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## Exploring Intercultural Engagement: The Multifaceted Challenges Faced by International Students in Hungary

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### Abstract

*Engagement is widely regarded as a fundamental concept for understanding academic achievement and student motivation in contemporary educational science. Moreover, student mobility has been identified as an effective approach to enhance engagement among international students. Despite the numerous challenges posed by a foreign environment, Eastern-European higher education has seen a sharp rise in international student enrolment, driven by advancements in education, internationalization, and attractive opportunities. Established by a government decree in 2013, the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship has positioned Hungary as a top destination for international students seeking higher education. However, awareness and engagement with cultural diversity and the available resources for international students remained limited, often resulting in their needs being overlooked. Given this, research on the experiences of international students and their adaptation to cultural diversity in Hungary warrants significant attention. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by international students across various Hungarian universities. Data were collected from N=15 international doctoral students through semi-structured interviews and analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. While the participants had high English proficiency, their limited Hungarian language skills emerged as a significant challenge in daily life and academic engagement. The emerging themes encompass cultural differences, social environments, and varied personal experiences, specifically focusing on communication, cultural challenges like language barriers, opportunities for social interaction—or their absence—along with accommodation services, and health concerns. The study's findings offer valuable insights for leaders and stakeholders, aiding them in addressing challenges and improving preparations for welcoming international students through both short- and long-term strategies.*

**Keywords:** Student engagement, international students, higher education, intercultural diversity, internationalization

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## Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a significant rise in international student mobility, a trend that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has identified as a major shift in global education dynamics. This cross-border movement has created increasingly diverse academic environments and contributed to the global economy (Global Education Monitoring Report Team [1180], 2018; OECD, 2021). In many countries, multicultural academic communities are becoming the norm, promoting the exchange of knowledge and cultural perspectives. Countries with strong higher education systems have become major hubs, drawing students from around the world. Many of these nations, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany, have implemented structured policies that facilitate smoother integration for international students (ICEF Monitor, 2023; Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2024; Weale, 2024). Similarly, Hungary, has experienced substantial growth in its international PhD and DLA student population, as highlighted by a recent Statista report (Medve, 2024).

In Hungary, the number of doctoral students increased by approximately 44% over recent years, underscoring the country's commitment to attracting and supporting advanced-level students from diverse backgrounds. This growth has been driven by the strength of Hungarian academic institutions, the availability of research opportunities, and scholarship programs like the Stipendium Hungaricum, which offers financial support to non-EU students. Such initiatives position Hungary as an attractive option for students pursuing advanced studies in fields like education, engineering, natural sciences, and medical research, mirroring global trends as students increasingly seek education beyond their home countries (OECD, 2023). Motivations for this trend include the desire to gain exposure to different cultural and academic perspectives, access to specialized training unavailable in some regions, and the international reputation of certain institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chirkov et al., 2007). In Hungary's case, the growing international doctoral student population has enriched its academic community and fostered greater global understanding and cooperation (Császár et al., 2023; Kasza, 2018). This influx of diverse perspectives and ideas has the potential to stimulate innovation, contribute to local economies, and leave a lasting impact on both Hungarian and global academic landscapes.

As international education expands, the need for intercultural engagement becomes increasingly important. International students bring a wealth of cultural perspectives, enriching academic environments and promoting mutual understanding among diverse student populations (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Glass et al., 2023; Urban & Palmer, 2014). In this study, intercultural engagement refers to the dynamic and reciprocal interactions that occur between individuals from different cultural backgrounds as they navigate new social, academic, and institutional environments. It goes beyond mere exposure to difference and emphasizes communication, mutual adaptation, and relationship-building. This understanding draws from Deardorff's (2006) definition of intercultural competence, which highlights the role of attitudes, knowledge, and skills in navigating

cultural diversity. While our participants came from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their engagement in Hungary's social and academic life involved challenges that spanned beyond language, encompassing access to services, feelings of inclusion or exclusion, and structural institutional dynamics. Navigating intercultural engagement requires both respect and effective communication, which are critical to students' academic success, personal development, and social integration. Research suggests that successful intercultural engagement hinges on two core elements: intercultural respect and intercultural communication (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009; Zhou et al., 2008). Intercultural respect, involving the acknowledgment and appreciation of cultural differences, has been shown to reduce social isolation for many international students and foster a welcoming academic environment (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Through respectful interactions, students from varied backgrounds feel more included, enhancing their overall well-being and academic participation.

