

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES IN HUNGARY

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Abstract

The number of students participating in study abroad programmes proliferates in present-day Hungary. International students arrive from various countries with different cultural backgrounds and mother tongues. Consequently, they have to face several differences in Hungary that might result in misunderstandings and problems or even lead to negative experiences. Therefore, the paper examines international students' intercultural challenges of everyday life in Hungary among 107 international students attending higher educational institutions in Hungary.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, international students, challenges, negative experiences*

1. Introduction

More than 235 million students were enrolled in higher education worldwide in 2020, more than twice the 100 million students enrolled in 2000. The number of students studying abroad tripled between 2000 and 2019, according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database. UIS analysed more than 200 countries and territories, and their research results show that 2 million students attended higher education institutions abroad in 2000, and in 2019 their number grew to 6 million. North America and Western Europe hosted 49% of international students in 2019, whereas only 13% came from these regions. The most mobile students worldwide are from Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The pandemic restricted physical movement, but virtual mobility rose (UNESCO, 2022).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has 38 member countries, including North and South America, Europe and Asia-Pacific. Similarly to UIS data, OECD data also shows that in the past two decades, the number of students studying abroad significantly increased worldwide, from 1.7 million in 1998 to 3.9 million in 2018. According to the latest OECD data in 2018, almost half of the international students (46%) chose to study in a European Union country, nearly a third of them (31%) attended a higher education institution in North America, several of them (12.5%) studied in Oceania, ten per cent chose Asia. Few (0.5%) decided to study in Latin America and the Caribbean. The top destination countries include the United States (25%), the United Kingdom (11.5%), Australia (11.3%), Germany (7.9%), France (5.8%), Canada (5.7%), Japan (4.6%), Turkey (3.2%), Italy (2.7%), and the Netherlands (2.7%). The data also show that in 2018, most international students enrolled abroad arrived from Luxembourg, followed by the Slovak Republic, Iceland, Lithuania, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Austria, Norway, and Switzerland. According to the data, the least mobile students arrived from Australia, Chile, Costa Rica, Japan, Turkey, and the United States (OECD, 2020).

The Erasmus Programme (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is a European Union student exchange programme in which 34 countries participate. Similarly

to the previously discussed data the number of students taking part in the Erasmus Programme shows an eightfold increase between the years of 2008 and 2021, as the number of students participating in Erasmus study abroad programmes grew from 28,283 in 2008 to 250,890 in 2021. In 2021, the most commonly attended higher education institutions were situated in the following countries (in decreasing order of attendance): Spain, Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Austria, Finland, and Hungary. Most students studying abroad in an Erasmus Programme came from the following countries in a decreasing order: France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Poland, Turkey and the United Kingdom (Erasmus+, 2022).

These programmes help students expand their knowledge of other cultures and languages, broaden their horizons, foster intercultural contacts and help build social networks. However, studying abroad requires not only speaking foreign languages but also knowing and understanding other cultures. It is even more critical in Hungary because it is a monocultural and monolingual society. According to the Census held in 2011, the mother tongue of the majority of the population (99%) is Hungarian, and most people (85%) declare themselves as ethnic Hungarian (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2012). Furthermore, the number of foreigners residing in Hungary was low; it accounted for only one per cent of the people living in Hungary in 2018. Most foreigners live in the capital city of Budapest and the western part of the country (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2021).

At the same time, the number of international students attending Hungarian higher education institutions has significantly increased among those international students who study in Hungary within the framework of the Stipendium Hungaricum Programme. This scholarship programme was launched in 2013 by the Hungarian Government. The programme's primary objective is to increase the number of international students in Hungary and to inspire Hungarian higher education institutions to attract the best international students. The programme is based on bilateral educational cooperation agreements between the Ministries responsible for education in the sending countries and Hungary or between institutions. More than 50 sending partners are involved in the programme from 4 continents. Students can apply to study at bachelor, master and doctoral level programmes and preparatory courses. The programme provides scholarship holders tuition-free education, a monthly stipend, medical insurance and a housing allowance (Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme, 2020). Statistics show that between autumn 2015 and 2021, the number of international students participating in the programme and attending a Hungarian higher education institution rose from 1265 to 11712, a 9.3 increase within a short period. Students arrived from 73 different countries, mainly from Jordan, Syria, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Mongolia, and Pakistan (Tempus Közalapítvány, 2022).

