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The academic integration of international students at an Italian university: exploring communication channels, feeling of belonging and social support

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Article info

Abstract

Language barriers, sociocultural barriers and academic adjustment are some of the main factors affecting international students' experience in foreign universities. Focusing on the Italian context, the present study aims to evaluate to which extent the language anxiety, the perceived practical-emotional support of local or foreign peers, the perceived effectiveness institutional communication, and communication channel used affect international students' feeling of belonging and academic performance. Data were collected with 185 international students from the largest university in Rome, using an anonymous online questionnaire. Results show that language anxiety levels affect with academic success; also, the support received by local students, the emotional support received by international students, and the effectiveness of information provided by the university affect the feeling of belonging to the university. Practical support received by other international negatively affect feeling of belonging. Age, gender also have significant effects in this context. These findings encourage institution to actively pursue the integration of international students with the local students and community, enhancing individual skills and opportunities for socialization with host and international students.

Keywords: Language anxiety, Sociocultural patterns, Italy, Higher Education, International students

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Introduction

In the glossary of UNESCO Institute for Statistics, internationally mobile students are defined as "individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination" (Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2023). The number of internationally mobile students from 2000 to 2019 tripled, increasing from two to six million (Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2022). Hence the importance of studying this population. Such trend, however, does not necessarily imply that these students are content with their academic and social experiences in the host countries (Qadeer et al., 2021). The challenges that these students face mostly regard language, sociocultural barriers and academic adjustment, which impact on their academic performance and social life (Norton et al., 2022; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) could contribute to overcome these boundaries by increasing opportunities for receiving information and interacting with other internationals and with locals in an asynchronous communicative context, which could reduce language and adaptation anxieties. Literature largely shows the importance of ICTs to assist students and increase inclusiveness (Ott & Pozzi, 2009; Verdegem, 2011), and in fostering the integration of international students (Lakhal et al., 2020). But there are not enough studies which consider the role of ICTs together with other barriers encountered by internationals. Also, most of the studies are limited to anglophone countries, leaving the experience of international students in other linguistic, academic and cultural contexts largely unexplored.

Aim of this study is to contribute to this literature by exploring the experience of international students in a large Italian university. In particular, we examined language barrier, perceived support by local and other international students, ICTs practices, and how they affect international students' integration and academic performance.

Theoretical background

Previous studies identified four main areas as relevant to understand the international student's experience in host universities: language barriers, socio-cultural barriers, academic adaptation and academic performance.

Language barriers

Among the many stressors international students can face, the language barrier results to be one of the major factors that determines adjustment problems (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007), which can affect the overall perceived integration in a host country's culture (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Language anxiety can be caused by intrinsic characteristics of the subject: a student with a shy personality could face generalized stress when it is needed to talk in front of the class (Horwitz et al., 1986). Yet, the stress doesn't come only from individual characteristics, and is more extended than expected. A study conducted in an Indonesian university found almost 70% of participants suffering of stress related to language barriers (Ali et al., 2020).

A further challenge comes from comprehension and production problems: research (mostly conducted in Australia, the US and the UK) has explored international students' problems in listening, and in oral and writing performance, both when interacting with local students and with lecturers (Robertson et al., 2000; Singh, 2005). Already in 1997, Stoynoff (1997) concluded that proficiency in a language is significantly interlinked with academic performance of foreign students. This could further activate Pygmalion effect and interact with gender issues, as suggested by studies pointing out a less supportive environment experienced by international female students compared to domestic ones (Beoku-Betts, 2004).

Research further show that international students may experience problems in communicating with locals because of not having enough information about the host country, its social norms and vocabulary (Sawir et al., 2012). Brown and Holloway (2008) showed that language barriers may be one of the main reasons why international students feel uncomfortable in expressing their opinion and in participating in group discussions. Language can thus mark a power differential between the international and domestic students, perceived as "experts" in comparison (Harrison & Peacock, 2009), whereas students who interact less or prefer listening, are correspondingly labeled as 'passive' or 'negative' (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003).

Other studies confirm that language barriers and cultural identities are crucial factors influencing international graduate students' engagement also out of the classroom, like looking for books in a library (Ishimura et al., 2007).

Finally, language difficulties can also affect intergroup relationships. Campbel and Zeng (2006) found that Chinese students in Australia and New Zealand do not have much domestic friends, and that they feel making friends with domestic students is harder than with other internationals due to linguistic barrier. On the other side, Barger (2004) has concluded that healthy communication among both domestic and foreign students may create mutual friendly relationships and have good effect in transferring linguistic, cultural and academic experiences.