In this study, the concepts multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural are used with distinct meanings to reflect the nature of international student experiences. Multicultural refers to the coexistence of multiple cultural groups within a single environment, often without necessarily interacting in meaningful ways (Banks, 2004). Cross-cultural pertains to comparative perspective between two or more cultures, typically highlighting similarities and differences (Berry, 1997). Intercultural, in contrast, emphasizes dynamic interaction and mutual understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds, focusing on dialogue, empathy, and adaptation (Spencer-Oatley & Franklin, 2009). These distinctions are important for interpreting how international students in Hungary engage with cultural diversity and adapt to the host environment.

Intercultural communication is equally essential as mentioned by Smith and Khawaja (2011), helping students navigate unfamiliar cultural and linguistic norms in their host countries. Challenges in intercultural communication, such as language barriers or differing communication styles, can lead to misunderstandings and limit students' ability to connect with peers and professors. Research highlights that support programs like language proficiency courses and intercultural workshops can significantly improve students' confidence and adaptability, ultimately enhancing their social integration and academic success.

While these opportunities benefit both students and their host communities, international students in Hungary also face unique experiences and difficulties in adjusting to a different cultural and academic setting. These difficulties include language barriers, cultural adjustments, differing academic expectations, and limited support networks, all of which can impact their academic and personal well-being (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009; Zhou et al., 2008). Studies on student mobility in Eastern European countries like Poland and Czech Republic highlight similar struggles, particularly in terms of language barriers and limited engagement opportunities (Kudrnáčová et al., 2020; OECD, 2023). Understanding the experiences of these students is essential not only for

improving their individual outcomes but also for shaping policies and support systems that facilitate their integration and success. This study aims to explore the intercultural engagement of international doctoral students in Hungary, examining both their experiences and challenges within the host country. Through this analysis, the research seeks to highlight the factors that enrich their educational journey and the obstacles they encounter, providing valuable insights for Hungarian universities and policymakers to create a more inclusive, supportive, and enriching environment for the growing international student population.

Given these considerations, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges faced by international students studying in Hungary in terms of cultural, social, and academic adaptation?
2. What are the common themes emerging from international students' experiences in Hungary?
3. What strategies or provisions can Hungarian universities implement to better support international students?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the intercultural experiences of international doctoral students in Hungary, offering insights that can inform support systems and policies aimed at enhancing their academic social experiences.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

A qualitative case study approach was employed in this study to explore and understand the immersive experiences of international students within the sociocultural context of Hungarian universities. Qualitative research was deemed the most suitable method, as it investigates phenomena within their natural settings, seeking to understand or interpret them based on the meanings individuals ascribe to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The case study design was particularly relevant for this research, as it centers on factual and observational insights into a phenomenon, with careful attention to detailed individual contexts (Yin, 2009).

### ***Research Respondents***

Fifteen international doctoral students from various Hungarian universities and diverse PhD programs were selected as participants through purposive sampling. To capture a range of perspectives shaped by institutional and geographic diversity, participants were drawn from a variety of institutions, such as Corvinus University of Budapest, Eötvös Loránd University, University of Debrecen, and National University of Public Service. All participants were enrolled in English-medium doctoral programs, and interviews were conducted in English. While participants demonstrated advanced English proficiency (as

detailed in Table 1), none reported conversational or academic-level fluency in Hungarian. This language gap significantly influenced their ability to navigate public services, engage with university resources, and integrate into the broader social environment.

