The role of on-campus support services in facilitating international student acculturation: The case study at International School, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

Anh Phuong Hoang[1], Tuan Cong Dao[1]*, Khanh Do Bao Tran[1], Loan Le Phuong Mai[1], Rez Alexis Dela Cruz[1], Huyen Thi Minh Nguyen[1]

1. International School, Vietnam National University Hanoi.
*Corresponding author email: tuandc@vnu.edu.vn

Abstract

The globalization of higher education has increased international student enrollment in Vietnam, yet cultural integration remains a significant challenge. This study investigates the role of on-campus support services at the International School of Vietnam National University (VNU-IS) in facilitating international student adaptation. Using a mixed-methods approach with surveys and interviews of 38 international students, the research identifies both strengths and limitations of existing services. Students expressed high satisfaction with faculty support and extracurricular opportunities, which foster cultural adaptation and belonging. However, gaps persist in academic adjustment and access to services such as dormitories, transportation, cultural exchange, Vietnamese language classes, and career counseling. Lastly, this study also recommends implementing conversation-focused Vietnamese language modules, piloting phased dormitory upgrades with common spaces, and establishing structured intercultural buddy programs, which can be immediately actioned to improve international student experiences.

Keywords: ***International Students, On-campus Support Services, International Student Acculturation, Higher Education.***

1. Introduction

In recent years, Vietnam's higher education system has increasingly embraced internationalization to align with global and regional trends. According to the Ministry of Education and Training (2023), the number of international students has grown significantly due to open educational policies, bilateral cooperation, and student exchange programs. By 2020, more than 21,000 international students were studying in Vietnam (Pham et al., 2022), reflecting the country's ambition to become an educational hub in Southeast Asia. Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU), particularly through its International School (VNU-IS), has emerged as one of the leading institutions attracting international students (Nguyen & Tran, 2022).

While this growth presents opportunities, challenges remain in supporting international students' academic success and cultural adaptation. As Tran and Marginson (2018) point out, institutional support often lags behind internationalization policies, leading to gaps in addressing diverse student needs. Existing studies confirm that on-campus services are critical in reducing stress, fostering integration, and enhancing academic outcomes (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Medel,). However, questions remain about the adequacy and effectiveness of these services in the Vietnamese context are rarely responded by previous scholars.

International students in Vietnam continue to face common barriers such as language difficulties, unfamiliar administrative procedures, and limited opportunities for cultural exchange (Pham et al. 2022; Do et al., 2022). At VNU-IS, despite a wide range of support services, prior research suggests that these do not always meet international students' expectations, particularly in terms of cultural sensitivity and social integration (Nguyen & Tran, 2022). While several studies have explored internationalization in Vietnam, few have systematically assessed how on-campus services influence international students' acculturation. This gap underscores the need for an empirical investigation into the role and effectiveness of student support services in facilitating cultural adaptation.

This study aims to evaluate the role of on-campus services in supporting the cultural adaptation of international students at VNU-IS. The specific objectives are to (1) examine international students' usage and perceptions of on-campus support services; (2) Identify key challenges in their adaptation process; (3) Assess the impact of campus services on academic and cultural integration. (4) Propose recommendations to enhance service quality and student experiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily on two complementary perspectives: acculturation theory and intergroup interaction theory. Accordingly, acculturation theory (Berry, 2005) views adaptation as a dual process of cultural and psychological change that occurs when individuals encounter a new cultural environment. Berry identifies four strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—depending on how individuals balance maintaining their heritage culture with adopting the host culture. Among these, integration is considered the most adaptive, allowing individuals to preserve cultural identity while actively engaging in the host society. Recent work by Ranabahu and De Silva (2024) further refines this framework, emphasizing that the frequency and quality of intercultural interactions shape acculturation outcomes: regular informal exchanges such as shared meals or group projects foster deeper integration, whereas sporadic or formal interactions often lead to weaker adaptation.

Intergroup interaction theory, rooted in Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, complements this perspective by focusing on the social dynamics of intercultural contact. Allport argued that positive contact between groups—when supported by conditions like equal status, cooperation, and institutional support—reduces prejudice and enhances mutual understanding. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis confirmed that structured intergroup engagement strengthens social cohesion. Applied to higher education, this means international students' adaptation depends greatly on opportunities to connect with local peers. As Ranabahu and De Silva (2024) note, while frequent intergroup contact nurtures belonging and mutual learning, excessive reliance on co-national networks may reduce motivation to engage with the host community, potentially limiting cultural growth.

