ACADEMIC ADAPTATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN LITHUANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

The global mobility of people and globalization contribute to a more intensive migration of international students in pursuit of learning in a foreign country. Since the number of international students continues to grow worldwide, it is critical to develop an understanding of their adaptation issues. One of the major concerns of international students is their adaptation to the reality and specifics of a new host society. Hence, the focus of the present article is to analyse international students' academic adaptation issues in the Lithuanian system of higher education, highlighting the potential challenges and opportunities as viewed by full-time international students. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten international students, who assumed full-time studies in one of the Lithuanian universities. A thematic analysis was employed for data analysis, which yielded two major themes: concerns expressed by international students regarding their academic adaptation to the Lithuanian system of higher education, and barriers that they encountered in the process of their adaptation at university. The first theme was concretized in the following sub-themes: academic threats and bureaucratic restrictions that the interviewees had to encounter during the process of their adjustment process, whereas the second theme was exemplified by three sub-themes, namely assimilation into the study process, linguistic adaptation to the study process, and interaction with people in the academic environment.

Keywords: *academic adaptation, barriers to adaptation, international students, academic environment*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global mobility of people and globalization contribute to a more intensive migration of international students in pursuit of learning in a foreign country. 'International students', or otherwise 'internationally mobile students', are defined as "individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination" (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2023). All higher education policymakers try to devise new ways to create conditions beneficial for student mobility acceleration and resulting in greater internationalization of studies (Hussain & Shen 2019; Volkova & Kolesov 2022). Following OECD (2023) data, the number of international students in OECD countries has increased by 70% over the last decade. This may result from the countries' attempts to meet the internationalization of higher education policies (de Wit 2019; de Wit & Deca 2020).

In Lithuania, universities have experienced a steady increase in international student enrolment due to the improving quality of university education, greater availability of study programmes delivered in the English language, as well as increased opportunities for international mobility of students via Erasmus+ or other mobility programmes. According to OECD (2023) data, Lithuania ranks 24 among OECD countries in terms of international student enrolment in Lithuanian institutions of higher education. The number of students has increased from 7.5 thousand in the academic year of 2018-2019 to 9.4 thousand comprising 9.6% of all university students in 2022-2023 (Official Statistics Portal 2022). Meanwhile, the number of students in colleges of higher education has also risen from 819 international students in 2018-2019 to 1112 foreign students in 2022-2023 (Official Statistics Portal 2022). The biggest part of international students, who generally enrol for full-time studies of 3-4 years or assume short-cycle studies of the duration of 1 year (2 semesters) arrive from Asia and the Near East (countries such as Lebanon, Israel, Pakistan, China, Turkey, etc.), whereas international students from neighbouring countries (Latvia, Belarus, Poland, etc.) or other European countries generally undertake short-cycle studies via Erasmus+ mobility programme (EURYDICE 2022). Due to the political situation in Europe

over the past period, Lithuania hosts more and more international students from Ukraine, who tend to enrol in full-time studies.

Since the number of international students continues to grow worldwide, it is critical to develop an understanding of their adaptation issues. In its most generalized meaning, adaptation refers to a general property of an organism to adapt to some conditions where it exists, including the adjustment of behaviour, thinking, attitudes, perceptions, etc. (Hrehová, Žiaran & Seňová 2021). The term 'adaptation' is frequently used interchangeably with the term 'adjustment' (Mesidor & Sly 2016; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins & Johnson 2018) or 'integration' (Rienties et al. 2012) by some researchers, yet in this paper, the term 'adaptation' is given preference to relying on its frequency of use in scholarly literature and/or is used synonymously with the latter two.

International students are required to adapt to the reality and specifics of a new host society. Yi et al. (2003) identify five areas, which international students need to adapt to, namely, academic, physical health, financial, vocational, and personal or social. Accordingly, their adaptation process is seen as manifold: subjective, objective, social, cultural, and academic (Russell, Rosenthal & Thomson 2010; Mesidor & Sly 2016; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins & Johnson 2018; Hrehová, Žiaran & Seňová 2021). *Objective* adaptation refers to the success of how a person is anchored in the world of family, education establishments, and the world of work and people (Hrehová, Žiaran & Seňová 2021); meanwhile, *subjective* adaptation reveals how much satisfaction a person experiences in the aforesaid areas of life (Badelina 2020). Upon arrival to a new country and the new environment, a student needs not only to adjust to the areas of the social, cultural, and economic environment of the host country but also to learn new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Furnham 2019). Hence, *social* adaptation presupposes a process in which international students acquire essential standards, values, habits, and behavioural patterns that are necessary to establish themselves in a foreign country, thus becoming its members (Hrehová, Žiaran & Seňová 2021) and their ways of dealing with interpersonal societal demands, such as making friends, participating in social activities, ability to work in different groups of students, etc. (Rienties et al. 2012; Lee at al. 2018). New culture demands an effort to perceive and interpret new verbal, non-verbal, social, and other meanings in communication. Hence, in seeking to understand these meanings and replicate culturally specific behaviours in different situations, an international student needs to go through the process of *cultural* adaptation (Wang 2022). *Academic* adaptation refers to the appreciation and acquisition of the target culture in an academic context (Kim 2012; Park 2016), resulting in coping with various educational demands such as motivation for studies, knowledge and skill application, performance, and satisfaction with the academic environment (Rienties et.al. 2012).

