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Assistance and Support Provided to International Students by University Teachers

Olga Marinenko

Article Info	Abstract
Article History	While studying abroad, international students face numerous difficulties, which forces host universities to provide such students with additional assistance and support. However, research about the various types of support employed by university teachers to international students is limited. The current research was undertaken to identify what type of additional support university teachers used and what categories of teachers were more likely to assist overseas students. The main method was a descriptive survey where a quarter of faculty (N=92) of the Belarusian-Russian University participated. The analysis revealed that the most popular activities to enhance learning outcomes of international students were providing them with easier and simpler assignments, using an interactive projector to deliver lectures, and encouraging international students to seek personal guidance. University teachers were also aware of psychological and socio-cultural problems of international students and did their best to create friendly classroom environments, demonstrate tolerance to their low language proficiency and speech errors, and facilitate intercultural interactions. More active positions in supporting international students were taken by middle career teachers. The study highlights the importance of providing additional support to international students and recommends that host universities organize special training within faculties with significant numbers of such students.
Keywords	International students University teachers Academic assistance Psychological assistance Socio-cultural assistance

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the number of international students has steadily been increasing worldwide. The United States, as a leader in international education, welcomed more than a million overseas students in the 2019/20 academic year (The Institute of International Education, 2020). International enrolments in Belarus are much lower, but they rise by about 10 % every year, and in 2019 foreigners made up 7% of the student population (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2020). Institutions seeking to expand international student enrollments need to be responsible for providing effective support and assistance to these students (Anderson & Peters, 2021), which substantiates the theoretical and practical significance of the current study.

Studying abroad gives graduates a number of advantages such as an international diploma and future career

opportunities, intercultural development and second-language acquisition, life experience and personal growth. However, these advantages are largely offset by the difficulties that include but are not limited to psychological and somatic disorders, academic and language problems, which are often exacerbated by the social and cultural differences between a student's native country and the host country culture (Marinenko & Snopkova, 2019; Yu & Wright, 2016). A host of challenges during study abroad have led researchers to the conclusion that it is necessary to provide additional assistance and support for international students (Arkoudis, 2008; Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Educational institutions develop and implement various supporting procedures, such as peer and buddy programs (Smith, 2016), mentorship (Yeh & Inose, 2003), special adjustment courses (Yan & Sendall, 2016), and psychological assistance and counseling (Thomson & Esses, 2016). These activities are usually provided by university departments responsible for international students, such as an Office of International Students, Writing Center, and Counseling Service.

Various studies have been conducted involving university teachers to explore their views on challenges and problems of international education (Anderson & Peters, 2012; Howson, 2002). Research has documented some of the difficulties faced by faculties in addressing the needs of international students, teaching them effectively, and enhancing interaction between international and domestic students (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Trice, 2003). However, research exploring the types of support employed by host universities to more effectively assist international students during their education remains limited. The research has neglected issues of how teachers organize their work in international groups, whether they have adapted their teaching strategies, and which types of support have been used to facilitate the necessary adjustments. As Australian researchers Arkoudis and Tran (2010) stated, "The strategies employed by lecturers to support international students have not been widely discussed in the scientific literature" (p. 170). This gap provides the rationale for our study that aims to explore what support activities faculties in Belarus use and what categories of teachers are most responsive to the challenges facing international students.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on the theory of sojourner adjustment, which is the process of entering a new environment, overcoming life obstacles, and gaining useful experience (Church, 1982; Siu, 1952). In 1952, Siu conceptualized the sojourners as immigrants who are "relatively short-term visitors to new cultures where permanent settlement is not the purpose of the sojourn" (Church, 1982, p. 540). International students whose short stay abroad is due to their pursuit of educational opportunities can be defined specifically as academic sojourners, who face both challenges typical for all migrants, and problems particularly relating to their learning and studying. At the same time, the assistance provided by universities and particularly by teachers may help them to manage adjustment difficulties and achieve academic success and satisfaction (Patel, 2013; Smith, 2016).

