From the European Dream to the Cultural Bubble: A Qualitative Examination of Kazakhstani Students' Adjustment Experiences in Hungary

Aigerim Yerken*[ID], Lan Anh Nguyen Luu**[ID]

In the extensive literature on adjustment and acculturation, cultural distance has emerged as a topic of increasing interest among researchers. While many studies have traditionally focused on the intrapersonal processes of individuals undergoing adjustment, there has been a notable gap in research examining the broader ecocultural contexts of intercultural contact. The present research aims to further fill this gap by focusing on the adjustment experiences of Kazakhstani students within a Hungarian context. We used semi-structured interviews with 20 Kazakhstani students, complemented by an ego network questionnaire, to examine social contact preferences. Through these methods, we sought to explore how individuals from a non-Western country navigate the challenges and opportunities of adjusting to a relatively Westernised environment. Our study highlighted significant perceived differences in cultural aspects, gender roles, relationship ties and family values between the two countries. Most participants essentialised their ethnic identity and preserved their ethno-cultural heritage in the private domain of their lives, such as marriage and family. Perceived cultural differences and limited contacts with their hosts might explain why most participants in our study prefer friendships with co-nationals.

Keywords: Kazakhstani students, Hungary, cross-cultural adjustment, ecocultural context, social contact, ethnic enclaves

* Doctoral School of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. Address for correspondence: yerkenaigerim@gmail.com.
** Institute of Intercultural Psychology and Education, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. Address for correspondence: lananh@ppk.elte.hu.

Introduction

Embarking on the journey of studying abroad opens up a realm of possibilities for international students. However, moving from one country to another involves substantial changes in their original ways of living (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001). These changes necessitate profound adjustment in their psychological, sociocultural, emotional and academic aspects (Duru and Poyrazli 2011). The success of this process depends not only on the features of the culture of settlement but also on the culture of origin (Ward and Geeraert 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the adjustment patterns of students, which vary depending on the unique influences of both host and home cultures on the adjustment process.

Hungary is gaining in popularity among international students as a host country. The ratio of international students within the total student population in Hungary was 7.25 per cent in 2013, rising to 9.94 per cent in 2016 (Oktatási Hivatal 2016). By 2019, the share of international students had reached 13.48 per cent. Between 2013 and 2022, the ratio of international students nearly doubled (Oktatási Hivatal 2022), increasing from 7.25 per cent to 14.39 per cent due to the impact of the Hungarian policy 'Opening to the East' (Lannert and Derényi 2018). In 2013, the Hungarian government established the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship (SH) programme, with the aim of attracting thousands of international students each year to study tuition-free at Hungarian higher-education institutions. Following the launch of the SH programme, there was a perceptible increase in the number of international students in Hungary, especially from post-Soviet countries (Samokhotova 2018). According to the Hungarian Education Authority (Oktatási Hivatal 2020), there were 37,925 international students out of a total of 287,493 students in the country during the 2020/2021 academic year. This number rose to 41,730 out of a total of 289,991 students by the 2022/2023 academic year, reflecting a growth of approximately 10 per cent (Oktatási Hivatal 2022). The upward trend continued in 2023/2024, with 43,137 international students recorded among a total student population of 310,414, representing a further 3.4 per cent increase in the number of international students compared to the previous year (Oktatási Hivatal 2023). This figure continues to rise annually, driven by the increasing interest and popularity of this programme.

According to the latest data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Kazakhstan sent 89,292 students abroad in 2019, an increase of nearly 14.11 per cent compared to the 78,253 students sent in 2015 (UNESCO 2019). Nevertheless, research on the adjustment and adaptation experiences of Kazakhstani students is very limited, with many of the previous studies focusing on repatriates, migrants and short-term exchange students from Kazakhstan (Bokayev, Zharkynbekova, Nurseitova, Bokayeva, Akzhigitova and Nurgalieva 2012; Valieva, Sagimbayeva, Kurmanayeva and Tazhitova 2019). A significant number of studies have explored the political, economic and educational changes that have taken place in Kazakhstan since the fall of the Soviet Union, while research identifying and describing Kazakhstani students' adjustment and adaptation experiences in the host country has been lacking.

With growing interest in the choice of Kazakhstani students to study in Hungary, we can observe different contextual features as well as similarities between both countries which may influence the adjustment process and its outcome. First, the shared legacy of the communist regime affected the economic structure, cultural and ethnic diversity, demographic trends and educational systems of Kazakhstan and Hungary to varying degrees (Huisman, Smolentseva and Froumin 2018). According to Orosz and Perna (2016), the Eastern bloc countries were not officially integrated into the Soviet education system, as it was in the case of post-Soviet countries; however, these countries still have similar features not only in their economy, politics and culture but also in the common characteristics in higher-education systems which they share. Traditional teaching methods and educational programmes with subject-centred curricula are still preserved in many post-communist settings (Chankseliani and Silova 2018; Khavenson and Carnoy 2016; Steiner-Khamsi 2006). On the other

hand, Samokhotova (2018) highlighted differences between the academic cultures of post-Soviet countries and Hungary, the latter having adopted more Western norms. Kazakhstan and Hungary are geographically distant. Moreover, the two countries exhibit contrasting climatic and environmental conditions. Culturally, Kazakhstan is a collectivist society compared to Hungary, which is an individualistic society with an individualism index score of 80, indicating a preference for a loosely knit social framework (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010: 95). Given the significant differences in geography, climate and cultural orientation between Kazakhstan and Hungary, it is worth noting that both countries are members of the Turkic Council. This latter, officially known as the Organisation of Turkic States, is an intergovernmental organisation that aims to promote cooperation between Turkic-speaking countries in various fields, including politics, economics and culture (Organisation of Turkic States, n.d.). Kazakhstan is one of the founding members, while Hungary joined as an observer member in 2018, meaning it participates in activities but does not have voting rights.