Socio-cultural adjustment

Socio-cultural adjustment is conceptualized as the "ability to fit in and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture" (Searle & Ward, 1990, p. 450). Various factors facilitate socio-cultural adjustment of international students, including close contact with host students, social support, involvement in extracurricular activities, good language skills, less perceived discrimination, and longer periods of stay (Constantine et al., 2005; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Interacting with members of the host country is fundamental for the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students, since through these contacts they become able to gain insight into why people behave, communicate, and interact the way they do, so that what previously was unexpected and unexplained behavior can be more easily understood

(Hendrickson et al., 2011; Kim, 2001). Besides, interactions with host nationals provide opportunities for international students to practice their communication and language skills (Hendrickson et al., 2011). However, international students may be held back by sociocultural barriers and perceived discrimination (Hendrickson et al. 2011). Furthermore, the sociocultural barrier could also impact negatively on the domestic students' openness to foreigners. Studies have shown that local students too feel hesitant in communicating to foreign students because of linguistic barrier, different cultures and origins (Kimmel & Volet, 2012). Also, they may be reluctant in including international students in projects when they perceive that an additional effort is needed, resulting in a "passive xenophobia" in the local students (Harrison & Peacock, 2009).

Academic adjustment

In addition to all the difficulties that international students face during their adjustment in the host country, they also need to adjust to the new educational system. On the one hand, academic adjustment can be referred to as "the degree of a student's success in coping with various educational demands such as motivation, application, performance and satisfaction with the academic environment" (Rienties et al., 2012, p.687). On the other hand, the increasing number of international students can be a source of challenges to academic staff too, who could be unfamiliar with the student's learning habits and needs (Marlina, 2009). This situation has the potential for a mismatch (Sheridan, 2011) and affect the experience of international students who do not adapt quickly to the new pedagogical and academic system. In this regard, the possibilities offered by ICTs in providing information, expanding and tailoring assistance seem particularly relevant (Lakhal et al., 2020).

Academic performance

Language, socio-cultural barrier and academic adjustment clearly affect academic performance. Several studies have proven the strong correlation between academic achievement and proficiency in language of the host country (Fatima, 2001; Lin & Yi, 1997). Also, academic adaptation, social integration and academic performance are related, though in a multifaceted way. Students who succeed in academic adjustment tend to show better study results (Rienties et al., 2012). For example, international students with a (mixed) western ethnic background perform well on both academic and social integration in western university. In contrast, international students with a non-western background are often less socially integrated compared to other international students, even though they have similar academic performances (Rienties et al., 2012).

International students at Italian universities

As the examined literature shows, international students and the barriers they encountered have been largely examined in the UK and US higher education systems. A number of studies has been conducted in other contexts, however, to our knowledge, only few studies have focused on the experience of international students in the Italian context. The phenomenon is nevertheless becoming increasingly relevant in this context as well.

In the academic year 2021/2022 there were 18,798 students with foreign citizenship newly enrolled in Italian universities (USTAT, n.d.). This population is further divided into international students who had prior education in a foreign system, and other internationals who have obtained prior education at an Italian institution.

In this context, a study by Giudici et al. (2021) compared the academic performance of Italian students, internationals with an Italian educational background, and international students. Results showed that students with foreign citizenship, with both foreign or Italian education background, suffer from lower academic performance compared to Italian students. However, internationals with an Italian educational background show an advantage if compared to students with foreign citizenship and foreign educational background. Other research further confirm that the support and orientation services provided by the host institution (e.g. through effective communication strategies), as well as the language and socio-cultural barriers (encountered within classrooms and the wider society) affect academic integration and academic performance of international students in Italy (Norton & Fatigante, 2018).