In the framework of the theory of sojourner adjustment, it is important to consider whether university teachers in Belarus are aware of the adjustment challenges facing international students and the extent to which they provide the necessary additional support that sojourners require. The objectives of this research are as

follows:

- 1) To analyze the scientific literature and identify the main activities to support international students while studying abroad;
- 2) To develop and administer a questionnaire in order to determine support techniques commonly used by university teachers to support international learners;
- 3) To identify the categories of teachers that are more likely to provide assistance and support to international students.

Literature Review

Research has documented the need of international students for additional assistance and support from lecturers (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Kingston, & Forland, 2008). Most often sojourners reported their need for support precisely in the educational process, since they struggled to master academic writing, participate in classroom activities, understand assessment methods, and pass exams (Alsaifi & Shin, 2017; Sonari, 1994). Some universities responded to this claim and encouraged their teachers to purposefully provide academic assistance to sojourners. Research at Drexel University suggests that academics should seek to enhance foreign students learning outcomes through facilitating participation in classes and creating intentional mixed groups with domestic students; providing written support for lectures and instructions for assignments; using computer technologies as effectively as possible; and giving models of good work (Hoekje & Finger, 2013). Research at the University of Melbourne recommends academics “outline the main points of the lecture and make links to other topics covered in the subject, define any new or unfamiliar words or concepts, summarize the important information at certain stages in the lecture”, amongst other things (Arkoudis, 2008, p. 9-10). Other possible strategies for academic assistance to foreign students may include incorporating more comprehensible input, creating opportunities for small group participation, explaining classroom policies and assessment expectations, encouraging students to make use of office hours, and internationalizing the curriculum (Carl & Cox, 2013; Crose, 2011).

Apart from problems directly related to learning process, international students have to cope with numerous emotional, psychological, and psychosomatic challenges (Marinenko & Snopkova, 2019; Thomson & Esses, 2016). Accordingly, universities, their staff and faculty should pay attention to student emotional states and provide them with psychological support. Research emphasizes that teachers should create a safe classroom environment where international students feel protected and relevant; encourage local students to be tolerant and friendly towards students from abroad; give international students additional time to formulate ideas and demonstrate a tolerant attitude to their low language proficiency. In addition, it is considered important that staff memorize student names and basic information (Carl & Cox, 2013; Carroll & Ryan, 2005).

While studying abroad, sojourners face social and cultural adjustments that influence their learning outcomes. International learners encounter problems with speaking a new language, interacting with local people and discovering local customs, rules and traditions (Thomson & Esses, 2016; Yu & Wright, 2016). Respectively, the studies highlight the importance to assist sojourners in their social and cultural adjustments to new environments

(Carroll & Ryan, 2005). The main activities to provide socio-cultural assistance embrace encouraging interaction between international and domestic students; explaining the host country and its traditions; motivating sojourners to talk about their homelands and using international examples in lectures (Arkoudis, 2008). Thus, three types of assistance are considered to be important for international students in terms of providing academic, psychological and socio-cultural support and these are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Activities for Providing International Student Assistance

Academic assistance	1. Using a projector to deliver lectures; 2. Providing lecture handouts; 3. Incorporating more comprehensible input (using simple language, explaining terms, avoiding colloquial expressions, etc.); 4. Providing international students with easier and simpler assignments; 5. Clarifying assignment tasks and providing models of good work; 6. Mixing international and local students for group work; 7. Publishing manuals adapted for international students (providing comments in their native language, translation of terms, etc.); 8. Encouraging international students to seek personal assistance and guidance.
Psychological assistance	1. Creating a safe classroom environment, encouraging tolerant and friendly relationships in the classrooms; 2. Memorizing international student names and basic information; 3. Waiting longer for international students replies, assisting while expressing ideas; 4. Demonstrating a tolerant attitude to low language proficiency and speech errors.
Socio-cultural assistance	1. Encouraging interaction between international and local students in the classrooms; 2. Developing projects by mixed teams; 3. Presenting Belarus and its features in the classroom; 4. Encouraging international students to talk about their homelands.

