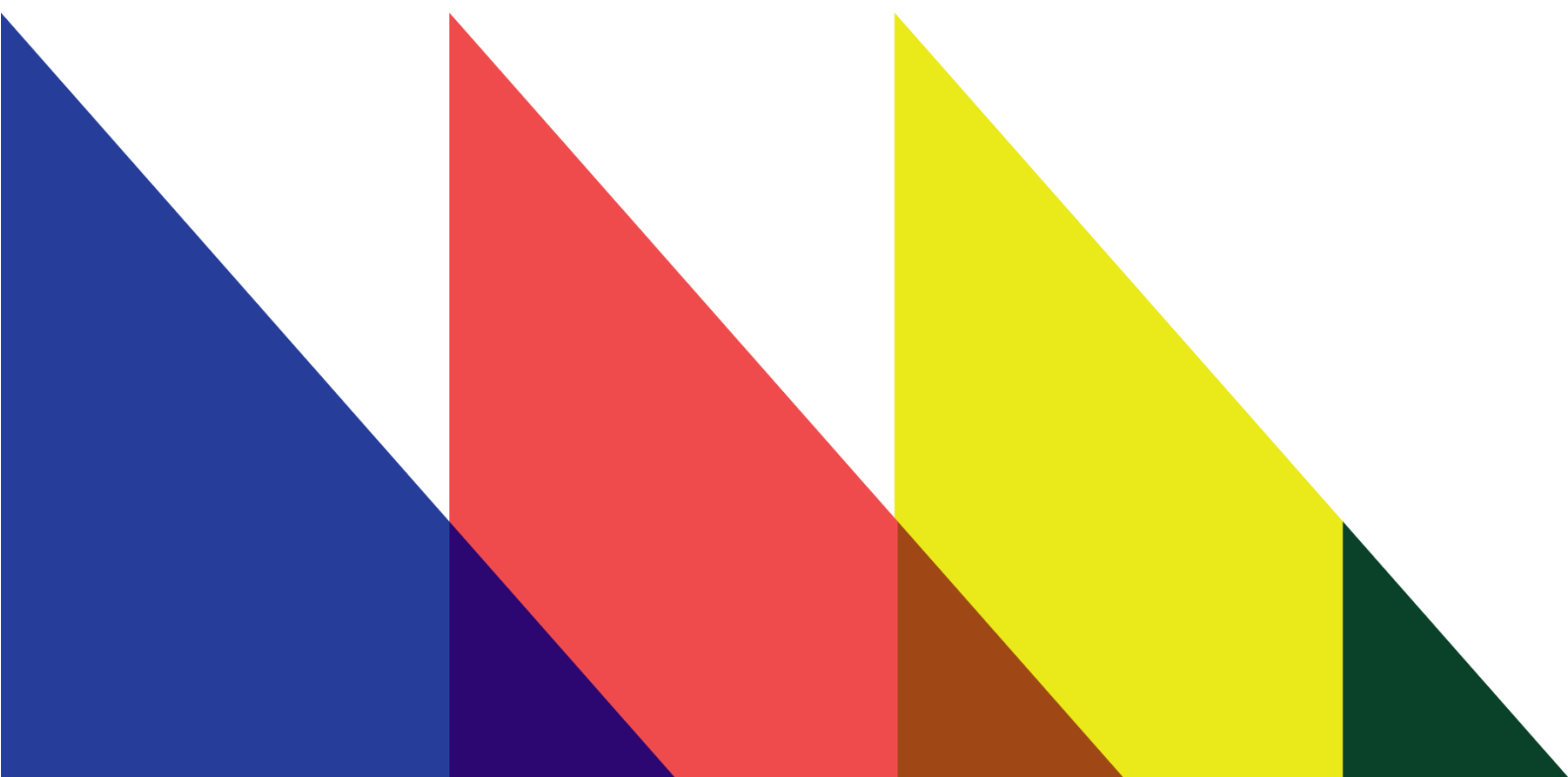# ENIS

European Network on International Student Mobility
Connecting Research and Practice

Mapping Effective Approaches to Support International Students' Social and Cultural Integration in Host Countries

ENIS Policy Brief 03/2024

30 August 2024

1. Snapshot overview

International student mobility has expanded dramatically in the past two decades, with over 5 million students pursuing degrees abroad in recent years (1). A poor integration of international students negatively impacts their mental health, achievement, and retention. In fact, the degree of academic success of international students is multi-faceted according to their social, cultural and ethical background (2). Therefore, as numbers grow, integrating international students socially and culturally has become increasingly important. However, many universities approach integration randomly or inefficiently (3). This highlights the need to map successful integration programme models globally. This policy brief intends to highlight successful approaches for providing support to international students.