Mesidor & Sly (2016, p. 266) claim that one of the optimal goals of international students to pursue education in a foreign country is "to gain an education that will allow them to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others". International students are thereby guided by enthusiasm to learn, change and adjust. Thus, it is not surprising that academic adaptation to a foreign academic environment poses a lot of challenges for international students. Scientific studies identify a number of barriers that hinder foreign students' successful adjustment to the educational system of a host country. According to Berry (2005), all the challenging issues are primarily associated with acculturative stress. Russell et al. (2010) and Rienties et al. (2012) also distinguish stress, which is often a result of culture shock or perceived discrimination, as the most significant psychological-emotional obstacle to the successful integration of international students into the educational process, which often results in lower academic achievement and even drop-outs. Being away from their family and close familiar environment, international students often encounter psychological distress, manifested through depression and anxiety (Hwang, Bennet & Beauchemin 2014), loneliness, homesickness, and even somatic complaints e.g. headaches, stomach aches, etc. resulting from mental tensions (Mesidor & Sly 2016).

Other acculturative stressors include language barriers and educational difficulties (Ecochard & Fotheringham 2017; Fayzullina 2019; Wang 2022). The linguistic ability remains the core factor for student adaptation (Smith & Khawaja 2011), which contributes to the acceleration of academic and social integration into the university system (Piller 2016; Li et al. 2018; Volkova & Kolesov 2022). Besides, language barriers lead to a number of other academic integration issues, such as skill development and knowledge acquisition, (Rienties et al. 2012; Volkova & Kolesov 2022), oral

presentations, understanding lectures and note-taking, written assignments and class discussions (Bastien, Seifen-Adkins & Johnson 2018; Wang 2022), as well as social integration problems, such as developing friendships, participating in various formal and informal social activities, team-based projects, and others (Rienties et al. 2012). Mesidor & Sly (2016) identify the following educational barriers to the successful academic adaptation of international students: anxiety about registering for classes, differences in degree completion requirements, choosing their major, adjustment to different methods of evaluation, interaction with faculty and other students, and others. In other words, in addition to the generally experienced social culture shock, international students also suffer from 'academic culture shock' (Wang 2022).

Despite the aforementioned acculturative stressors, international students' successful adaptation is often determined by other social factors that are typical of international students. Rienties et al. (2012) distinguish five of them: the perception of the university by the social network of students; social support by family and friends; social life; ethnic background; and financial support.

The perception of the university, i.e. its reputation and recognition by the public, prospective employees, students' families and friends, plays a key role in the successful adaptation of a student. Many universities worldwide have been striving for international recognition by competing at international university ranking lists, which international students address when selecting an educational programme. Furthermore, higher education institutions put considerable effort into providing both academic and non-academic facilities to students, including academic study support, social and cultural events for international students, ICT facilities, etc., seeking to facilitate the adaptation processes of international students (Rienties et al. 2012).

Another important factor in international students' successful academic adaptation is the support provided by their family and friends. It has been long established that family support plays a crucial role in developing motivation for learning, self-esteem, and ambition to attain the set goals (Attewell et al. 2006). Hence, being assured of their success in the closest environment raises self-confidence and motivation to adjust to the new academic and social environment.

Thirdly, social life outside the academic environment also contributes to the successful integration of international students. Having friends both from the same culture and host culture, sharing accommodation with other students, participating in different cultural, sports, or other social events, membership in student associations, etc. allows international students to establish a diverse social life, increase the sense of connectedness, and consequently lead to better academic performance (Russel et al. 2010; Rienties et al. 2012; Merola et al. 2019; Volkova & Kolesov 2022).

In addition, economic well-being is of no less importance than other aforesaid factors. It has been established that international students frequently drop out of universities due to financial constraints (Russell et al. 2010). Hence, financial support from the international students' social networks, the host university, or the governments of both native and host countries can significantly contribute to their efficacious adaptation.

Finally, the role of student ethnic and national identity should not be undermined. Rienties et al. (2012) claim that students' ethnic and national identity influences how they learn in social networks. Based on the previously conducted studies, three types of student social networks with reference to ethnic and national identity can be distinguished: a) a co-national network, which is composed of persons of the same national and ethnic identity that share the same cultural values and beliefs and perceive the new culture through common experience and shared attitudes (Bittencourt et al. 2021); b) a network with host nationals that involves home-based students and academic staff and aims at facilitating academic and professional success (Volkova & Kolesov 2022); c) a multinational network, mainly consisting of international students who come together to boost engagement in social and academic activities (Volkova & Kolesov 2022).

