FACILITATING ACCULTURATION IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: AN ANALYSIS OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING FOREIGN STUDENTS IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Borui Zheng[1], & Keegan Covey[2]
[1]*Department of Asian Studies, University College Cork (Ireland)*
[2]*Department of Geography, Trinity College Dublin (Ireland)*

Abstract

In an era of increasing global mobility, Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) have seen a significant rise in the enrolment of foreign students, necessitating a deeper understanding and enhancement of acculturation supports. This study applies a social psychological analytical approach to a qualitative content analysis of policy documents, teaching guides, and program descriptions across a representative sample of Irish universities. Using reported social trust and individual psychological well-being as parameters, it evaluates the inclusivity and effectiveness of these existing practices and identifies areas for improvement. The policy review found a broad spectrum of acculturation supports, ranging from formal policies and orientation programs to informal support networks and cultural exchange activities, although with significant variability in the scope and depth of support across institutions. Notably, the study finds a prevailing emphasis on administrative and logistical aspects of acculturation support, such as visa assistance and accommodation; these systems are found to have limited impact on psychological well-being and social trust when compared to classroom inclusivity practices. The analysis of teaching guides and curricular materials indicates a growing recognition of the need for culturally responsive teaching practices. However, there is a clear need for more structured training and resources to equip faculty with the skills to address the diverse needs of an international classroom effectively. The study also finds, based on prior studies and available survey data, that social trust, in particular "bridging trust" between identity groups and "vertical trust" between people and authority figures, are key to successful acculturation. Although 'bonding' trust between students of shared national origin is stronger than bridging trust, it also has a less positive correlation with psychological well-being than bridging trust, suggesting that students who have built relationships and social capital with others outside of their identity group are both most psychologically healthy and benefitting from acculturation. There is expected to be variation according to student nationality, as social trust is affected by the cultural and institutional context of students' national origin. The preliminary findings of the study are thus that inclusive teaching practices are most effective in building social capital between students and both schools and Irish peers, which in turn heightens the psychological well-being of these students. However, established logistical-administrative supports also have a positive effect on vertical trust, which is likely to have a positive effect on foreign students' academic performance. Greater emphasis is therefore recommended on standardising inclusive teaching practices in Irish HEIs.

Keywords: Acculturation, foreign students, Irish higher education, inclusive education, social trust.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of higher education has been significantly transformed by the forces of globalisation, leading to an unprecedented increase in the mobility of students across international borders. Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are no exception to this trend, experiencing a significant rise in the enrolment of foreign students (Darmody, Groarke, & Mihut, 2022). This demographic shift presents both opportunities and challenges, necessitating a re-evaluation and enhancement of supports for acculturation—the process by which individuals adjust to and become part of a new cultural environment. The importance of effective acculturation supports is underscored by research highlighting its impact on the psychological well-being and academic success of international students (Berry, 2005; Can, Poyrazl, & Pillay, 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan, 2020).

This study employed a social psychological analytical approach to conduct a qualitative content analysis of policy documents, teaching guides, and program descriptions across a representative sample of Irish universities. The objective was to scrutinise existing frameworks of acculturation support, assessing their inclusivity and effectiveness through the lenses of reported social trust and individual psychological well-being. Social trust, particularly, serves as a key parameter, encompassing both "bridging trust" between different identity groups and "vertical trust" between individuals and authority figures, and plays a crucial role in the acculturation process (Wang, Zhi, & Yu, 2023; Ye, 2018).

By evaluating these supports, the study aimed to highlight the variability in the scope and depth of acculturation supports across institutions, and to identify areas that require improvement. The preliminary findings suggested a predominant focus on administrative and logistical aspects of acculturation, such as visa assistance and accommodation. However, these supports have been found to offer limited benefits to students' psychological well-being and social trust when compared to more inclusive classroom practices (O'Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010; Saffari Rad, 2023; Sebastian & Slaten, 2018). As Ireland continues to welcome an increasingly diverse student body, it is imperative that HEIs refine their acculturation supports to foster a more inclusive and supportive academic environment for all students.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the acculturation supports available to international students in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This methodology was well-suited to the exploratory nature of the research, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the policies, programs, and teaching practices aimed at facilitating the acculturation process for foreign students (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hurley, Ryan, Faulkner, & Wang, 2022; Moran, Green, & Warren, 2021).