Together, these two frameworks provide a holistic lens: acculturation theory explains how individuals adapt, while intergroup interaction theory explains why the nature of social contact is decisive in that process. In the context of VNU-IS, this combined approach underscores the importance of designing on-campus services that both facilitate intercultural contact and reduce over-dependence on co-national communities, thereby fostering meaningful integration.

2.2 Overview of Research on International Students

Internationally, research on international education highlights the strategic role of universities in facilitating adaptation. De Wit (2020) conceptualizes internationalization not merely as

student mobility but as a comprehensive institutional process that enhances academic quality and global reputation. Katsumoto (2023) demonstrates that international experiences on campus in U.S. universities significantly contribute to intercultural competence, benefiting both international and domestic students. Similarly, Perez-Encinas and Ammigan (2016) provide evidence from Spain and the U.S. that effective support services—ranging from counseling to extracurricular activities—are critical drivers of international student satisfaction and integration. Collectively, these studies emphasize that support services are not peripheral but central to the success of internationalization strategies.

In Vietnam, studies reveal both progress and persistent challenges. Pham et al. (2022) argue that the ability of Vietnamese universities to attract and retain international students depends more on service quality and management efficiency than on academic programs alone. Yao et al. (2022) identify English-medium instruction as a "double barrier," where linguistic challenges are compounded by unfamiliar teaching and assessment methods. Meanwhile, Do et al. (2022) show that the lack of structured support systems significantly undermines socio-cultural adaptation, with many students reporting feelings of isolation and limited engagement with the host community. These findings suggest that although Vietnam is advancing as an educational hub, service gaps remain a barrier to effective international student integration.

2.3. Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation can be defined as the process by which individuals acquire the skills and competencies necessary to function effectively in a new socio-cultural environment. It encompasses four interrelated dimensions: (i) communication and relationship building, (ii) academic or work performance, (iii) participation in community and social life, and (iv) language proficiency (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Successful adaptation, therefore, requires both academic and non-academic support, ensuring that students can navigate not only coursework but also everyday social interactions.

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in this process by designing resources and environments that encourage adaptation. On-campus services such as language classes, counseling, cultural exchange programs, peer mentoring, and extracurricular activities are critical in reducing acculturative stress, fostering a sense of belonging, and promoting holistic student development. Within Vietnam's context, the effectiveness of these services is particularly significant in determining whether the country can meet its ambition of becoming a competitive destination for international education.

3. Research methodology

To investigate the role of on-campus support services in facilitating international students' acculturation at the International School – Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-IS), this study adopts a mixed-methods approach. This design was specifically chosen because it allows for a comprehensive examination of complex phenomena like acculturation, which involves both measurable trends (e.g., satisfaction levels and service usage patterns) and nuanced, subjective experiences (e.g., personal challenges and coping strategies) that are difficult to capture through a single method. Quantitative methods alone might overlook the kocultural and contextual subtleties inherent in adaptation processes, while qualitative methods could lack generalizability due to smaller sample sizes. By integrating both, the study achieves triangulation, enhancing the validity, reliability, and depth of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Mixed-methods research is particularly well-suited for studying acculturation in Asian higher education contexts, where cultural nuances—such as hierarchical social structures and language barriers — require both measurable indicators (e.g., survey scores) and narrative depth (e.g., interview stories) to fully understand socio-cultural dynamics (Bochner & Furnham, 2001; Do, Ngo & Phan, 2022). For instance, previous studies on international student adaptation in Vietnam have successfully employed this approach to uncover socio-cultural challenges and support needs, demonstrating how it bridges statistical trends with lived experiences (Do, Ngo & Phan, 2022; Jung & Anh, 2021).

In this study, the quantitative and qualitative components complement each other to directly address the research objectives. The quantitative data from surveys provide broad, generalizable insights into trends, such as average satisfaction ratings and usage frequencies, which are essential for objective (1) examining international students' usage and perceptions of on-campus support services, and objective (3) assessing the impact of campus services on academic and cultural integration. For example, Likert-scale responses allow for statistical analysis (e.g., means, t-tests) to identify overall patterns and group differences (e.g., by nationality or gender). In contrast, the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews offer explanatory depth, revealing the "why" and "how" behind these trends—such as underlying

reasons for dissatisfaction or specific cultural barriers—which supports objective (2) identifying key challenges in the adaptation process. This qualitative layer enriches the quantitative findings by providing context and personal narratives, enabling a more holistic interpretation. Finally, the integration of both data types informs objective (4) proposing recommendations, as survey trends highlight priority areas for improvement, while interview insights suggest practical, context-specific solutions. Data collection occurred in two sequential phases: (1) Surveys to establish baseline trends in service effectiveness, and (2) Semi-structured interviews to probe deeper into quantitative results and explore anomalies. Ethical protocols included informed consent, anonymity, and institutional review board approval from VNU-IS. Data were collected from January to June 2025, with surveys administered via Google Forms for accessibility and interviews conducted in-person at VNU-IS or via Zoom, based on participant preference. This phased approach mitigates limitations of single-method studies, such as survey bias or lack of generalizability, by cross-verifying findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), aligning with methodologies used in Asian higher education research (Do, Ngo & Phan 2022; Yao, Collins & Bush, 2022).

