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Adaptation And Stress of Asian and African International Students in Poland: Challenges and their Impact on Social and Economic Development

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Abstract

Purpose: The adaptation of foreign students from Asia and Africa in Poland represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the country. As Poland faces demographic changes, including an aging population, international students play an important role in supporting the labor market and contributing to the economic and social fabric. This article examines the challenges these students face, particularly cultural adaptation and stress, while also exploring their positive impact on Poland's economy and society. **Design/Methodology/Approach:** The article combines quantitative research, including surveys conducted with foreign students, and qualitative demographic data on Poland's aging population. The study analyzes the cultural adaptation process, language barriers, and the mental health challenges students experience, as well as their contributions to the Polish workforce. **Findings:** Foreign students from Africa and Asia in Poland face significant challenges related to cultural adaptation and language proficiency, with many reporting stress due to these factors. Despite these difficulties, their presence is crucial in addressing the labor shortages in various sectors. Additionally, these students contribute to the cultural diversity of Poland, promoting global connections and enriching Polish society. **Practical Implications:** The findings highlight the need for universities and policymakers to provide better support systems for foreign students, including mental health resources and language assistance. Enhancing integration efforts could lead to improved well-being for students and stronger contributions to the economy. **Originality/Value:** While much of the academic literature focuses on the challenges of student mobility, this article provides a unique perspective by also considering the broader social and economic impact of international students, especially in light of Poland's demographic challenges. This article seeks to fill a gap in the literature regarding the dual role of foreign students as both individuals facing adaptation issues and contributors to the labor market.

Keywords: Cultural Adaptation, Foreign Students, Stress, Demographic Challenges, Labor Market, Poland, Africa, Asia.

JEL codes: J14

Introduction

Students from Asia and Africa represent a steadily growing group of young people at Polish universities. Their presence is crucial, and it is hard to imagine the academic landscape without them. The tradition of welcoming foreign students in Poland dates back many years. In contemporary Polish history, especially after 1945, large groups of students from countries associated with the socialist bloc (the Warsaw Pact) had the opportunity to gain specialized education. This was largely due to the absence of higher education institutions in their home countries, or the destruction of university traditions caused by ongoing conflicts. Based on available estimates, it can be assumed that between 1970 and 1980, Poland hosted between 3,000 to 6,000 foreign students annually, resulting in an estimated total of 30,000 to 60,000 students over a decade. Many of these individuals returned to their countries as important experts contributing to the well-being of their communities. They also became informal ambassadors for Poland, viewing it as their second homeland. Some graduates settled in Poland, started families, and integrated into the local community. Concluding, this educational activity brought numerous benefits for all parties involved.

Today, the presence of international students does not stem from political motivations, but rather from free-market principles and geopolitical shifts. The social situation in Poland has undergone radical change. For over 20 years, our country has been a member of the European Union, and the standard of living is high, making the country an attractive place to study and build a career.

At the same time, Poland is witnessing concerning social trends typical of developed Western economies, including: an aging population, a decline in birth rates, and the emigration of young people. This trend is expected to intensify, potentially leading to a significant decrease in the population, if not addressed. According to data (2022) from the Central Statistical Office (GUS), the proportion of older individuals (aged 60+) in Poland's population reached 25.9% in 2022 [Wyszkowska, Gabińska, 2023]. The consequences of this phenomenon not only involve social costs but also relate to economic slowdown and deteriorating social well-being. Older individuals require care and costly medical or nursing services, which excludes their relatives from professional activities. There is a decrease in the number of people of working age [Pietrzyk, 2020]. The demographic changes resulting in the aging of society and the phenomenon of professional deactivation among older individuals significantly impact socio-economic dynamics [Król, 2014].

Therefore, one solution to the labour shortage in the job market is migration. Some international students studying in Poland decide to stay and settle down. Since they know the Polish language and understand the culture, it is easier for them to adapt and integrate. Their acquired specialized education allows them to take up employment in specialized positions and strengthen the domestic economy.

The tangible benefits indicate how important the adaptation of students from Asia and Africa is for the Polish labour market, foreign policy, and society. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine its quality, and the phenomenon of stress associated with it.

