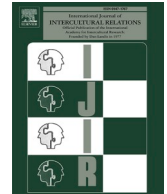




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# A stepping stone to the “West”: Academic adaptation of international students from post-Soviet countries in Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

The study aimed to investigate the academic adaptation experiences of international students from post-Soviet countries in Hungary. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 international students from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, studying at an institute of higher education in Hungary. We used reflexive thematic analysis to explore the adaptation experiences of the international students and to analyze a relatively large dataset. Three themes were generated: (1) From the post-Soviet to the “Western world”; (2) Comparison and contrast; and (3) Managing in an unknown academic environment. The results show that push-pull factors affected the international students’ decision to study abroad. International students consider Hungary as a “transit” country — an “affordable stepping stone” from which to look for future educational or job opportunities in other Western countries. Our findings also emphasize the importance of cultural distance in the institutional context of post-Soviet countries and Hungary.

## Introduction

Hungary is becoming a popular choice of destination among international students. According to the Hungarian Education Authority (Oktatási Hivatal, 2019), there were 36,090 international students in Hungary in the 2019/2020 academic year. The ratio of international students was 3.9 percent in 2006, and it was more than doubled in ten years by the impact of the Hungarian policy “Opening to the East” (Lannert & Derényi, 2018). Following the launch of the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship program in 2013, there was a perceptible increase in the number of international students in Hungary from post-Soviet countries (Samokhotova, 2018).

There is a vast amount of research on the adaptation of international students in Western countries (e.g., Brisset et al., 2010; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Sumer, 2009), while little is known about the adaptation of students from the post-Soviet states, especially in the countries such as Hungary, which has only recently become a relatively popular destination country. Studies in this field are extremely scarce, even though 8 percent of all internationally mobile students globally are from post-Soviet countries (Chankseliani, 2016). Most of the existed research on the adaptation and acculturation processes of individuals from the post-Soviet countries was conducted with immigrants (e.g., Michel et al., 2012; Tartakovsky, 2012).

This article extends the assessment of academic adaptation of an underrepresented group, exploring the experiences of

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international students in adapting to both a new academic environment and a new socio-cultural context in a foreign educational institution.

### Comparing the academic context of post-Soviet countries and Hungary

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the shared legacy of Soviet rule continued to affect the economic structure, cultural and ethnic diversity, demographic trends, and the educational systems of post-Soviet countries to varying degrees (Huisman et al., 2018). Soviet ideology had a big impact on the pedagogical culture of post-Soviet countries, and remnants of the former Soviet education system persist in some countries even today (Malinauskaite, 2016).

As part of the Eastern bloc, Hungary endured the Soviet Union's interventions in terms of policy and the economy for 45 years. Participation in the Bologna Process in 1999, and the European Union (EU) accession in 2004 had a big impact on Hungarian higher education, resulting in academic cooperation and the formation of new academic networks (Pusztai et al., 2016). Due to the new educational strategies, the EU structural funds, and scholarship programs offered by the government, Hungarian higher education has taken a significant step in the internationalization process and international student mobility over the past decades (Lannert & Derényi, 2018).

Previous studies on differences or similarities between educational systems of Hungary and post-Soviet countries were mixed. According to Orosz and Perna (2016), the Eastern bloc countries were not officially integrated into the Soviet education system, as was in the case of post-Soviet countries, however, their higher education systems still share certain characteristics. Traditional teaching methods and educational programs with subject-centered curriculums are still preserved in many post-Communist settings (Chank-seliani & Silova, 2018; Khavenson & Carnoy, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). Focusing more on inbound mobility, Hungarian higher education is less concerned with providing quality services to international students who are already studying in Hungary (Lannert & Derényi, 2018). As these authors mentioned, the main problem of Hungarian higher education is being too subject-oriented, where mostly lecture-style teaching prevails. However, Samokhotova (2018) highlighted the different academic cultures in post-Soviet countries and Hungary, the latter having adopted more Western norms. She found differences in the use of administrative systems, new e-learning platforms, grading systems, teacher-student interaction, and easy access to mobility programs.

As one of the Central-Eastern European countries, Hungary became an “academic mediator” or in other words “the region in between” East and West (Pusztai et al., 2016). Tempted by full scholarship programs initiated by the Hungarian policy “Opening to the East”, more international students come to study in Hungary from post-Soviet countries. In the current study, we would like to investigate the academic adaptation of international students from post-Soviet countries in their transition to the academic environment of Hungary.

### Conceptualizing adaptation

In the acculturation framework, acculturation pertains to cultural and psychological changes that result from intercultural contact (Redfield et al., 1936), while as an outcome of these acculturation experiences—adaptation refers to “the degree to which individuals can establish a new way of living” in a host cultural environment (Berry, 2019, p. 29). Searle and Ward (1990) distinguished two types of adaptation: psychological and sociocultural. The former can be explained in stress-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the latter is grounded in a culture-learning framework (Argyle, 1969). Both forms of adaptation have been studied with many factors (e.g., life satisfaction, coping strategies, cultural distance) and across varied cross-sectional studies (e.g., Brisset et al., 2010; Chirkov et al., 2007; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Sumer, 2009). However, the academic adaptation of international students to higher education received less attention in comparison to counterparts (Zhou et al., 2008), thereby leaving some questions unclear. For example, how do academic cultural distances impede or enhance the process of academic adaptation? What is the impact of previous study experiences on academic expectations?