The researcher shared a similar background as an international student, which facilitated a strong connection with the participants, offering insights from both within and outside the students' perspective. This shared experience of being similarly affiliated academically provided the researcher with both an insider and outsider perspective, fostering trust and encouraging respondents to engage in open, fluid, and conversational interviews that allowed for richer data collection.

Table 1 details the demographics of the fifteen students, who were selected according to the following criteria: (1) enrollment in a doctoral program at a Hungarian university; (2) residency in Hungary exceeding six months; and (3) specialization in Education, Social Sciences, or Humanities.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of the Respondents*

<i>Pseudonyms</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Length of Residence</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>First Language</i>	<i>English Proficiency Level</i>
1 Ysa	Female	25	4 years	Social Science	Philippines	Tagalog	C2
2 Nan	Female	33	2.5 years	Education	Myanmar	Burmese	C1
3 Aia	Female	31	4 years	Education	Myanmar	Burmese	C1
4 Will	Male	33	10 months	Social Science	Philippines	Tagalog	C2
5 Gal	Female	30	4 years	Education	Mongolia	Mongolian	C2
6 Seri	Female	31	2 years	Social Science	Malaysia	Malay	B2
7 Lorenzo	Male	28	5 years	Social Science	Philippines	Tagalog	C2
8 Lee	Female	26	10 months	Education	China	Mandarin	B2
9 Dao	Female	26	4 years	Social Science	Laos	Lao	C1
10 Daniel	Male	39	2 years	Humanities	Philippines	Tagalog	C1
11 Jai	Female	30	6 years	Education	India	Hindi	C2
12 John	Male	30	6 years	Education	Nigeria	Ikom	C2
13 Polina	Female	28	6 years	Education	Russia	Russian	C2
14 Ketevan	Female	30	2 years	Education	Georgia	Georgian	C2
15 Gabriel	Male	45	4 years	Social Science	Philippines	Tagalog	C2

### **Data Collection**

A semi-structured interview was conducted, where each participant was asked a set of core research questions, with flexibility to further explore topics based on their responses. This interview style was well-suited to the study as it provided insight into participants' subjective experiences capturing their personal insights and experiences (Gill et al., 2008; Kallio et al., 2016) and allowed for the exploration of themes that the researcher had not initially considered. Each interview session, conducted in English, lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. Immediately after each session, the interviews were

transcribed and the researcher prepared additional notes and reflections to compare with the transcribed content.

### ***Data Analysis***

Guided by qualitative research principles, the data analysis employed an inductive approach, utilizing both narrative and thematic analysis to synthesize the interview data in depth. The process began with repeated readings of each transcript to ensure familiarity and immersion in the data. Open coding was then applied, allowing patterns and meanings to emerge naturally from participants' narratives without the imposition of pre-established categories.

Thematic analysis followed the six-step reflexive model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Codes were created and themes were identified through iterative comparison within and across interviews. The analysis produced two categories: (1) the students lived experiences related to cultural differences, social environments, and internal pressures; and (2) the strategies and recommendations they proposed to navigate or mitigate these challenges. Within each category, subthemes such as language barriers, interpersonal dynamics, peer relationships, and healthcare access were explored. To enhance conceptual grounding, themes were refined through constant comparison, analytic memo-writing, and research reflection. This reflexive process allowed the researcher to remain attentive to both explicit content and underlying assumptions in the data. Recurring issues—particularly those related to language, access, and belonging—were interpreted not only as personal challenges but also as structural dimensions of intercultural engagement within the Hungarian higher education context.

