

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN SILESIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL INTERNATIONALIZATION

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Purpose: The purpose of the article is to analyse the experiences of international students studying at higher education institutions in Silesia and to identify implications for the development of regional internationalization, particularly in the context of integration, institutional support and graduate retention.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employed a quantitative survey approach. Data were collected using a CAWI questionnaire among 366 international students studying at Silesian universities in 2025. The analysis included descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests (Mann–Whitney U test and chi-square test) to examine differences between student groups and relationships between variables. A composite scale measuring regional openness towards international students was constructed and tested for reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

Findings: The results show that international students evaluate the academic environment of Silesian universities highly, while the regional environment is perceived as moderately open. Significant differences were identified between students from Europe and those from outside Europe in the evaluation of regional openness. The findings also reveal a statistically significant relationship between perceived employment opportunities and the willingness of students to remain in the region after graduation.

Research limitations/implications: The study is based on a cross-sectional survey and self-reported data, which may involve response bias. Although the sample size is relatively large, the representation of national groups is uneven. Future research should include longitudinal studies and comparative analyses across regions to better understand international student retention and integration processes.

Practical implications: The findings suggest the need to strengthen mechanisms facilitating the transition of international students from education to employment in the region, improve administrative accessibility for foreign students and develop targeted integration measures addressing cultural diversity.

Social implications: Improving the integration of international students may contribute to strengthening intercultural relations, increasing regional openness and supporting the long-term development of human capital in regions undergoing economic transformation.

Originality/value: The article contributes to the literature by linking international student experiences with the concept of regional internationalization and by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between student integration, labour market opportunities and regional retention of international graduates.

Keywords: international students, internationalization of higher education, regional internationalization, student mobility, intercultural integration, regional development.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education is one of the key phenomena shaping contemporary education systems and socio-economic development strategies. In J. Knight's classic approach, internationalisation means 'the process of integrating the international, intercultural and global dimensions into the objectives, functions and implementation of higher education activities' (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Contemporary approaches emphasise that internationalisation is not an end in itself, but a tool for improving the quality of education and building the competitiveness of education systems and regions (Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2010, p. 5; de Wit, 2011, p. 242).

One of the most visible manifestations of internationalisation is student mobility. According to the latest OECD report, *What are the key trends in international student mobility?*, the number of international students continues to grow, and their presence is an important element of the education and migration policies of OECD countries (OECD, 2025a, p. 3). The report *Education at a Glance 2025* indicates that educational mobility is directly related to human capital building and economic development, especially in regions competing for highly qualified graduates (OECD, 2025b, pp. 214-216). Student mobility has been widely analysed as part of broader global migration processes linked to education and knowledge circulation. Research indicates that international students increasingly combine educational mobility with longer-term migration strategies and career planning (Brooks, Waters, 2011, pp. 1-4).

The literature emphasises that the experiences of international students are multidimensional and include academic, social and cultural adaptation (Marginson, 2016, p. 418). Research conducted in diverse European contexts indicates that the integration of international students depends on institutional policies, the availability of administrative support and the level of inclusiveness of the local environment (Aksay Aksezer, Demiryontar, Dorrity, Mescoli, 2023, p. 4). The authors emphasise that effective integration requires cooperation between universities, public authorities and regional communities. Recent studies emphasise that the experiences of international students have become a central dimension of the internationalisation of higher education. Contemporary research increasingly focuses on issues such as student wellbeing, social inclusion and institutional support systems provided by universities and host societies (Soong, Maheepala, 2023, pp. 1213-1215). Systematic reviews also indicate that the growing scale of international student mobility requires more comprehensive mechanisms supporting academic and socio-cultural adaptation in host environments (Singh, Jack, 2023, pp. 845-847; Cankaya, 2024, pp. 4-6).

Increasing attention has been devoted to the retention of international graduates. Research shows that the decision to remain in the country or region of study depends on a range of economic, institutional and social factors, including employment opportunities, legalisation procedures and quality of life (Mosneaga, Winther, 2013, pp. 186-188). At the same time, studies on high-skilled migration indicate that labour market conditions and migration regulations significantly shape the mobility decisions of international graduates (Czaika, Parsons, 2017, pp. 603-606). International organisations also emphasise that graduate retention policies are increasingly becoming part of broader regional development strategies aimed at attracting and retaining human capital (OECD, 2025a, pp. 7-9; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024, pp. 495-497).

