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## ECOLOGICAL ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT FOR NEWCOMERS

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*Creating an ecological academic environment, especially for newcomers, is an important task for educational institutions, which in this context means creating a fundamental support structure that ensures smooth adaptation and integration into the educational environment. Newcomers face various difficulties of both academic and linguistic and socio-cultural nature. An international group of students is a more "sensitive group", since psycho-emotional factors, changes in the usual environment, cultural and linguistic differences can influence student satisfaction, cause internal imbalance and self-acceptance, especially at the initial stage.*

*Human ecology and the environment are directly related to each other, and this process is considered as a relationship between influence and change (Bronfenbrenner [2], Taylor [21]).*

*International students tend to experience more difficulties and stress during the initial admission and selection process itself, since educational institutions must evaluate candidates according to all academic requirements and standards (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen & Van Horn [6]; Leong and Sedlacek [10]; Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven [24]).*

**The aim of the article** is to reveal the need to create an ecological academic environment for the integration of a newcomer at the initial stage of the educational process.

**The research methodology** is based on theoretical and scientific research aimed at analyzing the key factors influencing the academic integration of international students.

**Conclusions.** The interaction between human ecology and socio-academic integration highlights the need to create comfortable environments that meet the changing and necessary needs of students. Institutions need to consider possible ecological adaptation approaches for this group of students, implementing adaptation support programs, providing language assistance, conducting trainings, seminars on intercultural communication and competence to help reduce stress and self-acceptance of students, especially at the initial stage. Ecologically designed academic environment can mitigate psycho-emotional instability, feelings of isolation and withdrawal, promote engagement and increase overall student satisfaction.

**Key words:** newcomers, integration, socio-cultural adaptation, language deficiency, academic compliance, ecological academic environment.

## ЕКОЛОГІЧНЕ АКАДЕМІЧНЕ СЕРЕДОВИЩЕ ДЛЯ НОВАЧКІВ

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*Створення екологічного академічного середовища, особливо для новачків, є важливим завданням для навчальних закладів, що в цьому контексті означає створення фундаментальної опорної структури, яка забезпечує плавну адаптацію та інтеграцію в освітнє середовище. Новачки стикаються з різними труднощами академічного, лінгвістичного та соціокультурного характеру. Інтернаціональна група студентів є більш «чутливою групою», оскільки психоемоційні чинники, зміни у звичному середовищі, культурні та мовні відмінності можуть впливати на задоволеність студентів, викликати внутрішній дисбаланс і самосприйняття, особливо на початковому етапі.*

*Екологія людини та навколишнє середовище безпосередньо пов'язані одне з одним, і цей процес розглядається як зв'язок між впливом і зміною (Bronfenbrenner [2], Taylor [21]).*

*Іноземні студенти, як правило, відчувають більше труднощів і стресу під час початкового вступу та самого процесу відбору, оскільки навчальні заклади повинні оцінювати кандидатів відповідно до всіх академічних вимог і стандартів (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen & Van Horn [6]; Leong and Sedlacek [10]; Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven [24]).*

**Метою статті** є розкриття необхідності створення екологічного навчального середовища для інтеграції новачка на початковому етапі освітнього процесу.

**Методологія дослідження** базується на теоретичних і наукових дослідженнях, спрямованих на аналіз ключових факторів, що впливають на академічну інтеграцію іноземних студентів.

**Висновки.** Взаємодія між екологією людини та соціально-академічною інтеграцією підкреслює необхідність створення комфортного середовища, яке відповідає мінливим і необхідним потребам студентів. Зкладам необхідно розглянути можливі підходи до екологічної адаптації для цієї групи студентів, запроваджуючи програми підтримки адаптації, надаючи мовну допомогу, проводячи тренінги, семінари з міжкультурної комунікації та компетенції, щоб допомогти зменшити стрес і самосприйняття студентів, особливо на початковому етапі. Екологічно розроблене академічне середовище може пом'якшити психоемоційну нестабільність, відчуття ізоляції та замкнутості, сприяти залученню та підвищити загальну задоволеність студентів.

**Ключові слова:** новачки, інтеграція, соціокультурна адаптація, мовний дефіцит, академічна відповідність, екологічне академічне середовище.