### **Findings**

The findings highlighted that international PhD students in Hungary experienced a range of both common and unique challenges as they adjusted to their new environment. These students had to navigate numerous aspects of Hungarian society, from cultural norms and social expectations to university structures and interpersonal relationships. Additionally, they encountered challenges in managing their psychological well-being, adapting to the healthcare system, and adjusting to behavioral norms. Furthermore, although language-related challenges were frequently mentioned and clearly significant, they were not isolated issues. Instead, they were interwoven with broader challenges relating to students' social environments, healthcare navigation, interpersonal experiences, and institutional inclusion. Each of these elements required significant adaptation as the students worked to find their place and thrive in a foreign setting. To provide a clearer understanding, the findings are organized into three key categories: the cultural differences, social environments, and internal pressures faced by these students.



### ***Cultural Differences***

The respondents came from a variety of cultural backgrounds, distinct from Hungarian or broader European culture. This diversity caused some individuals to go through what is commonly known as culture shock, as they encountered different beliefs, values, attitudes, and lifestyles. Entering this new cultural environment required them to adapt to unfamiliar communication styles, relationship dynamics, and value systems. Within this category, four themes emerged, highlighting common aspects of cultural differences.

*Theme 1: Language Barrier.* Respondents frequently highlighted language barriers as a major challenge, often underlying difficulties in areas like healthcare, information access, and housing. Language limitations led to misunderstanding with healthcare providers, restricted access to essential information, and caused miscommunication with landlords, complicating accommodation arrangements. The following excerpts reveal personal experiences that illustrate the daily impact of language barriers on students' lives and integration.

The first one was from John, as an international student, he often found the information provided to be insufficient. For instance, when browsing university or job websites, the English content can differ significantly from the Hungarian version. He came to realize that even when information is translated, it often requires verification from someone fluent in Hungarian to ensure accuracy.

*"I can say that as an international student, the information provided for us are not enough, like for example when checking school or job websites, the information provided in English are quite different from the ones provided in Hungarian. I remember one particular occasion with my bank's website, the Hungarian language translation to English was quite different and I needed help to understand better what the given information meant. So, I have come to realize that even though, for instance, in certain cases, if you receive an information in Hungarian and you translate it to English, you still must cross check it with someone who speaks the language, to make sure that it's the right information." (John)*

On another note, administering tasks, like handling visa matters, accessing healthcare, or visiting government offices, were challenging. For example, Ketevan and Dao recounted difficulties in explaining their issues and, in one case, needing to return multiple times just to get a mobile phone number due to language misunderstandings.

*"When it comes to administrative stuff, like visa [processing], doctors, and government offices, I had difficulties in explaining to them my issues, and for example when I had to take my mobile number, I had to visit the place five times because they were rejecting me since they didn't speak the language" (Ketevan & Dao)*

Ysa also noted the limited chances for international students to join campus groups or organizations; while these groups actively promote themselves, the information they display is often only in Hungarian.

*"I think there is a limited opportunity for international students to join groups or organizations, because like during the enrollment period, you can see that certain organizations are encouraging everyone to join but then you will see that all of the information printed are in Hungarian." (Ysa)*

Aia from Myanmar highlighted the challenges of accessing services, particularly healthcare, due to the language barrier. She observed that locals are generally more willing to help if a student speaks Hungarian, but without it, integration becomes far more difficult.

*"Due to the language barrier, availing services like for example the health care services here, it is very challenging, especially for the international students. If you speak Hungarian, they [the locals], I feel like they are willing to help but, if you don't speak the language, it's very very difficult to integrate here." (Aia)*

As Ysa, Jai, Dao echoed, the language barrier in Hungary not only limits communication but also restricted the information and opportunities available to international students.

*"In Hungary in general, it [the language barrier] is hard since Hungarians don't speak English nor us, international students, Hungarian fluently. Also, due to this [barrier] we receive limited information and opportunities." (Ysa, Jai, & Dao)*

Thus, the language barrier presented a significant challenge for international students in Hungary, affecting daily tasks, access to services, and integration. Despite institutional support, limited language accessibility hinders students' ability to access resources and opportunities, highlighting the need for more inclusive communication to foster fuller participation in academic, social and community life.