Academic adaptation is the extent to which students successfully cope with educational demands and the degree of satisfaction in the academic environment (Baker & Siryk, 1999). Several factors affect the process of academic adaptation, including individual differences between both teachers and students, and situational factors (Zhou et al., 2008). Motivational factors are another determinant of the adaptation process (Berry, 1997; Chirkov et al., 2007) since it is important to investigate the initial motives and expectations of international students to better understand their appraisal of academic performance and development. Motivation to study abroad predicted the academic activity and academic success of international students and is associated with indicators of adaptation (Chirkov et al., 2007).

According to our literature review, very few studies investigated academic adaptation within the broader ecological contexts of intercultural contact and most studies focused only on the intrapersonal processes of the individual. Nevertheless, the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) has been used as a general framework for studying acculturation (Stuart & Ward, 2016; Wang et al., 2014). It is grounded in the concept that acculturative changes take place within various ecological systems that overlap and create a group of influencing factors on the individual. These contextual factors “set the scene and define the operating parameters”, which can increase or decrease the likelihood that an acculturating individual will adapt well (Stuart & Ward, 2016, p. 674). The conceptual framework for this study was informed by Ward and Geeraert's (2016) model of ecological context. In line with this model, adaptation and acculturation processes are influenced by several contextual factors of both home and host cultural environment—familial, institutional, and societal contexts. In the current study, we will focus more on the institutional context, especially on cultural distance in the academic and socio-cultural environment of different educational institutions.

In the institutional context, the prestige and economic conditions of universities, teaching methodologies, classroom practices, and

teachers' and peers' support are essential parts of the adaptation process (Karim & Hue, 2022). A large comparative meta-analysis study found the factors that greatly influence the learning experience of international students in 96 institutions. These are the quality and expertise of lecturers, their teaching ability, academic content, and organization of the course (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Environmental factors of the university campuses were associated with the adaptation of international students and showed considerable correlation with psychological well-being, social connection with the hosts, academic stress, and discrimination experience (Wang et al., 2014).

### Academic cultural distance

The fast-growing number of international students shows that all the more newcomers have to face new social and educational regulations, cultural and behavioral differences in new intercultural educational settings. Both teachers and students have become aware that pedagogical and learning differences in one's culture compared to another culture also should be considered (Zhou et al., 2008). Cultural beliefs and values about how to teach and how to learn, different preferences, and pedagogical expectations about teacher and student roles, which are defined as the concept of "cultures of learning" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997), have an important effect on academic adaptation. Zhou et al. (2008) have adopted this model to focus on the academic adaptation of international students and highlighted academic cultural differences between a home-host educational environment. In our study, we have addressed the academic cultural distance between post-Soviet countries and Hungary.

Many international students from post-Soviet states may find it challenging to study abroad since the Western teaching style differs from the style inherited from the Soviet education system. Western pedagogy and curriculums are designed according to Western cultural assumptions and priorities of specific countries (Lee, 2005). This may create enormous challenges for international students who need to adapt academically to "Western-centered thinking", and to teaching methods that are unfamiliar in terms of their cultural expectations (Newsome & Cooper, 2017). Cultural distance makes it more difficult to cope with challenges and to adapt successfully (Berry, 1997). In the literature, there are very scarce studies available on cultural distance between different institutional contexts. However, a survey study in Hungary revealed that not the perceived academic cultural distance but the cognitive appraisal of it, in particular, the reported emotions related to it, predicted the academic adaptation of international students (Nguyen Luu, 2019).

Even though Hungary is a Western-oriented country in terms of its educational system, it would rather be perceived as a country somewhere in between East and West. Possible similarities and/or differences in the institutional context and common political past between Hungary and post-Soviet countries may provide a clear illustration of the impacts of the contextual factors on the academic adaptation of international students.

### The academic adaptation of international students from post-Soviet countries

An earlier study investigating Russian students in Finland revealed that the students had difficulties adapting to a new pedagogical culture and teaching methods. In a series of interviews, academic staff mentioned weaknesses in critical thinking, challenges with writing skills, and examinations among the Russian students (Huttunen, 2000). On the other hand, students complained about the lack of support from academic staff and unclear instructions regarding the principles of education in Finland.

Findings with Russian students in the Netherlands revealed problems connected to the learning and teaching methods at the university, difficulties related to language proficiency, and undertaking research projects (Tompoidi, 2016).

Russian students in France found it difficult to adapt to the French education system due to the learner-centered approach that gives students certain independence, compared to the teacher-centered approach prevalent in Russia (Sablina & Kopyatina, 2013). The French teaching methods are perceived as being intensive, requiring time-management and self-organization skills on the part of the students.