The Silesian Province, as a region undergoing economic transformation and competing for human capital, provides an important context for analysing the experiences of foreign students. The universities operating in the region are attracting an increasing number of foreigners, but the effectiveness of the region's internationalisation depends not only on the quality of the educational offer, but also on the level of social integration, the efficiency of administrative procedures and opportunities for professional development.

The aim of this article is to analyse the experiences of foreign students studying at Silesian universities and to identify conclusions that are relevant from the perspective of the region's internationalisation.

The study was carried out as part of the project entitled 'Experiences of foreign students at Silesian universities – conclusions for the development of the region's internationalisation', co-financed by the GZM Metropolis as part of the 'Metropolitan Science Support Fund' programme.

2. Methods

The study was quantitative in nature and was designed within the survey research paradigm. According to the methodological approach, survey-type studies serve to systematically analyse the opinions, attitudes and experiences of a specific population using a standardised research tool. They enable both the description of variable distributions and the analysis of relationships between them (Babbie 2020, pp. 253-268). The adoption of this strategy was justified by the need for a multidimensional diagnosis of the experiences of foreign students studying at universities in the Silesian Province.

The design of the research tool was based on an approach to research on intercultural adaptation, which involves analysing the functioning of an individual in a new environment in social and institutional terms (Berry, 1997, pp. 9-10; Ward, Bochner, Furnham, 2001, pp. 42-45). In practice, this meant operationalising students' experiences through indicators of

academic integration, social relations, administrative barriers and migration plans. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of research on international students, which points to the need to combine the academic and social dimensions in the analysis of adaptation (Smith, Khawaja, 2011, pp. 703-705).

The research project was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, a pilot study was conducted, the results of which were published in the article 'Experiences of Foreign Students in Silesia: Key Conclusions for the Internationalisation of Universities and the Region' (Katana, 2025). The pilot study covered 54 foreign students studying at universities in the Silesian Province and aimed to verify the design of the research tool and assess its functionality. In accordance with methodological recommendations for testing questionnaires, the pilot study allows for the identification of ambiguous questions, the assessment of the adequacy of response scales, and the verification of the logical structure of the tool (Babbie, 2020, pp. 294-301; Fowler, 2014, pp. 100-103). Based on the results obtained, corrections were made, including clarifying the response categories and expanding the section on social integration and administrative barriers.

The actual survey was conducted between 7 April and 10 July 2025 and covered 366 foreign students studying at universities in the Silesian Province. The CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) technique was used, which is recommended in mobile population surveys due to its anonymity, wide reach and organisational efficiency (Couper, 2017, pp. 123-125). Respondents were recruited through universities (distribution of invitations by email) and through social media using the snowball method. The research tool was a standardised questionnaire containing single and multiple choice questions, questions on a five-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. The structure of the questionnaire included thematic blocks on the quality of education, non-academic support, social relations, language and administrative barriers, assessment of the region's openness, and students' migration plans. Based on the responses to 26 items, a scale of the region's openness to foreign students was constructed. The responses were converted into a uniform point system (1-5), where higher values indicated a higher level of perceived openness. The reliability of the scale was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which reached a value of 0.91. Methodological literature indicates that alpha coefficient values above 0.70 are considered acceptable, while values exceeding 0.80 indicate high internal consistency of the tool (Hair, Babin, Anderson, Black, 2019, pp. 137-139).

Descriptive statistics (means, medians, standard deviations) and non-parametric tests appropriate for ordinal variables were used in the data analysis. The Mann-Whitney U test was used for comparisons between groups, while the chi-square test was used to analyse the relationships between categorical variables. As Field points out, these tests are appropriate for data that do not meet the assumptions of normal distribution and for the analysis of variables measured on an ordinal scale (Field, 2018, pp. 335-338).

3. Research results

The survey involved 366 foreign students studying at Silesian universities. The sample structure shows a slight predominance of males (53.0%) over females (46.2%), with the dominant age group being 20–25 years old (69.7%). In addition, 13.4% were under 20 years of age, 10.7% were aged 26–30, and 6.3% were over 30 years of age. The most numerous nationality was students from Ukraine (42.3%), followed by respondents of Turkish (6.3%), Nigerian (4.9%) and Indian (3.6%) nationality; 6.3% of respondents did not specify their nationality.