Based on the above review of scholarly literature, the current research focuses on the issues of international students' academic adaptation in a Lithuanian university. Despite extensive studies of international students' adaptation in the US universities (Park 2016; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins &Johnson 2018; Brunsting, Smith & Zachry 2018; Martirosyan, Bustamante & Saxon 2019; Wang 2022), Asian

universities (Hussain & Shen 2019; Wang & Devarajoo 2022), Australian universities (Russell, Rosenthal & Thompson 2010), and some European universities in economically advanced countries (Rienties et al. 2012; Hrehová, Žiaran & Seňová 2021; Yildirim, Zimmermann & Jonkmann 2021; Dermitzaki et al. 2022), no scientific studies concerning international students' adaptation in Lithuanian or other less economically advanced countries seem to be available. Bearing this in mind, the focus of the present study is to analyse international students' academic adaptation issues in the Lithuanian system of higher education, highlighting the potential challenges and opportunities as viewed by full-time international students.

The following **research questions** guide the study:

1) What are the challenges experienced by international students in the process of their academic adaptation to the Lithuanian system of higher education?

2) What areas of academic life are most challenging for international students to adapt to?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Data collection method and procedure

In order to empirically explore the phenomenon of academic adaptation of international students, qualitative interviewing was used for data collection as it allows "a repertoire of possibilities to address specific topics related to the phenomenon of study while leaving space for participants to offer new meanings to the study focus" (Galletta 2013, p. 24). In this respect, an interview is a specific form of conversation between the interviewer and the respondent leading to the creation of new knowledge, emerging as new 'truth' from the narratives of individuals situated in the same context and relying on their experiences (Bitinas 2013). In our case, the context is created by a Lithuanian university and its academic community of international students.

Pursuing to investigate the issues of the academic adaptation of international students, the form of a semi-structured interview was selected. Relying on the analysis of scholarly literature and previous studies on the academic adaptation of international students, the researcher developed an interview guide containing open-ended questions and leaving space for additional questions and interpretations reliant on the respondents' experiences (Žydžiūnaitė & Sabaliauskas 2017), as well as staying open for new unexpected data (Galletta 2013). The interview questions were split into four groups. The first group included questions related to the demographic data of the students (age, country of origin, year of studies, English language proficiency, and duration of their stay in Lithuania). The second group of questions embraced the ones related to their previous academic backgrounds, internationalization experiences, and reasons for selecting a Lithuanian institution of higher education. The third group centered around international students' attitudes toward the quality and effectiveness of studies in Lithuania, the most memorable moments in the process of education in Lithuania, the challenges that they experienced during the study period, and strategies to cope with the encountered obstacles. Meanwhile, the fourth group embraced a set of questions related to socio-cultural adaptation beyond university. However, due to the restrictions set for the length of the paper and limitations bound by the research questions to be explored in the study, the present article will focus solely on two aspects: what challenges are identified by international students and what strategies they employ to adapt to the academic environment of the university.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in March – April 2023 at a Lithuanian university that occurs on the list of the top 3 most popular universities in Lithuania among international students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Their duration varied from 32 to 65 minutes.

The interview transcripts were analysed employing thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al. 2013; Delve & Limpaecher 2023). The goal of thematic analysis is to identify the main themes from the data; to understand how these themes relate to one another and how they are manifested in the data, and finally, to use the identified themes to generate new insights about the analysed phenomenon (Delve & Limpaecher 2023). In the case of our study, all the interviews were transcribed and reflective notes were

taken after each interview. After that, all the themes relevant to international students' academic adaptation were open-coded and listed. The categorical coding was repeated several times to clarify the relationships between data sets. Consequently, the list was revised excluding the irrelevant themes and merging similar ones using in order to develop a unified list of codes. Finally, interview pieces relevant to a particular theme were grouped and given an appropriate title – this way sub-themes were developed. In this way, a unified approach was developed, which helped to ensure the credibility of the study.

2.2. Research participants

Convenience sampling was used for this study, which is a non-probability sampling method when a researcher selects units for inclusion in the sample because they are the easiest to access (Nikolopoulou 2023). Hence, the researcher addressed the faculty administration by asking which student groups were available for convenience sampling. Two student groups were selected according to the researcher's criteria (i.e. groups consisting of both domestic and international students who assumed full-time studies in a Lithuanian university; the study programme should be fully delivered in English) for purposive sampling (Hennink et al. 2011). Out of 16 international students in the selected groups, 1 student was excluded due to the fact that she arrived for short-time studies following Erasmus+ mobility programme, and 5 students expressed their resentment to participate in the study. Finally, the interview was conducted with 10 international students who expressed their consent to participate in the interview.

Pursuing to protect the interviewees' personal data from publicization, the research participants were given codes from RP1 to RP10. The demographic data of the research sample are presented in Table 1.

Participant	Gender	Age	Year of studies	Country of origin	Duration of stay in Lithuania
RP1	Female	18	1	Belarus	9 months
RP2	Male	17	1	Ukraine	7 months
RP3	Male	18	1	Ukraine	9 months
RP4	Male	18	1	Ukraine	9 months
RP5	Male	19	2	Belarus	2 years
RP6	Male	17	1	Belarus	8 months
RP7	Male	19	2	Ukraine	1 year 2 months
RP8	Female	22	3	Belarus	2 years
RP9	Female	20	3	Belarus	2 years
RP10	Male	32	3	Ukraine	2.5 years

Table 1. Participants' demographic data

The selected sample included international students that arrived from former Soviet Union countries: 4 students from Belarus and 6 students from Ukraine. According to gender, there were 3 female and 7 male students. The age ranged from 17 to 32; meanwhile, the ratio according to the year of studies was 5 first-year students, 2 second-year students, and 3 third-year students. The duration of the stay ranged from 7 months to 2.5 years.