Methodology

Questionnaire Development

The exploratory, descriptive study was designed to obtain an overview of supporting activities employed by university teachers. Based on Harlacher's guidelines (2016), a questionnaire was developed including three research questions:

- 1) How do you assist international students in their learning and studying?
- 2) Do you provide international students with psychological assistance and which techniques do you use for this?
- 3) Do you provide international students with socio-cultural assistance and which techniques do you use for this?

For each question, we presented a number of answers adopted from the related research, whereas respondents

were asked to choose which activities they usually used to support international students. Additionally, the participants could offer their answers by explaining the type of support they provided for international students or choose the option: I do not provide the assistance to international students since I believe that the requirements for international and domestic students should be the same. To increase the reliability of the data received, respondents were limited in the number of possible answers: they could give up to 4 options for academic assistance and up to 3 options for psychological and socio-cultural assistance. Before the survey, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by two researchers dealing with international education, whose feedback helped to improve it. Afterwards, the developed questionnaire was pilot-tested on a small sample of faculty staff at the Belarusian State Agricultural Academy (N=20) to have its validity and reliability confirmed.

Data collection

One of the largest university's in the eastern part of Belarus, the Belarusian-Russian University was the site for the study. The research protocol was discussed with the University management and the study received ethical approval from the head of University Research Department. The main method of data collection was a survey and teachers from all departments involved in international education were invited to take part in the study. The participation in the survey was voluntary and confidential, and as a result, 92 lecturers completed questionnaires. The reliability of the data obtained was confirmed by large sample size, since every fourth teacher at the University (24.9%) participated in the survey (statistics of participants are presented in Table 2)

Table 2. Statistics of Survey Participants

Gender	
Male	43.5%
Female	56.5%
Academic degree	
With academic degree	42.4%
Without academic degree	57.6%
Teaching experience	
Up to 10 years	7.6%
10-30 years	67.4%
More than 30 years	25%

Results

Academic Assistance Provided for International Students

According to the obtained results, only 14.1% of lecturers did not provide additional assistance to international students in their learning and studying, since they believed that the requirements for international and domestic students should be the same. Other teachers were aware of sojourner challenges and employed various assistance techniques (see Table 3).

Table 3. Academic Assistance Provided for International Students

Activities	Respondents	Respondents
	rated, N	rated, %
Providing international students with easier and simpler assignments	54	58.7
Using a projector to deliver lectures	39	42.2
Encouraging international students to seek personal assistance and guidance	38	41.8
Providing lecture handouts	36	39.1
Incorporating more comprehensible input	36	39.1
Clarifying assignment tasks and providing models of good work	31	33.5
Mixing international and local students for group work	9	9.8
Publishing manuals adapted for international students	7	7.6
Another activity	1	1.1

The most popular technique used by academic staff was providing international students with easier and simpler assignments with 58.7% of the participants employing this technique. These results are likely to have been due to the fact that the majority of sojourners experienced significant educational challenges and faculty staff had to take this fact into account. Many teachers agreed that it was important to visualize information, and 42.2% of respondents identified using a projector to deliver lectures as an important and useful technique. The third most popular answer was encouraging students to seek personal assistance: four out of ten teachers (41.8%) did this.

The teachers realized that not all international students were fluent in Russian and supported them in mastering the theoretical course, 39.1% of respondents provided printed lecture notes for overseas students and incorporated more comprehensible input by using simple language, explaining terms, avoiding slang and colloquial expressions. Every third teacher (33.5%) supported students by clarifying assignments and providing models of good work. Unfortunately, teachers were much less likely to use group work in the classrooms and mix international and domestic students for different assignments (9.8% of teachers chose this answer). The most unpopular technique to support international students became publishing adapted manuals; only 7 out of 100 academics identified this as a technique that they applied.