### **Relevance and analysis of recent research and publications.**

Upon arrival in a new country, international students have specific individual needs, and their adjustment problems vary depending on their country of origin, race and ethnicity, level of language proficiency, and whether they belong to a collectivist or individualistic culture (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell & Utsey [3]; Surdam & Collins [18]; Tafarodi & Smith [20]). International students with different cultural backgrounds may experience the learning environment differently (Koul & Fisher [8]). Newcomers, especially at the initial stage of their education, may experience cultural and linguistic dissonance, ethnic and racial differences, and educational experiences that may be assessed accordingly (Taylor and Sidhu [22]). It is worth noting that a newcomer is a person who has recently arrived in the country and may have various problems such as cognitive, cultural, linguistic, and learning (Meyer [11]). Educational integration is understood as "a dynamic approach and positive attitude towards the diversity of learners and viewing individual differences not as problems but as opportunities to enrich learning" (UNESCO [23]).

**The aim of the article** is to reveal the need to create an ecological academic environment for the integration of a newcomer at the initial stage of the educational process.

**The research methodology** is based on theoretical and scientific research aimed at analyzing the key factors influencing the academic integration of international students.

**Presentation of the main material.** Many young people consider studying abroad as there are a number of perspectives, self-actualization in society, gain international experience, improve language and communication skills, enter a new academic environment acquire new knowledge and skills. Moreover, international students tend to experience more difficulties and stress during the initial admission and selection process itself, as educational institutions need to evaluate the candidate according to all academic requirements and standards (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen & Van Horn [6]; Leong and Sedlacek [10]; Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee [24]).

On the one side, the language barrier, can negatively affect students' self-realization and their ability to comfortably adapt to the educational environment. Despite the fact that for many international students English is a second language, in many foreign institutions the official language may be not only a privilege but also a necessity for the education of international students (Barratt & Huba [1]; Stoyloff [19]; Yeh & Inose [26]). Language barrier can be interpreted as a feeling of constraint in communication, a manifestation of isolation and lack of confidence in one's knowledge and skills. This reduced ability of human ability is characterized as "linguistic isolation", in which individuals cannot speak and communicate fluently in the dominant foreign language, which provides limited opportunities to develop social capital based on the linguistic abilities of the majority (Nawyn S. et al. [16]). Low language proficiency can contribute to discomfort during conversation, which in turn can cause inconvenience in communicating to meet initial needs.

On the other side, international students with different cultural backgrounds may perceive the learning environment differently (Koul and Fisher [8]). Having certain cultural values, familiar social and linguistic environment, a person is in a comfort zone, when these conditions change, people usually feel emotionally less secure in a new or unfamiliar society. Newcomers, as a vulnerable group, being in a new society, unfamiliar culture and linguistic environment may experience stress and social-emotional well-being is an integral part of their needs, especially at the beginning of the academic stage. Promoting social-emotional well-being helps to reduce the risk associated with negative social circumstances in young people (Khanlou and Wray [9]). Socio-cultural well-being reflects a person's integration, the degree of trust and the ability to recognize the significance of events, which contributes to the direction in relation to belonging to society.

International students may experience limitations and uncertainty when various aspects in a given context, such as social, academic integration, language and cultural values are not satisfied. In order to demonstrate these factors influencing students in a new socio-academic environment, a visual model has been

developed that points out the essential connecting links influencing the integration of newcomers. This model has been developed by the author of the article and is shown in Figure 1.