2. The theoretical background of the research

Intercultural communication is the verbal and non-verbal interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds. Due to cultural differences, communication problems can occur because a member of one culture produces the message but must be understood by a member of another culture (Porter and Samovar, 1997). The interlocutors of intercultural communication face several differences, which might lead to misunderstandings, problems or conflicts, resulting in disappointment. To find out the differences and the barriers to intercultural communication, several research studies have been carried out.

LaRay M. Barna's research showed six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication: assumption of similarities, language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate, and high anxiety. The most significant barrier is verbal communication.

Vocabulary, syntax, idioms, slang and accents can cause difficulties and create communication barriers. A worse language problem is when someone clings to just one meaning of a word or phrase in the new language, regardless of the context or connotation (Barna, 1997).

Yener Keles conducted his study among ten European exchange students from the Erasmus programme, who studied at the University of Mugla in Turkey. His research proved that not sharing a common language meant verbal barriers in the classroom and everyday life because the participants experienced that most of the Turkish people did not speak English well. The exchange students did not speak Turkish (Keles, 2013).

Aysen Temel Eginli carried out her study at the University of Ege, Turkey, where 6 exchange students from Azerbaijan, Greece, Lithuania, Poland and Russia participated in the face-to-face, in-depth interviews. Her findings showed that students faced three barriers to communication. First of all, expressions in Turkish culture are more indirect, and these indirect expressions lead to misunderstandings. Secondly, culture affects our daily lives, and international students have problems about accommodation and the university, which they cannot solve. The third problem was English as a language factor because most international students have to speak English daily, and not having enough English speakers on or off the campus meant a challenge for them (Eginli, 2016).

Zuria Mahmud – Salleh Amat – Saemah Rahman – Noriah Mohd Ishak conducted their study of group interviews among 30 international students at the National University of Malaysia. The medium of instruction is English and Bahasa Melayu at Malaysian universities. Their research proved that the most significant challenge for international students was speaking and understanding English, Bahasa Melayu, and the local dialect and slang. Some participants had the experience that Malaysian people do not speak English, making communication difficult or sometimes impossible (Mahmud et al., 2010).

Suseela Malaklolunthu and Poovaikarasi Sateyen Selan conducted their questionnaire study among 250 international students at five major private universities in Malaysia. Their results showed that speaking English is one of the adjustment problems, and students felt that language was the basis for their difficulties (Suseela and Poovaikarasi, 2011).

Judit Lanert conducted her online questionnaire study among international students attending Hungarian higher education institutions, and her findings pointed out the respondents' positive and negative experiences. The main obstacles for most foreign participants were the reserved behaviour of Hungarian people and their low foreign language skills, which made it difficult not only to establish personal relationships and manage administrative tasks. Furthermore, several international students felt cheated because they did not speak Hungarian (Lannert, 2018).

3. The aim, method and participants of the research

This part of the paper describes the empirical study's aim, method, and participants in detail.

3.1. The aim and method of the research

The empirical study uses a quantitative data collection method to gain insight into international students' intercultural communication problems while studying at Hungarian higher education institutions.

Research data were explored by using non-probability sampling. It is used when probability sampling is difficult to achieve. Its disadvantage is that it fails to involve random selection. Non-probability sampling may not represent the population well; therefore, the sample cannot be considered representative of the examined population (Majoros, 2004). In the present research non-probability sampling was used because doing research among international students who are unknown to the

researcher is a difficult task, because the researcher has no means to convince the participants to participate. However, this method was the most suitable, and the individuals could decide whether to participate in the study.

The method of data collection was by questionnaire. The questionnaire in English contained closed- and open-ended questions; and Likert scales. Closed questions were used because they direct the respondents' thoughts but simultaneously allow the researcher to compare and process the participants' answers. It is easier and quicker to answer closed questions. The disadvantages are the loss of spontaneity and expressiveness (Oppenheim, 2005). The closed questions concerned the participants' personal data and the intercultural challenges of everyday life in Hungary.

