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**Addressing Cross-Cultural Challenges in  
International Student Adaptation to Higher  
Education**

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**ABSTRACT:**

There are various challenges that international students tend to experience in the process of adapting to a new academic and cultural setting. This paper discusses the adaptation of international students to higher education during one academic year, especially the cross-cultural issues. Despite the fact that students are facing academic, social, and psychological challenges, limited studies exist that explore how these challenges develop over time. This research paper answers this by delivering a deeper insight into the development of adaptation with time.

The study adopts a qualitative research design. The data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with 13 international students in Finland with various academic backgrounds who had studied abroad for at least one year. Thematic analysis was applied to the data to define the main trends in the experience and adaptation process of students.

The results suggest that the process of adaptation is not the same process and varies among students. Instead of taking place in distinct phases, adaptation is an evolutionary process that takes place as the students go through various interrelated issues. The respondents reported challenges in terms of language barriers, differences in academic expectations, and social integration. With the further progress of their experience, a good number of students actively formed coping strategies and routines and slowly became sure that they could cope with the academic requirements and daily life in the host environment. Nevertheless, this development did not always result in an absolute feeling of belonging since there were still certain challenges even after the first phase of integration. In addition, the issues of part-time working and the prospects of a future career were also always a matter of concern, which determined the overall experience of adapting to students. In general, the paper indicates that the adaptation of international students is a dynamic and continuous process that is affected by various factors. The results indicate that ongoing academic, social, and career assistance is essential for the universities in an effort to enhance the process of adaptation of the international students.

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**KEYWORDS:** International students, Higher education, Adaptation, Acculturation, Social integration, Coping strategies

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## 1 Introduction

Students cross borders every year in search of higher education, not only with suitcases but also with loads of cultural expectations, academic pressure, and personal transformation. The international student population has been increasing rapidly in recent years across the globe. According to the report, in 2022, nearly 6.9 million students studied abroad (ICEF Monitor, 2025). Studying abroad has become an element of lifestyle for many youth as a medium of personal and professional growth. Meanwhile, foreign students have numerous advantages for the host country, including cultural diversity, more appeal to know the study material, and positive economic impacts (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite these advantages, the international student body has several challenges to cope with. Studies indicate that when they go to live abroad, they experience academic, social, and psychological issues (Aldawsari et al., 2018). As an example, one of the initial challenges is academic. Even after students pass the language exams, they struggle to comprehend complicated words in academics, have problems with writing in an academic style, or keep up with rapid-fire conversations in the classroom (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). All of these issues are compounded by very different teaching styles than students are accustomed to (Huang et al., 2024). An example is that students in teacher-centered schools are usually anxious when requested to speak openly and disagree with professors (Liu et al., 2022). Moreover, students will need to study new regulations concerning referencing and academic integrity that might differ from those of their native nations (Ren & Hagedorn, 2014).

Another large issue is the social life issue. It has been observed that most international students experience loneliness and isolation, in particular during their initial months in a foreign country (Ellard et al., 2023). Most of the also fail to align with local communities and find it difficult to form friendships with the host students (Kusek, 2015). This lack of contact can also limit their social life and cause them to stay in their own cultural groups (Byrne et al., 2019). Some students even encounter discrimination or microaggressions that decrease the sense of belonging (Cena et al., 2021). The third challenge would be psychological. Nearly every international student feels stressed upon adjusting to the new

culture, and this stress is known as acculturative stress (Miao & Zhang, 2024). The stress manifests itself in the form of homesickness, identity issues, or schoolwork anxiety (Miao & Zhang, 2024). Studies have indicated that students who possess good social support and who have good cultural skills adjust well (Aldawsari et al., 2018). Close connections with local students also help to mitigate the impact of stress and lead to a positive mental health state (Bethel et al., 2020). The most valuable support can be both a source of emotional support and practical assistance (Kristiana et al., 2022). Nevertheless, not all students take advantage of the mental health services available on university campuses due to stigma or language barriers, or even long waiting lists (Newton et al., 2021; Ellard et al., 2023). Additionally, some studies describe student adjustment in terms of the U-curve, in which there is a positive honeymoon period, shock, and then gradual adjustment (Dailey-Strand et al., 2021). However, other studies indicate that this is not the case with every student. There are students with immediate feelings of distress in the absence of a honeymoon phase, which better suits the J-curve model (Dailey-Strand et al., 2021). Instead of assuming that all students adjust in a universal U-curve or have a honeymoon phase, this implies that the process of adjusting is highly individualized, with students following different patterns of adjustment.

However, numerous studies investigating those issues, there is still not a lot known about international students adjusting to new places over a longer period (Miao & Zhang, 2024; Rienties et al., 2012). Most studies rely on cross-sectional designs, which can only show a snapshot of the time rather than being able to provide a full year of changes. (Rienties et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2024). As an example, Kusek (2015) and Rienties et al. (2012) examined experiences only in the short run but did not illustrate a long-term evolution of adaptation. (Mesidor and Sly 2016; Miao & Zhang 2024) also mention that there is a variety of factors influencing adaptation, including resilience, self-efficacy, coping skills, and support provided by the university, but not all these studies have a long-term follow-up period. According to studies, coping skills, which include finding the support of friends and relatives, are also relevant to adaptation (Pinarbasi, 2023). Also, resilience can improve over time since a student will learn how to get through stress, and not every coping mechanism will work as well as others. (Aldawsari et al., 2018; Kristina et al.,

2022). In addition to this, pathway programs can also attempt to assist students, yet research indicates that despite the additional courses, international students continue to struggle with language and cultural issues (Elturkia et al., 2019). As an instance, Elturkia et al. (2019) discovered that pathway students did not cope with the lectures, assignments, and local study mates due to the language and cultural gaps. This reveals that it will still require additional help in the long run.

Due to these problems, Mesidor and Sly (2016) believe that adjustment is a special process and that there is no single factor that determines whether it will become successful or not. Therefore, this study will explore this phenomenon by answering the following research question: How do international students adapt over the course of one academic year? It will pay attention to resilience, self-efficacy, coping strategies, and institutional support, as previous researchers pointed out (Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Pinarbasi, 2023). To examine this, the study will take a qualitative approach, gathering semi-structured interviews of 10-13 international students who have studied abroad for at least one year and may study in different academic and cultural contexts. The interviews will examine their academic difficulties, cultural adjustment, and sources of support.

The study provides three contributions in the following ways. First, it provides more information on the adaptation of international students, which previous studies have identified to be minimal (Rienties et al., 2012; Kusek, 2015). Second, it addresses the research gap highlighted by Rienties et al. (2012) by demonstrating the way in which students and their coping resources affect adaptation over time. Third, it offers practical suggestions on how universities can be more helpful, minimize acculturative stress, and make the students feel more steeled (Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Pinarbasi, 2023).

This chapter, therefore, gives the background, problem, and framework of the thesis. The thesis comprises five parts. After this introduction, Chapter 2 will present an extensive literature review of the issue of the academic and social integration of international students. Chapter 3 will outline the research technique practiced, the qualitative research method, the technique used in collecting data, and the method of data analysis. In Chapter 4, the researcher will discuss the results of the interviews that were performed

with the respondents. Lastly, Chapter 5 will describe the importance of the research, its limitations, and future research on it. By listening to students' experiences, this study will show how adapting to a new culture can be made easier and how universities can create a more supportive and welcoming environment.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Adaptation of international students**

The high mobility of students globally has complicated the issue of cross-cultural adaptation, a very crucial research topic in the field of higher education. The concept of adaptation is used when describing the multifaceted process that international students are able to adjust to the academic, social, and cultural environment of the host nation so that they can achieve their educational objectives (Oduwaye et al., 2023). The phenomenon is closely related to acculturation, or the psychological and cultural transformation that occurs because of the continued interaction between the given cultural groups (Desa et al. 2023). Adaptation is very important as the problem of adaptation may affect the mental health and well-being of students in a negative way (Byrne et al., 2019; Holliman et al, 2022).

Scholars agree that adaptation is a multidimensional process, which can be academic, social, and psychological (Aarauja, 2011; Zhang and Goodson, 2011). This corresponds to the ideas of the Tinto Student Integration Theory, which has been applied in contemporary literature, such as Chrysikos, Ahmed, and Ward (2017), who highlight that academic and social integration among students is among the most influential aspects of their success and retention in higher education. These interrelationships imply that issues in one field could impact other fields; e.g., academic stress and mental distress can be enhanced by social isolation, and academic performance can alleviate social problems (Zhang and Goodson, 2011).

The empirical research, based especially on Western settings, has found a strong group of predictors of effective adjustment. The most prominent are English language proficiency (Araujo, 2011; Luo et al., 2019), access to social support, and the purposeful relationship with host nationals (Araujo, 2011; Byrne et al., 2019). Holliman et al. (2022) showed that among Chinese students in the UK, greater adaptability directly influenced the positive outcome of psychological well-being and exemplified how this internal

resource neutralizes the impact of acculturative stress. On the contrary, the non-Western literature reveals particular academic skills that contribute to adaptation; as an example, Zhu et al. (2023) determined course learning, self-regulation, and learning communication as essential positive contributors to the academic adaptation of international students in China.

One of the most important contextual determinants is cultural distance; the larger the gap between host and home cultures, the greater the acculturative stress and the greater the adaptation challenges (Desa et al., 2012; Malaklolunthu and Selan, 2011). This pressure can be due to both environmental (e.g., adapting to a new educational system, housing) and attitudinal (e.g., perceived discrimination) factors (Desa et al., 2012). As an illustration, Turkish international students in Germany have claimed that negative stereotypes and the view that they were immigrants and not students caused them stress (Erturk et al., 2021). A study conducted by Severiens and Schmidt (2009) revealed that the students in a problem-based learning (PBL) curriculum, where students are required to work and interact in groups, showed higher levels of academic and social integration compared to the students in a traditional lecture-based curriculum.

Qualitative studies offer insight into students' real experiences that support these quantitative results. On a social level, one simple thing is isolation and the inability to establish friendships with the nationals of the host country, which often causes grouping in co-national clusters (Byrne et al., 2019). In their study of medical students in Ireland, Byrne et al. (2019) discovered that the development of intercultural relations was complex due to such aspects as gender, languages other than English, and the prevalence of some regional grouping. The identity also filters the subjective experience of adaptation. According to Erturk et al. (2021), Turkish students in Germany were mostly used to referring to themselves as international students, which influenced their socializing behaviour and their unwillingness to access university counselling services, which they equated with severe mental illness and not adaptation.

In this method, the way of adaptation changes with time is overlooked, and a few longitudinal studies remain inadequate (Koo et al., 2021; Oduwaye et al., 2023). It has been verified that the acculturative stress is not always a linear process that reduces in certain students, and some students are still struggling (Koo et al., 2021). Some of the major barriers to adjustment during the initial months of living abroad are homesickness and socio-cultural stress, which are the most difficult to address at the same time (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). Further studies that follow students during a longer period are required to learn more about the development of challenges and coping handling strategies (Oduwaye et al., 2023).

Social support and institutional programs are important in assisting the students to manage these challenges. It has been shown that peer support, mentoring, and the university resources are great supporters in terms of the capacity of students to adjust to culture (Maymon and Hall, 2021; Martirosyan et al., 2019). The absence of such support is associated with greater isolation and psychological trauma (Byrne et al., 2019). Jiang and Xiao (2024) discovered that Chinese students in the UK perceived Intercultural Mentoring Programs (IMPs) in a positive way, referring to such positive effects as the development of better communication competencies. Nevertheless, they showed issues with their mentors and matching as well in their research, and established that support is effective only when carefully structured and implemented. Most studies are cross-sectional and do not show the interaction of the challenges and coping mechanisms and support systems across an academic year (Koo et al., 2021; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Zhang and Goodson, 2011).

### **2.1.1 Academic adaptation**

Academic adaptation is considered one of the most important aspects of the overall adjustment of international students because it directly defines their possibility to achieve success in a new educational system. It is the process of learning new teaching patterns, grading systems, evaluation procedures, and classroom engagement practices, and, at the same time, acquiring new academic literacies. Studies continually indicate

that international students experience significant challenges in this regard, including language-related issues with writing and communication (Aaraujo, 2011; Chen, 2018; Wei et al., 2024) and being confused about assignments, expectations of grade assessment, and pedagogy (Li et al., 2018; Krsmanovic, 2022). Meanwhile, the institutional setting and individual preparedness of students have a determining effect, as they are demonstrated in research carried out in China and Malaysia (Hussain and Shen, 2019; Singh and Jack, 2022).

As an example, Araujo (2011) also showed that in the U.S., academic success can be well predicted by English proficiency and affects classroom engagement and confidence in general. A qualitative study by Chen (2018) conducted in an ESL writing class reported that the communication issues were not only a linguistic problem but also a cultural problem. The Asian students interpreted the active participation and interruptions of an engaged instructor as rude and, therefore, against the expected behaviour in that classroom setting. According to Daudpota et al. (2021), students of a Pakistani university had difficulties with the use of English in lectures, which were inconsistent, and they needed to seek clarification from co-national students. The study of Chinese international high school students conducted by Wei et al. (2024) referred to the difficulty of academic writing, i.e., academic plagiarism, citation rules, and the ignorance of academic writing conventions. Similarly, in Malaysia, Singh and Jack (2022) focused on the term “linguaculture” because they reported on the problem of language barriers related to cultural practices that influence supervision, group work, and collaboration.

