

EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN SILESIA: KEY CONCLUSIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF UNIVERSITIES AND THE REGION

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Purpose: The article analyzes the internationalization of Silesian universities and the region, emphasizing the importance of collaboration between academic institutions and the local community. This synergy is essential for creating a supportive environment for international students, facilitating their adaptation and integration. The study of international students' experiences provides insights into the impact of internationalization on fostering an open and diverse academic community.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employed an online survey conducted during the 2024/2025 academic year among international students at Silesian universities. The questionnaire combined closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis with open-ended questions to explore students' experiences in depth.

Findings: The results reveal a variety of experiences among international students, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. Students appreciate the quality of education and affordability in the region but encounter administrative difficulties, language barriers, and challenges with social integration. These findings underscore the need to enhance internationalization strategies and foster a more inclusive academic environment.

Research limitations/implications: The study was conducted on a pilot sample of 54 students, which limits its scope. Further research with a larger sample is required. Additionally, the research tool could be refined by including more detailed and open-ended questions to better capture diverse student experiences.

Practical implications: The findings highlight the need to streamline administrative processes, improve access to English-language information, and develop integration initiatives. These efforts can enhance the experiences of international students and strengthen the region's attractiveness.

Social implications: The study emphasizes the importance of fostering intercultural relationships and understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of the region. These efforts enrich local communities and support the long-term internationalization of the region.

Originality/value: This article combines university and regional internationalization perspectives, demonstrating the importance of academic-community collaboration. It offers unique insights into creating inclusive environments and integrating internationalization strategies with regional development.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education institutions, intercultural integration, international students, internationalisation of the region, regional development

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The definition of internationalization in the context of higher education was proposed by researcher J. Knight, who describes it as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2003, p. 2). This definition has been widely cited by scholars worldwide for many years. A key element of the internationalization of higher education is mobility, encompassing both the subjective aspect, which includes the mobility of students, academic and administrative staff, and institutions themselves, and the objective aspect, related to the mobility of educational programs (Dymyt, 2018, p. 120). The primary goal of the internationalization of higher education is to introduce changes in the relationships between the university, participants in the educational system (students and academic staff), and the international environment. In this context, internationalization can be seen as a process of increasing institutional awareness of the impact of international activities on its future development and fostering international relationships that bring benefits to all involved parties (Pluta-Olearnik, 2013, p. 74). Internationalization is one of the most significant strategic challenges faced by Polish universities at the beginning of the 21st century, as evidenced by OECD reports highlighting a clear disparity between Polish institutions and European or Anglo-Saxon universities (Domański, 2017, p. 63). The mobility of foreign students who choose Poland as a destination for internships, exchange programs, or full academic cycles is steadily increasing. In the academic year 2022/2023, nearly 89.5 thousand international students from 180 countries studied in Poland. In 2023, according to data from the Central Statistical Office, Polish universities surpassed the milestone of 100,00 foreign students, including participants in exchange programs (Stat.gov.pl, 15.06.2023). By the academic year 2023/2024, the number of international students exceeded 107,000.

As one of the most industrialised and urbanised regions in Poland, the Silesian Voivodship is characterised by a specific socio-economic structure and a rich industrial history. The region's importance in the national economy stems primarily from its traditional links to heavy industry, including coal mining and steelmaking. However, in recent decades Silesia has been dynamically transforming its economic profile, developing modern sectors such as information and communication technologies, the automotive industry, renewable energy or business services. This process is the result of strategic investments in innovation and infrastructure modernisation, which increase the region's competitiveness on the national and international stage. One important element of Silesia's potential is its extensive network of higher education institutions. There are 26 universities in the voivodeship, both public and non-public, which offer a wide range of fields of study, from technical and medical sciences to the humanities and arts.

As a result, the region plays a significant role in educating highly qualified human resources for various branches of the economy, which is conducive to its further development. In the context of globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education, the increase in the number of foreign students choosing Silesian universities as a place to acquire knowledge and skills is particularly noticeable. This trend is part of a wider process of Polish universities opening up to international students, which is an important element in the development of the region (Katowice.stat.gov.pl, 30.05.2023).

Internationalisation has been an important topic of research and discussion for many years, yet most studies focus on the actions of academic institutions while overlooking the role regions can play in this process. A region's openness to cultural diversity and its ability to support the adaptation of foreigners can significantly enhance a university's success in attracting international students. Regions that invest in developing inclusive infrastructure and creating foreigner-friendly environments become appealing not only to young people pursuing higher education but also to skilled professionals seeking career opportunities.