3.1. Survey Questionnaire

To collect quantitative data on service availability, satisfaction, acculturative stress (e.g., language barriers, social isolation), and intergroup interactions. The questionnaire draws from validated instruments like the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Diener et al., 1985). A 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was distributed online and in-person, covering four service categories: academic support, student life, international student support, and cultural/recreational services. Items were adapted from studies on international student support in Asia for cultural relevance (Jung & Anh, 2021). The 20-item survey was pilot-tested with 10 non-participant students, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 for reliability. The response rate was 95% (38/40 distributed), ensuring robust data.

3.2. In-Depth Interviews

To explore nuanced experiences, unmet needs, coping strategies, and the impact of services on acculturation strategies (e.g., integration vs. separation) (Berry, 2005). This phase explains

quantitative anomalies, such as low satisfaction with specific services. Semi-structured interviews (30–45 minutes) used open-ended questions like “How have on-campus services influenced your cultural adaptation?” and “What challenges have you faced in accessing these services?”. This study did conduct the interview with 10 participants selected for diversity, interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. This aligns with phenomenological approaches in acculturation research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Yao, Collins, & Bush, 2022).

3.2.3. Sampling Method

A total of 38 international students enrolled at VNU-IS during the 2023–2024 academic year participated in the study. Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure access to students with diverse acculturation experiences. Purposive sampling was employed to deliberately select participants based on specific criteria relevant to the study objectives, including enrollment for at least six months to capture sufficient adaptation processes, and diversity in academic level (undergraduate and postgraduate), gender, and nationality (Asian and non-Asian countries). This approach ensured the inclusion of varied perspectives on support services and adaptation challenges. Snowball sampling was used to expand the sample by leveraging initial participants’ networks, which was particularly useful for reaching less accessible or underrepresented international students, such as those from smaller national groups.

Table 1: Demographic information

Category	**Group/ Value**	**Number (N=38)**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender	Male	17	44,7
	Female	21	55,3
Age Range	18-20	10	26,3
	20-28	5	13,2
	28-40	23	60,5
Nationality	South Korea	5	13,16

	Indonesia	1	2,63
	Russia	1	2,63
	Africa	31	81,58
Year of study	Year 1	2	5,26
	Year 2	3	7,9
	Year 3	15	39,5
	Year 4	10	26,3
	Graduated	8	21,04
Major	International business	15	39,5
	Business Data Analysis	10	26,3
	Management	2	5,26
	Accounting, Analysis and Auditing	3	7,9
	Logistic	8	21,04

To minimize potential sampling bias inherent in these non-random methods—such as over-representing students with similar characteristics (e.g., high satisfaction with services) or those within tight-knit social networks—several strategies were implemented. First, purposive sampling criteria were carefully defined to include a broad range of demographics, ensuring representation across gender (55.3% female, 44.7% male), age groups (e.g., 60.5% aged 28–40, 26.3% aged 18–20), nationalities (e.g., 81.58% African, 13.16% South Korean, 2.63% Indonesian, 2.63% Russian), and academic years (e.g., 39.5% Year 3, 26.3% Year 4). Second, snowball sampling was initiated from multiple entry points (e.g., different academic programs and student organizations) rather than a single network, reducing the risk of homogeneity in participant perspectives. Third, during recruitment, researchers explicitly encouraged participation from students with varied experiences, including those dissatisfied with services

or facing significant adaptation challenges, by framing the study as an opportunity to voice both positive and negative feedback. Finally, triangulation of data sources—combining survey responses with in-depth interviews—helped validate findings and mitigate bias by cross-checking self-reported experiences against broader trends. These measures align with recommendations for reducing bias in non-probability sampling while maintaining the richness of qualitative insights (, Bochner & Furnham, 2001; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Despite these efforts, non-random sampling may still limit generalizability, as discussed in Section 6 (Limitations and Future Research Directions). The diverse sample composition and rigorous methodological checks, however, enhance the study's credibility and representativeness within the context of VNU-IS.