Consequently, considering the impacts of the shared legacy of the communist regime and possible cultural differences and/or similarities between Kazakhstan and Hungary, Kazakhstani students in the Hungarian context were chosen as target participants.

Theoretical background

The present research was guided by the theoretical frameworks proposed by Ward and Geeraert (2016), as well as Schartner and Young (2016) which delineate cross-cultural adjustment as a dynamic and evolving process. The theoretical framework by Schartner and Young (2016) encapsulates the entire process of the 'international student experience' and clearly differentiates between 'adjustment' and 'adaptation' concepts. The term 'adjustment' pertains to the process of change experienced by an individual, while 'adaptation' refers to the outcome or result of this process. Methodologically, 'adjustment' can be tracked over time using qualitative methods, while 'adaptation' can be assessed through various outcome measures (Young and Schartner 2014). Given that our study is primarily qualitative and explores participants' lived experiences, we applied the concept 'adjustment' throughout the manuscript in explaining our study's findings.

Ward *et al.* (2001) divided the process of adjustment into two broad dimensions, which are related but conceptually distinct: psychological and sociocultural. Sociocultural adjustment refers to how well an acculturating individual *does* in the host society while psychological adjustment refers to how well an acculturating individual *feels* in the host country. Previous studies have shown that it is justified to add an academic adjustment when studying international students in a host country (Yerken and Nguyen Luu 2022; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping and Todman 2008). Psychological adjustment can be explained in the context of stress and coping theory, which considers coping resources as emotional and problem-focused efforts to manage stressful situations (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Sociocultural and academic adjustment is typically viewed through the lens of culture learning and social skills, which assumes that cross-cultural difficulties occur because students struggle to learn social skills and culture-specific knowledge which would enable them to fit into a new academic and sociocultural context (Argyle 1969; Ward *et al.* 2001).

Furthermore, Schartner and Young's (2016) theoretical framework distinguishes between contributory factors that significantly impact on international student adjustment: 'pre-sojourn' and 'in-sojourn' factors. Pre-sojourn factors encompass aspects like knowledge about the host country, language proficiency, prior overseas experience and motivation for studying abroad. Earlier studies reported that 'pre-arrival' factors have a significant impact on an individual's adaptation potential (Young and Schartner 2014; Young, Sercombe, Sachdev, Naeb and Schartner 2013). On the other hand, in-sojourn factors include social contact with host nationals and/or other international students, as well as social support. Social contact was found to be a significant 'in-sojourn' factor especially for the outcomes of the adjustment process: academic, psychological and

sociocultural adaptation (Szabó, Papp and Nguyen Luu 2020; Ward and Szabó 2019; Young *et al.* 2013). Having more friends from the host society fosters sociocultural and psychological adaptation by providing opportunities for culture learning and stress reduction (Cheung and Yue 2013; Geeraert, Demoulin and Demes 2014; Wilson, Ward, Fetvadjiev and Bethel 2017). Being socially connected only with one's co-nationals was associated with reduced sociocultural adaptation as it limits one's opportunities for culture learning (Geeraert *et al.* 2014).

In accordance with the framework of Ward and Geeraert (2016), the process of 'change' takes 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 and Ward 2015: 674). Ward and Geeraert (2016) defined *familial*, *institutional* and *societal* dimensions which exert an influence on the process of adjustment within both the home and the host cultural environments. Understanding the nature and attributes of the heritage and settlement cultures, along with their compatibility, is very significant. Greater cultural distance not only complicates the integration process but also heightens acculturative stress, thereby affecting psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Benet-Martínez 2012; Ward 2001; Ward and Geeraert 2016). In this paper we primarily focus on the institutional and societal levels, which underscores the significance of cultural distance within the educational and sociocultural environments of both host and home countries.

Ward and Geeraert (2016) criticised the fact that very few studies investigated adjustment and adaptation experiences within the broader ecological contexts of intercultural contact; most studies focused only on the intrapersonal processes of the individual. They suggested that the impact of cultural distance between the heritage and the host cultures – as well as their distinct contexts – on cross-cultural adjustment, warrants critical re-examination, with the inclusion of a broader range of cultures. There is very scarce research available on the adjustment experiences of Kazakhstani students in a host country. Recent research on the academic adjustment of international students from post-Soviet countries in Hungary highlighted the importance of considering not only the contextual factors of the host country but also those of the country of origin, as international students come from diverse contextual backgrounds (Yerken and Nguyen Luu 2022). Another study on international students from post-Soviet countries in Hungary revealed that the students had fewer sociocultural difficulties in academic performance, power relations, affiliative relations and cultural understanding compared to those international students who were from other countries of origin (Yerken, Urbán and Nguyen Luu 2022). These results may reflect the impact of cultural distance and historical political parallels between host and home countries on students' adaptation. A previous study (Samokhotova 2018) conducted on Russian-speaking international students in Hungary identified that, in comparison to students from other post-Soviet states, Kazakhstani students reported a relatively significant cultural distance between Kazakhstan and Hungary.

The present research endeavours to further fill this gap by focusing on the adjustment experiences of an under-researched group – precisely Kazakhstani students in a Hungarian context. We believe that it is important to investigate the adjustment of students from non-Western countries studying in a relatively Westernised context. A previous study demonstrated that students from post-Soviet countries perceived an imaginary axis of 'post-Soviet' versus 'West' dimension, where Hungary was seen as 'in between', though closer to the 'Western world' compared to post-Soviet countries (Yerken and Nguyen Luu 2022: 191). Considering certain similarities in politics and education in the past between Kazakhstan and Hungary, as mentioned above, we aim to study the impacts of possible cultural differences and/or similarities on the adjustment process of our participants within a broader ecocultural context. Thus, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges and strategies associated with international students' journeys in a new academic and sociocultural environment. Furthermore, students from Kazakhstan

came from a relatively highly collectivistic society compared to Hungary, meaning the greater importance of community and interpersonal relationships (Hofstede *et al*. 2010). Social contact with co-nationals was found to be one of the essential factors in cross-cultural adjustment (Szabó *et al*. 2020). Therefore, it is important to explore Kazakhstani students' social-contact preferences in a new academic and sociocultural context and their role in students' adaptation.