3. RESULTS

The present study focuses on the identification of the challenges that are incurred by international students in the process of their adaptation to the Lithuanian system of higher education and what action they undertake to deal with the raised issues. The study was performed in one Lithuanian university that

is located in the capital city of Vilnius in the spring of 2023. The semi-structured interview was selected as a data collection method.

The conducted thematic analysis of the research data helped to devise two major themes and five sub-themes and correspondent categories, as represented in Table 2.

Theme	Sub-themes	Categories
I. **Concerns of international students**	1. Academic challenges	a. English language issues
		b. Challenging content of a study subject
		c. Meeting deadlines for task completion
		d. Engagement in group work
	2. Bureaucratic restrictions	e. Migration conditions
		f. Political image of the home country
		g. Prospective job opportunities
II. Factors influencing international students' academic adaptation	3. Assimilation into the study process	h. Task completion and academic performance
		i. Flexibility of the schedule and non-committal attendance
		j. Time management
		k. Evaluation issues
	4. Linguistic adaptation into the study process	l. Solving miscommunication problems
	5. Interaction with people in the academic environment	m. Communication with the academic staff
		n. Relationships with fellow students

Table 2. Conceptual framework of the thematic analysis

3.1. Theme One: Concerns of international students

It is common knowledge that arriving in a new and strange environment a person suffers a certain level of concern, anxiety, and sometimes even frustration. These feelings are even more intensified when the person does not have extensive prior experience, as appeared in the case of our study – for the majority of the research participants (8 out of 10), arriving in Lithuania and assuming university studies was the first encounter with a foreign academic environment. Therefore, the international students expressed multiple concerns related to their adaptation in Lithuania, namely, difficulties in obtaining a visa, accommodation issues, financial troubles, detachment from their parents, relatives, and friends, problems in communication with locals, feelings of alienation, abandonment, loneliness, and others.

However, due to the limitations of this research, only the academic challenges will be considered in this section.

Analysing the concerns that international students experience in their academic life at university, two sub-themes were generated: academic challenges and bureaucratic restrictions.

3.1.1. Academic challenges

The sub-theme of academic challenges was classified into the following categories in terms of the frequency of occurrence in the participants' responses: English language issues, challenging content of study subjects, meeting deadlines for task completion, and engagement in group work.

The analysis of the research findings revealed that the insufficiency of English language skills was the main hindrance to international students' successful academic adaptation. Six out of ten research participants claimed that the level of their English language proficiency was too low to meet academic requirements:

> *"Some subjects are challenging in English, and even with certificates of C1 it's still challenging."* (RP4)

> *"Oh, my English… it's terrible. It's just terrible [laughs]."* (RP5)

> *"< …> it was really funny when we had a little bit of English miscommunication, I'd say, and for some moment it was really hard to understand, but it was most memorable."* (RP7)

One of the most frequently distinguished difficulties was awareness of English terminology. Half of the research participants admitted having problems with understanding English terminology or the necessity to study professional terminology in English:

> *"And the problem is that it's even difficult in the native language to understand this concept of object-oriented programming. And in English, it's even more difficult because you have another terminology, you have old English verbs, you have to understand what the professor wants to tell you."* (RP2)

> *"In studies, I would say it's perhaps, the understanding of terminology. It's understanding the coding in English."* (RP4)

Another issue that was frequently addressed by international students was related to challenges posed by the content of specific study subjects. Four students claimed that the main obstacle to studying a new study subject was the volume of the materials to study, problems in understanding the content, lack of time, and shortage of information on the required topic. For instance,

> *"I think the most challenging is right now because we have the subject "game design" and we learn something new of how to create a game and we have to create our own game. And it's really challenging to find time, to find materials, to find ideas to create this game."* (RP7)

> *"Also, studying new material is challenging, which you've never done."* (RP3)

> *"For me, it is difficult to prepare for some theory classes because I can't find the materials myself. Sometimes professors tell what to study and where to find, but sometimes we have to find information ourselves."* (RP10)

Keeping to the deadlines for task completion is another problem that was mentioned by some international students. It is noteworthy that the students admit the difficulties arising from their own inability to manage their time properly, personal traits, like laziness or loss of attention, preventing them from doing the tasks in due time, as well as occasionally being overloaded with time-restricted assignments:

> *"I think, yes, of course, but it would be better when we have a strict deadline, for example in a week or two weeks, and it's my own opinion <…> From my point of view, when I have*

> *the deadline, so for example, over last two days I begin working very hard and so on, and then, when I don't meet the time, I feel disappointed."* (RP6)

> *"Other ones are usually connected with giving in the task 30 minutes before the deadline. There aren't a lot of them, but usually it's the way how I give in the homework."* (RP4)

> *"<...> sometimes we have to complete several tasks with the deadlines on the same day or week <...> and then it's impossible. Well, possible, but very hard [laughs]."* (RP9)