3.3. Data Analysis Methods

The purpose of this study is to identify trends, relationships, and themes in how on-campus services influence acculturation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, percentages) in Excel/SPSS, while inferential tests (e.g., t-tests) examined variations by region and gender, with thresholds set at >3.0 for satisfactory and <2.5 for needing improvement. The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed systematically using the thematic content analysis approach outlined by Braun & Clarke (2021) to ensure rigor, consistency, and reliability. This process involved several distinct phases:

(i) Data Familiarization: All audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The research team repeatedly read through the transcripts to immerse themselves in the data and gain a deep understanding of the nuances of the students' lived experiences.

(ii) Initial Coding: The transcribed data were imported into NVivo software for systematic management and analysis. An inductive coding approach was adopted, where codes were generated directly from the data rather than being predetermined by existing theories. Two researchers independently coded the first two transcripts. They then met to compare their codes, discuss discrepancies, and develop a preliminary, agreed-upon codebook. Codes focused on capturing specific experiences, barriers, and facilitators mentioned by students (e.g., "dormitory difficulties," "lack of local peer interaction," "supportive faculty").

(iii) Searching for Themes: Once all transcripts were coded, the individual codes were collated and grouped into potential themes. For example, codes such as "inadequate dormitory amenities" and "transportation challenges" were clustered under the potential theme of "Infrastructural and Student Life Challenges."

(iv) Reviewing and Refining Themes: The potential themes were carefully reviewed at two levels: first, to ensure the collated codes within each theme were coherent, and second, to ensure the themes themselves were distinct and captured a clear aspect of the data. Some themes were merged, while others were split to create a more accurate thematic map.

(v) Defining and Naming Themes: Each final theme was given a concise and descriptive name, accompanied by a detailed definition outlining its scope and core concept.

To ensure consistency and reliability in the analysis, inter-coder reliability checks were employed. After finalizing the initial codebook, a third researcher coded a subset of the data (approximately 20%), and the results were compared to ensure a high level of agreement. Any disagreements in coding were resolved through team discussion to reach a consensus. Finally, the themes derived from the qualitative analysis were triangulated with the quantitative survey results. This cross-verification process allowed for a richer interpretation and enhanced the overall validity of the study's findings, mitigating the limitations of a small sample size.

4. Research findings

Our survey question assessed service availability and quality (Table 2). Overall mean score: 2.66 (neutral to agree), indicating moderate satisfaction but improvement needed, consistent with Vietnamese university support gaps (Jung & Anh, 2021; Do, Ngo & Phan, 2022). More specifically, the assessment highlights several aspects of university services and student experiences. Academic support received an average rating of 2.91, with libraries and Wi-Fi being highly rated due to their effectiveness, although career counseling lags behind, reflecting challenges associated with English-medium instruction (EMI) in Vietnamese universities (Yao, Collins & Bush, 2022).

Students appreciate these services for alleviating academic stress but desire more tailored EMI support. Student life, with an average rating of 2.52, revealed infrastructure gaps in dormitories and transportation, echoing adaptation challenges (Jung & Anh, 2021), and interviewees

pointed out cultural mismatches in living conditions. International support, scoring an average of 3.06, showed the support center effectively aids integration, though language classes underperform, aligning with EMI-related issues (Yao, Collins & Bush, 2022). Lastly, cultural and community engagement, rated lowest at 2.16, indicates infrequent interactions hinder acculturation, consistent with intergroup contact theory (Do, Ngo & Phan 2022; Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024). These results highlight moderate service effectiveness, with qualitative data emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive enhancements (VNU-IS 2023).

Table 2. On-Campus Services at the International School – VNU

No.	Services	Strongly disagree (1) -> Strongly agree (5)					Avg Score
I. Academic Support Services							**2.91**
1	Library (books, materials, self-study area)	5.26	7.89	10.53	34.21	42.11	3.00
2	Computer Lab & Wi-Fi	7.89	5.26	13.16	21.05	52.63	3.05
3	Academic Support Center	13.16	7.89	13.16	10.53	55.26	2.87
4	Career Counseling Services	15.79	7.89	13.16	13.16	50.00	2.74
II. Student Life Services							**2.52**
1	Dormitory	23.68	2.63	13.16	55.26	5.26	2.16
2	Canteen & Cafeteria	13.16	10.53	15.79	52.63	7.89	2.32
3	Medical & Healthcare Services	18.42	2.63	13.16	7.89	57.89	2.84
4	Gym & Sports Facilities	52.63	2.63	5.26	52.63	36.84	3.18
5	Shuttle & Internal Transportation Services	28.95	28.95	36.84	28.95	5.26	2.11
III. International Student Support Services							**3.06**
1	International Student Support Center	26.32	2.63	5.26	26.32	63.16	3.45
2	Vietnamese Language Classes	39.47	5.26	15.79	39.47	31.58	2.82
3	Buddy Program	28.95	10.53	13.16	28.95	42.11	2.92
IV. Cultural, Entertainment & Community Services							**2.16**