We began our investigation with three research questions: (1) How do Kazakhstani students experience the process of adjustment to new sociocultural and academic contexts in Hungary? (2) How do international students perceive and experience cultural distance in their transition to Hungary? (3) What are the social-contact preferences of Kazakhstani students in Hungary and what are the reasons behind them and their consequences regarding the adjustment of these students?

Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with Kazakhstani students to investigate their adjustment experiences in Hungary. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke 2020). We also used an ego network questionnaire (Fischer 1982) to examine the social-contact preferences of Kazakhstani students in Hungary. Approval for the research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the university to which the authors are affiliated.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study via social media. We used snowball sampling to reach the target population. Inclusion criteria were being an international student from Kazakhstan and having resided in Hungary for at least 6 months.

Twenty Kazakhstani students (11 males and 9 females) took part in the semi-structured interviews in Hungary. Participants were between 19 and 29 years of age and the length of residence in Hungary was between 9 months and almost 3 years for educational purposes. Most of the students reported being single (*n* = 17)*,* while three reported being in a relationship. Participants included international students doing Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees in Hungary. Characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Procedure

Data were collected between June and December 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic started. Participants were interviewed in person in Kazakh, Russian or English, depending on their language preferences. Interviews conducted in Kazakh or Russian were translated into English for further analysis. In order to avoid power distance and linguistic domination in the researcher–researched relationships (Andrews, Holmes, Fay and Dawson 2019; Holmes, Fay, Andrews and Attia 2013), acknowledging multiple languages at play and empowering participants' voices were important. Utilising the multiple languages enabled us to engage deeply with our interviewees, resulting in richer data generation. This approach facilitated a more comprehensive expression of the participants' experiences, allowing them to convey their thoughts and emotions in their full richness. Additionally, it fostered a relational space characterised by collaboration, trust and mutual respect between the researchers and the participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample Including Gender, Age, Length of Residency, Marital Status, University Degree Level, and Major (*N* = 20)

No.	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Length of residency	Marital status	University degree level	Major
1	Askar	Male	27	9,5 months	Single	MSc	Mechanical Engineering
2	Zhanar	Female	24	2 years	Single	MSc	Applied Linguistics
3	Fariza	Female	20	10 months	Single	BSc	Psychology
4	Aizere	Female	21	1 year	Single	BSc	Psychology
5	Mariyam	Female	21	1 year and a month	Single	Bsc	English and American studies
6	Aizhan	Female	27	1 year and 9 months	Single	PhD	Education
7	Perizat	Female	26	2 years and a month	Single	PhD	Computer Linguistics
8	Hadiya	Female	29	2 years and 3 months	Single	PhD	Education
9	Sardar	Male	19	9 months	Single	BSc	English and American studies
10	Aisha	Female	27	1 year and 9 months	Single	MSc	Central European Studies
11	Yernar	Male	23	1 year and 8 months	Single	MSc	Mechanical Engineering
12	Dariya	Female	22	1 year and 3 months	In a relationship	MSc	Environmental Engineering
13	Ali	Male	24	1 year and 9 months	Single	MSc	Computer Science
14	Amirkhan	Male	25	1 year	In a relationship	MSc	Chemistry
15	Murager	Male	19	1 year and 9 months	Single	BSc	Technical Management
16	Akan	Male	23	10 months	In a relationship	MSc	Engineering Management
17	Bek	Male	19	1 year and a month	Single	BSc	Psychology
18	Mukhtar	Male	20	2 years and 9 months	Single	BSc	Management in Business and Diplomacy
19	Alan	Male	21	2 years and 9 months	Single	BSc	International Relations
20	Sultan	Male	19	2 years and 9 months	Single	BSc	International Relations

The researching-multilingually approach, as highlighted by Holmes *et al.* 2013; Holmes, Fay, Andrews and Attia 2016, presented both opportunities and challenges for us, particularly since neither the researchers nor the participants had English as their first language. One significant challenge was the doubling of the workload due to the presence of multilingual datasets, necessitating translation into English for analysis. Moreover, software limitations in handling multilingual data added further difficulties to the process. To address these challenges, the translation approach involved ongoing dialogues between the researchers and continuous review of the translated transcripts. This ensured accuracy and fidelity to the original meanings conveyed by the participants. Importantly, consulting with the participants during the translation process helped to maintain trustworthiness in representing their experiences accurately. Additionally, during the member checking process, the researchers collaborated closely with each other to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Participants gave their informed consent and completed a demographic questionnaire. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was recorded digitally. The interview questions covered topics such as cultural distance, social support, various aspects of identity, previous intercultural experience, acculturative stressors and daily difficulties, adjustment, acculturation orientation, stress and coping and an appraisal of the student's stay in Hungary.

After the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to complete an ego network questionnaire. Ego network analysis was applied to determine the prevalence of social contacts among international students in Hungary. Moreover, it allowed us to understand general patterns in our participants' social networks and their relation to the students' adjustment experiences in Hungary. We used the 'name generators' tool, in which international students were asked to identify and give a pseudo-name to a specific person in three different situations. The 'name generators' tool is the most effective method of identifying an individual's social networks and it was based on the method developed by Fischer (1982). We identified networks of social contacts in three different situations: sharing the most important issues in the last 6 months; organising programmes and free time; and getting help with solving smaller or bigger difficulties in everyday life.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using the guidelines for conducting reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2020). Atlas.ti 9 Mac software was used for the coding procedure. The transcription and analysis of the data were performed by the first author, in discussion with the second author.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that one of the ways in which researchers can convince a reader about the worth of a study is trustworthiness. They proposed that the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability define the concept of trustworthiness. In the present study, to fulfil Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness, we followed a step-by-step approach during each phase of thematic analysis, which was offered by Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017). We followed a six-phased method in thematic analysis, which was originally proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). These six-phased steps are the following: being familiarised with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing initial themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

Firstly, we checked and read each transcript to familiarise ourselves with the depth and breadth of the content and identify items of potential interest. Initial codes were generated focusing on semantic meaning. We inductively analysed the data, concentrating on a broad thematic pattern throughout the coding process. Once all the data were coded, initial themes were generated from the collated data. We incorporated themes that were particularly rich and multifaceted, ensuring that they could encapsulate the central ideas of the data and convey the narrative effectively. These themes allow us to address our research questions comprehensively. Potential themes were reviewed and refined again during the review phase. All the extracted

codes were read and the patterns were reviewed for cohesive meaning. The analysis was continued by defining and revising the themes to determine which aspects of the data each theme represented. The last phase involved reporting on the four themes (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2020).