An important aspect closely related to the presence of international students at domestic universities is the internationalization processes of science and higher

education. The significance of these processes arises from both European Union legislation and published internationalization indicators, which allow for comparisons between university centres. This leads to a conscious construction of recruitment policies. It is also linked to increasing competition among higher education institutions and the search for new sources of students. Demographic issues in the European Union, including Poland, are associated with a declining number of young people, which translates into fewer students. Therefore, if university centres wish to develop or at least maintain growth dynamics, they seek students from abroad.

In Poland, the internationalization of higher education is also a priority. It brings many academic, social, and economic benefits:

- it raises the quality of education and research conducted at Polish universities
- it strengthens the position of domestic universities in the global academic environment
- it fills the labour gap in the Polish job market

This is evidenced by - the active policy of the Polish government in recent years. It has resulted in the undertaking of work on the creation of a National Strategy for the Internationalization of Science and Higher Education. This strategy is to draw attention to aspects such as: raising the quality of research, internationalizing education, treating science also outside academia, and recognizing the role it plays in the broadly defined policy of the state [NAWA 2024]. In January 2024, the first meeting of the Team of Experts for the National Strategy for Internationalization took place, chaired by Prof. Arkadiusz Adamczyk, Chairman of the Committee on Science Policy, initiating work on the strategy.

The internationalization of higher education is currently at a relatively low level compared to other EU countries. However, there has been a dynamic increase in this area (according to 2022 data, the number of foreign students in Poland was 8.4% of all students, compared to only 1.5% in 2012) [RADON, 2023]. According to data for the 2022/23 academic year published in the report by the Information Processing Centre of the National Research Institute, there were over 102,000 international students in Poland [OPIPIB, 2025]. It is obvious that almost half of this group are citizens of Ukraine, a neighbouring country, which is at war with Russia. This is due to geographical location, shared history, as well as cultural and linguistic proximity. The over-representative number of Ukrainian students is closely related to the refugee crisis caused by the war.

It is interesting to note that students from Zimbabwe are fourth in the ranking with 3,435, and those from India are fifth with 2,744. These data are also reflected in the employment structure in Poland. According to data from the Central Statistical Office of Poland, 141,600 foreigners were employed in Poland in July 2024, constituting 6.8% of all employees. Most of them were citizens of Ukraine and Belarus, but the number of workers from Asia, including India, is increasing rapidly. According to the report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy from August 2024, 18,730 documents legalising work were issued to them [MPIPS, 2025].

- **The presence of students from Asia and Africa and the labour market in Poland**

The dynamically progressing process of internationalization of enterprises causes, on an unprecedented scale, the phenomena of mobility and migration of employees. The opening of national labour markets, not only within Europe, but also the USA, Asian countries, etc., facilitates the process of economic emigration and increases the scale of international transfers of employees. This is favoured by international mobility, i.e., the willingness of citizens to external migration [Juchnowicz, 2014].

The presence of students from Asia and Africa influences the increase in the number of foreigners in the domestic labor market. They occupy both simple positions in production and advanced specialist positions in the IT industry. This fits into the idea of diversity management (Diversity). In organizations and in society as a whole, diversity management can create added value only in the context of the existence of a diverse (culturally) society/group/team in a globalized world [Gross-Gołacka, 2018]. Diversity management is undoubtedly one of the new approaches to human capital management in an organization. It is also an important issue from the point of view of educating future managers, who should be characterized by empathy, respect and understanding for the diversity of employees, thanks to which the organization functions and generates profits [Aronowska, 2014]. At the same time, the literature in the field of management indicates that diversity is one of the biggest challenges facing modern organizations. Functioning in multicultural communities brings many benefits such as: increased creativity, going beyond schematic thinking and reducing groupthink syndrome. Organizational diversity has a multidimensional face. In management sciences, diversity is usually associated with the diversification of human resources resulting from many variables constituting human identity [Jeruszka, Wolan-Nowakowska, 2020].

It is worth emphasizing that observing market trends reveals correlations between the number of international students in Poland and the increase in the number of employees from other countries. These processes are interconnected and have a positive impact on the competitiveness of Polish economic entities. This indicates the importance of addressing the issue of filling the labour market's demand gap for workers. The Polish economy, like other highly developed countries in the European Union, currently would not be able to function without the participation of foreigners in the labour market. A significant challenge remains to create favourable conditions for citizens from Asia and Africa to effectively adapt to new circumstances. The main challenge may be the cultural shock described in the literature. This can be a particular challenge for students coming from distant and culturally diverse countries. The phenomenon of cultural shock has been extensively studied in the area of employee transfers, yet it receives little attention in the context of adapting international students. Therefore, a definition of cultural shock related to labour relations will be applied.

