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## Adaptation of international students at universities as a main challenge of educational migration in Poland

Keywords: educational migration, international students, adaptation, communication, adaptation and language programmes

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to show a broad perspective on actions taken by universities in the area of adaptation and the influence of adaptation and language programmes on the performance of international students in the academic environment. What factors influence the process of acculturation and how does it relate to the ability to learn and work in the receiving society? The paper concludes with a few reflections on how the adaptation programmes should be seen by universities and why they are important for the education of foreigners.

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### Foreword

Human migration is currently one of the most pending global problems. Although the movement of people has been known in history since ancient times, it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the need arose to reflect on the issue of cultural adaptation and mutual development of social relations in immigrant circles in the country of residence<sup>1</sup>. Economic transformations, modern international relations and a growing level of life and education as well as availability of transport have had a significant impact on the dynamics of migration in highly developed countries.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Koryś, M. Okólski, *Czas globalnych migracji. Mobilność międzynarodowa w perspektywie globalizacji*, "Prace migracyjne", 2004, no. 55, p. 3.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a period of “information and IT civilisation, one of its elements being the formation of knowledge societies” (Mydel, 2011:123). In the era of globalisation, the development of such a society is inherently linked with educational mobility. This trend is reflected in statistics: according to the ICEF Monitor, in 2014, the number of international students globally was five million<sup>2</sup>. Academic migration highlights the multidimensional nature of human movement. Undoubtedly, one of the actors on the stage of education-based migration are universities. The presence of international students poses new challenges, such as the need to implement an international curriculum, or the co-existence of various national groups within a university, or having to rearrange the administration of a university. Another issue that attracts increasing attention is certain responsibility that universities have for the functioning of students from foreign countries in a new environment and their introduction – as future graduates – into the structures of the local labour market and social environment, which is a broad perspective on the problem of recruiting international students.

## Educational migration to Poland

In the history of educational migration, Poland has never played a major role and neither has it been a particularly attractive destination for international students. It was only after World War II, and more specifically in the 1950s that international students started – initially at a limited scale – enrolling for Polish universities (Żołądowski, 2010:54). An important factor that resulted in the arrival of foreigners was the introduction of educational programmes for third-world countries, and the most popular studies among foreigners were medicine and exact sciences (Ruda, 2014:28). The number of such students for a relatively long time remained low, below three thousand until the 1980s<sup>3</sup>. A more dynamic growth was reported in the 1990s, mainly due to economic and political transformations, a broader portfolio offered by universities and developed structures of grants for students of Polish origin and Poles living abroad. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of international students reached more than six thousand (Żołądowski, 2010:54).

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<sup>2</sup> ICEF Monitor data, *The growth of international students mobility 1990-2014*, 05.11.2015, <http://monitor.icef.com/2015/11/the-state-of-international-student-mobility-in-2015/>, (accessed on: 29.06.2016).

<sup>3</sup> Data of the Central Statistical Office; after: P. Hut, E. Jaroszevska, *Studenci zagraniczni w Polsce na tle migracji edukacyjnych na świecie. Badania. Ekspertyzy. Rekomendacje*, 2011, <http://www.isp.org.pl/uploads/pdf/772873926.pdf>, (accessed on: 29.06.2016).

In the last decade, Polish universities, both public and private, reported a significant increase in the number of international students. According to the 2015 Report “Study in Poland”, in the academic year 2014/2015, there were 46,101 international students in Poland, which is an increase by more than 28% compared to the previous year<sup>4</sup>. Although this result means that Poland’s share in the global market of international students is only 1.02%, analysis of the internationalisation indicator for Polish universities between the years 2005 and 2015 shows an increase from 0.52% in the academic year 2005/2006 to 3.14% in 2014/2015<sup>5</sup>.

Statistics is not the only issue that is worth considering in the context of the internationalisation of universities in Poland. Other aspects strongly linked with a growing number of international students are: a need for a holistic approach to the management of university internationalisation (Mazurek, 2016:48), activating the macro level associated with the presence of international students, including legislative processes to be undertaken by the legislator<sup>6</sup>, and, last but not least, raising the awareness of the role of universities in the process of cultural adaptation and integration of international students.