Psychological Assistance Provided for International Students

According to our findings, most teachers were aware that adjustment problems influenced emotional and psychological states of international students, since only 8.7% of faculty did not use any activity to psychologically support them (see Table 4). Teachers involved in international education confirmed that sojourners suffered from insufficient communicative competence. According to the results, 56.3% of lecturers were tolerant to low language proficiency and speech errors of international students, whereas every second lecturer (52.9%) waited longer for sojourner replies and assisted them while expressing ideas. The third most popular technique was creating a safe classroom environment and encouraging tolerant and friendly

relationships between international and local students (44.8% of respondents rated). Finally, the least applied technique for providing psychological assistance by teachers was memorizing student names and basic information that nevertheless, was chosen by almost every third respondent (27.6%).

Table 4. Psychological Assistance Provided for International Students

Activities	Respondents rated, N	Respondents rated, %
Demonstrating a tolerant attitude to low language proficiency and speech errors	52	56.5
Waiting longer for international students replies, assisting while expressing ideas;	49	53.3
Creating a safe classroom environment, encouraging tolerant and friendly relationships in the classroom;	41	44.6
Memorizing international student names and basic information;	25	27.2
Not providing additional assistance and support to international students	8	8.7
Another activity	1	1.1

Socio-Cultural Assistance Provided for International Students

The data indicated that the majority of respondents supported international students in their social and cultural adjustment: only 8.7% of respondents considered this type of assistance unimportant. The most popular strategy of sociocultural assistance was encouraging international students to talk about their homelands: more than seven out of ten teachers (71.7%) used this activity in the classrooms. Internationalization in education leads to increasing popularity of intercultural interactions and communications which was reflected in our study, where 63% of the surveyed teachers enhanced interactions between international and domestic students. More than half of the respondents (52.1%) found the opportunities to present the host country to international students in the classroom. Finally, only one out of ten (10.9%) teachers mixed local and international students to develop projects, it was the least popular option for socio-cultural assistance.

Categories of Teachers Assisting International Students

According to the obtained results, lecturers with teaching experience of 10-30 years were more likely to assist international students: only one out of ten respondents (9.5%) did not provide supporting activities for such students. 73.3% of respondents with teaching experience of more than 30 years also believed that studying in a foreign environment resulted in various challenges, which led them to practicing assistance activities. The least supportive were early career professionals, 42.8% of them did not intend to provide additional assistance to international students (the data are presented in Figure 1).