Cultural shock is a phenomenon encompassing emotions related to variable moods while working in a culturally different environment, thought patterns associated with the need to understand foreign partners, and skills and social identity related to creating professional and social bonds. Coping with cultural shock in the area of emotions means achieving job satisfaction through specific fluctuations of euphoria and

depression [Pocztowski, 2018]. The literature lists many symptoms of cultural shock, for example, feelings of anxiety, poorer work performance, helplessness, loss of energy, depressed mood, and even depression. Interestingly, the symptoms of cultural shock are often delayed and do not appear in the initial period, which is often perceived uncritically, hence the comparison to a "honeymoon period." Whether we realize it or not, subtle differences between countries in communication styles, as well as deep differences in what is considered good business practice or common sense, have a huge impact on our mutual understanding and, therefore, on how we work [Meyer, 2023].

Being aware of the possibility of experiencing culture shock reduces its intensity because it is no longer surprising. This applies to both international students and the higher education institution itself. As a result, we can examine these processes and plan actions that can limit their negative aspects.

This phenomenon also applies to universities and is multidimensional, as Professor A. Pocztowski points out, it is related not only to demographic and social and legislative changes, but also to globalization processes and greater employee mobility. However, the main foundation of this philosophy is the belief that diversity increases the efficiency of the organization and is a source of competitive advantage.

The listed symptoms of culture shock overlap precisely with the symptoms associated with stress. We can assume that culture shock is a powerful stressor that affects the adaptation and academic performance of students. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of stress experienced by students from Asia and Africa while studying at a Polish university.

There are many definitions of stress, but for the purposes of this study, the following definition has been adopted: Stress is the body's active response to demands and perceived threats, or stressors [Litzke, Schuh, 2007]. The research questionnaire included questions about specific signs of stress, such as feelings of alienation, low mood, difficulty concentrating, headaches and stomach aches, and feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities. As we can see, these signs closely overlap with the symptoms of culture shock.

• **Research**

The research conducted was quantitative, using the diagnostic survey method. The survey questionnaire was placed on the Google Forms platform, where students could complete it online. The study served to identify a segment of reality. Since 2019, the author of the study has regularly taught classes at a university with students from Asia and Africa. In describing the results and constructing conclusions, he referred to observations, focus studies, and discussions.

The study focused on the adaptation process and the phenomenon of stress experienced by respondents. The aim of the study was to understand the opinions of students from Asia and Africa regarding the quality of the adaptation process and the phenomenon of stress in connection with studying at a university in Warsaw.

The following research questions were developed as part of the research inquiry:

Q.1. In the opinion of students from Asia and Africa, how does the adaptation process at a Polish university proceed?

Q.2. What is the level of satisfaction among students from Asia and Africa with the support provided by the University?

Q.3. What is the level of adaptive stress among students from Asia and Africa studying at a Polish university?

