus of unsatisfaction is the weak English language skills they encounter in the professors. Another situation derived; Students felt the administration poorly solved. Lacking good control to solve issues like lack of professors, or the unexpected departure of current professors. Often, the solution is to occupy the position by professors from the Hungarian curriculum. These professors have command of their subject but possess a language barrier.

"My program was open when I arrived, so we were the first students in that major. We had a professor who sent his Hungarian PhD student to teach us. When the assistant could not come anymore, the professor limited himself to read the slides. When we asked him questions, he did not understand, and he said something completely different or that did not clarify the questions. Then we realized he is very good in his area, but he does not manage English to the level to transmit that knowledge, and it was one of the most important classes in our career". (E)

"We had a class, and the professor did not know English, so he brought his wife as a translator, and she would be the one teaching the class. This happened during the whole semester, and if we had a question, we had to ask her and then she translated it. It was in the first semester, so when I saw this, it downgraded my idea of the university, I though like come on guys University of Debrecen should be better than this". (J).

The aspect of language barrier is an issue that affects the academic satisfaction in students. For most of the students English is the second language, learning and understanding in this language has already a level of difficulty that becomes even more difficult when there are misunderstandings during learning. For example:

"Sometimes I get confused by grammatical mistakes. English is my second language, and it is already difficult. Three out of fifty teachers in my faculty Know English well. The good teachers are those who studied abroad" (J).

However, in the faculty of medicine, the perception of the academic learning is more positive. The professors have the pertinent level of English to teach and are very demanding in their assignments. On the other hand, in other faculties like the science and technology, student try to accommodate to the English level of the teacher:

"I really like that the professors evaluate in the test what they told you to study, when I answer I tried to copy exactly how they wrote in the slide or with the words that they used, so that they can understand my answer" (SA).

This barrier of language does not happen only in the classroom, but also between internationals with locals. There have been a few opportunities in which the students are mixed. It is optional if the Hungarians want to join courses in English, but in general, just on few occasions students have shared the same class. Within the student's perspective, they have the idea that by being together they could favor each other, locals to improve their language and foreigners to make better experience of the Hungarian culture.

"In second year, I had class with Hungarians, we did groups, and I could see their work ethic"(J)

"There should be more administrative organization by the university to have shared projects with Hungarians, many academic opportunities are just for Hungarians" (A)

"Hungarian students do not like to talk much and do not like to mix with foreigners. This may be due to their lack of English, their fear and their confusion from speaking and making mistakes". (IK)

In relation to the perception regarding the university infrastructure, the university provides all equipment necessary for a successful study, but it all depends on the major students are doing. For instance, in terms of medicine the university is very good with all the laboratories, however for other faculties the equipment is very basic. Nonetheless, it was mentioned that renovations are taking place, by the end of the year the chemistry building will have modern equipment.

"The chemistry building will start to be renovated and at the end of the year we will have new labs" (SA)

"The science faculty is not big, nor small, but labs should be improved to do good research otherwise the country will continue lagging." (E).

In terms of library as a study place, there are two main spaces the library in the main building and life science building. The others are small and are not as eye catching to go. Some people made remarks about timing since some wish they would be open 24/7. However, the interviewed participants mentioned that displacement to go from one building to another is not a problem due to the size of the city.

In brief, academic integration has been relatively positive, mentioning language barrier as the main disincentive part in the process. In response to it, students self-educate at home or search for information apart from the university curriculum.

My free time and my friends
In connection to the informal integration part, two main aspects are in consideration. On one hand the university programs that the university sponsors, and on the other what the student do for their own entertainment.