**Theme 2: Interpersonal Demeanor.** In Hungary, cultural differences in interpersonal styles between locals and international students, specially from Asian backgrounds, often emerge. Hungarians tend to value individualism and personal autonomy, which can feel distant to Asian students who are used to a more collectivist, team-oriented approach that emphasizes harmony and warmth. These contrasting attitudes can lead to misunderstandings but also offer valuable opportunities for cross-cultural learning.

An example was from Aia's observation, she observed a lack of warmth from locals, possibly due to her Asian background. Coming from Southeast Asia, where helping foreigners is common, she finds Hungary's more reserved attitude strikingly different from the welcoming spirit she's accustomed to at home.

*"I don't want to say that Hungarians are cold, but the public that the normal people we met, they are somewhat hostile. Maybe because I'm Asian, and like especially in*



*Southeast Asian countries, even though they don't speak English, if a foreigner or a stranger needs help, they are very willing to help and here they don't even try to communicate, so I feel like they are not really helpful because in the culture I grew up in, we have a very warm personality and we are always ready to help, but here it's quite the opposite." (Aia)*

In another context, Ysa felt that international students were often excluded from events and conferences, seemingly because they did not speak Hungarian. Although she understood the language barrier, she believed that there were ways to involve non-Hungarian speakers in meaningful roles.

*"There are times that I feel like we, international students, are not being included in the events and conferences just because we don't speak Hungarian, because my Hungarian colleagues they are given the opportunity to handle the departments and wants to participate with doing the task. I mean I understand that we don't speak the language, but there are ways around it, maybe just give us a little opportunity to help, for example, handle the registration for conferences, or administrative things that even though we need Hungarian speakers, we can work around it you know. We don't have to speak Hungarian to people, because if it's a conference, or an event, there will be people that will speak English and that is a well-known fact. That's why I always ask my supervisor about this, that it would be nice if they will also involve us, international students in handling events because this will be a great opportunity to be part of the university." (Ysa)*

To sum it up, both Aia and Ysa's experiences highlighted the challenges international students faced in adapting to Hungarian culture and university life. The reserved nature of local interactions and the language barrier created a sense of isolation for these students, making it difficult for them to feel fully integrated. Addressing these challenges by fostering a more inclusive and accommodating environment could greatly enhance the experiences of international students, allowing them to feel more connected and valued within their new community.

**Theme 3: Health care.** Healthcare services in Hungary present challenges for international students, particularly due to the limited number of English-speaking professionals. Many struggle to communicate medical needs, often relying on Hungarian speakers for assistance. Long wait times add to the stress, making access to care a complex and sometimes overwhelming process.

A case in point was Polina's difficult experience with a dentist in a state hospital, when the doctor became visibly frustrated with her for not speaking Hungarian and firmly told her not to return without a translator. She discussed that the treatment she received was unsatisfactory, leaving her feeling dismissed and poorly cared for.

*"I don't have much good experience, before the dentist in a state hospital got angry because I don't speak Hungarian and she said not to go back next time unless I had a*

*translator with me, then the general treatment that was given to me was not good at all so I had to go to a private hospital and fix the mistakes.” (Polina)*

Another instance was John’s experience, highlighting both the language barrier and the complexity of the healthcare system. While technically accessible, navigating it was difficult due to unclear details. Having a Hungarian-speaking friend helped, but he worried about how he would manage without that support, knowing not all international students have such connections.

*“I think the healthcare system here is difficult to navigate, probably more on the language, and I think also the healthcare system itself is tricky because not everything is written in black and white and not clear, so it makes it even a tad bit harder to navigate as a foreigner. So yes, you have access to healthcare, but that access comes about is the issue we have and for me, I’m just speaking generally, like for example you need a Hungarian speaking person to assist you, then it becomes easier, but it makes you wonder if you’re doing it alone.” (John)*

A further case was Aia’s experience, although she had private insurance, she was still directed to public hospitals. The waiting times were long, stretching out endlessly just to secure an appointment, in which other respondents also agreed with in their excerpts below.