The last category generated within the sub-theme of academic challenges was engagement in group work. Surprisingly, none of the interviewees claimed to enjoy working in groups or teams. When asked to give some justification for their reluctance to joint activities, two of the international students maintained that they are *'individualistic'* (RP5) and *'prefer working on my own'* (RP2). Two students were discouraged by shared responsibility for the task completion or its evaluation:

> *"I don't like group projects… I think they are a bit unfair. Well, I mean they are fair as a task, but the evaluation, the marks I mean, can be unfair. For example, we had a project on game design. And I know that I did much more than the other students in my group. And one student didn't do anything except put the information that we all sent him together on the slides, which is the easiest part. But we all got the same marks. That's a bit unfair."* (RP1)

> *"It is always that some students work more and others less. And then they pretend that they worked the same. Uhhh, I hate it."* (RP2)

Among other indicated reasons agreement on the time for task completion and sharing the tasks were emphasized:

> *"For me, it's very difficult to find time to work together with others. I like to work when I have time and inspiration, not when others want me to."* (RP8)

> "*I wanted to have a technical task, but my teammates can't do it for me. So I had to do what they told me."* (RP5)

After discussing the content of this sub-theme, it is obvious that participation in joint assignments, such as group work, group projects, and the like, seemed to be most challenging for international students due to a variety of reasons: unfair distribution of tasks within the group, unfair evaluation for the completion of an assignment, unwillingness to agree upon the time for group meetings and students' individualistic style of learning. Apart from that, the content of some study subjects and the related English terminology appeared to be problematic to grasp. Finally, poor skills in time management, the number of set assignments, and some personal characteristics prevented them from completing assignments on time.

3.1.2. Bureaucratic restrictions

Three categories were identified with the sub-theme of Bureaucratic restrictions – migration conditions, the political image of the home country, and prospective job opportunities.

Most of the research participants (six out of ten) expressed their concern with migration issues, such as getting a visa or prolonging their temporary residence permit, waiting in queues in migration offices, and receiving the wrong type of visa. For example, one international student from Ukraine explained his experience with the migration office as highly negative and discouraging:

> *"We came to Lithuania unexpectedly when the war broke out in our And when I first came to the migration office, I was waiting in queue for two months. At first, I came there and they told "OK, we will open it* [author's note: a visa]*", and one month later they sent me an email that they can't open this kind of visa because I am studying at university. And at that moment I was in Lithuania for more than three months, and if you're in any country for more than three months, you already need to have a visa, or you are not legal. And*

because of that situation, I had to open the type of visa that can be opened in several days, but you open it only for one or two months. And it costs a lot of money as well. And I opened this type of visa – a short-term one – and one month later I opened a student visa. Overall, I spent double the money than I should have spent." (RP2)

Moreover, the students from Belarus expressed their worries about their temporary residence permits not being prolonged, which would result in the coercive termination of their studies:

"I don't know. I am sometimes afraid that I won't get my TRP prolonged <…> and then I will have to leave without finishing university…" (RP1)

The international students from Belarus express their concern with the image of their home country in the eyes of local residents. They feel awkward to name the country they come from and scared of being maltreated in the academic environment due to the international policy of their home country, which often results in their alienation and social exclusion:

"At first, I was scared to tell that I come from Belarus, and I was scared to speak Russian. I thought other students will not communicate with me because of that. But luckily everyone is very friendly here, but still, I don't have friends here and I am always alone." (RP8)

" <…> the politicians' position towards my country in general, and the statements they give off – they scare me." (RP1).

Another important idea expressed by the interviewees was associated with their prospective employment opportunities:

"What you need to get a good job is you have to get a good portfolio and some soft skills so that you interest the people in the company. And studies here will help to get it." (RP1)

"The nature of studies hasn't changed for years in my country. Some professors teach the same things as they did ten or even twenty years ago. And professors here follow the latest trends and know the newest information. And it is important to get the newest information and practical skills to get a better job or a job in general. Who cares about old things these days?" (RP3)

"I think that when I come back to my country, I will get a better job just because I finished my studies abroad." (RP5)

It appears that international students associated studies in a foreign university with better career prospects. It is noteworthy that some of them emphasized the modernity of studies, which was also considered an important factor in getting a better job position. Besides, they were convinced that the very fact of studying abroad ensured them a job vacancy in their home country.

3.2. Factors influencing international students' academic adaptation

Academic adaptation presupposes more than the mere potential of a student to be academically successful. International students receive their basic education in the institutions in their home countries, which are often based on education systems different from the ones in the host country. Hence, international students very often are found to be more vulnerable to academic adaptation difficulties than their mainstream counterparts as they must deal with difficulties stemming from significant educational differences. International students may lack familiarity with specific instructional methods, conventional methods of testing and evaluation, and classroom norms, struggle with academic language issues, and feel insecure when navigating a new educational system.

The analysis of the interviewees' responses regarding the most sensitive areas of their academic adaptation at the university allowed generating the following sub-themes: assimilation into the study process, linguistic adaptation to the study process, interactions with people in the academic environment, and utilization of university facilities.