Interaction between university authorities and regional administration can be crucial in creating a comprehensive strategy to effectively encourage foreigners to choose Poland as a place for a full course of study. At the same time, such activities may increase the chance that students will decide to stay in the region after graduation, contributing to the development of the local labour market and enriching its potential with international experience.

This article presents the results of a pilot study conducted among foreign students studying at Silesian universities. The survey was designed to assess the degree of internationalisation of both the universities and the region itself, as well as to identify actions that can further develop these areas. The results offer valuable insights into the students' experiences and point to specific directions in which both universities and regional authorities should take action to effectively attract and retain foreign students while building a strong position for Silesia as a region that is open and welcoming to the international community.

2. Methods

This article examines the experiences of international students studying at Silesian universities, focusing on identifying the key difficulties and challenges they face. Its aim is to develop recommendations that may help improve their situation. In this context, research questions address both academic and social aspects of students' lives to provide a detailed understanding of their experiences. This study is a pilot project, designed not only to collect initial data but also to evaluate the validity of the constructed research tool (Babbie 2004, pp. 281-282).

One of the main objectives is to analyze whether social integration or adaptation to academic requirements poses greater challenges for international students. The study investigates

whether difficulties in forming relationships with local students outweigh problems related to class organization, communication with lecturers, or adjusting to the specifics of the educational system.

A separate research question explores the language competence of the academic and local environment. The analysis focuses on the difficulties students encounter when interacting with lecturers, administrative staff, and public institutions, as well as whether challenges in communicating in English represent their biggest obstacle.

The final research area explores the perception of the educational offerings at Silesian universities. The study evaluates how students rate the quality of education, the availability of teaching materials, and the engagement of lecturers. Additionally, it highlights aspects of the academic offerings that students particularly value and identifies areas requiring improvement.

The research employs an online questionnaire that reaches a diverse group of foreign students studying at Silesian universities. This tool enables the collection of data from students representing different fields of study, levels of education, and countries of origin. The survey yields 54 correctly completed questionnaires, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights.

As a pilot study, the project aims not only to gather preliminary results but also to test the validity of the research tool. The inclusion of closed, semi-open, and open-ended questions allows for an evaluation of whether the questionnaire effectively measures the phenomena under investigation and helps identify potential issues in how respondents interpret the questions.

The study achieves its objectives through the use of diverse question types, enabling both statistical analysis and a deeper understanding of students' experiences. The findings provide valuable insights for verifying hypotheses and drawing conclusions. These data form the foundation for recommendations aimed at enhancing the living and educational conditions of foreign students while strengthening the internationalization strategy of Silesian universities. This, in turn, positively impacts their standing on the global educational map.

3. Research results

A survey of foreign students studying at universities in the Silesian Voivodeship provided valuable information about their motivations, experiences and the challenges they face. Analysis of the responses revealed several key aspects that may be relevant to both the university and the regional internationalisation strategy.

In the pilot study, 54 international students from Silesian universities participated, all of whom are enrolled in the 2024/2025 academic year. The respondents represent 7 universities from Silesia, with the following distribution: (University of Economics in Katowice: 37.5% - 15 students, Katowice Business University: 30% - 12 students), WSB University: 22.5% - 9

students), University of Silesia in Katowice: 17.5% -7 students, Silesian University of Technology: 12.5% -5 students, Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa: 10% -4 students, Częstochowa University of Technology: 5% -2 students).

The participants represented a diverse range of countries, with notable variations in gender distribution across nationalities. Among the 13 students from Ukraine, the overwhelming majority were female, with 12 women and only 1 man, highlighting a significant gender imbalance. A similar trend was observed in Belarus, where 3 of the 4 students were female, and only 1 was male. In Turkey, the gender distribution was slightly more balanced, with 2 female students and 1 male. In contrast, India had a higher proportion of male students, with 2 males and only 1 female out of the 3 total participants. Azerbaijan followed a similar pattern to Turkey, with 3 female students and 1 male. Kazakhstan showed a slight majority of female students, with 3 women and 2 men out of the 5 participants. Uzbekistan had an equal gender split, with 4 female students and 4 male students, reflecting a more balanced representation. In Nigeria, there was a noticeable predominance of male students, with 4 males and only 3 females among the 7 total participants. Zimbabwe exhibited the highest male-to-female ratio, with 5 male students and only 2 females out of the 7 participants.