In addition to language, international students need to adjust to new teaching methods, assessment systems, and educational demands, which in many cases are markedly different in their home countries. As shown quantitatively by Bastien et al. (2018), the predictors of academic adjustment in the U.S. universities were English proficiency, length of stay, and help-seeking behaviour, and assessment systems were often cited as a cause of stress. To supplement this finding, the qualitative study of first-year undergraduates conducted by Krsmanovic (2022) found that scholars were confused

about grading standards, assignment format, and the ratio of independent to guided learning. On the same note, Li et al. (2018) found that East Asian students in the U.S. faced difficulties in course preparations, establishing relationships with faculty, and coping with heavy workloads. These findings are comparable with those indicated in Daudpota et al. (2021), who suggested that institutional expectations were often vague to the eyes of students, who then had no option other than informal strategies among their peers. Conversely, Severiens and Schmidt (2009) enabled the conclusion that problem-based learning (PBL) curriculums, emphasizing collaborative as well as active learning, were associated with higher academic integration as well as advancement than curriculums based on lectures.

The other common theme in the literature is the significance of readiness and institutional support in the development of academic outcomes. The authors of the research on international students in China (Hussain and Shen, 2019) have posited that on-campus orientation and the pre-departure preparation mediate the success of the academic adaptation significantly. Likewise, Singh and Jack (2022) established that supervisory guidance was beneficial to postgraduate students in Malaysia, although they also reported considerable difficulties in cases of a lack of cultural awareness in supervision. This view was supported by mixed-method evidence by Zhu et al. (2023), who demonstrated that course learning, faculty communication, and self-regulation had significant predictive power of academic adjustment of international students in China. Readiness is influenced by institutional policies, such as the programs of orientation, mentoring systems, and faculty support. However, even though the support mechanisms have been consistently acknowledged, fewer studies address the role of various types of institutional intervention, including peer mentoring, faculty advising, or academic writing workshops, in the final results of long-term adaptation.

Although individual studies show very useful information about the language and pedagogy and institutional support, general reviews note that academic adaptation research is still not organized. A study by Xu et al. (2024), reviewing studies from 2004

to 2024, suggests that the majority of work is conducted in Western countries, whereas less emphasis is placed on studying students in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. They also observed that models of studying adaptation are not common, and the results of various locations are difficult to compare. According to Zhu et al. (2023), the gap between academic skills, personal resources, and institutional support should be addressed by integrating them in studies.

In summary, there is the complex process of academic adaptation, which involves the skill of the language, the system of teaching and grading, and the assistance of the institution. Excellent English language skills and academic writing skills are required to achieve success (Araujo, 2011; Chen, 2018; Wei et al., 2024), yet students usually struggle to adapt to the new grading system and classroom practices (Li et al., 2018; Krsmanovic, 2022). Prearrival preparedness and the supervision or mentoring available are critical to students' seamless adaptation (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Singh & Jack, 2022).

### **2.1.2 Social and cultural adaptation**

This section follows the discussion of academic adaptation by researching the social and cultural aspects of adjusting to international students. Another key element of general student adaptation is social and cultural adaptation, which is in addition to the academic challenges mentioned earlier. Although academic challenges are commonly considered the priority in the institutional research, the fact that students can form meaningful social relationships and adjust to the different culture also affects their well-being, integration, and future success to an equal degree (Khanal and Gaulee, 2019; Oduwaye et al., 2023). Practically, the process of social and cultural adaptation is not just about learning social skills but also about identity, belonging, and coping with cultural distance as well as addressing structural issues, including discrimination or a lack of institutional support (Rivas et al. 2019; Newsome and Cooper, 2016).

Friendships with the host nationals have been continuously found to be extremely important in facilitating cultural adjustment. Hendrickson (2018) showed that

extracurricular activities and the tutor programs are intercultural connectors because they provide international students with a chance to make new friends among local students. Similar results have been found by Rivas et al. (2019), who discovered that international students were more likely to associate with other international students because Americans were perceived to be closed off and difficult to be friends with. It is not just a social resource, but academic motivation is also connected to belonging, as it is established that social interactions and support are critical to the adjustment of international students, and a sense of belonging is formed primarily through relationships with peers (Cena et al., 2021). In their investigation of global medical students in Ireland, Byrne et al. (2019) reported the prevalent occurrence of intercultural mixing being complicated by the language barrier and group identity, which led to the use of same-nation peers. According to Newsome and Cooper (2016), students of a British university identified that integration was an extremely difficult life, which was shown by poor contact with domestic students and a sense of being socially excluded. Collectively, these results emphasize that friendships are at the core of the adaptation process and indicate that some individuals are not able to gain these advantages due to the existence of barriers.

Culture shock and homesickness characterize the initial phase of cultural adjustment and can induce great stress for the new international students. Research by Rathakrishnan et al. (2021) on international students in Malaysia asserts that homesickness was a powerful source of stress and influenced the way students acted and responded to problems. In a similar way, Alharbi and Smith (2018) reviewed studies on stress and well-being among international students in English-speaking countries and found that isolation and unfamiliar social environments were among the most common stress factors. In their paper, Khanal and Gaulee (2019) also demonstrated that stress does not begin and end with the initial studying abroad experience but is present throughout the student experience, from predeparture through the end of graduation. The qualitative research also brings out the extent of the depth of these struggles. Some qualitative studies also show how deep these challenges can be. For example, Oduwaye et al. (2023)

found after 21 years of study that these problems persist long into the lives of students, especially when students experience difficulties in defining themselves or being treated differently. As Newsom and Cooper (2016) posted, students in the UK reacted with shock and confusion when presented with new cultural regulations. Through these studies, it is evident that stress can be experienced throughout the process of adjusting to a new culture until students learn to manage it and gain the necessary support.

Another factor, cultural distance, is still another aspect that affects how foreign students manage in a brand-new place. Lai et al. (2022), analysing Chinese students in the United States, found that learning the local language and customs helped students adjust socially, while holding on to their own culture helped them to have better psychological functioning and academic performance. On the same note, the study of international students in Japan conducted by Taniguchi et al. (2022) reveals that the choice to address either the members of the same culture or a different culture was affected by the cultural identification, which allowed uncertainty management in the foreign locations. These findings imply that students need to bring with them the identity and the degree negotiation in cultural adaptation, and the question of who they are as individuals: whether they should place most emphasis on their heritage culture, become a member of the host culture, or strike a balance between the two. These decisions not only determine their social interaction but also their psychological state, since integration that is not successful often leads to feelings of alienation that get intensified.

Moreover, besides all these, cultural distance, discrimination, and stereotyping still exist as significant obstacles to cultural integration. According to Rivas et al. (2019), international students in the United States reported that they were excluded by American peers most of the time, and the reason for that was that they were ethnically or linguistically different. Newsome and Cooper (2016) noticed that the same events happened in the UK, where microaggressions lowered the students' feeling of being part of the group. Khanal and Gaule (2019) not only agreed with this criticism but also emphasized how systemic these problems were in different countries all over the world.

The study conducted by Odunayo et al. (2023) also testifies to the contribution made by discrimination and inequalities as the primary factors that influenced the international students' experiences during the past 20 years, even though institutions have been promoting inclusivity. The results indicate quite clearly that there can be no adaptation reduced to the effort on chooses to put in it; the social climate and the institutions of the broader society have a very significant influence in facilitating or complicating the process of cultural assimilation.

Despite the obstacles, studies indicate that the assistance of universities and friends can help students to overcome cultural stress and adapt to new settings. It was discovered that students were more independent with strong cross-cultural skills, but they have confidence and control to overcome difficulties thanks to social support (Aldawsari et al., 2018). The results of Maymon and Hall (2021) also demonstrated that peer and university support alleviated the stress of first-year students, showing that the sense of belonging is developed in favourable environments. Due to this, universities also contribute significantly to assisting students in gaining social adjustment. Hendrickson (2018) stated that intercultural connections occur through activities and tutoring programs, whereas Byrne et al. (2019) emphasized that international students require purposeful means to find friends, language, and barriers, including dissimilar social norms. All these studies demonstrate that university support may be highly effective, yet when the support is well planned and designed to be sensitive to the needs of the students.

Generally, the literature indicates that the process of social and cultural adaptation is dynamic and complex in nature and differs in different circumstances. The students can adapt both based on their personal attributes, including resilience, which is important in mitigating stress, and due to the environment, they are in, which determines the capacity of the students to adapt socially and culturally as well as to be socially sustainable (Alharbi and Smith, 2018; Radhakrishnan et al., 2021). Friendships and networks among the local students are particularly relevant, yet such issues as cultural

differences, discrimination, and inadequate institutional support usually complicate the adaptation process (Byrne et al., 2019; Taniguchi et al., 2022). However, a significant amount of research is confined to one setting or only to one point in time, and it is challenging to monitor the process of adaptation (Cena et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2022). It shows that there is a need to conduct long-term and comparative studies that would examine the combination of personal strengths, university support, and the wider cultural backgrounds during the experience of a student.

### **2.1.3 Psychological adaptation and well-being**

The psychological adaptation is considered one of the most significant aspects of the international students' adaptation to the new country. It is defined as how students confront their thoughts, feelings, and emotional state when pursuing study and living in foreign countries. Psychological adaptation occurs internally, unlike academic or social adaptation, which could manifest in grades or friendships. It consists of stress, loneliness, anxiety, homesickness, and the overall emotional balance (Zhang and Goodson, 2011). This phenomenon is closely associated with acculturative stress, the emotional burden of experiencing new traditions, languages, and expectations in the attempt to discover a home in a new setting (Pinarbasi 2023). The success of adaptation among students relies on individual coping abilities, the support that the students obtain, and the type of environment that a university offers.

Studies indicate that foreign students frequently experience emotional instability when they initially begin their studies in a foreign country. Some of them are under stress and anxiety, homesickness, and even depression, most of them during the first several months when everything is new, and everything is different (Bender et al., 2019; Pinarbasi, 2023). The initial semester is considered to be the most challenging one, when the students have to find their way in new academic structures, learn to live in new social conditions, and address such practical issues as how and where to live or how to open a bank account. Their emotional state tends to suffer in the course of this period. But it tends to change as soon as they start adjusting. A study by Liu et al. (2022) surveyed

Chinese students in the United Kingdom, who experienced great stress and worry in their first year of education, which was even worsened by the COVID-19 situation. Students have to study online, which they feared of isolation and affect their health. Nevertheless, there are those students who managed to remain positive and adapt. This demonstrates that although the process of studying in a foreign country is a stressful one, it can assist students to be stronger, provided they receive adequate support.

Various factors can make psychological stress even more extreme. Language barriers are considered one of the biggest issues as they affect communication, classes, and socialization. Lack of freedom to express oneself and even to know other people can make students start feeling isolated or even distressed (Bethel et al., 2020). Cultural distance is also the cause. The bigger the difference between the home and the host culture, the more the students would be confused or misunderstood (Pinarbasi, 2023). Even the small incidences of discrimination or bias can also harm mental health and make students feel that they are foreigners (Cena et al., 2021). Emotional stress may be caused by financial pressures, academic difficulties, and a lack of family support. Those students who are not likely to find a sense of belonging and friends in a new environment are more likely to report sadness and loneliness (Byrne et al., 2019). However, on the contrary, the better people form good social networks with local students, fellow internationals, or co-national, the higher their possibilities are to be psychologically well (Bethel et al., 2020).

Despite such obstacles, a significant number of international students can remain strong. In this case, it is called resilience, and it is the capacity to recover after a setback and come out stronger after the event. Aldawsari et al. (2018) discovered that such factors of independence and a feeling of ownership of their life contribute to students being better adapted to new environments. Individuals who have positive coping strategies like seeking support and maintaining contact with their family or trying to view difficulties as learning opportunities are more stable and satisfied (Pinarbasi, 2023). Initially, numerous learners rely primarily on homeland friends and companions to

provide them with comfort and familiarity with which they can deal with their stress (Liu et al. 2022). They eventually form broader friendships and interact more with people later as they feel more established and confident. The result is usually a greater sense of belief in oneself, improved communication, and a more distinct sense of identity.

Supportive individuals can do much to make the international students feel good. Bender et al. (2019) discovered that students who receive emotional and social support make the adjustment process to the foreign country easier. It is not only the extent to which they receive assistance but rather the extent to which they feel a sense of support. More importantly, it is not just the amount of support that matters but whether or not a student feels that they are being taken care of, which is associated with a reduced stress load and increased happiness. Kristiana et al. (2022) supported this claim by establishing that social support reduces acculturative stress and improves emotional health. Similarly, as demonstrated by Bethel et al. (2020), good relationships with the local students assist the international students to adapt more quickly and feel less isolated. All these studies reveal that friendship and support networks are highly essential in relation to emotional health in the case of studying in a different country.