The results concerning educational experiences show that the vast majority of respondents rated the quality of education at their universities positively. The share of responses indicating “good” or “very good” ranged from 79.5% (innovative teaching methods) to 91.3% (language competence of lecturers). These results confirm a generally positive evaluation of the educational offer of universities in the region. Detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Evaluation of selected aspects of the quality of education

Aspect of education quality	Negative (Very bad + Bad) %	Neutral (Hard to say) %	Positive (Good + Very good) %
Preparing materials in the language of study	5.4	7.4	87.2
Availability of learning materials	6.3	7.7	86.1
Linguistic competence of lecturers	4.1	4.6	91.3
Innovative teaching methods	5.2	15.3	79.5
Verification of learning outcomes	3.6	12.3	84.2

At the same time, the area of non-academic support proved to be less clear-cut: only 16.4% of students rated the university's support in non-academic matters negatively, while 64.8% expressed the opposite view (i.e. rated it positively), which led to the rejection of the hypothesis of insufficient support. This result suggests that, in terms of the university (including non-teaching aspects), students' experiences are more often positive than negative, which is important as a background for further analysis of the regional component.

A key analytical element of the study is the synthetic scale of the region's openness to foreign students, constructed on the basis of 26 questionnaire items describing different aspects of functioning in the region. Reliability analysis confirmed a high level of internal consistency of the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$). The reliability statistics of the scale are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Reliability statistics of the regional openness scale

Indicator	Value
Cronbach's Alpha	0.91
Number of items	26
Scale range	1-5
Mean value of the scale	3.54
Standard deviation	0.59

The distribution of the scale results indicates a moderately positive assessment of the openness of the region. The mean value was $M = 3.54$, the median $Me = 3.62$ and the standard deviation $SD = 0.59$, with a minimum value of 1.73 and a maximum value of 4.81. The variability of the results suggests that although the average perception of the region is moderately favourable, some students experience significantly less favourable conditions.

Verification of the hypotheses allowed for in-depth comparisons between students from European countries and other parts of the world. In the analysis, which included only those who provided their country of origin ($n = 343$), students from Europe rated the openness of the region higher ($M = 3.71$; $Me = 3.77$; $SD = 0.53$) than students from outside Europe ($M = 3.31$; $Me = 3.31$; $SD = 0.57$); the difference was statistically significant ($Z = 6.30254$; $p = 0.000000$). For this difference, the effect size can be estimated as $r = Z/\sqrt{N} \approx 0.34$ ($N = 343$), which corresponds to a moderate (practically significant) effect and means that origin (Europe vs. the rest of the world) is associated not only with 'statistical significance,' but also with a noticeable difference in the assessment of the region's openness. This difference also has a distributional dimension: the median in the European group (3.77) is significantly higher than in the non-European group (3.31), suggesting a shift in the entire distribution of ratings towards a less positive perception of the region among students who are culturally more distant. At the same time, not all indicators of functioning in the region differed significantly depending on origin. An example is the assessment of getting around the region's cities in terms of understanding messages (public transport, accessibility of services). The percentage of 'good' ratings was high in both groups (Europe: 87.3%; rest of the world: 82.8%), and the chi-square test showed no significant differences ($\chi^2 = 1.44270$; $df = 2$; $p = 0.486095$; $n = 343$). The effect size (Cramér's $V \approx \sqrt{(\chi^2/N)} \approx 0.065$) indicates a negligible effect, i.e. practically no differences between the groups in this respect. In interpretative terms, this means that some of the 'infrastructure and information' components may be perceived similarly regardless of origin, while differentiation is more evident at the level of synthetic assessment of openness (and most likely those components that more strongly affect social integration and institutional service). The results also point to the importance of integration issues: although relations with Polish students were generally rated positively, 35.5% of respondents reported social integration problems, while 42.6% indicated language difficulties. This percentage should be read in the context of the openness scale distribution ($SD = 0.59$; $min = 1.73$), as 'integration difficulties'