2.1. Selection of documents for analysis

The corpus for analysis was carefully selected to represent a broad spectrum of acculturation supports across a diverse range of Irish universities. This selection included official policy documents, orientation program descriptions, and teaching guides, sourced directly from the universities' official websites, and through requests to institutional representatives. The aim was to capture both the formal and informal supports in place, recognising that acculturation extends beyond administrative procedures to encompass the academic and social integration of international students (Knox, Lim, Mahfouz, O'Connell, & Sheehan, 2019; Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

2.2. Analytical approach

The qualitative content analysis of this study was planned and executed to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data. This methodological approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the textual data gathered from policy documents, orientation program descriptions, and teaching guides from a representative sample of Irish HEIs. The analysis was anchored in a social psychological framework, focusing on acculturation processes, social trust dimensions (bridging and vertical trust), and indicators of psychological well-being.

2.3. Development of coding categories

The coding categories were developed iteratively, starting with a pre-defined set based on the literature review and refined through a pilot analysis of a subset of the documents. This approach ensured that the categories were both grounded in theory and responsive to the data. The final coding scheme was applied to the entire data set, with adjustments made as necessary to capture emergent themes accurately. The coding categories are tabulated and described in detail, including definitions and examples, in *Table 1* as follows.

2.4. Application of coding categories

The coding process involved reviewing each document for instances that exemplified the described categories. For example, any mention of initiatives aimed at integrating international and local students, such as buddy systems or joint cultural events, was coded under "Bridging Trust." Similarly, descriptions of faculty development programs on cultural sensitivity were coded under "Inclusive Teaching Practices." This systematic approach enabled the research team to quantitatively assess the prevalence of different types of acculturations supports across Irish HEIs and to qualitatively evaluate their depth and effectiveness. The findings from this analysis provided a detailed picture of the current landscape of acculturation support in Irish higher education and informed the recommendations for enhancing these supports.

Table 1. The coding categories.

Category	Definition	Examples
Bridging Trust	Supports that facilitate trust-building between international students and their Irish peers.	- Language exchange programs - International and local student buddy systems
Vertical Trust	Supports that foster trust between international students and institutional authorities.	- Accessible grievance mechanisms - Transparent communication from administration
Psychological Well-Being	Indicators and supports related to the mental and emotional health of international students.	- Counselling services tailored to international students - Stress management workshops
Acculturation Support	Policies and programs designed to assist international students in adjusting to the new culture.	- Orientation programs detailing Irish culture - Guides on navigating academic expectations
Inclusive Teaching Practices	Teaching methods and curricular designs that address the needs of a culturally diverse classroom.	- Multicultural curriculum content - Training for faculty on cultural competency
Administrative and Logistical Support	Services dealing with the logistical aspects of studying abroad, such as housing and visa assistance.	- On-campus accommodation assistance - Visa application guidance

3. Finding

The qualitative content analysis of policy documents, teaching guides, and program descriptions from a representative sample of Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) revealed a broad spectrum of acculturation supports, as well as gaps in formal acculturation training. These supports vary widely in scope and depth, reflecting a diverse approach to integration and well-being of international students. The findings were categorised into several key areas within the coding categories previously outlined.