3.2.1. Assimilation into the study process

Generalizing the obtained results, the sub-theme of international students' assimilation into the study process was manifested in four corresponding categories: task completion and academic performance, time management, flexibility of the schedule and non-committal attendance, as well as evaluation issues.

Relying upon the frequency of the obtained responses from the interviewees, the greatest issues they experienced were connected to academic performance and completion of assignments. One of the factors that influenced the interviewees' academic adjustment was the preference given by professors to group assignments and their oral presentations. However, international students' perceptions differed. Some of them enjoyed a different and more collaborative mode of academic performance than they were used to in their home countries:

> *"I think all these digital projects that we have to do together with others (laughs)… They're always funny, for example, right now we have Game Design. And in Game Design, we are supposed to create a game by the end of this semester, and all the tasks for this game are so funny…"* (RP4)

> *"I really like projects, especially for specific subjects that are connected to game development, such as Game Design and International Digital Content."* (RP6)

while others felt frustrated and disheartened:

> *"I hate all these projects and presentations. It seems that there are no other tasks to do – all the professors are obsessed with group work, which I hate."* (RP2)

> *"For me, the main problem is projects in a group because I don't like working with a group. That's because we have the role of a headmaster, a leader, and then other roles. When you make a project in a group of students, mhhhh…"* (RP5)

It is noteworthy that some students did not consider group assignments as serious enough for academic performance and progress. Moreover, they found these tasks time-consuming and useless:

> *"Yes… I expected stricter tasks, and more tasks, more information which is more specific, because some of the courses seemed to really touch the tops only, the surface… For example, group presentations… they give information, which is not really useful, they give information that is the basis of the basis because students do not put much effort to find something more interesting or useful. And it's not that practical."* (RP1)

> *"Ah, well… I believe they [group projects] are a waste of time… You spend a lot of time discussing very obvious things with your group, then you split the tasks, which also takes a lot of time… and then somebody doesn't do his task… and then you start discussing again… Come on… It's a waste of time!"* (RP7)

Moreover, international students also noted discrepancies between the materials taught in the classroom and the examination task, as well as differences in selecting a variety of assignments during the semester:

> *"Well, basically through the first two months we had to do all the assignments for one subject as homework, like just "write, remember the theory" and they give more theory next time. But then all of a sudden a few projects in a row at the end of the semester... Why is that?"* (RP3)

> *"During the semester we had a lot of practical tasks and our exam was more theoretical, so it was really hard to understand what was asked in the questions. Yeah, it was a funny exam and a funny experience."* (RP7)

In addition, the misbalance in the frequency of setting assignments throughout a semester was also noted by some interviewees:

> *"Errr… No, like in some months we don't have any presentations or any tests. And the next month we have like two presentations and one test, yes… So the workload is not spread equally throughout the semester…"* (RP10)

It should be noted that the students noted inconsistencies in assigning tasks during the semester, which obviously lead them to dissatisfaction and anger, as well as raised their feeling of being at a loss or even frustration, which might have negatively affected their academic adaptation.

Time management was another sensitive area, which was emphasized by four out of ten international students. The analysis of their responses highlighted that time management issues appeared mainly due to the lack of time management skills:

> *"Other ones [author's note: challenges] are usually connected with giving in the task 30 minutes before the deadline. There aren't a lot of them, but usually, it's the way how I give in the homework."* (RP4)

> *"I do English like two hours before the deadline [laughs]. Of course, I manage to do it on time, but you need to hurry and do everything in the last 2 hours and it's not so cool then."* (RP6)

Additionally, some students noted the complicated nature of the task, which necessitated multiple repetition of its completion until the desired result was achieved, which also resulted in shortage of time:

> *"We have made 100 recordings for our presentation, and I slept for 15 minutes just before the lecture and that was just a kind of funny."* (RP6)

The interview data analysis also revealed that the flexibility of schedule and non-committal attendance of classes were considered favourable factors by the majority of the research participants (seven out of ten). They associated it with freedom and a proper balance between their studies and free time:

> *"I think we do not have a too complicated schedule, sometimes it can be messy, but mostly it is well-structured, and we don't have a lot of timetable changes. And we don't study at weekends, which is a plus, because in my home country, they can still have classes on Saturdays."* (RP8)

> *"I think, freedom, because in Ukraine you spend like the whole day studying materials and preparing for the subjects, and it's really annoying because you don't have free time because you study at university, then you come home, do your homework and go to sleep. In Lithuania, you can study, you can enjoy your life, you can do whatever you want – it's really cool."* (RP7)

Another issue that was pointed out by the research participants was the transparency of evaluation. Although evaluation issues did not seem to cause major concern for international students, the problem of getting insufficient feedback from professors during the semester was noted in some of their responses:

> *"Basically, until you reach the very end of the semester, it's very hard to keep track of general marks, and how you will do in the end. Because basically, when it comes to the exam, not all, but some lecturers may publish those spreadsheets what you get for what assignments, then what is your cumulative mark, your exam. And yes, of course, that is all in percentages, say 40% for the exam or 60% for the exam, whatever. But when you're in the middle of the semester, there is no way to know what is your cumulative score right now. This is what I'd like to be changed."* (RP3)

Generalizing the obtained data, it becomes evident that the research participants' approach toward the distinguished factors of their assimilation in the study process was two-fold: some of the factors, such as flexibility of the schedule and non-committal attendance of classes, were considered positive and beneficial to their academic adaptation, whereas others seemed to cause more problems in the process of their adjustment to the academic environment. Among the latter, time management skills, diversity and proportion of the set assignments, as well as transparency of evaluation during the semester were referred to as causing the most distress and dissatisfaction.