Universities have a significant role in ensuring that international students remain mentally healthy. Newton et al. (2021) discovered that students appreciate mental health services that are conveniently located and consider their cultural background. Nevertheless, a range of students do not know how to use these services. Other people are concerned with language issues or the lack of understanding of how counselling works. Cena et al. (2021) also demonstrated that students who feel that they are accepted and included in the university community have greater mental health and feel more connected. It is due to this that the universities need to not only aim at providing counselling but also create open and free environments where students feel comfortable discussing their issues.

Programs that will aid students in finding people and be welcoming can make a considerable difference. Such activities as mentoring, peer-support groups, and cultural exchange events that enable international students to find friends and to understand the local life. Participation in such programs can reduce stress and help students feel that they are a part of university society (Cena et al., 2021). It has also been researched that involvement with other people is a way of learning to deal with trouble, and this raises the mental well-being of students. Holliman et al. (2022) discovered that adaptable students with a good social network are happier and more content with their lives. It implies that emotional strength can be achieved in cases when students are not only personally resilient but are also surrounded by a helpful environment.

Loneliness is one of the most difficult aspects of studying abroad, as many students feel lonely when they are too far away. Ellard et al. (2023) discovered that social programs such as loneliness reduction through group activities, peer mentoring, and other programs could be used to reduce depression as well as loneliness. In the case of international students, they can join clubs or groups where they can find like-minded people and feel better, which is particularly the case at the beginning. As they age, the interaction and association with the representatives of other cultures will assist them in becoming more accustomed and emotionally mature (Ellard et al., 2023; Kristiana et al., 2022).

How students' emotions change throughout their study abroad journey is also an important part of adaptation. According to some researchers, this process can be divided into phases: initially, the students are usually excited and interested in the new country, followed by a phase of stress and confusion, and later they begin to feel more familiar and at home once again. More recent research, however, demonstrates that not all students equally experience these stages. Some experience early excitement and occasionally feel anxious throughout their life span or experience fluctuations between positive and negative emotions over time (Liu et al., 2022; Pinarbasi, 2023). This indicates that there is no one way of adaptation. In most cases, the students become

less affected emotionally not only because they are getting stronger and more confident but also because they have a lot more time to overcome the challenges that they still encounter (Kristiana et al., 2022). For some, though, studying abroad becomes a life-changing experience that helps them build resilience and new emotional strength after going through early struggles (Pinarbasi, 2023).

On the whole, the emotional adjustment of students is determined by some balance of personal strengths, difficulties the students have to deal with, and the support that these students can get. Mental health is negatively affected by stressful factors, including cultural differences, academic pressure, or isolation, but with the support of networks and good personal resources, it is possible to improve it. Research shows that students who have good social support tend to have lower levels of stress and higher well-being (Holliman et al., 2022; Kristiana et al., 2022). Universities have a significant role as well in the form of providing friendly and accommodating environments. By providing mental health help and promoting open communication and assisting students in developing social networks, institutions alleviate stress and make students feel that they belong there (Newton et al., 2021; Cena et al., 2021). The combination of these factors facilitates the adaptation process of international students to their new environment, healthy lifestyles, and eventual success in the new environment.

To summarize, the emotional background of the process of international student adaptation is the element of psychological adaptation. It is determined by both personal and external influences, including resilience and coping skills, social support, and the university environment. Since the process of adaptation is dynamic, the journey of each student is somewhat different. Some adapt fast, some take time, and some become stronger due to challenges. The only evident thing is that a sense of support, belonging, and empathy goes the furthest. In cases where the students are supported, both personally and institutionally, they tend to have a positive well-being and feel a sense of belonging to their new academic and cultural home.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework: Adaptation process of international students**

Literature shows that international students undergo numerous academic, social, and emotional transformations in a study abroad. Adaptation does not happen immediately, but rather it is a process that builds up with time. Previous research indicates that students usually pass through various levels of adaptation where they encounter new learning environments, cultures, and lifestyles. On the basis of these concepts, the following section will outline the theoretical framework that will explain how the process of adaptation develops within a specific academic year and how this process will direct this study. It combines the concepts of previous research to demonstrate that adaptation is a process that is not only difficult but also encompasses growth as the students learn to cope with academic, social, and cultural changes.

The initial study was used to bring out the adaptation as a series of negative and positive emotions. Lysgaard (1955, as cited in Ward et al., 1998) was the first to introduce this concept of newcomers undergoing a U-shaped process, which includes excitement, then challenges, and finally balance. This concept was later tested by Ward et al. (1998) in their study on Japanese students in New Zealand. They discovered that the greatest stress was perceived by the majority of the students as they started, but gradually calmed down. This means that the adaptation process is not necessarily U-shaped and may be different in the way various people respond to it. Likewise, Dailey-Strand et al. (2021) also concluded that there were other patterns, such as the shape of J, in which the perceptions of difficulty and comfort fluctuated multiple times. The studies demonstrate that adaptation does not suit all people and that it may go up and down with time.

This study also applies the acculturation framework of Sam and Berry (2010) to comprehend these differences. They described four primary methods through which people adjust themselves: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, which depend on the manner in which they associate with the new culture and the extent to which they hold on to their own. Integration tends to provide more adjustment

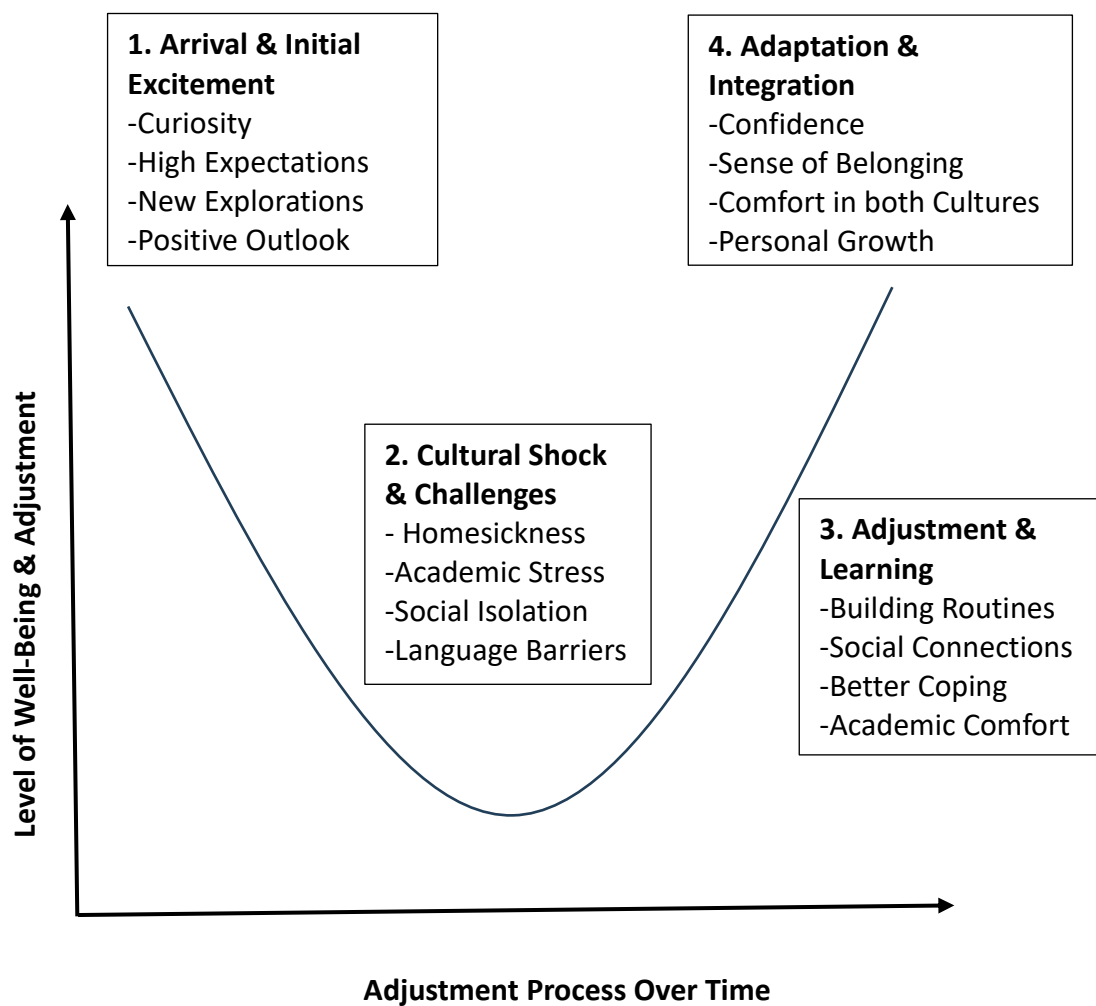
since students can feel part of the new culture yet preserve the value of their own background.

The concept of assimilation in the process of cultural adjustment also relates well to the university environment, as explained in Tinto's model of integration of students (as cited in Tucker, 1999). The theory presented by Tinto points to the fact that students tend to persevere when they feel academically and socially attached to their organization. Developing on this, Tucker (1999). The theory presented by Tinto points to the fact that students tend to persevere when they feel academically and socially attached to their organization. Developing on this, Tucker (1999) proposed vision and sense of community, a concept that characterizes the way the students envision their future and acquire a sense of community belonging. When students are aware of their ambitions and desire to belong to a community, adapting to college life becomes easier. The concepts connect with those presented by Sam and Berry (2010) and Ward et al. (1998), that both individual ambitions and social ties play a significant role in effective adaptation.

The personal characteristics will also contribute to the adaptation of students to a new environment. Aldawsari et al. (2018) demonstrated that social support and cross-cultural awareness make international students feel more competent and in charge when they are being introduced to a new culture. They also claimed that such factors as motivation and self-awareness can ease students' coping with difficulties and adapting to academic or social life in foreign countries.

Combining these concepts from previous studies, this paper will examine adaptation as a process that is progressive and takes place across time (see Figure 1). At the time of being first transferred abroad, students tend to feel joyful, inquisitive, and eager to begin with something novel. After some time, one then begins to realize what life is like in a new environment. Others start getting homesick or exhausted due to the attempts to adapt to the new forms of teaching, new food, climate, or communication methods. Most of the students begin to sort things out as time progresses. They become

accustomed to their schedules, they form new friendships, and they grow to know what they find comfortable. However, later one may come to a more stable and self-assured state and may start to experience the actual personal growth. Nonetheless, according to Ward et al. (1998) and Dailey-Strand et al. (2021), this is not how it happens to everyone. There are those who adjust within a short time, those who take a long time before adjusting, and those who continuously move up and down between the settled and the unsettled during the year.



**Figure 1.** Theoretical Framework: International Student Adaptation Process

In brief, this model demonstrates that adaptation is a progressive and personal process influenced by individual and environmental aspects. It gives a framework on how international students adapt in the first academic year, and how this research paper can examine the experiences of international students. To learn about their individual ways of adapting to international students, the interview questions will be directed at the subject of how the feelings, difficulties, and coping mechanisms of international students evolve throughout the academic year. This framework will be refined later based on the findings to represent the real experiences of the participants.

The structure shows an overall pattern of adaptation, yet the procedure is not the same and universal for every student. The students can shift between stages based on their academic, social, emotional, and institutional exposures.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter describes the way the research was done and why specific methodological decisions were taken. This study aims to investigate how international students adjust to higher education within one year of academic study. As the process of adaptation is individual and complicated, it was necessary to select the method of research that would enable students to elaborate on their individual experiences (Dodgson, 2017; Aspers & Corte, 2019).

The methodology chapter will give a clear description of the general research approach, the philosophical concepts that will be used as the guide in the research, and the ways in which the research will gather and analyse the data. It also describes how the quality of the research was taken into consideration (Nowell et al., 2017). With the clear presentation of these aspects, this chapter makes the reader realize the way the study findings were elaborated and the reason why the methods used were appropriate in response to the research question. Along with the literature review, this chapter sets the context for the results that will be presented in the next chapter.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

This paper follows a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research can be applied in cases when the purpose of the research is to comprehend the experiences, feelings, and interpretations of people and not to determine the information in numbers (Maher & Dertadian, 2017; Aspers & Corte, 2019). This study focuses on the lived experiences of international students who adapt to a new academic and cultural setting. Those experiences are usually related to emotions, personal issues, and changes over time, which are challenging to describe with the help of questionnaires or statistical data only. That is why a qualitative approach can be considered the most appropriate choice in this research (Busetto et al., 2020; Leko et al., 2021).

The research is guided by an interpretivist perspective. The philosophy of interpretivism relies on the fact that there is nothing like a fixed reality that is common to all (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). On the contrary, people shape their own reality, influenced by their background, culture, and personal experiences. This implies that people can interpret and perceive the same circumstance differently (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Within the frame of the current research, international students represent various countries and education systems, and hence their adaptation experiences are bound to be different as well. The interpretivist approach enables these various perspectives to be discovered and perceived as distinct from one another, rather than being compared or evaluated based on a single perspective (Chowdhury, 2014).