Research on Russian-speaking international students in Hungary revealed a perception of differences in terms of rules, regulations, and study organization (Samokhotova, 2018). Hungary might be a rather "loose culture" in comparison to post-Soviet countries, and the international students might experience more freedom in academic settings.

Given the paucity of studies on academic adaptation among international students from post-Soviet countries, it is important to promote a deeper understanding of the academic adaptation experiences of students in a foreign institutional context. In adaptation literature, it is necessary to expand research beyond studying the personal factors of international students. It is essential to focus on the wide range of contextual factors, thereby removing the sole responsibility from international students for their adaptation processes. The present study involved participants from several post-Soviet countries, to provide a broader view of academic adaptation among international students. The theoretical framework of Ward and Geeraert (2016) informs our study and serves as an organizing principle. We began the investigation with three questions: (1) What motivational factors contribute to the decision of international students from post-Soviet countries to study in Hungary? (2) What are the lived experiences of international students from post-Soviet countries in the transition to the academic environment of Hungary? (3) How do international students experience and perceive the academic culture of Hungary in relation to their previous academic experiences?

### Methods

Since qualitative research allows a more in-depth analysis of participants' life experiences (Ponterotto, 2010), semi-structured interviews were used to explore the academic adaptation of international students from post-Soviet countries. As we had a relatively large dataset and our analytic interest was in the personal experiences of international students in a new institutional context, we

used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). This approach reflects the values of qualitative research and is centered on the researchers' subjectivity as well as the importance of deep reflection on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Another reason for using thematic analysis was its flexibility and an advantage in highlighting similarities and differences across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Participants

Purposive sampling was used and participants were recruited via personal invitation as well as via advertising on social media. Participants had to be a citizen of one of the post-Soviet countries and had to have lived in Hungary for at least six months prior to the study. All the international students were enrolled in a Hungarian institute of higher education or had graduated within the previous year. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution.

The final sample comprised 42 international students (23 males [55 percent] and 19 females [45 percent]) from Kazakhstan ( $n = 20$ ), Azerbaijan ( $n = 9$ ), Georgia ( $n = 8$ ), and Moldova ( $n = 5$ ). Participants were between 19 and 33 years of age ( $M = 22.9$ ;  $SD = 3.17$ ). Participants had been residing in Hungary for between six months and three years for educational purposes. Most of the respondents reported being single ( $n = 34$ ), while the rest reported being in a relationship ( $n = 6$ ) or married ( $n = 2$ ). Eighteen participants were identified as undergraduates, and 24 were graduate students (the majority doing a master's degree) in Hungary. To ensure respondents' anonymity, all names in this report are pseudonyms.

## Procedures

Data collection took place between June 2019 and April 2020. The interviews were conducted in English and Russian by the first author, both in-person ( $n = 37$ ) and online ( $n = 5$ ). Each interview lasted between one and two and a half hours.

Participants provided their informed consent and completed a demographic questionnaire before the interviews. In the case of five participants, the interviews were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These five participants completed the demographic survey using Qualtrics software and submitted the informed consent form by e-mail. Each participant received an individual identification code to ensure the anonymity of the data. All interviews were recorded digitally.

During the interviews, participants were asked to provide information concerning their socio-psychological adaptation, their academic adaptation, the education system, teaching and learning methods, assignments, teacher-student interaction, administrative issues, behavioral norms, success in their studies, socialization at university, student support services, coping strategies, discrimination issues, and their appraisal of their stay in Hungary.

## Data analysis

Data were analyzed using guidelines on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). Within the thematic analysis, we used a critical-realist approach, which assumes the existence of a reality, and participants' interests, culture, and language would be one of the factors, which represent this reality (Ussher, 1999). Transcription and analysis were performed by the first author, in discussion with the second author.

A six-phased method of thematic analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used—being familiarized with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing initial themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

Firstly, we listened to the interviews several times before the transcription process started. Interviews conducted in English were transcribed immediately, while interviews conducted in Russian were translated into English and transcribed simultaneously. In the first phase, each transcript was checked and read to get familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Repeated reading of the transcriptions helped us to search for patterns within the data through prolonged engagement. In the second phase, initial codes were generated from the data, focusing on semantic meaning. The data were analyzed using the inductive analytic approach, with a focus on broad thematic patterning throughout the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We generated initial themes from the coded and collated data. At this phase of analysis, we already had a collection of potential candidate themes. In the next stage, a set of potential themes was reviewed. The extracted codes for each theme were read and compared to see if they formed a coherent pattern. Potential themes were reviewed, discussed, and checked with the second author. All themes were refined, defined, and named. We tried to identify the essence of each theme and to understand what aspects each theme represented. The last phase was to report on three initial themes.

## Results

Using reflexive thematic analysis, we generated three initial themes within the data: (1) From the post-Soviet to the "Western world"; (2) Comparison and contrast; and (3) Managing in an unknown academic environment. Each initial theme contained the selected participants' responses, illustrating the content of each theme in detail.