*“I’m not saying that the healthcare system in my country is great, but we still have our way around, like here for some reason they just send us to public hospitals despite having private insurance, and there, it takes forever to get an appointment. Let’s say, I was having an infection where I need to get immediate attention, I must wait, if I’m very lucky, then the closest appointment I can get is two weeks from now. There was a time that I was finally given an appointment, and when I showed up to hospital, there was no doctor because they made a mistake, like the doctor wasn’t scheduled to work during that day. So yeah, I was suffering a lot and there was no one there to treat me.” (Aia)*

*“[When you go to the hospital] the challenge is when the doctor, the physician doesn’t speak English and it’s difficult sometimes to explain what [physical pain] you’re really experiencing” (Daniel).*

*“The health care system is good, but you’d have to wait a really long time for you to get the appointment” (Lee, Daniel, Nan, Dao, Jai).*

In summary, navigating the healthcare system as a non-Hungarian speaker presented numerous challenges for international students. Together, these experiences revealed a pattern of difficulties that impact international students’ healthcare access, leaving many to rely on personal support networks or costly alternatives for the care they need.

**Theme 4: Accommodation.** International students in Hungary face challenges securing accommodation due to a competitive rental market and high demand for affordable

accommodation, Limited budgets often force students to compromise on location or quality, making it difficult to find safe and affordable housing.

*"It's very tricky [to find an accommodation], and well it depends on our personality and our situation but finding a good place that meets our criteria and our price range [as a student], it's not very easy to find proper accommodation." (Aia)*

*"If you want to buy something or rent a flat, I noticed that if I respond to a post expressing my intention, they don't reply or just leave the conversation since it's in English or even if it's in Hungarian when I use the translator. Oh! and the competition in looking for accommodation is so difficult because there will be competition among those who would like to rent a certain flat, and to get an actual spot to be considered in this competition that you must win for you to get the place." (Polina)*

Therefore, finding accommodation as an international student came with unique hurdles that went beyond simply locating a place to stay. Together, their experiences illustrated the complexities international students faced when seeking a suitable place to live in an unfamiliar environment.

### **Social Environment**

International students navigate a complex social environment shaped by interactions with both international and local peers. Connecting with fellow internationals often brings shared experiences, such as adapting to a new country and overcoming language barriers. In contrast, relationships with local Hungarian students offer deeper cultural integration but may require overcoming cultural and language differences. These interactions expose students to diverse viewpoints, broadening their understanding of both Hungarian and their own cultures, and reveal two key themes: peer relationships and diverse perspectives, each crucial for social adjustment.

*Theme 5: Peer relationship.* Building peer connections is essential for international students facing a new social and academic environment. Many bonds with fellow internationals who share similar cultural adjustments, creating a supportive network. However, friendships with local students can be harder due to language barriers and fewer opportunities for casual interaction. Here are some personal accounts from international students illustrating their experiences.

*"My peer relationships with other international students are very good, we get along very well, and like I mentioned before, I really don't have a Hungarian friend." (Aia)*

*"I don't really have that much interaction with the locals especially in the university because of the separation of international and Hungarian students in the faculty." (Gal)*

*"It's easier to build relationships with fellow international students than locals because we don't really have interactions or have limited interactions with them [the locals]." (Lee, Jai, Will, John)*

In essence, these international students' experiences show both the ease and challenges of building relationships abroad. While they form close bonds with fellow internationals, connecting with local students proves difficult due to language barriers and limited interaction opportunities. Despite friendly encounters, the lack of sustained engagement with Hungarian students creates a social divide. This highlights the need for more inclusive practices in educational institutions to foster genuine cross-cultural relationships.

*Theme 6: Diverse perspectives.* Studying abroad offers international students a chance to broaden their worldview, but differences in appearance, language, and culture can lead to distinct treatment, sometimes resulting in isolation or discrimination. Adapting to these challenges requires resilience as students navigate the excitement of a new environment while managing perceptions of being "different." Here are some experiences shared by international students.