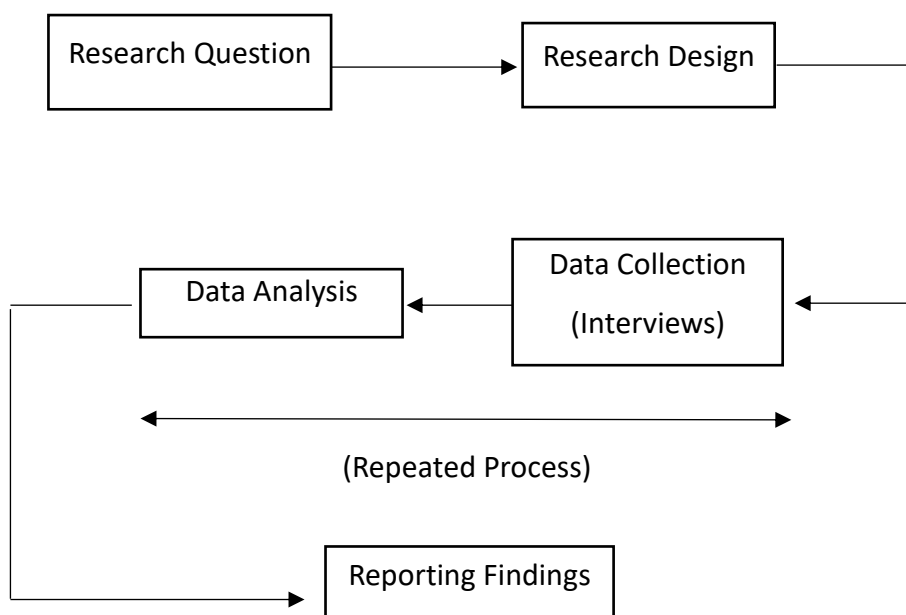
Regarding the interpretivist perspective, knowledge is constructed by the interaction between the researcher and participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The researcher is not entirely independent of the research process but participates in the active listening, interpretation, and meaning of the stories of the participants (Scotland, 2012; Chowdhury, 2014). In the study, the knowledge is formed as a result of interviews with international students. Their answers are not being looked upon as mere facts but rather as explanations that are significant and reflect how they make sense of themselves. This method assists the researcher in having a better understanding of the ways in which the students are adjusting academically, socially, and culturally.

This research also follows an inductive research method. An inductive approach means that the study does not begin with fixed hypotheses or assumptions that must be tested (Woo et al., 2017). Instead, the patterns and themes are given a chance to come out of the data gathered in the course of the research (Yom, 2015). Although some problems previously mentioned include language problems, loneliness, and academic pressures, the research is still open to the new or unforeseen challenges that could be occurring based on what students say. This transparency is significant in analysing the experiences of humans because not everything in the sphere of adaptation can be predetermined (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Qualitative studies are best appropriate in answering the question of how and why (Busetto et al., 2020). The primary research question in this research is how international students can become adjusted over time and why some difficulties or coping mechanisms emerge in the course of their studies. A qualitative method enables students to describe their experience using their own words and gives them time to reflect on the changes that happen throughout the year. Leko et al. (2021) state that qualitative research is particularly effective when the objective is to develop a detailed interpretation of complex social scenarios, but not to generate findings applicable to all groups of people. This opinion is very similar to the aim of current research.

The next important aspect of the qualitative research is that it is not a systematic process. Qualitative research is also flexible and responsive, unlike in quantitative research, where data collection and analysis are usually in a strict order (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Data collection and data analysis are usually conducted simultaneously, which enables the researcher to reflect on the data and make changes as the research is being done. Such a process is usually referred to as an iterative research process (Busetoo et al., 2020).

Figure 2 illustrates the iterative qualitative research process adopted in this research (Busetto et al., 2020). The first phase of the research is the development of the research question and research design. Information is then gathered by the interviews and analysed to determine new ideas and patterns. Depending on the analysis, additional data might be required or additional analysis. This repeated movement enables the researcher to narrow down the area of study and get a deeper insight into the research subject before transitioning to the last phase of translating the research.



**Figure 2.** Iterative Qualitative Research Process (adapted from Busetto et al., 2020)

This figure shows how the various phases of qualitative research can be interrelated. The researcher can also go back to previous phases, like data collection or analysis, as additional knowledge is acquired, instead of following a straight direction. This step enables reflection and assists in making sure that the results are based on the experiences of the participants. This research process is iterative, which especially applies to this study since the experience of adaptation of students is evolving and might vary as they advance through their academic year.

In general, the selected research method is suitable for this study. The interpretivist philosophy, the qualitative methodology, and inductive reasoning are interrelated to help in the in-depth exploration of the adaptation experiences of international students. The consistency of the research philosophy, research methodology, and research methods enhances the credibility and consistency of the research and offers a solid basis on which the analysis and research results will be reported in subsequent chapters (Singh, 2015).

### **3.2 Research sampling and participants**

In this section, the author explains the participants of the study and how they were chosen. The target of the qualitative research is not a huge number of participants. Rather, it focuses on the act of selecting individuals who can add value to the study subject in terms of experience (Robinson, 2014).

The study participants were international students attending higher learning institutions in Finland. The sample was comprised of students of undergraduate or graduate level and belonged to different nationalities and cultures. Such variety helped the study to encompass a variety of opinions and, at the same time, pay attention to a common experience of studying abroad.

There were clear inclusion criteria used to choose the participants. They needed to be international students in a higher education institution in Finland, and they had to have completed, or be near to completing, at least one academic year of study. This was significant since the student who has had some time in the host country can better reflect on how he or she has adjusted to the adjustment, not only of initial difficulties but also subsequent transformations.

This study employed a purposive sampling method. This implies that participants have been sampled purposely based on the fact that they had firsthand experience with the topic of study. Purposive sampling is typically applied to the study of a qualitative nature when it is necessary to gather extensive and informative information rather than opinions in general (Etikan et al., 2016; Robinson, 2014). In this research, international students were found to be the appropriate ones since they were in the process of academic and cultural adaptation in a new environment.

In this study, the unit of analysis was the individual student. The personal experience of each participant was viewed as useful in the process of understanding adaptation. The

research was based on the meaning that students created around their own experiences instead of making comparisons across institutions or programs.

The last sample involved 13 international students. This number is considered appropriate for an interview-based qualitative study, where the focus is on depth of understanding rather than sample size (Boddy, 2016). According to previous research, small samples may be adequate in qualitative interview studies when the data gathered is rich and when similar themes start to emerge in successive interviews (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

The process of data collection was carried out until the interviews provided sufficient information on the topic of the research, and no substantially new perspectives were formed. This method assisted in making sure that the data were significant, and this could be used to answer the research questions.

### **3.3 Data collection**

The data for this study were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. Interviews were selected as they enable participants to describe their experiences in their own words and provide a detailed description of their thoughts and feelings. The technique is particularly effective where the study is supposed to learn what can be personally experienced and what can be personally meant, but not simply gather the numbers (Kallio et al., 2016).

All the interviews were held on Microsoft Teams except one. An online format was chosen as it was convenient to international students and provided a lot of flexibility in time and place. Interviews were recorded on video or audio, depending on the preference of the participants. Before every interview, the participants were told the purpose of the study and gave consent to have the interview recorded. All the participants volunteered to be involved, and the anonymity of the participants.

The interviews were done in English since it was a common language between the researcher and the participants. Each interview took 15 to 40 minutes. The interviews gave participants sufficient time to think and answer without being rushed.

An advanced interview guide was prepared to support the interview process. Questions in the guide were based on the research topic, but there was flexibility to ask follow-up questions in case interesting issues were identified. This contributed to an open and comfortable dialogue. The questions were framed on the conceptual framework provided in Chapter 2 and guided by the various stages of the adaptation journey of the students. The entire interview guide is given in Appendix 1.

The participants were recorded during the interviews with their consent, which were later transcribed to be analysed. Transcription served to make sure that answers given by the participants were properly recorded and could be studied in detail as part of the data analysis process. This method of conducting interviews contributes to qualitative research since it makes it possible to gain a clear and contextual perception of the experiences of participants (Busetto et al., 2020). Appendix 2 presents the profile of the interviewees and the duration of the interview.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected during the interviews. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that assists the researcher in determining common ideas, patterns, and meanings within the data obtained from the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was selected since it is appropriate to analyse interview data, as well as to learn more about the experiences of participants.

The general steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to conduct the analysis. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed to be analysed. The transcription of most interviews was carried out automatically with the help of Microsoft Teams in the course of recording

the interview, whereas one of the interviews was conducted via Zoom and transcribed independently. The researcher prepared the review of all transcripts by listening to the recordings and reading the text to identify any mistakes after transcription.

The transcripts were read several times to better understand the data. In this process, the initial codes were created by identifying meaningful portions of text, such as keywords, sentences, and ideas within the data (Lochmiller, 2021). The earliest codes were marked out by labelling meaningful parts of the text. The transcripts were coded by reading them manually and identifying major concepts and patterns. The themes of these codes included academic experiences, language difficulties, social relationships, emotional reactions, and everyday life in Finland.

All interviews were coded, and similar codes were then grouped. These groups then evolved into more general themes that were common experiences among participants. The themes were revisited and revised to ensure that they were clear, reflected the data, and were in relation to the research question.

The data analysis started when data collection started, and this directed the researcher to use later interviews as a reflection of previous ones. This contributed to a better understanding of the research topic and facilitated an adaptable, reflective research process (Busetto et al., 2020). The identified themes are the core of the findings and will be discussed in the following chapter.

### **3.5 Assessment of the quality of the data**

This section discusses how the data quality and reliability were achieved in this study. The quality of data in qualitative research is achieved by being transparent and consistent in the research process and by having the results be representative of the experiences of the participants (Leung, 2015). Thus, the present study reflects on some research quality dimensions, such as credibility, dependability, and confirmability, which can reinforce the reliability of the results (Schou et al., 2012; Leung, 2015).

Credibility is one of the concerns about the quality of research. Credibility is the extent to which the findings are believable and accurate (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018). Credibility in this study was achieved through the application of semi-structured interviews, which gave the participants the opportunity to describe their experiences in detail, using their own words. The interviews were recorded with approval and transcribed subsequently so that the responses given by the participants would be recorded accurately. Repeated reading of the transcripts was also used to make sure that the identified themes were strongly correlated with what the participants actually said (Nowell et al., 2017).

Dependability is another element of quality, and this is defined by the consistency and clarity of the research process. The data collection and analysis steps were well outlined in this study. All participants were interviewed using the same interview guide to ensure consistency and flexibility of follow-up questions when necessary. The dependability of the study is supported by the fact that a clear, systematic method of analysis was used (Ahmed, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017).

Confirmability was supported by ensuring that the results were founded on the interview data and not on the opinion of the researcher. In this regard, the analysis was conducted by identifying themes that were repeated in various interviews. The analysis focused directly on the words of participants so that the interpretations would be based on the data. A clear linkage between the data and the findings will reduce researcher bias and improve the credibility of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017).

Another aspect of data quality involved ethical considerations. The participants participated voluntarily and were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews began. The participants' actual names were replaced by codes to protect the privacy of the participants, and the information was stored in a secure place. These measures contributed to making a friendly environment where the respondents felt free to talk and tell the truth, which also contributed to the quality of data.

On the whole, the data quality was enhanced by proper planning, clean research processes, and ethical behaviour. The measures assisted ensuring that the research findings will offer a reliable and valuable insight into the process of adaptation of international students.

## **4 Findings**

The chapter reports the results of the study on the basis of the interviews with the international students studying in Finland. This chapter intends to explain the experience of the participants in their adaptation process in the first academic year in a foreign country. The findings are reported based on the primary themes that have appeared during the data analysis. These themes are connected to the levels of adaptation presented in the theoretical framework, such as first impressions, initial struggles, coping and adjustment, and long-term adaptation.

The results are separated into sub-sections to demonstrate the various experiences described by the participants. Each part describes the general trends that emerged during the interviews with examples of the experiences of the students.

### **4.1 First impressions and the initial excitement**

This part explains the experience of the participants in the initial phase of the adaptation process. The interviews revealed that the initial weeks living in Finland were usually marked with excitement, high expectations, and curiosity about studying in a new country. Most students held positive ideas about studying abroad prior to coming there, and at the same time, they did not know what they would do in a new academic and cultural setting. The sub-sections below outline the key themes concerning the expectations of the students and their initial impressions upon arriving in Finland.

#### **4.1.1 Reasons for choosing Finland for higher education**

Most of the participants were found to have chosen to pursue their studies in Finland due to the fact that the country is reputed to have a good education system. It was noted that most of the interviewees had heard some positive words with regard to the quality of education and learning environment in Finland. Due to this reason, they felt that their

future opportunities would be better if they studied in Finland than if they studied in their home nations.