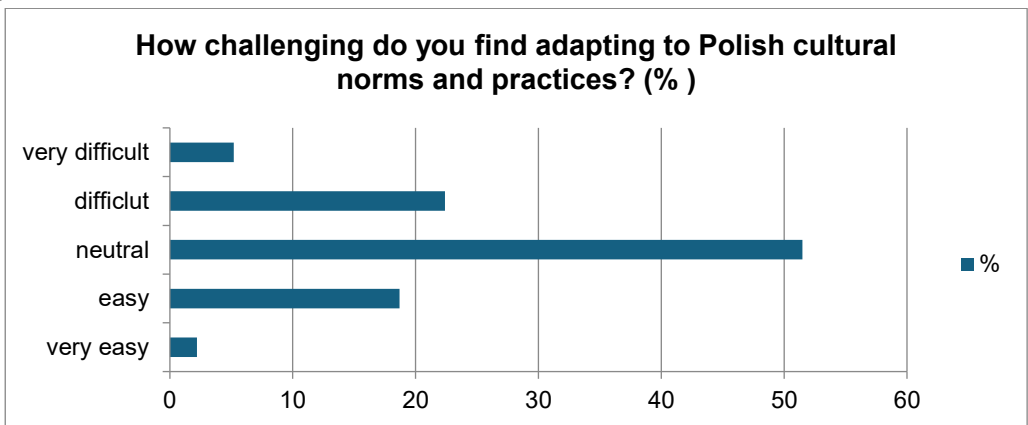
Conducting this type of research is very important as it helps to understand the challenges faced by students from Asia and Africa. This understanding allows us to develop good practices that enhance their adaptation efficiency. Such efforts will provide universities with a competitive advantage and, most importantly, insight into the factors that influence the effectiveness of adaptive processes. The presented results were gathered in the preliminary phase of research conducted in the fourth quarter of 2024 among students at Warsaw Management University (MANS). The first phase of the pilot study involved a group of $n=136$ (100%) students from several dozen countries in Asia and Africa (including India, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan, etc.). The study did not include the largest group of foreigners at Polish universities—Ukrainians, due to a separate study dedicated to them and a lower risk of cultural shock given the direct proximity of Ukraine to Poland.

The respondents came in a nearly equal proportion from Asia $n=61$ (45.2%) and Africa $n=75$ (54.8%), representing several dozen countries from these continents. This allows for the collection of representative results. Women constituted $n=52$ (38.5%) and men $n=83$ (61.5%), which corresponds to the statistical representation of both genders at the university.

In social sciences more than in natural sciences, what we measure is as important as how we measure it [Babbie 2009]. All respondents participating in the study were guaranteed anonymity. This gives us a greater chance of collecting reliable answers. Below, I present the results of the conducted study.

The first question generally examines how challenging adaptation at a Polish university is for students, correlated with **Q.1. How do students from Asia and Africa perceive the adaptation process at a Polish university?**

Table 1: How challenging do you find adapting to Polish cultural norms and practices?