### From the post-Soviet to the "Western world"

This broad theme reflected various push and pull factors affecting the decision of international students from post-Soviet countries to study in Hungary. Factors that attracted them to another country or encouraged them to leave their home country were the main

motivations for applying to study abroad. This theme was divided into two subthemes: (1) Why study abroad? and (2) An affordable stepping stone.

#### Why study abroad?

Many of the international students from the post-Soviet countries reported the following reasons in the institutional contexts of their home countries as the main push factors: the poor quality of education, low-quality teaching, irrelevant curriculums, lack of technical support, and the absence of updated materials. Some students mentioned fewer opportunities to secure an internship and obtain practical experience.

*We are coming from a post-Soviet country, and our education system did not change much from the Soviet era. All materials used in our universities were outdated. (Aziz, Azerbaijan)*

Faced with rapid economic and political changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union, governments have been trying to transform their higher education systems to reflect modern needs and provide good-quality education. However, most of the students stated that there is currently a shortage of professional teachers and that the remnant of Soviet education persists.

*The education system in Kazakhstan is constantly changing and it lacks a lot of professionals who can deliver the new system in a good way. (Aisha, Kazakhstan)*

Several statements referred to the socioeconomic and political factors affecting international students:

*I studied at one of the best universities in Azerbaijan. We had some changes in the university because of political issues. International professors were sent away, and then the situation became worse. I did not want to study there and tried to look for study opportunities abroad. (Isa, Azerbaijan)*

In terms of pull factors, many students mentioned that studying abroad provides many advantages and great prospects for their future. The main reasons stated for studying abroad were the quality of education and a European diploma. Acquiring in-depth knowledge and practical skills increases the chances of getting a prestigious job.

*A full degree program abroad will look well on your CV and you will have more opportunities for your future employment. (Makpal, Kazakhstan)*

Intercultural experience and making new connections were further reasons for studying abroad, while other benefits included improving intercultural skills, adaptability, and tolerance. This suggests that personal growth and development are important reasons that prompt international students to apply abroad.

*The big gain is becoming more experienced and skilled, being aware of the things happening. Also, to expand your connections and personal development as well, not just educational. (Makpal, Kazakhstan)*

Some indicated the opportunity to conduct research and engage in science. Students applying to master's and doctoral programs were particularly excited about developing their ideas or projects.

*The research directions that I saw on the website were especially interesting for me. I learned that they work on the human microbiome, which is my favorite topic. (Elene, Georgia)*

Ainur from Kazakhstan mentioned the Stipendium Hungaricum program as another motive for studying in Hungary, as it covers most of the expenses of international students. Opportunities to get a full scholarship are rare, and the selection process is highly competitive in many post-Soviet countries.

Several participants were encouraged by positive feedback from peers and friends already studying in Hungary.

*A friend of mine, who is studying her second year in Hungary, said that it is a pretty good place to study. (Ainur, Kazakhstan)*

Several students reflected that studying abroad improves their career prospects. In a competitive economic environment, employees with an international degree and experience are more valuable.

*I wanted to gain a lot of experience, learn more, and come back with a degree abroad, which is considered more valuable in Georgia. (Meri, Georgia)*

#### An affordable stepping stone

Most international students from the post-Soviet countries considered Hungary to be a starting point for their future education and career. Many participants reported that they had never planned to study in Hungary. However, compared to the education available in their home countries, a European diploma and the scholarships provided by the Hungarian Government were attractive.

*I never looked into Hungarian universities. But one day randomly at my school, we had visitors that were advertising the scholarship in Hungary. It was perfect, all the costs are covered. I decided to try and if I don't like it, I can always come back. (Tamari, Georgia)*

Transitioning into a Western-style education system caused difficulties for international students. Believing Hungary to have been

impacted by the Soviet education system, many did not expect it to be completely different. One individual indicated a belief that these impacts would make the process of adaptation easier.

*I knew that it will be a mixture of European and the post-Soviet education system, not as Western Europe. I thought that my transition to Hungary would be easier in terms of mentality. I saw only the positive sides of studying in Hungary. (Victor, Moldova)*

We found that the international students regarded Hungary as a “transit” country that would open up educational or job opportunities in other European countries. The same participant saw Hungary as a country of “departure” from which to look for other opportunities after graduation:

*Besides the quality of education, I have a point from where I can start and find some other opportunities afterward. (Viktor, Moldova)*

Some international students considered Hungary as one of the best destinations for young people in terms of comparative living costs and its wide choices of entertainment. However, these participants reported that they would be looking for more advantageous countries for their future career prospects and professional development.

*Hungary is a good place to spend youth. After 25 years you have different goals, you want to have a career and achieve something. I think Hungary does not have those opportunities. Later, I will go to some developed countries in Europe. (Isa, Azerbaijan)*

### Comparison and contrast

This broad theme encompassed perceived differences and similarities between the two institutional contexts. It consists of three subthemes: (1) More freedom, more responsibility; (2) More equal relationship with teachers, but also lacking personal engagement; and (3) In the light of the Western-type school.