*"When I came to know about the education system of Finland, that Finland has the world's best education system, so I decided to move to Finland to have degree from Finland." (Student 2)*

*"The main thing that I chose Finland because of its strong reputation for high quality education and safety, and of course, student friendly environment" (Student 6)*

*"I heard about the Finland and of course there's no any age limit for starting studying so, I decide to come to here and also as a country, it is really good to live with the high living status." (Student 10)*

A number of students claimed that they would like to study in Europe and have a different education system. To them, studying abroad was not just about the degree; it was about new experiences as well as an opportunity to enhance their future career. Finland was considered a good choice due to its excellent international image and reputation as a crime-free country. The issue of safety was quite a concern to most students during the selection of the place to study, especially given that it was the first time that they were in a new country.

*"I also wanted to experience something new and come to a different culture and become more independent, those kinds of things." (Student 3)*

*"I heard from some of my friends that they said that it's good for education and all the facilities are also good, and we are getting a good payment if we get a job." (Student 12)*

*"I chose Finland because it's well known like a high quality education and a strong focus on innovation, and Finland has a safe and friendly student environment." (Student 5)*

There were also those who cited financial reasons. Some of the students cited that a scholarship or the low cost of studying in Finland was what made them go there. It was easier because of the prospect of pursuing the educational system in a renowned location with financial aid.

*"I actually got a good scholarship from Finland's University, so it was the Finnish scholarship offered by the government, so....and that's the reason basically why I am here, because of this scholarship." (Student 1)*

*"I have heard that it's one of the best, and when I get admission, I get the scholarship, so I think that was the main motivation to choose." (Student 9)*

Overall, the findings suggest that the main needs that have driven the decision to choose Finland were the positive image of the education system, the opportunities to study in Europe, financial support, and the belief that it would be quite simple to live in a safe and healthy location.

#### **4.1.2 Feeling after arrival**

It was reported that the initial days in Finland were a time filled with emotion for most students. The fact that they were coming to a new country for the first time made them excited because they had long desired to study abroad. The beginning of a new life in a new environment posed a new sense of interest and inspiration, as it was all new and unheard of.

*"It is exciting because, as I said, it was my dream to come to this kind of country. So I had like some scenery and some pictures in my mind... so, I saw that in reality." (Student 10)*

*"I felt like excited about starting a new chapter in my life, but at the same time, I was a bit nervous because everything was new and unfamiliar, and the people in Finland is very unfamiliar. (Student 5)*

Nervousness was also a frequent feeling in the initial stages, in addition to the feeling of excitement. The fact that one is very distant from both family and friends was a challenge in itself, particularly to individuals who have never lived on their own. Some of the students found the first days stressful due to the new environment, a new culture, and the uncertainty of how their day was going to be.

*"It's I'll say it's quite like mixed feelings. I was excited at the same time little bit nervous because it's a new country, new environment, everything is new." (Student 7)*

*"When I arrived, I feel excited, but slightly overwhelmed. It was my first time living in a Nordic country, apart from family and yeah, the climate of the land was very difficult and different from home country. However, the calm and organized environment makes me feel safe and calm." (Student 13)*

The weather and overall ambience were also cited as a surprise experience in arrival. Some students indicated that the cold weather and the silence were totally contrary to what they were used to in their home countries. By this factor, the initial weeks were time-consuming to adapt physically and mentally.

*"The very first time when I landed to the airport and when I came out, it was the harsh weather that I first time met in my life ever. Because we all know the weather of Finland, we never ever met." (Student 2)*

Having spent a certain time in Finland, several of the students reported that their attitude gradually changed to a more positive one. As they understood how things worked and knew the new environment, the first confusion began to ease, and everyday life became more comfortable.

*"I felt bit overwhelmed at first, but at the same time I was really happy and proud that I made it here because coming to a new country is not easy. But then I have achieved it, so I felt happy." (Student 3)*

*"At the beginning, you know, new country, new weather was a bit tired and exhausted at the beginning, but after the one first month and then everything was fine. Yeah, slowly adjust because I had to continue the life." (Student 8)*

In general, the initial post -arrival experiences were positive and negative because students had to simultaneously cope with a new country, new life, and new responsibilities.

#### **4.1.3 First impressions of the academic and social environment**

In explaining their initial experiences at the university, most of the interviewees outlined the environment as being different compared to what they had been used to in their home countries in terms of learning. Some students cited that the teaching method was more self-reliant, and students felt that more responsibility was placed on them to learn. To others, this was captivating and encouraging; yet, on the other hand, it had to be adaptable. The course structure and application of various learning methods were also cited as new. More than some students thought, group work, presentations, and

independent assignments were more common. It is due to this fact that the initial few weeks were difficult in learning how the system operates.

*"If I talk about the higher education teaching and learning style there, I feel like here is easier and it's students be independent and self-discipline."  
(Student 8)*

*"The university was well organized, and the people were kind, and the lecturers are also very kind and respectful, and the learning environment is felt like supportive and cal." (Student 5)*

*"Here it's more practical, actually. And then the student center too, we have a lot of group works and also at the same time we have independent learning too, because back home I would say it was more like teacher-guided or something that, because we always had the teacher to guide us and everything. Yeah, it was challenging, but then we have to appreciate everything." (student 3)*

*"Finland style here is more practical research oriented and discussion based and in like subject like in strategic my faculty, case studies and teamwork, real world problem solving are strongly emphasized."  
(Student 13)*

Another factor that came out in the majority of interviews was the friendly and informal teacher-student relationship. The respondents said that they could ask questions and discuss with teachers, which was not always the case in their home education systems. This was a good feeling, even if it felt a bit odd initially.

*"Teachers and staff were very friendly and supportive at first, even though, like we had the tutors and they were supporting us, like, and*

*guiding us to do the things and our orientation part and everything."  
(Student 3)*

*"Yeah, and teachers are also cooperative, that's why it's ... I like the education system here, and they are also giving us a lot of extra opportunity beside the academic work so we can grow ourselves more personally and professionally. So yeah, it's good." (Student 12)*

Besides the learning atmosphere, some interviewees also provided their first impression of the overall atmosphere in the university and its environment. Other students claimed that the place was very quiet compared to their native countries. They observed that there are fewer people in the streets and open areas and that people are more closed off to day-to-day communication. To some of these participants, this was initially uncomfortable, particularly when they were born into more dense or interactive cultures.

*"My impression was good overall for the university and the people, they don't talk that much, a little bit introvert, but we all know, but when you ask for help they talk at least and they come and they help". (student 7).*

*"I came from a crowd and there were lots of people in my country. But here when I landed, I found there were least people, and that was a shocking moment for me." (Student 12)*

*"I went through some several countries, so I think the Finnish people are like they have some distance compared to other country. Yeah, but the learning environment is really good, and every facility is perfect. Even the everything is good, and it's good to take responsibility for the learning."  
(Student 8)*

On the whole, it was observed during the early experiences in the university that the learning environment in Finland was perceived as different yet largely positive, even though it may take time to get familiar with the new academic system.

## **4.2 Cultural shock and early challenges**

Following the initial excitement weeks, various students started facing various types of challenges as they started to adjust to life in the host country. The interviews revealed that not everything was easy at the initial phase of adaptation because the participants needed to change to a new culture, climate, language, and everyday routine. In some cases, these differences led to stress and confusion, particularly in the initial months of arrival. The subsequent paragraphs outline the most prevalent issues reported by the students in the interviews.

### **4.2.1 Adjusting to the cold weather and challenges**

Interviews revealed that the weather was among the initial things that students found to be challenging upon arrival in the new country. Most of them said that the temperature was colder than in their home countries and that the initial weeks were worse than they had thought. Students who originated in warm areas reported that living in very cold climates was an all new experience for them.

*"It was really, really dark, and it was so cold even I can't bear it because in my home country we have a, you know, weather situation, it's around + 30 + 35. So you know, imagine a minus cold weather conditions, it's quite difficult to bear it." (Student 6)*

*"The long winter and the short day were very difficult in the beginning." (Student 11)*

The daily activities were also affected by the cold conditions. According to some interviewees, it was more difficult to go outside, travel to the university, or even have classes in the winter. Low temperatures and short days made it more difficult to remain active, particularly when they had just arrived. Due to this fact, the initial weeks were characterized by physical and mental adaptation.

*"I think the most difficulties are with weather because the climate is very harsh. I have to go to university like 3 days or four days week because we have like contact classes, so very minimal online classes." (Student 9)*

*"I think the biggest challenge was adjusting to this long winter because we have almost six months of wintertime." (Student 5)*

The climatic difference was not just physical but also emotional to many students. The winter was very dark and silent, and it took time to adjust to the new environment. But this was not the only negative experience. A few of the interviewees showed that after a while, they began to like the winter and they got interested in the snow, even though it was hard initially. The other student also said that the experience of the weather was also altered once the winter season was over, as the summer period was much more comfortable and easy to enjoy.

*"When I arrived, it was summertime. So everyone said that you arrived in perfect time. It's so good. Yeah. And I saw the weather was so good and daylight most of the time. And I liked it... I enjoyed it." (Student 7)*

*"I'm just enjoying the snow. I'm enjoying the sunny vibes, which last only for two months. I enjoy the summer." (Student 12)*

*"I felt like now the winter is good more than the summer period." (Student 5)*

All in all, the results show that the climate was among the initial challenges that were encountered by the students upon arrival. Though the initial stages were difficult for some, the majority of the interviewees slowly got used to the weather as they progressively lived more in the new environment.

#### **4.2.2 Language barriers in daily life**

The language barrier was another big problem experienced by most of the students. Although interviews were held in English and students could also study in English, life outside the university was not necessarily easy every day. A lot of them explained that the Finnish language complicated communication in all the possible situations: in shopping, using services, or reading the official information.

*"Finish language, it's very difficult to understand the language and also what they speak in English it's difficult to understand and adjusting to the this new daily life and such as shopping and transportation." (Student 5)*

*"With language sometimes with documents and some registrations... Because most of documents in Finish language so it had to translate." (Student 10)*

*"When we got into the supermarket, I can't see any label in English. It was really difficult to find what we wanted, so we need to use our translator." (Student 6)*

Some of the students also indicated that the inability to know the local language left them less confident in engaging with other people. Sometimes, simple tasks were stressful since they were not certain of how to communicate effectively.

*"We couldn't even ask the, people there because the first time thought that ok, they are not much friendly, they don't want to talk to new people, so we need to, you know work hard and we need to find things by our own." (Student 6)*

*"And of course, the language which we couldn't communicate with the people here. And yeah, that is the barrier what I faced at the beginning. Of course, I'm learning the language now, but that is real. That was the real barrier. Still, I'm struggling with that." (Student 12)*

*"Finnish language is another level altogether, like the consonants, the vowels, everything threw me for a loop. I did not know where to start from. I'm still finding my way around it. Well, hopefully by this time next year I'll be OK with it." (Student 4)*

Employment opportunities were also closely related to the language barrier. The reason why many were unable to secure part-time jobs, as a few described, is that most of the employers demand Finnish language skills, and while also doing some group work with local students. This constrained students, and it even frustrated them at times.

*"Coming here and then seeing that you have so many experiences of what, like the jobs that they have here, you have experiences, but because they want you to be able to speak their language." (Student 4)*

*"Because I remember in one course I did one group work with some students. There were two or three Finish student and may be 2 were internationals and those 2-3 were talking in their own language and we were feeling like left out. So yeah, just like that. Not like badly. It's because of the language, I think." (Student 7)*

Gradually, a great number of students claimed that the situation improved as they knew some simple words and were more familiar to the environment. Nevertheless, the language barrier has continued to be cited as one of the biggest challenges in the initial phase of adaptation.

#### **4.2.3 Homesickness and emotional stress**

The initial adaptation process was normally filled with emotional challenges. The majority of students stated that during the first months of staying in Finland, they were stressed and homesick. The early months were difficult to most of the interviewees since they were out of the home, getting adjusted to the new environment, and had to endure the pressures of school at the same time.

*"Especially at the beginning.... like I missed my family a lot because everything felt unfamiliar." (Student 3)*

*"Yes, especially during the first few months being away from family and adjusting to new like culture sometime made me like feels homesick. The main reason was adapting to this new culture and academic system and also I have to manage responsibility independently and missing my family back home... That's the thing." (Student 5)*

*"I experienced homesickness during the first few months. It was few 3-4 months being far from family, which was emotionally challenging for me." (Student 11)*

Alongside the homesickness, some interviewees also said being lonely and stressed at the beginning of their stay. The absence of close social ties and the environment that was new complicated the first months. Some of the students needed time to get used to the situation emotionally, and the situation changed as the students got to know their new life better.

*"Yeah, it's home alone. Remembering or if I was at home, I would have been discussing with my friend or my mom or my dad or my siblings, all those things. I always feel homesickness....But knowing what brought me here, I try to put it at the back burner and then forge ahead until I get what I want." (Student 4)*

*"Emotional, yes, because in the starting you are being sensitive about everything...so when you feel like you are not welcome at any place and of course the language barrier is there as well and people don't talk. So yes, it does affect emotionally." (Student 9)*

But not all students had such experiences. Some of the interviewees said that they had no major homesickness or emotional distress. This was primarily because they went to Finland with their family members, who gave them emotional support and a sense of stability.

