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**Title:**

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AZERBAIJANI HIGHER EDUCATION:  
EXPERIENCES AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS**

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**STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY**

We have read ADA's policy on plagiarism and certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this paper, entitled "International Students in Azerbaijani Higher Education: Experiences and Support Mechanisms", is all our own work and does not contain any unacknowledged work.

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In recent years, Azerbaijan has become an increasingly attractive destination for international students, welcoming learners from over 110 countries. This capstone project investigates the experiences of international students enrolled in Azerbaijani higher education institutions, with a specific focus on their cultural adaptation processes and the institutional support structures in place. Using a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with thirteen international students, the study identifies key challenges encountered during their adaptation, including language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, social isolation, and academic adjustment difficulties. Emotional reactions such as homesickness and impostor syndrome were also commonly reported, particularly during the initial phases of transition.

Despite these challenges, many students developed coping strategies that helped them adjust to their new environment. These included forming social networks, participating in cultural and academic activities, learning the local language, and drawing on university-led support mechanisms. Orientation programs, peer mentoring initiatives, and accessible faculty were among the most effective institutional responses cited by participants. However, gaps were noted in the availability of structured language instruction, mental health services, and consistent intercultural engagement.

This study contributes to the limited body of research on international student adaptation within the Azerbaijani context. It offers practical recommendations for universities and policymakers aimed at enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of student support systems. By highlighting the importance of both institutional responsiveness and student agency, the findings underscore the complex and evolving nature of cultural adaptation in higher education settings.

**Keywords:** cultural adaptation, support systems, culture shock

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In an increasingly globalized world characterized by growing interconnection and interdependence among nations, thousands of students pursue their education abroad for a variety of reasons. Welcoming international students not only benefits host institutions by enhancing cultural diversity and fostering exchange experiences but also raises important questions regarding their cultural adaptation (Glass et al., 2014). Pederson (1995) defines

cultural adaptation as the process of assimilation, wherein individuals adjust their cultural patterns to align with those of the host culture. Similarly, Redfield et al. (1936) describe cultural adaptation as the phenomena arising when groups from different cultures come into continuous, first-hand contact, resulting in changes to the original cultural patterns of one or both groups.

The process of cultural adaptation, often referred to as acculturation, involves exploring new ideas, norms, traditions, and practices, and adapting to changes in one's social environment (Berry, 1997). It encompasses both cultural and psychological changes prompted by intercultural contact. Successful cultural adaptation is crucial for international students, enabling them to communicate effectively, build meaningful relationships, and navigate unfamiliar environments (Hertzum & Hyldegård, 2019). By understanding and embracing the host culture, students can integrate more smoothly into their new communities, reduce stress, and enrich their overall educational experience (Cai & Teng, 2014).

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Azerbaijan, a country undergoing rapid development and increasing global engagement, has become an attractive destination for international students. According to the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2023), over 9,000 students from 110 different countries are currently studying in Azerbaijan. Students from Türkiye, Iran, Russia, Georgia, India, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, and others enroll in Azerbaijani higher education institutions both as full-time and exchange students. Moreover, the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2023) recently announced intentions to increase the number of international students by 15–20%.

Despite Azerbaijan's growing appeal, preliminary findings based on surveys involving five international students reveal that these students encounter significant challenges during their adaptation process, including culture shock, language barriers, and limited social support networks. These difficulties mirror global patterns, where international students frequently face psychological, academic, and social hardships that hinder cultural adaptation and impact their

academic and personal lives (Marginson et al., 2010). Understanding the factors that influence adaptation is therefore crucial for universities, enabling them to provide better support services, improve student success rates, and enhance institutional reputation (Makeeva et al., 2022). Effective adaptation strategies can further contribute to higher student retention and overall satisfaction (Koon & Mehdi, 2022).

While numerous studies have investigated international student adaptation globally (Cai & Teng, 2014), research specifically addressing the experiences of international students in Azerbaijan remains limited. Existing studies, such as that of Koon and Mehdi (2019), primarily employ quantitative methods, lacking the qualitative insights necessary to understand students' lived experiences and nuanced perceptions. As Cresswell (2012) argues, qualitative exploration is essential for developing a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena such as cultural adaptation.

Thus, this study seeks to address the challenges international students face in adapting to Azerbaijani culture and examine the role of institutional support in this process.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the primary experiences international students encounter during their cultural adaptation process in Azerbaijani higher education institutions and to examine the institutional practices and support mechanisms that facilitate this adaptation. By investigating both student perspectives and institutional efforts, the study aimed to provide insights into the challenges, coping strategies, and culturally responsive practices that influence the success and well-being of international students in the Azerbaijani academic context.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

1. What are the primary experiences international students encounter during their adaptation process in Azerbaijani higher education institutions?

2. How do Azerbaijani higher education institutions facilitate the adaptation process for international students?

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Studying the cultural adaptation of international students in Azerbaijani higher education institutions is important for several reasons:

First, this research fills a notable gap in the literature. Few studies have specifically examined the challenges and support mechanisms relevant to the Azerbaijani context. A deeper understanding of these dynamics is critical for developing targeted, culturally sensitive support strategies.

Second, the study offers practical recommendations for universities seeking to improve their services, ultimately leading to higher student retention, better academic outcomes, and greater overall satisfaction (Gumush, Gok, & Esen, 2019).

Finally, the research contributes to the broader body of knowledge on international student adaptation by providing context-specific data from a non-Western, emerging educational setting. These insights may serve as a foundation for future studies on international student experiences in similar contexts, enriching the global discourse on cultural adaptation in higher education (Hassan, Bamurange, Foster, & James, 2019).

#### **1.5 Definitions of Terms**

- **Cultural Adaptation:** The process by which individuals adjust their behaviors, language, and social interactions to align with a new cultural environment, facilitating effective integration and communication (Cai & Teng, 2014).
- International Students: Students who pursue full-time academic study or participate in exchange programs outside their home country (Institute of International Education, 2022).

- **Culture Shock:** The sense of confusion, anxiety, or disorientation experienced when an individual is exposed to an unfamiliar culture, often leading to discomfort as they adapt to new norms and traditions (Oberg, 1960).
- **Support Systems:** Structures offering academic, social, and emotional support to individuals adapting to a new environment, including counseling services, mentorship programs, and peer networks (Berry, 2006).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Cultural adaptation is a vital process that influences the well-being and academic performance of international students. It involves balancing social, cultural, and academic spheres in the host country, significantly impacting their overall experience (Koon & Mehdi, 2019). While adjusting to a new culture and educational context, international students encounter various challenges and adaptation barriers, including social isolation, language

constraints, and cultural differences, all of which can interfere with their ability to function effectively (Eynullayeva, Gökalp, & Hatunoglu, 2023; Makeeva, Kulinich, & Yakovleva, 2023).

Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of the factors affecting cultural adaptation and the strategies that support successful adjustment (Arslan & Polat, 2023; Eynullayeva et al., 2023; Kaikenov et al., 2024; ). Studies by Arslan and Polat (2023) and Mitrofanova et al. (2020) highlight that social networks, cultural familiarity, and language proficiency are critical aspects influencing not only students' learning performance but also their broader sociocultural adjustment (Arslan & Polat, 2023; Koon & Mehdi, 2019).

While previous studies provide valuable insights into the adaptation of international students in Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Russia, further investigation is needed within the Azerbaijani higher education context.

This literature review synthesizes existing studies on international students' adaptation, particularly in countries neighboring Azerbaijan, to identify the key contributing factors, challenges, and recommended strategies. The chapter is organized into three main sections:

1. Key factors affecting cultural adaptation,
2. Primary challenges faced during the adaptation process,
3. Strategies for facilitating adaptation, alongside identifying gaps in the literature for future research.

## **2.2 Key Factors Contributing to the Adaptation of International Students**

**Language proficiency** is recognized as a central factor in the cultural adaptation process. Proficiency in the host country's language not only enhances academic performance but also promotes social engagement (Makeeva et al., 2022). Effective communication with university staff builds confidence among international students, while language barriers can lead to misunderstandings and feelings of isolation, highlighting the importance of institutional language support systems (Arslan & Polat, 2023).

**Social relationships** with local students also play a critical role in facilitating adaptation. Building friendships fosters a sense of engagement and emotional support, both of which are crucial for students adapting to a new environment (Eynullayeva et al., 2021; Pinarbasi, 2023). Support networks — including those formed through orientation sessions and social organizations provided by universities — help international students overcome homesickness and encourage smoother adjustment (Arslan & Polat, 2023; Vevere et al., 2017).

**Prior intercultural experiences** further influence adaptation success. Students who have had prior contact with different cultures often adapt more easily to new environments by reducing misunderstandings and feelings of isolation (Arslan & Polat, 2023; Eynullayeva et al., 2021). Awareness and knowledge about the host culture, whether through media, personal connections, or previous travel, lessen the cultural distance and help prevent feelings of alienation (Makeeva et al., 2022).

Creating a **safe and welcoming environment** significantly affects students' academic success and overall satisfaction (Pinarbasi, 2023). When international students are informed about their new surroundings, they experience fewer challenges during the adaptation process (Arslan & Polat, 2023).