Aims

Drawing on the examined literature, the aim of this study is to address the following hypotheses:

Hp1) Based on results by Stoynoff (1997), Beoku-Betts (2004), Norton and Fatigante (2018) and Norton et al. (2022), we expect that language barriers would negatively affect academic performance and integration of international students;

Hp2) Based on results by Barger (2004), Hendrickson et al. (2011), Kim (2001), Kimmel and Volet (2012) and by Harrison and Peacock (2009), we expect that higher levels of perceived practical and emotional support from host students would positively affect academic performance and integration of international students;

Hp3) Based on Campbel and Zeng (2006) and Norton et al. (2022) we expect that practical and emotional support from other international students would positively affect academic performance but that only emotional support would affect the academic integration of international students;

Hp4) We further expect that an effective use of ICTs by the institution (Lakhal et al., 2020; Norton & Fatigante, 2018) to provide information and social engagement could positively affect academic integration of international students;

Hp5) Finally, we expect that other socio-demographic variables such western background (Rienties et al., 2012), longer periods of stay in the country (Constantine et al., 2005; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Giudici et al., 2021), gender (Beoku-Betts, 2004) could also affect positively the performance of international students.

Methods

An anonymous online survey was used to collect data with a convenience sample of international students attending regular courses at the largest European university, Sapienza University of Rome. It should be noted that data were collected after the pandemic-related closures, in a context where students were given the option of attending classes and other academic activities either in person or online.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of different sections.

A first section collected data on gender, age, nationality, permanence in Italy, student status, university of enrolment, field of education, level of study program, how they received information about the degree and about the university, and if they contacted the university before arrival.

The second section explored the language issue: native language, the language of the course, and language anxiety in the classroom. Language anxiety was measured using an adaptation of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) from Horwitz et al. (1986). The original questionnaire consisted of 33 statements, we selected 11 items, and slightly rewording 2 of them to make them relevant to the context examined.

The third section collected data on the socio-cultural adjustment. In particular, we explored perceived practical and emotional support, and engagement of international students with other international or host students. The items of this section were selected and adapted from the survey proposed by Chuah and Singh (2016).

The fourth section examined different facets academic adjustment, with a specific focus on the use of communication channels and ICTs. Five items examined the knowledge and participation to social events at the University. Communication channels and ICTs use were examined with 14 questions revolving around the type of communication channel used communicate with the institution (institutional and personal emails, face-to-face interactions, social media, letters), the frequency and the number of communications, and if the participants felt well informed about the university and about social events (from 1 not at all, to 5 fully informed). Feeling of belonging to the university was assessed through a single item (scale range 1 to 5).

The last section collected data on the academic performance of the participants, using the number of exam, satisfaction with the grades (scale range 1 to 4) and self-reported academic average grade (from 1- sufficient '18-21', to 4- top '27-30').

FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) and perceived support by host and international students (Chuah & Singh, 2016) were submitted to exploratory factor analysis (PCA, varimax rotation). In the case of FLCAS, PCA showed a single factor that explained 70.1% of variance, including 11 items (e.g. Because of language... I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in the classroom) with factor loadings from .79 to .89. This measure of anxiety showed very good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .957). As regards perceived support by host students, the analysis showed a single factor that explained 66.4% of

variance, including 7 items (e.g. When I cannot cope with my studies, I get encouragement from host national students) with factor loadings from .74 to .85. The host support dimension showed very good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .915) In the case of perceived support by international students, the analysis showed two factors that explained 35.3% and 33.8% of variance respectively. The first factor was named practical support, it included 3 items (e.g. International students advise me about university rules and regulations) with factor loadings from .69 to .90; the second factor was named emotional support, it included 4 items (e.g. International students accept me as I am) with factor loadings from .69 to .80. Both internationals' practical and emotional support proved reliable (Cronbach's alpha equals to .831 and .792 respectively).

Composite factor scores were computed and multiple hierarchical regressions were used to examine the hypotheses.

Respondents

Participants of the questionnaire were recruited via social networks and via e-mail, and also with the help of professors to reach potential participants. Inclusion criteria were: foreign nationality, enrolment at Sapienza bachelor or master degrees. Exclusion criteria were: Italian nationality, Italian native speakers, enrollment at PhD courses which do not have regular lectures and exams. The total number of respondents was 203, of which 25 were excluded. After cleaning for incomplete answers, the final convenience sample considered for this study is of 178 respondents (56.7% female, 41.6% male, 1.7% preferred not to say), coming from 46 different countries. The 54.2% of respondents had been in Italy for less than one year, and 45.8% of them had been in Italy for one year or more. The participants were completing their Bachelor's degree (44.9%) or their Master's degree (55.1%), and their average age was 24.4 (SD = 5.06). The degree courses ranged from Humanities, Engineering, Political Sciences, Health, Economics, and other disciplines.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Our respondents overall showed a low-intermediate level of language anxiety (M = 2.37, SD = 1.04). The host students' support mean score is at intermediate levels (M=3.15, SD = 0.91). The perceived practical support (M=3.42, SD =0.93) and emotional support (M=3.52, SD = 0.86) received by other international students is moderately high. For what concerns the feeling of belonging and the academic success, the mean values are close to the middle point (M=3.15, SD=1.31; and M=3.07, SD = 0.84 respectively).