*"Not at all.. because I was with my family here....seriously, my husband and my daughter really supported me because they always surrounded me." (Student 6)*

In order to manage these emotional provisions, students adopted different coping strategies. Other were relying on the daily routine of the day to keep themselves out of the stress, and those who focused their attention on the stress, and those who focused their attention on the family and friends back home. Constant interaction among themselves and finding ways of relaxing helped them to become more comfortable.

*"I tried to make friends, especially at the university, and then I just used to listen to music and then talk to my friends who were there. And I used to go walking and enjoy the weather." (Student 12)*

*"It's like I came with my husband and I stay in regular contact with my family every time. And made new friends in Finnish and other Asian from other Asian countries made friends and follow a new routine and took part in university activities and do voluntary things which helped me to feel comfortable more. (Student 5)*

*"Sometimes I listen to music. I'm a Christian, so I listen to Christian music or I watch a movie. I do love watching Korean movie and Chinese movie, sometimes even Indian movies, and that's how I relive my own stress." (Student 4)*

Over time, the majority of the students reported that such feelings decreased. They became less tense and were able to feel more at ease when they adapted to the surrounding world and built new patterns of living. Generally, the results show a high prevalence of the period of homesickness and stress during the first phases of adaptation, although the students were able to manage such issues using various coping strategies and to adjust to the new environment as time went by.

#### **4.2.4 Difficulty in finding part-time jobs**

Among most students, the basic challenge in the initial months of settling in the new country was getting a part-time job. Many of the interviewees said that they decided to work to fund their everyday needs, and the procedure of finding a job was more difficult and time-consuming than they had supposed it to be. The language requirement was cited as one of the reasons more than once. Most places of work favored employees who could speak Finnish, and therefore, the international students felt that they had very limited opportunities, particularly in the initial stages.

*"Here the unemployment rate is quite high and I have more than 10 years experience in my home country. Even though I had 10 years experience,*

*these people taking us as pressures, so It's quite difficult to find even an internship here. It's a big challenge." (Student 6)*

*"One thing we are facing here is the job search. You can say the job issues because of the language barrier, as we are unable to search the job. So I am just worried about this regarding my future." (Student 2)*

Other interviewees reported that they submitted numerous applications to jobs, but no response came, leading to disappointment and concern regarding their financial positions. Some students also reported being unfamiliar with the job application system, which further complicated the search.

*"When you apply for jobs and then they send you, unfortunately, unfortunately, unfortunately, it becomes demoralizing. Like it makes you feel so down. I remember I cried one certain time last year." (Student 4)*

*"I had so many stress about finding jobs that was the most mentally broken period, like very stressful period. And distressed because by rejecting when I apply every time, rejecting by rejecting every time. So it was really stressful." (Student 10).*

Yet, not everyone was able to experience the same. Some students even said that they could work part-time without good Finnish speech, particularly in areas where they could speak English. Such examples brought hope to others, but the majority of interviewees reported that they were still seeking employment at the time when the interviews were conducted.

*"I got a part time job in a restaurant. So it was like every day, six or seven hours. (Student 1)*

*"I became a student ambassador also at my University." (Student 3)*

*"Then I consider about that elder care home working job, so I learn so hard Swedish language. Then I got the job from that." (Student 10)*

The results show that part-time jobs were not readily available in the initial stages of adaptation. There were many interviewees who were still trying to find work, and only a few had employment already. Nevertheless, students reported that they had hope that their opportunities would be improved in the long term as they progressed in language and became better acquainted with the surroundings.

*"I have spent it almost one year here and then I have also spent a lot of experience through different activities. So I feel positive that I will get a good job and get a good position here." (Student 12)*

*"I hope I can build my future and more prepared in professional and personal challenges in here." (Student)*

#### **4.2.5 Challenges in building friendships with local students:**

Many students did not find it easy to adjust to the new social life. Some interviewees said that bonding into close relationships required time, at least in the early years after arrival. They usually found that people were less vocal and open than they were in their home countries, and thus, socially interacting was initially difficult.

To some, this variance initially made it seem that people were less friendly. Nevertheless, with time as they adjusted themselves in the new setting, they found themselves coming to the realization that this was mostly because of cultural differences and not because people were not being friendly to them. Back home, communication was more open and immediate, and here, the relationship would take a longer time to build. Due to this fact, a good number of students could find it easy to relate to other international students.

They had similar experiences of living in foreign countries and thus share with one another and speak more easily.

*"Finnish. Not yet, maybe they are much more comfortable in their own zone. They don't come out that easily. I worked with so many Finnish students, but it's not that easy to make friends with them. yeah." (Student 7)*

*"We are just you can say class fellows till the course we are doing in the university. After that, we don't have any...you can't see connection, any relationship with them. We just have to be in touch till the course were completed. I don't have any close friend that is Finnish. (Student 2)*

*"Finnish class fellows, but they are good. But we can't say that we become friends with them. But I have, with the time I have met very good people, Finnish people as well." (Student 9)*

*"I had a lot of connections with other international...so now, those are the good friends for me, but not any Finnish people." (Student 1)*

Language has also been cited as an aspect that affects social interactions. Although more people used English in their studies, it was not always possible to communicate beyond the classroom. This also discouraged some students as they attempted to initiate a conversation with the locals. Only a few mentioned that they were able to connect with local students.

*"Even if you try to make a friend and then unlike international students, once we become friends, everybody keeps in touch, asks about how you're doing, see if there's way to hang out and other. But the Finnish people, they find it difficult to do that, and it's not easy to communicate very well*

*with them because not all of them know how to speak English. And right now we are still learning their language." (Student 4)*

*"Usually they are more at the beginning.... They are politely are introverts....But after talking and after with the connections they are becoming friends... I have two 2-3 Finnish friends." (Student 11)*

In general, the results show that the process of forming friendships was slow. Though there were numerous challenges that arose for a lot of students, their experiences got better with time as they got to know more about the culture and day-to-day life.

### **4.3 Developing coping strategies and academic adjustment**

Students gradually became familiar with their academic and social environment after the first adjustment period. The overall experience of most students was reported as positive, particularly about the learning system. Though there were some differences observed initially, the same could not be considered significant challenges. With time, students got used to academic requirements and everyday living, students worked out their own means of coping with the new reality. The sections below demonstrate how the students adapted to the learning system, the experiences they had as international students, and the various forms of support and personal techniques that enabled them to go through the process.

#### **4.3.1 Academic adjustment and changes in learning style**

The academic system was one of the key aspects where students observed differences. Most interviewees said that the learning style was not identical to their home countries, and initially, it took some time to learn how the system functions. Specifically, students reported that they were supposed to learn more autonomously and become more responsible in their learning.

*"In our country, only two or three days before the final exam we used to study. Other than that, we are like no, there's no need to study because the final exam isn't coming. I can do that in two days. I can prepare for that. But in Finland you have to study continuously because every week there will be assignments. Every week there will be some project interviews, some project works with your teammates...it's in Finland, the study is a continuous process." (Student 1)*

*"It is more student centered and practical. So there is more emphasis on the independent research, teamwork and critical thinking. But I was, I was really surprised that calling...you know, professors on their name. I was really, I was really surprised because as I said in my country, we never call them in their name. We always call them respectfully, Sir, Madam. So it was quite, you know, unexpected and it was a bit uncomfortable for me. (Student 6)*

*"If you are busy in anything, even if it is voluntary work or any study project or other things like that, if you can keep yourself busy, then I think you can overcome those depressions." (Student 1)*

The students were supposed to be active during a lecture and independently learn, as opposed to systems that were more traditional. Some of them meant that they had to make minor changes in their study routines, which included group work, opinion sharing, and being more independent in their studies.

*"Back in my home country we followed like traditional way which is like teacher is going to teach and we learn and which was like exam based, completely exam based. We used to take lesson from the teacher and then*

*we learn and we go back and for we prepare for the exam. But here it's completely different." (Student 7)*

*"It's more flexible we could book our exam schedule as per we need. And yeah, that is the thing what is most flexible about this culture." (Student 12)*

*"Here it's focus on discussions, projects, and real-world applications. So, this helped me to develop critical thinking skills. Here in my home country, it's just a book reading, just that type of academic literature. But here we can put our theory into practice. That was the main thing that attracted towards the International Studies." (Student 11)*

But these differences were perceived in a positive way, mainly. The learning environment was supportive and flexible to the needs of many students. Gradually, they were convinced that this system was able to make them feel better about their confidence, communication, and critical thinking. In general, the results indicated that students adapted to the academic setting easily and considered the learning system helpful to their personal and academic growth.

#### **4.3.2 Perceptions of being treated as an international student**

Student perceptions were mostly positive regarding how they were treated as international students. Most of them believed they were treated at the same level in the study setting, and they did not feel significant difference from other students. Students felt comfortable because the university and the outside environment were usually described as respectful and inclusive.

*"No, no, no, no. I have never ever felt anything in Finland. you can see in my university, in my studies time. Never. I didn't face anything like that.*

*No differences. No, you can see good and bad. I see that everyone is treating us with the rest of the students equally." (Student 2)*

*"Generally, I felt respected and welcome by both student and staff." (Student 5)*

*"I don't think I particularly faced that situation because I found people here so friendly and then I also got some opportunities. So I don't think that I got some biased feeling from the people here just because I'm international." (Student 12)*

*"No, no, I did not feel treated and felt different. Teachers treat international and the local Finnish students equally." (Student 11)*

Simultaneously, some students said that there were moments when they felt a bit different than other students. In a new country and being surrounded by other people of a different culture at times gave one the impression of being an outsider. Some interviewees reported that this was particularly experienced in social contexts where they understood that their backgrounds and experiences did not match those of local students.

*"In university I have never felt differently treated or uncomfortable because the university environment is just superb and very helpful. But yes, in sometimes supermarkets or some places like I feel a little racism....As I said, I feel like the people judge you when you are different from them...That I feel, especially in supermarket." (Student 9)*

Moreover, other students described that these feelings were usually related to language or cultural differences instead of negative treatment. They were not directly excluded; only the new environment left them less confident in some circumstances. Overall, many

students feel comfortable in the new environment, even though a few struggle sometimes; this is due to the cultural differences.

*"No, no, I don't think I've felt differently. But then sometimes it feels like this, that people are quiet. So you may feel like they don't really want to talk to you or something. But then you have to understand it's how their culture is. Other than that, I don't think I've ever been treated badly. No." (Student 3)*

*"No not is a negative way, because here people, as I said, they are very polite and they are fair. But you know that sometimes the communication takes effort, but overall, the environment is really respectful." (Student 6)*

#### **4.3.3 Support from the university and teachers**

University and teaching support were also key factors in assisting students to adapt to their new academic environment. A lot of students said that they usually found their teachers approachable and friendly, to be able to communicate with them and seek help as necessary. This made the learning environment more comfortable, and this was particularly true in the initial phases of the adaptation.

*"The university and the teachers are very supportive, especially our course teachers they are all very supportive and are open to questions and providing clear feedback. That was very interesting. So this support helps me to gain confidence academically. That was too good." (Student 11)*

*"I have some issues. I'm unable to understand where I'm lacking, and then the teacher personally attend a Zoom meeting with me and explained all the problems to me in Christmas holidays. So that's a lot of guidance we can ask for. Not many teachers do that." (Student 9)*

*"I was in bit difficult situation with my mentality and they said do no need to worry, you can submit the assignment when you feel well...it was really helpful that teachers help." (Student 10)*

Another aspect that the students enjoyed was the organization of courses and the support offered to them during study. Access to course materials, instructions, and feedback helped them to better perceive academic expectations and manage their workload in a better way.

*"From my master's thesis, he is a very helpful person and he helped me to do may masters within few months and he graded me after uh few weeks when I submitted it. He's that best person I have ever met and taught. Other teachers are also approachable and supportive and the university offers academic guidance and student supportive service also." (Student 5)*

*"Teachers are very friendly and you can talk to them about anything at any moment and I'm grateful about that." (Student 7)*

*"Yeah, teachers here are very much cooperative. They are very much supportive. They understand our problems. They understand our problems. They understand the phenomena that how they would be at our ease. Maximum, the easiest level they can make for us, they can do here." (Student 2)*

Moreover, other students also stated that the university provided them with a number of support options, including academic advice and student services. Although not all people took advantage of the services, the users who did included these services in their comprehension of the system and adapted to university life. Altogether, the assistance

of the teachers and the university played a positive role in the experiences of students and made them feel more confident in coping with their academic tasks.