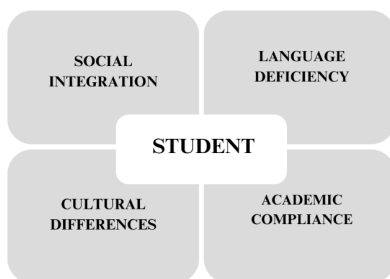


Figure 1. *Constraining factors influencing the integration of newcomers*

**Cultural differences.** Cultural differences refer to the diversity of different behaviors, beliefs, values, and practices of ethical or social origin. They can affect communication style, interpretation of social cues, and language. Cultural differences can affect interpersonal interaction and communication effectiveness in different settings. When language deficit is accompanied by a problem of cultural adaptation, the complexity of social communication increases. A new environment is an unfamiliar condition for a person, which can cause disorientation and a reduced level of self-realization. Each established society has a culture of language and communication style, a unique nature of information delivery and communication between subjects. Having an idea of the culture, language, traditions, and other features of the host country itself cannot provide guarantees of smooth acculturation in new conditions. Different societies have unique ideas about time frames, interpersonal distances, forms of expression of emotions, and the degree of acceptable straightforwardness in communication, but a newcomer, as a unit of a new society, cannot become a full-fledged link in the holistic ecosystem without going through all the stages of acceptance. In particular, at the initial stage, one of the essential aspects is cultural shock, which is a psychological state that occurs when faced with an unfamiliar environment.

Moreover, depending on emotional variability, a person may experience stress, anxiety, rejection, and acceptance of oneself in a new society, as well as a feeling of loss of significance of one's own identity. However, over time, the properties of human endurance and flexibility through the process of acculturation, provide an opportunity to form intercultural competence, which allows not only to adapt to a new culture, but also to successfully interact with representatives of various ethnic and social groups (Hayes and Lin [15]).

Certainly, foreign students may experience general dissatisfaction, especially at the initial stage of adaptation to a new academic and social environment, which emphasizes the importance in this context of creating an ecological approach, which in turn will provide an opportunity to acquire and develop skills of cultural sensitivity, flexibility of thinking and empathy, which contributes to more harmonious intercultural interaction.

**Social integration.** The process of social integration in a new society is a complex and multifaceted process, which implies various socio-cultural aspects. The new environment dictates certain rules for a newcomer during the period of adaptation to unfamiliar norms, values, and communication styles, which in turn depends on personal, language, communication skills and can create significant barriers in socialization and intercultural interaction. Comfortable integration is especially necessary for students who are at the initial stage of accepting themselves in a new academic and social society. Interaction problems can be a consequence of difficult relationships of a verbal and non-verbal nature in connection with other contacts. Stiffness in communication can significantly reduce involvement in maintaining a conversation, awkwardness, or discomfort in perceiving information. Moreover, this can lead to a feeling of isolation, internal conflict in various social contexts. To overcome this kind of barrier, international students need to accept the dictating conditions and actively participate in student life to immerse themselves in the culture of the host country (Wu H. et al. [25]).

Certainly, flexibility and readiness to learn new models of behavior, to perceive cultural differences not as an obstacle, but as

an opportunity to expand significant opportunities, can contribute to the acceleration of the process of social adaptation. However, in the absence of sufficient support from the close and academic environment, the integration process can take a difficult form, emphasizing the instability of the psycho-emotional state, the manifestation of anxiety and a sense of loneliness. A particularly vulnerable group are students who arrived from countries with other socio-cultural regulations, which can cause the phenomenon of culture shock - a state of disorientation and emotional stress due to a collision with a new social environment (Oberg [14]). It is necessary to use neutralizing forms and approaches to create an ecological environment in which newcomers can experience satisfaction and self-acceptance as an important unit of the new society. In this context, the ecological approach considers the educational institution as a complex ecosystem, where the interaction of individuals, the environment and institutional mechanisms determines the success of adaptation (Bronfenbrenner [2]).

Integrating environmental awareness principles into the educational process helps to create a common platform for interaction between students from different cultures. Educational competence implies the development of important values, participation in social life, and access to specialized adaptation programs, which can significantly increase the likelihood of successful inclusion of an individual in a new society and academic environment, reducing stress levels, thereby increasing satisfaction. Joint cultural and international projects create opportunities for informal communication, cooperation, and exchange of cultural values, which in its own way creates a healthy ecology of communication between people (Constantine M. et al. [12]).

**Language deficiency.** Language deficiency is one of the most common and significant problems faced by newcomers in another country. Limited language skills can not only complicate the communication process, but also significantly reduce the level of social interaction. Considering language competence in the educational process for international students, it is worth noting that the level of proficiency in the language required for the educational

institution plays a significant role in successful integration, affecting academic achievement, social adaptation, and well-being.

Insufficient proficiency in the language of the host country, as well as the language skills requirements of educational institutions, can hinder the effective assimilation of the material and limit access to resources.