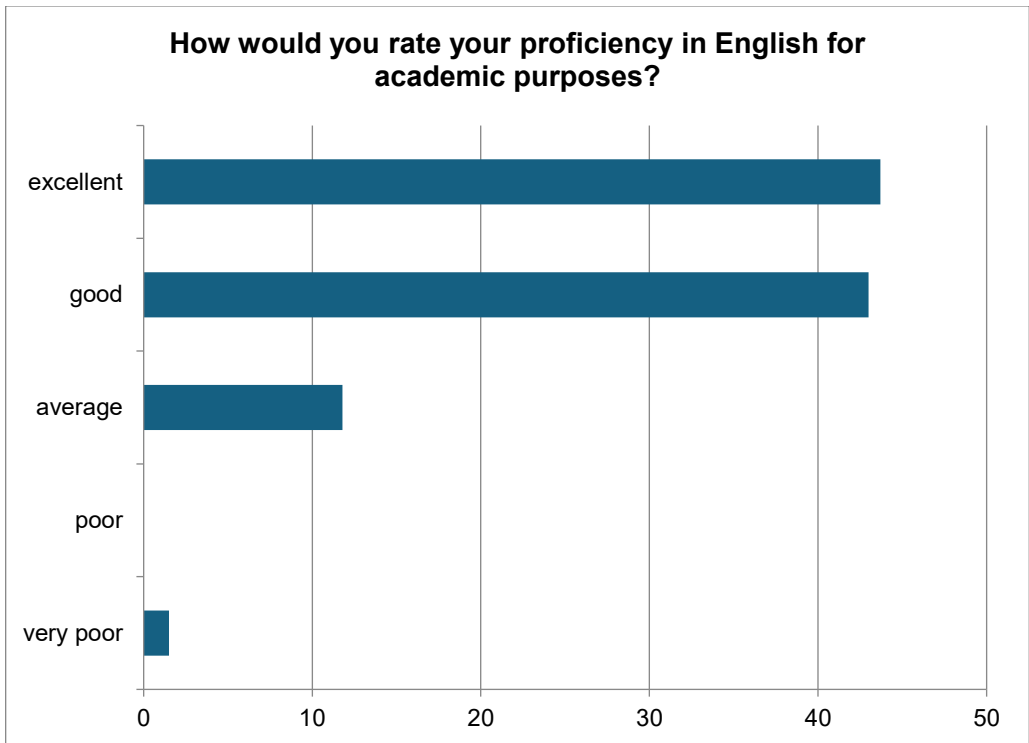


Source: own elaboration

Responses to the first question confirm the principle that neutral values assume the highest level $n=70$ (51.5%). $N=28$ (20.9%) of respondents believe that adaptation processes are not a challenge for them. The remaining $n=38$ 27.6% of students consider it difficult or very difficult to adapt to new conditions. The question is self-assessment in nature; therefore, this result will be verified later in the study. Therefore, we can assume that the adaptation of students from Africa and Asia is not a particularly difficult challenge for them.

The second question aimed to investigate whether self-declared proficiency in specialized academic English influences adaptation quality and stress levels.

Table 2: How would you rate your proficiency in English for academic purposes?

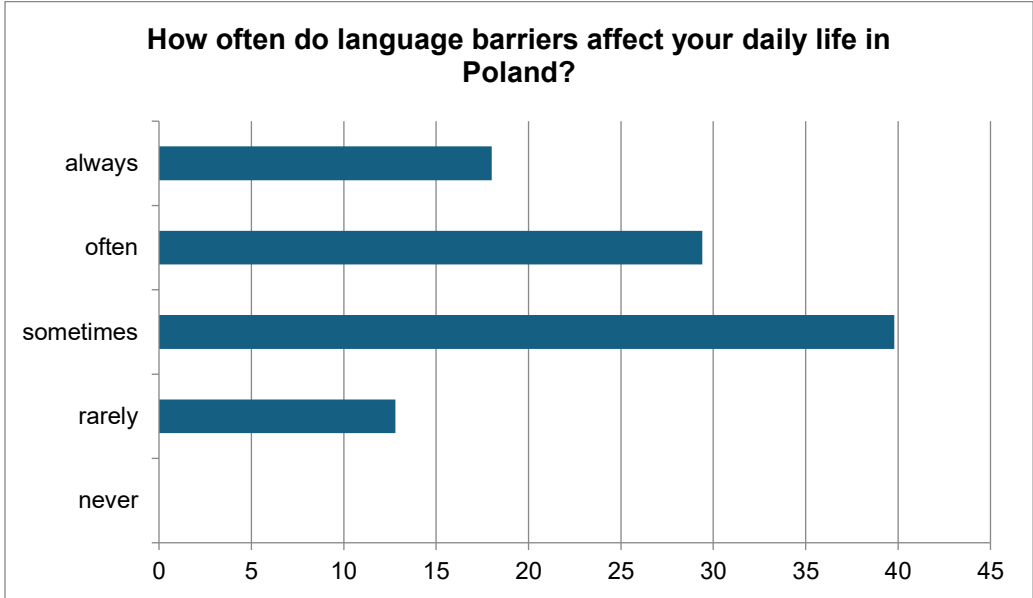


Source: own elaboration

The results of the study align with my observations: it is very rare for students to have difficulties communicating in English. Therefore, we can conclude that the language barrier regarding English is likely an insignificant factor here. It should be emphasized that this is, of course, a subjective declaration from the respondents; however, it is hard to disagree with it. The study shows that 43.7% of respondents consider their level of English to be excellent, while only 1.5% rate it as poor. Thus, it certainly does not seem to be a factor causing stress. The response to this question correlates with **Q.1. Is the adaptation process at Polish universities a major challenge for students from Asia and Africa.** In this area as well, adaptation does not appear to be a challenge.

Students do not just exist in an academic sphere, but also in a social one, so the next question concerned the occurrence of a language barrier in contacts outside of the university. This is particularly important due to the scale of the phenomenon of culture shock.

Table 3. How often do language barriers affect your daily life in Poland?



Source: own elaboration

The provided answers contradict the declared knowledge of the English language. They may also indicate difficulties in communicating in English with the native Polish population.