#### *More freedom, more responsibility*

Many of the international students described Hungarian education as autonomous, while in most post-Soviet countries the teacher-oriented learning system still prevails. An autonomous learning system gives students freedom and flexibility in the learning process and allows them to work at their pace. There are major differences between the two institutional contexts in terms of their structure and organization of studies, as well as concerning academic regulations.

*The main difference is that you are more autonomous. There is no strict monitoring on how you do your performance. You're responsible for yourself, that's why you need to be disciplined. (Makpal, Kazakhstan)*

Several students mentioned the advantage of being able to choose courses and create a timetable, which is not common in universities in their home countries.

*You have more freedom in choosing your courses, timetable, and exam period. You have more freedom with decision-making. In Moldova, you have a plan that needs to be followed. (Sofia, Moldova)*

According to the students, attendance is more flexible in Hungary, while in their home countries attendance is mostly mandatory. This can also be explained by the autonomous learning system in Hungary, which gives students greater freedom and independence. One participant reported:

*In Azerbaijan, it's mostly mandatory to attend the lessons, whereas in Hungary you may have a little bit of flexibility. (Vahid, Azerbaijan)*

Another main difference was in the grading system. Unlike in the post-Soviet countries, in Hungary, you either collect points throughout a semester or have a final exam at the end of the course.

*At my university in Georgia, we had a daily assessment of the knowledge. We got grades every day. (Ana, Georgia)*

There is a greater emphasis on developing practical skills in Hungary, while in their home countries education is more concentrated on theory, which may indicate the persistence of Soviet-style education.

*We have a huge amount of practice and tasks to do in Hungary, while we learn more theory in Azerbaijan. (Sevda, Azerbaijan)*

Many students stated that the courses are well organized, allowing them to participate in class discussions in Hungary. Course requirements and assignments are more difficult, which demands preliminary preparation and the completion of tasks on time.

*They have a European attitude. Lecturers send us materials in advance for a future discussion on the lecture. I like it because you are involved during the process, compared to Georgia. (Ana, Georgia)*

#### *More equal relationship with teachers, but also lacking personal engagement*

This subtheme reflected perceived differences in teaching, such as teacher-student interaction, knowledge delivery, and the role of the teacher in the learning process. In an autonomous learning system, the teacher acts mostly as a facilitator and students take

significant responsibility for what and how they learn. As one participant from Moldova put it: “Professors are just part of the teaching process in Hungary.” Some students expressed dissatisfaction in this respect, compared to their experience in their home countries where a traditional learning system largely prevails. The teacher takes an active role in the learning process by directing the students.

*In Hungary, professors behave like they don't have to explain everything in detail. If I miss something, it becomes difficult for me. Then teachers don't care about my interest and motivation. But, in Azerbaijan, they tried to create an interest in their subject. (Aslan, Azerbaijan)*

Additionally, some participants reported disappointment in the lack of an interactive environment during classes:

*I have the impression that some lecturers just want to do their job and go away because we have some classes which are not interactive. (Meri, Georgia)*

The international students saw their relationship with their Hungarian professors as merely formal, compared to their home countries, where teacher-student interaction was sometimes more important than the academic environment, and where they were closer to their professors.

*We are more bonded to each other because of our culture. We may go to drink coffee or tea with teachers from my previous university. In Hungary, I haven't witnessed it so far. But, when I have a question to ask, teachers are always happy to assist. (Vahid, Azerbaijan)*

Furthermore, there was a possibility to negotiate academic regulations in their home institutions, where exceptions were sometimes made for students. Students reported that the teaching and administrative staff valued the flexible application of rules and placed greater emphasis on relationships to provide support and help for students.

*You can talk to the administration and lecturers in Georgia. They will accept your situation and will try to help you by creating an environment for you. For example, if you cannot attend the exam in Georgia, you can negotiate it with the lecturer. They will let you write it earlier or later. In Hungary, it's impossible. (Natela, Georgia)*

Participants reported that there was a stricter hierarchy among professors in the post-Soviet countries compared to Hungary and that the kind of student behavior acceptable in Hungary would not be acceptable in their home countries:

*Our professors have a higher hierarchy and we can't behave as Hungarians do in lectures. We don't call professors by their names or we can't eat at the lectures. (Sofia, Moldova)*

Many students reported having to make an appointment with their professors in Hungary, who keep office hours, while the system was more flexible in their previous universities. However, one advantage of studying in Hungary, according to the students, was that they felt more relaxed when communicating with their professors:

*You don't have to keep very formal or worried about being judged. Here's easy to communicate with your professors. (Tamari, Georgia)*

#### *In the light of the Western-type school*

Depending on their previous educational setting, the international students had come with different expectations of Hungarian education. Some participants in our research had studied at prestigious private universities in their home countries. They perceived no differences between the two education systems or even reported dissatisfaction with the quality of education in Hungary. A few students mentioned that the courses were disorganized and not interactive.