2. Background

Many higher education institutions still lack strategic integration approaches attuned to international students' needs. Moreover, while there are instances where certain strategies (mentorship programmes, orientation or language support) have been acknowledged as effective in addressing the needs of international students, these successful practices often remain isolated and lack uniform adoption across the sector. With a strategic, coordinated effort, the social and cultural integration imperative can become an opportunity for benefiting all regardless of their background. With this aim, a web-based questionnaire was designed and distributed among higher education stakeholders and international institutions. A total of 35 individuals responded to the questionnaire between November 2023 and January 2024, and the gathered data were subsequently thematically analysed using NVivo. This policy brief summarises the key findings and offers clear guidelines for developing targeted orientations, peer matching, mentorship, cultural immersion and other inclusion initiatives that could foster international student integration, engagement and intercultural exchange. We hope that the findings and recommendations provide some valuable direction to higher education institutions and other stakeholders for developing context-appropriate, tailored international student integration systems.

3. Key findings

3.1. Overarching theme: Towards a holistic, comprehensive support system

The process of international student mobility involves overcoming significant challenges, including the physical act of relocating to a new country, the emotional and psychological impact of leaving behind a familiar social and cultural context, and the feeling of uprootedness from one's own "affective, personal, language territory" (6). The findings indicate the need for a holistic, comprehensive support system that addresses all aspects of international students' adaptation and integration into their new interweaved geographical, socio-cultural, and personal contexts, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Fig. 1 : Mapping of the Effective Approaches to Support International Students' Social and Cultural Integration
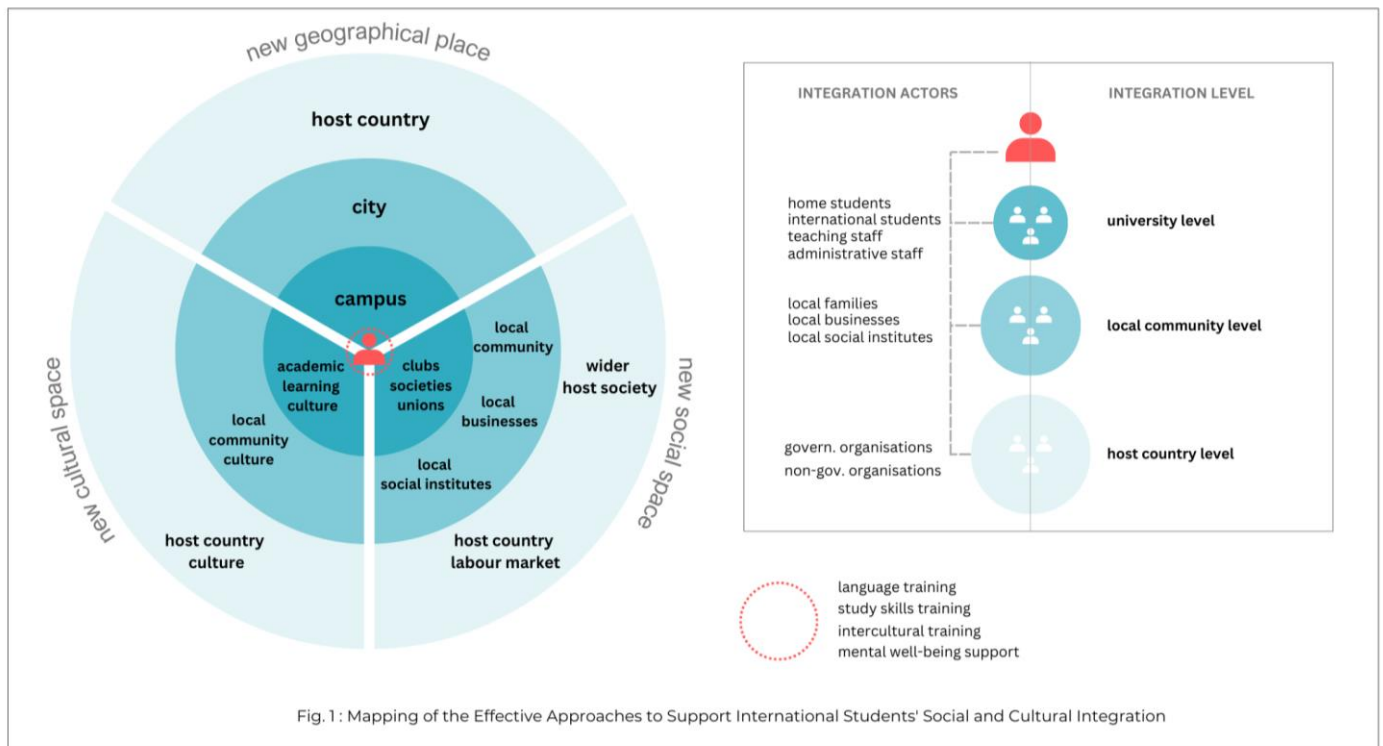
3.2. Theme 1: Facilitating personal, sociocultural and academic transitions