may be one of the mechanisms generating the lower tail of the distribution of region ratings. The results concerning plans to remain in the region after graduation and factors influencing migration decisions are particularly important for the internationalisation of the region. The study indicated a high interest in taking up employment in the region (70.8%). At the same time, an analysis of the factors influencing the decision to potentially remain shows that the quality of life in the region has the strongest impact ($M = 4.12$; $Me = 4.00$; $SD = 1.01$) and the possibility of finding a job related to one's field of study ($M = 4.03$; $Me = 5.00$; $SD = 1.25$). The importance of programmes supporting the integration and professional development of foreigners was also rated quite highly ($M = 3.72$; $Me = 4.00$; $SD = 1.27$) and the availability of job offers in English ($M = 3.67$; $Me = 4.00$; $SD = 1.42$) were also rated quite highly. It is worth noting the median of 5.00 for 'the possibility of finding a job in the profession', which suggests that at least half of the respondents attributed maximum importance to this factor on a scale of 1 to 5. The relationship between the perception of job prospects in the region and plans to stay was confirmed by a chi-square test. Among those who did not see job prospects in their profession in the region, the highest percentage were those who clearly rejected the possibility of staying (35.7%). On the other hand, among students who saw such prospects, the highest percentages were those declaring that they would stay for several years (39.2%) and permanently (19.6%). The relationship was statistically significant: $\chi^2 = 35.4665$; $df = 6$; $p = 0.000003$. For this table (4×3), the effect size can be described by Cramér's V coefficient ≈ 0.22 , which indicates a small to moderate effect – i.e. not only 'significance' but also a noticeable strength of the relationship in practical terms (in social research with this type of variable, this level of V is interpreted as meaningful in the context of public policies and recommendations).

The results therefore allow us to reconstruct a more precise picture of the internationalisation process of the region 'from the perspective of experience': the university component is rated highly (80-91% positive ratings in key aspects of education quality), while the regional component is moderately positive ($M = 3.54$; $Me = 3.62$), but with significant variability in experiences and clear differences in ratings between students from Europe and outside Europe ($Z = 6.30254$; $p = 0.000000$; $r \approx 0.34$). Most importantly from the perspective of the region's internationalisation, decisions to remain after graduation are strongly linked to the assessment of employment opportunities in the profession and, more broadly, to quality of life and integration and professional support, and the statistically confirmed link between job prospects and plans to remain ($\chi^2 = 35.4665$; $p = 0.000003$) shows that labour market policies and instruments to support foreigners can effectively strengthen the retention of graduates in the region.

The questionnaire also included open-ended questions that allowed respondents to provide additional comments on their experiences of studying and living in the Silesian region. The qualitative responses were analysed thematically in order to identify the most frequently mentioned issues. The analysis indicates that the most commonly reported challenges

concerned language barriers, administrative procedures and social integration. Respondents pointed out that limited knowledge of Polish in everyday situations, particularly in public services or healthcare institutions, may hinder effective communication and access to services. Students also emphasised the need for more opportunities for interaction with local residents and Polish students through integration initiatives. Additionally, some respondents highlighted the importance of career opportunities and stronger cooperation between universities and local employers, which could increase the attractiveness of the region for international graduates. Overall, the themes emerging from the open-ended responses correspond with the patterns identified in the quantitative results of the study.

4. Discussion

The results confirm that the experiences of foreign students in the Silesian Province are complex and multidimensional, which is consistent with the concepts of intercultural adaptation indicating the parallel functioning of academic, social and institutional dimensions (Berry, 1997; Ward, Bochner, Furnham, 2001). The study clearly outlines the asymmetry between the highly rated university component and the moderately rated regional component. While the quality of education and the competence of the teaching staff received very high satisfaction ratings, the experiences related to functioning in the administrative and social space of the region were more diverse.

The insights obtained from the open-ended responses further support the quantitative findings, particularly with regard to language barriers, administrative challenges and the need for stronger social and professional integration of international students.

This result is in line with broader observations on the internationalisation of higher education. Knight (2003) points out that internationalisation is not limited to the curricular or mobility dimension, but requires the integration of the international dimension into the overall functioning of the institution. OECD studies (2025a; 2025b) emphasise that student mobility is increasingly linked to graduate retention policies and regional development. In this context, the results suggest that universities in the region are relatively effective in implementing the academic component of internationalisation, but the full effectiveness of this process depends on the quality of the host environment outside the university structure.

The difference in assessments between students from Europe and outside Europe is particularly significant. The moderate effect of the difference in the assessment of the region's openness indicates that cultural distance may play a real role in shaping perceptions of the host environment. According to Berry's acculturation theory (1997), the greater the cultural and linguistic differences, the higher the likelihood of adaptation difficulties. The results of the study confirm this relationship at the level of perceptions of the region's openness and

integration experiences. At the same time, the lack of significant differences in the assessment of certain infrastructural aspects (e.g., getting around the city) suggests that the barriers are primarily social and institutional in nature, rather than logistical.