Results

Four themes were generated from the interview data: (1) In search of the best opportunities abroad; (2) Finding common ground between dreams and reality; (3) Contrasting values; and (4) Life inside a bubble.

In search of the best opportunities abroad

The first theme encompassed several motives that had influenced Kazakhstani students' decisions to apply for study in Hungary. These 'pre-sojourn' factors are categorised based on the extent to which the desire to study abroad was driven by external or internal influences. The 'pull factors' that attracted international students to Hungary included future and employment opportunities, a European diploma, personal development, prior intercultural experience and a compared quality of education. For instance, Hadiya emphasised that the recognition and prestige of earning a degree from a European institution was a significant motivating factor, as it not only enhanced her CV and employment opportunities but also expanded her connections and experience and fostered personal development.

Some of the students mentioned opportunities to build intercultural competence through travelling, practicing several languages and meeting people from different backgrounds. Studying abroad was described as helping the students to 'step out' from Kazakhstan into the international sphere, where diverse experiences and unforeseen learning opportunities await them, as Aizere suggested: 'International experience is valuable. I was sure that Hungary would give me something that I could not get in Kazakhstan. I wanted to meet people from different backgrounds'.

Several participants already had experience of travelling, staying or studying abroad for short periods. Participants with previous intercultural experience regularly compared the quality of life and social situations between Kazakhstan and the 'Western world', using it as a point of reference. This exposure may have sparked their desire for an international education and could facilitate a smoother adjustment process. Students who previously studied in a Westernised context had already undergone the adjustment process once, making their second immersion in a foreign setting potentially easier and faster, as Alan, a Kazakhstani student, reported: 'I have seen people abroad, I have lived abroad before and I liked it. That's why, while I was graduating from high school, I was sure that I am gonna be abroad'.

Some of the interviews touched on beliefs about life abroad, which was expected to be better and more attractive than life in Kazakhstan. There was a general acknowledgment of the many contrasts between post-Soviet countries and Europe, whereas students believed that Hungary would represent a midpoint between these two opposites on this 'imaginary dimension'. Responses appeared to echo the idea that life and education in Europe are of better quality and more modern compared to Kazakhstan, which was recognised as being a post-Soviet country characterised by fewer opportunities and the remnants of a Soviet education system. Hungary – due to its being influenced by the West – is seen as offering valuable things from which to learn.

> *Even though we have some similarities in mentality, we, Kazakhs, are not as open-minded as Hungarians. Being a part of the European Union influenced Hungary a lot and these influences are good. Kazakhstani people need to learn a lot from the Western world. I am not proclaiming that the West is doing good and the East is crap, no. But I think we should change our view of life* (Alan).

Leaving Kazakhstan to study abroad is seen as a great and highly sought-after opportunity that cannot be missed, not only by our interviewees but also by their surroundings in the home country:

> *I was surrounded by people who never wanted to stay in Kazakhstan because they wanted to use this opportunity. People leaving the country to study abroad with good scholarships were always a great example in my eyes* (Sardar).

Alongside these 'pull' factors, participants reported several factors that 'pushed' them to study in Hungary. One student, Alan, mentioned the socioeconomic and political situation in Kazakhstan as the main reason: 'I was not satisfied with the situation in my country. That was the main motivation'. Students reported the quality of education in Kazakhstan as another push factor that prompted them to apply to Hungary. Although, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the government of Kazakhstan tried to introduce changes to the education system in response to modern needs and the process of internationalisation, education in Kazakhstan today still faces insufficient quality. Its reasons include the low number of qualified teachers, outdated curricula and a lack of educational resources. Introduced changes can also be perceived as a problem, as Aizere states: 'The Kazakhstani education system changes constantly, which is the biggest negative side. The current system lacks lots of professionals that can deliver a new system'.

Several statements referred to the remnants of Soviet education in Kazakhstan, where teachers play a leading role in the students' learning process. As a society characterised by a high-power distance, the authority of teachers is given great emphasis in Kazakhstan: 'In Kazakhstan, teachers are tough. Maybe it is because of the Soviet education system. But young teachers try to integrate into the European system and behaviour' said Yernar. This quote refers to a hopeful sign of change: there are educators in Kazakhstan who have adopted a modern, 'European' teaching style and the international students use this as a point of reference. This is something they seem to look for during their studies abroad.

Finding common ground between dreams and reality

Prior to their arrival in Hungary, the imagined picture of Hungary varied between the different students. It means a frame of reference, influencing the students' appraisal of their situation in the host country. For many of our interviewees, Hungary would mean Europe. These students had high preliminary expectations of Europe, although many of them were subsequently disappointed. Their first, visual experiences did not live up to what they had imagined and expected. One student, Alan, whose previous experience abroad was limited to travelling, shared: 'I was expecting a bit higher level of standards. (…) I remember the road from the airport to the city centre by bus. It was a mess around. I didn't feel the Europe that I used to see before'.