The geographical context in the findings has a triple representation: (i) as a new place of study (e.g. a university campus), (ii) as a new city, and (iii) as a new country, as operational and recreational infrastructures. Therefore, international students are to be introduced to these infrastructures prior to and upon arrival, as well as facilitated in their transition towards being independent users by means of ongoing proactive as well as on-demand support. This includes supporting students with finding suitable accommodation, opening a bank account, and guiding them through other daily life practicalities. The socio-cultural context is complex and multilayered, with learning and academic culture as well as student body (e.g. extra-curricular clubs, societies, and other social groups) being the first level to be integrated into and adapted to. The wider contexts are those of socio-cultural spaces beyond university, including local community and the labour market. The most proximal level of integration is, however, that of the personal level, as the need to establish a new immediate support network of friends and be recognised as a person of value (e.g. by sharing their culture) despite possible communication difficulties associated with language competence. The latter can be targeted through classes in both the language of instruction and the language of the destination country, either in the face-to-face format or online.

3.3. Theme 2: Embracing and supporting temporal stages of integration

There is also strong evidence that the effective approaches to support international students across the above target areas ought to shift from singular on-arrival orientation towards a series of measures across the following temporal stages: pre-arrival via digital technologies, upon arrival, and in the first few weeks, supplemented by ongoing support, whether through the organisation of regular formal and informal events, provision of spaces for informal gatherings or on-demand personal assistance, be that online or offline. There is a growing understanding across institutions that the information provision approach needs to be replaced by that of mentorship for both affective and transfer from knowledge to skills development rationales.

Integration actors, as representatives of a university, the domestic student body, and wider society, play a crucial role in this process by acting as pivotal points through which students integrate and adapt to the triad of the new contexts. These actors can provide invaluable support and guidance, helping new international students navigate the complexities of their new environment. The findings indicate that apart from the international office staff, the following actors can and should be mobilised to act in this capacity: academic staff as designated points of inquiry at a faculty level; domestic students as mentors, buddies, academic tutors, and language learning tandem participants; students' unions; others more advanced in the programme of study; international students as more experienced and attuned; local families; local businesses and local social institutes as volunteering and internship opportunities providers. Beyond university and local actors, governmental and non-governmental agencies and country-wide student organisations can play a significant role. There is also an increasing understanding of the need to develop intercultural competence of those supporting international students in their transition, particularly of teaching staff and home students.

3.4. Theme 3: Maintaining psychological well-being

The utmost importance is placed on the psychological and well-being support of international students to ensure their thriving as opposed to surviving through the integration and adaptation process. Furthermore, to ensure the endorsement of intercultural experience and competence development of students and staff as a form of extrinsic incentive as well as to facilitate bilateral, dual-in-direction integration of international and domestic students, it is possible to formalise some aspects of this process through extra credits or a free certification programme, e.g. the Certificate of Intercultural Communication and Competence (CICC) in Germany and the Certificate Programme for Intercultural Competence in Switzerland.