1	Student Clubs	18.42	15.79	60.53	18.42	5.26	2.13
2	Student Cultural Center	2.63	44.74	26.32	2.63	23.68	2.00
3	Innovation & Startup Space	15.79	7.89	7.89	63.16	5.26	2.34

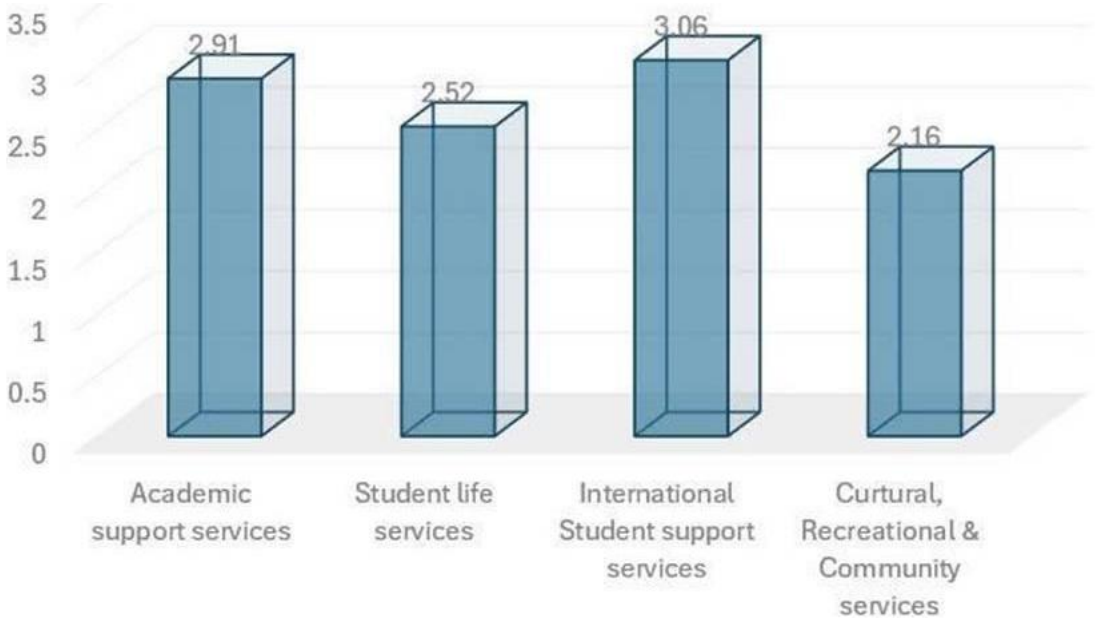


Figure 1. The findings of International students satisfaction on-campus services

Relating to satisfaction of international students with on-campus services (Table 3). The results show the overall mean: 3.45 (agree), indicating positive but varied experiences. High faculty support (3.71) buffers stress, aligning with social support theories (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Extracurricular opportunities (3.53) foster integration, but academic adaptation difficulties (3.37) persist, linked to EMI and cultural gaps (Yao, Collins & Bush, 2022). Interviews confirmed services promote belonging, but irregular events limit intergroup contact (Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024; Do, Ngo & Phan, 2022). T-tests showed no significant gender differences ($p>0.05$), but Asian students reported higher language challenges ($M=3.5$ vs. 2.8 for others; $p<0.05$).

Table 3. Satisfaction Levels of International Students with On-Campus Services at the International School – VNU

No.	**Questions**	**Strongly disagree (1) -> Strongly agree (5)**					**Avg Score**
1	I am satisfied with my learning experience at the school.	7.89	2.63	7.89	34.21	47.37	3.11

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree (1) -> Strongly agree (5)					Avg Score
2	I face many difficulties adapting to the academic environment.	2.63	2.63	2.63	39.47	52.63	3.37
3	I can easily access the school's support services.	2.63	0	2.63	28.95	65.79	3.55
4	I have sufficient opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and connect with friends.	0	0	0	47.37	52.63	3.53
5	I feel well-supported by the school's faculty and staff.	0	0	0	28.95	71.05	3.71

Additionally, the interview results also showed that international students at VNU-IS had high expectations for support services but were often disappointed by their actual experiences. While academic resources like the library were rated positively, other areas—including dormitory conditions, transportation, extracurricular activities, and cultural integration—were lacking. For instance, students criticized the dormitories as outdated, missing basic amenities such as air conditioning, kitchens, and social spaces. The absence of campus shuttle services caused inconvenience. Language barriers were a major issue, with Vietnamese classes seen as too theoretical and not practical enough for daily conversation, leaving many students reliant on self-study and still lacking confidence.