3.1. Bridging trust

The analysis identified a number of initiatives aimed at building bridging trust between international students and their Irish peers. These initiatives include language exchange programs, cultural sharing events, and buddy systems designed to facilitate mutual understanding and friendship (Darmody et al., 2022). Despite these efforts, the effectiveness and application of such programs in creating sustained interactions was inconsistent across institutions. Some programs were highly structured and well-received, promoting significant interaction between diverse student groups (Cleary, Graham, Jeanneau, & O'Sullivan, 2009; Institute of Education, 2024; Lowry, 2017), while others lacked the necessary resources or institutional support to achieve their objectives (Knox et al., 2019; Sheridan, 2011; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

3.2. Vertical trust

Supports aimed at fostering vertical trust between international students and institutional authorities were found to predominantly focus on administrative assistance, such as visa processing and accommodation services. While these services are undeniably important, our findings suggest that they contribute minimally to the development of vertical trust. Institutions that offered regular, transparent communication and accessible grievance mechanisms reported higher levels of trust from international students (Amara, 2020; Carbajosa, Morgret, Spencer, & Hameister, 2022). These mechanisms are critical not only for students to navigate the academic bureaucracy of foreign countries of study, but also for feeling supported and welcomed by their institution and, by extension, by the host country.

3.3. Administrative and logistical support

As an extension of and contributor to the above, administrative and logistical supports were found to be well-established across the sampled institutions. These supports are crucial for the initial stages of acculturation, providing international students with essential information and assistance regarding visa regulations, accommodation, and enrolment processes (Kristiana, Karyanta, Simanjuntak, Prihatsanti, Ingarianti, & Shohib, 2022). While these supports are valued by students for easing their transition, they do not, in isolation, contribute significantly to the deeper aspects of acculturation, such as social integration and psychological adaptation and well-being, as elaborated upon below.

3.4. Psychological well-being

The study highlighted a growing recognition of the need for mental health and well-being supports tailored to the unique challenges faced by international students. Services such as counselling, stress management workshops, and social support groups were noted. However, the availability and accessibility of these supports varied significantly, with some institutions offering comprehensive mental health services and others providing minimal or ad hoc support (Sakız & Jencius, 2024). The disparity in support services underscores the need for a standardised approach to psychological well-being across HEIs (Forbes-Mewett, 2019).

3.5. Inclusive teaching practices

There is an emerging commitment to culturally responsive teaching practices among Irish HEIs, as evidenced by the incorporation of multicultural content in curricula and the provision of training for faculty on cultural competency (Darby, 2022). Nevertheless, the study finds that these initiatives are often sporadic and not systematically integrated into faculty development programs. The lack of structured training and resources for faculty members to effectively address the diverse needs of an international classroom remains a significant gap (Howe & Griffin, 2020).

4. Discussion

The analysis within Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) highlights the complexities of creating an inclusive environment for international students, emphasising the necessity of balancing logistical support with social and emotional needs for effective acculturation. Despite the recognition of culturally responsive teaching and mental health support, the inconsistency in their implementation underscores a need for standardised practices and resources to ensure all students benefit from comprehensive acculturation support. This would improve the acculturation experience for international students and enrich the educational environment for all by promoting diversity and inclusivity.

Findings indicate that the effectiveness of programs designed to foster interactions between international and local students varies greatly, pointing to the importance of standardising practices that encourage meaningful connections to enhance psychological well-being and academic success. Additionally, the establishment of trust with institutional authorities through transparent communication and accessible grievance mechanisms is crucial yet insufficient on its own to meet broader acculturation needs. The study suggests that, while such logistical supports are essential, there is a clear need for a more balanced approach that also prioritises the psychological well-being and social integration of international students through bridging trust and inclusive teaching practices. It thus recommends policies that promote a more holistic acculturation approach, standardise initiatives to build inter-community relationships, enhance transparency and student engagement, and implement faculty development programmes on and training for culturally responsive teaching.

5. Conclusion

This discussion highlighted the complexity of acculturation support within Irish HEIs, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the varied needs of international students. There is a clear need for a deeper surveying of HEI international student psychological well-being, to be conducted alongside deployment of a more standardised and comprehensive programme for acculturative practice. By moving beyond administrative and logistical support to prioritise social integration, psychological well-being, and inclusive teaching practices, HEIs can enhance the acculturation experience for international students, contributing to their success and the richness of the educational community.

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