On the other hand, open-ended questions give freedom to the respondents, let their thoughts roam freely, and free-response questions are expressed spontaneously. They are easy to ask but difficult to answer and even more difficult to analyse (Oppenheim, 2005). An open-ended question was used to determine the international participants' negative experiences and the respondents' country of origin.

Likert scales were developed to measure people's attitudes. The questions should be presented to permit a judgement of values, not facts (Likert, 1932). A five-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire to measure the students' frequency of facing eight different problem areas of everyday life (concerning communication, behaviour, cultural customs, food, weather, and clothing), and five alternatives were used between 'never' and 'every day'. The participants received the link of questionnaire by e-mail and then they filled in the Google Forms questionnaire. The respondents completed the questionnaire voluntarily and their anonymity was assured.

3.2. The participants of the research

In the academic year of 2020/21 more than forty thousand international students attended Hungarian higher education institutions, which means that 14 percent of undergraduate students came to study in Hungary from abroad (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2022). The data was collected in the spring of 2022 at the top ten Hungarian higher education institutions where most international students studied. Although the questionnaire was sent out to 10 institutions, only 4 participated in the study and 107 students filled in the questionnaire; therefore, the present study cannot be considered to have a representative sample.

Table 1 contains further information on the international students in question. We can see that more than half of the respondents (56%) are male, and a little less than half are female foreigners (44%). The table shows that the participants are young, their average age is 27.49 years, more than a third of them (39%) are between 19 and 25 years of age, another third of them (35%) are between 26 and 30 years of age, 16 percent are between 31 and 35 years of age, 6 percent are between 36 and 40 years of age, and only 4 respondents (4%) are above 40. The table illustrates that the majority of the participants (67%) arrived in Hungary with the help of the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme, almost a quarter of them (24%) are fee-paying students, a few of them (4%) study within the framework of the Erasmus student mobility programme, and two participants received support from the Asian Development Bank, and three of them from the Brazilian Science without Borders scholarship programme. We can see that half of the participants (50%) attended a master's programme at Hungarian higher education institutions, a quarter of them (25%) studied on a PhD programme, and another quarter of the foreigners (25%) went on a bachelor's programme.

Table 1. The participants of the research (n=107)

	number of students	percentage
GENDER	Female: 47	44%
	Male: 60	56%
AGE	average age: 27.49 years	---
	19 – 25 years: 42	39%
	26 – 30 years: 38	35%
	31 – 35 years: 17	16%
	36 – 40 years: 6	6%
	above 40: 4	4%
NAME OF THE EXCHANGE PROGRAMME	Stipendium Hungaricum: 72	67%
	fee-paying: 26	24%
	Erasmus: 4	4%
	other: 5	5%
STUDIED IN	BSc programme: 27	25%
	MSc programme: 53	50%
	PhD programme: 27	25%

Regarding the country of origin, the participating students arrived from 45 different countries, a little less than half of them (44%) from Asia, a quarter of them (25%) from the African continent, a fifth of them (19%) from Europe, and twelve percent from the American continent. Most of the students filling in the questionnaire came from Germany (8 students), Iraq (8 students), and Ghana (7 students). Some of the participants arrived from Ecuador (5 students), Indonesia (5 students), Algeria (4 students), Jordan (4 students), and South Africa (4 students). Few respondents were from Angola (3 students), Brazil (3 students), China (3 students), Colombia (3 students), India (3 students), Iran (3 students), Pakistan (3 students), South Korea (3 students), Syria (3 students), and Vietnam (3 students). There were two students from the following countries: Laos, Nigeria, Norway, Slovakia, and Tunisia. There was one respondent from Albania, Azerbaijan, Argentina, Cape Verde, Cyprus, England, Eritrea, France, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kosovo, Malaysia, Morocco, Namibia, Russia, Switzerland, Turkey, the UAE, the USA, and Uzbekistan. For most participants (79%) it was the first time they had come to Hungary, and only a fifth (21%) had previously visited Hungary. More than half of the respondents (65%) had never lived abroad before, and more than a third (35%) had such an experience.