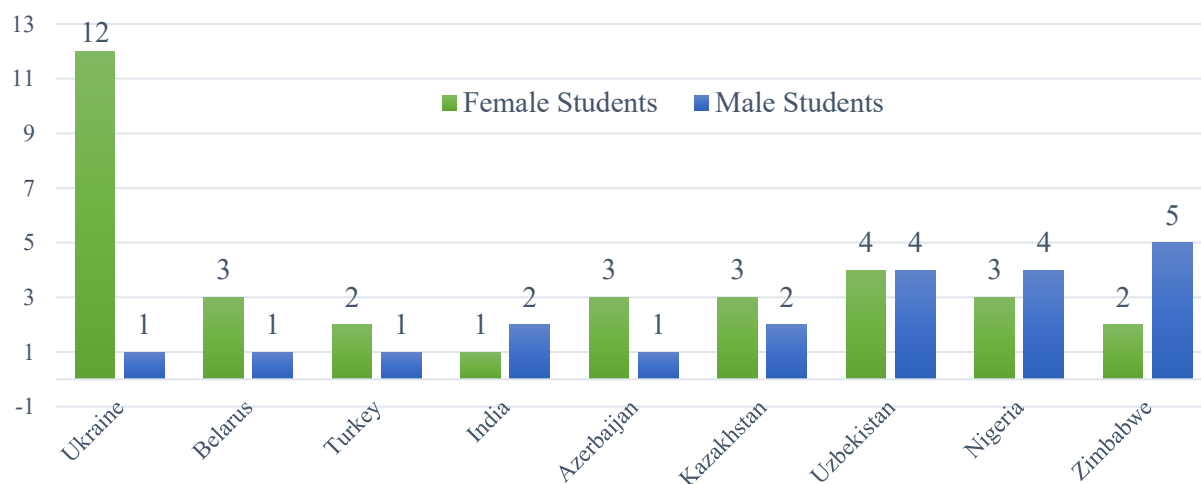


Figure 1. The number of students by country of origin.

Source: Own study.

One of the main reasons respondents chose to study in the Silesian region was the relatively low cost of living and education. Approximately 20% of the students pointed to the attractiveness of the educational offer and the availability of programmes in English, and 15% considered the reputation of the university as a key factor in their choice. Some respondents paid attention to specific study programmes that matched their academic and professional interests. Only a small percentage of students were guided by recommendations from friends.

Opinions were divided when it came to assessing the level of lecturers' language skills and the use of innovative teaching methods. More than 50% of respondents rated the English language level of lecturers as 'very good' and 35% as 'good'. At the same time, 40% of respondents

indicated the high quality of innovative educational methods, while 20% found it difficult to assess them, suggesting a lack of clear experience in this area.