*The quality of education in my previous university was much better than in Hungary. Not every university has the same quality of education in Azerbaijan because my university was a private one. (Shamil, Azerbaijan)*

In contrast to the other international students, participants who had attended elite universities were disappointed with the quality of teaching and the English language proficiency of professors in Hungary. They compared the professors at the Hungarian institutes of higher education with their previous professors, who were native speakers from Western countries, and used this as a reference. This suggests that they expected the same level of English proficiency and that comparison played a significant role.

*All my previous professors were foreigners from the USA, Ireland, and England. But some professors in Hungary don't speak English well. They usually forget some terminologies or words in English. (Askar, Kazakhstan)*

A few of the participants perceived the impact of the Soviet system on education in Hungary, a country that was part of the Eastern bloc. Such impacts are apparent in the educational program and the organization of studies. Compared to others, some participants perceived a smaller cultural distance between the two institutional contexts due to their perception of the impact of the Soviet system.

*Hungary was part of the Soviet bloc and even the study program is the same as in Russia. I think it's some circumstances of being under the Soviet bloc. So, we have some slight differences and similarities. (Askar, Kazakhstan)*

Some students were disappointed that their expectations were not met concerning the education system, the organization and management of studies, and teaching methods.

*My expectations got destroyed a little bit in Hungary and I saw a different reality. I was disappointed after my first semester, especially with the quality of education. I expected the classrooms to look different, the way of teaching, and the teaching methodology to be more advanced. (Stefan, Moldova)*

### Managing in an unknown academic environment

This broad theme reflected the challenges and difficulties that international students faced in adapting to a new institutional context. Participants described their experiences while studying in Hungary. The theme consists of two subthemes: (1) Facing differences and (2) Feeling out of a place where Hungarian is spoken.

#### Facing differences

Adaptation to a new academic environment was perceived as a challenge by some participants, while others reported it as an advantage that would hone their academic skills. Despite some participants being satisfied with the quality of education and the method of teaching, many respondents faced challenges, reporting difficulties in adapting to a new education system, such as dealing with differences in assignments and requirements and adjusting to new teaching methodologies.

*Challenge is adapting to a different study environment. Being asked to do stuff differently than what you have been doing before. (Lali, Georgia)*

Some students complained about the poor curriculum and unclear requirements during courses and exams. Not all the international students were familiar with using e-learning platforms, which caused additional difficulties. Participants suggested organizing a meeting before the start of their studies, where clear instructions would be provided.

*I wasn't familiar with a new system, which was different. Later, I learned the requirements and adapted. (Fatma, Azerbaijan)*

A few participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with the management and organization of studies. Students were unable to register for some required courses because of limited places, which interfered with their study plans. Others were disappointed with the administrative system at the university.

*My university is very disorganized. Sometimes we have problems with the course registration because of the limited places for students. If you go to the international office, they try to solve the problem, but they don't even know what's happening inside the faculty. It's really problematic in this bureaucracy. (Aidar, Kazakhstan)*

Coming from a different institutional context and a lack of practical skills caused difficulties for many international students.

*Although we had a good program in Georgia, that background was not enough for me. I had to learn a lot of extra materials to keep up with the pace. I felt out of place in the academic environment. (Natela, Georgia)*

Participants stated that different educational backgrounds should be taken into account by the university and recommended that extra hours be allowed for preparation.

*They should consider that we have different backgrounds. Sometimes we don't have a foundation for some courses at university. (Sevda, Azerbaijan)*

Feelings of sadness and regret at the beginning of their studies, as well as other negative emotions, were reported by participants. A few of the students mentioned loneliness, homesickness, and stress due to their studies.

*I'm not confident anymore. It's too much stress to participate in harder class discussions. In Georgia, I was always in the center and confident. (Ana, Georgia)*

This may suggest that some international students experienced a loss of status in adapting to a new institutional context. Those who had a high subjective social status at their home universities may experience lower levels of well-being in Hungary.

#### Feeling out of a place where Hungarian is spoken

This subtheme reflects challenges owing to the language barrier and the negative feelings that international students experienced in Hungary. Some participants felt unwelcome because of the non-English-friendly environment at the universities. Students complained that news related to social activities was sent in Hungarian, which the international students could not read, so they preferred simply to ignore it. Students' complaints also included the fact that menus and posters in the cafeteria were in Hungarian and staff did not speak English.

*We don't feel very secure and welcome. Why do they give us scholarships and don't provide us with an English-speaking environment? (Sofia, Moldova)*

English is the main language used in the lectures and seminars, although Hungarian is still an important tool of communication on the campus, thus the international students felt isolated and found it difficult to adjust to the university community.



*The language is a big barrier. I have started working on my thesis in the research laboratory. Even though the supervisor and the head of the laboratory speak to me in English, the whole day I am alone and feel isolated because everyone speaks Hungarian. (Meri, Georgia)*

Studying separately from Hungarian students makes it even harder for international students to become deeply involved and communicate with local students. Membership in many volunteers and organizational groups at the university requires knowledge of the Hungarian language, and students hesitate to ask for help or participate in events. To solve such problems, participants suggested mixing classes with Hungarian students, organizing more English-friendly events, and improving mentor programs in Hungary. Many international students would like to learn Hungarian but cannot afford to pay for expensive courses. Participants suggested providing more opportunities to learn the Hungarian language.