Furthermore, cultural exchange opportunities with local students were limited, leading to feelings of isolation. Many students were unaware of how to join such activities despite wanting to engage. Additionally, the university was seen as too academically focused, offering few recreational activities, sports facilities, mental health support, or community-building opportunities.

Students suggested practical improvements: more speaking-focused Vietnamese classes (e.g., weekly role-play sessions on survival topics like ordering food or navigating public transport); regular cultural exchange events (e.g., monthly intercultural nights with food sharing and games); better dormitory conditions (e.g., immediate addition of common lounges

with Wi-Fi); enhanced counseling services; and buddy programs to connect local and international students (e.g., paired meetings twice a month). They emphasized the need for a more balanced investment between academics and student life to foster a more engaging and supportive environment.

5. Discussion and contribution

5.1. Discussions

The survey and interview results from this study align with and further expand upon findings from prior research, highlighting both consistent patterns and areas of divergence in the experiences of international students at Vietnamese universities.

In terms of university services, strong faculty support (mean: 3.71) aligns with Smith and Khawaja's (2011) social support theories, reinforcing the critical role of faculty in helping international students adapt academically. Extracurricular activities also positively contributed to integration (mean: 3.53), though irregular and poorly advertised events remain a limiting factor. Language barriers were particularly significant for Asian students (mean: 3.5 vs. 2.8 for others, $p < 0.05$), echoing findings from Yao, Collins, and Bush (2022) while this study further highlighted the inadequacy of Vietnamese language classes, which prioritize theoretical content over practical communication skills. These findings indicate a need for practice-oriented language interventions, such as task-based "Survival Vietnamese" classes incorporating role-play labs and field tasks, consistent with evidence from a meta-analysis showing that TBLT produces measurable gains in speaking fluency, accuracy, and complexity (Fernández, 2021). The study also reiterates past findings on cultural adaptation challenges, such as the lack of cultural exchange activities, which mirrors and feelings of isolation due to weak intergroup engagement Do, Ngo, and Phan (2022). A key gap identified is the lack of cultural sensitivity in service delivery, which hinders access and exacerbates acculturative stress. For instance, African students (81.58% of the sample) reported difficulties with services that overlook collective cultural values, such as family-oriented support or communal living preferences, while South Korean students highlighted mismatches in hierarchical communication styles. This aligns with acculturation theory of Berry (2005) where integration

- the most adaptive strategy - requires balancing heritage culture maintenance with host culture adoption. Without culturally sensitive services, students may default to separation or marginalization, limiting psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy. Intergroup interaction theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) further explains how structured, positive contact reduces prejudice; thus, services failing to facilitate equitable intercultural interactions perpetuate isolation.

These findings highlight the importance of making support services more culturally responsive to align with diverse needs and enhance integration. This could include training administrative staff in intercultural communication to recognize and address biases, providing multilingual service counters or online portals for accessibility, and ensuring that counseling and orientation programs incorporate cultural perspectives relevant to African, Asian, and European student groups—such as adapting mental health support to account for stigma in collectivist cultures or offering dietary accommodations in dormitories for religious practices.Research shows that culturally adapted services increase student satisfaction, reduce acculturative stress, and promote belonging.For example, inclusive mental health initiatives that integrate non-Western approaches (e.g., community-based coping) can better support international students' well-being, as evidenced by studies emphasizing multicultural self-awareness among professional.Practical recommendations from this study, including conversational Vietnamese classes, structured cultural exchange events, and buddy programs, align with earlier calls for improved support systemsbut offer more context-specific solutions for Vietnamese universities, emphasizing how these foster intergroup contact and acculturation.

5.2. Theoretical implications

Theoretical implications of these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of international student integration by reinforcing Tinto’s Theory of Student Integration (Alexander, 2017), which posits that both academic and social integration are essential for student success. While academic support in this study met expectations, the lack of social integration through cultural exchange and peer interactions created a sense of isolation, undermining overall satisfaction. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory is also supported, as the inadequacies in Vietnamese

language programs and limited intercultural interactions highlight structural barriers to successful adaptation. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs further explains how unmet basic needs, such as adequate housing and hygiene, hinder students' ability to achieve higher-order needs like belonging and esteem. Overall, the study underscores the importance of a holistic, student-centered approach in international education that addresses academic, cultural, and well-being needs, contributing to future theoretical frameworks aimed at improving international student experiences

5.3. Practical implications

This study provides actionable feedback directly from students, such as increasing conversational Vietnamese language classes, organizing cultural exchange events, and implementing buddy programs Based on the survey findings, several practical implications can be drawn to enhance the quality of services and overall experience for international students at the International School-Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-IS).