4. Results and discussion

The following section presents the results of the research. The first part describes different problems the students have encountered in everyday life in Hungary. The second part presents the participants' negative intercultural experiences.

Table 2 describes the respondents' frequency of experiencing eight different areas of difficulty. As can be seen, the participants' most significant problem is communicating with people in Hungarian: almost half of the students (46%) experience it every day, more than a quarter of them (28%) have such difficulties frequently, 16 percent of the respondents sometimes, 6 percent of them rarely and only 4 percent of them have never had any problems while communicating with people in Hungarian. The second most significant challenge is the experience of differences in food: nearly a third of the

participants (31%) have problems with this aspect of everyday life. A fifth of the students (21%) frequently face this difficulty, 16 percent of the respondents sometimes, 17 percent of them rarely, and 15 percent of the participants have never encountered such a challenge. The third most problematic issue is communicating with people in English; almost a quarter of the students (23%) face this challenge daily. More than another quarter of the participants (27%) frequently have such a problem, nearly a third of them (23%) sometimes, 12 percent of them rarely, and 15 percent of them never encounter such a difficulty. The fourth most challenging element of everyday life is the differences in weather, which 16 percent of the respondents found problematic daily. More than a quarter of the students (27%) frequently experienced this problem, a quarter of them (25%) sometimes, almost a third of them (29%) rarely, and a fifth of the participants (21%) have never faced any such challenges. Compared with the previously mentioned areas, differences in non-verbal communication have proved to be less difficult for the respondents because only 6 percent encounter this problem daily. Furthermore, a fifth of them (20%) frequently face this difficulty, a quarter of them (24%) sometimes, nearly a third of them (29%) rarely, and a fifth of the students (21%) have never had such a problem. The study participants have found proper behaviour less problematic; only 3 percent face this challenge daily. Eight percent of the respondents frequently have problems with adequate manners, almost a third of them (29%) sometimes, more than a third of them (40%) rarely, and a fifth of them (20%) never encounter such a difficulty. The table shows that differences in clothing are even less troublesome for international students because only 7 percent faced such challenges every day, and 12 percent of them frequently. More than a fifth of the participants (22%) sometimes encounter this problem, a quarter of them (25%) rarely do, and more than a third of them (34%) have never had any problems concerning the differences in dressing. The least challenging issue of everyday life concerns with Hungarian cultural customs, which has proved to be troublesome every day for only 4 percent of the respondents and a frequent problem only for 6 percent. More than a fifth of the students (23%) sometimes face this difficulty, a third of them (33%) rarely, and another third of them (34%) have never encountered such a problem.

Table 2. The frequency of facing challenges (n=107)

challenges	never = 1	2	3	4	every day = 5	average
communicating with people in Hungarian	4%	6%	16%	28%	46%	4.05
differences in food	15%	17%	16%	21%	31%	3.36
communicating with people in English	15%	12%	23%	27%	23%	3.31
differences in weather	19%	13%	25%	27%	16%	3.08
differences in non-verbal communication	21%	29%	24%	20%	6%	2.63
proper behaviour/dos and don'ts	20%	40%	29%	8%	3%	2.35
differences in clothing	34%	25%	22%	12%	7%	2.33
everyday Hungarian cultural customs	34%	33%	23%	6%	4%	2.14

If we compare the answer of students based on their countries of origin, we can see that communicating in Hungarian caused frequent problems to more than half of the participants (52%) arriving from the African continent, and more than half of the respondents travelling to Hungary from the Asian continent (51%). However, only a third of the students (35%) from Europe, and a third of

them (34%) from South America experienced this difficulty every day. The differences in food proved to be an everyday problem to more than third of the Asian students (38%), a third of the African (34%), and a third of the South American (34%) participants, but only to ten percent of the European respondents. Communicating with people in English was the most troublesome to Asian students, almost half of them (45%) experienced it every day. On the other hand, only less than a quarter of the African students, and only 10 percent of the European and 8 percent of the South American participants had such a problem every day. The differences in weather caused frequent problems to a third of the South American respondents (34%), but it was less problematic to the Asian (17%), African (15%) and European (5%) students. Facing challenges concerning the differences in non-verbal communication, proper behaviour, the differences in clothing and everyday Hungarian cultural customs proved to be less problematic for all the respondents of the four different continents, and no significant difference between the different continents can be seen regarding these areas.