## **Educational migration to Poland – a broader perspective**

At its core, the dynamic development of recruiting international students to Polish universities is mainly linked with the demographic downturn in Poland and the dropping number of students. This, as it were, “preventive measure” against the challenges facing the existence of the main actors on the higher education market in Poland is linked with a broader perspective and certain consequences associated with the arrival of international students to Poland. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) lists the basic factors affecting the choice of studies by foreign candidates: “migration policies of the country of destination, job possibilities in the country of destination, recognition of education, costs of studies, living costs, opinion about studies, accessibility of university (exams,

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<sup>4</sup> B. Siwińska, *Studenci zagraniczni w Polsce, Raport statystyczno-informacyjny przygotowany w ramach programu Study in Poland*, Fundacja Edukacyjna Perspektywy 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Data of the Central Statistical Office; after: B. Siwińska, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Recently, educational migration in Poland has been strongly promoted through numerous legal and institutional instruments, such as inclusion of the degree of internationalisation in the evaluation of university courses by the Polish Accreditation Committee or liberalisation of the access of students to full time studies or of graduates to the labour market following the Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 21 April 2015.

*numerus clausus*), support network, attractiveness of the country or infrastructure for students”<sup>7</sup>. Significantly, those factors do not include in a direct way the issue of an organised adaptation process offered by universities. This may be due to the vagueness of such activities, measurable rather as effects – after all, such factors as opinion about university or support network are indirectly influenced by university’s proper adaptation policies for international students. Also, job possibilities in the country of destination are not unrelated to social capital development during studies.

The major challenges international students face upon arrival to the country of destination for their studies are new living conditions in a culturally foreign environment and different conditions of learning. Educational migration is specifically linked with the concept of “acculturation”, which is “the process of cultural transformations triggered by the flow of content between culturally different communities” (Zenderowski, Koziński, 2012:58). The process is vital for students, as it enables them not only to learn the cultural code and freely communicate with the environment, but also to establish effective interactions in the new environment and achieve a mental condition in which satisfaction is possible<sup>8</sup>. Such competencies gradually facilitate the functioning in not only academic but also professional environment. From this perspective, educational migration to Poland may – and should – be regarded as a phenomenon that yields “social, cultural as well as economic benefits” (Main, Dydow, 2015:101) for the society. “Income generation” by international students is associated not only with the university fees they pay but also with their potential contribution to the development of economy and science. Another positive effect is cultural diffusion, which, in the era of globalisation, is an indispensable competence, in particular in a country with a uniform ethnic and national system, like Poland. According to S. Ruda: “Considering the positive changes that, together with the phenomenon of educational movement of academic youth, may happen in Poland, it is worth undertaking various projects and initiatives that would cause a growth in the number of foreign students” (Ruda, 2014:28).

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<sup>7</sup> E. Jaroszewska, *Edukacja studentów zagranicznych w liczbach*, “Biuletyn migracyjny”, <https://sites.google.com/site/biuletynmigracyjny/archiwum-html/biuletyn-migracyjny-26/bm26art4>, (accessed on: 28.06.2016).

<sup>8</sup> A.S. Baranowska, *Tutoring akademicki jako forma wsparcia studentów międzynarodowych w adaptacji do nowych warunków życia i nauki w Polsce*, “Journal of Modern Science”, 2015, <http://yadda.icm.edu.pl/yadda/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-47ab1b40-b12c-4707-a0b9-39ee1934129a> (accessed on: 28.06.2016).

## **Challenges facing educational migrants**

The above phenomenon of the acculturation of an individual is associated with certain challenges facing a migrant student during his stay and education in a foreign country. The need to establish and develop communication tools is mainly associated with the following areas:

- Language problems limiting one's independence and sense of safety,
- Cultural problems due to the migrant's different cultural potential,
- Institutional and legal problems limiting accessibility of services offered by various institutions in a given country,
- Economic problems, mainly due to lack of language proficiency, but also market conditions and labour law in the receiving country.

Fluency in Polish language<sup>9</sup> is necessary for a student to properly and fully participate in academic life and develop relationships and possibilities outside the university. "According to the guidelines adopted by the Council of Europe, we check the language fluency level in five areas: hearing and reading comprehension, writing and speaking skills, and the ability to establish verbal communication with interlocutor" (Laskowska, 2016:263). Given such technical and transparent description of foreign language skills, if a prospective student presents a certificate confirming his proficiency in Polish, a university may assume that he will be able to study without much difficulty. However, linguistic sensitivity and communicational possibilities are verified during actual studies rather than in the recruitment process. This is in particular the case of studying with native speakers. International students often have problems understanding written texts, especially in a situation of time pressure, e.g. during a test or exam: "(...) foreigners often understand spoken language very well (e.g. they grew up in a house, where their grandmother or grandfather spoke a given language), but cannot understand written texts" (Laskowska, 2016:263). They also have limited ability to quickly react in a discussion during university classes and are afraid of being misunderstood or ridiculed by others, if they make a mistake. Abstract issues discussed in academic classes require high levels of language proficiency in order to be able to express a student's opinions or realise his ideas, e.g. during group project tasks. It often turns out that linguistic skills confirmed by a certificate do not correspond to the reality of the first encounters of international students with Polish language in classes. "We should bear it in mind then that foreigners who have sufficient language skills to study are a heterogeneous group" (Laskowska, 2016:263).