In conclusion, existing research indicates that students with prior cultural exposure or familiarity adapt more readily, while those without such backgrounds tend to face greater difficulties (Eynullayeva et al., 2021).

### **2.3 Primary Challenges that International Students Encounter during their Adaptation Process**

International students face multiple challenges that can impact both their mental health and academic success. These include language barriers, cultural differences, social isolation, homesickness, financial difficulties, and bureaucratic obstacles (Eynullayeva et al., 2023; Makeeva et al., 2023).

**Language barriers** are one of the most prominent challenges (Pinarbasi, 2023; Vevere et al., 2017). As noted by Eynullayeva et al. (2023), limited proficiency in the host country's language can hinder social interaction, cultural integration, and academic performance. Students struggle to understand lectures, participate in discussions, and seek academic assistance (Makeeva et al., 2023). Vevere et al. (2017) similarly found that language difficulties significantly affected ERASMUS students' social and academic engagement.

**Cultural differences** also present substantial obstacles (Eynullayeva et al., 2023; Kaikenov et al., 2024; Makeeva et al., 2023). International students often encounter unfamiliar social norms, classroom expectations, and interpersonal dynamics. Students from significantly different sociocultural backgrounds may face feelings of confusion, isolation, and difficulty building relationships with local peers (Kaikenov et al., 2024; Makeeva et al., 2023).

**Homesickness and social isolation** are additional critical challenges (Eynullayeva et al., 2023; Mitrofanova et al., 2021). Separation from family and familiar support networks can lead to loneliness, emotional stress, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Mitrofanova & Khon, 2021). A lack of social integration also affects participation in academic and extracurricular activities (Pinarbasi, 2023).

**Financial difficulties** further complicate adaptation. Many international students struggle to manage tuition fees, living expenses, and other costs in a new economic environment (Kaikenov et al., 2024; Pinarbasi, 2023). Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles — such as visa procedures and residency permits — create administrative stress that diverts students' focus from academic integration (Koon & Mehdi, 2019).

#### **2.4 How Azerbaijani Higher Education Institutions Facilitate the Adaptation Process**

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in supporting international students' adaptation through various strategies and services (Eynullayeva et al., 2021; Kaikenov et al., 2024; Makeeva et al., 2022).

According to Glass, Wongtrirat, and Buus (2014), institutions that promote inclusivity by offering organized support networks, mentorship programs, housing assistance, and other resources significantly enhance international students' acculturation. Establishing welcoming, connected campus environments is essential for students' cultural and academic success.

Research by Klypachenko and Levkov (2021), Koon and Mehdi (2019), and Volkova and Kolesov (2022) emphasizes the importance of **social networks** and **peer interactions**. Strong social connections with local students and active participation in campus activities mitigate loneliness and foster a sense of belonging. Events such as cultural festivals, national holiday celebrations, and country days serve as vital platforms for intercultural engagement (Klypachenko & Levkov, 2021; Volkova & Kolesov, 2022).

**Pre-arrival orientation programs** have been identified as another critical strategy (Arslan & Polat, 2023). Providing logistical and cultural information before students' arrival can ease their transition. Coupling orientation programs with **buddy systems**, where local students mentor newcomers, offers practical and emotional support (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021; Nilsson, 2019).

**Counseling and psychological support services** are essential, especially for managing homesickness and cultural stress (Kaikenov et al., 2024; Makeeva et al., 2022). Mental health support fosters a safe environment where students can openly discuss their struggles and receive professional help, thus promoting emotional well-being and successful adaptation.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The literature emphasizes the fundamental roles of **social networks**, **cultural familiarity**, and **language proficiency** in shaping international students' experiences (Arslan & Polat, 2023; Makeeva et al., 2023). Persistent challenges, including linguistic barriers, social isolation, and cultural separation, continue to hinder full adaptation, particularly in contexts like Azerbaijan where international students encounter unique academic and cultural dynamics (Eynullayeva et al., 2023; Koon & Mehdi, 2019; Mitrofanova et al., 2020).

Addressing the effects of cultural distance is crucial for enhancing adaptation outcomes. Tailored strategies such as **cultural orientation sessions**, **peer mentorship programs**, and **language support services** can help mitigate adaptation barriers and create a more welcoming environment for international students (Eynullayeva et al., 2023; Koon & Mehdi, 2019).

This review lays the foundation for future practical initiatives and research aimed at improving the cultural adaptation of international students in Azerbaijani higher education institutions.

## **2.6 Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the growing number of international students in Azerbaijan, research on their cultural adaptation remains limited. Koon and Mehdi (2019) conducted one of the first studies in this area; however, their work employed a quantitative approach, focusing on broad statistical trends rather than the nuanced, lived experiences of students.

A qualitative inquiry is essential to capture the emotional, personal, and social dimensions of cultural adaptation that quantitative methods may overlook. Understanding students' perceptions of institutional support, strategies for overcoming cultural barriers, and the significance of interpersonal relationships requires a more exploratory, narrative-driven approach.

Addressing this gap is critical for advancing internationalization efforts in Azerbaijani higher education. By capturing students' detailed experiences, future research can develop both theoretical insights and practical tools to support international students more effectively, enhancing their academic performance and overall quality of life.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This study investigated the cultural adaptation of international students in Azerbaijani higher education institutions. The main objective was to provide insights into institutional practices that support students of diverse backgrounds, thereby enhancing their integration into academic and social life. The study explored the primary challenges international students faced during cultural adaptation, the key factors influencing this process, and the role of institutional support in facilitating acculturation.

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the primary experiences that international students encounter during their adaptation process in Azerbaijani higher education institutions?

2. How do Azerbaijani higher education institutions facilitate the adaptation process for international students?

This chapter details the research design, methodology, participant recruitment strategies, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations that underpin this investigation.

### **3.2 Research Methodology**

Given the study's aim of understanding human experiences and perspectives, a qualitative research approach was employed. Qualitative research is especially suited for exploring the significance of individuals' lived experiences, allowing participants to voice their narratives authentically (Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative methods are particularly valuable for examining complex social phenomena, as they prioritize participant perspectives and nuanced interpretations over generalizations. In alignment with Creswell's (2012) recommendations, this study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect rich, detailed narratives from international students, enabling an in-depth exploration of their adaptation experiences, including language barriers, cultural differences, social isolation, homesickness, and bureaucratic challenges.

Semi-structured interviews also allowed flexibility, permitting follow-up questions that clarified or expanded upon participants' initial responses, thereby capturing the complexities of the cultural adaptation process.

### **3.3 Research Design**

An exploratory research design was employed, appropriate for investigating relatively underexplored or complex issues (Stevens et al., 2013). This design enabled an in-depth examination of international students' adaptation processes, uncovering underlying relationships, experiences, and insights that can inform future studies and policy development.

### **3.4 Target Population**

The target population consisted of international students enrolled in higher education institutions across Azerbaijan. This diverse group included individuals from various countries, cultural backgrounds, and academic programs, encompassing both full-time and exchange students. According to the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2023), over 9,000 international students currently study in Azerbaijan.

### **3.5 Sampling Method**

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants who met the specific criteria necessary for achieving the study's objectives. Participants were sourced through university networks, international student organizations, and direct email invitations.

#### **Inclusion Criteria:**

- Enrolled at a university in Azerbaijan for at least six months.
- Represent diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Include both full-time and exchange students.

### **3.6 Sample Size**

The study aimed to include 15 to 20 participants, comprising both male and female students from varied cultural, financial, and academic backgrounds. The final sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, ensuring that sufficient data were collected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

### **3.7 Setting for the Study**

The research was conducted at two different universities in Azerbaijan with significant international student populations. Institutions were selected based on their diverse academic offerings and multicultural environments, providing a rich context for exploring cultural adaptation experiences.

### **3.8 Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through the following strategies:

1. E-mail invitations distributed through university networks and personal connections with international students.
2. Face-to-face solicitation during orientation sessions and cultural exchange events.
3. Direct follow-up communication to confirm participants' availability.
4. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no financial or material incentives were offered.

### **3.9 Sources of Data**

The sources of data for this study are the personal narratives and lived experiences of international students enrolled in Azerbaijani higher education institutions. These narratives explore students' cultural adaptation journeys, including the challenges they faced, the factors that influenced their adaptation process, and the support systems they encountered. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method particularly suited for gathering rich, first-hand accounts of complex social experiences (Creswell, 2012).

### **3.10 Instrumentation**

The primary instrument for data collection was a **semi-structured interview guide** developed based on adaptation theories (Berry, 1997; Glass et al., 2014) and previous research on international student adaptation (Koon & Mehdi, 2022; Makeeva et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were selected for their balance between consistency and flexibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018), allowing participants to narrate their experiences while ensuring that key themes related to cultural adaptation were systematically explored.

The interview guide focused on three core areas:

- **Facilitators of adaptation** (what helped students adjust),
- **Barriers to adaptation** (challenges experienced),
- **Institutional support received** (assistance provided by universities).

Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their experiences in detail, while follow-up questions allowed the researcher to clarify and deepen understanding where necessary. By maintaining a structured yet adaptable format, the interviews enabled the collection of nuanced, authentic data aligned with the study's goals.

### 3.11 Data Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, ensuring validity and reliability is essential to produce trustworthy findings.

- Validity was reinforced by using semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to share authentic and comprehensive accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
- Reliability was enhanced through consistent application of the interview guide, careful transcription of audio recordings, and thorough cross-checking of transcripts against audio files.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, minimizing interpretation bias and preserving the authenticity of participant narratives. In addition, content validity was ensured by grounding the interview guide in established literature, guaranteeing that all relevant aspects of cultural adaptation were covered.

### 3.12 Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process followed these systematic steps:

**Table 1: The steps of data collection**

Step	Action
Participant Recruitment	One month prior to interviews, recruitment emails outlining the study's aims and confidentiality assurances were sent.
Consent Acquisition	Participants provided electronic or paper consent prior to interviews, with assurances of voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Scheduling Interviews	Interviews were scheduled according to participant availability, conducted either face-to-face or online (Zoom or Google Meet).
Conducting Interviews	Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted, recorded with participant consent, and supplemented by field notes.
Post-Interview Process	Participants were thanked, debriefed, and offered the opportunity to review and comment on their interview transcripts.
Data Management	Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was anonymized, and data were stored securely on an encrypted computer accessible only to the research team.

### 3.13 Data Analysis

Following Creswell’s (2012) approach, data analysis proceeded in several stages:

- Preliminary exploratory analysis to develop a general sense of the data.
- Coding of relevant text segments to create descriptive categories.
- Thematic analysis to group codes into broader themes addressing students’ experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of institutional support.

Themes were directly linked to the study’s research questions, and interconnections between challenges and support strategies were examined to deepen understanding.

Findings were presented through a narrative discussion supported by direct participant quotes.

### 3.14 Trustworthiness

To ensure the study’s credibility, dependability, and confirmability, the following strategies were employed:

- **Member Checking:** Participants were invited to review their transcripts and verify the accuracy of recorded data.
- **Peer Review:** Data analysis and interpretation were reviewed by a second researcher to minimize bias.

### 3.15 Study Limitations

Several limitations were identified:

- **Recruitment challenges:** Difficulty in obtaining a sufficiently diverse and open sample willing to share detailed experiences.
- **Researcher positionality:** The potential influence of the researcher's background and experiences on data interpretation.

### 3.16 Ethical Considerations

Consistent with Creswell's (2012) guidelines, ethical standards were strictly maintained:

- Participants' identities and personal information were kept confidential.
- Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.
- Data were reported honestly and without alteration.
- Participants' right to withdraw at any time was respected.

Ethical procedures were detailed in the consent forms provided to all participants.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the primary experiences international students encounter during their cultural adaptation process in Azerbaijani higher education institutions and to examine the institutional practices and support mechanisms that facilitate this adaptation. By investigating both student perspectives and institutional efforts, the study aimed to provide insights into the challenges, coping strategies, and culturally responsive practices that influence the success and well-being of international students in the Azerbaijani academic context..

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the primary experiences that international students encounter during their adaptation process in Azerbaijani higher education institutions?
2. How do Azerbaijani higher education institutions facilitate the adaptation process for international students?

This chapter presents the qualitative findings derived from semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with thirteen international students enrolled at an Azerbaijani higher education institution.

Findings are organized according to the main themes derived from the findings:

**Theme 1:** Primary experiences during the cultural adaptation process

**Theme 2:** Institutional facilitation of cultural adaptation

#### **4.1 Theme 1: Primary Experiences During the Adaptation Process**

International students described a diverse range of experiences upon arriving in Azerbaijan, reflecting both excitement and significant adjustment challenges. Several common themes emerged: language barriers, emotional and psychological challenges, social integration difficulties, academic adjustment, and coping strategies.

##### **4.1.1 Language Barriers and Communication Challenges**

A lot of international students in Azerbaijan considered the language barrier to be one of the challenging parts of settling in. Many students came to Azerbaijan with limited or no language skill and that made simple life things like shopping, asking questions, or just chatting and making friends more difficult and overwhelming. As one student shared:

*"I couldn't understand the signs or what people were saying,"* without language skills even the simplest things – like finding your way or just asking questions – make them feel like major things. One student shared like: *"It's hard to adapt... not many people are speaking English,"* they pointed out that once they are outside the classroom, it is not easy to find anyone who could speak a language they were comfortable communicating with, making simple life interactions even harder.

For many students, struggling with the language barrier came with major hurdles, often bringing on feelings of loneliness and stress during adapting to live in Azerbaijan. As one participant put it simply:

*"The language barrier was the biggest challenge."*

Being unable to have conversation with local peers or follow the daily conversations made many of them feel disconnected – both socially and culturally.

These communication challenges affected various aspects of student life. Some students felt they were "missing a lot" of the social experience because:

*"I didn't understand the language,"*

They shared that without speaking in Azerbaijani they are unable to participate in campus events or informal meetings, where the local language is mostly used. Even in some academic settings – despite most classes taught in English – there language barrier still appears during group projects or casual conversations when local students share the ideas in Azerbaijani inside the group or in administrative processes where Azerbaijani language is needed. As one participant shared:

*"Even administrative tasks could become overwhelming when no one at a service office spoke English, which made me anxious."*

Gaps in communication led to misunderstanding or international students had to put extra effort to express themselves.

With time some of them began to break the language barrier by learning the Azerbaijani language, and a few mentioned that they slowly pick up Azerbaijani words and use it, because they had to. As one student explained:

*"I learned Azerbaijani because everyone around me spoke it,"*

illustrating how constant exposure to the language pushed them to acquire it informally. Others turned to technology for immediate help:

*"I use Google Translate all the time,"*

describing a coping tactic for on-the-spot translation of signs, documents, or conversations.

Moreover, several participants emphasized the usefulness of Azerbaijani language courses offered by University A. One student noted that:

*"The Azerbaijani language course offered by [University A] was helpful, and thanks to that, I managed to speak basic Azerbaijani and was treated positively by people outside the university."*

These efforts reflect students' adaptability in dealing with communication barriers. Although they gained enough language knowledge or an effective way to cope, their limited knowledge of Azerbaijani still continued to be crucial obstacles that influenced their experiences of adjusting to the new culture.

**Table 2 : Participant Quotes Related to Language Barriers and Communication Challenges**

Quote	Context
<i>"I couldn't understand the signs or what people were saying."</i>	Difficulty with basic navigation and understanding surroundings
<i>"It's hard to adapt... not many people are speaking English."</i>	Struggles with communication outside the classroom
<i>"The language barrier was the biggest challenge."</i>	Primary emotional and social challenge upon arrival
<i>"I didn't understand the language."</i>	Feeling excluded from social activities and campus life

<i>"Even administrative tasks could become overwhelming when no one at a service office spoke English, which made me anxious."</i>	Stress when dealing with university and legal administration
<i>"I learned Azerbaijani because everyone around me spoke it."</i>	Coping through immersion and gradual language acquisition
<i>"I use Google Translate all the time."</i>	Reliance on technology to bridge language gaps
<i>"The Azerbaijani language course offered by [University A] was helpful... I managed to speak basic Azerbaijani and was treated positively."</i>	Institutional support by academia

#### 4.1.2 Emotional and Psychological Responses to a New Culture

The international students had pronounced emotional and psychological responses when adapting to a new cultural setting. Participants talked about an emotional journey that frequently started with enthusiasm and curiosity, but quickly replaced with stress, confusion, or anxiety when faced with the reality of an unfamiliar place.

Most learners reported some level of culture shock in the first days and weeks of staying in Azerbaijan. One of the students remembered:

*"The first days were so confusing, I didn't know where to go or what to do,"*

highlighting the disorientation commonly felt upon arrival. Similarly, another participant mentioned:

*"My first week was incredibly overwhelming,"* conveying the intensity of initial culture shock when faced with new surroundings, unfamiliar customs, and a foreign language all at once.

These remarks indicate the early signs of culture shock: the students' comments reveal a level of disorientation, anxiety, and confusion as they tried managing life on a daily basis devoid of the aids from home. One major factor contributing to this was the wide range of administrative processes needed to stay in Azerbaijan, such as collecting documents for temporary residence permits or visas, registering mobile phones, purchasing SIM cards, and the difficulty adapting to the new academic environment, particularly the understanding of institutional procedures and conversion methodologies, was equally challenging.

In addition to confusion, anxiety and nervousness were prevalent in the early phase of adaptation. A number of participants described their concerns before arrival as well as their initial concerns after arrival. One of the respondents noted:

*"Before I arrived, I was worried if people would accept me,"*

revealing anxiety about social acceptance in the host country. Another student who arrived at night described feeling unsafe initially, saying:

*"When I first arrived, I felt like the country might be dangerous."*

Such fears were often derived from not knowing what to expect and encountering unfamiliar faces and environments for the first time.

Despite these concerns, students reported feeling more comfortable with their surroundings over time. Individual experiences differed, for example, one student felt worried about safety, while another felt a sense of safety and security immediately.