*"Actually like teachers, they are quite approachable, I would say, because they are willing to help anytime we ask them. And also university also provides like student support services, and we have the student union, which take care of the student matters and everything. Yeah, then I would say that is the thing that made easier about studying and the things that we didn't know. So they really helped." (Student 3)"*

*"Luckily I also got a chance for Erasmus exchange program and then I went for my exchange study for three months and then the subject was artificial intelligence. So I'm a business student, but then I enrolled to the artificial intelligence and then I moved to the digital world which was really a fascinating experience for me. And yes, that was the support. And then I also got some scholarship from that. Yeah, that's the support and thing I got from the university." (Student 12)*

#### **4.3.4 Personal coping strategies and motivation**

Many of the students reported a change in their attitude and confidence as they went through their studies. They were more independent and capable of managing daily duties on their own as compared to the start. Life in a new country meant that they had to solve their issues alone, and with time, this made them become stronger.

*"Yeah, it's easier because now I know how things are working and I've got used to it. Like I plan my studies better and also I'm doing activities to, in my leisure times. And then yeah, I would say I have like adjusted everything now. I understand how things work now." (Student 3)*

*"I made a lot of international friends, I think, and some are from international..... So yeah, gradually I'm trying to communicate with them and make a good friendship with them." (Student 12)*

*"I have made friends from different countries and also friends from Finnish and I participate in lots of voluntary things like workshops and I participate in Christmas parties here. From that also I made some good friends and my social life has improved and I feel more connected now with." (Student 5)*

In addition, having a positive attitude was observed to be a crucial step to winning challenges. Students added that being willing to have new experiences and accept challenges in the process is what helped them cope with change better.

*"Yeah, as the time is passing now, I'm just trying to adapt to the culture and then I'm just trying because language was the main barrier for me, so I'm learning the language and I'm trying to cope up with it. I'm just trying to adopt the culture and then I'm trying to adapt to the situation now." (Student 12)*

*"Things are a bit easier now, but they're not as easy as it can be, but we can't complain." (Student 4)*

*"I think, well, I used to, I got used to the daily lifestyle here and things are becoming manageable and I can understand the system like, nothing to worry." (Student 8)*

*"Now I feel more settled in this place and now I know the whole city where I am living, daily activities, studies and communication field means much easier compared to the first month." (Student 5)*

Students stated that they felt more confident both in academic and daily life as time went by. The challenging task during the initial stages turned out to be less challenging as they got familiar with the system and had experience in the tasks. The overall findings indicate that the adaptation process not only assists the students in adapting to the new environment but also assists them in developing independence, self-confidence, and future motivation.

*"I become confident in managing the studies and my daily life, so everything now feels more familiar and it's structured nicely." (Student 11)*

*"So many things are easier. I'm like adjusted and adapted with so many things, especially the academic thing, which is more independent here. I'm now ok with the thing that we have to do the group work in every course almost. And yeah, also the roads I know, now I can go anywhere for the shopping. Yeah, so many things have become easier over the time." (Student 7)*

#### **4.4 Long-term adaptation and personal growth**

Throughout their education, students had their experiences in terms of evident change in the manner in which they handled both their studies and day-to-day life. They reported being more stable and able to manage responsibilities on their own, as compared to the early stage. Although most of the positive changes were realized, there were some fears about future opportunities. These points are discussed more specifically in the following sections.

#### 4.4.1 Changes in personal attitudes after studying abroad

Students claimed that their personal attitudes changed significantly during their stay in foreign countries. Being in charge of all the academic and daily chores helped to build independence and increased responsibility. Many also thought of how they changed in relation to new situations. Exposing them to another cultural and academic setting made them open-minded and ready to accommodate other views. This experience helped them to be more tolerant and understanding in cases of unfamiliarity.

*"I have become more independent, confident, and probably organized because I improved my communication and critical thinking skills when I studied at this university and you know, communicate with people."*  
(Student 6)

*"Yes, in the very first month, then now we are in a good stable situation with my job. I feel like I'm secure. Here now. And feel more comfortable than past."* (Student 10)

*"A bit more independent, confident also, I am like I'm a little bit reserved person, so yeah. Like it helped me to become more in my analytical skills and the cultural communication and problem-solving activities improved significantly."* (Student 13)

Students also add that their confidence grew as they got to know their environment better. They had a better sense that could manage academic work, interaction with others, and make decisions independently.

*"Lots of positive change has come in me I think. I don't know, but I try to manage my time because we have to work in time and then schedule there. The time is much better valued here so, I become more punctual in everything what I do and then here honesty is practiced."* (Student 12)

*"I would like to mention that I especially learned to go by myself before I was dependent on my parents. We were living all together, but, yeah, now I'm much more responsible and do my own stuff and try to learn what's going on. And yeah, so I learned a few things and the social life is developing. So yeah, I have become more independent. So yeah, that's kind of positive change." (Student 7)*

*"I have become more independent. That was the main thing. I become more independent, also confident. I can handle challenges now more calmly. So living abroad has improved my adaptability and the strongest thing is the communication skill that was also improved." (Student 11)*

On balance, the results indicate that the experience of studying abroad led to certain significant personal changes. Students gained independence, were opened to thinking, and acquired confidence in handling various areas in their lives.

#### **4.4.2 Adjustment to life in a new environment**

The students reported feeling more stable in their everyday experiences as they advanced in their studies. They got used to the system, and academic works and daily duties became more manageable. They also became more comfortable in handling both study and real-life experience. Their routine, which involved activities that once demanded more effort, like learning about systems or routines, became part of their everyday life.

*"I become more independent and confident in everything and better to handle new challenges more than in first months." (Student 5)*

*"I think, you know, like how do we call it, like stepping out of the safe zone, become stronger, more patient and more resilient. Then, like we learn how*

*to grow, how to manage pressure and adapt to new environment. I should feel proud of me." (Student 8)*

This also involved the development of a sense of belonging for some people. Although not all felt this way equally, some students said that they were more connected to the world around them than ever. Meanwhile, some of them continued to have different moments, particularly in terms of social or cultural differences.

*"I feel confident like studying in Finland has brought a global perspective and prepared me for a leadership role. So yeah. I'm confident I think I'm getting it little by little, step." (Student 13)*

*" I think I was more confident and I what to say, it's globally aware. So studying in Finland and now in Germany has broadened my perspective actually. So I feel more prepared for an for an international career. We can say that like that for an international." (Student 11)*

*"Sometimes I got help from friends who are living here or the local people, so it was not that challenging, but it was successful, and I am adaptive and try to learn, try to get what's with the time, what's going on, I try to learn it." (Student 7)*

In general, it can be concluded that students were at the point where their everyday life became more stable and manageable, although not all students felt fully comfortable or belonged.

#### **4.4.3 Perspectives on future career opportunities**

Together with the personal development and adjustment, students also gave their insights concerning the plans after graduation. Most of them showed their interest in

remaining in Finland, all the more because they liked the standards of education and the living standards.

*"I stay motivated. I stay positive. yah, that's the thing which I keep in my mind. And then that will because when people become positive, that will always lead to good direction. And what I believe is that I will go to the good direction somewhere." (Student 12)*

*"I do because here we get to learn so many culture, people coming from different culture and we're learning so many things. So yeah, I think learned much more than before and yeah, I become much more confident, but we have to learn more the way to grow." (Student 7)*

Meanwhile, the issue of employment was frequently cited. Some of the students had a sense that employment may be difficult, primarily because of the language needs. Although they studied in English, they thought that knowing it was in Finnish would make them better off in the job market.

*"Sometimes I am confident, but due to the language barrier and a little bit of confusion, I feel I get confused that if there is any future for me there...so it's 50-50. But when you like meet people who are very good and motivate you to do something good, then you will feel like yes, you have some future there." (Student 9)*

*"I am not sure about that because one thing we are facing here is the job search. You can say the job issues because of language barrier, as we are unable to search the job.... So I am just worried about this regarding my future. Rest everything is ok." (Student 2)*

Other respondents also expressed their doubt regarding their future, stating that they were not certain of their ability to get appropriate opportunities once they had finished their studies. Nevertheless, there were also some positive students who could improve their language level and acquire more practice in order to have more opportunities.

*"That shocks because I still couldn't get a confident about the future because not about the studies, not about the family matters and everything, because here the unemployment rate is quite high." (Student 6)*

*"Not really....I try to becoming more confident in here. I try always and let's see how I can do my career. I don't know. I hope I can build my future and more prepared in professional and personal challenges in here." (Student 5)*

*"The job is an issue. I didn't have a problem with the job in the previous countries where I was staying, but coming here has been an eye opener. So yeah, if I'm able to get a job before I'm done with school, I will stay longer." (Student 4)*

*"Yeah, I think because as a nursing student, when I complete my studies and when I learn language more and very well, I think it is secure, and I can get good opportunities here." (Student 10)*

Students were also questioned during the interviews about what they would advise their fellow students. It was recommended by many that newcomers must be ready to face challenges in their initial stages and should not lose heart in case the initial months prove to be tough. They say that successful adaptation requires patience and the desire to learn.

*"I would say them to be patient because you know, everything takes time actually. So then to be patient and no to be so hard on yourself. And then actually it's okay to feel at lost first because you know it, it happens to everyone. But then get involved in like student activities and everything, it will make a change. (Student 3)*

*"I like to tell them be more open to new experience and participate in like all workshops, do volunteer things and don't hesitate to ask for help from supervisors, teachers and give yourself to adjust for the time. (Student 5)*

The interviewees also gave their views on how universities could assist international students. They said that additional employment information, learning a language, and living might make the process of adjustment easier, particularly in the initial months.

*"Maybe the university should give more chance at least for a student to like, you know they have some slot the internship at the university, but, very few slot...If the university can create more chance for international student to have the working experience here, then this would be great." (Student 8)*

*"I think they should arrange some cultural activities because I saw in the University very few. So if they want to adopt with new international students from all over the world, they should try to maintain every culture there...Like this, they should arrange more cultural activities, more sports activities, so that people can get together and spend time together to know each other, and they can, yeah, they can get opportunities to make new friends." (Student 1)*

In general, the answers indicate that despite the situation where the students had adjusted to the new environment, they still reflected on their future and what they had

learned throughout their time in the foreign country, and could give advice on how they could have done it.

#### **4.5 Summary of the key findings and the revised framework**

This chapter presents the key findings of the research, which are centered on how international students went through the process of adapting to their first academic year. The findings were categorized based on the main levels of the framework applied in this research: the first experiences, initial difficulties, changes, and adaptation during the long term.

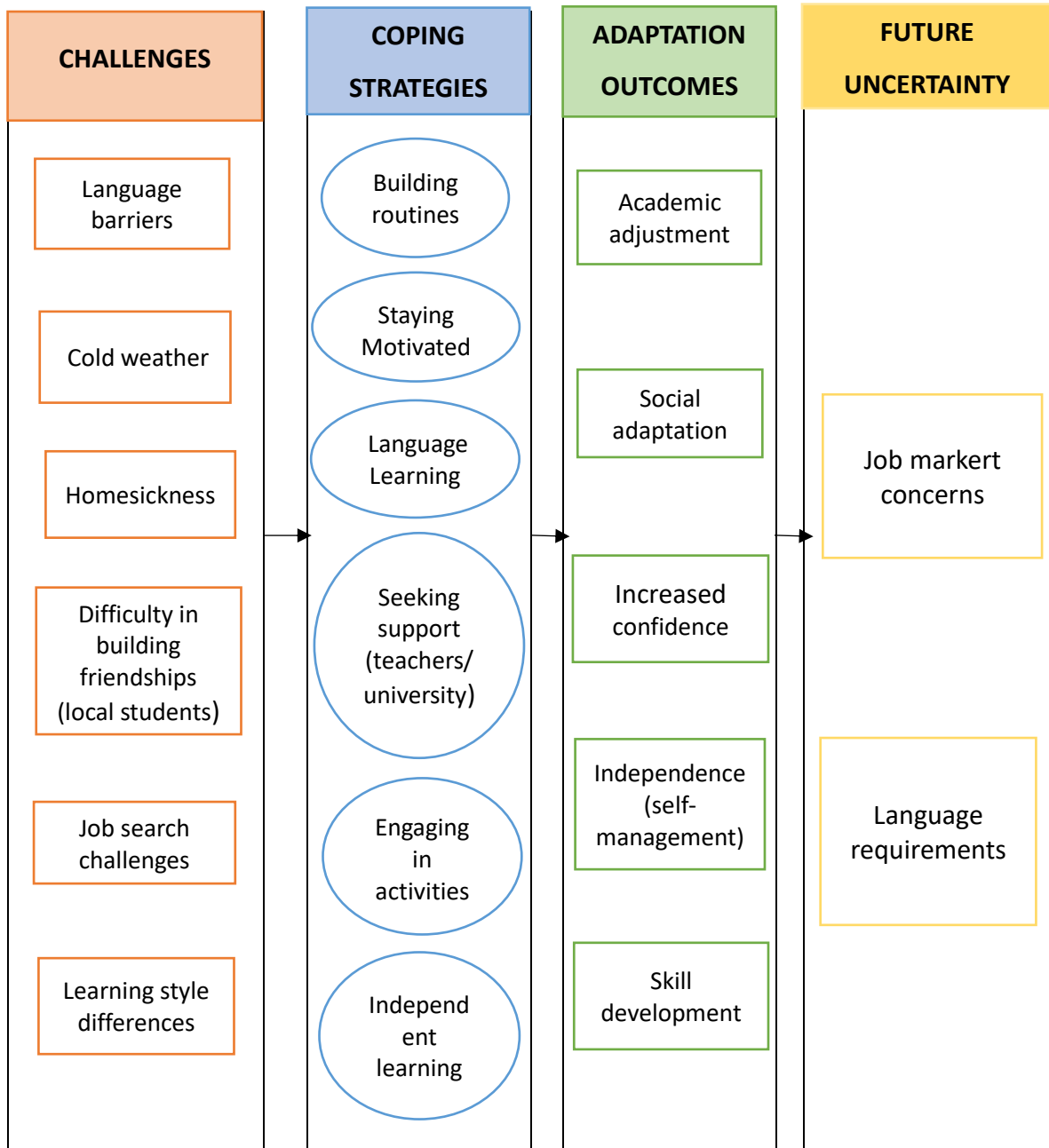
The results indicate that the majority of students began their experience with high expectations and anticipations regarding studying abroad. Nonetheless, this first step was also accompanied by a number of issues, including language barrier, weather, homesickness, and the inability to find employment on a part-time basis. Another fact that made social interaction difficult for some students was the difficulty in communicating and connecting with a new cultural environment.