3.2.2. Linguistic adaptation into the study process

As has already been mentioned, English language proficiency was identified as one of the major concerns of international students in terms of their academic adaptation. The greatest challenge determined by the interviewees was the awareness of specific English terminology:

> *"Sometimes professors focus too much on specific words and terms, terminology… It's very important for them that we use correct terms. And it is very difficult to learn so many terms in English."* (RP9)

In addition, insufficient knowledge of the language of instruction, i.e. English, was singled out as the main factor leading to some miscommunication in the study process. The issue was noted by three research participants:

> *"It was really funny when we had a little bit of English miscommunication, I'd say, and for some moments it was really hard to understand, but it was most memorable."* (RP7)

Besides, poor knowledge of English sometimes prevented the students from providing a proper answer:

> *"We had to make presentations, we needed to present and the professor started asking questions. <…> I was trying to translate it from Belarussian to English and the professor said: "Skazhi po russki…" For me it was fun – I tried to translate it with all the rules, but he understood that we couldn't tell the answer [laughs]."* (RP5)

Hence, a lack of proficiency in the foreign language lead not only to miscommunication in the study programme, but also affected the academic performance of international students.

3.2.3. Interaction with people in the academic environment

The sub-theme of the interaction with people in the academic environment was specified by two categories: communication with the academic staff and relationships with fellow students.

Describing their communication with the academic staff, nine international students highlighted the teachers' professionalism and high expertise in the subjects taught:

> *"Professors in Lithuania are real professionals of their subjects, they always about the most recent research, know all the latest facts."* (RP3)

> *"What I like most is the expertise and professionalism of most of my professors. I was impressed that they use different technologies and apps to teach their subjects, and they give a lot of online tasks. That makes the subject interesting and attractive. It is more interesting to learn than from books.*" (RP7)

> *"They* [author's note: professors] *seem to know everything. Whenever you have a question, you always get the answer [laughs].*(RP10)

> *"<…> and here the professors follow the latest trends and novelties."* (RP2)

As is seen from the sample answers above, the students also recognized the teaching style as interactive and informative. Moreover, the teachers were perceived by the international students as honest and able to admit their ignorance, as well as willing to search for extra information interesting to or required by students:

> *"They* [author's note: professors] *always want to teach us more. Even when they don't know the answer, they will search for it for the next class. And then they will spend half a class giving a lecture on this specific answer [laughs]."* (RP10)

The teachers' willingness to help and enthusiasm in explaining problematic aspects to students was appreciated by the majority of the international students (nine out of ten):

> *"And it's also cool about the communication between the students and professors because if you have some trouble, you are free to ask a professor what you don't understand and he or she will explain everything to you again and again until you understand."* (RP7)

> *"If we have questions, you are always free to ask questions and the teacher always replies to them. And you can stay one hour longer, but you will still get the answer to the question which bothers your mind. And you will still get the answer and you will understand. And I'd say that the teachers are paying a lot of attention to make sure that the students understand."* (RP4)

One student also noted that some teachers were even willing to provide their support to students beyond the classroom:

> *"And I also have one of the professors, who can always help, even if we don't study her subject this term – she always helps in any situation."* (RP8)

Despite the positive and highly excited responses concerning the communication with the academic staff, one student expressed his concern about understanding the explanations provided by some of the teachers:

> *"<…> you have to understand what the professor wants to tell you, and especially when he gives you an example, you don't understand what he's trying to show you with this example."* (RP4)

As far as the relationship with fellow students is concerned, the interviewees seemed less enthusiastic. Most students (eight out of ten) experienced various difficulties in establishing contact with local fellow students and other international students. Some of the reasons might be explained and justified by the personality types of the research participants themselves:

> *"I'm not a very sociable person. It's a bit difficult for me, and it was a bit of a challenge to make these friends that I have right now. I mentioned this guy from Azerbaijan, who is my neighbour and my close friend, and that's all."* (RP4)

> *"I am not very communicative, not now, not at this time."* (RP8)

It appears that international students experienced less anxiety in establishing friendships and cooperating with other international students than with their mainstream counterparts:

> *"The other students, well, there're students who are international for me [laughs]. But I'd say they are foreign for me as well, foreign for Lithuania, and usually with them I have very good contact. Of course, other students from Ukraine and Belarus, they usually get among themselves. Well, I mainly stay in contact with them, as well. Well, I think it's easier to make friends with them <…>"* (RP3)

> *And communication with other students? [a pause] because we have a lot of foreign students – it's a plus, because we can speak English.* (RP10)

The research participants often noted challenges in establishing closer contact with Lithuanian students due to language barriers:

> *"Well, Lithuanian students come here already in groups, and because they speak this weird mixture of Lithuanian and English – it's hard to come to their groups."* (RP3)