*"Being different, I have a different 'look' compared to the locals in Hungary, so frequently I get stares from them and it's uncomfortable, and feel like I get treated differently, just because I look different." (Aia)*

*"I find Europe to be casual overall, but I've experienced subtle discrimination. As an Asian student studying abroad, locals sometimes greet me by shouting "Ni hao" [Chinese for "hello"] or "Konnichiwa" [a Japanese greeting], which can feel uncomfortable. Another difficult experience was during the COVID pandemic; I noticed people seemed to avoid or dislike me, especially when I was walking on the street, likely due to my Asian appearance." (Gal)*

Aia and Gal's experiences reveal the challenges of feeling "different" abroad. Though their host countries were mostly welcoming, they encountered subtle discrimination and stereotypes. Being treated differently based on appearance, through inappropriate greetings or avoidance, was disheartening. These stories highlight the need for greater cultural sensitivity to ensure all students feel respected and valued.

### ***Internal Pressure***

International students face significant internal pressures beyond academics. Financial adjustments, managing living expenses, and often being without family support are key challenges. Living independently adds further stress, requiring them to handle budgeting, and time management in a new environment. Cultural and language barriers can also lead to isolation and homesickness, creating a complex set of pressures as they adapt.

*Theme 7: Financial Adjustments.* For international students, financial adjustments often include additional academic costs, like attending conferences essential for professional development and growth. Though universities offer some funding, it's often minimal, leaving students to cover expenses themselves. This financial gap can deter students from

valuable opportunities, highlighting the challenge of balancing academics with financial stability.

*"The university does try to support students [in attending conferences], but the assistance provided is often insufficient (Daniel, Aia, Nan) they [the university] only offers a small amount of funding. If a student is not presenting at the conference, they are expected to cover the costs on their own." (Lee)*

**Theme 8: Isolation.** International students often experience profound isolation, as they adjust to life far from the familiar support of family and friends. Building connections with locals can be challenging, leading to feelings of detachment and an increased sense of self-reliance. Polina highlights the pressure of navigating life where "everything depends on you." While empowering, this independence can be daunting, making routine challenges feel overwhelming and the adjustment process deeply personal and emotionally taxing.

*"It's very hard to build up connections with locals, and you have to be totally independent. To build up your life based only on yourself because you are far away from your family and your friends, like everything depends on you. There is this kind of pressure, it's not external, but internal pressure that 'I'm responsible for everything' and sometimes, independence with this pressure is not good when you are alone and away from your support system." (Polina)*

### **Insights from International Students**

International students valued support services during their time abroad, particularly faculty counseling for homesickness and isolation, international offices for administrative help, and faculty-led workshops for connecting with peers and gaining insights. Despite their resources, language barriers and limited healthcare access remain issues. Students suggested ways universities could ease integration, including informal gatherings for new and senior students, which Polina noted would help ease anxieties. Lorenzo recommended more outreach to prevent isolation, and Ysa stressed the importance of accessible networking opportunities, like conferences and teaching roles, to support students' growth.

*"I can recommend what the university can actually do for the fresh newcomers, to organize simple gatherings with senior students, especially for freshmen, to help them and make it easier for them to adapt, like they will have the opportunity to meet and ask senior students to reduce their anxiety. This will be a great way for them to ask questions because sometimes, as a student, you're just lost and you don't know who to ask, with this they can form connections with other students and have this kind of certainty and feelings of safety." (Polina)*

*"I would recommend to the universities to try to incorporate more community outreach to other international students, in terms of providing activities, because group clamping is really a thing." (Lorenzo)*

*"I would like to suggest, even though there are organizations, for example, ambassadorship or organizations by countries that are trying to organize international*

*or events or academic for students to be join, I feel like it could be more improved in terms of giving each other sources for conferences and events that are related to the specific fields of students, especially PhD students, wherein other students can't get hold of. The same goes for teaching opportunities, because we are required to teach but there are only limited opportunities, it would be great to be given the opportunity to collaborate with other institutions." (Ysa)*