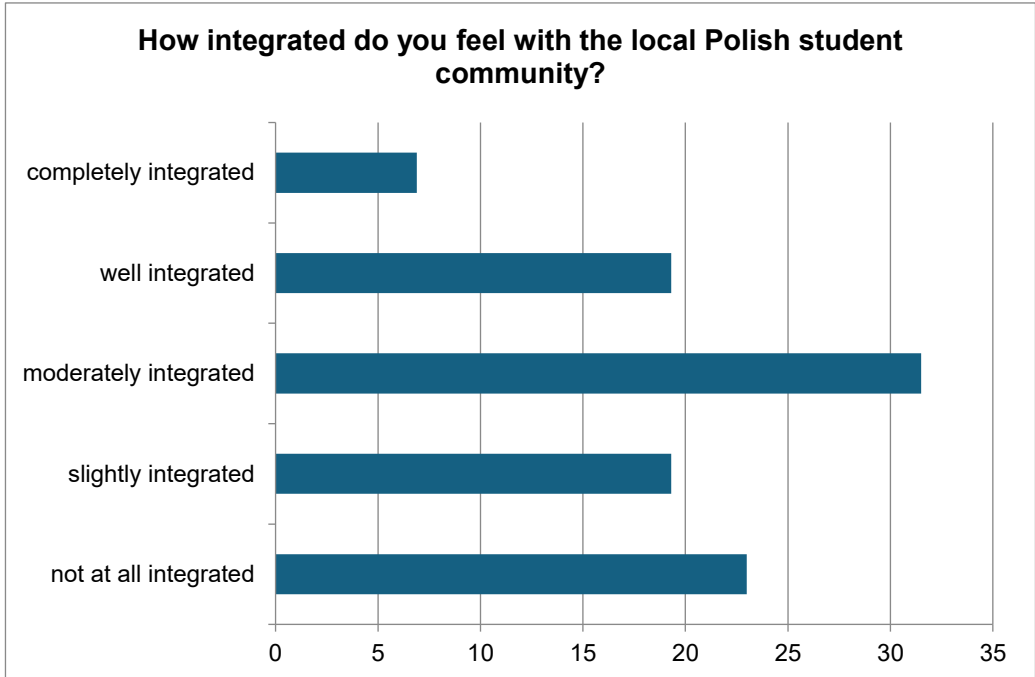
- N=24 (18%) of respondents state that they encounter a language barrier every time they have daily interactions.
- N=40 (29.4%) of respondents believe that they often encounter this barrier.
- At the same time, n=54 (39.8%) of students encounter a language barrier only sometimes in their daily interactions.
- The option "I rarely encounter it" received n=17 (12.8%) responses.

The gathered responses indicate an approximate 50/50 ratio of students encountering language barriers in daily interactions with the local population in English. This suggests a need for students to learn basic Polish to facilitate smooth communication in everyday situations. The role of not only universities but also government organizations may be significant in addressing this issue. The responses to this question correlate with **Q.1. In the opinion of students from Asia and Africa what does the adaptation process at Polish higher education institutions look like?**

While the question posed is not directly related to university activities, perhaps it would be worthwhile to offer Polish language workshops to students within the university framework.

The next question in the questionnaire concerned the feeling of being integrated with other students. These results are very important because they indicate the social aspects of adaptation within the academic community.

Table 4. How integrated do you feel with the local Polish student community?



Source: own elaboration

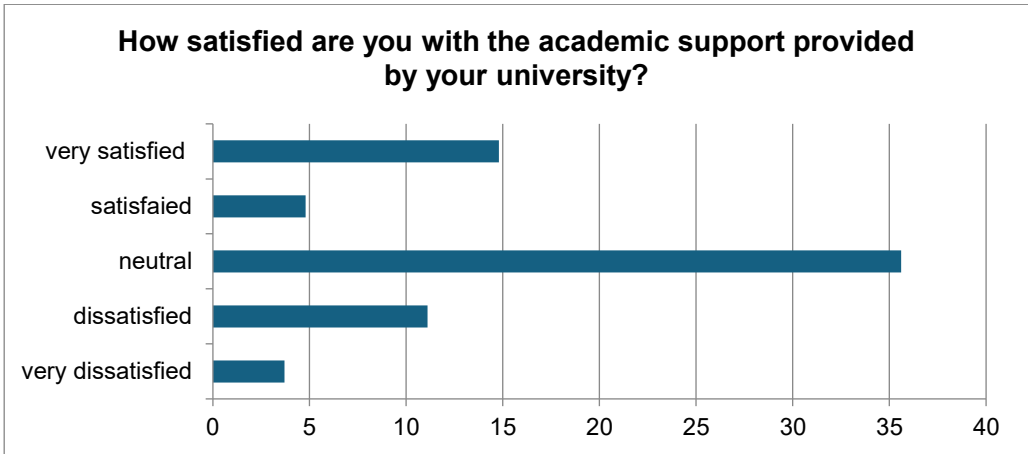
In the case of the results obtained regarding the level of integration with local Polish students, we see that the responses are evenly distributed. This may indicate their validity, as they show diametrically different points of view.