## Discussion

We investigated the academic adaptation experiences of international students from post-Soviet countries in Hungarian higher institutions. Since there is scarce literature available on this group of international students, our study can fill this gap and contribute to the existing literature. First of all, we wanted to see what motivational factors impacted the decision of international students to study in Hungary. Participants reported poor-quality education as one of the push factors, including irrelevant curriculums, low-quality teaching, and a lack of updated study materials. Limited opportunities to do an internship and get practical experience and a lack of technical support were also reported as push factors. A few of the students indicated that socioeconomic and political factors had affected their decision to study abroad. The research carried out by [Tran \(2019\)](#), supported our findings that push factors among students included mainly social and political motives, such as dissatisfaction with the quality of life and poor-quality education.

Pull factors for studying abroad included quality education, a European diploma, scholarships provided by the Hungarian government, and practical skills that improve the chances of getting a prestigious job. [Lányi and Pozsgai \(2016\)](#) also found that educational factors, such as the high quality of the education, the reputation of the university, and a degree issued by an EU member state, are the main motivations for international students to study in Hungary. The positive international experiences of family members and encouragement from peers were additional pull factors. [Michael et al. \(2004\)](#) found largely similar results, reporting quality of education as the main reason given by students for studying abroad, while recommendations from friends and relatives were found to be the second most important motivating factor.

Our results contribute to the knowledge by emphasizing the importance of a specific understanding of post-Soviet versus “Western” worlds in the adaptation literature of international students. The results showed that in the perception of the interviewed students, “post-Soviet states” and their educational system at one end of an imaginary axis were contrasted by the “Western world” and its educational system on the other. Hungary is in between, although closer to the “Western world” with promising future prospects. Studying in Hungary is being seen as an “affordable stepping stone” for their educational or job opportunities in more developed Western countries afterward. Compared to the academic and socio-economic environment in post-Soviet countries, Hungary and the potential opportunities it brings seem to be perceived by international students as a better choice. In migration literature, it is very well known that people make use of a particular transit country for a short period to enter their country of destination. However, international students stay for longer periods for academic purposes and look for other opportunities after graduation. In terms of cognitive appraisal ([Lazarus & Folkman, 1984](#)), international students may consider studying in Hungary as less challenging than a Western-type education but more beneficial than studying at home.

In the ecological framework ([Ward & Geeraert, 2016](#)), our study emphasizes a need to investigate not only the contextual background of the hosts but the country of origin as well. International students come to study in Hungary from different educational backgrounds, bringing with them different sets of references. Some of the participants in our study had previously studied at private universities that offer a Western-style education. Their perception of the institutional contexts of the Hungarian higher education was opposing to that of those participants who studied previously at the universities that still have features of the post-Soviet system. Participants who had studied in private universities were not satisfied with the organization of courses and the quality of teaching in Hungary, stating that education was better at their previous universities. They compared the professors in Hungary with their earlier professors, who were native speakers from Western countries. International students seemed to expect the same level of English language proficiency from professors in Hungary, and the comparison was significant for them. According to [Holliday \(2006\)](#), the ideology of native-speakerism creates a sharp distinction between native English-speaking and non-native English-speaking teachers, leading to a questioning of the skills of the latter.

Our study contributes to the literature, by studying cultural distance between the two institutional contexts of Hungarian and the post-Soviet countries’ higher institutions since academic cultural distance has received little attention in research studies. It is also important to see how international students perceive the cultural distance between the academic and socio-cultural environments of home-host universities. Our participants perceived the Hungarian higher education system as having a relatively more student-centered approach, giving students greater autonomy and freedom over the learning process compared to the post-Soviet education system. Major differences were found in the structure and organization of studies in Hungary, as well as in academic regulations. Flexibility in terms of attending courses and creating timetables was another difference. For example, Russian students in France had difficulties stemming from the academic cultural distance between the Western-style and Russian education systems ([Sablina & Koptatina, 2013](#)). Having the freedom to choose courses and having greater independence from teaching staff are features not found in post-Soviet education. In Hungary, there is a greater focus on developing practical skills compared to many post-Soviet countries. Students have access to research tools, databases, and new methodologies. However, new teaching and learning methods, the use of a different language, and a lack of practical experience caused difficulties for many international students in terms of their academic

adaptation. Similar results were found among Russian-speaking students in Hungary and the Netherlands, where the difference in the institutional contexts resulted in challenges for students (Samokhotova, 2018; Tompoidi, 2016). Nevertheless, the recent study on the adaptation of international students from post-Soviet countries in Hungary found that the international students from post-Soviet countries had fewer difficulties in academic performance, power relations, affiliative relations, and cultural understanding compared to those international students who were from other countries of origin (Yerken et al., 2022). These results demonstrate that the institutional context from where international students come from needs to be investigated more because their previous educational settings can vary considerably.