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<sup>9</sup> The paper concerns international students doing university courses in Polish language.

A migrant's communication skills depend not only on his knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, but also on his familiarity with the cultural context and the related principles of communication in a given environment. In order to fully and fluently communicate with and understand others, an international student must also "gain knowledge of the cultural reality, acquire sociocultural competencies and learn to use the same cultural code as the native speaker of a language" (Tambor, Achtelek, 2016:259). This concerns not only knowledge of culture, pop-culture or history, which is necessary to properly decipher the content of classes or informal discussions with fellow students. A foreign student often does not know how to properly address others or "is unfamiliar with the principles of non-verbal and relational communication in a new culture"<sup>10</sup>. Such situations constitute examples of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis<sup>11</sup> of linguistic relativity.

Speaking of the specific situation of international students, it is also worth noting the cultural factor concerning the university itself. This concerns not only a general cultural context, but also a specific academic context. The complicated situation of an international student attending university classes is due not only to language gaps associated with technical or specialist language, but also unfamiliarity with the academic context. Different experience with and cultural patterns of teaching, learning and performing basic activities associated with studies<sup>12</sup> pose major problems at the beginning of a university course. International students may be unfamiliar with the methods of group work used at a university or differences between lectures and classes. Compared to the situation of Polish students, who gain knowledge and studying models from their most immediate environment, the problem seems even more acute. Responding to this problem, American and British universities offer courses like Academic Writing or Group Working, to introduce new students to the academic context.

Insufficient language skills and unfamiliarity with the principles governing the functioning of a university result in limited access to the university infrastructure. "Thus, international students have problems complying with various formalities at the university or in offices"<sup>13</sup>. The academic context covers, in particular, application documents, e.g. for grants or student dormitories, university's legal acts (e.g. terms and conditions of studies), communication with the university and university teachers (e.g. various forms of intranet already functioning at Polish universi-

<sup>10</sup> A.S. Baranowska, *op.cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> Linguistic theory developed in the 1930, according to which the language we use affects, to a greater or lesser extent, our way of thinking.

<sup>12</sup> Such as: writing, active participation in classes, projects, etc.

<sup>13</sup> A.S. Baranowska, *op.cit.*, p. 203.

ties), scale of grades or even knowing how to read the schedule of classes. Similar challenges exist outside the university – in offices and in association with various practical issues, such as renting an apartment or applying for health insurance, whenever it is necessary to know not only legal regulations but, more importantly, the social and cultural code required for their interpretation.

Economic problems are, to a large extent, the consequence of the phenomena described above. Linguistic and cultural limitations make it impossible to get a job quickly, and the costs of studying in Poland are a major financial burden for the family in the country of origin<sup>14</sup>. Of the international students of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> degree studies at the Wrocław School of Banking, as many as 80% respondents claimed that the costs of studying and staying in Poland are paid by the family<sup>15</sup>. Often, financial problems cause low self-esteem in such students and keep them away from social life, which is costly. “In their time free of university obligations, most respondents simply work (...). Moreover, the percentage of respondents who work in their free time has grown from 35% for MA studies – up to 45% for BA studies”<sup>16</sup>.

## The concept of academic success and the impact of adaptation courses

The USA has been one of the main destinations of educational migration since the end of World War II and growth of academic mobility<sup>17</sup>. The many years of experience of this giant in the global educational market are nowadays reflected in the process of transition to the American higher education system. The system, based on the concept of academic success, achieving the best results and graduating from university, is equipped with such elements of “transition” education that enable students with differing social capital to settle in the actual academic context. These courses, which teach how to write academic texts or work in groups, help build the kind of social capital that enables an international student to participate in academic life. Examples of such measures and activities addressed to foreign students were collected and elaborated by the American Center for Global Education, an institution re-

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<sup>14</sup> This problem concerns mainly students from countries East of Poland, which form a large part of international students.