Most students feel a sense of integration with the Polish student community. The highest value in the study was the feeling of being moderately integrated, with $n=43$ (31.5%) of all responses. We can conclude that this area is not a significant source of stress, but the fact that as many as $n=31$ (23%) of students do not feel integrated in any way may be a cause for concern. This could be an impetus for the university to take action to increase the integration of Polish students and those from Asia and Africa.

The question is correlated with **Q.2. What is the level of satisfaction among students from Asia and Africa regarding the support provided by the University?** It concerns the role of the university as an integrator of relationships between foreign and Polish students. The results indicate that there is still some work to be done in this area.

The next question concerns a key issue for the study, which is the sense of support provided to international students by the university. This question is closely correlated with **Q.2. What is the level of satisfaction among students from Asia and Africa with the support provided by the University?** Institutional support is usually related to systemic solutions that, on the one hand, ensure the satisfaction of basic needs. At the same time, we have a sense that it does not meet the individual needs of students from Asia and Africa.

Table 5. How satisfied are you with the academic support provided by your university?



Source: own elaboration

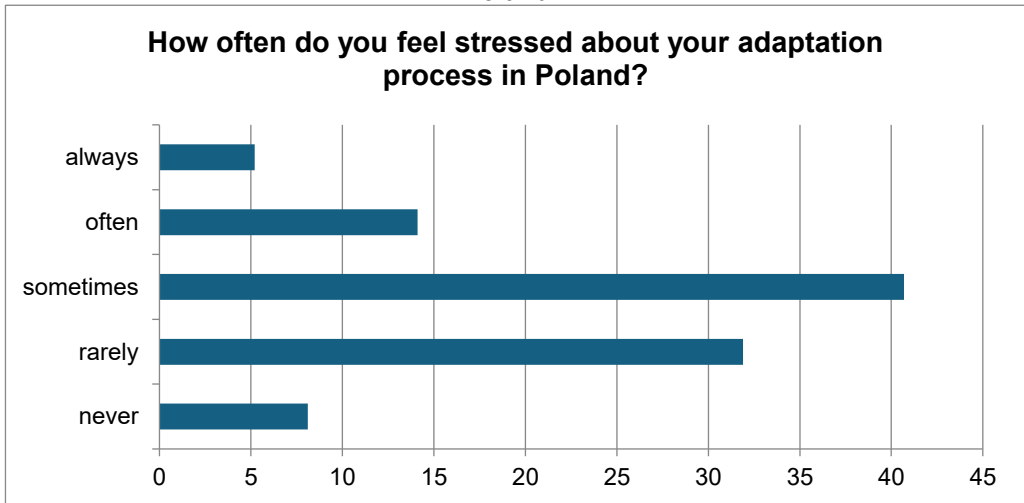
The collected results align with the principles of social research and the law of large numbers, following a Gaussian curve. Neutral values in the study reached the highest level at $n=48$ (35.6%). Individuals who are satisfied and very satisfied account for $n=27$ (20%) of respondents. Extremely dissatisfied individuals constitute only $n=5$ (3.70%), while dissatisfied individuals make up $n=15$ (11.1%). Observing students, I believe that such a study would be representative of any student group. Typically, a low level of satisfaction with the university is associated with low grades received by the student, leading to the transfer of emotional reactions stemming from this fact to the entire institution. The Gaussian curve and the Pareto principle evident in the results may reinforce our confidence in the reliability of the obtained results. Difficulties in unambiguous interpretation and the large "neutral" value indicate general satisfaction with the university's support.