The participants were asked to select the areas where they encountered problems (they could choose more than one problem area), and the results were calculated according to the number of choices in one area. Figure 1. illustrates the respondents' views on the rate of everyday challenges. We can see that most international students (64%) have experienced communication in Hungarian, the most problematic activity. The second most troublesome task is communicating in English; a fifth of the participants (21%) have found it challenging. The differences in food (6%) and weather (5%) have caused problems for only some respondents. The dissimilarities in clothing (3%) and proper behaviour (1%) have been thought to be problematic for only few students.

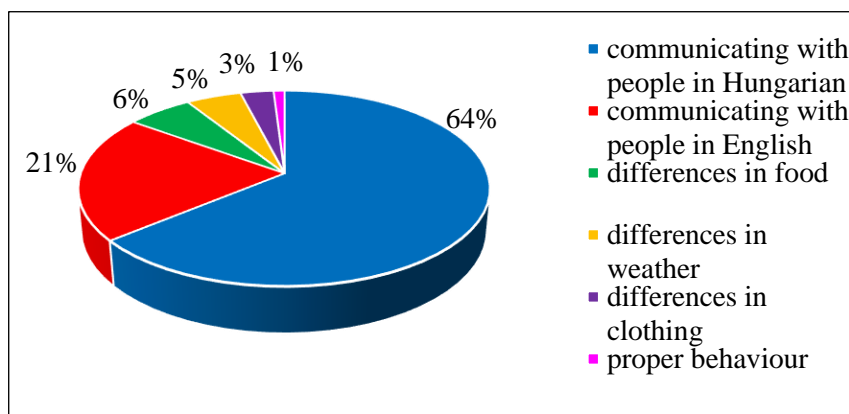


Figure 1. The rate of the everyday challenges (n=107)

When we compare the responses of the students according to their countries of origin, we can see that communicating in Hungarian was the most problematic of the listed areas for the Asian participants (68%) and the African students (67%), and it was proved to be quite troublesome for the European respondents (55%), as well. On the other hand it was less problematic for the South American participants (34%). Communicating in English was another area where some significant differences could be seen because for a third of the South American students it was the greatest problem while living in Hungary. However, it was less troublesome for the Asian (23%), European (20%) and African (15%) respondents.

If we compare the results of Table 2 and Figure 1 some similarities and differences can be seen. We can state that the participants' most challenging activity that has caused problems the most frequently is

communicating with others in Hungarian. English communication has also proved to be a significant and common obstacle for the respondents. Furthermore, differences in food, weather and clothing have shown similar results in the two questions, i.e. the dissimilarities have been distressing, but less frequent and less problematic. Likewise, similar outcomes can be seen in the case of proper behaviour. Table 2 shows that differences in non-verbal communication have caused problems less frequently; however, in Figure 1, it does not even appear that international students have not classified them causing challenges. Moreover, we have seen in Table 2 that everyday Hungarian cultural customs have been the least challenging for the participants, which has not even been listed in Figure 1.

The open-ended question (What do you think are the disadvantages (negative experiences) of living and studying in Hungary?) was intended to determine the respondents' challenges of staying in Hungary. Nearly half of the answers (41%) mentioned language barrier to cause problems. Students experienced it either because they did not speak Hungarian or because local people could not communicate in English. The participants thought learning the Hungarian language was difficult even after studying it for several years, and due to the lack of knowledge they felt excluded, did not receive or understand information, and faced challenges doing paperwork and filling in documents in Hungarian. One of the female respondents from Ecuador expressed her opinion: "The difficulty of the language limits the opportunity of interacting more with Hungarian people." According to the international students' experience, only few Hungarian people speak English, which makes communication and everyday life more challenging, especially in supermarkets, shopping malls, and banks. Moreover, some of the participants complained about the insufficient English level of their teachers and the lack of English language knowledge of students and administrative staff at local universities.