Several other participants reported that their worst expectations about Hungary being greatly impacted by the Soviet Union were not proven to be true. The Eastern bloc countries were mentioned a few times as being different from Western Europe, which may suggest that the Europe imagined and dreamed about by these students was mostly identified with Western Europe:

> *I expected the Soviet bloc country, however, I was completely surprised when I came to Hungary. It was like an image of Europe I had in my mind before. I couldn't believe that it's me standing here right now* (Sardar).

Acculturative stress, caused by the geographical, language and cultural distance between the two countries, also affected the students' adjustment at the beginning of their sojourn in Hungary. These initial days there

were described vividly by one participant as a clash between 'expectations' and 'reality'. The sentiment encapsulates the overwhelming experience many faced during their early days in the country. For most participants, the difficulties ranged from overcoming language barriers to managing financial constraints and adjusting to local cuisine. Fariza reported the struggle: 'Challenge is having a language barrier with other people. I don't know Hungarian, so it's hard to understand what is going on'. Despite the linguistic barriers, she expressed gratitude towards the locals for their assistance, recounting instances where fellow Hungarians stepped in to translate, even during simple tasks like explaining purchases at the cash desk.

Culinary differences posed another obstacle, as highlighted by Bek:

Sometimes food can be a problem. Food here is definitely different. For example, we cannot find that much beef here, usually it's chicken or pork. Because I don't really eat pork, not because of religion, I am not religious, I am not just used to eating it.

Moreover, academic pressures added to the strain, particularly for Perizat, who reflected on her time during her preparatory studies:

When I was studying there, I faced significant pressure. I had to handle many responsibilities, including final exams, which often left me feeling exhausted. Learning the Hungarian language throughout the year was particularly challenging.

The feeling of being disconnected from people or things that are familiar can also be quite distressing, whether it is because of a lack of technology to communicate with loved ones back home or due to a lack of contact with those who share a common identity. Mariyam reported feeling ready to leave everything behind and return to Kazakhstan:

When I moved to the dormitory, I had no wi-fi; no one from Kazakhstan or any Russian-speaking countries lived in this dormitory. I felt totally lonely, especially when I saw flying planes from the windows. I called my mom and said: 'I wanna go back home'.

The situation in their home country is a constant frame of reference. Dariya, who completed a preparatory course in the Hungarian language, shared that:

We've been thinking about whether to continue our studies in Hungary because no one wanted to study in the Hungarian language. Choosing between life in Kazakhstan and studying in Hungary, we decided to choose Hungary.

This may imply that, while Hungary as a whole did not meet some students' expectations about life abroad, it was still evaluated as being better than Kazakhstan – as a less-bad option.

Contrasting values

The third theme referred to the perceived cultural differences between the two countries. The differences in cultural values showed themselves best in their perception of gender roles, relationships and, especially, family values.

The Kazakhstani interviewees valued belonging to cohesive in-groups. Relational ties and obligations were deemed crucial. Family values and relationships with members of the in-group played a significant role in the participants' lives, as expressed by Bek: 'Maybe as a Kazakh person I appreciate family values because, for me, family means a lot. (…) I am really interdependent'. Participants also stated that the opinion of society matters in Kazakhstan, which puts pressure on students. The largely conservative society is still sceptical about social changes. More rigorous expectations and standards in terms of gender roles in Kazakhstan are good examples of this phenomenon, as Aizere said: 'I think that, in Kazakhstan, gender roles are more strictly defined than in Hungary. There are pretty strict guidelines and roles based on gender. Hungary is much more liberal and freer'.

Perceived differences between the two countries were reported in terms of parenting and household roles. Participants such as Hadiya stated that marital status plays a big role in Kazakhstan, compared to Hungary: 'Women in Hungary have more independence compared to Kazakhstan. In a relationship, women are treated with expectations in the role of mother and housewife in Kazakhstan. Marital status validates women's existence'.

International students, particularly those at the stage of forming romantic relationships, often face added expectations from their communities and families – especially women, who may feel pressured to balance both their careers and personal lives. In Kazakhstan, there seems to be a constant social pressure regarding marital status and relationships whereas, in Hungary, these expectations are less prominent, allowing women to feel a greater sense of freedom and better psychological well-being.

The similarity in terms of cultural values and mentality played a big role in the choice of a future partner. Students seemed to hold positive opinions about international marriage, although they perceived the strong norms of the home society and the expectations from their families to marry co-nationals. This motivation towards endogamous marriage and the alleged rejection of marriage with someone from outside the national group was reported by several students, like Zhanar: 'International marriage is not acceptable in Kazakhstan. We have some kind of rule that Kazakh should marry Kazakh. (…) If I marry an international guy, my family will not accept it'.

Others, like Aizere, did not mention objections against exogamous marriage but, rather, emphasised the advantage of marriage with an ingroup member: 'I am positive about international marriage. However, I think it is just easier to marry your co-national'. The comfortable feeling with someone from the co-national group was reported not only in a romantic relationship but in friendship as well, as explained in the next section.

An additional cultural difference was found in relation to personal space. Participants stated that a person's background is given greater emphasis in Kazakhstan and people often cross personal boundaries compared to the Western cultures, as Hadiya states:

The main difference is respect for personal space. As a Western country, they know the limits and boundaries that they do not cross. (…) They will not ask how much you earn, what you do, who are your parents and what is your salary. I think it is Eastern and Western cultures.

Life inside a bubble

The fourth theme included factors that influenced the social contacts of the Kazakhstani students in Hungary, as well as the consequences of these social contacts for their adjustment process. The different bubbles (co-nationals and internationals) where our participants socialised the most seemed to differ in depth and closeness of relationship (see the results of our Ego Network analysis, below). These differences were found in sharing the most important issues, organising free time and getting help with solving problems with co-nationals or

internationals. Social contact with host-nationals was found to be rare or even lacking. The comfort of using their native language and meeting people with a similar mentality and culture seemed to be the main factors behind the students' friendship preferences for co-nationals or Russian-speaking international students. Our participants' circle of social contacts was more extensive in the academic environment and also included international peers. However, in everyday life, the students communicated mostly with their co-nationals, as Alan said:

I usually prefer going out with co-nationals. The important thing is to have a common language, rather it is Russian or Kazakh, as it feels more convenient for me to use these languages in daily life. Academically, I am fine using English, which is why I am good with my international classmates.