*"I definitely feel safe as a female student here,"*

expressing pleasant surprise at the level of safety and independence she felt in Baku's environment. This contrast suggests that emotional responses differed based on individual perceptions and contexts; for some, concerns about personal safety or acceptance diminished after positive early encounters.

Feeling homesick as well as emotionally isolated were two major challenges that numerous students faced, primarily during the first few months. Most students reported missing family, friends, and home. As noted by one participant:

*"Almost every day... I was missing home, I wanted to go back,"*

describing intense homesickness during the first semester. Another similarly admitted:

*"I cried a lot and wanted to go back home, but my family supported me,"*

indicating how overwhelming the longing for home could become.

These feelings often intensified during moments of stress or when encountering stark reminders of being in a foreign land, such as different foods, holidays, or social norms. One student explained:

*"Homesickness was connected to food culture differences,"*

noting that not finding familiar foods or adjusting to a different cuisine made them yearn for home cooking and emotional comfort.

Besides homesickness, students also reported feelings of being lost or out of place. One participant remarked:

*"I felt both lost and excited,"*

describing the mix of enthusiasm and uncertainty at the start of their journey.

Feeling "lost" was not only physical (navigating campus or the city) but also psychological—being unsure how to behave according to local cultural expectations. For instance, one participant noted:

*"Initially, I felt out of place due to attire differences,"*

explaining that their clothing style made them stand out until they adapted or became accustomed to local norms.

Others described struggling with impostor syndrome in the academic context, doubting their abilities within a new education system. As one student confessed:

*"Impostor syndrome was a big issue for me,"*

reflecting the self-doubt experienced when surrounded by unfamiliar academic pressures and peers who appeared more confident.

Confronting these emotional issues often posed significant challenges that required considerable support and great emotional strength. Some students appeared to experience an improvement in their emotional condition after the initial shock diminished and as they slowly built routines and social connections. As an example, one participant who had early doubts said:

*"Initially, I questioned my decision but learned to adapt,"*

indicating that over time they overcame regret and began to feel more positive about their experience in Azerbaijan.

A large number of students described an emotional journey that included initial excitement, an intermediate period of stress and homesickness, and then eventual adjustment as they adapted to their new surroundings. In other words, emotional responses were a vital and complex component of adaptation; responding to anxiety, confusion, and homesickness transformed into ease, embracing, and developing enjoyment with their environment as their self-confidence increased.

**Table 3: Participant Quotes Related to Emotional and Psychological Responses**

Quote	Context
<i>"The first days were so confusing, I didn't know where to go or what to do."</i>	Initial disorientation upon arrival
<i>"My first week was incredibly overwhelming."</i>	Intense early culture shock

<i>"Before I arrived, I was worried if people would accept me."</i>	Pre-arrival anxiety about social acceptance
<i>"When I first arrived, I felt like the country might be dangerous."</i>	Early fears about safety
<i>"I definitely feel safe as a female student here."</i>	Positive shift in perception of safety
<i>"Almost every day... I was missing home, I wanted to go back."</i>	Homesickness during initial months
<i>"I cried a lot and wanted to go back home, but my family supported me."</i>	Emotional support from family helping cope
<i>"Homesickness was connected to food culture differences."</i>	Cultural adjustment linked to food traditions
<i>"I felt both lost and excited."</i>	Mixed feelings of enthusiasm and uncertainty
<i>"Initially, I felt out of place due to attire differences."</i>	Social discomfort from different dress styles
<i>"Impostor syndrome was a big issue for me."</i>	Academic self-doubt and pressure
<i>"Initially, I questioned my decision but learned to adapt."</i>	Personal growth through resilience

#### 4.1.3 Social Integration and Peer Support

Another main aspect in international students' adaptation experiences was the challenge of social integration: building friendships or meaningful connections and a sense of belonging in the host culture. Majority of the participants admitted that creating a social network from scratch in a foreign country was overwhelming. One student said:

*"I had to start from zero socially, which was a big change,"*

explaining that they arrived not being familiar with anyone and had to rebuild their circle of friends and acquaintances completely.

Some students expressed initial feelings of social isolation. One student, being used to having a vast group of friends back home, described the impact of the sudden absence of the same network:

*"It affected my adaptation process, because I'm used to having so many people around me,"*

emphasizing the feeling of loneliness experienced at times when familiar support and connection systems were no longer present.

Many students frequently experienced homesickness and stress caused by the lack of the instant emotional support offered by family and friends.

Several participants also stated that it was difficult for them to make local friends, especially at the beginning. A few students observed that local Azerbaijani students tended to be polite but somewhat reserved or difficult to approach. One participant claimed:

*"Local students might not be very approachable,"*

while another supposed:

*"Maybe they don't really want to talk that much."*

These impressions imply that social gap between international and local students was caused by the cultural differences in communication styles or shyness.

Despite these challenges, proactive methods helped some students bridge the gap. One student from Kazakhstan recalled:

*"I approached a local student first, and now we're good friends,"*

proving that while integration might not occur naturally, taking initiative was effective.

In fact, participants who made an attempt to connect, by participating in discussions, study groups, or social events, often reported creating meaningful connections after the initial discomfort passed.

Social integration was occasionally made more challenging by cultural differences. As was previously indicated, differences in attire or social norms made some students feel alienated and isolated initially. One student reflected:

*"Initially, I felt out of place due to attire differences,"*

while others mentioned varying social norms, such as differing perspectives toward mixed-gender friendships or social gatherings, that required adjustment.

One student encountered cultural misunderstanding:

*"They see it as a weird thing—you shouldn't be that belonging to your country,"*

implying that the student felt under pressure to fit in because local peers occasionally misinterpreted displays of homesickness and national pride, making the student feel pressured to adjust.

Additionally, several students from different ethnic or racial backgrounds experienced cases of prejudice or stereotyping. According to one African student, the first phrase she learned in Azerbaijani was:

*"gara qiz,"*

which translates to "black girl," and noted:

*"It felt weird being labeled,"*

explaining how such labeling, even if not intended offensively, made her feel singled out because of her appearance.

Another participant reported experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness during religious observances:

*"It was Ramadan and nobody around me was fasting. That was very hard,"*

emphasizing how being part of a cultural minority intensified feelings of social isolation.

Peer support eventually emerged as one of the most significant adaptation facilitators in spite of these obstacles. Many students were able to develop relationships over time, either with other foreign students or with local students, which greatly enhanced their experience.

Students repeatedly highlighted how much easier adaptation became once friendships were formed. One participant stated:

*"It became easier when I found people I could trust,"*

demonstrating how having even a small circle of reliable friends offered both emotional safety and practical guidance.

Another student noted:

*"Local friends made adaptation much easier,"*

crediting friendships with Azerbaijanis as a major contributor to their sense of belonging.

By inviting them to events and explaining slang, local friends frequently assisted international students in navigating daily duties and the nuances of Azerbaijani culture, creating a sense of inclusion.

Peer support extended beyond local connections; fellow international students also established an important support network. A number of participants described finding themselves to other foreign full-time or exchange students who were experiencing similar challenges.

One student living in a university dormitory shared:

*"All the exchange students lived in the same residence, and we always meet at dinner,"*

establishing a supportive group that spent time together daily.

Another participant noted:

*"I've made friends from different countries, and we've supported each other through the adaptation process,"* illustrating how sharing experiences with peers eased adaptation challenges.

In some cases, students also relied on personal ties, such as family members or compatriots living in Azerbaijan. One participant mentioned:

*"My biggest supporter is my husband and also international friends were supportive,"* demonstrating that close personal interactions played a key role.

Others joined online communities for foreigners. A student from Russia shared:

*"I subscribed to community groups on Telegram for Russians,"* which helped him connect with a familiar language community for advice and socializing.

Through these various channels like local friendships, international peer support, family, and online communities, students developed support systems that were essential for overcoming cultural transition. Friendships and social ties provided emotional reassurance, cultural guidance, and practical help, significantly easing the challenges of adaptation.

**Table 4: Participant Quotes Related to Social Integration and Peer Support**

Quote	Context
<i>"I had to start from zero socially, which was a big change."</i>	Feeling overwhelmed by lack of a social network
<i>"It affected my adaptation process, because I'm used to having so many people around me."</i>	Missing established support systems
<i>"Local students might not be very approachable."</i>	Challenges forming friendships with locals

<i>"Maybe they don't really want to talk that much."</i>	Perceptions of local students' shyness or reservation
<i>"I approached a local student first, and now we're good friends."</i>	Overcoming barriers through proactive outreach
<i>"Initially, I felt out of place due to attire differences."</i>	Cultural differences contributing to feelings of isolation
<i>"They see it as a weird thing—you shouldn't be that belonging to your country."</i>	Cultural misunderstandings about national identity
<i>"Gara qiz" ("black girl") — "It felt weird being labeled."</i>	Experiences of racial labeling and discomfort
<i>"It was Ramadan and nobody around me was fasting. That was very hard."</i>	Feeling culturally isolated during religious observances
<i>"It became easier when I found people I could trust."</i>	Importance of building friendships
<i>"Local friends made adaptation much easier."</i>	Positive impact of local friendships
<i>"All the exchange students lived in the same residence, and we always meet at dinner."</i>	Community support among international peers

<i>"I've made friends from different countries, and we've supported each other through the adaptation process."</i>	Peer support from fellow internationals
<i>"My biggest supporter is my husband and also international friends were supportive."</i>	Emotional support from personal relationships
<i>"I subscribed to community groups on Telegram for Russians."</i>	Building support through online communities

#### 4.1.4 Academic Adjustment in a New Educational Environment

Navigating the educational system of an Azerbaijani institution was yet another major experience that international students dealt with. Many participants highlighted the difference of academic culture in Azerbaijan compared to their countries. This difference included the methods of instruction, interaction in the classroom, evaluation procedures, and the overall level of education, all of which required some form of adjustment in students' learning approaches and attitudes.