Some respondents (7%) had an unpleasant stay due to stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, xenophobia, and racism against foreigners, mainly Asian people. They expressed suffering and feeling insecure because of their different colour and language. Several of the students (6%) were disappointed because they found that there were either no job or internship opportunities for foreigners or it was difficult to get a job as a foreigner in Hungary. A few participants (6%) wrote about homesickness and missing their families and friends. Some respondents (5%) complained about high inflation, expensive apartments, low-quality services and small salaries. One of the male students from India summarised his negative experiences as follows: "For non-Erasmus students, scholarships are low. The house rent and grocery item prices are very high. The salaries are also low compared to other European countries, and the cost of living is high. For example, the salary difference between Hungary and Italy is huge, but the cost of living in major cities of Hungary and Italy is not that much. The wages are lower than in any other European countries." Several respondents (5%) were disappointed about the local weather; they felt that winters were colder than they got used to, and adapting to the changing seasons was also challenging. A few international students (4%) had unpleasant experiences when they discovered that some local people were reserved towards foreigners – especially the elderly – what's more several Hungarians were not open-minded to foreigners. A male student from Iraq describes this view: "People aren't much comfortable with foreign people; they think Non-Hungarians are somewhat outlanders in Hungary, maybe disturbance for culture and religion, and I'm afraid to say they hardly accept them welcomingly. Especially if two people don't speak Hungarian." A small number of participants (3%) found the Hungarian educational system to be much more complex and stricter than the ones they got used to at home.

A handful of the respondents (3%) thought that several Hungarians were pessimistic. Although the Turkish male student suggested that, on the one hand, the pessimism of Hungarians was understandable, on the other hand, he highlighted several positive aspects of Hungarian people and their culture. He

expressed his thoughts as follows: “There are some disadvantages as well, for instance, the pessimistic and depressive attitude of some people. These are also understandable due to historical facts, such as Trianon and the 1848 Hungarian Revolution. But I think, Hungarians don’t look at themselves as objectively as they should. They have a great historical and cultural heritage and a very promising potential. In my eyes, Budapest can be no different from Vienna.” Only two students (2%) felt that cultural barriers existed due to different cultural customs, making their lives more challenging in Hungary. For one of them seeing people smoking on the streets was a shocking experience. However, some participants (9%) had no negative experiences in Hungary.

The statistical data and research results discussed above show that student mobility is also increasing in the world and Hungary. The findings also reflected that there are a few areas where changes are required to avoid further problems and decrease culture shock among international students attending Hungarian higher education institutions in the future. The results imply that one of the problematic areas is communication; therefore, foreign language training should play a crucial role in Hungarian education, and special attention should be paid to teaching English as a foreign language. However, it means not only the teaching of Hungarian students but also the academic and administrative staff should be involved in the language learning process. The research outcomes also indicate the importance of preparing Hungarian and international students for cultural differences, the differences in mentality and way of thinking, and intercultural communication. According to Michael Paige and Matthew Goode: “Psychological stress is increased as the degree of cultural difference increases between the person’s own and the other culture. Moreover, the more negatively the individual evaluates those cultural differences, the more stressful the intercultural experience will be” (Paige and Goode, 2009). Therefore, it is essential to raise both the Hungarian and international students’ cultural awareness and break down cultural prejudices and stereotyped misconceptions to help meaningful communication with people from other nations and decrease cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication, which can lead to problems and conflicts. Therefore, tertiary education should familiarise students with different cultural norms and customs, the most well-known stereotypes of other nations and show which ones are true. Furthermore, intercultural training courses at the tertiary level should aim to develop negotiation skills, teach students the differences in the order of life values in different countries and cultures, and teach students how to be more receptive and open towards foreigners and their cultures.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the international students’ intercultural challenges in Hungary. The outcomes showed that the participants arrived from 45 different countries, mainly from Asia and primarily within the framework of the Stipendium Hungaricum programme. The results proved that during their studies in Hungary, respondents encountered some problems, and the greatest one of which was related to language knowledge. Therefore, foreign language teaching should play a crucial role in Hungarian education institutions of all levels. The study also showed that Asian and African students faced the most problems during their stay in Hungary. Consequently, intercultural training courses should be introduced to satisfy the foreign students’ needs and adaptation better.

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