Some students insisted on the value of their own cultural and ethnic identities and showed little interest in learning about the host culture. This suggests that perceived cultural differences and challenges may have prompted the international students to maintain their co-national ties: 'We made a lot of friends who are Kazakhs and it was like a small Kazakhstan in Hungary. I did not have to adjust to international society when we were going out', as Akan said.

Many students reported not having any Hungarian classmates and mostly studying separately, which did not help to foster communication with local students. This might be another reason why the Kazakhstani students found themselves in ethnic enclaves, as part of a group with a common language and cultural similarities, as Bek pronounced: 'We do not have Hungarian classmates. I am not exposed to Hungarians and do not have a real communication with them, apart from teachers'.

Many participants mentioned being interested in forming friendships with Hungarian students. However, they failed to do so because of a perceived lack of motivation on the part of the local students: 'I am kind of living in a bubble. I do not know a lot about the news and what is going on in Hungary. (…) I would be happy if we could have more opportunities to communicate with other Hungarian students', Aizere said.

It was not only the lack of opportunities for contact with locals but the blatant discrimination they faced and which was experienced by many. Several students felt that they were not 'accepted' or welcomed by the host society. Some participants perceived a lack of belonging and felt themselves to not be an integral part of the Hungarian community. International students studying in Hungarian cities other than Budapest reported a feeling of being rejected, as did Askar.

I feel that I am not part of Hungary, like a 'guest' because I am a foreigner. (…) Sometimes you can see papers like 'No immigrants here'. There is also a picture of internationals and there is written: 'No entrance'.

The factors mentioned above may have led Kazakhstani students to form their own 'cultural bubble' while in Hungary. Social connections with fellow nationals were seen as beneficial for psychological well-being and instilling confidence during their time abroad. Some participants, such as Mariyam, noted that being surrounded by their ethnic peers facilitated a smoother adjustment process: 'My adjustment here went really well and smooth, mostly because of help of people surrounding me (meaning her co-nationals)'.

As one participant suggested, organising meetings between locals and international students at the university level could foster connections and facilitate the international students' integration into the host culture. For sociocultural adjustment, interactions with host nationals were deemed helpful, particularly in terms of learning the culture and language. When asked by the interviewer 'What do you think helps the most to adjust for international students in Hungary?', Perizat answered: 'I think organising meetings between locals

and internationals would help. We shouldn't be separated; we need to have a connection. It should be made at the university level'. As highlighted by this student, such initiatives can bridge the gap between locals and international students, emphasising the importance of connection and interaction for successful integration. This approach aligns well with our exploration of social contacts, which extends beyond interviews to include the analysis of ego network questionnaires.

Results of the ego network analysis

The use of ego network questionnaires provided a comprehensive understanding of how Kazakhstani students in Hungary navigate their social networks and integrate into the host culture. We found that, on average, participants shared their most important issues and problems in Hungary with co-nationals in 67 per cent of cases, with internationals in 23 per cent of cases and with Hungarians in just 4 per cent of cases while, in the remaining 6 per cent of cases, the participants did not mention any social contacts.

In terms of organising programmes and free time, on average, our participants' social networks consisted of 44 per cent co-nationals, 33 per cent international students and 6 per cent Hungarians, with 17 per cent not mentioning any contacts. For getting help in solving smaller or bigger problems, on average our students counted 55 per cent on co-nationals, 26 per cent on internationals and just 1 per cent on Hungarians, while they attempted to solve difficulties on their own in 18 per cent of the cases. Participants' social networks consisted mostly of co-nationals or international classmates, as well as the people they shared a flat with. Having many co-national and international peers and being separated from Hungarian students in the academic environment may explain the lack of social contact with locals. Moreover, the perceived feeling of being rejected by the host society may be another reason for participants' choice of co-ethnic peers.

Discussion

We investigated the adjustment experiences of Kazakhstani students in Hungary and uncovered four thematic areas, each reflecting distinct phases and challenges faced by participants: (1) In search of the best opportunities abroad *(pre-sojourn factors)*; (2) Finding common ground between dreams and reality *(in-sojourn factors)*; (3) Contrasting values *(in-sojourn factors)*; and (4) Life inside a bubble *(in-sojourn factors)*.

In the first theme, we explored how participants' decision to study abroad was driven by a mix of 'pre-sojourn' factors that may impact on their adaptation potential. Several studies have already demonstrated that 'pre-sojourn' factors play a significant role in international students' adjustment process and its outcome–adaptation (e.g. Schartner 2014; Young and Schartner 2014; Young *et al.* 2013). According to Kim (2001), newcomers' adaptation potential largely depends on how well they are prepared to face the changes and challenges presented by the host culture. Moreover, she categorises these 'pre-sojourn' factors under the broader concept of 'preparedness for change'. In the present study the pre-sojourn factors included – but were not limited to – students' motivation to study abroad, building intercultural competence, prior intercultural experience, prior expectations, dissatisfaction with the socioeconomic and political situation back in the home country, the quality of the education on offer and future opportunities for self-development, travel and employment.

According to Nilsson and Ripmeester (2016), the most important reasons for international students to study abroad were broader experience, higher-quality education and improved career prospects. In our study, the students' answers echo the idea that their meritocratic pursuit of a better life and education abroad served as a key motivator, potentially shaping how they perceive the challenges of adjusting to a new environment. This greater motivation to study abroad might be a good predictor of several adjustment outcomes (sociocultural

adaptation, psychological adaptation and academic adaptation), as demonstrated in the study by Chirkov, Safdar, Guzman and Playford (2008) on the role of motivation in international students' adjustment.