<sup>15</sup> R. Majkut, J. Pluta (2015), *Jakość i warunki kształcenia studentów obcokrajowców studiujących w Wyższej Szkole Bankowej we Wrocławiu. Raport z badań*, typescript of internal report, Wrocław 2015.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> O. Akiko, *Factors Influencing Social, Cultural, and Academic Transitions of Chinese International ESL Students in U.S. Higher Education*, 2013, [http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2050&context=open\\_access\\_etds](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2050&context=open_access_etds), (accessed on: 30.06.2016).

sponsible for promoting international cross-cultural education. These programmes include, for example, such courses as: *The Culture of Higher Education in the U.S.*, which introduces students to American academic practices, *Transitions for International Students*, focusing on the development of relevant skills associated with studying at American universities, or a broader course – *Bridges to University Success*, covering also the emotional aspects of studying abroad<sup>18</sup>.

Good practices of American universities are not limited only to special academic courses, although these are undoubtedly an innovative example for Polish universities. A number of actions associated with so-called international students orientation covers, among other things, tutoring and adaptation programmes, permanent support in the form of International Students Assistance, career development workshops, integration projects for American and international students and psychological assistance. Such comprehensive approach to the phenomenon of educational migration is of course due to the scale of the migration and the overall social experience in a country built by immigrants. Importantly, however, it yields positive results for both parties of the process: international students as well as the receiving country and the receiving universities. Thanks to the provision of an adequate academic background, academic success is much more available to international students. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if the basic needs associated with safety, belonging or esteem are satisfied, an individual is more likely to achieve self-realisation.

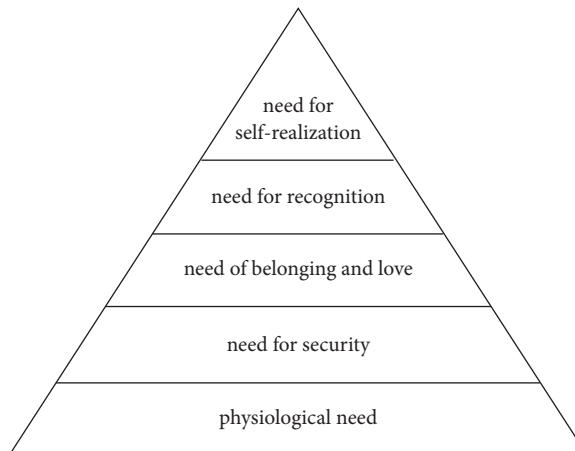


Fig. 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs, (source: <http://ebookinga.com/pdf/piramida-potrzeb-maslowa>).

<sup>18</sup> A full list of programmes compiled by the Center for Global Education is available online at: <http://globaled.us/internationalization/academic-advisement-for-international-students.asp#table>, (accessed on: 29.06.2016).



“A sense of belonging to a peer group and academic environment are important for the physical and mental health of students” (Łazarewicz, Werner, 2016:269), and this is directly linked with the need for the development of adaptation programmes at Polish universities. Properly developed and designed programmes are a chance for an improved sense of safety, help properly search for and decipher information, and prevent isolation and poor academic performance. This way, they increase active participation of foreign students in the social life of a town, contributing to their commitment to university activities and raise the chances of professional activation of the group. These positive consequences help international students graduate from studies and often make them decide to stay in the receiving country.

### **Adaptation and language courses as an example of linguistic and cultural adaptation projects**

Adaptation courses responding to the challenges described hereinabove require not only planning an appropriate structure of the programme, but also a broader interaction and cooperation between various units of the university and their and students' involvement in the implementation of the programme. It should be noted, however, that adaptation and language courses that take place before academic year should be the beginning of the adaptation process and should show students the areas, where they may first of all receive assistance and secondly, where they should apply for that assistance, because young people are often unaware at the beginning of their migration process of the challenges that may face them once they start studying abroad.

The most optimum version of the programme development should be as follows:

- Determining the goals of the programme.
- Building a team directly and indirectly responsible for the implementation of those goals.
- Proper planning and preparing of the programme.
- Monitoring, drawing conclusions and analysing the programme upon its completion.
- Developing tools to measure the effectiveness of activities covered by the programme, regularly measuring those effects and constantly modifying the programme to match the actual needs.