Poor knowledge of the language has a negative and significant impact on overall student satisfaction. The requirements of higher education institutions, depending on the chosen program and terms of cooperation, may require a candidate to have a certain level of proficiency in both an international language, in this context, English is considered, including the state language. Language barrier can be a huge obstacle in communication, as language is a link between people, expression of personal needs and understanding of what is happening. At the same time, the ability to use the required language skills at a sufficient level of proficiency significantly reduces the level of stress and can predict the engagement and academic performance of students in the educational environment.

In addition, the adaptation of students with low language proficiency is complicated not only by academic but also by socio-cultural factors. Communication difficulties can lead to social and personal isolation, as students experience discomfort in informal interactions and may avoid group discussions, experience restrictions and participation in student life (Sawir E. et al. [17]). Moreover, the curriculum and teaching procedures may be implemented in another language (Day & Hajj [4]). Considering the whole picture, a vicious cycle is formed, in which it can be noted that a low level of language proficiency complicates integration, and insufficient social interaction, in turn, hinders the development of language skills in newcomers. Thus, the importance of creating an ecological environment in which newcomers can get more opportunities in language practice, taking into account personal characteristics and needs, is emphasized. Moreover, it is worth noting that not all newcomers may have enough time and opportunities to learn the language of the host country, depending on various factors that could contribute to the

consideration of studying abroad. It is also worth noting that educational institutions offering integration programs reduce the level of anxiety in students and contribute to their successful adaptation, which, ultimately, has a positive effect on their academic and social success (Glass & Bista [5]).

**Compliance with academic requirements.** When considering studying abroad, it is worth considering the features and possible requirements. Of course, it is worth approaching the choice of an educational institution with awareness and understanding the necessary skills and knowledge required for consideration of a candidate. However, it is worth understanding that after passing the selection system, it is necessary to take into account the readiness to accept the educational process as a whole and the subsequent management structure and system organization.

Adaptation of international students to a new academic environment is not an easy process that requires consideration and consideration of many factors. Self-acceptance in a new environment can be stressful in terms of language connections, personal factors, perception of new information, differences in culture and social relations. For successful integration, students need to demonstrate a high level of academic and language preparation and literacy, flexibility, and the ability to adapt to new conditions. The academic success of international students directly depends on their correctly oriented, correctly chosen adaptation strategies and involvement in the educational process. Students who actively participate in academic life, interact with classmates and teachers, demonstrate higher rates of academic engagement (Kember [7]). Educational institutions have certain standards for applicants, in accordance with the curricula, disciplines, both domestic and international. Newcomers may encounter other methods and approaches in the education system, language forms of communication and interaction in the academic community.

For successful adaptation of newcomers, as a "sensitive group", educational institutions need to use an ecological approach based on the creation of an inclusive academic environment, providing for personal needs, potential risks of self-acceptance of the student in a new society and educational environment. This

approach involves multi-stage support, including linguistic, academic, communicative, and emotional-psychological, which in its own way creates favorable conditions for integration. Institutions can promote the implementation of special preparatory programs that can reduce the risk of stress for newcomers, and, moreover, contribute to the development of an understanding of academic, specialized, and language requirements.

**Conclusion.** Integration of international students remains a hot topic, moreover, with the progression of global changes and trends, young people continue to consider studying abroad in order to acquire quality and qualified education for self-realization opportunities.

An ecological academic environment promotes inclusion and support, paying attention to personal needs and characteristics, which in turn helps to soften the introduction into the academic and social environment, creating a comfortable ecosystem for a newcomer.

These constraints, such as language deficiencies and cultural dissonance, can hinder the academic success and social well-being of newcomers, which in turn can provoke stressful situations, cause a sense of isolation, and reduce self-efficacy. Moreover, differences in educational systems and institutional expectations require targeted support strategies, including preparatory programs and the development of intercultural competence. An ecological approach, considering the academic environment as an interconnected system of institutional, social, and personal factors, offers a basis for a comprehensive solution to these problems.

**Future research** requires exploring adaptive strategies that promote integration and examining the impact of ecological academic environment on international students' academic performance and personal development, paying attention to inclusiveness and personal needs.

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