> *"But with locals, I mean Lithuanian students, I haven't made any contact not because I am scared to speak to them or that they are boring, no, but it's somehow a language barrier… You know that Lithuanians speak between themselves in Lithuanian and that's not so much of a problem – still you have to respect the language, but perhaps this language barrier leads us not to get into the group."* (RP4)

A couple of international students also signified that mainstream students generally formed close-knit groups unwilling to accept and ignoring new members, especially international students:

> *"When you're in class, there are usually groups of locals, who talk to each other. And it is a rare interaction between the groups. That's perhaps why I haven't made any friends with Lithuanians, with locals."* (RP4)

On the other hand, some international students admitted having made friends with local students and enjoy spending time with them. They also emphasized that Lithuanian students frequently offered their support and help to foreigners:

> *"Yah, of course, I mix up with international students as well, yeah, but my first acquaintances were Lithuanian students, my group, and their helpfulness – everyone tries to offer me help, probably because on the first of September there was only I, only me from international students somehow. It appeared to be so but they try to communicate and to help me, to help me somehow..."* (RP1)

The data analysis reveals a highly positive and appreciative attitude of international students toward the academic staff. The university teachers were viewed as highly professional, following the latest findings and keeping track of all the innovations in their fields of instruction. Moreover, the majority of international students felt reassured by the friendly support received from the teachers. Nevertheless, the nature of the communication with mainstream students differed. Some interviewees were distracted from interacting with local students because of the language barriers or Lithuanians' segregation into separate groups. However, some contradicting arguments were also provided, emphasizing the helpfulness and friendly relationships of Lithuanians with regard to foreign students.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigated the challenges and opportunities of international students' academic adaptation in a Lithuanian university. The thematic analysis of the research data yielded two major themes: *concerns* expressed by international students regarding their academic adaptation to the Lithuanian system of higher education, and *barriers* that they encountered in the process of their adaptation at university. The first theme was concretized in the following sub-themes that emerged from the research data: *academic threats* and *bureaucratic restrictions* that the interviewees had to encounter during the process of their adjustment process, whereas the second theme was exemplified by three sub-themes, namely *assimilation into the study process, linguistic adaptation to the study process, and interaction with people in the academic environment.* The study revealed important insights into the academic adaptation issues incurred by international students.

Firstly, the findings of the present study confirmed the results of other researchers (Ecochard & Fotheringham 2017; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins & Johnson 2018; Wang 2022) that proficiency in the English language is key to the successful adaptation of foreign students. Park (2016) concluded that low English proficiency influences international students' adaptation by reducing the likelihood of seeking social interactions and understanding the content delivered. Our study confirmed that international students' mediocre knowledge of English caused various kinds of misunderstandings both in the study process and in relationships with fellow Lithuanian students. For this reason, they frequently chose to interact with other international students rather than seek closer contact with mainstream students. However, it is important to note that in the case of our study, the research participants did not experience deep feelings of frustration or alienation (as discovered by Wang 2022), as they exploit the opportunities of communicating with other international students. Therefore, it is important to look for opportunities of helping international students to establish closer relationships with local students by not only enrolling them to the same courses but also by encouraging their communication and joint activities outside the classroom.

Secondly, the present study revealed international students' insufficient effort to fully engage with the study process by completing the assignments on time (or in advance), as well as their unwillingness to participate and cooperate actively in performing the tasks. Hussain & Shen (2019) determined that unfamiliarity with the new academic system poses difficulties for international students. They claim that such factors as course selection, understanding lectures, communication with teachers, home and other assignments, as well as assessment generate the greatest challenges for them, and may lead to learning shock (Wang & Deverajoo 2022). Our study reiterates some of the afore-said findings. It was established that in the Lithuanian system of higher education, international students mostly have to solve issues related to the types of assignments: group assignments like team projects and group presentations turned

out to be the least favourable among the interviewees, to the deadlines of assignment completion: the majority of the research participants postponed them to the very last minute, and understanding the course materials. Differently from the findings in other studies (Mesidor and Sly, 2016; Wang & Deverajoo 2022), our research participants did not experience a learning shock but rather assumed a negligent attitude toward the studies by referring to it as an opportunity to gain more freedom and a better balance between their studies and leisure. Thus, attempts should be made to find other modes and methods of study that would seem more attractive to international students and would encourage them to take conscious responsibility for their academic progress and results more seriously.

Thirdly, there are fewer cultural differences between Lithuanians and the nationalities under investigation (namely, Belarussians and Ukrainians), as all of these countries are post-Soviet ones, which suffered from the same regime once in their history. Due to this reason, the participants of the present study did not suffer from acculturative shock (Berry, 2005) as much as it was determined by other studies. Hwang, Bennet & Beauchemin (2014) discovered that international students often encounter psychological distress, loneliness, homesickness and alienation, whereas Mesidor & Sly (2016) determined the connection of somatic complaints with mental tensions. No similar findings were confirmed by our study. Although some international students occasionally experienced feelings of exclusion and separation from the local community, their major concern was associated with some bureaucratic factors, such as prolonging of permanent residence permit and obtaining a student visa.

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