About ICTs use and communication channels, before entering the university, 67.4% of participants contacted the university via e-mail, 1.1% contacted the institution through social media, 7.3% using university website, 1.1% asked to a friend, 0.6% used skype and 21.9% did not contact the university at all. Also, when asking which communication

channels were mostly used to communicate with the institution, 91.6% of respondents chose institutional e-mail, 24.2% personal e-mail, 27.6% social networks, 15.3% face-to-face, 2.3% letters, 0.6% other communication tools for videoconferences (multiple answers were allowed). When asking about how they received communication about social events organized by the university, 72% of participants chose institutional e-mail, 43.9% social networks, 5.1% face-to-face, 5.6% personal e-mail, and 15.8% said they don't receive any communication (multiple answers were allowed).

Predictors of academic performance

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the predictors of academic performance (Table 1). With exam grades as the dependent variable, sociological variables were entered in the first block (i.e. continent of origin, gender, age, years of permanence in Italy), perceived typologies of support and adequacy of info from University in the second block (i.e. host students' support, international students' practical and emotional support, and quantity of information received by university), language anxiety scores in the third block.

The model, despite explaining a limited amount of variance, shows that (Hp1) language anxiety, together with (Hp4) gender and age, are the main predictors of academic

performance. Interestingly, the effect of gender becomes significant only when language anxiety is considered. Indeed, a separate T-test confirms that women have significantly higher levels of language anxiety (M=.263 SD= .99) then men (M= 2.05, SD= .99) t(173) = 3.76, p = .026.

The other examined variables, contrarily to our expectations (Hp2) and (Hp3), are unrelated to academic performance.

Predictors of feeling of belonging

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the predictors of academic integration (Table 2). With sense of belonging to the university as the dependent variable, sociological variables were entered in the first block (i.e. continent of origin, gender, age, years of permanence in Italy), perceived typologies of support and adequacy of info from University in the second block (i.e. host students' support, international students' practical and emotional support, and quantity of information received by university), language anxiety scores in the third block.

The model explains 50% of variance and confirms hypotheses (2), (3) and (4), whereas the inclusion of language anxiety does not improve the model at all (Hp1).

Information received by the university (Hp3) and host students support (Hp1) are the main predictor of feeling of

Tab. 1. Multiple Regression Models Predicting Academic Performance.

Predictors	Step1				Step2				Step3			
	B	SE	β	p	B	SE	β	p	B	SE	β	p
Continent	.146	.078	.143	.064	.085	.085	.084	.317	.054	.085	.053	.528
Sex	-.192	.120	-.119	.112	-.210	.122	-.131	.088	-.285	.125	-.178	.024*
Age	.161	.059	.208	.007**	.160	.060	.206	.008**	.149	.059	.192	.013*
Permanence in Italy?	.009	.130	.005	.946	.049	.134	.030	.714	.024	.133	.015	.855
Information received					-.051	.053	-.078	.343	-.058	.053	-.089	.276
Int students practical support					-.096	.083	-.105	.252	-.101	.082	-.111	.223
Int students emotional support					.150	.091	.153	.102	.131	.090	.134	.150
Host students support					.051	.079	.056	.519	.032	.078	.035	.684
Language anxiety score									-.147	.064	-.182	.022*
R²	.073				.097				.125			
Adj R²	.051				.054				.078			
ΔR²(ΔF; p)	.073 (3.326; .012)				.024 (1.125; .347)				.028 (5.358; .022)			