Perhaps the most frequently reported change concerned coping with a greater degree of interactivity and student participation. Many students came from educational systems which were more lecture dominated and where student participation was minimal. Moving to Azerbaijan was a big shift. One student noted:

*"Professors often ask for the opinions of almost every student... At first, it was difficult for me because I wasn't used to sharing my opinion,"* describing how challenging it was initially to participate in class discussions. This participant had to overcome a prior habit of being a passive listener and build confidence to voice opinions in class.

Similarly, another student from a more traditional academic background observed:

*"In my university, classes are lectures only; here it's more interactive,"* emphasizing that the active learning style in Azerbaijan was unfamiliar at first.

On the other hand, a few students thrived in this environment, noting they adapted quickly. Several participants, notably from Yemen and the Czech Republic, appreciated the open atmosphere. One shared:

*"The professors are very open to discussion... it's a more interactive learning environment,"*

and reflected that, once adjusted, this style made classes more engaging compared to previous experiences.

While some may have experienced heightened concern or anxiety during the initial shift to an interactive classroom, over time, most students adapted to the change, accepting it as a valuable aspect of their development.

Learning gaps, as well as differences in curriculum and pedagogy, were an issue for the students. As an example, one interviewee drew attention to:

*"My studies in my country were more theoretical; however, here it's more experimental,"* pointing out that courses in Azerbaijan (at least in her program) placed greater emphasis on practical, hands-on learning and projects compared to the theory-heavy approach of her home institution.

Students had to modify their study strategies as well as other relevant academic skills that required some level of innovation. Initially, some students suffered from anxiety related to keeping up with the demands of their theoretical courses due to the need to participate more actively in practical, hands-on activities such as group work and case studies. While some students enjoyed the change, for others, the practical orientation led to stress.

Additionally, participants mentioned experiencing academic rigor and a stricter environment than they were accustomed to. One student expressed this sentiment vividly:

*"Teaching here is based on stress. If I do not stress you, you will never learn,"* quoting what they perceived as a local educational philosophy. This comment suggests that the student felt that a high-pressure environment with strict deadlines and expectations was common in Azerbaijani higher education.

Another student from Pakistan described the environment similarly:

*"The academic environment is overly strict and surveilled,"* possibly referring to strict rules regarding attendance, honor codes, or exam surveillance, which felt more intense than those in their home country.

These insights suggest that certain international students found it challenging to adapt to the host academic system's pressure and rigor, viewing the heavy workload and close supervision as stressors.

Outside of class, students had to learn to use new academic systems such as the distance learning platform and the grading schema. One participant recalled:

*"The first week was hectic, especially with getting used to Blackboard and the GPA system,"* referring to the university's online learning management platform (Blackboard) and the unfamiliar 4.0 GPA grading scale.

For the beginning stage of students' education, adapting to these systems created an extra mental workload. English as an academic language was particularly challenging for non-native speakers. Even though a considerable number of students possessed adequate English communication skills, learning intricate academic topics in a second language was exhausting. One participant reflected:

*"I wish I had improved my English and math skills before coming here,"* suggesting that gaps in academic preparation made the first semester more challenging.

These simultaneous academic difficulties affected the students' self esteem. As we discussed before, there was clear evidence of impostorism, especially in relation to students'

interactions with students who appeared better prepared, or simply high expectations from the faculty.

Nonetheless, most of the participants reported that they managed to cope academically and even perform well. They made an effort to get helped which included going to the professors, attending office hours, getting help from teaching assistants, and working with other students. One striking observation was that the support by the faculty was greatly appreciated and had a positive impact. This was indicated by the following student:

*"Professors are quite helpful, they always try to help,"*

suggesting that the availability and responsiveness of faculty members helped mitigate academic stress.

In some cases, students expressed gratitude for the academic style they encountered once they adjusted to it. One participant explained:

*"I chose [University A] because it offered a Western-centric academic structure,"*

noting that the university's teaching methods and interactive learning model met their expectations and academic goals.

In summary, the academic adaptation process included overcoming the reluctance to participate in classroom interactions, learning a new set of systems and standards, coping with a shifted or more complex workload, and closing any gaps in readiness. Despite the struggle, the process fostered the students' academic and individual development.

**Table 5: Participant Quotes Related to Academic Adjustment**

Quote	Context
<i>"Professors often ask for the opinions of almost every student... At first, it was difficult for me because I wasn't used to sharing my opinion."</i>	Difficulty adjusting to interactive classroom participation

<p><i>"In my university, classes are lectures only; here it's more interactive."</i></p>	<p>Comparison of lecture-based vs. discussion-based teaching</p>
<p><i>"The professors are very open to discussion... it's a more interactive learning environment."</i></p>	<p>Positive appraisal of discussion-based learning</p>
<p><i>"My studies in my country were more theoretical; however, here it's more experimental."</i></p>	<p>Shift from theoretical to practical, hands-on learning</p>
<p><i>"Teaching here is based on stress. If I do not stress you, you will never learn."</i></p>	<p>Perception of academic rigor and stress as part of teaching style</p>
<p><i>"The academic environment is overly strict and surveilled."</i></p>	<p>Observation of strict academic policies and exam surveillance</p>
<p><i>"The first week was hectic, especially with getting used to Blackboard and the GPA system."</i></p>	<p>Challenge in adapting to new academic technology and grading systems</p>
<p><i>"I wish I had improved my English and math skills before coming here."</i></p>	<p>Language and subject-specific challenges</p>
<p><i>"Professors are quite helpful, they always try to help."</i></p>	<p>Positive experience with faculty support</p>

<p><i>"I chose [University A] because it offered a Western-centric academic structure."</i></p>	<p>Alignment between academic expectations and experience</p>
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#### 4.1.5 Strategies for Coping and Adaptation

Faced with various challenges, international students employed a range of coping strategies and adaptation techniques to help themselves adjust. The interviews revealed that students were not passive in the face of difficulties; rather, they actively sought ways to overcome obstacles and ease their cultural transition. These strategies were both personal and social, and often evolved as students became more familiar with their environment.

One crucial strategy was building and leaning on support networks. As discussed in the social integration theme, forming friendships was not just an outcome but also a deliberate coping mechanism. Many students recognized that having friends would alleviate loneliness and provide guidance, so they took steps to connect with others. Sometimes this meant stepping outside their comfort zone to meet people. One student from Russia explained:

*"I approached them. It was a challenge because I was a bit introverted before,"*

illustrating that taking social initiative paid off in companionship.

Likewise, other students joined student clubs, attended campus events, or simply started conversations in the dormitory or cafeteria to meet both local and international peers. Over time, these efforts resulted in a peer group they could rely on. Students would study together, explore the city, or share meals, creating both emotional support and a sense of belonging. As one participant from Italy emphasized:

*"The people here are very kind, and I've made friends who have helped me navigate the new environment."*

Friendship circles functioned like informal “coping teams” that made daily life less stressful.

In addition to in-person friendships, students utilized online communities and communication tools for support. Social media and messaging apps became valuable resources for advice and emotional reassurance. A Russian-speaking student described:

*"I subscribed to community groups on Telegram for Russians,"* allowing them to stay connected to familiar language and cultural advice.

Others mentioned WhatsApp or Facebook groups set up specifically for international students. One participant shared:

*"We have a WhatsApp group with the staff, and they are always available to help,"* which provided quick support when encountering logistical or academic issues. Having an online community reduced feelings of isolation and created accessible support channels.

Students also engaged in personal coping activities to manage stress and homesickness. Some found comfort in familiar spaces or calming activities. One student shared a unique coping method:

*"When I feel homesick, I go to the sea here, and it makes me feel better,"* indicating that natural surroundings helped them emotionally reconnect and stabilize.

Others found comfort through familiar foods, music, or hobbies. While not always directly mentioned, many students hinted at finding small emotional anchors that made a significant difference.

Another critical coping strategy was active cultural engagement—confronting the unfamiliar environment by immersing themselves in it. Some students intentionally participated in local cultural events, holidays, or activities. As one student explained:

*"I attended local art exhibitions, theaters, and cinemas,"*  
demonstrating proactive efforts to appreciate Azerbaijani culture.