The university through the ISU (International Student Union) and the Höök (National Union of Students in Hungary) supporting the stipendium Hungaricum scholars. They are the main organizations that deal with the events promoting activities. Students can either experience more of Hungarian traditions or can show their culture and talents. Events like the You Day (music festival), Zamat (international food festival), Night of a thousand lights (activity to show talents)

are organized by ISU and the Mentor Factor (a talent show) and the Annual Stipendium Hungaricum Banquet (a dinner in Budapest) by Höök. These events are the most recognized for international students. In addition, trips to different Hungarian cities are undertaken. However, due to pandemic situation since 2020 some of the events have been done online, under covid care or canceled. Students feel satisfied about the events that are created and it can be seen as follows

"I like the food festival, because I love food, and seeing people cooking traditional things and using traditional clothes takes me back to my roots" (J)

"The trips offered were a good opportunity to know the country. I could attend to some events, but there was lack of organization because I could see that the same students repeated attendance in all the trips". (E).

In relation to what international students do on their own, the social relations are mostly with other international students. Mingling with locals is reduced and only with those who already have English knowledge and with those whom students get to know from living together, introduced by friends, or in social events around the city. Students rely on events found in social media, especially in the setting of events on Facebook. Social life of student varies depending on their age and their status. Young people are more open to go to clubs and participate in all of the activities the city has to offer. For those who are married, they prefer to join people in the same circumstance, or socialize with parents of other children. They are more interested in learning Hungarian as a way to support their kids, their social integration is mediated by their family status.

"In my free time my activities are cooking, shopping, teaching my son and doing housework. In the university environment, I have superficial and not serious friendships with Hungarians, but I have other friendships with the mothers of my son's friends at school" (IK).

"My priority is my family, my husband and I like that the city has good programs for family, and I have friendships with everyone, Hungarians, internationals and people from my country, but it all depends on the age, I am not old, but I'm in a different stage in which I am into more serious things" (E).

"I feel good about myself when I am surrounded by other international students, and I have met Hungarians though friends or in the mentor program, they are lovely" (J).

"We normally get together with friends, in different houses, cooking and trying food from different countries, or it depends on the season, we go on trips, or events in the city or we do picnics in the park" (A).

The socialization with locals has not taken a big place in the social life of students, however there is interest from the foreigners for obtaining this integration. The students feel comfortable and satisfied with the city, transportation, but wish more shopping options and food variation.

We are in Hungary
The students who have been here since 2020 and are stipendium scholarship holders need to take Hungarian class as mandatory. In this case, they have been immersed in the language. The most common places where they need to use it are on the public transportation, in the supermarkets and when they need to get aid from the service sector. Another type of contact with the culture is when

attending festivals and the public holidays. In general terms students would like to learn Hungarian, but on one hand it is a difficult language, and on the other they are temporarily in the country. Only those who would like to extend their stay for higher degrees or work in Hungary see the goal in doing the extra effort in learning.

One of the hardest and most needed help students require is in the immigration office. Students encounter harsh attitudes there. Some students feel mistreated while others try to understand the type of behavior in the service sector anywhere could be the same situation.

"Even if you have appointment, immigration officers can make you wait up to three hours outside the fence. Many times, I have had to sacrifice my classes to be there waiting. We are in twenty first century, they can make an electrical version, but service in general in Hungary you cannot expect to be fast. Doctors speak English, but nurses do not, and they want to take us out fast. Police officers, oh I had a story with them, we celebrated New Years Eve and the neighbors called the police. Then, they came with big guns. I was afraid, luckily, we had a Hungarian friend who came from Miskolc to celebrate with us. If she is not there, they would have given us a fine. My friend who spoke with them, said that they wanted to fine us just because we were internationals, and we can be more dangerous" (J).

Students acknowledge the relevance of digging more into the language as a first step to be more included and accepted in jobs, and especially relevant for those who have their families here and want to support their children in the school.

"Normally the students who learn more about the language are medical students since they have direct contact with locals, I didn't learn Hungarian, but I regret because many job opportunities require to have a level of Hungarian" (SA).

"If you live in Hungary, you need to learn the basics of the language, because not everyone can understand you. I have tried to learn it, but it is a difficult language, and I cannot deal with studying and learning Hungarian. I try to communicate with Hungarians a little bit in Hungarian". (IK)

"I need and I want to learn Hungarian to help my children in the school" (E).