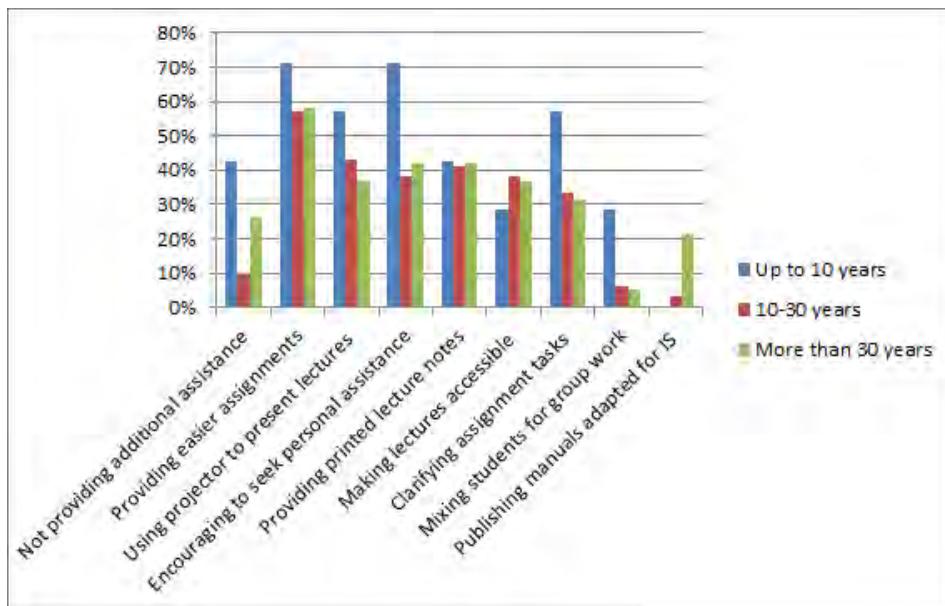


Figure 1. Assistance of Faculty with Diverse Teaching Experience

At the same time, teachers with least experience who did provide additional support tended to use a broader range of techniques, particularly techniques that required their personal efforts and creativity. Every third young teacher (28.5%) mixed international and domestic students for group work (in comparison, only 6.3% of middle career teachers and 5.3% of most experienced teachers did this). Faculty staff with little teaching experience were also more active in encouraging international students to seek personal assistance, providing easier and simpler assignments for foreigners, using projectors to deliver lectures, and clarifying assignment tasks. No significant statistical differences were found in the responses of middle career teachers and respondents with teaching experience of more than 30 years. The exception was the activity of publishing adapted manuals for international students: every fifth among most experienced teachers practiced it compared to 3.2% middle career professionals.

Discussion

Theoretical research and practical data have assumed a vital role of university teachers in creating working atmosphere in the classrooms that positively supports self-efficacy, motivation and academic success of students (Aktan, 2019). In our research, Belarusian educators did not support the previous opinions that faculty and staff were not adequately prepared to help overseas learners (Crose, 2011; Trice, 2003). The findings revealed that 85.9% of university teachers in Belarus did their best to provide additional support to assist international students in their learning abroad. The outcomes of our survey coincide with the previous findings: in particular, Patel's study (2013) investigating teacher perspectives at the University of Western Australia, which concluded that 86% of faculty staff agreed to change their teaching style to accommodate the needs of international students.

In the framework of the theory of sojourner adjustment, the obtained results demonstrated that teachers were aware that international students experienced a lot of hurdles and worked hard to help sojourners overcome their

difficulties. The current findings were consistent with previous research. According to Crose (2011), the faculty has “a crucial role in establishing a classroom environment that will lead to intercultural learning taking place, while also providing ample opportunities for international students to experience academic success” (p. 394). Moreover, this researcher admits that faculty members need to be cognizant of the cultural diversity that exists in their classrooms, help overseas students while overcoming language barriers, differentiate assessment techniques, and booster classroom interactions to meet the needs of international students in the classroom (Crose, 2011).

Our study indicated that the most popular strategies to assist international students in their learning and studying were providing simpler and easier assignments, using projectors and encouraging students to seek personal assistance and guidance. Similarly, McCallum (2004), on the basis of research in New Zealand, concluded that most lecturers assumed their role in meeting the special needs of international students, with 56% of respondents setting simplified tasks for international students, 94% using overhead projectors to deliver lectures, and 89% encouraging students to seek individual consultations. More than one third of Belarusian teachers assisted international students in their learning by providing printed lecture notes, making lectures accessible, clarifying assignment tasks, and giving them models of good work. The popularity of similar assistance strategies is also highlighted in other studies (Carl & Cox, 2013; Haan, Gallagher, & Varandani, 2017). For instance, in the study of Anderson and Peters (2021) with 1,502 members of faculty staff involved, 79% of participants reported that they adapted their communication style to be more comprehensible for foreigners, 63% provided handouts and PowerPoint slides, and 55% encouraged overseas students to use campus resources.

Challenges relating to homesickness, emotional problems and social isolation that are often experienced by sojourners have highlighted the importance of ensuring that the necessary psychological support is in place. According to our data, 91.3% of Belarusian teachers approved of the idea to psychologically assist academic sojourners. These findings were supported by the previous research. Faculty staff interviewed at Edith Cowan University (Australia) appreciated and understood the importance of their roles in creating inviting classroom environments to encourage international students to be engaged in their own learning environments (Haan et al., 2017). Similarly, McCallum (2004) concluded that 80% of New Zealand teachers recommended “establishing a rapport with international students based on mutual respect and understanding” (p. 28).