Excursions organized by the university also played a major role. Several students mentioned trips to cities like Lankaran, organized by University A's international office or student network. These outings not only exposed students to local culture but also fostered peer bonding, creating shared experiences that eased adaptation.

Language learning was another practical coping tool. Some students picked up Azerbaijani through immersion, while others enrolled in formal classes. Participants from Pakistan, Nigeria, and the Czech Republic specifically mentioned:

*"I took Azerbaijani language courses. Now, I feel more confident,"*  
or *"I'm really happy because I find myself able to communicate at some level."*

The widespread use of Google Translate and other language apps also provided crucial day-to-day support:

*"I use Google Translate all the time."*

Finally, maintaining a positive mindset and resilience was an abstract but crucial coping strategy. Students who managed to reframe their experiences from negative to learning opportunities showed stronger adaptation. One student shared:

*"Initially, I questioned my decision but learned to adapt,"*  
highlighting the importance of patience and perspective.

Many students relied on emotional support from families back home, regular calls, and encouragement to boost resilience. For example:

*"My family supported me,"*

was a common reflection across participants dealing with homesickness.

In conclusion, international students demonstrated strong agency and adaptability. By actively building support networks, engaging with the host culture, leveraging technology, and maintaining resilience, they navigated cultural adaptation proactively and successfully.

**Table 6: Participant Quotes Related to Coping Strategies and Adaptation Techniques**

Quote	Context
<i>"I approached them. It was a challenge because I was a bit introverted before."</i>	Pushing personal boundaries for social connection
<i>"The people here are very kind, and I've made friends who have helped me navigate the new environment."</i>	Importance of forming friendships
<i>"I subscribed to community groups on Telegram for Russians."</i>	Using online communities for support
<i>"We have a WhatsApp group with the staff, and they are always available to help."</i>	Digital platforms offering quick assistance
<i>"When I feel homesick, I go to the sea here, and it makes me feel better."</i>	Finding emotional comfort in natural spaces
<i>"I attended local art exhibitions, theaters, and cinemas."</i>	Engaging actively with local culture
<i>"I took Azerbaijani language courses. Now, I feel more confident."</i>	Formal language learning easing adaptation
<i>"I'm really happy because I find myself able to communicate at some level."</i>	Language learning through immersion

<i>"I use Google Translate all the time."</i>	Technology-assisted communication
<i>"Initially, I questioned my decision but learned to adapt."</i>	Resilience and positive reframing
<i>"My family supported me."</i>	Emotional support from family boosting resilience

## 4.2 Theme 2: Institutional Facilitation of Adaptation

The second research question focuses on how Azerbaijani higher education institutions support and facilitate the cultural adaptation of international students. The experiences of the participants show that, via a variety of institutional support mechanisms, institutions significantly facilitated the adaptation process. These included structured peer support systems (like buddy programmes and student networks), formal programmes and services (including orientation sessions, city tours, and language assistance) and the informal but crucial assistance from academic and administrative staff.

Students pointed up areas where greater assistance may be helpful and highlighted several ways their institutions made them feel welcome and made adjustment easier.

### 4.2.1 Orientation Programs and Peer Support Initiatives

The majority of students had some form of welcoming festivities or orientation programme tailored especially for international students when they first arrived. These activities were often cited as beneficial experiences that aided students in acclimating to their new surroundings.

Many participants had positive feedback on the organised excursions. One student pointed out:

*"The trips to Lankaran... the trips are really helpful,"*

referring to trips that the university organised to help newcomers discover Azerbaijan outside the campus.

Another student shared a similar experience with an on-campus international student network:

*"The ESN club at ADA University was very helpful during the first week... they organized tours around the city,"*

highlighting the vital early exposure to local sites and traditions that student-led projects provided.

Students found these tours significantly helpful:

*"The international city tour was amazing... a really good idea from ADA,"*

emphasising the social and cultural benefits of early orientation programmes in addition to their geographic benefits.

The buddy system, which pairs new international students with a local student volunteer, was another extremely successful support mechanism discussed. Numerous students praised this initiative:

*"The buddy system really helped; my buddy even guided me before arriving,"*

demonstrating that assistance began even prior to physical arrival, easing the logistical and emotional burden.

Upon arrival, buddies frequently helped international students with necessary tasks such as registering on campus, opening bank accounts, buying SIM cards and finding out where to shop. One student recalled:

*"My dorm neighbors helped me with basics like buying water and a SIM card,"*

and

another

explained:

*"My roommate helped me with everything, even with opening a bank account,"* showing how individualised peer support significantly facilitated adaptation to everyday life.

The buddy program created sincere connections that lasted throughout the students' academic careers in addition to providing helpful support:

*"ESN helps with that a lot... the buddy system is really nice,"* stated one participant, reflecting widespread satisfaction with the program.

University A arranged continuing social events such as club activities, cultural evenings, and mixers for international students beyond the initial orientation. Students appreciated these ongoing efforts:

*"There were trips for international students, which helped me adapt,"* indicating that such events were not just icebreakers but critical adaptation tools.

International students frequently lived with or close to one another in the dormitory settings. One campus-dwelling student shared:

*"All the exchange students lived in the same residence, and we always meet at dinner,"* revealing how simple daily interactions enhanced support networks.

Nevertheless, a few participants suggested areas for improvement. One participant admitted:

*"I felt pretty overwhelmed because I missed the orientation day,"* highlighting the need for makeup sessions or catch-up support for late arrivals.

Another student praised the buddy and event system but noted:

*"ESN and cultural events significantly aided my adaptation, but more specific platforms for international student support could help,"* suggesting that universities could go beyond social integration by providing formalized academic or administrative guidance tailored for international students.

### **Table 7: Participant Quotes Related to Orientation and Peer Support Programs**

Quote	Context
<i>"The trips to Lankaran... the trips are really helpful."</i>	Excursions easing geographic and cultural orientation
<i>"The ESN club at [University A] was very helpful during the first week... they organized tours around the city."</i>	Student-led city orientation tours
<i>"The international city tour was amazing... a really good idea from [University A]."</i>	Appreciation for city exposure programs
<i>"The buddy system really helped; my buddy even guided me before arriving."</i>	Peer mentoring beginning before arrival
<i>"My dorm neighbors helped me with basics like buying water and a SIM card."</i>	Practical support from peers in daily life
<i>"My roommate helped me with everything, even with opening a bank account."</i>	Peer help in navigating formal processes
<i>"ESN helps with that a lot... the buddy system is really nice."</i>	Positive reflections on structured peer programs
<i>"There were trips for international students, which helped me adapt."</i>	Ongoing events fostering social integration
<i>"All the exchange students lived in the same residence, and we always meet at dinner."</i>	Dormitory-based community-building

<i>"I felt pretty overwhelmed because I missed the orientation day."</i>	Need for better latecomer support
<i>"More specific platforms for international student support could help."</i>	Suggestion for more formal institutional structures

#### 4.2.2 Faculty and Administrative Support

None of the participants' comments about the focus group highlight the importance of faculty and staff reinforcement as much as the individual interviews. Faculty and staff support were major influences on the students' successful coping with the new learning environment. Participants uniformly recognized the support provided by their teaching and non-teaching staff, including their instructors, administrative clerks, and academic advisors.

From the participants' comments, it was obvious that professors went beyond the university's expectations about the progress of international students.

*"Professors are quite helpful, they always try to help,"* was a statement made by one student about his positive experience of helpful university faculty assisting students.

Faculty were available for all students and were ready to explain simple or complex concepts to students who came from different cultures and were reluctant to (or had limited ability to) take part in classes due to language difficulties.

The range of assistance available to students encompassed booking and attending lectures, enabling international students to legally reside in the country and be cared for within the borders of the country. One participant shared:

*"The faculty members and administrative staff... assisted me with my TRP and other documentation issues,"*

encapsulates the experience of one participant regarding the effortless support enabled by the institutional structures in place to assist students to navigate intricate legal regulations such as the renewal or application for a Temporary Residence Permit.

There was extensive coverage regarding the remarks on getting any communication and how they can communicate with the international office staff considering the use of WhatsApp and other platforms:

*"We have a WhatsApp group with the staff, and they are always available to help,"* which provided useful and immediate assistance when it came to registration, accommodation, and other official procedures.

Support offered for general scholarly and language competencies, however, received divergent verdicts. Some interview participants commended the Azerbaijani language courses that were offered, while others contended that more proactive or even forced language classes could facilitate daily acclimatization.

One participant suggested:

*"Mandatory language classes could help,"* illustrating how voluntary programs are unlikely to benefit all students who need extra language help.

Also, some students observed that psychological and counseling services were sparse or difficult to access, alongside a lack in emotional and mental health support, as well as gaps in these areas. As one participant put it:

*"Counseling is hard to access,"*

This highlights an area of concern that requires institutional attention considering the cultural shift's emotional burden.

In spite of these gaps, the overarching institutional culture was reported as caring and welcoming. Including, one student's concluding remark was:

*"Institutional support at [University A] makes everyone feel seen and heard,"* encapsulating the general sentiment that supportive administration and faculty contributed positively to their adaptation journey.