Reviewing past literature on the effects of cultural distance on the academic adaptation of international students, we understood that we are in a difficult position to find applicable previous research studies. As one of few exceptions, a study found that some groups of international students in the Netherlands experienced personal-emotional and social difficulties in their academic adaptation because of the cultural differences (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

We found that some of our participants experienced a loss of status in performing in a different language in their new academic environment, which affected their well-being. Status loss can negatively impact the performance quality among high-status individuals, resulting in the experience of greater self-threat (Marr & Thau, 2014).

Teacher-student interaction and the role of the teacher in the learning process may play an essential role in academic adaptation. Some participants in our study were dissatisfied with the autonomous learning system, in which the teacher acts as a facilitator, unlike their experience in their home countries where the teacher plays an active role in the students' learning process. This finding is consistent with the results of studies of Russian-speaking students in France, Hungary, and Finland, where the students were disappointed with the inadequate assistance provided by the academic staff and their unclear instructions (Huttunen, 2000; Sablina & Kopiatina, 2013; Samokhotova, 2018).

Participants in our study reported having only a formal relationship with the teaching staff in the academic environment. Teacher-student interactions had been closer in their home universities, where academic staff "cared" about their students. International students from post-Soviet countries might expect paternalistic leadership behavior from teachers in Hungary, in which benevolence is combined with strong discipline and power distance (Farh & Cheng, 2000).

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2011) differentiated cultures into specific versus diffuse cultural dimensions based on how separate is someone's work and private lives. We can assume that Hungary is seen as a more specific culture where people tend to keep their private and work lives separate and can work without overlapping them. Many post-Soviet countries may have more diffuse cultures where people are prone to see their private and work lives as being interconnected. Our participants seem to believe that a strong teacher-student relationship is crucial for better academic outcomes and may expect caring attitudes from teachers.

Close teacher-student interaction is very important for international students. Studies have shown that international students in the USA valued professors who "cared" about the students, where "caring" can be interpreted as "being available, working with students and showing patience" (Ku et al., 2008). A close relationship and interpersonal caring are appreciated in collectivist societies (Hofstede et al., 2010). According to Hofstede (1986), individualism versus collectivism and power distance dimensions strongly determine teacher-student interactions. Our participants came from relatively highly collectivist societies, compared to Hungary, which is an individualistic society with a score of 80, meaning a preference for a loosely-knit social framework (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hungary scores low on the power distance dimension (a score of 46) compared to Kazakhstan (88), Moldova (90), Azerbaijan (85), and Georgia (65). This may explain why the students in our study found it easier to communicate with the professors, compared to their home countries.

Some participants stated that teacher-student interactions were sometimes placed ahead of the academic environment in their home countries. Academic regulations could be negotiated and certain exceptions made to support and help students. This may be explained by the universalist-particularistic cultural dimension of Trompenaars's model, in which particularistic cultures value the flexible application of rules depending on circumstances and relationships (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2011). The aforementioned findings highlight how cultural and behavioral differences in educational settings are important for international students' academic adaptation in a new institutional context.

## Limitations and future implications

The fact that the interviews were conducted in English may have limited participants' ability to fully share their personal experiences, especially if their level of proficiency in English impeded the discussion of individual issues.

The responses of the five participants who were interviewed online due to the outbreak of COVID-19 may differ significantly from those of the other participants, since the pandemic may have impacted their mental health and the adaptation process.

The present study has several implications for future research. It contributes to the limited literature on academic adaptation among international students from post-Soviet countries, providing findings peculiar to this underrepresented group. Very few studies investigated academic adaptation within the broader ecological contexts of intercultural contact. Our study highlights the perceived cultural differences and/or similarities between the institutional contexts of post-Soviet countries and Hungary. Several international students who had attended prestigious private universities or international branch campuses in their home countries had particular expectations before starting studies in Hungary. This calls attention to the importance of investigating more the educational settings where international students come from.

In the existing literature on the adaptation of international students, the question of cultural distance is significant and has been investigated on several occasions. However, academic cultural distance has received little attention, while our data indicate that international students consistently compare the two education systems. For some international students, it is challenging to adapt to

the new academic environment and socio-cultural context of the host educational institution. Moreover, our study was the first to draw attention to the importance of the post-Soviet versus the West dimension. The results showed that international students from post-Soviet countries might have an imaginary axis of “post-Soviet states” and “Western world”, where Hungary is perceived to be in between, although closer to the end marked by the “West”, whereas post-Soviet countries stand at the opposite end.

We suggest conducting quantitative research, involving more subjects, to explore the relations between various influencing factors and the academic adaptation of international students.

Universities are greatly encouraged to provide a more English-friendly environment and/or opportunities to learn the Hungarian language. It may also be beneficial to create mixed groups of international and Hungarian students to facilitate communication with local students. We also recommend the improvement of mentoring programs and the development of English-friendly organizations in Hungarian institutes of higher education. Teaching and administrative staff are encouraged to focus on the cultural sensitivity and concerns of international students.

## Author notes

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