The results concerning migration plans are particularly important from the perspective of the region's development strategy. The high percentage of students declaring an interest in staying in Poland after graduation indicates the region's retention potential. At the same time, the analysis of the relationship showed that the key factors determining the decision to stay are the possibility of finding a job related to the field of study and the overall quality of life. This result is consistent with the research by Mosneaga and Winther (2013), which indicate that graduates' migration decisions are strongly linked to their assessment of the local labour market and career development opportunities. This means that the internationalisation of the region cannot be understood solely as a strategy to attract students, but must include instruments to support their transition from the education system to the labour market.

From a public policy perspective, the results suggest a need for stronger integration between universities, regional authorities and labour market institutions. Universities seem to be effectively fulfilling their teaching function in an international environment, while the administrative and integration areas require further development.

The literature on internationalisation emphasises that the effectiveness of this process depends on the coherence of actions at the institutional and regional levels (de Wit 2011; Aksay, Aksezer et al., 2023). In this context, the moderate level of openness of the region and the significant diversity of student experiences point to the need for a more systematic approach to the integration of foreigners in urban and institutional spaces.

It is also worth noting that the high reliability of the region's openness scale allows it to be treated as a potential tool for monitoring the internationalisation process over time. The repeatability of the measurement in subsequent years would enable the analysis of trends and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions implemented.

However, the study has its limitations. Firstly, the CAWI technique was used, which may be associated with the effect of self-selection of respondents. Secondly, the analysis is cross-sectional and does not allow for the assessment of changes over time. Thirdly, despite the relatively large sample size, not all nationalities were represented in equal proportions, which may affect the generalisation of the results.

In summary, the results indicate that the Silesian Province has a strong academic component of internationalisation, but full utilisation of the potential of foreign students as future participants in the regional labour market requires strengthening integration and administrative measures. The internationalisation of the region should be understood as a process that involves not only attracting students, but also creating conditions conducive to their long-term social and professional integration.

5. Conclusion

The study provides empirical grounds for assessing the level of internationalisation in the region from the perspective of foreign students' experiences. The results clearly indicate that the academic component of internationalisation in the Silesian Province is functioning at a high level, as confirmed by both high ratings of the quality of education and the measurement stability of the constructed scale. This means that the region has a strong institutional foundation for attracting foreign students.

At the same time, the moderate level of the region's openness rating and statistically significant differences between students from Europe and outside Europe indicate that the internationalisation process is not uniform and is subject to cultural diversity. The results suggest that the barriers are not infrastructural but socio-institutional in nature, which means that the key challenge is not the availability of resources but the way they are organised and communicated.

The most significant finding is the statistically confirmed link between the assessment of employment prospects and the declared willingness to remain in the region after graduation. This means that the internationalisation of the region should not be analysed in terms of student inflow, but in terms of human capital retention. From the perspective of metropolitan development, it is crucial to transform educational mobility into professional mobility rooted in the region.

In light of these findings, it is reasonable to shift the focus of metropolitan policy from promotional and recruitment activities to structural retention mechanisms. First, it is necessary to institutionally link the higher education system to the regional labour market by creating sustainable student-intern-employee transition paths. This means that an integrated system of internships financed or co-financed at the metropolitan level needs to be implemented in sectors that are strategic for the region's transformation (e.g. new technologies, green economy, medical services).

Secondly, the results justify the need to standardise the administrative experience of foreigners in the region. This is not about general declarations of openness, but about creating a measurable standard of institutional service, including the time required for procedures, the availability of information in English and the transparency of formal processes. Standardising these elements could have a real impact on improving the synthetic assessment of the region's openness.

Thirdly, the differences between students from Europe and outside Europe indicate the need for a segmented approach to integration. Internationalisation is not a homogeneous process; it requires taking into account varying levels of cultural distance. It is therefore reasonable to design integration programmes that are differentiated in terms of adaptation needs, rather than applying universal solutions.

Fourthly, the scale of regional openness constructed in the study can be used as a tool for operationalising internationalisation at the metropolitan level. The cyclical use of this tool would allow a transition from a declarative to a measurable model of managing the internationalisation of the region.

In summary, the Silesian Province has strong academic potential in terms of internationalisation, but the long-term development of the region's internationalisation requires a focus on graduate retention and the quality of socio-institutional experiences. It is these elements, rather than the influx of students alone, that are the key condition for transforming educational mobility into a sustainable development resource for the metropolis.

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