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

Tab. 2. Multiple Regression Models Predicting Feeling of Belonging

Predictors	Step1				Step2				Step3			
	B	SE	β	p	B	SE	β	t	B	SE	β	p
Continent	-.201	.124	-.126	.108	.004	.098	.002	.971	.001	.099	.001	.989
Sex	.276	.191	.110	.150	.328	.141	.131	.021*	.323	.147	.129	.029*
Age	.038	.094	.031	.688	.104	.069	.086	.133	.103	.069	.085	.138
Permanence in Italy?	.106	.207	.041	.610	-.169	.155	-.065	.278	-.171	.156	-.065	.277
Information received					.611	.062	-.600	.000***	.611	.062	.599	.000***
Int students practical support					-.189	.096	-.133	.052	-.189	.097	-.133	.052ᵃ
Int students emotional support					.228	.105	.149	.032*	.226	.106	.148	.034*
Host students support					.427	.091	.301	.000***	.426	.092	.300	.000***
Language anxiety score									-.010	.075	-.008	.892
R²	.039				.507				.507			
Adj R²	.017				.484				.480			
ΔR²(ΔF; p)	.039 (1.747; .142)				.468 (39.397; .000***)				.000 (.018; .892)			

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; ᵃp=.05

belonging. Perceived emotional support by international students also contribute positively to sense of belonging (Hp3). However, perceived practical support has a negative effect on sense of belonging (p=.05). Finally, also as regards sense of belonging gender has a significant effect.

The other examined variables (Hp1), are unrelated to sense of belonging to the university.

Discussion and conclusion

The present study examined the experience of international students in a HE institution in Italy, focusing on language anxiety, perceived support and interaction between international and local students. In this study we further considered the role that institutional communication could play in enhancing international students' academic performance and sense of belonging.

Results confirmed that language anxiety is related to the academic success of international students. Interestingly, when this factor is controlled, women have a better academic performance then men, suggesting some gender dynamics (Beoku-Betts, 2004). However, the low levels of variance explained, and the fact that other variables such as background or years of permanence (Constantine et al., 2005; Rientes et al., 2012) were not predictive, suggest that there may be other factors which can predict the international students' academic performance. Further research is needed to examine other variables such as typology and levels of facilities offered to internationals (Norton & Fatigante, 2018).

Overall, the results confirm the importance of locals in fostering sense of belonging, and the key role that information from the university has in creating boundaries between international students and the new pedagogical context (Lakhal et al., 2020; Norton & Fatigante, 2018). Even though we aimed to examine the effect of diverse communication channels, students communication in academic and personal life are mostly ICT based. We thus focused on the overall effectiveness of communication received. Results confirm the role that institutional communication is not determinant for academic performance but – most important – that the information received from the university complements host students support and contributes to foster a sense of belonging to the institution. As a side note, further evidence comes from the qualitative comments added by respondents to the questionnaire: many complained that they do not participate in university social activities simply because there are none, or they do not know about them.

On the other hand, the practical and emotional support from other international students is not predictive of the respondents' academic performance but affect the feeling of belonging. Especially the negative effect of practical support by other internationals brings to our attention the potential marginalization of internationals 'among themselves' (Norton et al., 2022). Indeed, the need for belonging and support -as other research also suggest– could create bubbles of internationals with the paradox effect of fostering exclusion and self-segregation. Other studies in the same context suggest that these bubbles could even foster direct opposition and resentment of internationals towards the university and more broadly the city and the socio-cultural environment that initially attracted them (Campbel & Zeng, 2006; Norton & Fatigante, 2018).

Multiple studies remarked that the feeling of belonging, specifically in the education context, has powerful long and short-term implications for students' positive psychological and academic outcomes (Allen et al. 2021; Pedler et al., 2021). Further research will definitely need to examine these relationships in greater detail and with a broader sample of international students.

On the practical level, these results suggest the importance of promoting positive interaction between international and local students. Therefore it is vital to encourage institutions to involve the international students in the local environment, instead of creating international students' groups. Face-to-face activities such as language trainings and mentorship programs for international students should be enhanced to support them in the adaptation process (Thomson & Esses, 2016). Moreover, the use of ICTs could be optimized to disseminate information about social events and meetings.

Covid-19 pandemic has deeply affected the current research. The pandemics inevitably caused changes in academic life, from the course modality to the reduction of organized events. We cannot exclude that some variables which resulted non-significant, could have a greater effect in a more 'in-presence' academic context. Nevertheless, even in such an extreme situation as the pandemic was, language anxiety, support of the locals and internationals and information received proved to influence academic performance and perceived sense of belonging.

If -as many suggests- online and blended teaching courses are here to stay, and will be crucial in the future to attract broader numbers of international students, the impact of these factors on the academic integration of international students should be considered. Language anxiety, support and institutional communication should be considered in interventions aimed at improving international students experience, in its broader and most significative sense.

subjects participated anonymously, and could withdraw their participation at any time.

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