Students who were still studying evolved to have various methods of handling these challenges. Even the academic system was mostly looked upon in a positive way, particularly in the content of teaching and learning on one's own. Teacher and university support were significant, and personal motivation and responsibility assisted students in their daily and academic lives.

Most of the students were reported to have made positive personal changes after surviving a longer time in the new environment. They also felt freer and more confident than when they had started, and the day-to-day life was a lot easier since they had become more at home with the surroundings. Although a number of the students integrated well, not all of them felt integrated to the fullest. Other interviewees still did not feel like local students, and many students had worries about their future careers. The most frequent concerns when considering life after graduation were language requirements and competition in the job market.

The results of this paper mostly reflect the theoretical framework illustrated in Figure 1, although a few changes had to be made in light of the interview findings. The second stage or the original structure was primarily oriented at the emotional stress; however, the interviews revealed that the students were also facing practical challenges like weather conditions and the inability to find a part-time job. Due to this reason, these factors were included in the updated framework. Secondly, the last step was not necessarily the full integration because some students remained unsure of their future. Thus, the final phase was changed to demonstrate long-term adjustment and self-development, along with the uncertainty of the future in terms of career prospects.

The updated structure in Figure 3 illustrates the process of adaptation as a gradual evolution in various steps. Students pass through the stages of early excitement, early troubles, and then adaptive learning, and then stabilize with a more stable stage that involves personal development plus future worries. The updated model is more representative of the actual experiences that the interviewees provided and demonstrates that the adaptation is complex and, as such, depends on academic, social, and emotional factors during the duration of the study.



**Figure 3.** Revised Theoretical Framework (International Student Adaptation Process)

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Theoretical contribution

The present study adds to the current literature on international student adaptation as it provides a better insight into how the process of adaptation changes during a single academic year. Some of the major challenges identified in the previous studies include acculturative stress, academic adjustment, and social integration (Aldawsari et al., 2018; Miao and Zhang, 2024). Nonetheless, this paper is based on such thoughts and demonstrates the evolution of these experiences over the years and their relation to one another.

To begin with, the results give a new understanding of the way the process of adaptation should be viewed, proving the fact that it is not consistent and linear. The existing models, like the U-curve and the J-curve, treat adaptation as a step-wise process. The U-curve implies that there can be a honeymoon stage and further cultural shock and subsequent adaptation, but the J-curve points to the fact that some people can experience problems at the very first stage and may not even feel an initial excitement (Dailey-Strand et al., 2021). The findings of this piece of research indicate that the experiences that the students go through cannot be completely described by one systematized model. Some of the participants explained that they had positive expectations at the start, whereas some said that they experienced challenges at the first moment of arrival. Such a difference implies that adaptation is influenced by personal situations and histories, so the process is more complicated than classical models indicate.

Second, the research makes a contribution to the body of knowledge concerning social and academic adaptation since the adjustment is not always accompanied by a full sense of belonging. Previous studies have placed an emphasis on how social networks and support systems can be used in an effective integration (Aldawsari et al., 2018; Kristiana et al., 2022). These results of the present research prove the necessity of these factors;

nevertheless, they also show that gaining confidence and independence does not always mean getting rid of the sense of difference. A great number of students reported feeling more at home in their setting, and at the same time, aware of their status as not entirely belonging to the local context. This shows that the adaptation process is both enhancing and restricting simultaneously, which implies that the full feeling of belonging might not necessarily be reached.

Third, the results provide a more in-depth insight into how students cope with issues as they focus on the changing coping styles. Students do not seem to use a specific or fixed solution, but instead they tend to modify their answer depending on their experience. In line with previous studies (Pinarbasi, 2023; Mesidor & Sly, 2016), the participants were adjusting their real-life routines using various types of support, personal habits, and feasible accommodations. But what becomes apparent in this research is that these strategies do not remain the same. Rather, they grow as students learn to be more at ease with their environment, and able to cope with the academic and personal demands. This strengthens the concept that the process of adaptation is not a result of one condition or resource, but an interaction between factors over time.

Lastly, the proposed study also adds to the existing body of literature by focusing on the little emphasis placed on the time aspect of adaptation (Miao and Zhang, 2024; Rienties et al., 2012). The study includes students who have had at least one academic year in the host environment, thus capturing changes that would be ignored in short-term research. The results explain that adjustment is not over after the initial adjustment, but a continuous reflection on future prospects. Particularly, some students also raised their concerns about the career opportunities, the language requirements, and the opportunities to find a job. This shows that adaptation is not limited to current experiences, but it is directly linked to the way students view their future and sustainability in the host nation.

On the whole, this paper is a contribution to the literature because it introduces international student adaptation as dynamic, non-linear, and continuous processes that depend on a variety of interaction factors. It shows that adaptation is not only a positive process but also a process that continuously challenges the individual, and that the full sense of belonging is not necessarily realized.

## **5.2 Managerial implications**

This study provides a number of managerial implications that can be of great importance to universities and other institutions of higher learning that want to assist international students to adapt within a period of one academic year. Since, as the findings reveal, the process of adaptation is gradual and continuous, including academic, social, and personal aspects, the institutions must offer consistent and properly organized assistance, but not only at the very beginning of the student's arrival.

First, universities must offer more formal academic and early-stage assistance to overseas students. The results indicate that several students experienced challenges in understanding the learning system, academic expectations, and daily learning needs during the first period. Though the students managed to adapt, in the initial stages, it was usually difficult. This implies that universities must increase orientation programs and academic guidance and offer their support throughout the first weeks. As an example, academic writing, classroom expectations, and independent learning workshops might assist the students to be more adaptive. Such organized assistance can make the life of students easier and enable them to feel more confident in their academic setting at the first stage.

Second, universities should become more involved in assisting social integration and providing international students with a sense of belonging. The results reveal that there were students who felt different or still not a part of the local environment even after the adjustment. This means that it is a social process and not an academic process. Universities can contribute to this by making sure that there is increased interaction

between international and local students. An example would be to arrange a mixed group activity, a peer mentoring program, and group projects to facilitate meaningful interactions. These programs are likely to decrease the sense of isolation and assist students in feeling more belonging as time passes.

Third, the universities are expected to care more about career and employment provision to international students. The findings show that a high percentage of students could not get part-time work, and this was primarily caused by language and a lack of jobs. The fear of their future career opportunities had been raised by other students as well. This proves that students need more practical help in this area. One of the roles that can be played by universities is to provide career advice, workshops on job search, and provide information on how the local job environment works. In addition, the universities can also integrate an internship subject as part of the academic course. This can help the students to get real-life experience, to learn how work is done in the new environment, and to have more confidence. It is also able to enhance their employment opportunities on completion of the course.

Overall, all these implications lead to the conclusion that international students should be offered greater and continuous assistance. Through academic support enhancement, promotion of social integration, and career preparation, universities can make the environment more inclusive and supportive of students so that they can better able to adapt and make their overall experience even more positive.

### **5.3 Limitations**

This research provides important information on the process of adaptation of international students during one academic year. Nevertheless, there are a number of limitations that must be considered when drawing the conclusions.

One of the limitations of this study is the small number of participants. The detailed results are based on 13 international students, and, thus, the sample size limits the scope

of the results. Although the method enables one to have an in-depth and rich insight into the individual perceptions, it is not intended to be applied to a broader population. A diverse group of participants could not be representative of the entire range of experiences of international students, in spite of the diversity of the group. Consequently, the conclusions can be regarded as context-dependent instead of general.

Besides, the information is based on self-reported experiences and perceptions of the participants. Although interviews were very rich and meaningful, the responses are based on how individuals recollect and share their experiences. Participants can underline some of the challenges more than others, and some aspects can be left out. Therefore, the results are subjective and might not be able to describe the complexity of the process of adapting.

The other limitation is associated with the time frame of the study. It concerns the experiences of students in a single academic year, and this is valuable in demonstrating how adaptation changes as time passes. Adaptation is, however, a continuous process that does not end at this stage. The long-term adjustment, career development, and future planning issues can become more pronounced in the future and are not considered comprehensively in this study.

Lastly, the research mainly addresses the opinion of international students and fails to include the opinion of university personnel and support services. Although the student perspective is the focus, incorporating these other perspectives would have provided a more extensive understanding of the institutional support system and the possible ways of enhancement.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for future research**

This research has indicated that there are a number of directions in which future research on international student adaptation can be directed.

A direction that would be important is to have a more diverse sample of participants. Engaging students who may belong to various cultural groups, academic fields, and study stages might be more informative about the process of adaptation. This strategy can also be used to determine the similarities as well as significant differences in how students adapt to new environments.

Also, some comparative viewpoints might be helpful. The study of the experiences of international students in various countries or institutions can be used to describe how cultural, social, and institutional influences contribute to the adaptation process of students. It is also necessary that future research should examine adaptation in the longer run. This research is limited to one academic year, which cannot fully represent the ongoing nature of adjustment. A longer period of observation may be useful to have a clearer insight into how students experience and cope with challenges.

Finally, future research can focus on the efficacy of university support services. As this research demonstrates the relevance of academic support, social networks, and access to information, it may be beneficial to determine what forms of support are most beneficial to universities to offer to international students to enhance their services.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview questions for students

#### PART 1: Arrival & Initial Excitement (Month 1)

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and what made you choose to study abroad (Finland)?
2. How did you feel when you first arrived in Finland?
3. What were your first impressions of the university, the people, and the learning environment?

#### PART 2: Early Challenges & Culture Shock (Months 2-4)

4. Did you face any difficulties in the beginning, such as with language, studies, or daily life?
5. Have you experienced stress or homesickness?
  1. **What were the main sources of that stress?**
  2. **How did you cope with it?**
6. Looking back, what do you think was the most challenging part of your first months here?
7. Did you notice any cultural differences that were hard to adjust to?
8. Did these challenges or cultural differences affect your emotional or mental well-being in any way?
9. Have you ever felt treated differently or uncomfortable because you are an international student? (Only if you feel comfortable sharing.)

#### PART 3: Adjustment & Daily Life (Months 5-8)

10. How have things changed for you since those first months? What started to feel easier?
11. What do you think of the teaching and learning style in this country compared to your home country?
12. How do you manage your studies and time now? Has it become easier than before?
13. Have you been able to make some friends with Finnish or international students? How has your social life developed?
14. Have you joined any orientation, mentoring, or supporting services? Were they helpful?

**PART 4: Stabilisation & Growth (Months 9-12)**

15. What kind of support have you received from your university or teachers?
16. What helps you stay motivated and comfortable when things get difficult?
17. What positive changes do you notice in yourself after living and studying here?
18. How do you see yourself now, after almost one year here or more than a year? Do you feel more confident about the future?

**PART 5: Reflection & Advice**

19. Looking back, what advice would you give to new international students who are about to begin their studies abroad?
20. And what advice would you like to give to the university?

## Appendix 2. Summary of Interview Participants

Participant	Nationality	Study Program	Level of Study	Duration in Host Country	Interview Duration (mm: ss)
Student 1	Bangladesh	Business	Master	1.5 years	32:24
Student 2	Pakistan	Business	Master	1 year	22:43
Student 3	Sri Lanka	Energy Technology	Bachelor	1 year	19:43
Student 4	Nigeria	Nursing	Bachelor	1.5 year	40:50
Student 5	Sri Lanka	Business	Master	1 year	17:50
Student 6	Sri Lanka	Business	Master	1 year	23:15
Student 7	Bangladesh	Business	Master	1 year	23:07
Student 8	Vietnam	Business	Master	1.5 years	23:50
Student 9	Pakistan	Research	Master	1.5 years	21:06
Student 10	Sri Lanka	Nursing	Bachelor	1.5 years	30:29
Student 11	India	Business	Master	1 year	15:30
Student 12	Nepal	Business	Master	1.5 years	23:48
Student 13	Nepal	Business	Master	1.5 years	19:12