The goals of an adaptation and language programme should focus on the implementation of tasks associated with adaptation, integration and support, and in

this case, adaptation means both linguistic, cultural and social aspects. Proper determination of goals and methods for their achievement enables “transition from applying to university to being a student and reduces the anxiety associated with the process” (Łazarewicz, Werner, 2016:274). Based on an analysis and deliberations, we may conclude that those goals should cover:

- A broad and flexible approach to improving language proficiency and verbal communication,
- Integral language and culture teaching,
- Academic work,
- Administrative issues associated with studies,
- Introduction to the town and the social space of the new environment,
- Elements of coaching support and development workshops (e.g. CV writing, finding a job on the local market),
- Practical information: legal aspects of the residence of foreigners in Poland, presented in a friendly and easy to understand way,
- Possibilities to receive support at the university and in town.

The right team and a strategic division of the areas of engagement and responsibility are in many cases decisive for the success of projects. “Seamless functioning of the complex internationalisation system at a university is the necessary condition for success in this area. The classical, so-called ‘silo’ functional approach to the problem enables effective achievement of goals, as most of those activities require the competencies of various organisational units” (Mazurek, 2016: 52-53). An example of such network approach should be adaptation courses held at numerous university units, with additional external support. Apart from the obvious involvement of the course coordinator and his immediate support, usually in the form of an international cooperation team, language teachers are also important, serving as guides to the culture they represent (Tambor, Achteлик, 2016:255). Close cooperation in terms of the curriculum during the courses (and after their completion) is important to build an adaptation base for international students.

In order to familiarise international students with academic work, it is necessary to include university educators in the adaptation process. Building awareness of the need for such solution is particularly important for the abovementioned concept of academic success. Academic teachers are the group of university workers with whom students form the closest relationship. Creating a special dimension of this relationship in the context of an international student is highly desirable, as is shown by the abovementioned experience of American universities in this field. The engagement of researchers and academic teachers in the process of “transition” to the Polish educational system by including this group of students in

adaptation programmes is not only a need but, more importantly, the condition to give international students equal chances in education.

The administrative personnel of a university is also an important actor in the adaptation process. Meetings with representatives of various departments offering services to students, such as university career offices, libraries, dean's offices, etc., make it possible to understand the processes taking place at the university and provide students with necessary tools and emotional support – to overcome barriers associated with the use of services available at the university. Engagement of units, such as career offices, and departments directly involved in student development, is fundamental for the achievement of the goals of coaching and activation workshops. An important role in international student activation, in the broad meaning of the term, is also played by integration and interaction with more senior students – both foreign and Polish. It is easier and faster to “clear the path” towards academic groups and organisations and, what is important for young people, towards social life at the university and in town – if a network of buddies participates in the adaptation and during the full year of adaptation. The engagement of more senior international students in the planning and development of a course is also important for the inclusion of such elements of adaptation that a “person from outside” might unknowingly disregard. Their experience and knowledge are a source of knowledge both for 1<sup>st</sup> year international students and university workers.

The external actors of the adaptation process include representatives of institutions associated with the presence of foreigners in Poland and in respective towns. Information meetings and workshops with the personnel of foundations, town organisations or offices are a response to the challenges associated with every level of adaptation, because the scope of activities and services of those institutions covers linguistic, cultural and institutional issues as well as social integration.

A necessary, though not always directly engaged member of the team should be a representative of the university authorities. From the historical perspective, university authorities are responsible for the organisational foundations of the internationalisation process<sup>19</sup>, which means that the process and all its model initiatives – such as adaptation programmes – should not be implemented without the support of those authorities.

Monitoring and readiness to change and learn lessons for future adaptation projects are crucial for the success of adaptation projects in the long-term perspective. In the case of adaptation programmes and courses, it is important for education to be based on the evaluation of the support offered, which should be

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<sup>19</sup> G. Mazurek, *op.cit.*

conducted before, after and after completion of a project. This way, it is possible to collect recommendations as to the usefulness of adaptation projects, increase their effectiveness and detect obstacles and changes. Also, it will enable activating the learning process of all persons engaged in the project, being an added value in the internationalisation process in a holistic approach.

## Summary

To sum up, the problem of the presence of international students in Poland and their adaptation, presented in this article, is relevant to Polish universities, although it is a new phenomenon. Given that the number of foreigners who come to study in Poland is increasing, broader aspects of the receipt of foreign students, not limited only to immediate financial income and fighting the demographic downturn, must not be neglected. Recruiting international students obliges Polish universities to answer the following question: *What next?* The example of more experienced universities, holistic engagement, monitoring, learning lessons and a sense of responsibility are an important element of activities that will help deal with the issue of educational migration to Poland in a way that will be beneficial for all parties to the process.

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