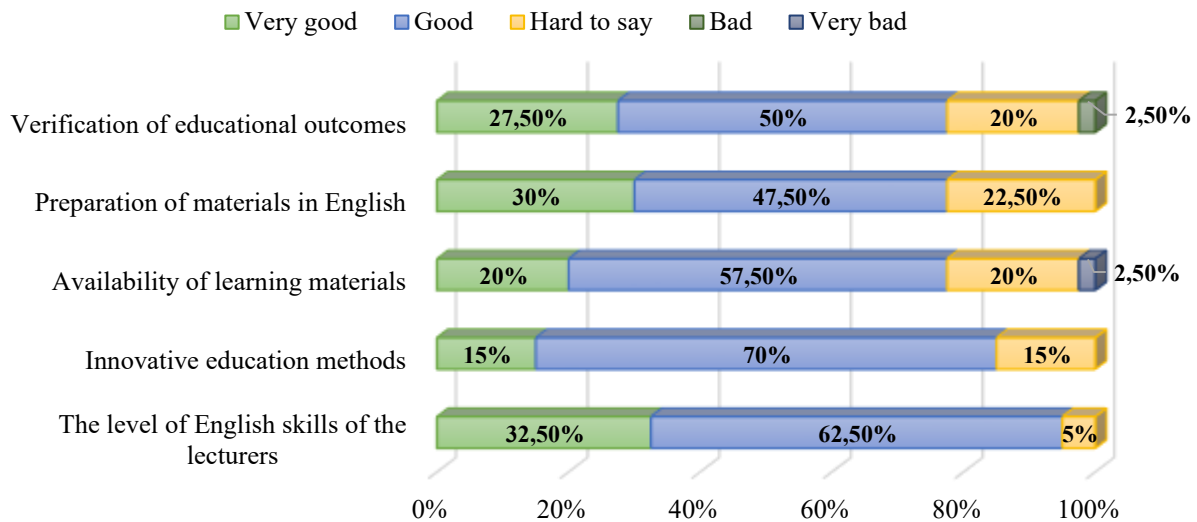


Figure 2. Students' evaluation of the quality of education at the universities.

Source: Own study.

The biggest difficulties faced by students concerned language barriers and problems related to administrative formalities. As many as 45% of respondents indicated problems with dealing with official matters, and 30% highlighted difficulties arising from adaptation to the academic system in Poland. The Polish language was a significant barrier to everyday functioning for 40% of students, suggesting a need for more support in learning the language at a basic level.

As part of the survey, an open-ended question was asked to gather foreign students' opinions on possible ways to improve their experience of both studying at universities in the Silesian Voivodeship and their everyday life in the region. This form of question allowed participants to freely share their comments and suggestions, which provided valuable information for qualitative analysis.

One of the most recurring themes in the responses was the issue of language barriers and the need to increase the availability of information in English. Many students indicated that the lack of adequate information in this language was a significant barrier. As one respondent noted: "I know that it is Poland and it is important to learn the language of the country, but some things should be done in English." Another student highlighted the need for better signage and labels in English: "Having more of English labelling and options on their applications or informative labels." Respondents also highlighted the difficulties associated with administrative processes, in particular obtaining a residence permit. These problems were described as time-consuming and complicated. One survey participant noted: "Easy access to Residency Permit application process would be a great plus to me and other prospective Students." A similar frustration was expressed by other students: "Dealing with official matters faster and getting residence permit faster." Some also suggested the need for support from the university in terms of administrative formalities. The issue of social inclusion and openness of the local community

was another important theme. One respondent wrote: "The locals need to be more open to foreigners," indicating a difficulty in establishing contacts with local people in the region. Other students suggested that more involvement of Polish students in integration could improve their experience: "More interactions with polish students." There were also suggestions to introduce more activities and events conducted in English and to organise language courses. As one participant noted: "Language courses and scholarships." Another respondent suggested a greater involvement of the university in creating development opportunities: "More involvement I suppose." Despite numerous criticisms, some students highlighted their positive experiences, expressing their overall satisfaction with living in the region and studying at the university. One wrote: "So far so good." Another pointed out: "An exciting to study and live here because my experience so far has been smooth."

The students' responses provide valuable information on areas for improvement and also point to positive aspects of their experience. Analysis of these opinions can form the basis for recommendations to improve the quality of life and education of international students in the region.

Analysis of the data shows that most students do not plan to stay in the region after graduation. Only 20% of respondents declared a desire to stay for a few years, while 70% do not intend to continue their working life in Silesia. Among the factors that could influence a change in this decision, students mainly pointed to the availability of attractive job offers (60%) and improved economic stability in the region (40%). The quality of life in the region was an important factor for 30% of the respondents, showing that social and economic aspects play a key role in decisions to stay in the region.

There was a further open-ended question in the survey, aimed at foreign students studying at Silesian universities, which asked for their general comments and suggestions about their experiences while studying and living in the region. The purpose of this question was to create a space for respondents to freely share their opinions on the challenges they face and identify areas for improvement. The responses provided important information to better understand the needs and expectations of this group of students, while identifying key issues worthy of detailed analysis. Many students highlighted their overall satisfaction with living and studying in the region. As one respondent noted: "It's pretty good. I like it so far and I think I might continue being in Silesia in the near future." Similarly, another person added: "Overall it's great." These positive opinions indicate a high level of acceptance and a generally good experience among some international students. However, responses also included criticisms of administrative and bureaucratic barriers, particularly in the context of obtaining a residence permit. One respondent noted: "The government offices should do well to provide the permit to stay until the student's graduation as the ease of getting this is a nightmare by the day." This issue is also highlighted by another student: "The bigger problems with studying and living are not there. The problem is the residence card and the bureaucracy. I applied for a residence card two and a half years ago and I am still waiting." These responses point to the need for streamlined administrative