Finally, as the scope of support grows in complexity in terms of targeted areas, number and types of stakeholders involved, frequency of organised interventions as well as overall support duration, the holistic approach to integration of international students gains recognition. This leads to the acknowledgement of the need for extra human and financial resources allocation as well as for designated staff to manage the entire process and serve as the main point of contact for all parties involved.

4. Recommendations

01 | For higher education institutions

HEIs should adopt a holistic approach to support international students' integration, emphasising pre-arrival and on-arrival assistance, ongoing mentoring, informal discussions, intercultural events, and workshops. Understanding students' diverse needs is paramount, requiring systematic data collection and analysis across academic, social, mental, financial, and practical domains.

A universal orientation scheme should be established, offering digital pre-arrival and when possible face-to-face post-arrival support. However, support must extend beyond on-arrival orientation to continuous mentoring throughout the academic journey. Domestic students, academic staff, and experienced international students should act as mentors, guiding new students through academic, social, and cultural transitions. Implementing a mentorship programme for incoming students, paired with experienced peers, aids in navigating challenges effectively.

Encouraging engagement between local and international students through shared interests, university groups, and social events fosters inclusivity. Personalized integration should focus on fostering support networks. Platforms like the Buddy Programme can facilitate connections and team-building activities. Regular events and online platforms should promote informal interactions and community building.

Incorporating psychological and well-being support into the system is crucial, offering free, accessible individual and group counselling sessions and promoting destigmatisation of seeking help. Ensuring counsellors are equipped to address cultural concerns enhances support efficacy. Offering intercultural competence programs, such as the Certificate of Intercultural Communication and Competence (CICC), can enhance bilateral integration and promote student well-being. Overall, a holistic approach encompassing various aspects of student life promotes successful integration into the host country's academic and social environment.

02 | **For policymakers**

Policymakers, including European Commission where appropriate, should create supportive frameworks and funding mechanisms to enable higher education institutions to ensure the successful integration of international students. Allocating resources and supporting the implementation of a holistic approach that fosters meaningful connections, promotes cultural understanding, and ultimately enriches the educational experience for all students.

Policymakers are urged to endorse adequate funding/financial support for institutions' initiatives that promote campus inclusivity, emphasising diversity and the celebration of multiculturalism, while fostering a welcoming environment. To facilitate informed decision-making, policymakers should prioritise the establishment of a robust data collection system and allocate resources for identifying students' needs, with a particular focus on digitising internationalisation processes and enhancing institutional and human capacities to support international students. Furthermore, policymakers should advocate for adequate support services and effective promotion, encompassing access to accommodation, canteens, mental health services and language support.

Prioritise a data-driven approach to understanding student needs, including their challenges. This knowledge is crucial for tailoring effective evidence-based support mechanisms that improve student outcomes and well-being.

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6. Authors' information

Mariia Tishenina

Edge Hill University, United Kingdom

Member of WG3, WG2

tishenim@edgehill.ac.uk, mariyatishenina@google.com

Dangeni

Newcastle University, United Kingdom

Member of WG3, WG5

Dangeni@newcastle.ac.uk

Mete Sipahioglu

Samsun University, Turkey

Member of WG3 and WG5, Stakeholder advisor of WG3

metesipahioglu@gmail.com

Cristina Ramona Fit

Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding(UEFISCDI) / National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA), Romania

Member of WG 3, WG5

cristina.fit@uefiscdi.ro

Burcu Koç

Sakarya University, Turkey

Member of WG3

burcukoc@sakarya.edu.tr

Judith Borràs

Universitat de Lleida, Spain

Member of WG3, ENIS social networks manager

judith.borras@udl.cat

Elina Apsite-Berina

University of Latvia, Latvia

Member of WG3 and WG5

elina.apsite-berina@lu.lv

Fatos Ozkan Erciyas

University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

Member of WG3 and WG4

f.ozkanerciyas@bham.ac.uk

Nurullah Eryılmaz

IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), the Netherlands

Member of WG3

ne331@bath.ac.uk

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