The findings of this study point to several practical strategies that can be implemented at VNU-IS to enhance the international student experience. In terms of language support, Vietnamese classes should move away from grammar-heavy instruction to task-based, conversation-focused modules. Role-play activities, "Survival Vietnamese" workshops, and field-based tasks would allow students to practice real-life communication, an approach shown to improve oral fluency and confidence . Improvements are also needed in student housing. A phased plan beginning with the conversion of unused spaces into common rooms with kitchenettes and Wi-Fi, followed by more substantial upgrades such as floor-level kitchens and living-learning communities, can foster stronger peer connections and a sense of belonging (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003. Transportation challenges may be addressed through the introduction of a regular campus shuttle service and partnerships with municipal transit providers to offer a student pass program, both of which have been linked to better access and academic outcomes (Clay & Valentine, 2021). Cultural integration can be strengthened by expanding buddy programs so that all international students are automatically paired with local peers and by requiring structured interaction points in the early semester, complemented by monthly intercultural events .Furthermore, career counseling should be adapted to the needs of international students through bilingual CV workshops, employer networking events, and visa guidance sessions, interventions that are associated with higher satisfaction and career readiness (Ammigan, 2019). Finally, as euqally important, support services should be made more culturally responsive, for example by providing multilingual information materials,

offering intercultural training for staff, and tailoring counseling and orientation programs to reflect the cultural backgrounds of diverse student groups, which research shows reduces acculturative stress and improves integration (Smith & Khawaja, 2011. Together, these targeted measures shift the focus from broad recommendations to specific, actionable improvements that universities can begin implementing immediately.

6. Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides valuable insights, its findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations, which in turn offer important directions for future research.

First, a limitation exists within the sampling method. This study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. While effective for accessing a specific population like international students, this non-probability sampling approach carries a potential risk of sampling bias. Participants recruited through existing networks may share similar characteristics or experiences, potentially leading to an underrepresentation of more isolated or less socially active students who might face the most significant acculturation challenges. Future studies should, where feasible, employ stratified random sampling to ensure a more representative sample of international students across nationalities, academic majors, and years of study.

Second, the study is limited by potential biases in data collection. The reliance on self-reported data from surveys and interviews introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, where participants might provide responses they perceive as more favorable or expected rather than reflecting their true experiences. Furthermore, given the multinational composition of the sample (predominantly African students), cultural differences in expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction could also influence the results. Some cultural backgrounds may tend to more moderate responses, while others may be more direct, potentially skewing the mean satisfaction scores. To overcome the limitations of self-reported data, future research could adopt a more in-depth mixed-methods design. This could involve triangulating survey data with qualitative approaches such as ethnographic fieldwork or participant observation to gain authentic, real-time insights into students' daily lives and social interactions.

Third, the scope of the study and generalizability are constrained. The research was conducted as a single-institution case study at VNU-IS, an international school with a unique environment. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to the broader Vietnamese higher education landscape, particularly to public universities that may have vastly different support structures and institutional cultures. Comparative studies across different types of higher education institutions in Vietnam (e.g., public vs. private, technical vs. social sciences) are strongly recommended. Such research would help determine whether support needs and adaptation challenges vary significantly across different institutional contexts, thereby leading to more tailored and effective policy recommendations.

7. Conclusions

This study examined the international student support services at Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-IS) and their impact on students' cultural adaptation, academic performance, and social integration. The findings reveal that students greatly value faculty and staff support, as well as extracurricular opportunities. However, persistent challenges remain, particularly in areas such as dormitory conditions, internal transportation, cultural activities, Vietnamese language courses, and career counseling. Theoretically, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of international student acculturation within the Vietnamese context. It expands knowledge about the factors influencing international students' adaptation, while also highlighting the unique aspects of the Vietnamese environment that impact their integration.

Practically, the findings suggest clear priorities for improvement in supporting international students. For the university, it is essential to upgrade dormitories through phased renovations, starting with communal kitchens and social spaces, followed by living-learning floors, introduce a fixed-route campus shuttle or student transit pass partnership, redesign Vietnamese classes to task-based conversational modules, such as role-play labs and survival workshops, and strengthen cultural exchange with mandatory buddy programs and monthly intercultural nights. Additionally, offering bilingual CV workshops, employer networking events, and visa guidance sessions. Equally important, support services should be designed to be culturally sensitive, for example by providing multilingual information materials, embedding intercultural training for staff, and tailoring counseling and orientation programs to the diverse cultural backgrounds of international students, which can reduce acculturative stress and foster stronger integration. For students, actively engaging in extracurricular and cultural activities plays a key role in fostering integration and building social networks. For policymakers,

providing adequate resources and policy support is crucial to enabling educational institutions to develop more comprehensive and culturally sensitive support systems for international students

References

Alexandros Chrysikos, Ejaz Ahmed, Rupert Ward. (2017). Analysis of Tinto's student integration theory in first-year undergraduate computing students of a UK higher education institution. International Journal of Comparative Education and Development (2-3): 97–121. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCED-10-2016-0019

Allport, G. W. (1954). The nature of prejudice. Addison-Wesley. https://search.worldcat.org/title/255436.