**Table 8: Participant Quotes Related to Faculty and Administrative Support**

Quote	Context
<i>"Professors are quite helpful, they always try to help."</i>	Faculty support with academic adjustment
<i>"The faculty members and administrative staff... assisted me with my TRP and other documentation issues."</i>	Assistance with legal residency requirements
<i>"We have a WhatsApp group with the staff, and they are always available to help."</i>	Administrative responsiveness
<i>"Mandatory language classes could help."</i>	Need for structured Azerbaijani language support
<i>"Counseling is hard to access."</i>	Need for better mental health services
<i>"Institutional support at [University A] makes everyone feel seen and heard."</i>	Positive experiences with inclusive campus culture

### 4.3 Mapping Literature-Based Adaptation Challenges to Participant Experiences

This section compares the main cultural adaptation challenges identified in the literature to the actual experiences of the 13 participants interviewed for this study.

**Table 9: Comparison of Literature-Based and Participant-Reported Cultural Adaptation Challenges**

<b>Challenge From Literature</b>	<b>Participants Facing It (Countries)</b>	<b>Total Participants (Out of 13)</b>
Language Barriers	Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, Yemen, Czech Republic, Italy.	8
Cultural Differences	Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Czech Republic, Kazakhstan.	8
Social Isolation and Homesickness	Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, Yemen, Egypt, Nigeria, Kazakhstan.	5
Academic Pressure and Classroom Expectations	Pakistan, Yemen, Russia, Turkey, Zimbabwe, Kazakhstan.	6
Financial Difficulties	Turkey, Zimbabwe, Italy	3
Bureaucratic/Administrative Issues	Russia, Zimbabwe, Sudan.	3

Lack of Support Systems	Nigeria, Russia, Turkey, Pakistan, Yemen.	5
Unfamiliarity with Local Culture and Environment	Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey, Sudan, Czech Republic, Sudan, Italy, Russia.	5

#### 4.4 International Students' Suggestions for Enhancing Institutional Support Services

Students proposed several actionable suggestions aimed at improving international student services within Azerbaijani universities.

**Table 10: Student Recommendations for Enhancing International Student Services in Azerbaijani Universities**

Theme	Suggestion	Countries
Language Support	Make Azerbaijani language classes mandatory; learn basic Azerbaijani/Russian before arrival	Yemen, Nigeria, Italy
Pre-Arrival Preparation	Provide clear guidelines on arrival procedures; offer cultural and historical context	Czech Republic, Kazakhstan
Social Integration	Organize joint academic and extracurricular events for local and international students	Yemen, Russia,

		Sudan, Italy, Pakistan
Academic Orientation	Explain GPA system, Blackboard use, and culturally sensitive academic topics	Egypt, Russia, Italy, Kazakhstan
Personalized & Emotional Support	Assign mentors/advisors familiar with international student experiences; regular check-ins	Russia, Zimbabwe
Digital Communication Tools	Create Instagram/online platforms for international student concerns; provide info online and in English	Pakistan, Czech Republic

#### 4.5 Summary of The Findings

In this chapter, the qualitative results of the study are described with respect to “In-depth Interviews Conducted with 13 International Students Studying in Higher Education Institutions of Azerbaijan.” In accordance with the two guiding research questions, results were structured, which are: (1) the primary experiences international students encounter during their cultural adaptation process, and (2) the ways in which Azerbaijani institutions facilitate their adaptation.

It was found that international students face several language barriers on their adaptation trajectory, as well as emotional and psychological reactions of culture shock and homesickness, social integration challenges, and problems with academic adjustment. To mitigate these issues, students employed active coping strategies such as establishing social

contacts, utilizing communicative technologies, participating in local cultural activities, and displaying resilience.

Institutional aid proved to be a major factor in easing students' adaptation through orientation programs and faculty and administrative caring. However, students also pointed out several other aspects, such as lack of adequate language assistance, superficial preparatory instructions for pre-arrival, limited mental health service availability, and inadequate local to international student engagement opportunities.

This chapter analyzed in detail the adaptation challenges encountered by the participants and integrated them with published sources, validating the presence and recognition of certain contextual study challenges attributed to Azerbaijan. In closing, participants offered perceptive suggestions aimed at improving the frameworks of institutional support designed for international students.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Most interview data support the literature's view regarding the relevance of language proficiency, social networks, and institutional support as key components in shaping an international student's adaptation experience. As noted by Makeeva et al. (2022) and Arslan and Polat (2023), a lack of Azerbaijani (or Russian) language proficiency acted as the most pervasive barrier. Participants reported that most aspects of their daily life, academic engagement, and administrative interactions were challenging until they were able to communicate, with the aid of Google Translate. This supports Eynullayeva et al.'s (2023) argument that language barriers amplify isolation and limit engagement in participation gaps, of which the first semester tends to be the most pronounced.

Social integration progressed in a parallel manner, although with some unusual differences. Consistent with the claims of Pinarbasi (2023), students reported that establishing friendships, either with local students or other international students, served as a landmark in their adaptation process. Having peers helped with not just homesickness but also in mitigating the experienced practical chaos of university life. Surprisingly, the students placed more attention and appreciation towards day-to-day activities (for example, mates assisting with the purchase of SIM cards and city tours) rather than large-scale cultural activities. This indicates that proactive small support which is often relational contributes to smoother transitions than large-scale and formal events designed to welcome students.

Structural support including orientation sessions, buddy programs, and international-student offices were noted as helpful but did not fulfill identified gaps. Support mechanisms, such as advising, were described as friendly and helpful; however, respondents reported lack

of mental health services, even though literature (Glass et al., 2014) recognizes such services as vital to one's emotional health in acculturation processes. Similar patterns were noted in voluntary language courses. Students whose needs were greatest were often least reached by the courses, thereby supporting Makeeva et al. 's (2022) calls for more criteria-based, and possibly mandatory, language training.

Lack of individual approach in academic context was another reason for concern. Some participants appreciated the debate-based and interactive classroom model in discussion-oriented classes, while others found the severity, constant surveillance during tests, and overall anticipated vs. actual outcome mismatch very difficult to work with. At times, these challenges lead to something akin to impostor syndrome which connects to Kaikenov et al. 's (2024) observation that differences in cultures can have academic etiquette as a gap difference that is confusing to newcomers.

By looking at all the perspectives, the research highlights that the international students' adaptation experiences, while unique in expression, often are underpinned by an emotional and practical framework. The initial enthusiasm gets replaced with an uncertain phase filled with language difficulties, bureaucratic complexities, and social isolation. As time went by, however, students showed resilience and resourcefulness in building community, both in-person and online which were more confident. Often, simple human interactions from exceptionally kind roommates, patient professors, and well organized student trips made the most impact.

It becomes clear that while Azerbaijani higher education institutions have made significant advancements in supporting international students, there remains room for strategic enhancement. Clearer pre-arrival preparation, more inclusive and accessible counselling services, structured language instruction, and continuous intercultural engagement are among the recommendations suggested by participants themselves.

Ultimately, creating a student-centered environment that is both welcoming and responsive is essential, not only for individual well-being and academic success but also for positioning Azerbaijani universities as attractive and sustainable destinations within global education.

## 5.1 Summary of the Discussion

**Table 11: Comparative Analysis of Literature and Study Findings on International Students' Adjustment Factors**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Literature Expectations</b>	<b>Study Findings</b>	<b>Alignment / Contribution</b>
<b>Language proficiency</b>	Core driver of social & academic integration (Makeeva et al., 2022)	Largest early barrier; formal courses and immersion reduce anxiety	Confirms importance; highlights need for <i>mandatory</i> courses
<b>Social networks</b>	Local friendships key to well-being (Pinarbasi, 2023)	Peer bonds, <i>both</i> local and international, mitigate homesickness	Extends by stressing value of international-peer “coping teams”
<b>Institutional orientation &amp; buddy</b>	Ease transition, foster	City tours, buddy help with	Affirms; shows micro-level practical help

<b>schemes</b>	belonging (Arslan & Polat, 2023)	banking/SIM cards most praised	outweighs macro events
<b>Mental-health &amp; counselling</b>	Essential but often overlooked (Makeeva et al., 2022)	Services perceived as inaccessible or unknown	Reveals critical service gap
<b>Academic culture &amp; pressure</b>	Cultural differences in pedagogy create stress (Kaikenov et al., 2024)	Interactive classes welcomed after adjustment; strict surveillance fuels impostor feelings	Partially aligns; adds nuance on surveillance-related stress

Together, the evidence verifies a significant portion of the regional scholarship while surfacing two actionable blind spots: systematic language instruction and accessible counselling that must be attended in order for Azerbaijani institutions to transform episodic goodwill into a comprehensive, student-centered adaptation framework.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This capstone project explored international students' experiences and institutional support mechanisms in Azerbaijani higher education. Interviews with thirteen international students identified key challenges including language barriers, emotional stressors like homesickness and culture shock, social integration issues, and academic adjustments. Students overcame these barriers through peer networks, engagement with local culture, language assistance tools, and emotional support from family and online communities.