We found that prior intercultural experiences of studying and living abroad were another motivating factor for participants applying to study in Hungary. Participants with prior overseas experience often compared life and education in Kazakhstan to in of the 'Western world', using it as a reference point. This previous exposure may have sparked their desire for international education and potentially eased their adjustment process, as they had undergone similar transitions before. Empirical evidence from Schartner and Young's (2016) study showed that those international students with previous intercultural experience performed better academically than those without this experience. Moreover, Kazakhstani students with prior overseas experience might possess greater intercultural competence, enabling them to interact more effectively with diverse groups and adjust more easily to new environments.

Social and political factors, along with an unsatisfactory quality of life in Kazakhstan, emerged as the primary motivators prompting international students to seek opportunities in Hungary. Additionally, participants cited dissatisfaction with the quality of education in Kazakhstan as another significant push factor. This dissatisfaction stemmed from issues such as irrelevant curricula, low-quality teaching standards and a lack of updated study materials. Furthermore, a shortage of professional teachers and the persistence of the remnants of Soviet education were also mentioned.

For our participants, the 'imaginary dimension' of living abroad was the belief that it would be of better quality than life in Kazakhstan. A marked contrast between Kazakhstan and Europe was perceptible in participants' responses, with Hungary representing the midpoint between the two. Although Hungary as a whole did not fully meet some students' expectations regarding life abroad, it was still perceived as a preferable option compared to Kazakhstan and evaluated as a less-unfavourable choice. The 'Europe' the students dreamed of was predominantly associated with Western European countries. Our findings echoed the idea of perceived contrast between 'post-Soviet states' and the 'Western world' of our previous study conducted on the academic adjustment of international students from post-Soviet countries (Yerken and Nguyen Luu 2022).

In the second theme, we identified in-sojourn factors that develop during the sojourn, specifically challenges related to participants' psychological and sociocultural adjustment. These included overcoming language barriers, coping with financial difficulties and adjusting to the local food. The first months in the new country proved particularly demanding for the international students, with the first semester marked by additional academic stress. These findings are consistent with the results of qualitative research carried out in the United States, where international students experienced 'change overload' (weather, food, academic expectations and social differences) that contributed to their adjustment difficulties (McLachlan and Justice 2009). Earlier qualitative research also found that Kazakhstani students experienced difficulties in adjusting to a new dietary and academic environment in Korea (Choi and Kim 2014).

It is well known that difficulties stemming from the cultural distance between the host and the home countries can result in acculturative stress, which is defined as 'a special kind of response' to the challenges generated by intercultural contact in the process of acculturation (Berry 2019: 15). Nowadays, researchers prefer the term 'acculturative stress' to 'culture shock' because the latter implies only a negative meaning, focusing only on stressors and undermining a person's ability to deal with them. Sojourners who settle temporarily in the host society may experience higher levels of stress since they have no established social support (Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok 1987). Temporary separation from family and relatives and their unfamiliarity with the host society result in uprooting stress, which encompasses a variety of psychological symptoms (Szabó, Ward and Jose 2016).

In the third theme, we explored in-sojourn factors arising from perceived cultural differences, particularly regarding gender equality, social norms, relational ties and family values between the two cultures. The

influence of national culture and traditions was noticeable in the friendship and marriage preferences of most of our participants. Family values and relationships with members of the in-group play a significant role, where social interdependence and harmony are valued. These results correspond to those of a large cross-cultural study by Hofstede *et al*. (2010), which reported that Kazakhstan ranked lower on the individualism dimension than Hungary (scores of 20 and 80, respectively). A Kazakhstani's self-image is defined in terms of 'we' and people belong to cohesive in-groups. Similar results were found in a study of Russian-speaking international students in Hungary, who also experienced a relative cultural distance between Hungary and their home countries, including Kazakhstan (Samokhotova 2018).

According to Demes and Geeraert (2014), values and beliefs (such as perceptions of right and wrong), social norms (like appropriate public behaviour) and family life are key components in measuring sociocultural adjustment. Unfortunately, there is a noticeable lack of research on relationship dynamics, marriage preferences and family values within the adjustment literature, despite its importance. For many international students, particularly those from collectivist cultures like Kazakhstan, societal and familial expectations around marriage remain highly influential. These expectations often emphasise maintaining cultural traditions and adhering to family values, which can be a source of stress or conflict when students encounter the more individualistic norms of their host country, such as Hungary. In Hungary, the reduced emphasis on marital status and the freedom to form relationships based on personal preferences provide a stark contrast to the social pressures many students experience in their home country. This lack of social pressure in Hungary may have a positive influence on students' psychological well-being. However, for those without prior intercultural experience, the process of sociocultural adjustment may prove more challenging, as it could take longer to acquire the necessary skills, attitudes and behaviours with which to navigate and adjust to the new environment effectively. This connection was identified through member-checking discussions.

Presumed similarities in mentality and culture played a significant role in the choice of a future partner for most participants in our study. Although international marriage is not new in Kazakhstan, it is still not widely socially accepted and young people are encouraged to marry co-nationals. This can perhaps be explained by the essentialisation of the concept of ethnic identity, which is characterised by 'groupism' or a tendency to treat ethnic groups as strongly homogeneous and bounded (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). The aspiration to ethno-cultural continuity, which involves maintaining the ethno-cultural heritage and transmitting it to the younger generation (Lamy, Ward and Liu 2013), is connected with essentialist thinking and the perception of ethnicity and nation as entities. Continuity-enhancing behaviour prevails among the 'small people' population, those who 'have faced different degrees of existential uncertainty' to ensure ethnic identification and cultural transmission (Lamy *et al*. 2013). Kazakhstan has a relatively small population – 20 million people – and declared its independence only 33 years ago. This might demonstrate a potential factor behind participants' motivation for ethno-cultural continuity.