processes and better support for international students in this regard. Another major problem highlighted was the difficulty of social integration, especially for non-EU nationals. As one respondent wrote: "Generally, Poland is a closed country. I don't have an idea if it is a bad thing or a good thing for the country, but for foreigners it is hard to live, socialize, and to be recruited (especially if you are from Non-EU)." These insights point to the challenges of social openness and integrating international students into local communities. Several students emphasised the need to develop English-speaking communities in the region. One respondent suggested: "Build more English community for foreigners." Others highlighted the general low level of English proficiency among local people, although at the same time they appreciated their friendliness and willingness to help: "In general the English level of public isn't too high, but people are friendly and open to help when needed." There were also suggestions about the university becoming more active on social media and the need for more employment opportunities for international students. As one survey participant noted: "Be more active in social media." Another respondent added: "More employment opportunities for international students." Despite many comments and suggestions, some students had no additional comments or rated their experience as fully satisfactory. As one respondent highlighted: I don't have any suggestions for improving life and studying at the university right now. "Maybe there are some problems, but I managed them and now I will calmly continue my studies and life in Silesia."

In summary, the answers to this question reflect the diversity of foreign students' experiences at Silesian universities. On the one hand, they indicate their satisfaction with living and studying in the region; on the other hand, they highlight the difficulties associated with integration, bureaucracy and the limited availability of information and English-speaking communities. The insights gained can provide valuable material for university and regional authorities seeking to improve the living conditions and quality of education offered to international students.

4. Discussion

The study confirmed that foreign students at Silesian universities encounter more difficulties in social integration than in academic adaptation. This result is important in the context of the development of internationalisation strategies, as it highlights the need to expand integration measures, which have so far received less emphasis in the literature. The problems of establishing social relationships, especially for non-EU students, point to the need for mentoring programmes, intercultural workshops and joint social initiatives. These findings contribute to the debate on the relationship between academic and social adaptation in the context of internationalisation.

The second hypothesis, that difficulties in communicating in English are the biggest challenge for international students in the region, was also confirmed. This indicates an urgent need to develop an information infrastructure in English, both at universities and in public spaces. Previous research on internationalisation has emphasised the importance of English as a key communication tool, but our analysis has highlighted its under-utilisation in the regional context, which requires the cooperation of university authorities and public administration.

The results also indicate that foreign students rate the educational offer of Silesian universities well. This positive perception is an important asset that can be used to promote the region as a place conducive to acquiring a quality education. Moreover, it confirms the assumptions of earlier studies, which pointed to the quality of education as a key factor in attracting foreign students.

The similarities of the findings with earlier studies, such as the need to simplify administrative procedures or increase the availability of materials in English, confirm the universal challenges of internationalisation. At the same time, new findings on social and language barriers point to the under-utilisation of the potential of foreign students as future graduates who can make a significant contribution in the local labour market. Internationalisation strategies to date have rarely taken into account the role of graduates in economic development, which opens up new perspectives for university and employer activities. Further research should focus on understanding how to better support international students in building competences and social networks that will facilitate their entry into the labour market after graduation. Developing research tools, especially in terms of open-ended questions, can provide valuable qualitative data, helping to develop measures to foster both better integration of students and to realise their potential in the context of local economic needs.

5. Conclusion

The study highlighted both its cognitive value and limitations, which should be considered in future analyses. The confirmation of hypotheses regarding difficulties in social integration and the significance of language barriers provides a better understanding of the needs of international students in the region. At the same time, the results indicating a high evaluation of the educational offer are a positive signal and a foundation for the further development of internationalisation.

The limitations of the study include a small research sample and a limited scope of open-ended questions, which may impact the comprehensiveness of the data obtained. Nonetheless, the analyses provided new insights that can be applied both locally and globally. Highlighting the role of regional authorities in creating English-language public infrastructure and the need

to increase integration efforts are significant findings that can have practical applications in designing supportive strategies.

The significance of this study extends beyond the local context, offering a new perspective on the relationship between academic and social adaptation in the process of internationalisation. The findings can be utilised to develop support programs for international students and serve as a basis for further analyses on regional specifics in the internationalisation of higher education. These actions can contribute to increasing the attractiveness of the Silesian Voivodeship as a welcoming place for the international academic community.

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