Institutions significantly supported students through orientation programs, peer mentoring, city tours, and accessible staff. However, participants highlighted the need for improvements, including mandatory language instruction, accessible mental health services, structured intercultural activities, and clear pre-arrival guidelines. Tailored academic orientations addressing specific educational practices were also recommended.

This study underscores critical areas for enhancement in Azerbaijani higher education, advocating for comprehensive, student-centered approaches. Improving language training, psychological support, and intercultural initiatives will notably enhance international student satisfaction and academic success.

## **Chapter 7: Final Product**

These study findings revealed that international students face multiple forms of adaptation difficulties while in Azerbaijan. It was crafted to address two primary beneficiary groups which were (1) the international students who wanted relevant support that is not only appealing but easy to access, and (2) the university administrators who wanted to improve diagnostic support services and communication frameworks. Keeping in mind the overwhelming reliance on digital media by both groups, the final product came in the form of a multi-stop social media outreach campaign conducted exclusively on Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn.

### **7.1 Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of this product is to refine the cultural, academic, and sociological integration for international students studying in Azerbaijani universities. Furthermore, it has been designed to help the leadership comprehend their international students in a way that enables them to assist the students meaningfully. Instagram and LinkedIn were chosen for this campaign due to their broad appeal and visual nature. The platforms foster ongoing engagement, narrative sharing, community support, and providing institutions with recommendations for enhancing their support for overseas students as well as promoting education in Azerbaijan.

### **7.2 Social Media Content: Reels**

In service of the informational and emotional gaps toward the research, a set of Reels (short videos) has been created. These 30 to 60 second videos combine storytelling with practical tips and are offered in English. Each video focuses on students' issues, captures their voices, and offers transformative solutions.

**Reels topics (Based on research findings):**

**1. TRP and Visa procedures in Azerbaijan** – Administrative steps bothering a student are shown in a guided manner.

**2. Azerbaijani culture: Traditions and holidays** – Holidays, customs, greeting norms, and bordering etiquette.

**3. Life in academic institutions of Azerbaijan** – Academic culture overview: behavior in classes, assessment methods, and relations with adults.

**4. Guide for international students** – Practical guide students’ housing, moving around the city, and life.

Designed to engage their fellow students, these Reels blend relatable contexts with genuine emotion, enhanced through student perspective and accurate lived experiences.

### **7.3 Complementary Static Posts: Topics and Concepts**

In order to streamline operations and address content diversification, specific static posts are scheduled which do not overlap in topics or formats with the Reels. These posts focus on broader themes aligned with institutional policies designed toward attention generation, dialogue promotion, and student wellness advocacy. In addition to student-centered themes, one post will specifically focus on **recommendations for universities**, drawn directly from the voices of interviewed participants.

**Table 12: Proposed Static Post Topics and Concepts**

<b>Post topic</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>“Spotlight: International alumni success stories”</b>	Profiles focused on students who, despite the numerous challenges in Azerbaijan, persevered and achieved success.

Post topic	Purpose
<b>“University services you should be using (but probably aren’t)”</b>	Educating people on resources that are available but not actively used.
<b>“Cultural misunderstandings 101”</b>	Employing humor and empathy to resolve gaps of understanding between cultures.
<b>“Safe spaces on campus”</b>	Advocacy for the availability of mental health services, quiet zones, and support hubs.
<b>“How universities can better support us” (Carousel)</b>	Framed institutional feedback by students suggesting changes anonymously.
<b>Hints from current international students</b>	Methods of coping, socializing and other adjustment strategies shared by students.
<b>Recommendations for universities based on interviewees' responses</b>	Evidence-based insights from actual student interviews, summarized as concrete, actionable steps for university leadership.

Each post will include bilingual captions and use formats such as carousels, quotes, or infographics to engage a diverse, multilingual audience.

#### 7.4 Alignment with Research Findings

The campaign responds directly to the lived experiences and challenges of international students identified in the study:

- **Language barriers:** Addressed through content in English and accessible visual aids.
- **Social isolation:** Decreased by community storytelling and peer visibility.
- **Academic adjustment:** Supported through accessible and relatable academic advice.
- **Institutional blind spots:** Addressed through professional Q&As and student-centered narratives as well as recommendations for improvement.
- **Mental health needs:** Addressed via relevant material on wellness and campus resources.

### 7.5 Benefits for Stakeholders

- **International students:** Access information tailored to their culture, receive emotional, and peer support.
- **University leaders:** Gain understanding and willingness to address international student needs .
- **National educational stakeholders:** Access a consolidated cross-university communication platform dedicated to advancing internationalization initiatives.

### 7.6 Sustainability and Expansion

To achieve sustainability, an international office collaborative content calendar, hashtag system, and shared management workflow will be configured. Importantly, hashtags like **#StudyinAzerbaijan** and **#Azerbaijan4Internationals** will be adopted in place of more specific institutional ones to portray the unified goal of all Azerbaijani universities.

The campaign's sustainability and growth over multiple semesters will be supported through partnerships with alumni, student ambassadors, and university media groups.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Interview Consent Form

#### Consent form

## **International Students in Azerbaijani Higher Education: Experiences and Support Mechanisms**

Dear participant,

The purpose of this study is to investigate the cultural adaptation process of international students in Azerbaijani higher education institutions by identifying the primary challenges they face, exploring the key factors influencing their adaptation, and examining the role of institutional support in facilitating this process. The study aims to provide insights into the experiences of international students, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies that can promote a smoother transition and better support for their integration. The information gathered will be used solely for research purposes to better understand the challenges faced and experiences of international students in Azerbaijan and to offer recommendations for policy and practice that can improve institutional approaches to enhance the overall well-being and academic success of international students in Azerbaijan.

The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, depending on how long your responses are.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may say no or you may choose to answer only the questions you feel completely comfortable. Any direct identification information, such as your name and workplace, will be removed from the data when the responses are analysed. Only the reviewers who agree to the terms of confidentiality will have access to the data as they review the data analysis and codes and will have no direct identification information and will not see your name. After your responses are analysed and built into theme, they will be compiled into a paper as part of a research study.

Because all the possible measures will be taken to keep participant identity private, this study poses no risk to the individuals. Participants may feel unnecessary pressure to partake in this study because of the administrative or political pressure. However, this type of involuntary participation is completely discouraged as it violates the participant rights.

Therefore, you should know the participation is completely voluntary and your decision to not participate will not be disclosed to anyone. However, your voluntary participation will benefit you through self-reflection and sharing your voice and concerns you are facing in the teaching process.

A final copy of the study will not include your identification information and name. Although every attempt will be made to protect participant confidentiality, some distinguishing answers may reveal participant identity. Your responses or decision whether or not to answer some questions will not affect your status as a student. At any point, you may withdraw as a participant from the study. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowed by law.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Elmira Mastieva, emastieva19129@ada.edu.az, Ayisha Zeynalova, azeynalova18864@ada.edu.az, Tural Alizada, talizada181989@ada.edu.az, Vusala Ganjaliyeva, vganjaliyeva18896@ada.edu.az, or Dr. Samira Hajiyeva, shajiyeva@ada.edu.az.

Thank you for participating!

I agree to participate in this study. In addition, by signing below I agree to allow my responses to be audio-recorded for research purposes of this study

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B. Interview Questions**

**Question 1:** What are the primary experiences that international students encounter during their cultural adaptation process in Azerbaijani higher education institutions?

1. Can you describe your overall journey of cultural adaptation since you arrived in Azerbaijan?
2. What were some of the key challenges or surprises you encountered during your adaptation process?
3. How have you adjusted to the social and academic norms here? Could you share any specific experiences, positive or challenging, in these areas?
4. Have you encountered any cultural differences in classroom dynamics or teaching styles? How did you handle these differences?
5. How did you manage feelings of culture shock or homesickness, if you experienced them? Please share any specific examples.
6. What strategies or personal resources did you find helpful in coping with the cultural transition? Any specific examples.
7. In what ways have you engaged with the local culture (e.g., language, traditions, social events) during your time here?

8. How do you think these experiences have shaped your understanding of Azerbaijani culture?
9. Looking back, what do you think were the most significant milestones or turning points in your cultural adaptation process?
10. Is there anything you wish you had known or been better prepared for before arriving?

**Question 2:** How do Azerbaijani higher education institutions facilitate the cultural adaptation process for international students?

1. What kinds of support services or programs did your institution offer to help international students adjust culturally?"
2. How did you learn about these services, and how accessible were they to you?
3. Can you share an example of a program or service that was particularly helpful (or unhelpful) in facilitating your adaptation?
4. What improvements or additional support do you think could further assist international students in adapting to the academic and social environment?
5. How have faculty members and administrative staff contributed to your cultural adaptation? Could you provide any specific examples?
6. Do you feel that there is an open and supportive communication channel between international students and the institution's staff?
7. Have there been any initiatives, such as orientation sessions, cultural events, or mentoring programs, that helped you integrate better? Please describe your experience.
8. What role did peer interactions (with both international and local students) play in your adaptation process?
9. Have you had opportunities to provide feedback on the adaptation support services at your institution? If so, how was your feedback received and acted upon?

10. In your opinion, what are the key elements that should be included in a successful cultural adaptation program for international students?