It seems that participants in our study perceived a lack of acceptance from the host country and a strong endogamous motivation from family members back home, especially in selective dating and marriage preferences. Reasons for applying endogamy to marriage might be considered in the framework of minority integration, where the heritage culture is maintained in the private domain and the culture of the host society is preserved in the public domain (Lamy *et al*. 2013). According to the model of domain specificity, an individual's choice in terms of acculturation may differ depending on the specific situation (Rosch and Lloyd 1978). Many participants in our study chose separation as an acculturation orientation in the private domain. In terms of education, which belongs in the public domain, participants were longing to be in 'Europe' which, as mentioned above, was perceived as more attractive and offering a better quality of education. A recent study on the academic adjustment of international students from post-Soviet countries demonstrated that students perceived Hungarian education (Hungary is seen as a Western-oriented country) as more 'modern', with better

quality and also made a distinction between 'post-Soviet' and 'Western' education (Yerken and Nguyen Luu 2022). Similarly, Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver (2004) found that Turkish-Dutch migrants maintained their Turkish culture in the private domain and their Dutch culture in the public domain.

In the final theme, we examined in-sojourn factors, focusing on the participants' social contacts and their impact on the adjustment process. The results of both the ego network and thematic analyses demonstrated that co-nationals played a significant role in the lives of Kazakhstani students in Hungary. Despite having a strong desire to go 'abroad' and expectations of a better quality of life for the duration of their studies, interviewed Kazakhstani students mostly ended up in a bubble of ethnic peers and sometimes of international students. Many students communicated with co-nationals or Russian-speaking peers as well because it was more convenient linguistically. The shared legacy of the communist regime and similarities in the education system may also be important elements within the same language community. Similar results were found in the study by Szabó *et al*. (2020) in which international students who mostly connected with co-national peers represented the largest group in Hungary. These international students indicated positive psychological outcomes, similar to the case of those with mixed social contacts (e.g. having contacts with both co-nationals and locals or both co-nationals and internationals) and which emphasised the important role of co-national support. Although living in an ethnic enclave may provide a sense of confidence and security and might be beneficial for psychological adjustment, greater participation in the host society can foster sociocultural adjustment (Szabó *et al*. 2020; Ward and Kennedy 1993) and reduce acculturative stress (Berry 2019).

As mentioned above, people's ethnic identities can be one of the factors for the maintenance of heritage culture and the tendency towards the majority culture in Berry's framework (Brown and Zagefka 2011). From the results of our analyses, we can assume that the essentialist thinking and perceived outgroup rejection could explain why most participants in our study chose cultural separatism and 'ended up' in ethnic enclaves. Furthermore, endorsement of the separation strategy by the host society may strengthen a belief in established cultural differences between the host and home cultures (Brown and Zagefka 2011).

When faced with multiple challenges, some participants noted that, in Hungary, they started to value their own cultural identity and traditions more than they did in Kazakhstan. This can be explained by the 'cultural encapsulation' phenomenon, a process by which individuals preserve ethnic cultural values to an even greater extent than people living in their homeland (Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe and Hong 2001). Kazakhstani students in the USA had a very similar international experience: their patriotic feelings were enhanced and they were motivated to preserve their cultural heritage (Baltabayeva 2019).

We also asked our participants whether their plans had been realised and their expectations met in Hungary. Many reported that their expectations had been fulfilled. However, having more social contacts with co-nationals or Russian-speaking students, most of the participants had fewer intercultural experiences and fewer opportunities to improve their language skills than they had expected.

Limitations and future implications

Some of the interviews were conducted in English, which may have limited the respondents' ability to fully share their personal experiences. Due to resource constraints, the research project was unable to allocate funds for professional translators. Despite this limitation, the authors made every effort to maintain accuracy and fidelity to the original meanings expressed by the participants during the translation process. However, it is acknowledged that the full accuracy and trustworthiness of the translated transcripts may not have been entirely ensured. Subtle meanings and nuances may be lost.

Although we selected participants with similar characteristics, our sample was not homogeneous. Some participants had previous intercultural experiences, which may have affected their adjustment process. The

present research contributes to the limited literature on international students from post-Soviet countries, providing findings on this under-represented population in the Hungarian and Eastern European contexts. We found that participants seemed to hold beliefs about life abroad, which they expected to be of higher quality compared to Kazakhstan. There was a general acknowledgment of the many contrasts between the post-Soviet country and the 'West', with Hungary representing a midpoint between the two opposites. We think further research on international students' perception of two different worlds, 'East' and 'West', is needed, especially in a non-Westernised context.

The present study showed that, in the private domain (marriage, family, etc.), the Kazakhstani students essentialise their ethnic identity and preserve their ethno-cultural heritage. It would be important to further investigate the concept of ethno-cultural continuity among international students and its relation to marriage preferences.

While longing to be abroad and preferring a 'Western-style' education, the most of the participating students still socialised more with their co-ethnic peers. We found that co-nationals played a significant role in the students' social lives, while the convenience of the native language was another important factor. We recommend conducting quantitative research to investigate the association between various factors (e.g., ethnic identity, social contact, acculturation strategies) and the adaptation experiences of international students from post-Soviet countries. It would also be important to conduct cross-national comparisons to explore the adjustment and adaptation experiences of these groups of students and to investigate cultural differences.

In the adjustment literature, we need to broaden research beyond the examination of personal factors affecting international students. It is crucial to shift the focus towards exploring the diverse array of contextual factors, thereby alleviating the sole responsibility of students for their adjustment processes. The findings on cultural distance in terms of gender roles, marriage prospects and family are quite new in the context of a study of international students' adjustment process. Thus, we think that future research should focus on the ecocultural context of both home and host countries. Understanding cultural differences within an institutional context would help universities to tailor their support services more effectively, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students. It would also empower institutions to enact meaningful changes that positively impact on the experiences of international students.

We recommend that Hungarian higher-education institutions foster a more favourable English-speaking environment for international students, while also providing opportunities for them to learn the Hungarian language. Additionally, forming mixed groups of international and local students would be important to facilitate communication and promote successful integration.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID IDs

Aigerim Yerken [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0753-1958
Lan Anh Nguyen Luu [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2045-3763

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