Belarusian teachers employed a range of support techniques demonstrating their tolerant attitude to low language proficiency of sojourners and supporting them while expressing ideas. In keeping with our findings, teachers in other studies also devised coping strategies to address the problem of weak second language skills (e.g., Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). Every second lecturer in our study did their best to establish a positive classroom environment and maintain friendly relationships between international and domestic students, which also echoes the results of research by Arkoudis (2008) and Carroll and Ryan (2005). The findings demonstrate that memorizing foreign names and basic information about international students were the most challenging for academic staff with only a third of teachers using this as a technique.

Teachers from Belarus were also aware of the importance of cultural and social support for sojourners. With

regard to strategies of socio-cultural assistance, participants prioritized encouraging foreigners to present their homelands and facilitating cross-cultural interactions in the classrooms. Arkoudis (2008) and Smith (2016) both emphasized the importance of making bonds between international and domestic students and a high proportion of Belarusian teachers also intentionally mixed groups for activities. Furthermore, the proportion of teachers who applied this technique was similar: 63% of teachers in our research versus 66.7% in the study of McCallum (2004) regularly grouped international and domestic students.

According to the findings, not all teachers were equally involved in supporting international students where faculty staff with little teaching experience being the most likely to be indifferent to the challenges facing international students. These results contradict the findings of Rice (2010) that “teachers show the greatest productivity gains during their first few years on their job, after which their performance tends to level off” (p. 1). The most friendly and responsive attitude towards sojourners was demonstrated by middle career respondents, since 90.5% of them provided additional assistance. These results were generally consistent with previous studies. So, research by Podolsky, Kini and Darling-Hammond (2019) that reviewed 30 previous studies came to the conclusion that teachers, on average, improved in their effectiveness as they gained experience in the teaching profession.

The obtained data revealed that a quarter of the most experienced faculty staff were passive in providing additional assistance, as they voted for the idea that requirements for international and domestic students should not differ. These results correspond with the findings of Harris and Sass (2007) and Rice (2010) who concluded that “veteran teachers” were less effective than their less experienced counterparts, since “perhaps experienced teachers are not staying upon the latest curricular and pedagogical advances; or, the decline in performance could be a function of teacher burnout” (Rice, 2010, p. 5). The research revealed some contradictory results, since although 42.8% of early career teachers refused to assist international students, the rest of young teachers were more likely than other faculties to support them with a broader range of creative techniques.

Limitation

The study has three limitations. First, it was limited by the views of teachers representing one educational institution. Canvassing opinions of faculty staff from different universities would enable the collection of more comprehensive data. Second, only 16 techniques to assist international students were included in the questionnaire. Representing a wider range of such activities would provide a more complete overview about the challenges of providing additional support. Third, due to time and word limit, this study did not analyze other variables, such as academic degree and gender of teachers, so, future research may explore these issues in more detail.

Conclusions and Implications

University teachers perceived that international students experienced a host of issues and concerns caused by the new learning system, insufficient communicative competence, adjustment to foreign socio-cultural environment,

and their unstable mental and emotional states and these perceptions resulted in more caring attitudes of teachers to these students. Middle career professionals appeared to be the most active in providing additional assistance to overseas students. The most popular activities to support sojourners in their learning and studying were developing easier and simpler assignments, using projectors to deliver lectures, and encouraging students to seek personal assistance. Most of the teachers supported the idea of providing support to overseas students not only in their learning, but also in their socio-cultural and psychological adjustment. To implement these types of assistance, faculty staff was tolerant to sojourner low language proficiency, supported them in expressing ideas, created a friendly classroom environment, and encouraged international students to present their homelands in the classrooms.

The study has a number of implications. For international students, it emphasizes the importance to actively participate in their adjustment, discuss arising difficulties with teachers, and seek assistance opportunities. For teachers, the study identifies the importance and value of providing additional assistance to international students and highlights the significance of developing and employing various techniques to support them. For education providers, the findings may indicate the need to organize special training for teachers involved in international education where various support techniques and procedures could be discussed and experiences and knowledge could be shared. A potential area for further research may be to explore how sojourners will evaluate assistance activities and how effective these activities will be.

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