Having the opportunity to study with Hungarians could break the gap that is being built in the university. However, at the same time, international students are aware of the difficulties that can bring for locals to study in English. They understand why this is not happening, there must be proficiency and the next excerpt shows the clear opinion, a translator is not expected in the class.

"Mixing class can make us feel like home. It will be beneficial. I don't know how it will be for them to learn in another language but having a translator in the class would not be good" (SA).

The reality is that the language gap exists. A way to reduce it in the service sector widely used by students. As proposed by a participant is to have a person who is an English representative and have more tolerance towards the others.

"Debrecen is known for integrating with international students. If that is the goal, employ people who are bilingual or have an English representative" (SA).

"It is interesting that those who speak English are ruder than those who don't. In immigration office someone was aggressive, because I think she was frustrated with all the international

students asking for residence permit renewal. When it was my turn, she closed the window and finish attending. More than domain of the language they need to be more tolerant" (E).

Acculturation part is a process that, per se, students are willing to make since they make the decision to be abroad. There is hope that if the country is opening the doors for them, they can also receive a better treatment of inclusion.

Discussion

In response to the first research question, international students perceive a good environment of knowledge, and they are convinced that their professors have expertise in their domain. It seems that the experience of students may vary depending on their faculty. For example, the university has a good reputation. Almost half of international students belong to the Faculty of Medicine. This being said, it is probably the faculty which gets more investment. Those programs which are covered under the medical department are benefitted by their good infrastructure and equipment. On the other hand, there are some other programs like Humanities or Business which does not require a complex infrastructure but lack spaces for individual study. The Faculty of Science and Technology is in the transition from basic to better equipped laboratories. Being this solved, better practices and research can be conducted to put in practice what is learn in the theory. Finally, their communication with professor is expected to be better. To be informed about research, internship or academics opportunities that can contribute to their professional preparation.

In response to the second research question, students are open to integrate into the Hungarian culture. The cultural shock comes when they understand that most Hungarians do not like to speak to foreigners or they are afraid to do it. Generally, a student's circle of friends includes other international students. Some of them have weak connection with people from their countries. Students integrate into the city which although is small, possesses a good atmosphere for internationals and there are a lot of events and things to do. There are places mostly frequented by internationals, and they are satisfied about the support the university and the Höök provides with activities and trips around the country. This is a different form to integrate into the culture, even if this is not creating friendship with locals, students create networks and support each other in a process that they all are living.

And finally, for the third research question, even though internationals do not have so many friendships with locals. They merge into the culture by taking the Hungarian classes offered by the university. They practice the few commands of the language in daily settings with the drivers, in the supermarket, and if they need more complex communication, they use translator. They attend Hungarian traditional festivals, events and of course try the cuisine like lángos, goulash and the famous paprika, traditions that some students have incorporated in their kitchen as said by one of the participants. Students need to learn to make a life in another country. It was mentioned that the service sector is tough, and luckily not something they need assistance every day. Despite the good and bad, international students must sort out their way to take their best out of this experience.

Implications

One of the implications of the study is to acknowledge that the country and the university are doing a big effort in opening the doors for foreigners. Additionally, the main implication is to inform and to make visible to the university staff and recruiters of international students, the areas that need to be taken into consideration for improvement. This will give insight about proposing solutions to make the students experience more welcoming fitting the expectations of a globalized and internationalized era.

Suggestions for further research

During the realization and analysis of the information, it would be relevant to get more information from the ISU and the Höök about their experiences in trying to integrate students into the country and city. Also, to research about the research groups that take place in the university to inform those who are new and do not know about these opportunities and identify possible chances to upgrade their academic knowledge. Similarly, it could be interesting to determine the levels of knowledge students have about the language and ask university representatives if they would cooperate in the teaching providing more than the three levels of Hungarian offered by the university. On the other hand, it could be very good to know what the perception of locals about international students is and how willing are they to integrate with them.

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Conflict of Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.