In summary, although the recommendations of these international students do not solve every challenge they encounter, they offer meaningful guidance to ease the transition for future students. suggestions such as organizing peer support events, enhancing community engagement, and improving access to academic and professional opportunities can help reduce some of the common difficulties of adjusting to life abroad. While these ideas may not entirely address persistent issues like language obstacles or navigating healthcare, they highlight practical, student-informed actions that universities could adopt to foster a more inclusive and supportive experience for international students.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal the complexity of intercultural engagement as experienced by international doctoral students in Hungary. Rather than being defined by a single dominant factor, students' challenges were shaped by a constellation of interrelated factors—cultural norms, institutional support, language accessibility, peer relations, and access to services. Language barriers undoubtedly played a significant role, but they were embedded in a broader social and structural context that shaped students' ability to adapt, connect, and participate fully in university life. The experiences of international PhD students in Hungary reveal a complex landscape of adaptation challenges that span cultural, social, and internal dimensions. Each of these areas contributed significantly to their overall adjustment process, underscoring the need for supportive infrastructure withing host institutions. In line with previous studies, language barriers present one of the most pressing difficulties, affecting access to services, healthcare, housing, daily communication, and academic engagement (Campbell & Li, 2008). As international students steer through unfamiliar bureaucratic systems, the lack of English-speaking professionals becomes an acute obstacle, emphasizing the importance of language accessibility in enhancing student experiences. While many Hungarian universities offer optional Hungarian language courses, these are often underutilized due to their voluntary nature in PhD/DLA programs. Moreover, the differences in interpersonal demeanour highlight the cultural dissonance many students feel. This finding aligns with Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which posits that individualistic societies like Hungary's may seem less approachable to students from collectivist backgrounds (Hofstede, 2011). These interpersonal challenges are not only about adaptation but also about finding belonging and connection in the host culture. The



sense of isolation that arises from cultural misunderstandings and limited peer relationships, particularly with local students, echoes findings from Gareis et al. (2011), who noted that such social divides can exacerbate homesickness and stress among international students. Structural barriers like securing affordable accommodation and navigating the healthcare system add further complexities while, limited accommodation options, compounded by competitive markets and language barriers, impose additional financial strain (Fincher & Shaw, 2009). These issues contribute to the unique and common experiences of international students in Hungary, reinforcing themes of cultural dissonance, the need for Hungarian language support in navigating essential services, social isolation, and financial pressures. These insights reflect the students' everyday realities and highlight the need for target support mechanisms to ease their transition and integration.

To address these challenges, this study offers actionable recommendation for Hungarian universities that could significantly enhance the international student experience. Language support is critical, with expanded translation services for essential resources like healthcare and accommodation poised to alleviate many difficulties. Hungarian universities should implement structured language courses where students are required to complete introductory language training as part of their academic program. Community-building initiatives, such as informal gatherings between first-year and senior students, could foster social integration and alleviate isolation, reflecting the importance of peer support as a central component of successful acculturation (Ward et al., 2020). Formal mentorship programs where local Hungarian students are paired with international students to assist in cultural and academic adaptation may also be a big step to intercultural engagement. Polish universities have successfully implemented such programs, leading to higher levels of engagement and retention among international students (The Association of Polish Universities for Internationalization, 2024). Furthermore, intercultural training for both students and staff could bridge cultural gaps, promoting inclusivity and mutual understanding. While these recommendations cannot eliminate all barriers, they provide a framework for easing international students' transition and fostering an inclusive university environment. Addressing structural issues such as healthcare accessibility and offering financial support for professional development opportunities could empower students to thrive academically and personally. Further research should explore how universities might implement these strategies effectively, assessing their impact on international student well-being and academic success. This study, therefore, contributes to a broader understanding of the multifaceted challenges international PhD students face and emphasizes the role of institutional support in enhancing student adaptation and success.

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