Ammigan, R. (2019). Institutional satisfaction and recommendation: What really matters to international students? Journal of International Students, 9(1), 262–281. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.260.

Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 29(6), 697–712. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. SAGE Publications. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/thematic-analysis/book248481.

Boers, F., & Faez, F. (2023). Meta-analysis to estimate the relative effectiveness of TBLT programs: Are we there yet? Language Teaching Research. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688231167573.

Clay, J. R., & Valentine, J. L. (2021). The impact of transportation supports on community college students: Evidence from a quasi-experimental evaluation of the U-Pass program at Rio Hondo College (ERIC Document No. ED626841). MDRC. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED626841.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). Designing and conducting mixed methods research (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). Designing and conducting mixed methods research (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. Journal of Personality Assessment, 49(1), 71–75. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13.

Do, M. N. N., Ngo, T. C. T., & Phan, T. H. (2022). Socio-cultural adaptation of international students in Vietnam. Education Quarterly Reviews, 5(2), 124–135. https://doi.org/10.31014/aior.1993.05.02.500.

European University Foundation. (2018). Handbook of buddy programme practices. European University Foundation. https://uni-foundation.eu/buddy-programme-handbook.

Fernández, A. M. (2021). The effects of task-based language teaching on the speaking skill: A systematic research synthesis and meta-analysis. [Doctoral dissertation, Universidad de Granada].

Inkelas, K. K. & Weisman, J. (2003). Different by design: An examination of student outcomes among participants in three types of living-learning programs. Journal of College Student Development, 44(3), 335–368. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2003.0027.

Jung, H. R & Anh, T. N. (2021). Internationalization of higher education in Vietnam: current situations, policies, and challenges. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 23 (3): 227–241.

Katsumoto, S. (2023). Internationalizing international students' experiences: Analysis of intercultural dispositions for international students who engage in study abroad and internationalization at home. Journal of Studies in International Education, 28(2), 125–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153231178128.

Medel, S. (2021). How on-campus support services influence Muslim international students' acculturation process [Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. https://eric.ed.gov/?q=acculturation&ff1=pubDissertations%2fTheses+-+Doctoral+Dissertations&ff2=subAculturation&id=ED669993

Ministry of Education and Training. (2023). Summary report on higher education in Vietnam. MOET. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/347431588175259657/pdf/Improving-the-Performance-of-Higher-Education-in-Vietnam-Strategic-Priorities-and-Policy-Options.pdf.

Nguyen, H. T., & Tran, M. A. (2022). Current situation and solutions for the development of international education in Vietnam. Vietnam Journal of Educational Science, 18(2), 45–58.

Perez-Encinas, A., & Ammigan, R. (2016). Support services at Spanish and U.S. institutions: A driver for international student satisfaction. Journal of International Students, 6(4), 984–998. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i4.324.

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90(5), 751–783. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751

Pham, L. T. (2022). Challenges in international student adaptation in Vietnam. Vietnam Journal of Higher Education, 15(3), 67–82.

Ranabahu, N., & De Silva, M. (2024). Acculturation through a postcolonial lens: A case study of Sri Lankan postgraduate students in Japanese universities. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383630983_International_students'_acculturation_in_host_countries_A_typology_of_intergroup_and_intragroup_contact

Sandhu, D. S., & Asrabadi, B. R. (1994). Development of an acculturative stress scale for international students: Preliminary findings. Psychological Reports, 75(1), 435–448. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1994.75.1.435.

Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35(6), 699–713. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004.

VNU-IS. (2023). Summary report on international student support activities at International School - Vietnam National University, Hanoi. (Available from VNU-IS institutional repository).

Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1999). The measurement of sociocultural adaptation. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 23(4), 659–677. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(99)00014-0.

Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). The psychology of culture shock (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://books.google.com/books?id=2zM3AAAAIAAJ.

Yao, C. W., Collins, C. L., Bush, T., Briscoe, K., & Dang, N. (2022). English as a 'double barrier': English-medium instruction and student learning at Vietnamese transnational universities. Higher Education Research & Development, 41(5), 1372–1386. https://doi.org/10.1080/072943601896489.