The next question concerns the second key issue, which is the experience of stress. The presented results are as follows:

- $n= 7$ (5.2%) believe that there is always stress associated with adaptation
- In contrast to that statement, $n= 11$ (8.1%) of respondents believe that they never experience this stress
- Average values such as "I sometimes experience it" are $n = 55$ (40.70%), and "rarely" $n = 3$ (31.9%)
- $n= 19$ (14.1%) of respondents often experience adaptation stress.

The question is correlated with **Q.3. What is the level of adaptive stress among students from Asia and Africa studying at a Polish university?** The picture presented by the results is quite optimistic and indicates that while adaptive stress exists, its scale is not large.

Table 6. How often do you feel stressed about your adaptation process in Poland?



Source: own elaboration

Browsing the literature on culture shock often reveals that the initial period of stay in a new country is viewed particularly positively. Some negative phenomena are not apparent to students due to a lack of understanding of cultural codes. Approximately $n=27$ (20%) of respondents experiencing adaptation difficulties may require individual attention in the integration process. The results gathered in the study may indicate a need for closer examination and support for students exhibiting adaptation difficulties. The low level of stress declared by students in relation to their adaptation may indicate a person's belief that they are capable of performing the task [Ricky W. Griffin, 2017]. The source of this belief may be both an internal conviction as well as support activities carried out by the higher education institution.

Conclusions

The conducted research allowed us to answer the formulated research questions.

- **Q.1. In the opinion of students from Asia and Africa, how does the adaptation process at a Polish university proceed?**

The level of this challenge is not high; however, the language barrier resulting from a lack of knowledge of Polish is noticeable and significant, especially in interactions outside the university. It is worth noting that, despite the fact that most students do not have problems with integration, there remains a group of approximately $n=27$ (20%) requiring special support. The reasons for this situation require detailed future research, as the answers may be complex and have direct practical implications for future actions.

- **Q.2. What is the level of satisfaction among students from Asia and Africa with the support provided by the University?**

The level of satisfaction is average, with a large number of neutral responses, and there is certainly much more that can be done in this area. The university undertakes many supportive activities, and it is worth paying attention to their quality through regular evaluation and implementation of improvements to this important process. It is also worth continuing research in this area to better understand the topic and implement innovations in this regard.

- **Q.3. What is the level of adaptive stress among students from Asia and Africa studying at a Polish university?**

While the phenomenon of adaptation stress is not widespread, it undoubtedly exists and warrants greater attention in the future. The Pareto principle (80/20 rule) evident in the results may also indicate that 20% of the problems consume 80% of our resources, such as time, etc. Improvements in this area could lead to a significant enhancement in quality and directly translate into increased satisfaction for international students studying at Polish universities.

Positive answers to research problems 1, 2, and 3 confirm that, **the adaptation of students from Africa and Asia at Polish universities is proceeding effectively.**

Summary

Organizational changes are necessary due to the scope and rapidity of environmental changes [Cameron, Quinn, 2015]. This situation also applies to universities. The presence of foreign students at Polish universities is not a new phenomenon, but its dynamics and scale show that it is worth analysing in order to develop conclusions supporting this process. The more effective the adaptation of students, the greater the chance of their integration and involvement in the country's economy, raising the social well-being of both Poland and their home country.

Currently, research is underway involving a larger number of respondents. The topic of adaptation for international students is new and requires deeper analysis. However, the results have shown that despite significant cultural differences between students from Asia and Africa and Poland, the adaptation processes are at a high level. Considering the presented results, practical conclusions can be drawn, and it is suggested to implement a mandatory training system for adaptation for students. This includes training for academic staff on working with multicultural students and training for university administration staff in the dean's office regarding intercultural communication. It is also worth undertaking actions aimed at integrating students from Asia and Africa with their Polish peers, such as peer mentoring (peer to peer). The last aspect of the proposed changes is to eliminate the language barrier by organizing Polish language classes for students. The influx of foreign students to Poland is a fact that presents a significant opportunity for the Polish economy and the entire country. By ensuring high-quality adaptation and educational processes, Polish higher education can build its competitive advantage and position itself as a significant participant in the internationalization of science and higher education. It is worth emphasizing that this is not just about short-term actions but about building a long-term strategy for competitive advantage and attracting high-potential talent. A short-term remedy in the talent war is worker migration. When the shortage of human resources in one country decreases, it increases in another.

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